



THE
Billionaire's
CHRISTMAS
Fake Fiancée



LAURA HALEY - MCNEIL

THE BILLIONAIRE'S
CHRISTMAS FAKE FIANCÉE

CHRISTMAS BILLIONAIRES SERIES

BOOK TEN



LAURA HALEY-MCNEIL

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For more information about the author, please visit www.lurahaleymcneil.com.

For Thomas

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Thank You!

About the Author

CHAPTER 1



Gabby Adams slid from the ski chairlift at the Aspen ski resort and inhaled the crisp air. She looked out at the snow-covered mountains that stretched to the horizon. A ski vacation with her best friend, Diana, was the perfect way to forget the humiliating mistake she'd made one year ago.

"Come on, Gabby," Diana shouted as she skied past her. "We have a mountain to conquer."

"I'm with you," Gabby called back. She checked her ski bindings and adjusted her ski poles, then looked down the mountain.

Snow spraying over her skis made her look up. Several members of the ski patrol dismounted the chairlift. Several ski patrol members unlatched their toboggans from their ski lift chairs. They grabbed the toboggan handles, then skied down the slope. Other members of the team spoke into two-way radios as they followed the rest of the group.

Gabby sidestepped to give the ski patrol room to ski down the mountain and help the injured skier. She whispered a quick prayer, asking God to be with that person.

She waited until the group had moved partly down the slope before readying herself to follow her friend. She planted her poles into the snow.

"Gabby?" The deep voice evoked a memory she wanted desperately to forget.

The blood draining from her face, she turned to the powerfully built man wearing a red jacket with a white cross

emblazoned across his chest.

She stared at Ryan Knight—the man she had prayed she'd never see again. He stood before her like a monument to the powerful Knight name. Though he wore a ski helmet and goggles, they didn't conceal the sculpted jaw that reminded her of when he told her she and his brother Mike would never marry—she should forget she'd met Mike and move on with her life.

Forgetting Mike hadn't been a problem. If only she could forget Ryan that easily. The words he spoke to her that evening in his family's solarium echoed in her mind. She stared at him now but couldn't speak his name.

“Sorry.” He lifted his goggles so she could see his face. “I didn't mean to startle you.”

“You didn't,” she stammered, then berated herself for being nervous. Looking into cool blue eyes, she took a breath. She could stand up to one of the most powerful men in the country. “I just didn't expect to see you working ski patrol.”

“I volunteer when I have time.” His mouth crooked into that half smile that almost made him seem human. He hadn't seemed human when they last spoke.

“As I remember, you don't have a lot of free time,” she said surprised.

“Funny thing I've discovered—if you make time, you can find it.” His mouth tipped in a way that made her stomach rise and then drop.

That he almost seemed human now didn't match her memory of him. He'd been nice enough, but what he said—that she and his brother Mike weren't meant to be together—made her ache inside. Looking at him now, he seemed different.

Had he changed? She hoped so, but she wouldn't stay in town long enough to find out.

“It was nice seeing you again.” She winced. She hadn't wanted to see him again, but the encounter hadn't been as bad as last time. “I'll let you get back to your ski patrol duties.”

Turning away, she shoved her poles into the snow and pushed away from him.

“Gabby,” he called after her.

Her heart pounded, and she crouched low to pick up speed. What if he followed her?

Oh, Lord, I have tried to heal from that night. Please give me Your strength to forgive and forget.

Tears came, swelling hot. Through the blur, she could barely see but knew the slope well enough to know where she was going.

“Gabby!” he called again more urgently.

Her head came up. Too late she saw where she was going—right over the ski jump.

With her heart in her throat, she skied down the ramp that flung her into the air. She swung her arms and legs wildly as terror sank its fangs into her soul and gripped her with paralyzing fear. Looking down she saw the slope plummet toward her. She closed her eyes. She couldn’t watch. From a distant place, she heard her name followed by gasps, then screams.

She slammed into the slope. An explosion of pain wracked her body. A current of air caught her as she bounced, then slammed into the mountain again. She tried to open her eyes. She had to get away from Ryan. The pain licking through her core made her stomach wrench. Blackness swept over her. Mercifully, she remembered nothing else.



RYAN WATCHED in grim horror as Gabby headed toward the ski jump. He didn’t know her skiing ability, but he had a feeling she wasn’t ready to take the ski jump.

“Gabby!” he called after her. Adrenaline pumping through him, he raced after her. A cold sweat broke out over his body. He had to stop her.

He was feet from her when she tipped her skis over the jump. The terror of her scream pierced him with agony. He raced down the ramp as she caught air, struggled against the wind that lifted her, then plummeted to the ground. Crouching low, he sped down the ski jump, then straightened and leaned forward as he lifted from the jump's tip. Sailing through the air, he neared the ground and pulled his knees to his chest. As he landed, he watched Gabby as she sickeningly hit the ground, bounced into the air, then crumpled into a heap at the edge of the slope.

He heard the shouts and screams as other skiers watched in horror. He skied to her side.

"Gabby." Fear gripped him as he kicked off his skis and shucked off his poles. He knelt next to her.

Her breathing shallow, her thick lashes curved in dark crescents against her pale cheeks. One of her legs bent awkwardly behind her.

He knew enough first aid to situate her until help arrived.

"Is she okay?" Diego, another ski patrol member, stopped next to him.

"She's fainted." Ryan pulled off his jacket and tucked it behind her head.

"I called dispatch." Diego knelt next to him. "The team should be here shortly."

"Thank God," Ryan murmured a prayer. That shocked him. When was the last time he prayed? Too long if he couldn't remember.

"Do you know her?" Diego asked.

"Yeah." Ryan felt his friend's sharp glance. "She was going to marry my brother. Thanks to me, she never did."

Diego's soft snort told Ryan he'd confessed too much. He tightened his jaw. What no one knew was that he had to stop the marriage. His brother marrying Gabby would ruin the merger he'd planned for months. He wouldn't admit there was another reason.

He pushed the memory aside and worked with Diego to make Gabby comfortable. He swallowed at how delicate she felt in his arms. He tightened his jaw. He wouldn't let those feelings distract from his real purpose—making sure Gabby received expert medical care.

Soon other members of the ski patrol arrived. After securing her leg, the team gently lifted her to the toboggan. Ryan followed the team down the hill. When they reached the clinic, a medical team waited outside the facility. Ryan kicked off his skis and followed the team inside.

“Do you know her?” One of the doctors gave him a curious look.

“Yeah,” he whispered raggedly. “Can you let me know as soon as possible how she's doing?”

“Don't worry.” The doctor grinned. “You'll be the first.”

“Thanks.” Ryan's voice was low. His heart wrenching, he watched as the team wheeled her through the double doors.

Turning away, he dragged his fingers through his hair. She was trying to get away from him. Now only God knew the injuries she'd suffered.

He hadn't meant to chase her away. He wanted to talk to her. He didn't owe her an explanation, but he wanted her to understand why she couldn't marry his brother. It was a business decision. Nothing personal. As a person, he liked her. She was funny, warm, and not bad to look at, but she was the wrong girl for his brother.

Mike had never known what was good for him, so Ryan spent his entire life directing him. When Mike was attracted to Essie Fernsby, the daughter of the family that owned the company Ryan wanted to do a business deal with, he knew this was the union he had to encourage.

He'd never forget the night he explained his reasoning to Gabby and the hurt in her eyes. His throat closed. He had wanted to comfort her, not cause her pain. Like most people, she didn't understand the importance of business mergers. Instead of listening to his reasoning, she rushed away.

Should he chase after her? Before he could answer that question, she disappeared into the night. The last he saw her, she had climbed into the rideshare she had called and drove away from the Knight estate. He telephoned her, but she never returned his messages.

He let her go. Time would heal her wounds. It was a hard lesson to learn. He hated that she had to learn it, but he'd learned it and survived. She was tough. He knew she'd understand. If only he could forget the anguish in her eyes.

She didn't like him, but her feelings toward him shouldn't have mattered.

He felt hollow inside. Seeing her made him realize her feelings toward him mattered.

CHAPTER 2



Gabby grimaced when the doctor anesthetized her leg and then manipulated the fracture and set it.

“Sit tight, and I’ll be back later to check on you.” The doctor gave her a sympathetic look.

Gabby tried to smile. She had a broken leg. She wasn’t going anywhere. She lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. She needed to call Diana.

Her phone rang. She rolled to her side and reached for the chair where one of the nurses had stuffed her belongings into a plastic bag. Pain shot up her thigh, and she tightened her jaw. She should let the call ring to voicemail, but what if it were Diana looking for her? Gabby’s friend had skied down the hill ahead of her and wouldn’t know that she’d taken the ski jump and had broken her leg.

Gabby set her jaw. How could she have skied down a ski jump? Why hadn’t she watched where she was going? If she hadn’t been in a hurry to get away from Ryan, she would have paid attention. Instead, she was stuck in an emergency room, and she’d ruined her ski vacation.

She dragged the plastic bag to the bed and dug through a pile of clothes until she wrapped her fingers around her phone. With a sigh of relief, she tugged it from the bag.

“Hello?” She couldn’t hide the desperation in her voice.

“Gabby?”

“Hi, Diana.” She exhaled a breath. She was so glad to hear her friend’s voice. “I have some bad news.”

“Yeah, well, so do I,” Diana said. “My car won’t start. I’m at the charging station now waiting for it to charge. As soon as it’s finished, I’ll call you and come back and pick you up ... unless you can find someone to give you a ride back to the ski condo.”

Gabby stared down at her cast. She didn’t want Diana to have to come back to get her after her car was charged. Maybe someone at the clinic could give her a ride when they finished their shift.

“I’m sure I can find someone,” Gabby said slowly. “When I find a ride, do you want us to come get you?”

“Don’t bother. These new charging stations are quick. My car should be fully charged in an hour or two,” Diana said. “I’m so sorry. Now what were you going to tell me?”

“Oh, I just wanted to know what we should have for dinner tonight. I can get it started when I get home.” Gabby winced at the lie and tried to press away the guilt that tugged in her chest. The doctor had told her she could only walk on her leg when it was absolutely necessary, but she couldn’t tell Diana the truth—that she had broken her leg. She didn’t want her friend to worry.

“We’re not eating at the condo tonight.” Diana sounded anxious. “Remember? We were invited to that fancy party on Billionaire Mountain. I can’t wait to go. My friends told me celebrities will be there. Won’t that be exciting?”

“Yeah.” Gabby curved the corner of her mouth. She didn’t consider celebrities as exciting as Diana did. Maybe by the time Diana charged her car, she’d be too tired to go to a party, but that was unlikely. Diana loved parties. “I’ll ask around and see if I get a ride back to the condo, then I’ll call you. When you get home, we can decide what we want to do.”

“We already know,” Diana’s voice rose. “We’re going to that party. Don’t worry. My car will be charged in plenty of time. Then I need to rush back to the condo and decide what

I'm going to wear tonight. I have another call, so I have to go, but remember to call me as soon as you get a ride." She hung up.

Gabby dropped the phone onto her lap. Once she got back to the condo, she'd have to tell Diana the truth, but she wouldn't have to say much. The leg cast was an obvious sign that she wouldn't ski for the rest of the vacation, let alone attend parties.

"How're you doing in here?" A nurse with a name tag labeled Vicky stepped into the room. She washed her hands and moved to Gabby's bed.

"Except for the broken leg, I'm fine." Gabby managed a weak smile.

"I'm sorry that happened. The good news is you didn't break a major bone. The doctor is writing your discharge orders." Vicky checked the monitor tracking Gabby's vital signs.

"Thank goodness," Gabby said elated, then remembered—she needed a ride to the condo.

"You do have a visitor. Do you want to see him before you leave?" Vicky asked as she typed notes into her computer.

"Someone's here to see me?" Gabby's eyes widened. No one knew she was here.

"Yes, ma'am." Vicky grinned. "He's been waiting since you went into surgery. We wanted to make sure you were out of recovery before we allowed visitors."

"But who ..." Gabby took a breath. The only person who knew she was here was Ryan. Would he wait for her? If he did, why? Ryan never did anything without a reason ... a financial reason. But that still didn't make any sense. He couldn't make money off of her. She didn't have any.

"That cute ski patrol who brought you in." Vicky lifted her brows. "If he were waiting for me, I'd see him." She started to laugh, and then her face froze. "What's the matter? Do you not want to see him?"

How did Gabby answer that question? If he'd been waiting all this time to see her, she wanted to know why.

"I'll see him," Gabby said with a heavy exhale. Once he explained his reason for waiting, she'd tell him goodbye and hope she never saw him again. He may be her only opportunity for a ride home, but she refused to ask him. She'd wait until she could find someone to drive her back.

"I'll let him know, then I'll be back to help you pack up your things so you can leave," Vicky said. She stepped from the room before Gabby could ask her if someone could drive her back to her condo.

She was about to get up when the door to the examining room slowly opened. Gabby froze. Ryan peered through the opening. His arctic blue eyes stared straight at her. Her heart quickened. Frowning, she filled her lungs. How could she feel anything for this man?

"Hi." The ridges between Ryan's brows softened. His mouth curved at the corner, making her wonder if he were attempting to smile. She was struck by how handsome he looked when he did smile.

"Hi." She managed a smile. "The nurse said you were waiting to see me. You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to make sure you were okay." The compassion in his eyes made her catch her breath. His gaze dropped to her leg before lifting his gaze to hers. His mouth softened with sympathy. "Considering. Are you in pain?"

"No, but I think they gave me something." She lifted a shoulder. "We'll see how I feel after the medication wears off."

He pressed his lips together and nodded.

"Thanks for waiting, but it wasn't necessary." Gabby looked away. The tumultuous emotions stirring in her chest made her set her teeth. She couldn't feel anything toward this man even if he did rescue her from the mountain.

"Do you have a ride back to your condo?" He lifted a brow.

“I think so.” She spoke slowly. She’d never been a good liar.

“Are you sure?” His penetrating stare made heat flood her face.

“I talked to my friend Diana.” Her voice quivered, and she bit her lower lip. She wouldn’t tell him the whole story—that Diana was charging her car and it would be a couple of hours before she could pick up Gabby, except she didn’t know where Gabby was and she didn’t know Gabby had broken her leg.

“And what did Diana say?” Ryan tipped his head. His voice was soft, but his firm gaze demanded a truthful answer.

“That she’d call me as soon as her car was charged.” She dropped her gaze.

“She needs to charge her car?” His mouth twitched as if he were trying to keep from laughing.

“Yes,” she murmured and looked at him through her lashes.

“In other words, you don’t have a ride home.” Ryan gave a slight nod.

“I do, it’s just that it’s going to be a while,” she said.

“Like a couple of hours.” He straightened. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” She struggled against the panic that threatened to burst inside her.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back.”

“That’s what has me worried,” she said.

“I’m going to let John, Dr. Roberts, know you have a ride to your condo. The medical team was concerned about your getting back to your place.” He stepped into the hallway.

“But—”

The door drifted shut.

“Now what do I do,” she muttered into the silence. She’d do anything not to spend another minute with him.

Her heart beat dully. When he came, she'd tell him. She'd find a way back to her condo, even if she had to walk. She'd weighed the options. Walking was the lesser of two evils.

CHAPTER 3



Ryan couldn't blame Gabby for not wanting to spend time with him. He couldn't forget the shattered look in her eyes when he told her his brother Mike would marry Essie Fernsby. When Mike told Ryan his decision, he'd been surprised but relieved.

Essie's father, Leroy, had been ecstatic. Essie was the apple of his eye. He'd do anything to ensure his daughter's happiness.

Ryan would do anything to secure his and Leroy's business relationship.

It wasn't until he'd seen Gabby's hurt at the devastating news that he realized how much she cared for his brother. That made him more determined than ever to keep them apart. He did that for her sake. As much as she disliked him, he cared about her—in a friendship sort of way. His brother was too flighty to know what he really wanted. Ryan had been relieved to learn Mike liked Essie. They were now happily married.

Mike wasn't like Ryan, who could be happy making business deals. Personal relationships never appealed to Ryan. He was relieved to learn that raising a family was what mattered to his brother. Maybe Mike would've been happy with Gabby, but they're being together hadn't seemed right to Ryan. Essie was more his type and benefited the family corporation.

Ryan was sorry that telling Gabby the truth had hurt her. He wanted to help her. He was a businessman with a skill for

solving problems. If she'd let him, he'd find a way to make it up to her.

After Ryan told Dr. Roberts that he'd give Gabby a ride to her condo, he parked his sports car beneath the hospital's porte-cochère, then returned to her recovery room. The nurse was teaching Gabby how to walk with the cast. Ryan watched with sympathy as she moved across the room, then back again.

Gabby's face was flushed as she alternately stepped on her good leg, then maintained her balance.

"It's harder than it looks." Frustration creased her brow.

"You'll get the hang of it." Ryan's chest squeezed tight. He felt partially to blame.

She was trying to get away from him. He could've explained everything if she'd given him a chance, including why she was better off without Mike. Now she had a broken leg.

Gabby took a few more steps, then relaxed and smiled. She lifted her gaze to his.

The lift in his chest took his breath away. He had never seen such warmth and tenderness as in Gabby's eyes. He could almost hear angels sing.

He twisted the corner of his mouth. Where had that corny thought come from? Gabby was learning how to walk with a cast. That was hardly a reason for the heavens to open, though he was glad she was making progress.

"I think I've got it." She looked at him. The dimples her smile pressed into her cheeks made his heart stall.

"I'd say you do," he said roughly, then cleared his throat. He picked up her ski parka and held it open for her.

The surprise flickering in her eyes made him tighten his jaw. Was she that shocked that he wanted to help her? He had hurt her. He'd never realized how much.

"Let me help you with this." He lifted her coat so she'd understand he wanted to do something good for her.

The wariness in her eyes softened. The stiffness in his chest eased. Maybe he could gain her trust after all.

He stepped behind her, then helped her slip her arms into the jacket's sleeves.

When she was bundled into her jacket and hat, the nurse helped her into a wheelchair and wheeled her to the entrance where Ryan's sports car waited.

He opened the passenger door but didn't miss the surprise in her eyes. Her gaze brushed his with question.

"Don't worry. We'll get you in here," he said with a laugh.

"I'm not worried about getting in here." She sighed. "I'm wondering how I'll get out."

"I have a plan for that, too." His laugh was soft.

"Now I remember. You have a plan for everything." She sighed.

His breath caught. Is that what she thought of him? He hadn't realized he was that obvious, but she was right. He planned everything to get what he wanted.

Disappointment caught the edge of his heart. He had wanted her to trust him. He made a mistake but didn't mean that for ill toward her. He was a businessman who convinced people to see the good he meant for them. If Gabby doubted his motive, he'd have to work that much harder to show her he had her best interests at heart. He'd find a way to do that no matter how long it took.

After packing Gabby and her belongings into the sports car, Gabby called Diana to let her know she had a ride to the condo. When it rang to voicemail, she pressed her lips together.

"Do you mind taking me to the charging station?" She gave Ryan a hopeful look. "I want my friend to know she doesn't have to get me, and I want to make sure she's all right."

"So do I." Ryan smiled at her. "Which charging station is she at?"

The after-ski traffic was heavy as vehicles moved from the ski area to the highway. Gabby gave him directions to a station near the edge of town. The station was empty.

“Oh, no.” Gabby chewed her lower lip. “I hope she didn’t drive back to the ski area to look for me.” She pulled out her phone. “I’ll call her again.”

As she pulled her phone from her pocket, it rang. She smiled.

“I take it that’s Diana?” Ryan raised a brow.

“Yes,” she said with relief. “I hope she got my message. Diana?”

Ryan couldn’t hear the conversation, but as Gabby’s smile widened, the tension in his chest broke.

Gabby laughed, spoke softly into the phone, then disconnected the call. She looked at Ryan with such relief it was all he could do to keep from stroking a finger across her smooth cheek.

“She got my message.” Gabby relaxed into the seat. “She’s on her way to the condo so she’ll meet me there.”

“Then everything worked out.” Ryan merged onto the highway. “Now you just need to tell me where you’re staying.” He glanced at her and grinned.

Gabby may have been the wrong woman for his brother, but she wasn’t half bad. He was glad to get to know her. He might even get to know her better. It could take some convincing for her to agree, but he’d find a way. He always found ways to make things better.

Ryan followed Gabby’s directions to the condominium complex. After grabbing the plastic bag that held her belongings from the trunk he sprinted to the passenger side of the car and helped her out.

Inside the building, they stepped from the elevator to the hallway leading to Gabby’s condominium. The door at the end of the hallway flew open. The blonde stepping from the condo saw Gabby and froze.

“What happened?” The woman sprinted toward them.

“I broke my leg.” Gabby moved slowly down the corridor.

“I see that, but how? You were fine when we got off the chairlift. Are you all right?” The woman grabbed Gabby’s arm. Looking at Ryan, she introduced herself as Diana.

“I’m better than I was.” Gabby alternated steps with her crutches.

“Thank goodness this knight in shining armor showed up,” Diana said.

“Knight?” Gabby and Ryan questioned at the same time.

“What?” Diana frowned. “Did I say something wrong?”

Gabby snorted a laugh, then looked at Ryan before glancing at her friend.

“My last name is Knight.” Ryan laughed dryly.

“You’re Ryan Knight?” Diana’s eyes widened. “You’re the one who—” She gasped and slapped a hand over her mouth.

“Yes?” Ryan gave her a quizzical look before looking at Gabby.

Her horrified expression made Ryan wonder what Gabby had said about him.

“Oh, not you.” Diana’s face reddened. “It was another Ryan Knight.” She glanced at Gabby and seemed to seek affirmation. “I mean, how many Ryan Knights could there be?”

“Apparently one more,” Ryan said with a wry smile.

“Maybe even more—” Diana looked at Gabby, who gave a slight shake of her head. “Or maybe you’re the only one. I’d have to check the Census Bureau for that answer.”

“You’ll have to let me know what you find,” Ryan said drolly.

“Oh, sure,” Diana said in a way that said he’d never know that answer.

“Now that we have that out of the way,” Gabby said. “Maybe we could go into the condo.”

“What a great idea!” Diana sounded relieved.

Inside the condo, Ryan worked with Diana to help Gabby get situated. Diana received a call and stepped into the other room and closed the door.

“Can I get you anything?” Ryan looked down at her. She looked relaxed despite her paleness. Apparently, the walk from the car had been more exhausting than anticipated.

“I’m fine.” She lifted her dark gaze to his.

His heart picking up speed made him wonder what was happening to him. He found Gabby attractive. Despite her feelings toward him, he found her enticing.

How could she be different than any other woman he knew? He met attractive women every day. What he felt now reminded him of when he was thirteen and had first discovered girls.

He was discovering Gabby. Her musical voice. The brilliant light in her eyes. The curve of her cheek. Her creamy skin.

The air in his lungs froze. His thoughts were getting away from him as if he had no control over them. That didn’t make sense. He was in control of everything—not just his life but everything around him. Isn’t that what he proved when he made sure Mike married the woman who would make him the perfect wife? And he proved that Gabby could move on with her life. She hadn’t been happy with the decision Ryan had made for her, but she’d recovered. The decision Ryan had made was good for everyone.

For himself? He got what he wanted—a deal with Leroy Fernsby—but making those he cared about happy made him happy.

“I guess I should leave.” The unevenness in his voice shocked him.

Gabby's face came up. Apparently what he'd said had surprised her, too.

"Yes, thank you for driving me here." Her voice was soft, light and stirred something unfamiliar deep within him.

Looking down at her, he wanted to touch a finger to her chin and tip her face to his. He wanted more than that. The realization was a jolt.

"Gabby." His voice didn't conceal the emotion surging through him.

Her lips parted—lips he was dying to taste.

The bedroom door flew open.

Gabby jumped.

Ryan straightened.

"I'm glad I got that straightened out." Diana stepped from the bedroom.

Her gaze moved from Gabby to Ryan. Her mouth dropped open.

"It was nice to meet you, Diana," Ryan said, the coolness in his voice shocking him. His gaze shifted to Gabby. "If you need anything, give me a call."

"Thanks." Gabby's voice was raw. She seemed to shrink into the sofa. "But I have everything I need."

"I'm sure you do." Ryan curved the corner of his mouth. Giving Diana a nod, he turned to the door and stepped into the hall.

He waited until he stepped into the elevator before he let his head fall back against the wall. What had he been about to do?

He didn't have to ask. Even though he was no longer in Gabby's presence, the urge to kiss her soft lips was overwhelming.

Closing his eyes, he shook his head. What he was feeling toward this woman had to stop—now.

CHAPTER 4



Gabby watched Ryan step into the hall and then close the door. She stared at the space his powerfully built form had filled. In this tiny condominium, his size dwarfed the room.

Looking away, she felt strangely empty. What was this vacuum rising inside her? She'd never been fond of Ryan. When she'd dated his brother, Mike, she knew Ryan was determined to separate her from his brother, though she didn't understand why.

Mike was only two years younger than Ryan, but they seemed light years apart. Ryan was serious, almost stern. The only thing he thought about was his family's corporation. Mike wanted to have fun and could be found commandeering the family jet to the ends of the earth.

Gabby was struggling to establish her interior design business and had been ecstatic when a friend recommended her services to Mike. He'd just bought a penthouse in a Denver high-rise and wanted it completely redone. During the process, she and Mike had grown close, which surprised her. He didn't seem the type to care about interior design, but he had a say in everything.

She still remembered how her heart hammered when he invited her to the family Aspen home for a ski weekend. That was the weekend she met Ryan. He didn't hold back his feelings for her dating his brother. Mike wasn't the man for her. He didn't date one woman. He may be interested in her

now, but that could change. His brother didn't know what he wanted.

The news crushed her, but she shouldn't have been surprised. Wherever they went, women were drawn to him. Handsome and charismatic, every woman wanted to be with him—including Gabby.

When Essie attended the party, it was obvious she'd come to see Mike.

Gabby's heart broke. No matter how hard it was to accept, she had to realize Ryan had told her the truth. Holding back her tears, she ended what she thought would have been the most glorious weekend of her life.

CHAPTER 5



Gabby stood in the middle of the condo bedroom and awkwardly slipped on the snowflake sweater and the flared skirt. Why had she let Diana talk her into going to this party? She had a broken leg. But her friend had been excited about the party ever since the Hollywood mogul she'd met on the chairlift had invited her. Gabby had thought the party sounded fun—until she broke her leg.

She stared down at her pink toenails that peeked from the opening of the cast. How was she going to keep her toes warm?

Hobbling to her suitcase, she dug through thermal socks until she found one that wouldn't clash with her skirt. She sat on the edge of the bed and tugged it on.

"Are you almost ready?" Diana leaned into the bedroom, her eyes bright with excitement.

"I don't think I should go." Gabby straightened. "It's going to be awkward trying to mingle while wearing this cast."

"You won't have to mingle." Diana's eyes widened with panic. "You can sit on the couch. You're so cute, all the guys will come to you."

"I'm not that cute," Gabby muttered. "You said most everyone there would be from Hollywood. That has to mean that every girl there will look like she stepped out of a fashion magazine."

"I'm sure there will be normal people like you and me," Diana said. "Here, let me help you get that sock on." She knelt

in front of Gabby and pulled the sock into place. “There.” She stood. “How does that feel?”

“Like I shouldn’t be going to this party.” Gabby gave her a pleading look.

“You’ll have fun.” Diana grinned and flipped her hand. The text notification on her phone sounded, and she pulled it from her pocket. “They’re here! Our ride is here!”

“Wonderful,” Gabby murmured.

“I’ll help you with your coat.” Diana raced to the closet and pulled out Gabby’s ski parka. “We’re going to have so much fun.”

Gabby didn’t want to tell her that she would have fun. Gabby having fun seemed iffy.

When they rode down the elevator, Diana texted the driver and asked if he’d help Gabby come down the front steps. Gabby felt guilty but relieved when he met them in the lobby. She made a mental note to give him a big tip. When they reached the parking lot, she gasped when she saw the tiny car that barely had a backseat.

“It’s bigger than it looks.” The driver grinned. “The backseat is very roomy.”

“Maybe for toy poodles,” Gabby murmured.

“It looks divine.” Diana raced ahead and opened the passenger door for Gabby. “I can sit in the back. I like sitting in the back.”

“Since when?” Gabby stared at her. “You get motion sickness.”

“If I forget to take a motion sickness pill,” Diana said in complete seriousness. “I took one before we left. I’ll help you get in.” She gave the driver the address for the party, then squeezed into the back seat.

“You’re going to see the rich people.” The driver gunned the accelerator, then took off.

Gabby’s heart in her throat, she grabbed the panic handle.

When they reached the gate to a mansion that looked like the Disneyland castle, the security guard told the driver he couldn't enter the premises.

"Oh," Gabby said in dismay. "Are you sure he can't drive us to the entrance? I've broken my leg. Walking up the drive is going to be a little difficult with a cast and crutches."

"Let me make sure you're on the list." The guard's mouth tipped in sympathy. He checked the list.

Gabby prayed that she wouldn't be on it, but hoped Diana would. Diana went stiff at her side and chewed her fingernail.

"You're on it." The guard offered them a slight smile.

Gabby sighed. Diana squealed and clapped her hands.

"Okay," the guard said to the driver. "You can drive them to the door but come right back."

"You got it, boss." The driver saluted the guard who snorted and shook his head. The driver took off like a shot.

Diana clutched Gabby's arm and helped her walk up the front steps. When they stepped inside the mansion, Diana's mouth fell open.

"I see a place to sit over there." Gabby nodded toward a sofa tucked in the corner of a room decorated with armchairs, exotic rugs and Western oil paintings. "Go mingle. I'll be fine."

"I'll get you something to drink." Diana worried her lower lip, then turned and headed toward a group of people Gabby was certain she'd seen in some movies.

She hobbled to the sofa and breathed a sigh of relief when she settled into a cushion that wrapped around her.

"I hope you're enjoying yourself." The familiar voice sent a shock up Gabby's spine.

She jerked her gaze to Ryan, who looked handsome with his tousled hair. His blue eyes shone in his tanned face. The casual blazer and jeans he wore looked like they had been tailored for his well-built form.

“I am, now that I can sit.” She looked away. She didn’t want to enjoy looking at Ryan Knight.

“Here. I brought you something.” He held out a tumbler with a sparkling beverage. When she pressed her lips together, he said, “Don’t worry. It’s non-alcoholic. I remember that you don’t drink adult beverages.”

“That’s okay.” She looked past Ryan. She didn’t want to accept anything from this man. “My friend Diana should be back any minute with a drink for me.”

Ryan arched a brow, then looked over his shoulder to Diana, who was giggling as she talked to a group of men who seemed enamored with her.

“Is that your friend?” He looked back at Gabby.

Her eyes widened before she looked away. “I believe so.”

“You don’t want to wait too long for that drink.” He held the glass in front of her.

“Thank you,” she murmured. She took a sip, then set the glass on a coaster. “I’m surprised to see you here. As I recall, you’re so busy with your company that you don’t socialize.”

The flicker across his brow showed his surprise that she remembered something about him. She tightened her jaw. Why did she have to say anything? She didn’t think about Ryan. Maybe occasionally, but not enough to mention it.

“How’s the leg?” Ryan’s gaze flicked to the sock that covered her toes

“It’s fine.” She didn’t look at him.

“And so we’ve reached another conversational impasse.” Ryan laughed dryly. “Look, Gabby, I know you’re—”

“Ryan Knight.” A jovial-looking man moved through the crowd toward them.

Ryan turned to the man. His smile broad, he shook the man’s extended hand. “Howard Allcock, it’s good to see you.”

“And you.” Ryan introduced Howard to Gabby.

“It looks like you had more fun than you bargained for.” Howard laughed at his joke as he shook Gabby’s hand. He turned to Ryan. “I’m surprised to see you here. Don’t you usually get your fun by making deals instead of making small talk?”

The flicker of surprise in Ryan’s eyes quickly vanished as he looked at Gabby, who lifted her brows. “So I’ve been told, but since we have a deal that’s almost been finalized—”

“That’s why I’m glad to see you here.” Howard flung an arm around Ryan’s shoulders. “I’ve been thinking about that deal, and I think I’m going to take a different direction.”

“Is that so?” Ryan said calmly, though his eyes sparked with surprise. “And what direction would that be?”

“The family-oriented direction,” Howard said with a jolly laugh. “Howard and Company are all about family and children and building communities. Let’s face it, pal, I know most men envy you for your freewheeling lifestyle—”

“Freewheeling?” Parallel lines pressed between Ryan’s brow.

“You know how people see you. You’re surrounded by beautiful women. You drive fast cars, but that image doesn’t attract the consumer for our products.” Howard punched Ryan’s shoulder. “I knew you’d understand.”

“I’m not sure where you’re getting your information.” Ryan frowned at the man.

“Actually, Mr. Allcock.” Gabby sat up straight.

“Please call me Howard.” His smile was endearing.

“Howard.” Gabby cleared her throat. “I don’t believe that freewheeling image of Ryan is correct.”

“What?” Ryan jerked his gaze to her.

“Is that so?” Howard’s brows shot up. He gave Ryan a sly grin. “Are you keeping secrets from me, old pal?”

“I’m not sure.” Ryan gave Howard a slight smile, then turned to Gabby with a what-do-you-think-you’re-doing stare.

“He wanted to keep it a secret, but it looks like that cat’s out of the bag,” Gabby said with a sigh. “Ryan’s actually very serious about someone.”

“Really?” Howard’s eyes widened.

“Really?” Ryan’s gaze narrowed.

“Yes, I’m sure the announcement will be made any day now.” Gabby picked at a piece of imaginary lint on her skirt.

“Well, what’s holding you back?” Again, Howard punched Ryan’s shoulder.

“I ...” Ryan frowned at Gabby. “What *is* holding me back?”

“The ring,” Gabby whispered and tapped her ring finger. “You’re searching for the perfect one.”

“No.” Ryan shook his head.

“Congratulations, man.” Howard grabbed him into a bear hug and slapped his back. “Who’s the lucky lady?” His gaze shifted from Ryan to Gabby, then grinned. “Oh, I get it. She’s sitting right here.”

“What?” Gabby’s face heated. Her mouth dropped open. She looked at Ryan, who gave her a now-look-what-you’ve done expression.

What had she done? She was trying to help Ryan. She hadn’t expected to get involved.

“Of course, she’s too good for you, but you always did land on your feet.” Howard’s laugh made Gabby jump. He turned to the crowd milling around them. “Hey, everybody, Ryan’s engaged, and the lucky lady’s right here.”

CHAPTER 6



Ryan stared at the stunned expressions surrounding him. He jerked his gaze to Howard, then to Gabby, whose helpless look made him fill his lungs. “There seems to be a miscommunication—”

The rush of guests surrounding him froze the words in his throat as they shook his hand and congratulated him, then Gabby.

“Thank you.” He smiled weakly.

“Ryan, why didn’t you tell me?” Mike, holding the hand of an attractive brunette, emerged from the crowd.

He embraced his brother while the brunette smiled and offered her congratulations. She introduced herself to Gabby.

“Now I guess I can call you sis.” Mike hugged Gabby. “You know, when we were kids, Ryan used to tell me everything. Now that he’s president of the company—”

“Let’s not get carried away.” Ryan’s voice was rough.

“Gabby, why didn’t you tell me?” Diana looked disappointed when she sat next to Gabby. “Here’s your drink, by the way.” She pressed a watery drink into Gabby’s hand. “Sorry, the ice melted. It must be hotter in here than I thought.”

“Thanks.” Gabby gave the beverage a questionable look and set it on the end table. “And I didn’t tell you because—”

“That’s okay.” Diana waved her hand. “You can tell me later. I met the cutest guy.” She looked through the crowd to a

handsome man who grinned at her while he talked to a couple. “His name is Sherman.”

“I know who he is,” Gabby said shocked. “He’s like the most popular Hollywood actor right now.”

“I know.” Diana squealed. “And he’s really nice.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Gabby looked at her. “Remember, you and I are leaving together.”

“I wouldn’t leave you here by yourself.” Diana looked stunned.

“And I wouldn’t leave you.” Gabby gave her a firm look.

“It looks like Sherman wants to tell me something.” Diana rose.

“I’d like to tell him something.” Gabby looked at the handsome actor, who flashed her a smile.

“I’ll be right back.” Diana wove through the crowd.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Ryan sat next to Gabby and murmured in her ear. He looked about the crowd, who seemed to have forgotten his announcement.

“Helping.” Gabby gave him an obvious look. “Everyone knows Howard Allcock has cornered the market on educational toys for children. I even played with some. Maybe you did, too.”

“Uh, no,” Ryan said in a low voice. “I was older by the time his products hit the market, but why do you think I need help closing a deal?”

“I’ve seen you in action.” She looked surprised. “Getting a deal is the most important thing to you.”

“Not *the* most important,” Ryan spoke hesitantly.

“Like the Mountain View deal? That wasn’t the most important deal? Or the Epic deal? That wasn’t the most important deal?” She tipped her head at him.

“Those were ... different.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “How do you know about those anyway?”

“I read the financial page, and they were all different because they were huge money makers.”

“Mom?” Mike’s voice carried through the crowd.

Ryan looked up to see his brother talking on his phone. Rising, he shook his head and strode toward Mike. “Do not call Mom,” he murmured.

“He’s right here.” Mike grinned at his brother and handed him the cell phone.

“What did you tell her?” Ryan covered the mouthpiece with his hand.

“I didn’t tell her anything.” Mike looked innocent. “She already heard. She called me.”

“What? Why did she call you? Never mind.” Ryan pressed the cell phone to his ear and turned away. “Mom?”

“Congratulations, son,” his mother’s cultured tone filtered through the earpiece. “I knew you’d find the right girl someday. Now, both of my boys have made me happy.”

“Why did Mike make you happy?” Ryan froze. He looked at his brother, who smiled and wrapped his arm around his wife. Her endearing smile made Ryan turn away.

“Essie’s expecting.” Pure delight reflected in his mother’s voice. “She’s eight months along. Didn’t you notice?”

“No, why didn’t Mike tell me?”

“Probably because you have your head in the corporate clouds. Now I have hope that both my sons will bless me with grandbabies before I join the celestial choir. Ryan, dear, you’ve made me very happy indeed.”

Ryan turned to Gabby, who offered him a hopeful smile. He couldn’t explain the swell of emotions that rose inside his chest when she smiled. That gave him a jolt. He was an engineer. He had an explanation for everything.

“Now when’s the wedding?” his mother asked.

“We haven’t set a date.”

“Did you buy her a ring?” his mother asked shocked.

“Not yet,” Ryan said. “We can talk about all that when I get back.”

“Make it soon. I need to put an announcement in the Times.”

“Don’t do that.” Ryan froze.

“Of course, I’ll do that,” she said stunned. “I did it for your brother. I’ll do it for you. I don’t play favorites.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“We’ll discuss the details later,” she said, “But buy that ring as soon as possible. I’m scheduling the photographer as we speak, and I want that engagement ring and your beautiful fiancée to be on the tongues of every maven in town.”

“No, Mom.”

“I’m glad you agree. Now get some rest. We have a lot of planning to do,” his mother said and hung up.

Ryan curved his mouth. He was good at solving problems. Why did it feel this problem was getting out of control? Turning around, he saw an Oscar-winning actor sit next to Gabby. She leaned away from the actor, uncertainty in her eyes making Ryan wonder what the man was saying.

“Here.” Without looking at Mike, he handed his brother’s phone back to him, then strode toward the sofa.

As Ryan approached the actor looked up. His gaze shifted.

“Nils, it’s nice to see you again.” Ryan offered the actor a warm smile and extended his hand.

“Ryan,” Nils said in his clipped accent. He stood and took Ryan’s hand. He glanced at Gabby before looking back at Ryan. “I was getting to know your fiancée.” He emphasized the last word.

“Fiancée.” Ryan’s flat voice hid well the jolt that shot through him.

“That is what you said.” Nils’ brow drew up slightly.

“Actually, neither of us—” Gabby began.

“Yes, that is what I said.” Ryan didn’t look at Gabby but felt her gaze flick with surprise. He didn’t want this problem to get any more out of hand than it already had. Once he had a chance to think about a solution, he’d devise a way to end this charade of an engagement. He’d pay Gabby a tidy sum and send her on her way.

Would offering her payment work? He’d never forget how angry she’d been when he offered her a check after Mike decided to marry Essie. He felt sorry, even somewhat guilty, but he wanted to make it up to her. Mike’s other girlfriends had gladly accepted the payments he’d offered them. Gabby had thrown the check in Ryan’s face.

If she wouldn’t accept his money, he’d offer her something else. Everyone had a price.

“It’s too bad you can’t mingle.” Nils turned to Gabby and smiled.

There was something about that smile that made Ryan stiffen. He didn’t trust the man for good reason. His reputation with starlets was legendary. He looked at Gabby with her large dark eyes, creamy skin and her wavy hair tumbling past her shoulders. A muscle jerked in his jaw. He wouldn’t let this lothario add Gabby to the other notches on his bedpost.

“If you were my fiancée, I’d be parading you everywhere.” Nils flashed Gabby his megawatt smile.

“But she isn’t your fiancée,” Ryan said.

Nils’ head turned to Ryan. The surprise in his eyes was almost nonexistent. Ryan didn’t miss the narrowing of Gabby’s gaze. Was she aware of Nils’ game? If she weren’t, their pretend engagement might last a little longer—at least until Ryan could get Gabby safely away from Nils’ clutches.

Gabby was hardly the type of woman Nils pursued—statuesque blondes who turned heads were his style. Though Gabby carried herself well, she was petite with soft curves.

That strange tumble rolled through Ryan’s chest again. He wouldn’t think about these unfamiliar emotions. For now, he’d

find a way to get Nils away from Gabby. Women were this movie star's greatest lure.

He glanced around and noticed a tall blonde chatting excitedly with a group of people.

"Hello, Colleen." Ryan took a step back and smiled at the woman.

"Ryan. It's so good to see you." Colleen gushed and moved to his side. "I hear congratulations are in order." She turned to Gabby but her gaze lingered on Nils, who rose.

"Thank you. I'd like to introduce you to Gabby Adams," Ryan said.

"It's nice to meet you, Gabby." Colleen's gaze grazed Gabby before landing on Nils again. "And you don't need any introduction."

"Oh?" Nils smiled modestly and took Colleen's hand.

Ryan gave a soft snort. No matter what people thought of Nils, he was a good actor.

Colleen and Nils fell into conversation. When Nils offered Colleen a drink, the two of them stepped away.

Ryan sat next to Gabby.

"That was a smooth move." Gabby gave him a sidelong glance. When he lifted a brow, she said, "Your finding a way to distract Nils."

"Nils doesn't need my help when it comes to distractions." He shifted his gaze away from Gabby. Had his plan been that obvious? In business, he was known for his smooth tactics. Maybe in other affairs, he needed a little more finesse.

"And I don't need your help either." Gabby's meaningful smile made him realize she could take care of herself.

Maybe in most situations, but she wasn't familiar with the tactics of the Hollywood crowd who preyed on the innocent. He doubted Gabby was a match for their deceptive schemes.

"Then accept my apologies," he said gently.

“Because you’re my fiancé for the evening, I suppose I can do that.” She looked around. “Have you seen Diana? It’s late. We need to get back to the condo. She’s getting up early to go skiing.”

“What will you do?” Ryan asked.

“Good question.” She sighed and looked at her cast. “I’ve been looking forward to this ski vacation all year.”

“Since you don’t have plans, tomorrow would be a good day to shop for that engagement ring.” He rose and held out his hand to her.

“You can’t mean that.” She paled, though her smile remained in place. Even pale, her skin was beautiful. “We can’t continue with this pretense. It will make matters worse. Let’s just tell everyone we made the wrong decision. We can remain ... friends.” She laid her hand in his and let him help her to her feet.

“Don’t worry. I’m working on a plan, but with my mother scheduling the photographer ...”

“Photographer?” Gabby looked ready to faint.

“Are you all right?” Ryan tightened his hand around hers.

“That depends.” Her voice trembled. She lifted her big brown eyes—eyes he could fall into. “Why is your mother hiring a photographer?”

“For the engagement pictures.” Even as he said the words, it struck him that panic didn’t set in. He wasn’t really engaged. By morning he’d have a plan to gracefully end the ruse and placate his mother.

“We can’t do that.” Gabby’s voice quivered. Fine lines pressed into the corners of her eyes.

“I agree.” He hoped his smile would allay her fears. “Don’t worry. Everything’s under control. Isn’t that your friend over there?” He nodded to Diana, who seemed to be having a lively conversation with Sherman.

“Yes,” Gabby said weakly.

“I’ll go tell her it’s time to go, then I’ll drive you back to your place.”

“You will?” Gabby’s eyes came up.

“Sure. You didn’t think I’d let my fiancée—”

“Fake fiancée,” she said quickly.

“Exactly.” He smiled. “Anyway, I’ll take you and Diana back to your place.”

“And you’ll figure out a way to get out of this engagement.” She gave him a firm look.

“I’m already working on a plan,” he said and tried to ignore the strange feeling that made him wonder if what he was doing was right.

CHAPTER 7



The next morning Gabby hobbled into the kitchen and put the tea kettle on the stove. She already tried to wake Diana three times, but her friend was a sleepyhead. Even at home, she had trouble getting out of bed to go to work.

When Ryan had told Diana that he would drive her and Gabby to the condo, Sherman had offered to take her. To Gabby's relief, Ryan had been kind but firm. Though Diana had been disappointed, she'd been excited to meet the famous movie star and talked about him during the drive to their rental place.

Gabby was relieved to have the distraction. Ryan had said he'd have a plan to break the engagement. She should've been glad. Instead, she was filled with doubt. They couldn't let people believe they were engaged.

To be engaged, they'd have to be in love. "I love you," were three words that would never pass between her and Ryan. Something tightened inside her. She was the one who got them into this mess. Ryan said he'd get them out of it. She hoped he was right.

Stomach turning, panic gripped her insides. Maybe she should call Ryan and talk to him about his plan to cancel the engagement. She should be involved in the breakup because she was involved in this charade.

She picked up her phone.

"What are you doing up?" Diana walked into the room, her eyes half open.

“I’ve been up. I tried to wake you three times, remember?” She set her phone on the kitchen table.

“Sort of.” Diana rubbed the sleep from her eyes and sat at the kitchen table.

“Would you like some breakfast? I’m going to make pancakes,” Gabby said.

“Yum!” Diana’s eyes widened, then she bit her lip. “That’s okay. I’ll eat when I get to the ski area. Sherman said he’d pick me up and that we’d stop for brunch on the way.”

“Diana, I don’t know if your seeing Sherman is a good idea.” Gabby gave her friend a concerned look.

“I know you think that because he’s a big Hollywood star that he’s not good enough for me, but he’s a sweet guy.” Diana pushed her fingers through her hair. “Why does morning have to come so early?”

“Because it’s the period of time that comes between midnight and noon,” Gabby said matter of factly. The tea kettle whistled. Moving to the stove, she lifted the kettle and filled two mugs with hot water. She set them and a box of tea bags on the table before sitting across from Diana and giving her friend a direct look. “Promise me you’ll be careful of Sherman. He may seem like a nice guy, but he’s an actor. They take lessons at being nice.”

“He’s so sweet.” Diana plopped a tea bag into her mug, then wrapped her fingers around it and looked at Gabby. “He’s from a small town just like me.”

“Just promise me you’ll be careful.” Gabby squeezed Diana’s hand.

“I promise.” Diana glanced at the clock. “I better get ready. Sherman will be here in fifteen minutes. Why did you get up so early?”

“I wanted to see you off.” Gabby gave her friend a frozen smile and tried to ignore the tightness in her chest.

“That’s nice.” Diana hugged her, then frowned. “Now that you’re engaged to Ryan, are you going to spend the day with

him?”

“We have plans,” Gabby spoke slowly. She shifted her gaze.

The doorbell rang.

“That’s Sherman. I have to get ready.” Diana’s eyes widened with panic. She jumped to her feet and dashed out of the room.

“I’ll get the door,” Gabby called after her. She struggled to her feet and hobbled to the door.

Sherman was tall and broad-shouldered and stood with his back to her. When the door opened, he turned and smiled. That smile dimmed a notch when he saw Diana wasn’t standing in the doorway.

“Come in.” Gabby stepped to the side. “Diana will be out in a minute. I’m her roommate, Gabby.”

“I remember.” Sherman shook her hand and stepped inside.

Gabby was struck by his almost shy behavior. On the screen, he was larger than life, but in person, he seemed like a small-town boy.

He looked around. “Nice place.”

“Thanks,” Gabby said.

When she and Diana arrived, she’d glanced at the interior decorations, but because it was what she expected—the basic design for a rental—she’d dismissed it. She was sure Sherman said the condo was nice just to be polite. As a movie star, he had to live in a mansion. Wherever he was staying in Aspen had probably been decorated by one of the crème-de-la-crème designers.

“I’m ready.” Diana dashed into the living room while she tugged on her hat.

The warmth in Sherman’s eyes made Gabby wonder about this man. The photos on the Internet showed him with a different woman several times a week. The look he gave Diana

made Gabby wonder if this Lothario really was a small-town boy at heart.

Kind of like Ryan. He was photographed with beautiful women, but when she'd visited Mike at the Knight mansion, she never saw Ryan with a woman. He would pace the ornately decorated living room with a phone pressed to his ear and talk business, or he was in his office sitting in front of his computer. Who were those women in the photographs?

"Have fun," Gabby called after Diana as she dashed out the door.

Sherman flashed her a smile, then closed the door.

Gabby stepped into the kitchen. She picked up her mug and grimaced at the cooled tea. She'd brew herself another cup, then call Ryan and have him explain his plan to call off the engagement.

She pulled out her phone and checked her email. A couple of people she'd met with to redecorate their homes had emailed to say they wanted her to start the projects. She quickly responded, then emailed her suppliers to schedule deliveries. She couldn't ski, she may as well work.

Like Ryan.

She tensed at the thought. She'd never be like Ryan. He was all business. Someday she'd marry and have a family. That was one of the reasons she had become an interior designer. It was a great career to schedule around family activities.

If she had a family.

To have a family, she had to date someone. If news got out that she was engaged to marry Ryan Knight, that would destroy her social life. She had to call him and find out his plan.

She scrolled through the internet sites, then froze. Page Six was covered with a spread about Ryan's upcoming nuptials.

"Engaged? Everyone is asking—who is this mystery woman?"

Below the caption was a photo taken when Ryan had driven her and Diana to the condo. When he'd helped her out of his SUV, he'd wrapped an arm around her waist and told her to lean against him. She didn't want to, but she didn't want to slip on the ice and endure more injuries. With great reluctance, she did as he said and tried to ignore the strength that held her close to his muscular chest.

Her phone rang. Her mother's name flashed across the screen.

She squeezed her eyes tight. This couldn't be happening. She pressed the speakerphone. "Hi, Mom."

"Gabby, what's going on? Why didn't you tell me? Who is Ryan Knight and why are you on Page Six?" Her mother sounded hurt.

"Don't worry, Mom." Gabby took a breath. "It's a typo."

"You're telling me that this ten thousand-word article is a typo?" Her tone rose with each word.

"Yes." Gabby's voice squeaked. "I talked to Ryan, and he's taking care of it."

"How is he taking care of it?"

"I'm not sure," Gabby said.

Her phone's call waiting notification sounded. Her heart beat wildly.

Ryan.

"Ryan's calling me now. After I talk to him, I'll call you back. Bye, Mom." She disconnected the call and closed her eyes.

The second phone ring tied her stomach into knots.

"Hello?" She stepped to the window that overlooked the parking lot and watched Sherman help Diana into his SUV.

"Hello, Gabby." Ryan's deep voice raised goosebumps along the curve of her neck. "I'm calling to let you know the plan for the day."

“I’m so glad you thought of something.” Gabby breathed a sigh of relief. “We need to get this engagement canceled. Did you know there’s a picture of you—us—on the Page Six website?”

“Yes,” he said flatly. “Trust me. I’ll take care of it.”

“How?”

“That’s what I want to talk about. I can be at your place in half an hour, then we can discuss the plan over brunch.”

“But we’ll be seen together.”

“For a while,” he said. “People have short memories in this town. They’ll soon move on to the next newsworthy—or not-so-newsworthy—item. The place I have in mind for brunch knows how to be discrete.”

Did that mean he was taking her to a place where he’d taken the other women in his life? What did it matter as long as the engagement was broken and they could move on with their lives?

“All right. I’ll see you in thirty minutes,” she said.

She should’ve felt relief. Instead, she felt trepidation. She’d been engaged for less than twenty-four hours. Now she was planning a way to break the engagement.

She’d always dreamed about her engagement and her wedding. She’d never expected it to be made and broken in so short a time.

And she sure hadn’t planned to be engaged to Ryan Knight.

CHAPTER 8



Ryan helped Gabby with her chair in the secluded corner of the exclusive restaurant. He caught the subtle scent of her skin. Tightening his jaw against stirring emotions, he forced his thoughts to serious matters that would chill this tumultuous feeling. They were at the restaurant to discuss the end of their short-lived engagement.

The tuxedo-dressed server rushed to their table and asked if they would like to order drinks.

“I’ll just have water.” Gabby glanced at the calligraphed menu.

“I’ll have the same.” Ryan smiled at the server, who nodded and withdrew.

“This place has a nice view.” Gabby glanced out the picture window that framed the ski area, then looked back at him. “But I guess we should get to the matter at hand—the end of our engagement.”

The server stepped to their table, placed water glasses in front of them, then asked if they were ready to order.

“I’m not sure. Everything looks delicious.” Gabby lifted her dark eyes to Ryan. “What do you suggest?”

Captivated by her brown eyes, Ryan took a breath and dropped his gaze to his menu. “The eggs Benedict are good,” he said before looking back at her.

“Thank you for simplifying my choice.” She smiled at the server. “That’s what I’ll order.”

Ryan ordered the same and leaned back as the server collected their menus and left.

“I want to apologize.” Gabby straightened the knife and fork on the table in front of her, then dropped her hands to her lap and looked at Ryan.

He raised his brows.

“If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t have this mess,” she said with a vulnerable smile that made Ryan want to draw her to him and kiss her.

He waited. In business, he’d learned that the less he said, the more forthcoming his business associates tended to be, though Gabby would never be his business associate. Right now, the world believed her to be his fiancée.

The drumming in his chest made him draw air. He was torn between ending their engagement and enjoying a quiet moment with this woman who was the center of his thoughts.

He blinked. Business was his focus. Why was he thinking about her?

“Everyone thinks we’re engaged.” Her lips parted. “I thought I was helping ...” She blushed and looked down before looking at him through her lashes. “That isn’t true. I was playing a joke on you.”

“I know.” He smiled slightly.

“You did?” Her eyes hooded. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“I wanted to see how far you would take this little game.”

“This is a game to you?” She lifted her chin.

“Isn’t that how you meant it?” He lifted a brow.

“Of course.” She straightened her shoulders.

“Then let’s concern ourselves with the matter at hand. We’re here to work on a plan—our broken engagement. I suggest we join forces.”

“That is why we’re together—to break up.” The flooding in her cheeks gave away her innocence and filled him with

heated feelings he pushed down but couldn't bury.

"Yes, and so this calls for a toast." He lifted his water glass.

"Does that mean you've solved this dilemma?" She picked up her glass.

"It does." He touched his glass to hers, waited until she took a sip, then followed suit. "The engagement is officially broken."

"Was your mother very disappointed?" Gabby looked shocked. "She had scheduled a photographer and was planning a party."

"That's all in a day's work for my mother." He set his glass on the table. "She's also scheduled a photographer to immortalize the birth of her first grandchild. Mike and Essie are walking hand-in-hand through a snowy meadow with a photographer trailing them as we speak."

"At least your mother has something to look forward to," Gabby said simply.

"You look disappointed."

"I'm not." Surprise widened her eyes. "But there's something wonderful about engagements and babies, especially this time of year."

"Why is that?" he asked confused.

"It's Christmas," she said, shocked.

"Oh, right." He nodded. How did it get to be Christmas already?

He glanced around the restaurant to the boughs that framed the windows and stretched along the tray ceiling. Lights and colorful bulbs were intertwined with the branches. A Christmas tree surrounded by artfully wrapped gift boxes sat behind the hostess' desk.

"This Christmas will be exciting because you can shop for Mike and Essie's new baby." Gabby's smile made his insides warm.

“Shop?” That word spread through him like terror.

He’d never shopped in his life. Every year his assistant gave him a list of items he should buy for family and friends. He barely glanced at the list. He always approved it. Whatever she bought for the recipients, they loved. He would receive thanks from everyone he knew. He would smile and nod and wish he could remember which gift they’d received.

Business was easier to deal with. He could remember every detail of every transaction since he’d joined the family corporation after he graduated college. Those were the exciting moments in his life. Shopping for his new niece or nephew? He’d text his assistant and see what she recommended.

“I hope you plan to shop for this baby,” Gabby said in earnest, making him wonder at the discomfort in his chest that felt like guilt.

“Of course.” He tried to squelch the surprise that had to show in his eyes.

In business, he was an expert at schooling his emotions. Why did he feel he was losing control when he talked to Gabby?

“You should do that this afternoon.” Excitement built in her voice. “There’s a cute shop on Main Street? Have you seen it?”

“Possibly,” he said, though he’d never noticed any of the shops in Aspen.

“You should go there,” Gabby said. “They have the cutest baby things. In the display window is a cute little puffer jacket and matching hat. The new baby would look adorable in that.”

“You haven’t seen the baby yet.” He frowned. “No one has, except for that fuzzy picture Essie pulls out on occasion.”

“This is Aspen.” She met his look. “Babies wearing adorable snow outfits are everywhere. If you need help picking something out, let me know.”

“I think I can pick out a baby gift,” he said flatly. Not he. His assistant could. After he and Gabby finished brunch, he’d take her back to her condo, then he’d go to his place ... and what? Work? When would he see Gabby again? The raw scratch on the inside of his chest confirmed never. “But I wouldn’t mind a second opinion. That is if you think your foot can stand the pressure.”

“When it comes to Christmas shopping, I’m a rock. Christmas is all about families and children.” She grinned.

“Then maybe we should become shopping partners,” Ryan said with a grin.

“You’d be amazed at what I buy in an hour,” Gabby said. “And I can get the best price.”

“Money’s important,” he said, though wondered at his discomfort for voicing that opinion. He’d never been concerned about negotiating for the best price when it came to business, but he did like to win. “How about we plan an excursion after brunch?”

“Since I suddenly have more free time than expected.” Her mouth curved as she glanced at her leg.

“It looks like your day is planned,” Ryan said.

“Ryan, my boy.” A deep voice boomed into the alcove where he and Gabby sat.

Ryan turned to see Howard emerge from a group of people waiting to be seated. Ryan rose.

“What a nice surprise to see you here.” Howard pumped Ryan’s hand, then grinned at Gabby. “How’s the engagement ring hunt going?”

“We’re about to discuss that.” Ryan slipped his hand from Howard’s. Glancing at Gabby’s surprised expression, he gave her a reassuring look. All he needed was a plan to convince Howard that Knight Enterprises was the right company for their business deal while explaining that Ryan was a more effective business associate as a single man than if he were juggling business with family time.

“Good.” Howard’s eyes twinkled when he looked at Gabby, whose mouth dropped open in stunned surprise. “When you fall in love, there’s no sparing expense for that engagement ring. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime moment.”

“We’re working on that.” He gave Gabby a reassuring smile.

She had that deer-in-the-headlights expression.

“Howard.” Ryan turned to his friend. “I’ll be in touch regarding the engagement and other things.”

“Good to know.” Howard patted his shoulder. “The wife and I love this time of year, and an engagement party during Christmas is the perfect time to share good news.”

Party? Ryan hadn’t said anything about a party. His heart picked up speed. Howard must have talked to Ryan’s mother. He needed to get this engagement situation settled, then explain everything to his mother.

His throat dried, but he shook the discomfort away. His mother was reasonable. She’d understand.

“Howard, yoo-hoo.”

Howard looked up to a blonde woman who Ryan assumed was Howard’s wife. The woman waved to him. The other people surrounding her followed the hostess into a private dining room.

“Looks like they’re ready for us.” He pointed a finger at Ryan. “Looking forward to hearing from you, pal. I have documents about our deal ready to email to you, which I’ll do when I get back to the office. Review them, then we’ll talk.” He nodded to Gabby, then strode to the lobby where the blonde looped her arm through his and followed the others in their group through a doorway.

“He has to know the truth.” Gabby leaned back into her chair, stricken.

“He will.”

Ryan hadn’t thought Howard would get this excited about an engagement. Until now, the only thing they’d discussed was

business. In all their conversations, Howard had never mentioned his family. Maybe it was the season. Gabby seemed to have that same excitement about Christmas. Hadn't she said it was about families and children?

He glanced down at Gabby's plate and the breakfast she'd barely touched.

"Is your entrée all right?" He frowned.

"What?" She looked at her plate too, then gave him a half smile. "It's fine. I guess I wasn't as hungry as I thought."

"Would you like something else?"

"No, thank you." She shook his head. "I'm ready to leave whenever you are."

"All right." He rose and moved behind Gabby's chair. His hand clasping hers, he helped her stand but couldn't ignore the softness of her skin and the delicate structure of her hand. Her feminine physique belied the feistiness that rumbled beneath her smooth façade. She was high-spirited with a determination that matched his.

"Don't we need to settle the tab?" She gave him a curious look.

"I run a tab." He smiled at her.

"But I should—"

"I invited you, remember?"

Before she could answer, the hostess rushed to them with their coats. Once bundled, they moved out of the restaurant to the valet service, where his SUV idled. He helped Gabby into the passenger seat, then sprinted to the driver's side.

"Where is this shop that sells baby items?" He guided the vehicle down the long drive to the two-lane highway that led to Main Street.

"It's next to the Deauville. You can't miss it. It has all the cute Christmas scenes of Santa working with his elves and Mrs. Claus baking cookies." The excitement in her voice was like warmth wrapping around his heart.

Being with Gabby could almost make him believe in the joy of Christmas.

CHAPTER 9



Gabby was in heaven when she and Ryan entered the shop filled with designer baby clothes. The sales clerk was helping another woman who wore a fur coat and called out that she'd be right with Gabby and Ryan.

Stepping to a dresser where clothes were artfully folded on top and in open drawers, Gabby picked up a bright yellow outfit. Holding it to her chest she turned to Ryan. "What do you think?"

"It's nice." Ryan didn't look at the outfit.

The intense look he gave her made heat rise into her face. She turned away. She didn't know why Ryan made her blush. She'd worked with tougher customers than he. Glancing at the outfit again, she noticed it didn't have a price tag. There was a catch in her throat. Did that mean if someone had to ask the price, they couldn't afford it?

What was she thinking by recommending Ryan to shop at such an expensive store? She had no doubt he could afford it, but she always searched for the best price for her clients.

"Now that I think about it, I know the perfect place to shop for the new baby." She turned to him.

"You said this was the perfect place." His brow furrowed.

"It is, but there's a place in the town a few miles from here that sells designer clothes, but not at designer prices."

"I think I can afford these prices." He seemed amused at her determination to bargain shop. "How much is the outfit?"

“That’s just it. There’s no price tag,” she said with wide eyes. “I know cost doesn’t concern you, but if I don’t bargain shop for my clients, I feel I’m doing them a disservice.”

“Is that what I am?” His well-shaped mouth curved into a half-smile. “A client?”

“No,” she said, alarmed. “But I could never recommend an item that doesn’t have a price tag. I realize this is Aspen, but a customer should have some idea about pricing. Let’s go to the place in the next town.”

“All right, but if we don’t find something there, we’ll come back here,” Ryan said.

“We’ll find something there,” Gabby said with the same confidence she used with her clients. She knew how to shop.

They stepped to the sidewalk now filling up with shoppers and tourists. As they moved down the street, Ryan glanced at the store next to the baby shop—a jewelry store.

“Let’s go in here.” His hand on the door, he touched the small of her back.

“We can’t do that,” she said, horrified. She hung back, though she was struck by the warmth and tenderness in his touch.

His aloof demeanor seemed to hide a compassionate man. Who was Ryan Knight? Why was he so reserved? His mother and brother were open and friendly. Gabby never knew his father, but those who did remembered him as congenial and friendly.

“What’s the matter?” Ryan’s frown was slight.

“We’re about to walk into a jewelry store,” she said. “What if someone sees us? That could complicate our breaking up.”

“We’ll explain,” he said. He opened the door and drew her inside. “Who knows? This might be a good place to buy a baby gift.”

“What gift would that be?” she asked with a snort. “A diamond diaper pin?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” He looked thoughtful and led her to a display case filled with diamond rings. She was certain that these items would not have price tags. This was a place where asking the price meant they were too expensive for her.

“An engagement ring makes a nice Christmas gift.” The clerk, whose name tag read Antoine, approached them and flashed a white smile beneath his pencil-thin mustache.

Ryan smiled and nodded, then looked at the rings in the case. He turned to Gabby. “Which one do you like?”

Was he serious? She liked them all. Why was he teasing her this way? They were supposed to end this fake engagement, not make it more complex.

“Perhaps this one?” He nodded toward a ring whose sparkling center stone was surrounded by a gallery of accent diamonds.

“Of course, I would like it. It’s beautiful.” She gave him a bemused smile.

“We’ll start with that one.” Ryan turned to Antoine.

The jeweler slipped on a pair of white, cotton gloves, then lifted the ring from the display case. Taking a soft cloth, he wiped the ring, then held it over a black velvet pad where its diamond captured the light and sparkled.

A bubble of panic rose inside Gabby. Many of her friends had received beautiful engagement rings, but none compared to the ring she stared at now.

“What do you think?” Ryan’s voice was low in her ear.

“It’s the most beautiful ring I’ve ever seen.” Gabby could barely speak. She had to remember they were looking at rings. They weren’t buying anything.

“Would you like to try it on?” Antoine angled the ring so it would easily slip onto her finger.

Gabby started to shake her head. Trying on the ring seemed more than just a game. Her little joke was getting out of control. If she tried on the ring, it would seem as if she were

admitting something that wasn't real. People who tried on engagement rings were in love. She was still trying to decide if she liked Ryan. Maybe she liked him, but that was all. He was nicer than the last time she saw him, but why?

The rapid beat of her heart disappointed her. She felt nothing for this man, though he was kinder than she remembered. When he had told her that she wasn't the right woman for Mike, she had been angry and hurt. The man she was with today was different. He seemed to care.

She took a breath. He cared when it had to do with his company. This fake engagement would benefit his business dealings with Howard Allcock. He knew how to succeed in business and would stop at nothing to win.

Why would that bother her? Ryan was the one who would have to explain their broken engagement to everyone. The media wouldn't care if she were engaged. Until yesterday, they hadn't known she existed.

Gabby looked up to see Antoine's patient smile and Ryan's curious one.

"I can try it on," she said slowly. "That's all I'm doing is trying it on." She lifted her left hand.

Until now her unadorned fingers and short nails had never mattered to her. When Antoine slipped the ring onto her ring finger, she suddenly wished she had an exotic manicure. Looking at the diamond that flashed on her hand took her breath away. The ring instantly made her fingers look long and slim and elegant.

Her heart pounded wildly. This ring should not be on her finger. It wasn't a toy. The design had been made to denote a serious commitment. There was nothing serious about her relationship with Ryan. They didn't have a relationship.

He had taken her to brunch to devise the plan that would explain their broken engagement. Now she was trying on engagement rings. They were headed in the wrong direction.

"What do you think?" Antoine's soft voice broke through the turmoil churning inside her head.

“What any woman would think.” Her voice trembled, and she tightened her jaw. “It’s the most beautiful ring I’ve ever seen. It even makes my hand look beautiful, but it doesn’t belong on my hand.”

She felt Ryan stiffen.

“Perhaps another ring.” Antoine’s smile was warm.

“Would you like to look around?” Ryan’s look was so sincere, she felt as if he was her concerned fiancé eager to buy her a ring today.

Was he nuts? Did he realize the scuttlebutt this would create?

He was an astute businessman. He had to know what he was doing.

“After trying on that ring, it would be hard to look at another,” she said and meant it.

If the day ever came when she met someone she wanted to marry, she had to forget this ring. She would never marry someone who could afford it, which was fine with her. All she wanted from her marriage was to live with her loving husband in a cute house with their two-point-two children. The ring didn’t matter. The man she married did.

“We’ll take this ring,” Ryan said to Antoine, which gave Gabby a jolt.

“A very good choice.” Antoine smiled. “I’ll have the ring resized and delivered to your home tomorrow.”

“We should discuss ...” Gabby lifted her brows at him.

“That’s what we’ll do.” Ryan thanked Antoine, who smiled obligingly. He touched a hand to the small of Gabby’s back and guided her out of the store to a sidewalk crowded with shoppers and skiers stopping for lunch.

“You can’t be serious about buying that ring.” Gabby turned on Ryan but pasted a smile into place.

After seeing their pictures plastered all over the internet from yesterday’s mishap, she didn’t know who would be

watching but someone would be. Everything Ryan did made news.

“Didn’t you once tell me I was serious about everything, except what mattered?” Ryan spoke softly.

“I didn’t think you’d remember.” Gabby blinked.

“It’s my job to remember.” Taking her hand, he drew her close, so close she caught his subtle masculine scent. “Now I believe you told me there was a little shop in the next town that sold designer baby items for less.”

“It’s a half hour from here.” She looked into his blue eyes, which no longer seemed cold. They were warm and inviting. Another business tactic? This man was too complex to figure out. “Are you sure you want to go?”

“You sold me on it ... that is if you’re up to it. How’s your leg holding out?” He glanced at her cast.

“Oh.” She’d almost forgotten she’d broken her leg. “It’s fine. It doesn’t hurt.”

“Then I’d say that doctor did a good job setting it.” He escorted her to his SUV and helped her inside. He climbed behind the steering wheel. “Now tell me the name of the store. I’ll enter it into the navigational system.”

“We don’t need a navigational system to find this place. Follow Main Street to the highway and turn north,” she said and told him the name. “It has a cute sign with a blue perambulator.” When he frowned, she settled into her seat and said, “Don’t worry. We’ll find it. I’ve been there thousands of times.”

“Good to know.” He looked amused and shifted the SUV into gear.

They drove down a stretch of highway that was dotted with mansions and then gave way to forests and meadows. Gabby looked out the window at the trees glistening with snow. She was glad to be away from the Aspen glitz and glamor.

“You like it out here.” Ryan’s gentle voice cut through her thoughts.

“Sorry.” She gave him a slight smile, then returned her gaze to the window. “This country is so beautiful. It’s nice to see something natural. Aspen seems like a different world.” She stiffened. “I don’t mean to criticize Aspen.”

“Why not?” he asked amused. “It’s never held much charm for me.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that,” she said, shocked that one of Aspen’s most important residents would criticize the elite town.

“Because I live here?” His brows dropped.

“Yes.”

“My family’s always had this place in Aspen, but the town has changed over the years.” He exhaled slowly. “When my brother and I were kids, my father bought the lot which was then on the edge of town. Mike and I used to wander through the woods. We’d hike in the summer and snowshoe or cross-country ski in the winter.”

“Is that your current Aspen home?” she asked in surprise.

“Yes.” His mouth curved when he glanced at her. “It’s hard to believe that our place was once isolated. When others discovered the area, they built their mansions and moved in. When the area changed, so did Mike and I. We had come here to ski, not attend parties.”

“That surprises me,” Gabby said and wondered at this man who would do anything for a business deal, which included making sure his brother married the right woman.

Gabby hoped Mike married the right woman. She was happy that he and Essie were expecting.

“Why is that?” Ryan glanced at her, something unreadable in his eyes.

“Because it seems you make a point to be seen with the right people,” she said flatly and stared out the windshield.

“You made sure Mike married the right woman. At least, I hope he married the right woman.”

“Mike wouldn’t have made you happy.” His voice was soft, but firm.

“And you know that how?” She looked at him. Her mouth dropped open.

“Because you’re a strong, independent woman who knows her mind.”

“That isn’t an answer.” She crossed her arms over her chest and stared out the side window. “You tell me I know my mind, yet you didn’t think I knew my mind when it came to liking your brother.”

He guided the SUV to the side of the road and stopped. Other cars whizzed by him.

“What are you doing?” Gabby sat up straight and stared out at the highway.

“What did you like about my brother?” He faced her and propped one arm over the steering wheel.

“Lots of things.” She lifted her chin. “For one, he was nice.”

“And I’m not.”

She gave him a hard stare.

“That answers that question.” He laughed dryly. “What else?”

“He was easy to talk to.”

“Meaning that I’m not, but you’re talking to me now.”

“Because you asked me a question.” Her hard stare turned severe.

“When I told you that I didn’t think you and Mike should marry, I was protecting you.” His voice was soft. There was a look in his eyes she’d never seen before.

“Then you don’t think I’m a strong, independent woman,” she said. She fought the emotion that had built inside her when

Ryan told her Mike was seeing someone else. “I have news for you—I don’t need your protection.”

“No, you don’t, and you didn’t then.” He looked chagrined. “I was wrong to interfere, though I couldn’t stand by and watch you be hurt.”

“Mike wouldn’t have hurt me.” Gabby jerked her gaze to his. She blinked back threatening tears.

“Instead, I hurt you.” He touched her hand. The warmth and compassion in that touch made her breath catch. “That was never my intention.”

She looked at him through a blur of tears.

“Ah, Gabby, how can I make this up to you?” He smoothed a hand across her cheek.

She didn’t pull away. His touch was comforting and surprising. She lifted her gaze to his. What passed between them confused her more. This wasn’t the Ryan she knew. He had been hard and demanding and inflexible. He hadn’t cared what he’d done to her.

After she’d left, he had tried to call her, but she had nothing to say to him and had changed her phone number. If he had called again, she never knew, and she hadn’t cared.

“What I need is your forgiveness,” he said gently. The imploring look in his eyes made her drop her gaze.

“You had that long ago,” she whispered.

“Thank you,” he murmured. He never stopped looking at her. When he leaned toward her, her heart hammered hard and fast.

His lips soft and firm, Gabby closed her eyes and relished the kiss that warmed her blood. The rush of pleasure drowned out the resistance she’d built against this man. He had been her sworn enemy. All the hurt and anger withered away. Instead, her mind filled with the delight of a kiss she hadn’t realized could feel so good.

CHAPTER 10



*R*yan sank into the joy of kissing the most fascinating woman he'd ever met. The taste of her soft lips filled his mind with confusing emotions. Never had a woman affected him this way. He couldn't get enough of her.

All last night he'd paced his room. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't stop thinking about Gabby Adams, which was ridiculous. She wasn't a business associate. She offered nothing that would help his company. More confusing was that he didn't care. When he wasn't with her, he thought about her. When he was with her, he couldn't be close enough.

Now he was close. How did having her in his arms feel so right?

Was it right? She had liked his brother.

Gabby gasped and pulled away. The confused look in her eyes made a muscle jerk in his jaw. He'd never meant for this moment to get away from him. He knew business—knew how to stay in control. When he was with Gabby, the powerful surge of emotions rushing through him pushed all rational thought from his mind.

"You shouldn't have done that." Gabby's skin paled. Her chest rose with the breath she took.

"You're right." How did he explain that being with her muzzled all resistance? He couldn't. He didn't understand the feeling himself. He leaned away from her. "Do you still want to go to this baby store?"

"I don't think it's wise." Her voice was a bland whisper.

“I can promise you this will never happen again,” he said.

The unreadable look she gave him made him wonder what she was thinking.

“If you want to text me the information, I’ll have my assistant—”

“Your assistant.” Her voice held derision. “Shopping for your brother’s baby shouldn’t be left to your assistant.”

For a moment, he couldn’t speak. He hadn’t expected a scolding, yet he couldn’t argue with her allegation.

“The newest member of your family deserves thought and care in every gift.” She leaned back into her seat.

“Then that’s what I’ll do. If you’ll text me the store name, then give me suggestions for a gift.” He watched the shock on her face turn to sympathy.

“You really don’t know what to do, do you.” Her eyes softened.

“No.” He hated to admit there was something he couldn’t do. Shopping, let alone for a baby, was on that list.

“Let’s go,” she said. When he stared at her in confusion, she added, “To Gwilliam Park. That’s the next town over. That’s where the baby shop is.”

“I haven’t been to Gwilliam Park in years,” he said, surprised. He checked his side view mirror and merged into the traffic.

“It’s one of those untouched mining towns,” she said. “Thankfully the billionaires haven’t discovered it yet.” She touched her fingers to her lips and gave him an apologetic look. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

“I’m not offended.” He laughed dryly. “There are days when I wish the billionaires hadn’t discovered Aspen, which is hypocritical because I’m one of them. How did you discover Gwilliam Park?”

“Quite by accident.” Her mouth curved as if remembering. “I was remodeling a home on the Denver Polo Grounds. The

owners wanted a Western style, so I started searching the internet for furniture makers who could design the furnishings the homeowner requested. These little western towns are filled with artisans and most are available to start work immediately. I wanted to see for myself what kind of work they did, so I drove here.”

“And what did you discover?” He only cared because he liked the light in her eyes as she relayed an adventure that had moved her. He liked hearing her talk about her discovery and how she met creative people who preferred to live in an isolated town rather than with the monied crowd whose recommendations could change their lifestyles.

To what, he wondered. Was having more money worth sacrificing a life that offered freedom to create?

He had plenty of money, which allowed him to do whatever he wanted, but did he feel free? Hardly. His mind constantly sought the next business deal that would bring him more money.

Did he need more money? That was the only thing he gained when he completed these business transactions. That and the satisfaction of winning—something he learned from his father, who was no longer here to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

It wasn't until his father had lain on his deathbed that it dawned on Ryan his real purpose in life. His father wanted to make sure Ryan knew the reason—a personal relationship with God.

“What we have here doesn't matter.” His father had looked at him through watery blue eyes. “Promise me you'll get to know Him before it's too late.”

“But, Dad, I do know Him.” Ryan tried to hold back the pain of watching his father slip away.

His father said nothing else. A few hours later, he was gone.

Now Ryan saw he was ignoring his father's advice. He was in the midst of the holiday season, the day when he should be

celebrating God's greatest gift to mankind. Still, he couldn't ignore his mission to make the Knight name a household word.

The country road gave way to log homes surrounded by soft mounds of snow. Smoke curled from chimneys into a brilliantly blue sky. The dirt road turned to a cobblestone street. The false fronts of two-story buildings sat back from wooden sidewalks. Many of the buildings had freshly painted fronts and large display windows filled with Christmas scenes of Santa and his elves and reindeer. Other displays featured children throwing snowballs, building a snowman or skiing. The last display was the nativity with Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the angels giving thanks to God for the long-awaited birth of their Savior.

"There's the shop next to the old opera house." Gabby sat up straight.

The storefront was exactly as she'd described it with the artfully designed sign and the perambulator perched in front of the store's gables. It was filled with colorfully wrapped gifts.

Ryan found a free place to park directly in front of the store—another sign they were no longer in Aspen. When he parked the SUV, Gabby reached for the door handle.

"Let me help you." He touched her arm.

Her delight dimmed as she looked into his eyes as if she'd forgotten they had driven to the town together.

"The street is icy." He kept his voice low. "You already have a broken leg. You don't need more complications."

"No, I don't." Her mouth tipped slightly.

He slipped from the driver's side and rounded the SUV. He opened the door and took her hand. It was soft and delicate in his own.

She thanked him, then lifted her gaze to the shop. "It's exactly as I remember it, except for the Christmas decorations. Those make it homier."

His gaze followed hers. He had to agree. The town's decorations were warm and inviting, not like Aspen's decorations, which were brittle and harsh and hardly endearing. Looking about the town, he felt he'd come home.

To what? He hadn't been here in years.

His hand wrapped around hers, he steadied her until they stepped into the store. The bell above them tinkled. The store's floorplan had been divided into rooms as if it had once been a house.

Gabby's eyes turned bright, and she slipped her hand from his.

He tightened his mouth. This was where she felt free. He'd step back and watch her work.

"Gabby Adams, aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" A tall, lean woman wearing a colorful sweater, a full skirt and boots stepped through the curtains that separated the shop from the back area.

"Augusta, it's good to see you." Gabby moved to the woman and hugged her, then stepped away. "This is Ryan. He's about to become an uncle and I told him this was the place to come for baby gifts."

"Nothing like a little pressure." Augusta laughed and shook Ryan's hand. She glanced at Gabby's cast. "What do we have here?"

"What?" Gabby's eyes widened, then she dropped her gaze. "I broke my leg." She flushed. "I had planned to take a ski trip with a friend but took a wrong turn and now I'm hobbling around with this thing on my leg.

"A friend?" Augusta's eyes widened with interest, and she glanced at Ryan.

"Oh, no." Gabby lifted her hands. "A girlfriend. Fortunately, she found someone else to ski with. A broken leg in Aspen kind of limits my activities. Thankfully, it doesn't interfere with shopping."

“Now I remember. You were the best shopper I’d ever met.” Augusta grinned. “You knew how to sniff out a deal.”

“I want the best for my clients.” Gabby’s pretty blush heightened her color. “Ryan and I were shopping for baby gifts. I remembered your cute store, so we drove here.” She turned to Ryan. “Everything in here is handmade.”

He nodded and scanned the shop that looked like a nursery with its cribs, dressers and strollers. Animals and fairytale characters covered the walls. The open dresser drawers and armoires were filled with knitted, crocheted and hand-sewn items.

“Are you shopping for a little boy or a little girl?” Augusta asked.

“We don’t know yet,” Ryan said. “My brother and his wife have decided to wait.”

“Ah, the old-fashioned way.” Augusta’s eyes twinkled. “We have plenty of items that will fit into any nursery. Have they picked a theme?”

“Not yet,” Ryan said. Who knew that shopping for a baby could be technical?

“Then I’ll show you some items that will complement any decorating idea.” Augusta crooked a finger at them and led them into another room filled with some carefully crafted furniture and more handmade garments.

A little boy and girl dashed from behind the curtain and raced into the store.

“Do you want to see my new truck?” The boy held it up for Gabby to see.

“Yes, I do.” Gabby bent to his level. “My, that’s impressive,” she exclaimed and the little boy beamed.

“I have new shoes,” said the girl, not to be outdone. She pointed her toe.

“My grandchildren,” Augusta said proudly and stood between the children. She wrapped her arms around their shoulders.

“I see the resemblance.” Gabby laughed. “And you have pretty new shoes,” she said to the girl.

The child blushed and turned her face into her grandmother’s skirt.

“Shall we show Gabby all the wonderful baby things we have in the store?” Augusta arched her brow at the children, who nodded.

“What is your favorite thing?” Gabby asked.

“I like the rocking horse.” The boy clutched the truck and stood next to the wooden horse. He smoothed a hand over the toy’s mane.

“I like the tea party.” The girl sat at the table.

Gabby looked at the items the children pointed out, then walked through the room carefully inspecting each item. She pointed out her suggestions to Ryan, explaining how they would complement each other.

The children became bored and dashed behind the curtain.

“What is your budget?” Augusta asked Ryan.

Ryan schooled his surprise. He worked with budgets all the time—in business. It never occurred to him to have one when shopping for the newest member of the family.

“What do you suggest?” he asked simply.

“When I work with young families, they keep the budget in a range.” She explained the figure amounts—far lower than what he’d consider for a business arrangement.

“That sounds reasonable,” he said flatly. “What should we include in that amount?”

The store bell tinkled.

“I’ll leave you to do your decision-making,” Augusta said, but if you need anything, let me know.” She stepped from the room to greet the next customer.

“If we’re buying items for the nursery in your family’s Aspen home, this is what I would suggest.” Gabby moved

some items into a group and arranged them in a style that would welcome parents into a nursery. “These newborn items would be perfect for a winter baby.” She arranged baby clothes into colorful collections. “What do you think?” She looked at him.

“Are these clothes big enough?” He’d never seen such tiny outfits. They looked too small to fit a doll.

“You haven’t been around many newborns, have you.” She laughed that musical sound.

“To be honest, I don’t know that I’ve been around any newborns,” he said with apology. How could he be thirty-five years old and not seen a newborn? Suddenly the life that had been filled with mergers and acquisitions seemed empty.

He felt Gabby’s shocked look and turned his gaze to her dark eyes. He wished she didn’t look at him with pity. He lived his life like most of his friends—searching for the next business deal. Was that his legacy? Making Knight Enterprises the conglomerate that attracted more business? Was that how he wanted people to remember him?

He remembered his father’s words. He had urged him to focus on what was important. God’s love was important. Ryan had always thought he’d have time for that—someday.

“It’s a good thing you’re going to be an uncle.” Gabby’s full lips pressed thumbprint dimples into her smooth cheeks. “That little baby is going to teach you lots of things.”

“I can’t wait,” he said. The tumble in his chest took him by surprise.

This new baby may teach him new things. Did Gabby know what she was teaching him? He wasn’t sure—yet—but he had a feeling his life was about to change.

He couldn’t wait.

CHAPTER 11



Gabby wondered at the look in Ryan's eyes. She hadn't known him long, but she'd met enough people to recognize someone consumed by business.

Whenever she had visited his family home, she'd see him pacing the terrace or through the manicured gardens with a phone pressed to his ear. She could tell when he closed a deal. His eyes shone with the satisfaction of a victory.

Did he think about anything besides business? Whenever she saw him, he'd been alone, she'd never seen him with anyone. She didn't know who he talked to on the phone, but the calls sounded as if he were conducting a business arrangement and not something personal.

How could someone be so consumed with business? Didn't he want more out of life? This was the time of year when people could feel exceptionally close to God's love and the gift He'd given mankind through His Son. How could anyone receive this gift and not want to share this joy with others?

The only joy Ryan showed was when he completed a merger or an acquisition.

He looked at her but not in his typical I've-closed-a-deal way. What it stirred inside her, she didn't want to analyze. It seemed as if he were realizing something about himself—or her.

She took a breath and turned away. She didn't want to be that close to Ryan Knight. That kiss they'd shared stirred

emotions within her that she'd never understand and refused to try. She'd help Ryan pick out some gifts for the new baby, then he'd drive her back to the condo. It was time to end her vacation in Aspen. She'd explain to Diana she had business in Denver and had to return right away. She could find a ride back to Denver. The bulletin boards in the coffee shops were covered with notes left by people looking for someone to share costs for the drive to the city.

“What do you think of these pieces?” Gabby pulled her gaze from Ryan's.

“They're good choices,” he said, his voice filled with an emotion that caused a strange burst of sensation in the pit of her stomach.

“They seem to fit in with Mike's relaxed style.” She withdrew her phone from her pocket and snapped some pictures. “I'll text these photos to Mike now so he and Essie can review the items and let me know what they think. I'll leave a deposit with Augusta so she can hold the items for the rest of the day. What's Mike's phone number?”

“Thank you.” He moved close to her.

“I'm not sure why you're thanking me.” She lifted her gaze to his. “I'm only making suggestions so that Mike and Essie have an idea of the direction they want to take.”

“It's more than any of us could've done,” he said, his voice husky. “You have a gift. You showed that when you decorated Mike's apartment.”

“I'm doing what I love,” she said, the sincerity in his eyes scooping air from her lungs.

“It shows—in everything you do,” he said, then gave her Mike's phone number.

She texted the pictures to Mike but couldn't ignore Ryan's closeness—and that she liked it.

“How's it going in here?” Augusta's sing-song tone blew into the room. “Oh.”

Gabby felt the blood drain from her face and stepped from Ryan. He rubbed the back of his neck.

“It’s going fine.” His tone changed as if he were closing a business deal. He handed his credit card to Augusta. “We texted pictures of these items to my brother and his wife so they can decide on what they want. I’ll make a deposit so you can hold them until we contact you tonight.”

“All right.” She turned away. “I’ll get my pad and make note of your selections, then wait to hear from you.”

Mike and Essie called before Augusta finished recording the selections. Ryan set the call on speakerphone. Gabby was relieved to hear they wanted everything Gabby had chosen.

“It will look great in the nursery Mom has set aside for Baby Knight when he or she arrives,” Mike said. “We knew Gabby would know what we wanted. I’m still getting compliments on the way she decorated my Denver apartment.”

Essie giggled in the background.

“Baby Knight?” Ryan lifted a questioning gaze to Gabby, who shrugged a shoulder.

“We have to call him something until he arrives.” Mike sounded joyous.

Gabby looked at Ryan and wondered at the thoughtful look in his eyes. Did he notice Mike’s joy? Did he wonder if there was more to life than looking for the next deal? What would he be like as a husband? And a father?

Strangely it wasn’t that hard to imagine. A man who knew his mind, she had been surprised that he could also show his compassionate side. He did care about others. He volunteered for ski patrol at the ski area.

“Gabby, what do you say about decorating our nursery? You did a great job with my apartment,” Mike said. Essie’s voice sounded in the background, giving her agreement.

“I’d love to.” Gabby’s excitement was hard to control. “There are some great items at this store. I’ll text you some

more pictures, and you and Essie can let me know what you like.”

“Great idea. Hang on a minute,” Mike said. “Mom wants to talk to you.”

“Tell her I’ll—”

“Ryan?” Novelynne’s voice sounded through the earpiece. “What’s this I hear about you and Gabby buying a ring?”

“Who told you we bought a ring?” Ryan frowned, then looked at Gabby.

Gabby went hot. They had gone to brunch to devise a plan to end their fake engagement. Not only did they fail to break up, the entire charade was out of control. Now Ryan’s family was involved. Soon her mother would call and want to know what was going on. She’d been shocked when she saw Gabby with Ryan on Page Six.

“Antoine, among several others. You know people report back to me everything that’s of interest, and you know Antoine’s my very good friend and tells me everything before he tells anyone else.” She sounded perplexed.

“No, I didn’t know that,” Ryan spoke slowly.

“Well, what is it? Did you buy a ring? I need to know if we’re celebrating a holiday engagement.” Novelynne’s tone implored her son.

“We’re not.” Gabby could barely speak.

“What?” Novelynne asked. “Who said that?”

“I did, Mrs. Knight. This is Gabby.”

“Oh, Gabby, you’re so funny.” Novelynne laughed. “I could’ve sworn you said you weren’t engaged, which is ridiculous. Why else would you be trying on rings?”

“It was something we did as a whim, Mom,” Ryan said lightly. He gave Gabby a look that said they were sharing a joke.

Was trying on engagement rings a joke? At the time, it hadn’t felt that way. It didn’t feel that way now.

“We just happened to pass a jewelry store, and I suggested we look inside,” Ryan said. “One thing led to another, and Gabby tried on a ring. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Didn’t it? Gabby struggled with the strange ache that filled her throat. Her trying on the ring didn’t mean anything to Ryan because the only thing that mattered to him was his next business deal. An engagement wasn’t a business deal, so what would it matter to him that he took Gabby to a jewelry store?

Gabby stiffened at the tightening in her chest. Why did what he said to his mother hurt? Trying on the ring meant nothing to her either, but somehow things changed when she looked at the beautiful ring on her finger and realized what it meant. Everything about that ring was serious—the way the diamond shone and the way it made Ryan look at her. That ring with its brilliantly cut diamond, its glistening side stones and the slender shank that wrapped around her finger told the world the man who gave that ring to a woman wanted to commit to her.

Her breath came more easily as she realized she was reading too much into a stroll through a jewelry store—even an elegant Aspen jewelry store. Ryan had only one commitment—to Knight Enterprises.

A gasp sounded through the phone. Had Ryan surprised his mother?

“Ryan, you’re such a joker,” Novelynne spoke slowly, then laughed. “Of course, it means something. For years you had me worried that the family corporation was the only thing that mattered to you. You’ve been keeping things from me and quite cleverly. I had no idea you were interested in Gabby. She’s such a darling girl. I couldn’t have chosen a better match for you myself, and you know I’ve tried.”

“What?” Gabby fought against the panic shooting through her chest. “Oh, no, Mrs. Knight, you have it all wrong.”

“I don’t think so. And please call me Novelynne,” she said, clearly surprised by Gabby’s denial. “After all, you’re about to become my daughter. I’ve always wanted a daughter. Now I’ll have two. You young people forget. I was once young, too.”

“Mom.” Ryan’s voice was steady. His eyes turned dark with concern. “I’ll be back at the house after I take Gabby back to her condo. We can talk then.”

“I have to go, dear,” Novelynne said with apology. “The caterer is calling. I have to book this party while he still has an opening.”

“Party?” Tension pressed tiny lines into the corners of Ryan’s eyes. “What party is that?”

“Why the one we have every year on Christmas Eve? This one will be special because we’ll celebrate Christmas while we celebrate your engagement.” Novelynne sounded so happy, Gabby hated that she and Ryan would make her understand—there would be no engagement party because she and Ryan weren’t engaged. “I’ll give you all the details when you arrive.”

She disconnected the call.

Silence echoed inside the store.

“She has to understand,” Gabby said in a strained voice.

“She will,” Ryan said in a confident tone that didn’t match the concern in his eyes. “Let’s snap those pictures and send them to Mike, then I’ll take you back to your place. When I get home, I’ll talk to my mother.”

“We both need to talk to her,” she said softly, though she prayed they could make Ryan’s family understand without disappointing Novelynne. She liked Ryan’s mother. She didn’t want her to be disappointed.

Ryan glanced at her, his mouth in a firm line.

Gabby’s heart pounded like a war drum. She had told Howard Allcock that Ryan was engaged only because Howard was concerned about Ryan’s single lifestyle. Howard’s company promoted family. Pictures of Ryan on the Internet showed him with a different woman several times a week, though she wondered about these women. When Gabby worked with Mike to remodel his Denver Apartment, Ryan had visited to see the result. He never came with a woman, let

alone one of the glamorous ones who accompanied him to celebrity-attracting social events.

“Surely, you can make your mother understand we were just looking at engagement rings for fun,” Gabby said, though doubt crept into her voice.

“You don’t know my mother,” Ryan said.

A bubble of panic rose in Gabby’s throat.

What had she done?

CHAPTER 12



When Ryan drove through the entrance gate of the Knight estate, he stared in shock at the white vans emblazoned with The Aspen Scullery on their sides. Aspenites clamored to hire the elite chef to cater their events. No one declined a soirée that had hired The Aspen Scullery owner, Cohen.

“We’re too late.” Gabby swallowed.

“Not if I can help it.” Ryan parked the SUV at the base of the steps. Climbing out, he raced to the passenger side and helped Gabby from her seat.

Climbing the steps, he devised the best way to tell his mother the reasons she couldn’t host an engagement party. The best explanation was the truth, but his jaw clenched knowing the hurt that would appear in her eyes.

Her marriage to Ryan’s father had been filled with love and excitement. She wanted the best for her sons. Ryan didn’t have the heart to tell her marriage wasn’t for everyone. Not everyone found the person they wanted to be with for the rest of their lives. That his parents had been in love made him grateful but complicated his problem of explaining to his mother that their union had been the exception rather than the rule.

Those explanations had fallen on deaf ears.

“My marriage to your father is proof that marriage can be happy,” she said, with more seriousness than Ryan had ever noticed before. “If you expect perfection, you’ll be

disappointed. You work hard to make the family company a success. You need to be more committed to your marriage. Great marriages don't just happen. And a marriage without Christ at the center will be a lost cause.”

His mother's statement had stunned him. He knew of his parents' commitment to their faith. His father rose early every morning to spend time reading scripture and praying before his first meeting. Ryan had joined him. After his father passed away, Ryan continued the practice of a quiet time before God.

He wasn't sure when those moments became less frequent. Urgent meetings seemed to intrude in the time he had set aside to seek God's guidance. Soon those moments he spent before God's throne became less frequent, along with the reminders that God needed to be involved in all business transactions. Ryan's continued success made it easy to forget his need to include God and His wisdom in every decision he made.

What was more important? Success as seen in the world's eyes or a relationship with God? He had success. Why did he hunger for more? He had thought the direction he had taken the company would please his father, but now he felt the emptiness his accomplishments brought him.

Holding Gabby's hand, he helped her up the steps. He swallowed, the softness of her smooth skin that almost made him forget why he'd rushed home—he had to stop his mother from planning his and Gabby's engagement party.

Walter, who had worked for the family as long as Ryan could remember, opened the door. His smile sincere, he took their coats and hats, then stepped to the side.

“Hello, Walter.” Ryan forced a smile to cover the hammering in his chest. “Where is my mother?”

“You've come home. Both of you have.” Novelynne stood in the doorway to the catering kitchen she'd built to accommodate the many parties she was known for hosting. “And just in time.” She turned and disappeared into the kitchen. “Because this party is for you, you should have input in the theme, which will of course be Christmas, but I need to iron out a few details.”

“Mom.” Ryan slipped an arm around Gabby’s waist. The delicate curve brought back the memory of her sweet kisses and made him want to pull her close and kiss her again. He cleared his throat. He was here to stop his mother from throwing an engagement party. Stopping a charging bull would be an easier feat.

“In here,” Novelynne called.

Ryan walked slowly and held Gabby close. He didn’t want his urgency to stop his mother from planning this party to offend her. She was happiest when she planned a party and could spend time with her friends.

He stepped into the catering kitchen. He pulled the chair from the kitchen computer and helped Gabby sit. Cohen, the caterer, was standing next to Novelynne and jotting notes for the final menu. Ryan shook the man’s hand, then introduced the caterer to Gabby.

“You’re just in time to approve the menu.” Novelynne handed the printed sheet Cohen had given her to him.

“About this.” Ryan firmed his jaw. He had to stop this charade before the news spread through town and the internet.

“The items I selected are my most popular requests.” Cohen looked pleased. “But I have other suggestions if you’d prefer something else.”

“This looks fine.” He scanned the elegant script. His stomach rumbled at the appetizing selection. His throat dried. He felt Gabby’s sharp glance. He handed the menu to her.

She gave him a confused look but looked at the menu. He saw the swallow slide down her throat. She handed the menu to Novelynne. Her firm say-something expression made him nod, then panic set in. He had a plan for everything. Never had he drawn a complete blank.

“I don’t know if Christmas is a good time to announce our engagement,” he said, praying his mind would formulate the reason the party should be postponed. “Gabby and I have a few things to discuss before we make the announcement official.”

“You have time.” His mother took the menu and handed it to Cohen. “You can work out the other items, such as the wedding date, later, but don’t take too long.” She smiled sweetly. “And be sure to pick up that ring before the party. That will be the reason everyone will come. They’ll want to see that ring.”

“If there’s nothing else.” Cohen closed his laptop and tucked it and the portable printer into his computer bag. “I’ll be on my way.”

“I’ll see you out.” Novelynne looped an arm through his. “Now remember, I want the petits fours to be decorated with a ribbon and two wedding rings ...” They stepped out of the catering kitchen and moved through the dining room.

“We have to do something,” Gabby said, her eyes filled with the terror he felt. She pushed herself to her feet. She wavered slightly.

Ryan caught her arm. His hands at her elbows, he steadied her. Her warmth penetrated him. Looking into her eyes, he filled his lungs with her subtle fragrance. The look in her eyes reflected the deep feeling stirring in his chest.

“Oh, Gabby.” He slipped a hand to the back of her neck, his fingers tangling with the soft curls that fell about her shoulders.

“Ryan?” Gabby’s soft voice swept the fog of desire filling his mind. “We have a problem.”

The urgency in her tone brought his head up. He dropped his hands and tightened his chest against the emptiness that rushed to fill the fulfilling pleasure he wanted to last forever.

“A small one,” he said, trying to placate her as well as himself.

“All of Aspen will come to this party.” She spoke as if explaining something to a toddler. “You know better than anyone that no one declines an invitation to one of your mother’s parties.”

“This isn’t insurmountable.” He wasn’t sure if he was saying that for her sake or for his.

He'd dealt with his mother in other matters. She was a reasonable person, though he was disappointed that he'd have to tell her that he and Gabby wouldn't marry.

When his father passed, she had mourned his death but found satisfaction in managing the foundation she and Ryan's father had established to help those in need. Mike marrying Essie had brought her pure joy. Their baby announcement made her ecstatic. One son would know marital bliss. She wanted both her sons to be happy.

Ryan wanted that, too, not because he wanted his mother to be happy, but lately, he didn't feel the satisfaction he once felt when he negotiated transactions. That never became more real than when he saw Gabby again.

He knew there was more to life. His parents had demonstrated that to him and his brother with their love for each other, their love for Ryan and Mike and their love for others.

How had he lost his way?

He couldn't have a relationship with someone else until he had a relationship with God.

"I'm missing something here." He sighed.

"What do you mean?" Gabby looked confused, and he didn't blame her.

"Don't worry. I'll explain to my mother why we won't have an engagement party." He laughed dryly. "It's been a while since she's been this excited."

"She is happy." Gabby gave a soft exhalation.

"She was excited when Mike and Essie announced their engagement, though we all were sad that my father wasn't with us that day."

"I'm sorry I never met him." Compassion filled her eyes. "He sounds like a wonderful man."

"He was." Ryan stared out the window at the mounds of snow that covered the garden. "He loved children. He and my mother were both sorry they couldn't have more. He would've

enjoyed the grandchildren.” He cleared his throat and turned to Gabby. The sheen in her eyes made him catch his breath. “What is it?” He wove his fingers through hers and tucked her hand against his chest. “Sorry, I didn’t mean for my memories to make you sad.”

“They don’t.” A tear escaped the shimmering pool welling in her eyes and slid down her cheek. “They make me happy. These are happy tears. I’m so glad you had time with your father. I miss my father.”

“I’m sorry.” He rasped.

She opened her mouth, then closed it. She lifted a shoulder.

He understood. Sometimes the memories of his father filled him with such emotion he didn’t know if what he felt were joy or pain.

“He was deployed. I remember the day my mother and I stood on the dock and waved goodbye to him,” she said in a choked tone. “Every day after that, my mother would tell me he would be coming home soon. I’d get excited knowing I’d see my father and knowing his return would make my mother happy. One day, she quit telling me he was coming home. She knew even before the notification team came to our home. She held me close. I could feel her tremble as she stared at the officers who explained why my father wouldn’t be coming home. My mother didn’t cry, so I didn’t either.”

“Gabby,” he murmured. The pain in her eyes caught a jagged corner of his heart.

He had been devastated when his own father had died. Though he missed the man who had been his best friend, he had been blessed to have known the man for thirty years.

Gabby was a child when she lost her father. She never really knew the man whom her mother had loved.

Ryan slid his arms around Gabby. The need to be close to her was too overwhelming to analyze. He tucked her into the curve of his chest. He closed his eyes relishing her softness fitting into the angles of his own body. The place for Gabby was at his side. If only it weren’t for a short time.

CHAPTER 13



Gabby closed her eyes against the images of the notification team coming to her home all those years ago, to tell her and her mother the man they loved most was gone from them forever. Tears burned her eyes. The comfort Ryan wrapped around her eased the pain followed by a flood of emotions that took her breath away.

She tightened her jaw, trying to understand these unfamiliar sensations. This was Ryan Knight holding her—the Ryan Knight who had found her on the terrace of his family’s home during one of the Knights’ legendary parties. She hadn’t seen Mike since the party began and had thought she’d find him on the terrace. Instead of finding Mike, she found Ryan, who told her not to plan a future with Mike. He was interested in someone else.

Shamed by her naïveté, she had wanted to leave the party. How could she have thought Mike would be interested in her? Ryan apologized and explained that Mike’s whims pulled him in different directions.

“Protect your heart.” Ryan touched his knuckle to her cheek. “Mike isn’t the man for you.”

“Only because my seeing your brother doesn’t fit in with your plans.” She stepped from his confusing touch. She’d been so angry and hurt, she’d kept her voice low. She didn’t want to say something she’d regret.

The flicker in Ryan’s eyes told her she’d failed miserably. She’d gone from wounded to demoralized. She turned away.

“Don’t go like this.” Ryan’s voice stopped her.

When she faced him, the concern in his eyes sent her thoughts into confusing turmoil.

“Why do you care?” she asked, her voice cracking.

“I care.” The feeling in his tone stilled her but only for a moment. How could he say something that wasn’t true? He’d voiced his displeasure of Mike’s interest in her since she began the remodel of Mike’s Denver apartment.

She dashed out of the solarium to the great room. What she saw—Mike with Essie—made her press her hand to her mouth. Turning away, she hurried down the steps to the garden where she got lost. She and Mike had wandered through the grounds before, but that was during the day, and he knew the layout of the labyrinthine garden. They had strolled through the maze that opened to the field house before returning to the main house.

She had been so infatuated with Mike she hadn’t paid attention to how they found their way to the facility.

The tears filling her eyes blinded her as she ran through the dark and into the garden. She heard Ryan call her name but ignored him. He made his point. She begged God to help her find her way through the shrubbery. When she stepped into an opening, she was a few feet from the parking area where the valets watched over the cars. They had looked at her curiously when she told them she’d hired a rideshare. Would they please let the driver onto the grounds? She had to leave—now. She was relieved they consented.

The driver arrived and she climbed into the backseat. As they drove away, she looked through the rear window. Someone dashed into the circular drive and stared after her.

Had Mike looked for her?

She couldn’t go back, not when the tear in her heart smothered painful cries. If Mike wondered why she left, he could call her.

He did call, and so did Ryan. Mike’s messages were filled with apology, which she accepted though she never returned

his calls.

Ryan didn't leave a message, which made her glad. There was no reason to return his call. She'd finished remodeling Mike's apartment. She had no more business with Ryan or anyone else in his family.

She'd never expected to see Ryan again. Seeing him on the ski slope had shocked her, especially because he was working with the ski patrol. Ryan was a man she didn't understand. She had thought he only cared about his company, then she saw him working with the ski patrol. People who worked ski patrol cared about others.

Who was Ryan Knight?

The more she thought about Ryan and their history together, the more confused she became. With the confusion came the pain of Ryan telling her Mike was interested in someone else.

Now Ryan comforted her. Why did this moment with him have to feel so right?

She didn't understand these feelings storming through her, and she didn't understand Ryan. Now his mother was planning their engagement party.

Inner turmoil churned beneath her surface.

She and Ryan had looked at engagement rings.

How could she have agreed to a fake engagement with Ryan?

She lifted her gaze to him and looked into blue eyes that weren't cold. Instead, warmth and compassion lingered in those depths.

He lifted a hand to her face and cupped her cheek. His thumb stroked her skin.

Could such tenderness exist in a man who thought only of his company?

She had to quit thinking about Ryan and the engagement and what it was like to be so close to this man.

“Ryan? Gabby?” Novelynne rushed into the room and clutching her cell phone. “I need to know your wedding colors so I know what to tell the florist. She suggests hydrangea, roses and anemones.”

“Wedding?” Gabby stepped from the warmth of Ryan’s touch. Her blood ran hot.

Ryan frowned at her, then turned to his mother. “Colors?” Confusion creased his forehead, then he looked at Gabby.

So did Novelynne.

How could she decide? They weren’t getting married.

“Those flowers sound fine,” Gabby said weakly.

Surprise widened Ryan’s eyes. He looked at his mother. “I agree. They sound lovely.”

“They’ll make beautiful arrangements. I’ll text you pictures of the floral designs,” Novelynne gushed. “Now about those colors.”

Gabby gave Ryan a firm look. They had to break off this engagement. It was getting too complicated. At the end of the week, she and Diana would drive back to Denver. She’d never see Ryan again.

“Red and green,” Gabby said the first colors that popped into her mind.

Novelynne blinked with shock. The corner of Ryan’s mouth tipped.

“Because it’s Christmas.” Gabby managed a smile.

“Of course.” Novelynne beamed. She turned away, then cast a sly glance at her son. “Does that mean the wedding will be soon?”

“Yes,” Ryan said with the same firmness he probably used in business negotiations.

“No.” Gabby jumped. Her voice rose.

“No?” Novelynne narrowed her eyes at her son. “Which is it?”

“It’s yes, Mom.” Ryan smiled at her but stepped to Gabby. Taking her hand, he lifted her hand and kissed her fingertips.

Her lips trembled at the warmth rushing through her. This charade had to stop or she’d believe they were getting married, too.

“We’ve just started to discuss the matter. Gabby’s concerned that if we marry here, it might be too cold for a winter wedding.”

Gabby jerked her gaze to his.

“That’s nonsense.” Novelynne laughed. “We have heaters on the terrace, or you can have the wedding in the field house. It will be plenty warm.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Ryan smiled at Gabby.

“You’re making my life so easy.” Novelynne tapped her phone screen. “It looks like I’ve completed everything on my list, which means Cohen’s list just got a lot longer.” She turned and strode from the room.

“Ryan, this has to stop.” Gabby turned to him.

“Trust me.” Ryan lifted his hands. “It will never go farther than this.”

“It wasn’t supposed to go this far.”

“One more thing.” Novelynne stood at the kitchen entrance, her phone in hand.

“Buttercream,” Gabby and Ryan said at the same time, then looked at each other in surprise.

“Lovely,” Novelynne said, then she strode into the kitchen.

“We just decided on the filling for our wedding cake.” Gabby felt dizzy. She touched the back of her hand to her forehead.

Ryan pushed a chair behind her and eased her into it. He pressed a cool glass into her hand. “Drink this.”

She frowned at the glass. Where had that come from?

Did it matter?

She took a sip and nearly drained the glass. Ryan took it, then looked down at her. “How are you feeling?”

“Stunned, shocked.” She looked up at him. “Please tell me I’m dreaming.”

“It isn’t possible that two people have the same dream.” Ryan gave her a half smile.

“I was afraid you’d say that.” She sighed. “We need to work on that breakup plan.”

“It’s top on my list.”

“What is it?” Her head came up.

“I’ll tell her the truth.”

“We will.” Gabby’s heart squeezed tight. “I can’t let you take full blame. I told Howard you were engaged. It never occurred to me that everyone would assume I was your fiancée.”

“Let me take care of it. I know my mother very well, and I know how to explain things to her,” Ryan said. “I’ll take you home, then I’ll come back and explain to her what happened.”

“I can’t let you do this alone.” Her heart ached. She had created the problem.

“Dear, sweet Gabby.” Ryan stroked a finger across her cheek filled her with those confusing emotions again. “Everything will be fine.”

But everything wouldn’t be fine. Their simple ruse had spiraled out of control.

CHAPTER 14



Ryan looked into Gabby's dark eyes filled with determination. He had let the situation get out of control. He'd explain everything to his mother. Once his mother understood, he'd call Howard. It didn't matter if he lost the contract. Everyone had to know the truth.

He saw what his little game with Gabby had done. He now had a contract he didn't deserve. His mother was planning an engagement party. He owned an engagement ring that he didn't know what to do with. He wouldn't return it, though he couldn't explain why. Once it was delivered to his house, he'd shove it in the back of his sock drawer and forget about it.

He wouldn't forget Gabby. Looking at her now, he could stare into her dark eyes forever.

He released a breath. Forever wasn't a word that applied to him and Gabby. Their relationship, fake as it was, was about to end.

Novelynne rushed into the room. "I'm so glad we've got the preliminaries for the party arranged." She sat in the chair across from Gabby. "Are you all right, dear? You look a little pale. I remember when I planned my wedding. There are so many things to think about. Mike and Essie expecting adds to the excitement. But don't you worry." She tapped Gabby's knee. "Everything will be fine."

"That's what I keep thinking." Gabby's smile was wan.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" Novelynne smiled at her.

“Thank you, but my roommate and I made plans.” She glanced at her wrist. She wasn’t wearing a watch. Blushing, she pulled her sleeve over her wrist, but not before Novelynne arched her brow. “I should get back.”

“We can leave now.” Ryan held out his hand and helped her to her feet.

When they moved into the foyer, Walter appeared with their coats. Ryan thanked him, then helped Gabby with her coat.

Novelynne sat in a chair near the foyer. She rose but rested her hand on the back of the chair. The color in her face ebbed.

“Mom?” Ryan strode to her and took her hand.

“Novelynne?” Gabby hobbled after him.

“Walter, call an ambulance.” Ryan looked at the butler, who already had a phone pressed to his ear. He picked up his mother and carried her to a sofa.

Gabby grabbed the afghan folded on the armrest and spread it over Novelynne.

“Oh, dear, don’t call the ambulance.” Novelynne gave a slight wave of her hand. “That will make everyone talk. Besides, I feel better already.”

“You don’t look all right.” Ryan frowned. “You’re far too pale.”

“Because it’s winter, and I haven’t been in the sun.”

“Nice try, Mom. There’s something wrong.”

Walter opened the front door and a team of paramedics rushed into the great room. After getting the information they needed, they bundled Novelynne to the gurney and whisked her out the door.

Ryan went cold as the medical team pushed his mother into the ambulance. When they left, he turned to Gabby. “I’ll take you back to your place—”

“You’re not facing this alone. I want to go with you.” She took his hand. Once again he was struck by how delicate she

felt. Her resolve made her far from delicate. “I feel responsible.”

“Gabby—” He shook his head.

“Please.” Her gaze implored him.

“All right.” Taking her hand, he helped her out of the house and into the soft snowflakes that fell onto the circular drive. He helped her down the front steps and into his SUV.

They drove in silence down the highway that was filled with skiers leaving the slope and heading for home. When they reached the hospital, an attendant led them down a hallway to a private room.

Without thinking, Ryan took Gabby’s hand, pushed open the door and stepped into a room filled with monitors that beeped and flashed. Staring at his mother, he was surprised to see how small she seemed in the bed covered with white.

Bouquets lined the countertop on the other side of the room. He pressed his lips together. His mother would be disappointed that word had already leaked that she had been hospitalized.

A nurse stood next to his mother’s bed and typed something into her computer. She smiled at Ryan and Gabby.

“How is she?” Ryan’s voice was ragged.

“She seems fine now,” the nurse said. “Dr. Stanford will be here in a minute to explain what happened.”

Ryan nodded. He should never have let this engagement charade get out of hand. He’d lost his father. He wasn’t ready to lose his mother.

The doctor arrived and introduced himself, then explained that his mother suffered from exhaustion.

Mike and Essie rushed into the room.

“Walter just called us,” Mike said breathlessly. “Is she going to be all right?”

“She needs rest,” the doctor said. “I understand you want to be here for her, but for tonight she needs peace and quiet.”

We'd like to keep her overnight for observation. Once the test results have been completed, we can evaluate the best remedies for her health."

"What? My health is fine. I've always been in the peak of health," Novelynne said groggily. "I can't stay here. I have a party to plan."

"Mom, if you don't stay here, there may not be a party." Ryan tightened his jaw. There wouldn't be a party anyway—at least not an engagement party.

"Nonsense." She waved her hand dismissively. "Of course, we'll have a party. We always have a Christmas party."

"This year, let me take care of the party." Ryan stood next to the bed and looked down at her.

"And me, Mom." Mike took his place next to Ryan, his face set with determination.

Ryan looked at his brother and tried not to show his surprise at his brother taking responsibility. Had marriage and impending fatherhood opened his eyes to the leadership position he should take?

He glanced over his shoulder to Gabby, looking pale, her eyes filled with the shock he felt. From Mike's declaration or his mother's illness? Perhaps both.

Next to Gabby stood Essie. She looked at her husband. Her eyes glowed with pride.

Ryan gave her a slight smile, then turned to his mother. He was proud of Mike, too.

"I couldn't do that." Novelynne struggled to keep her eyes open. "It's like your father would say—party planning is in my blood."

"Which you've done every year and well, but I think one year without your planning a party would be wise," he said but didn't miss the lines pressing into his mother's face. Party planning had been her life. It had helped her husband finalize many business deals. "Your first grandchild will arrive soon.

You want to protect your health so you can enjoy those precious moments you'll spend with the new baby."

Mike glanced at Ryan, then flashed him a broad smile as if pleased with his brother's approval. That was something Ryan rarely gave Mike.

Guilt was a thin slice across Ryan's heart. He had always considered his brother too unreliable to take responsibility for the company and the family. Rather than guide his brother, he'd taken over. He should've given him the same chance their father had given Ryan. Their father had patiently stood by Ryan as he learned to recognize potential deals and bring them to a successful conclusion.

Though their father had passed when Mike was ready to take a place in the company, Ryan had never given him a chance. He had underestimated his brother.

Ryan returned Mike's smile. Looking into his brother's eyes, he could see Mike was looking forward to fatherhood. Now was the time to give Mike his rightful place in the family business.

Oh, Lord, what have I done? You are the God of second chances. You've given me plenty. Please guide me to show the same mercy to Mike that you've shown me.

"Do you think you're up to planning a party?" Novelynne struggled to open her eyes.

"I believe I—" He glanced at Mike. "—we can make the arrangements—under your guidance, of course, but not until you're better."

Novelynne relaxed against the pillow. "Maybe it is time I loosen the reins and give you boys a chance."

"I think that will be the first of many changes that need to take place," Ryan said quietly. He saw the surprise in Mike's eyes turn to gratitude. "First, you need to rest. I'll return in the morning to see how you're doing."

"So will I, Mom." Mike maintained a firm stand next to his brother.

“It’s nice to see you boys working together,” Novelynne said weakly, though her eyes filled with pride. “That has to be the best answer to prayer possible.”

Her words struck Ryan’s heart. If he hadn’t been so consumed with winning, he would’ve seen how desperately Mike wanted to contribute. This would be the first of many changes he’d make. Looking at his mother, he saw this was the greatest Christmas gift he could give her. Why had it taken him so long to realize that?

Because he had been consumed with his achievements, he hadn’t given thought to Mike’s needs—nor his mother’s.

“You’ll see more changes.” Ryan’s tone was husky.

Mike blinked, then grinned.

“I see that now,” Novelynne said softly, then a frown pressed between her brows. “First thing tomorrow, you must call Cohen and make sure he has everything in place for your engagement party.”

Ryan went rigid. “Mom—”

“Don’t worry, Mom.” Mike grinned at their mother. “Since Essie and I announced our engagement, I’m kind of a pro.”

Ryan jerked his gaze to his brother.

“I am.” Mike’s jaw firmed as he looked at his brother. “I did a lot of work on that party.”

“That’s true, honey,” Novelynne said. “He did.”

Ryan’s mouth curved. He couldn’t doubt his mother.

“All right, then,” Ryan said. “I’ll talk to Mike and get some advice on the party and forward those ideas to Cohen. Let’s table the party talk for now.” Taking his mother’s hand, he squeezed it gently. “You rest. I’ll ... Mike and I will see you in the morning.”

Novelynne’s face filled with peace, she nodded. Soon her breathing had the slow, steady rhythm of sleep.

Ryan waited until Mike, Essie and Gabby stepped into the hallway. With a last look at his mother, he followed them.

“What still needs to be done to plan your engagement party?” Mike asked when Ryan closed the door to their mother’s room.

“Engagement party?” The nervous tremor in Gabby’s voice dismayed Ryan.

Looking at her, he took a breath and turned to his brother. “About the engagement party.” Seeing the eagerness in his brother’s eyes, he prayed God would give him the right words to explain to his brother that there wouldn’t be an engagement party. He owed it to his mother to tell her before telling anyone else. Cohen had to know before he placed the orders.

“Let me check a few things, then I’ll let you know.” Ryan rested a hand on his brother’s shoulder.

“I’ll wait to hear from you.” The delight in Mike’s eyes knowing that his brother trusted him enough to involve him with company and family matters showed in his eyes.

Mike took Essie’s hand and led her down the hallway.

Gabby stood next to Ryan as they watched Mike and Essie leave.

“Ryan.” Gabby’s voice was ragged when she turned to him.

“I know.” Ryan held up his hand.

“But the longer we wait, the worse it will be.” The imploring look in her eyes made his mouth dry. Telling the truth meant he’d lose Gabby forever, but how could he lose someone he never had?

If he and Gabby were meant to be together, God would have told him ... and her. He let her go before. Already he could feel the familiar pain. Wasn’t that why he’d thrown himself into the company business?

“I agree,” he said, “but I don’t want to risk her health by telling her now.”

“No, I don’t want that either,” she said softly.

“I know.” He took her hand. “I’ll take you to your condo. In the morning, I’ll visit Mom and see how she’s doing. If she’s up to it, I’ll explain everything to her.”

“I’ll go with you.” The firm set of Gabby’s delicate jaw made Ryan smile.

“That isn’t necessary,” he said.

“It is.” She lifted her chin. “I’m as involved as you.”

“I guess it does take two to have an engagement.” He let out his breath. “All right, I’ll pick you up at nine. We can go to brunch and discuss a tactic, then go to the hospital.”

She looked ready to argue, then her face softened into the smile that made him want to cup her face and kiss her. The urge to draw her close overpowering, he shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll be ready at nine.”

She’d be ready. They’d tell his mother, then there’d be no reason for them to be together. She’d walk out of his life and return to Denver.

How would he have the strength to let her go?

CHAPTER 15



Gabby should've felt relief that tomorrow she and Ryan would end their fake engagement. Instead, she felt cold and empty.

They stood at the door to her condo, neither speaking, yet the silence between them spoke volumes. She knew that confessing this fake engagement to Ryan's mother was the right thing to do, still, she couldn't ignore the discomfort rubbing the inside of her chest.

Lifting her gaze to Ryan's, her breath caught at the softness in his eyes. Before he had been hard-charging and determined for the benefit of his family's corporation.

Seeing the concern he held for his mother and his brother caught her by surprise. She had thought she had Ryan figured out. She'd met people like Ryan—consumed with making their mark in the world. The Ryan she looked at now was a different person. This man was compassionate and concerned. Had she never known him?

"Thanks for bringing me home," she said, then winced at the huskiness in her voice.

He studied her a moment, then slipped his arms around her waist. Pulling her close, he slanted his mouth over hers. The passion in his kiss scooped all rational thought from her mind, and she melted against him, her hand resting against his chest. The taste of him, the feel of his lips against hers, filled her with a burning desire and ignited a hunger within her that left

her wanting more. When he lifted his head from hers, she blinked.

She touched trembling fingers to her lips, which felt tender from the kiss. She stared at him. She hadn't wanted him to stop, but tomorrow, they'd tell his mother their engagement had been a farce. Stifling her want and need for the passion Ryan could offer her would make walking away pure torture.

"The only thing I should apologize for is stopping what we both seem to want," he said, his voice ragged.

She did want to be this close to Ryan—the one thing that was wrong for her and him.

"Good night, Gabby." His face unreadable, he turned away and moved down the hallway to the elevator.

She waited until he stepped inside before entering the condo.

Fragrant odors of marinara and freshly baked crusty bread assaulted her senses, along with laughter and music.

"There you are." Diana peered around the corner of the opening to the kitchen and grinned.

Sherman moved into view behind her.

"We got back from the slope and are ready to sit down to dinner," Diana said. "Come join us."

"I don't want to intrude."

"Nonsense." Diana waved dismissively. "We have plenty. You can let us know how you spent your day."

How had she spent her day? Trying to put an end to her and Ryan's fake engagement, rushing his mother to the hospital, then kissing the man who stirred in her emotions she'd never felt before.

Just another day.

"It was fine, though Ryan's mother had to be admitted to the hospital." Gabby stood in the opening that separated the kitchen from the dining area.

“Oh, no.” Diana’s eyes widened. Sherman showed the same concern. “Will she be all right?”

“She’s tired. The doctor wants her to rest,” Gabby said. “Ryan and I will visit her in the morning.”

And would probably ruin her day when she learned Gabby and her son had never been engaged. Novelynne wanted her sons to be married and happy.

And she wanted grandbabies. At least Mike could give her that.

Gabby bit her lip. She hoped Novelynne survived that announcement. With her precarious health condition, Gabby thought to delay the revelation—but then she’d have to live with the lie she’d told.

“Sit down and tell us all about it.” Diana nodded toward the dining room table.

The last thing Gabby wanted to do was eat. She wanted to sit in her room and try to forget the most amazing kiss she’d ever experienced and devise an explanation to tell Novelynne why she and Ryan had pursued this charade of a fake engagement. She’d been trying to think of an excuse but nothing seemed right.

Excuses weren’t right.

Truth was right.

“Can I help with anything?” Gabby looked about the kitchen to the baking dish filled with lasagna and the tossed salad sitting in a wooden bowl.

Sherman pulled a loaf of bread from the oven.

“Nope. Everything’s ready.” Diana carried the casserole to the table.

Sherman followed with the salad bowl and a bread basket filled with buttery slices of bread.

They sat at the table. Bowing their heads, they gave thanks for the meal, followed by the passing of the serving dishes and the conversation of their day on the slope.

Sherman laughed and talked, not like some untouchable movie star, but like a guy who had spent the day skiing and was enjoying a home-cooked meal with friends. He looked at Diana with a fondness that made Gabby's heart warm. He really liked her.

Had Gabby misjudged him—the way she'd misjudged Ryan?

She had told Diana to be careful of Sherman only because he was a movie star. She'd worked with the rich and famous and kept her distance from those who showed predatory tendencies. It would be easy to assume someone who acted for a living was interested in her. For that reason, she maintained a business relationship with her clients, though she had made a mistake when she helped Mike remodel his apartment. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

She didn't want her best friend to fall victim to someone who was looking for a conquest and not a serious relationship.

In Sherman's eyes, she saw affection. That he made Diana happy caused the barrier Gabby had built around her heart to soften. Maybe she had been too quick to judge Sherman.

She thought of the kiss she and Ryan had shared and the desire that left her wanting more. Her heart pounded heavily. Had she misjudged him, too?

Help me to know, Lord.

Did it matter?

After she and Ryan confessed everything to his mother, they'd never see each other again. There was no need, though the thought of never seeing him again made her insides ache. She had made a mistake with Mike and had vowed never to do that again. How had she let her feelings take free rein when it came to Ryan?

She'd faced disappointment before. She took a breath. She'd face it again. She wasn't so naïve to assume disappointment wouldn't be part of life.

Walking away from Ryan was the right thing to do.

Was it that important that she always be right?

Suddenly, being right lost its victory. Quieting her heart and listening to God was where the real victory lay, even if that still small voice gently told her what she didn't want to hear.



THE NEXT MORNING, Ryan stood in front of the door to Gabby's condo. He'd spent a sleepless night rehearsing how he'd break the news to his mother—that he and Gabby weren't really engaged.

He knew his mother well enough to imagine the surprise and hurt that would reflect in her eyes. He had no excuse for the ruse he'd perpetrated. Though he knew Gabby would share the blame, he wouldn't let her. He could've stopped the fabrication and should have. Instead, he'd let the game continue—and had deceived his mother, brother and friends.

The game was over. His resolve in place, he'd let everyone know that their original assumption about him had been correct. He was married to the family corporation. If he were to marry, that woman should be first in his life.

A woman would never be first in his life.

His concern to make sure the family corporation was first was ingrained in him. Realizing where his priorities lay made him feel hollow. A muscle worked in his jaw. What would it be like to have a family and think of them first? That thought was followed by a drop in his stomach. He'd never know.

Gabby opened the door. His heart stilled as he took in the cloud of curls framing her angelic face. The smile she gave him didn't reach her eyes. They both knew what they were about to confess would hurt his mother more than the exhaustion, but it couldn't be avoided.

“Are you ready?” he asked, though the disquiet in her eyes reflected his apprehension.

She opened her mouth to speak. No words came, and she pressed her lips together and nodded.

Movement behind her caught his attention. Her roommate, Diana, had rushed into the room. She munched a piece of toast while she dug through the guest closet and pulled her ski parka from a hanger. Turning to the front door, her eyes widened.

“Hi, Ryan.” She swallowed the toast in her mouth. “I didn’t realize you were here.” Her gaze flicked to Gabby, who looked over her shoulder at her.

Diana looked from Gabby to Ryan. Her smile dimmed slightly. “Is everything all right?”

“What?” Gabby’s shock turned to levity. “Yes, of course. I mean, as good as it can be. We’re going to visit Ryan’s mother.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Diana bit her lower lip. “I heard she was in the hospital. I’m so sorry. How’s she doing?”

“All right ... considering.” Ryan hoped she was all right. He had called the night nurse before he left his house, and she had said his mother’s night was uneventful.

“Please tell her I’m praying for her,” Diana said, compassion in her eyes.

“Thanks, I’ll do that,” Ryan said.

The chime of the elevator sounded, followed by the sound of someone moving down the hallway. Ryan glanced to the side and was surprised to see Sherman Tressler striding toward him.

Sherman looked up. When he saw Ryan, he stuck out his hand.

“Ryan Knight.” He grasped Ryan’s hand. “I didn’t expect to see you here.” His gaze shifted to the doorway—to Gabby. A knowing look flickered in his eyes.

“How’ve you been?” Ryan wanted to explain that he didn’t have a personal interest in being there. He was there to right a wrong—the wrong that may be responsible for his mother’s health condition.

Something uncomfortable moved through his chest. For the first time in his life, he wanted his priorities to be different—he wanted his priorities to be right. For them to be right, he'd have to change. Was that possible?

Glancing at Gabby, he saw the same wariness in her eyes.

“He stopped by because we ... uh ...” Her look at Ryan begged for help.

“We have some business to take care of.” Ryan offered her a half smile.

When Gabby's eyes flickered, he felt a stab of disappointment. Why did their being together have to be a business arrangement? Why did everything in his life have to be a business arrangement?

“Oh.” Sherman's slight frown showed he had trouble believing that explanation. “Sure.”

“I'm almost ready,” Diana called from the living room. “I just need to find my gloves.” She dashed down the hall to the bedroom.

Ryan moved to the side to give Sherman access to the condo. Sherman stepped into the living room, then faced Ryan and Gabby.

“Hopefully you get a chance to enjoy the snow.” Sherman pushed his fingers through his hair. “There was a record snowfall last night.”

“I heard.” Ryan smiled slightly.

“As long as I wear this thing, the closest I'll get to the slopes is the ski lodge.” Gabby lifted her leg with the cast, then looked at Ryan. “I'll get my coat, then we can leave.”

“I'll get it.” He didn't have the heart to watch her hobble to the coat closet.

“Thanks,” she said, surprised as he walked to the closet. “It's the blue one.”

He found it and held it for her. When she pulled her hair from the collar, he marveled at the sweet scent of her skin and

the silky locks that cascaded down her back. Everything about her seemed familiar as if he noticed these things before. He had. He'd noticed everything the first time he saw her with his brother.

An odd feeling gripped his chest, and he was surprised when he realized what it was—longing. Had he been envious of her interest in Mike?

That shocked him. Never had he felt anything but love toward his brother. Now, he wondered at his efforts to make sure Mike honored his commitment to Essie. He had thought it was because he wanted to do the business deal with Essie's father. Suddenly, that didn't seem like the reason.

After wishing Diana and Sherman a great ski day, he and Gabby walked down the hallway to the elevator. In the lobby, he walked her outside to his SUV, which was still warm.

"I'm glad your mother's doing all right." Gabby offered him a smile, then looked at the road that was heavy with ski traffic.

The rest of her statement remained unspoken. Did she, as he, hope his mother tolerated what they were about to confess—that their engagement was a sham?

"The nurse said she slept well." His mouth was dry, and he cleared his throat. "Hopefully, that's a good sign."

When they reached the hospital, Ryan helped Gabby from the SUV and let the valet park the vehicle.

Inside the hospital, he rested her hand on his arm and escorted her to the elevator. Once again he was struck by her gentle touch, which hid her determination. He savored her warmth.

The hospital elevator opened to intensive care. Ryan and Gabby moved down the hallway, which was a flurry of activity with personnel dressed in green scrubs and fluttering white lab coats rushing down the hallway and disappearing through a sliding glass door.

"Oh, Ryan, look." Gabby stared straight ahead and gasped. She squeezed Ryan's arm.

He steadied her, then looked at the medical team rushing through a doorway.

“They’re going into Mom’s room.” He could barely speak. The grip on his chest pushed air from his lungs.

CHAPTER 16



Gabby shook when she saw the medical team disappear into Novelynne's hospital room.

"Let's see what's going on." Ryan's arm tightened around her waist. How did he sound so calm?

"Go ahead," she said. His mother needed him. She couldn't walk fast enough to keep up with him. "I'll catch up."

"I'm not leaving you here." His look was firm.

Holding her close, they moved down the hall together.

"What's going on?" Ryan asked the tech, who rushed from his mother's room. His gaze jerked from the tech to the door to his mother's room.

"Are you a relative?" There was a wariness in the young man's eyes as he looked from Ryan to Gabby.

"I'm Novelynne's son." How he managed to keep his voice steady, Gabby didn't know. She wanted to help him.

"Dr. Stanford is with her now. I'll tell him you want to speak to him." The tech slipped into the room. When he reappeared, he said, "The doctor will be right with you." He rushed down the corridor.

Ryan stood in the doorway and stared at the people hovering over his mother's bed. A nurse injected a syringe into his mother's IV tubing while Dr. Stanford and another nurse spoke in low tones and checked the monitors and their tablets.

Finally, Dr. Stanford straightened. He pulled his stethoscope from his ears and tucked it into his pocket. Pulling gloves from his hands, he tossed them into the trash. He cleansed his hands with fluid from the dispenser near the door and stepped into the hallway.

Ryan didn't like that the man looked pale, but at least he looked relieved.

"What happened?" Ryan's gaze shifted from the doctor to his mother's bed.

Gabby's heart pounded heavily, afraid to hear what the doctor would say.

"I'll be honest." The doctor's face was grim. "We thought we lost her."

"She was fine when I called the hospital this morning." Ryan's hand tightened on Gabby's waist, and he held her close.

Gabby swallowed.

"She was," the doctor said. "And she's fine now."

"I want to be with her." Ryan's voice was low but still held the command of someone who ran a major corporation.

The doctor looked over his shoulder at Novelynne, then back at Ryan. "All right but keep it brief. This isn't the time for any last-minute confession." His gaze shifted from Ryan to Gabby.

Ryan's face was unreadable, but Gabby found it hard to breathe. That was why they came. His mother had to know the truth.

"I just want to be with her." Ryan's tone was flat.

The doctor stepped aside.

From behind them came the sound of rushing feet.

"Ryan?" Mike whispered hoarsely.

Gabby and Ryan turned to see Mike and Essie rushing toward them. Essie was flushed, making Gabby stiffen. She

was expecting her first child. What would the news of Novelynne's health lapse do to her?

"Is Mom okay?" Mike sounded breathless. He nodded at Gabby. His brows rose when his gaze dropped to Ryan's arm around Gabby.

Gabby swallowed. She and Ryan were supposed to be engaged, but theirs was no love match. It was an arrangement. So why did this moment with Ryan feel real?

"She is now." Ryan glanced at the doctor. "Dr. Stanford said we can be with her for a short while, but she needs to remain calm."

"Of course." Mike looked surprised.

Ryan looked at the doctor. "Can we both go in?"

"Let's limit it to two visitors," Dr. Stanford said.

"It's okay." Gabby stepped from Ryan and tried to smile. "Go to your mother."

"I'll wait here, too." Essie nodded. The color in her cheeks had calmed.

Mike smiled at his wife, squeezed her hand, then stepped into the room.

Ryan turned to Gabby. When he pulled her close and kissed her forehead, she closed her eyes.

This charade was getting out of control yet being close to Ryan felt like the place where she belonged.

Ryan stepped into the hospital room.

"Do you want something to drink?" Gabby turned to Essie. She winced at the strain in her voice.

"That's okay." Essie pulled a bottle from her purse and uncapped it. "I take this everywhere I go."

"Let's sit down." Gabby took Essie's arm and guided her to the seating area outside the room.

"We got the nursery furniture you picked out." Essie's light voice didn't hide the concern in her eyes. "We arranged the

furniture and hung the plaques. Everything looks perfect.”

“Good.” Gabby tried to smile. This was a moment when everyone should be happy. The new baby was coming. Instead, she couldn’t stop thinking about Novelynne and praying for her healing. “I’ll have to stop by and see how everything looks.”

“Maybe you could do that today.” Essie looked hopeful.

“All right,” Gabby said, relieved by the distraction.

Movement at the door to Novelynne’s hospital room caught her eye. She lifted her gaze to Ryan and Mike, who stepped from their mother’s room. Essie’s gaze followed hers. She and Gabby rose.

“How is she?” Gabby asked when Ryan and Mike approached.

“She was aware we were with her,” Ryan said with an exhaled breath. “She even said a couple of words.”

Mike nodded. His face filled with emotion. Gabby understood why he couldn’t speak.

“I’ll take you back to your place.” Ryan looked at Gabby. “I’ll call the doctor this afternoon and see if Mom’s up for visitors then.”

“I should go with you.” Gabby gave him a direct look. If Novelynne could see visitors, Gabby didn’t want Ryan breaking the news of their fake engagement alone. She was as culpable as he was. She would stand by his side.

“We’ll see,” Ryan said, but there was doubt in his eyes.

“I had invited Gabby to the house to look at the nursery.” Essie looked anxiously at her brother-in-law.

“Good. I’ll take you there.” Ryan looked relieved, making Gabby wonder what else he would tell her.

“Or you can take me back to my place, and I can drive myself.”

Ryan’s gaze dropped to her cast. Looking into her eyes, he raised a brow.

“I can drive.” She tipped her head. “I’ll borrow Diana’s car.”

“I’ll take you there.” The hand Ryan touched to her back was reassuring and warm. “We can have lunch, then I’ll call the hospital to see how Mom’s doing.”

“That’s a great idea.” Essie squeezed her hands together, then looked at Gabby. “There’s so much I want to show you.”

Gabby’s heart lifted before it dropped. She wanted the distraction of baby furniture while they waited for more news about Novelynne. If Ryan’s mother were better, how would she react when she and Ryan confessed that a business deal rested on their fake engagement?

CHAPTER 17



“Are you really going to our place?” Ryan asked Gabby after he’d helped her into his SUV. He sat behind the steering wheel and gave her a direct look. The heater was on full blast, but the interior of the vehicle was still cold and caught their breath in white clouds.

“Yes, I want to see the furniture,” she said firmly. “And if your mother’s better, I want to see her, too.”

“To confess.” Ryan snorted softly.

“Yes,” she said. Heat stung her cheeks and she lowered her gaze before looking at him through her lashes. “She needs to know the truth.”

“I’ll make sure she does,” he said, wondering at Gabby’s plan. “She’s my mother. I’ll make sure she knows everything.”

“I’m part of this problem.” She gave Ryan a direct look. “She believed we were engaged, and I said nothing.”

“Nor did I.” His gaze shifted as if he struggled with guilt.

“What we did wasn’t right. If you want to tell her the truth about our engagement, fine. I understand you would want to explain everything to your mother, but it’s only right that I be present when you tell her.”

“Neatly argued.” He put the car into gear and exited the parking lot. “But we’ll see.”

“There’s no seeing about it.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “She needs to know.”

“I agree, but she’s my mother—”

“She’s my friend.” The softness in Gabby’s eyes unearthed a surge of sensations he couldn’t identify. She had no idea what she did to him. Sometimes, he wondered.

“Your mother encouraged me when I decorated Mike’s apartment,” Gabby said, her tone compassionate. “Because of her recommendations, several of her friends hired me to remodel their homes.”

“She is fond of you,” he said, barely controlling the feelings rising in his throat.

He’d never forget how his mother raved after she’d visited Mike’s apartment. Ryan hoped to see her that excited again. She deserved joy in the prime of her life. She didn’t deserve confinement to a hospital bed.

“With you or without you, I want to see her as soon as she’s up to it,” Gabby said.

“All right,” he said, remembering how stubborn she could be.

They drove up the winding mountain road to the imposing wrought iron gate at the driveway leading to the Knight estate. The gate swung open and Ryan guided his SUV up the driveway. Mike and Essie followed in their SUV. After parking in front of the stone steps that led to the main entrance, Ryan helped Gabby from his SUV while Mike helped Essie from his. Walter moved down the steps to help them.

“I’ve got it, Walter, but thanks,” Ryan wrapped an arm around Gabby’s waist. It amazed and felt natural the way Gabby fit so perfectly against him.

“Very good.” Walter took a step back, though concern remained in his eyes.

Ryan helped Gabby up the steps and into the foyer, where Walter took their coats.

“We’ll take the elevator,” Ryan said to his brother, who held his wife’s hand as they moved toward the stairs.

“Good idea.” Mike’s mouth tipped as he looked at Gabby’s cast. His hand at his wife’s back, he escorted her up the stairs.

Ryan led Gabby down the hallway and touched the panel that hid the elevator. The panel slid into its pocket and he and Gabby stepped inside.

“I’m excited to see the furniture,” Gabby said. The light in her eyes made wave after wave of joy rise high in Ryan’s chest. He couldn’t look away.

“Mike and Essie love it, so I’m sure everything will look fine,” he said.

The elevator opened to the second floor. He touched her back and moved down the hall to the doorway where Mike and Essie waited for them. They stepped back and let Gabby, followed by Ryan, enter the room.

“This is perfect.” Gabby’s dark eyes glowed with excitement. Her gaze scanned the room.

Ryan looked at the brocade bed curtains that surrounded the crib. It sat in front of a plush rug. A colorful ottoman that was almost as large as the crib sat next to it. A life-size giraffe stood near the marble fireplace. Plaques featuring beloved fairytale characters decorated the walls.

His heart picked up speed. All his life, he’d focused on the family business. Even as a child playing beneath his father’s desk and listening to the man make deals and crack jokes, he’d never thought there was anything more to his life than running the family company.

Mike had discovered that there was. He and Essie would start a family.

Troubled, Ryan wanted to leave the room. Being in the nursery made him feel as if he’d taken the wrong direction with his life. That wasn’t right. He had the awards and accolades to prove it.

“What do you think of the nursery theme?” Gabby’s sweet voice made Ryan turn to her as she looked from Essie to Mike.

“We love it.” Essie looped her arm through Mike’s and looked into his eyes. “It tells a story that our baby will love as long as he or she lives in this room.”

“I’m so glad.” Gabby smiled. The sheen filling her eyes made Ryan want to hold her close. She’d worked hard to create the perfect ambiance for the nursery. He felt as relieved as she looked that Mike and Essie liked the decorating.

“Excuse me. Lunch is ready whenever you are.” Walter stood in the nursery’s doorway. He glanced about the room, a slight smile teasing his normally unsmiling mouth.

“We’ll be right there,” Ryan said. He studied the decorations that were ready to welcome the newest Knight into the world. “What do you think, Walter?” He smiled at the butler.

“I think the new baby will be very happy in this room,” he said and moved from the door.

“So do I.” Essie ran her hand along the crib’s rail. “I don’t want to leave.” She looked at Mike.

“It’s only for a short while.” Mike took her hand and led her from the room. “We’ll come back after lunch.”

Essie nodded and let Mike lead her from the room.

Ryan turned to Gabby. She scanned the pictures and the furniture and looked as if she didn’t want to leave either.

What would she be like as a mother? He’d seen her with children—saw the delight in her eyes as she’d bend to their level to ask them to tell her about their favorite project or toy. The children loved her. They’d run to her as soon as she entered the room, even if they’d never seen her before. She was approachable. They sensed that.

So did he.

“Are you ready?” Ryan hated to break the mood that settled into the nursery. It was filled with her joy.

“I suppose.” She gave the nursery one last look, then moved toward the door. “I always imagine what a room will

look like when I'm picking out the furniture and accents. I love it when everything fits better than I expected."

"I'd say you exceeded everyone's expectations." Ryan smiled at her. "Mike and Essie are overjoyed. I like the way you decorated it, too." He hadn't meant to say that. It slipped out, but he'd spoken the truth.

Gabby's face came up. The only sound was Ryan's heartbeat in his own ears.

"That means a lot to hear you say that," she said softly, her face radiant in the rays that filtered through the skylights.

"I mean it." The emotion rising in him made him want to pull her close.

He swallowed. He would return to the hospital and tell his mother that he and Gabby weren't engaged. Kissing her would make a complicated situation convoluted no matter how much he wanted to taste her lips.

"Shall we join Mike and Essie?" He cleared his throat, then extended his hand to the door.

She flushed, making him wonder what she had been thinking. She moved out the door.

When they reached the dining room, Ryan saw that Mike and Essie had waited for them. A platter of sandwiches and a tureen of soup sat in the middle of the table. Walter stood by, ready to serve.

"You should've started," Ryan said, regretting their delayed arrival. He helped Gabby with her chair.

"We knew you'd be along." Mike gave his brother a knowing look.

If Mike thought that something had happened between him and Gabby, he was in for a shock. So was their mother. The longer Ryan waited to tell his mother the truth, the more he wondered if he were making the right decision. Not because he didn't want to share the truth, but because he was wondering what the truth was. He and Gabby weren't really engaged, but his mind conjured the possibilities.

At work, he always looked for possibilities. When it came to Gabby, his mind told him the possibilities were endless.

Taking a breath, he knew the right thing to do. He'd set his mind straight.

CHAPTER 18



After lunch, Gabby sat in front of Ryan's desk in his home office and watched his face as he spoke to Dr. Stanford about his mother.

Mike and Essie had gone into town to run a few errands but said they'd wait until they heard from Ryan regarding Novelynne's condition and, if possible, would visit her before returning home.

Gabby was relieved when Dr. Stanford said that Novelynne was feeling better. She was awake and had eaten but was still weak. If they wanted to visit, they had to keep it short.

"We'll be there in a little while." A rigid line formed along Ryan's jaw as he thanked the doctor, then disconnected the call. He looked at Gabby. "You know you don't need to go with me."

"I disagree." Her voice was firm but soft. "Novelynne means a great deal to me. I feel responsible that she's suffering from exhaustion in the first place."

"You're not responsible." He gave a rough exhale, but there was compassion in his eyes. "You had no idea of my mother's health condition. She didn't know."

"I should be there." She looked into his eyes.

"All right." He picked up his phone. "I'll text Mom's condition to Mike, and then we can leave."

A half-hour later, they entered Novelynne's hospital room. Her face brightened before a frown slid into place.

A strange feeling came over Gabby. If Novelynne was anything like her mother, she was intuitive. She'd learned mothers could sense when something wasn't right. What would she think when she learned the truth about her and Ryan?

"How're you doing?" Ryan's voice was light. He stepped to the bed and squeezed his mother's hand.

Gabby stood next to him and smiled at the older woman. Ryan reached for a chair for her, but Gabby touched his arms and shook her head. After they told Novelynne the truth, his mother may not want her to stay. If so, she wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

"Better now that you're here. It's a treat to see both of you." She looked from him to Gabby. "I hope you're taking me home."

"Not yet, but soon," Ryan said. "Mike and Essie should be here shortly."

"The furniture for the nursery arrived," Gabby said.

"How does it look?" Novelynne's eyebrows rose.

Gabby and Ryan glanced at each other before looking back at his mother.

"It looks wonderful." Ryan laughed as if relieved to have a few more moments before discussing his and Gabby's engagement. "Mike and Essie are thrilled."

"Good." Novelynne straightened the bedcovers before looking at Gabby. "Now that I've had free time on my hands, I've been thinking that it's time I remodel the house. That old place needs a complete makeover, and you, my dear, are the one who can do it. That is if you agree. If we start now, everything should be finished before the party."

"I'm honored that you would ask. As for the timeline, we'd have to discuss what you want to see if finishing before Christmas Eve is possible," Gabby said with a faint smile.

“It’s possible. You decorated Mike’s apartment in record time.”

“But that was an apartment.” Gabby blinked. “Your home is several times larger.”

“A minor detail. Now what’s the other reason you came to see me?” Novelynne studied her son.

“We want to discuss our engagement with you.” He didn’t look surprised at his mother’s forthrightness. He glanced at Gabby, who could barely control the pounding in her chest.

She liked Novelynne. She didn’t want her to be hurt. The lie she and Ryan were living would hurt her.

“Never mind.” Novelynne waved dismissively. “I know what you’re going to say. You’re not engaged.”

Gabby’s mouth fell open before she recovered from her shock and tried to stand as stoic as Ryan.

“You knew.” Ryan’s tone was indistinct.

“Not at first.” Novelynne exhaled roughly. “At first, I believed because it was what I wanted, but then I wondered why you two weren’t wrapped in each other’s arms. Your father and I had been. We kissed every chance we had.”

“You and Dad were just out of high school.” Ryan gave a soft laugh. “I’m fifteen years older than you were when you married Dad.”

“Make excuses if you want, but love is the same at any age,” Novelynne said.

“I’m sorry.” Gabby looked down at the older woman, who suddenly had more color. She hoped that meant she felt better. “Please don’t put all the blame on Ryan. I share in that responsibility.”

“Who I blame is myself. I see how you work.” Novelynne squeezed Ryan’s hand. “I want you to relax and enjoy life, and I wanted to believe that my older son had found someone. What you’re saying is that I don’t need to plan an engagement party.”

“You still need to plan the Christmas Eve party.” Ryan tipped his head at her.

“Yes, I do,” Novelynne said. “Though I’m sorry it won’t be an engagement party, celebrating the reason for the season does bring me joy. Now you have to help me get out of this place so I can plan the house remodel. I want everything in place before the party.”

“I should make sure—” Gabby’s pulse leaped.

“I know it won’t be easy.” Novelynne lifted her chin. “But we don’t have a choice. We’re going to have a party and the house can’t be half decorated. Everything will be complete. Don’t worry. I’ll help.”

“No,” Ryan and Gabby said at the same time.

“You don’t want to end up back here,” Ryan said.

“I don’t, and I won’t,” Novelynne said. “Everything in moderation is what I’ve learned since I’ve been here, but we’re talking about my home, and I intend to be involved in every aspect of the party planning and the interior decorating.”

“We’ll see what the doctor says.” Ryan gave her a wary look.

“He’ll agree. You’ll see.” Novelynne’s mouth was firm.

“If he does, I’m happy to help with the party planning.” Gabby didn’t want Novelynne back in the hospital.

“If I need help, I’ll let you know.”

Mike and Essie rushed into the room. Mike was relieved to see his mother looking better. He and Essie stepped to the bed as Ryan and Gabby made room for them.

“You may as tell them the news.” Novelynne peered past her younger son at Ryan.

“Tell me what?” Mike slipped an arm around Essie. They both looked at Ryan.

“Gabby and I aren’t engaged,” he said and stared straight at his brother.

“You broke up?” Mike’s brows disappeared into his hairline.

“It’s more complicated than that,” Ryan said with apology. “I’ll explain it all when we leave.”

“In the meantime, we have a Christmas Eve party to plan,” Novelynne said. “I’ve already discussed everything with Ryan. As soon as the doctor discharges me, I’ll take over, but we don’t have a moment to lose. This party is going to be one Aspen will never forget.” A smile on her face, Novelynne sank into the pillows.

Gabby said a quick prayer, grateful the older woman had taken the news of her and Ryan’s fake engagement better than she expected. Glancing at Ryan, she saw he watched her with regret in his eyes.

The churning inside her was a confusing mass of emotions. She didn’t want to have feelings for Ryan, but God help her, she did.

CHAPTER 19



Ryan was relieved when the doctors planned to release his mother from the hospital the following day. Novelynne's joy was short-lived when she learned she'd have home care. She'd never needed help before.

"It's a good idea, Mom." He spoke with trained calmness. "You don't want to risk your health and end up back here."

"No, of course not." Her head came up. Her eyes widened.

"With the improvement you're showing, the home care team may not have to stay long," he said. "That's a fair exchange to keep you out of the hospital, don't you think?" He was relieved to see the stubborn lines in her face ebb.

"All right." Novelynne smoothed the covers over her lap. "They can help me, but as soon as I'm better—"

"Don't worry, Mom. I'll arrange everything," Ryan said, relieved.

With his mother resting comfortably in her hospital room, Ryan drove Gabby back to the condo she and Diana had rented for their winter holiday.

"This has to be the craziest breakup in history," Gabby said with a wry laugh as Ryan helped her from his SUV and walked her into the condominium building. "Most couples don't speak to each other after they break up."

"I guess that's a sign that we weren't really engaged." Ryan tried to ignore the odd feeling moving through his chest. He'd always believed he wouldn't want to be engaged. He

didn't have time to date, let alone have a fiancée. This fake engagement made him wonder.



THEY STEPPED from the elevator and down the hall to the condo. Gabby pushed open the door.

Inside, Diana dragged a suitcase into the living room. She straightened when Gabby and Ryan stepped into the condo.

Sherman followed her carrying her skis, poles and ski boots and leaned them against the sofa. He grinned at Gabby and Ryan.

“You’re packing up.” Gabby blinked. She’d been so busy with her and Ryan’s fake engagement and then helping him take care of his mother, that she’d forgotten she’d come to Aspen for a ski vacation.

“Yes, the ski vacation is over, even though you didn’t get to enjoy it very much.” Diana gave her a sympathetic look and straightened. She blew a whisp of hair from her face. “I packed all my stuff. I’ll help you pack, then we can go downstairs.”

“You don’t have to help me pack,” Gabby said quickly. “You just packed your own things.”

“I think I better.” Diana looked at Gabby’s leg cast. “Uh, there’s one more thing.” She shifted her gaze to Sherman, who tipped his head at her. “We’re not driving back to Denver.”

“How are we getting there?” Gabby frowned.

“We’re flying.” Diana squeezed her hands together and bounced. “Sherman chartered a jet. He’s shipping my car back to Denver.”

“Thanks.” She smiled at Sherman.

“I’m glad to help.” Sherman gave a slight nod.

“Then we don’t have to worry about driving back in a snowstorm,” Gabby said.

“The jet’s ready to leave whenever you are,” Sherman said.

“I’ll get my things.”

“I can help.” Ryan stood next to Gabby. His solid presence at her side was a comfort yet a surprise. He was all business all the time. She hadn’t expected him to notice when a friend needed help.

Were she and Ryan friends? For a year, she’d considered him her enemy, then he became her fake fiancé. What was he now?

“That’s okay. I can manage.” Gabby waved dismissively.

Ryan tipped his head at her. His gaze dropped to her cast. “Where are your skis and poles?” His voice was soft, but determination flashed in his eyes. This was a man who didn’t accept the word no.

“Everything’s in the back bedroom.”

“Have you and Ryan been celebrating your engagement?” Diana asked when Gabby led Ryan down the hallway.

“Engagement?” Gabby turned to her. She had to be honest, especially with her best friend. “There isn’t any engagement.”

“You broke up?” Diana’s eyes widened in her pale, shocked face.

Sherman stood next to her and frowned.

“No.” Gabby shook her head. If she hadn’t started this charade in the first place, she wouldn’t be in this uncomfortable position of having to confess the truth. “We weren’t engaged. It was a ruse because—”

“Not that the reason matters.” Ryan looked at Gabby, a gentleness in his eyes. “It started with her helping me with a business deal. Maybe not so unfortunately, things snowballed from there.”

Gabby frowned. What did he mean, not so unfortunately? She had tried to help him get a deal but had ended up deceiving his mother, his family, Diana and everyone that Novelynne had planned to invite to the engagement party.

Something she had never meant to do to the woman who had been her friend. She hated to think that she might be responsible for Novelynne's exhaustion.

"You've broken your engagement," Diana said. When Gabby gave her a quick look, she said, "Okay, your fake engagement, but you're still together."

"Only because Ryan gave me a ride home," Gabby said hoarsely.

Ryan tipped his head at her and frowned, which quickly disappeared. He smiled. "Let's go to your room and get your things.

Gabby nodded and led the way down the hall.

In the bedroom, Gabby added a few more items to her already-packed suitcase. Latching it, she slid it from the bed to the floor.

"Don't go back to Denver." Ryan faced her with such quickness, she took a step back.

"I have to," she said. The intensity in his face made her struggle to breathe. "Diana and I came together. If I don't go back with her—"

"Sherman is flying Diana back to Denver. You don't have to worry about her driving alone." Ryan gave her a direct look, his expression firm.

"There's no reason for me to stay," Gabby said, trying to understand why he wanted her here. "And there's no place to stay. We'd only planned to stay for the week. I'm sure this condo's been rented by someone else. Because of ski season, accommodations are nonexistent and expensive."

"Not if you stay with me," Ryan said.

"Well, I'm not." Grabbing her suitcase handle, she stepped past him.

"You're going to help my mother redecorate the house, which has to be done before her Christmas Eve party. You and she will have to talk several times a day. How will you do that? Over the phone? Over the computer?"

“Which is what I’ve done with other clients.” Gabby lifted a shoulder. “I can’t always be with them.”

“But you can be with my mother,” Ryan said, leaving no room for argument. “My suggestion makes sense.”

“Except that I live in Denver,” Gabby said simply. “My vacation is over. I need to get back to work.”

“You can do that at my place. You can have your own suite. Mom’s office is large enough for you to work in there. Since Mom’s confined to her bed, it will be a while before she can use her office.” He tipped his head as if expecting her to agree.

“Ryan, everything I need is in Denver—my clothes, my computer.” She gave him a firm stare.

“Clothes can be replaced,” Ryan said, sensibly. “We can set up a computer in Mom’s office so you can network into your computer. It’s settled.” He picked up her poles, skis and boots and headed to the bedroom door.”

“What do you mean by settled?” Gabby followed him.

When she reached the living room, a porter was in the room and gathering up the suitcases and ski equipment.

Ryan turned to her and waited. The final decision would be hers.

“You can take my luggage and ski equipment,” Gabby said. She hesitated. Her gaze met Ryan’s. “But leave my things in the lobby.”

Everyone looked at her. She exhaled slowly. Was she going to agree with Ryan? She had to be crazy, but what he said made sense. She didn’t have any other clients at the moment. She had planned to return to Denver, then get on the phone and use her connections to drum up more business.

If she stayed in Aspen, she’d be close to Novelynne and could keep an eye on her while she worked with the designers to select the furnishings for her Aspen mansion and help her select furniture.

Her stomach dropped. Ryan was the last person she should be with, but she wouldn't be with him. She'd stay at the mansion and work with Novelynne. Ryan had a company to run.

"I'm staying in Aspen." Gabby didn't look at Ryan.

"Here? At this condo?" Diana's expression registered shock.

"No," Gabby said, taking in air. "I'll stay at the Knight estate. I can work with Novelynne on the mansion remodel and make sure she doesn't overexert herself."

"All right." Diana seemed to mull over the explanation.

"I'll keep in touch and let you know how things are going," Gabby said. "I should know in a week or so when everything will be finished and when I'll leave."

"Good, then I'll come and get you." Diana looked slightly relieved.

"Thanks," Gabby murmured, though she didn't miss Ryan's glance.

She wasn't sure how she'd get around. She'd left her car in Denver. Even if she had her car, driving while wearing a cast would be a challenge. Ryan couldn't drive her. He didn't have time for anything except work.

These last few days had been different. Ryan had made time for his mother, and he'd made time for Gabby. She didn't hope that he'd realized there was more to life than work. He was doing what any son would do—caring for his mother.

The porter stacked Gabby's and Diana's luggage onto the cart and moved down the hall. Ryan made arrangements to have him load Gabby's luggage and ski equipment into his SUV.

A text notification sounded from Sherman's phone, and he checked the screen. "Our driver's here."

Excitement lit Diana's eyes, then her face fell. "We're leaving."

“It’s okay.” Gabby hugged her. “Go fly your private jet and have fun. I’ll be in touch.”

Diana swallowed and nodded. Sherman slipped his hand around hers. After saying goodbye to Gabby and Ryan, he led Diana into the corridor.

Gabby looked around the condo. She and Diana had been so excited when they first stepped into the place. Little did they know how the week would change their lives. She hoped that Diana meeting Sherman was good for her. He seemed fond of Diana.

As for Gabby, she’d broken her leg, broken her fake engagement, was hired by one of the wealthiest women in the world to remodel her Aspen mansion, and would stay in the same house as billionaire Ryan Knight.

What else could happen?

She was sorry to have thought that question. Anything could happen. Was she ready?

CHAPTER 20



It was snowing when Ryan parked at the entrance to the family mansion. Gabby had said little during the drive. She gazed out the window to the front doors that opened. Walter stood at the entrance.

“Don’t come out,” Ryan said to Walter as he climbed out of the SUV. He walked to Gabby’s door. “I’ll take care of the luggage.”

“It’s no bother to do my job.” Walter moved down the steps while putting on his coat, then smiled at Gabby. “Your room is ready and waiting for you, miss.”

“Already?” Gabby looked at Ryan. “I didn’t realize anyone knew I was coming.”

“It’s their job to know.” Ryan smiled at her and offered her his hand. He liked the light in her eyes.

“They must operate through osmosis.” She took Ryan’s hand and climbed from the SUV.

“What can I say? We have the best staff.” Ryan chuckled.

Inside, Walter took their coats. “I’ll have your luggage sent to your room.”

“Thank you, Walter.” Gabby smiled as Ryan thanked him, too.

Ryan rested Gabby’s hand on his forearm and walked her down the hall to the elevator. Upstairs he guided her to a suite of rooms decorated in gold and cream. The king-size bed was piled with pillows. A chandelier hung from the tray ceiling.

Bay windows overlooked the snow-covered lawn that glistened. Through an archway was a sitting room with a desk that faced French doors overlooking the balcony.

“If this doesn’t work, there’s a room on the other side—”

“This will be perfect.” Gabby looked at him and sighed. “The room is beautiful. This is the perfect environment for an interior designer.”

“Good.” Ryan had hoped she’d like it. “Once you’re settled, we can check the kitchen and see what Susan made for dinner, then I’ll see how Mom—”

“I should go with you,” she said.

He was surprised when she touched his hand. She flushed. Dropping her gaze, she moved her hand to her side.

He tipped his mouth at the wave of disappointment that rushed through him like cold water. He didn’t want to release her. He wanted to hold her closer. He filled his lungs. The deep emotions that burrowed through him were foreign and surprising. All his life he’d focused on business. Nothing prepared him for what he was feeling now. He wasn’t sure what he was feeling—strange and pleasurable as it was.

“I can wait if you want to see your mother now.” She lifted her gaze to his. “I’m not hungry.”

“But you will be. Eating doesn’t take that long,” he said. “Freshen up. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

He left her room and strode to the opposite wing toward his room. He went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face, which did little to ease the sensation that was powerful and compelling and too outlandish to contemplate. He stared at his dripping wet face.

“Get it together, man,” he said firmly to his reflection. “You know where your priorities lie.”

The words rang hollow. Had his priorities been wrong?

He shook his head. Grabbing a towel, he dried his face. Never had his priorities been wrong. He’d won awards for his business acumen.

Straightening, he rolled his shoulders and shook his head.

Before going downstairs, he called Howard Allcock. The man had agreed to their business deal because he'd thought Ryan had changed his ways—that he and Gabby were engaged. Howard had to know the truth. Ryan was committed to being honest with his business partners.

“I'll understand if you want to cancel our agreement,” Ryan told him.

“Let me think about it.” Howard sounded thoughtful. “We'll talk before Christmas.”

That shocked Ryan. Nothing would change. He and Gabby wouldn't be engaged, but if Howard wanted to wait to cancel the agreement, Ryan would agree. Whether they canceled the deal now or later didn't matter.

Feeling freer than he'd felt in a long time, he strode through his bedroom and down the hallway. On his way to the kitchen, he called his mother and was glad to learn she'd been moved to a private room.

“Good, then I'll know where to find you,” he said. “By the way, we have a houseguest. Gabby's going to stay for a few days to help you with the decorating.”

“What a splendid idea,” his mother said, her usual excitement returning. “There's so much to do before the party. Her help is welcomed, indeed. I'll make a list.”

“That doesn't mean you can overdo it.” Ryan's tone held warning.

“Me? Never!” His mother sounded too innocent.

“Yeah, right,” he said dryly. “We're going to grab lunch, then we'll stop by to see you.”

“We meaning you and Gabby?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said cautiously. “Why?”

“No reason,” she said lightly. “I look forward to seeing you both.”

When she hung up, Ryan paused. There was something enigmatic in his mother's tone. He shook his head. He'd find out later. When it came to secrets, his mother couldn't keep one.

Stepping into the kitchen, he found the soup and sandwiches Susan had prepared and set in the refrigerator. He put the soup in the microwave, then set two place settings on the small dining room table.

He sensed when Gabby entered the room. Despite her leg cast, she walked softly. Her subtle fragrance was as fresh as the mountain air.

"Just in time." He looked over his shoulder and smiled at her.

"What can I do?" Her gaze scanned the kitchen.

"Get your appetite ready." He drew two glasses from a cupboard. "What would you like to drink?"

"Water is fine."

"Water it is." He filled the glasses from the refrigerator tap and set them on the table. Turning to her, he saw she frowned. "What is it?"

"I never expected to see you in a kitchen, let alone know what to do." Her mouth tipped apologetically.

"It's called college." He grinned. "I could starve or learn my way around a kitchen."

"I'd say you made the right choice."

"I agree. Have a seat."

"I can help—"

"So can I." He gave her a direct look. "I called Mom and told her to expect us after lunch. By the time we arrive, they'll have moved her to a private room, which will allow her to make a list of items you'll need to research for the house remodel. Enjoy the quiet while you can."

He stepped into the kitchen and returned a moment later carrying a tray loaded with sandwiches and a tureen of soup.

After saying the blessing, he waited while Gabby served herself.

As they ate, Ryan's phone rang. His mouth tight, he glanced at the screen, then pressed the disconnect button. Gabby's wide eyes looked from the phone to Ryan.

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Fine, I just didn't expect you to miss a phone call," she said, then flushed. "I mean—"

"It's all right." He dismissed the comment with a shrug. "There was a time when I wouldn't have missed a call." There was a time when he wouldn't have lost an opportunity that would benefit the family corporation. "Now that I take note, it appears I've missed other opportunities that would have benefited others."

Gabby stared at him as if he'd spoken a foreign language.

"Why do you look surprised?" he asked, though her disbelief was expected. He wanted to laugh out of sadness—for himself and those he had placed second to his business.

"You've always been concerned about your company." She still stared at him in that same confused way. "You didn't want me to marry Mike because his marriage to Essie would benefit Knight Enterprises."

"I never told you that," he said, though the grip on his chest was the reminder of the truth she spoke.

He and Leroy would join forces for a project that would make Knight Enterprises a household name. Leroy and his wife Agatha were concerned when they saw Mike with Gabby and thought they looked like they were more than friends. Mike wouldn't listen to Ryan when he told his brother Essie would make a better match for him, so he told Gabby that Mike wasn't the man for her.

At the time, he told himself he was protecting the Knight reputation. Looking into Gabby's dark eyes, he realized that hadn't been true. He was struck that he wanted to look into Gabby's eyes for the rest of his life.

“You didn’t have to.” The curve of her mouth filled him with regret. “Your meaning was clear.”

“Gabby, I—”

“No.” There was a crack in her voice, and she shook her head. “At first I was shocked, then hurt, but now that I see how happy Mike and Essie are, I realize you were right.”

“Marriage and expecting a child has changed Mike, but when you were seeing him, he was flighty and uncertain about what he wanted.” Ryan barely managed a breath.

“I see that now. You don’t have to explain. We should go see your mother.” Gabby pushed away the meal she’d ignored and rose. “We don’t want her to be too tired to see us.”

“I’ll get our coats.” He moved to her side. Looking into her eyes, he saw pity and compassion.

He had to tell her the truth, but what was that? He had to confess it to himself before he could explain what he had felt the night he told her she should save her heart for someone worthy of her. First, he had to tear down the wall that he’d built around his emotions.

CHAPTER 21



Gabby was relieved to see Novelynne sitting in bed, though alarmed that she was reading an architectural magazine.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” Novelynne’s eyes brightened when Gabby and Ryan walked into the room.

“It’s good to see you with color in your cheeks.” Gabby smiled as she moved into the hospital room.

“I agree.” Ryan squeezed his mother’s hand.

“But you should give it another day before thinking about the remodel.” Gabby glanced at the magazine.

“Gabby’s right, Mom.” Ryan lifted a brow.

“I have to do something.” Novelynne sighed and set the magazine on the overbed table. “Do you know how boring it is to lay in the hospital?”

“I have an idea.” Ryan chuckled. “But the goal is to get you out of here. Rest while you have a chance. You’ll be busy soon enough.”

“And I can’t wait.” Novelynne crossed her arms over her chest. She looked from her son to Gabby and frowned. “What’s going on with you two?”

The question made Gabby glance at Ryan. When she saw Novelynne’s curious look, she wished she could have ignored the turmoil roiling through her chest. Ryan showed no surprise at his mother’s question. Why couldn’t she be as unaffected as Ryan?

“Nothing unusual.” Ryan smiled at his mother. “We ate lunch, then came to see you.”

“Is that so?” Novelynne lifted her chin at her son.

“It is.” Ryan released a slow breath. “Now what’s the news from the doctors?”

“Good, considering.” Novelynne’s face brightened.

Ryan’s flicker of relief showed he was glad to have distracted her. Gabby was, too.

“I’m showing improvement so I’ll be released tomorrow.” Novelynne planted her arms to her sides. “Which is a relief. I need to get ready for our party.”

“Let’s focus on one thing at a time, starting with getting you out of here,” Ryan’s mouth curved.

“Don’t worry,” Novelynne said. “That’s my top priority. Now tell me how Mike and Essie are doing?”

Gabby and Ryan stayed until a nurse stepped into the room to check Novelynne’s vitals. “Your mother’s on the mend. You don’t want to wear her out,” she said and smiled at Novelynne.

“Having my children visit is the best medicine,” Novelynne gave the nurse a determined look.

“It is good, but rest is good, too,” the nurse said as she checked the monitor above Novelynne’s bed.

“She’s right, Mom.” Ryan straightened. “We’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Both of you?” Novelynne gave each of them a firm look.

Ryan lifted his gaze to Gabby.

“Yes, of course.” Gabby blushed. “I want to make sure you’re getting better.”

“Something tells me I’m going to have a miraculous recovery.” Novelynne lifted her chin. “Now run along. Tomorrow, we’ll get some things done.” She gave the nurse a sly look.

“As long as you follow Doctor’s orders.” The nurse’s look held warning.

“You don’t need to worry about me.” Novelynne smiled sweetly.

The nurse narrowed her eyes at her.

“Get some rest, Mom.” Ryan squeezed her hand.

Gabby patted her shoulder, then stepped into the hallway with Ryan.

“She’s making a remarkable recovery.” Gabby turned to him. She was surprised to see his gaze on her. “Is everything all right?”

“What?” He blinked, then gave her a slight smile. “Fine, and you’re right. Her recovery is remarkable. What about you? You didn’t eat much for lunch. Let’s grab something light for dinner.”

“I’m really not hungry.” She gave him a tentative look. Her stomach jolted when he looked as if he had more to say. “We should get back. Your mother’s going to keep me busy. I want to get some designs together so she has a good starting place. She hired me to help her, and that’s what I intend to do.”

“You’re not working tonight.” His brows shot up.

“Look at you worried about someone working at night.” She laughed. “I wouldn’t call it work. I love what I do, so I’d hardly consider working on a preliminary as work. I guess that’s why you think about your business all the time. You love what you do.”

Something flickered in his eyes, making her wonder about his reaction to what she’d said. She’d spoken the truth. He was consumed with work and was handsomely rewarded. Why wouldn’t he like what he did?

“Let’s stop for dinner. There’s a little out-of-the-way place on the edge of town that the tourists haven’t discovered yet, then we’ll drive back to the house.” He touched her back and walked with her to the elevator.

After a quiet dinner, they returned to the house. Walter took their coats and asked about Novelynne.

“She’s doing better.” Ryan smiled at the butler. “I’d say our prayers have been answered.”

“Thankfully.” Walter looked relieved. He asked Ryan if he needed anything else. When Ryan told him no, he nodded and withdrew.

“I’m going to bed,” Gabby said. “Please know I’m grateful that your mother is better.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said, his voice husky.

Gabby moved down the hall to the elevator. Before she stepped inside, she glanced at the foyer. She was surprised to see Ryan standing in there. He was watching her.

“Ryan.” She took a step. She didn’t want to leave him if he were still concerned about his mother.

“Good night.” His eyes enigmatic, he smiled, then turned away.

She watched until he stepped into his office. Novelynne was better. He should be overjoyed. Maybe that was how he coped with his mother’s illness—he worked.

He’d been concerned that Gabby would work tonight. What about him? She stepped into the elevator. He was Ryan Knight. For him, work was like breathing.

CHAPTER 22



Ryan sat behind his desk but didn't turn on his computer. Instead, he leaned back in his chair. He was relieved his mother was better and thanked God for the miracle, but his thoughts jumped back to a year ago when he and his brother had taken a lunch break from skiing and stepped into a restaurant.

At a center table sat a group of skiers enjoying sandwiches and sodas, but it was the dark-eyed beauty with the musical laugh who caught Ryan's eye. That surprised him.

At the family corporation, he was surrounded by women—those who worked for him and those who did business with him—as was Mike when he came to the office. None of the women Ryan worked with had interested him. They were business associates, and he treated them the way he treated the men.

“There's Charles. I'm going to say hello.” Mike strode across the restaurant and greeted the diner who was his tennis partner. After talking to Charles, Mike turned to the brunette.

“Your table's ready.” The hostess appeared at Ryan's side.

“I'll just be a minute.” He followed his brother.

By the time he reached the table, Mike was seated next to the brunette. His arms crossed on the tabletop, he was listening to everything the woman said.

Ryan greeted Charles and acknowledged a couple of other diners who were business associates.

“This is Gabby,” Mike told his brother without looking at him. “She’s up here for the weekend skiing with friends.

“Nice to meet you, Gabby.” Ryan reined in his patience. He was in the middle of a deal with Leroy Fernsby, whose daughter, Essie, had been Mike’s latest love. He didn’t want Mike’s wandering eye to ruin the deal. He placed a hand on Mike’s shoulder. “Our table’s ready.”

“Why don’t you join us?” Charles gestured toward the table. “There’s room.”

The other diners moved making room for Ryan and Mike.

“Sorry,” Ryan said, while Mike grinned and settled in.

Ryan wouldn’t leave Mike alone with Gabby. He joined the table. He had to keep an eye on his brother.

It was after lunch that Mike told Ryan he’d see Gabby that night.

“You’re dating Essie.” Ryan tried to hide his surprise but his brother’s wide eyes told him he’d failed.

“We’re dating.” Mike’s gaze turned away.

“Didn’t you tell everyone you were interested in her?” Ryan tipped his head at his brother.

“Did I say that?” Mike frowned.

“You also said that to her father.”

“Oh.” The light in Mike’s eyes dimmed. “Maybe I was. I just met Gabby. We’re nothing more than friends.”

“Does she know about Essie?” Ryan asked.

“She will.” Mike dragged out the words.

“Make sure she does.” Ryan’s voice was firm. “If you see her and Essie, that’s going to make life complicated.”

Here he was again, keeping track of his brother as he had since Mike could walk.

“I’d never do that,” Mike said innocently, but Ryan could tell he was trying to sort out the dilemma. He’d always been drawn to a pretty face.

Ryan couldn't blame him. With Gabby's radiant smile and her glossy mane, she had been the first person he'd noticed when he and his brother entered the restaurant.

While Ryan worked on the deal with Essie's father, he learned that Mike had made plans to meet friends for dinner—a dinner Gabby would attend. After she returned to Denver, Mike was calling her every night. Leroy had seen Mike with Gabby and had questioned Ryan about Mike's intentions with his daughter. As a flight attendant, she traveled all over the world, but she'd mentioned to her father that Mike hadn't called her lately.

Something uncomfortable settled in Ryan's chest. He had to get rid of this complication. It was when Mike had invited Gabby to one of their mother's parties that Ryan prayed he wasn't too late. He had to save his business deal with Leroy.

He liked Gabby. She was a sweet kid. Her laugh was like long-forgotten music. He didn't want to see her hurt. Because his brother had a hard time deciding who and what he liked, Ryan was there to help him make a choice. The first thing he'd do was make sure Essie's name was added to the guest list.

When Mike saw Essie arrive at the party, he grinned broadly before he realized he'd invited Gabby.

"I need help." He came to Ryan, panic in his eyes.

Ryan looked past his brother to Gabby, who'd worn a gold dress that highlighted the color of her hair. Essie's white dress hugged her curves. She saw Mike and Ryan and waved, then wove her way through the crowd.

"Don't tell me my little brother has a problem—again," Ryan said flatly.

"It was an accident." Mike paled.

"Talk to Essie," Ryan said. "She's on her way over."

Mike looked over his shoulder. Seeing Essie come toward him, he faced her. Taking her hand, he led her to the other side of the room.

Ryan looked through the crowd and saw Gabby on the terrace. Was she waiting for Mike? He exhaled roughly, then stepped to the terrace that was warmed by radiant heaters.

“I hope you’re enjoying the party.” Ryan positioned himself to block Gabby’s view of Mike and Essie.

“It’s a wonderful party.” Gabby smiled and tried to look past him.

“You’re an interior designer, right?” Ryan moved with her gaze.

“Yes, I remodeled Mike’s Denver apartment.” Gabby looked at him as if wondering at his sudden interest in her career. “You’ve been there. You saw it.”

“So I did,” he said, his smile slight.

“Did you have something you wanted me to look at?” Gabby gave him a curious look.

“As a matter of fact.” Ryan took her hand and led her through the French doors to the solarium where his mother’s Ming Dynasty vases sat.

“Oh, my. Ming vases.” Gabby gasped and stepped to the porcelain wares.

Ryan felt relief that Gabby recognized the artwork. She knew craftsmanship.

“This is the perfect place for them.” She scanned the intricately designed glass ceiling, then studied the plants. “Mike never mentioned these.”

“I’m sure he overlooked them,” Ryan said, not willing to address his brother’s short attention span.

“I hope he’ll show me more.” Gabby looked back at Ryan. “I’m sure your mother has quite a collection.” As she studied Ryan’s eyes, her expression turned more serious. “You didn’t bring me in here to discuss Ming vases, did you.”

“There’s something you should know about Mike.” Ryan took a breath. The disappointment in Gabby’s eyes struck him in the chest.

“You don’t need to tell me anything.” Something sparked in Gabby’s eyes. Her mouth curving into a sad smile, she took a step back.

“You know?” The ache in his chest was like an open wound. He liked Gabby, maybe more than liked. He didn’t want to see her hurt.

He liked Essie, too.

Why did his brother always create problems? Why was Ryan always cleaning them up? It would do Mike good to clean up his own mess, except this affected the business deal he wanted to finalize with Essie’s father.

“I haven’t known Mike long, but I know enough to see what he’s like.” Her voice was soft but firm. “He’s kind and considerate, and he cares about others. I’ve no doubt you love your brother, but you and he are nothing alike. I hope you don’t hold that against him.”

“No, of course not,” he said. This conversation wasn’t going in the direction he’d planned. “He’s my brother. I care about him very much, but he tends to have a short attention span and—”

“A lot of people do these days.” She stepped around him. “But Mike and I care about each other. Granted we haven’t known each other long, but the engagement—”

“Engagement?” Panic like a lead weight dropped through Ryan. “Mike proposed to you?”

“We’ve discussed marriage. I don’t have a ring yet.”

“Let me tell you something about Mike.” Ryan kept his voice steady to hide the familiar coldness coiling in his stomach.

Mike had done it again. His brother loved women, and he wanted to be with them all, which meant someone got hurt. Looking into Gabby’s dark eyes, he saw the innocence that had drawn Mike to her. If things had been different, Ryan might have been drawn to her, too.

That made him take a breath. He was in charge of a major corporation. A woman—especially one as naïve as Gabby—didn't fit into his life. Ryan's draw to her was an overwhelming need to protect her from the cruelties of life—and from his brother's inability to say no.

Ryan felt sorry for Gabby. Life was something she'd learn on her own. He hoped it didn't change her beautiful spirit.

"You don't need to explain anything to me about Mike." Gabby gave a startled laugh. "He's an open book. We've talked a lot."

"I'm sure you have." Looking into Gabby's eyes, he saw the tenderness she held for his brother. "You haven't lived much, have you."

"What do you mean?" she asked, surprised.

"That you've stayed close to home," he said.

"Maybe, but what does that have to do with Mike and me?" The momentary confusion on her face cleared. "You don't want Mike to be with me, do you?"

"No." He straightened. "But not for the reason you think."

"I know what you're up to," she said softly. She looked at him sadly. "Mike told me you might say something to me if you learned about our engagement."

"Oh?" His brow lifted. He and Mike had discussed his brother's easy attraction to women. He hadn't expected Mike to remember the conversation—except when he was in trouble. Those were the late nights he was knocking on Ryan's door—he needed help.

"Mike said that you would be against it and try to warn me." She lifted her chin. "Your little talk won't do any good, so save your breath. I know what you're up to."

Had any other woman said this to him, Ryan would have walked away. Gabby was challenging him. He liked her, but she didn't know what she was getting into with his brother. Ryan had to break the news to her. She would be hurt. He hoped she had the strength to move past the pain.

“Does the name Essie Fernsby mean anything to you?” He braced himself for the truth she had to hear.

“No.” She frowned and shook her head, then hesitated. “As in Fernsby Sciences?”

“The same.”

“Yes, I’ve heard the name. Their inventions help the physically challenged.” She lifted a shoulder. “Why are we talking about her?”

“Because she and Mike plan to marry,” Ryan said and watched her face.

“You mean had planned to marry.” Her look was direct. “Mike and I are together now. He wouldn’t have proposed to me if he were seeing someone else.”

Ryan said nothing. He looked into her dark eyes and watched the light glow then dim as she realized what had happened.

“You don’t want me with Mike. I can guess why. You’re the moneyed set as is Essie Fernsby. Like marries like. Isn’t that how it works?” A sheen filled her eyes.

“Gabby, I don’t want to see you hurt.” His heart aching, he stepped to her.

“It’s a little late for that.” She flashed him a dark look. “I’m not taking your word for it.” Turning, she strode from the room.

“Where are you going?” he called after her.

“To find Mike.” She glanced over her shoulder, her walk purposeful. The crack in her voice made him sick. “I’m going to tell him what you said. He won’t be surprised.”

“Gabby—” He took a step but she’d flung open the door that slammed with finality—the conversation had ended.

He followed her. When she saw Mike with Essie, she’d break in two. He liked her too much to let that happen.

When he reached the hallway, she wasn’t there. He rushed down the Persian runner to the hum of voices that filled the

great room. She wasn't going through this alone.

His heart was pounding when he reached the salon. The silhouette of her lithe form stood beneath the archway that framed the guests laughing and talking and enjoying hors d'oeuvres.

Turning, his mother saw him and lifted her chin. He nodded that he would be with her shortly. He scanned the room to find what made Gabby stop.

His breath caught when he saw Mike, his hand touching Essie's back as they spoke to Essie's parents. Mike laughed, then turned. When he saw Gabby, his smile froze. His gaze moved to Ryan, who tightened his mouth.

Essie was laughing when she looked at Mike. She frowned and said something to Mike, which made him jerk his head to her and force a grin. Essie looked past Mike, but not at Gabby. She looked at Ryan and gave him a tentative smile as if wondering what silent message passed between the brothers.

Gabby turned away. Her face pale she rushed down the hallway.

Mike's eyes widened. He said something to Essie that made her frown. He moved through the guests to Ryan.

"Where did she go?" Mike asked alarmed. He looked down the corridor lined with museum-quality artwork.

"Why?" Ryan's tone was flat.

"I want to talk to her and tell her ..." Mike looked at his brother. "I don't know what I'll tell her, but I have to say something."

"That's what I thought. Don't make this worse." Ryan snorted. "Go back to Essie." He looked past Mike to see Essie watching them. "I'll talk to Gabby."

"You've been taking care of my problems all my life." Mike's mouth flattened. "It's time I learn to clean up my messes."

"You're admitting you made a mess?" Ryan choked a laugh.

“Yes, I am.” Mike looked into his brother’s eyes. “It seems to be the one thing I’m good at.”

“So you think that by telling Gabby what you did, you’ll make things better?” Ryan stared at his brother in disbelief.

“I don’t know what I’ll say.” Mike looked helpless. “She’s hurt, and it’s my fault. I can’t let her leave like this. I have to say something.”

“I agree.” He placed a hand on Mike’s shoulder. “I never thought I’d see the day when you’d take responsibility for your actions, but your vow to make things right shouldn’t be practiced on Gabby.”

“I wouldn’t be practicing.” Mike jerked. “I’d tell her the truth.”

“And say what? That you like Essie better than you like her?” Ryan asked. “That’ll make her feel great. For old times’ sake, I’ll talk to her.”

“Why would you talk to her?” Mike asked, confused.

“Because it’s what I do.” Ryan turned away.

“Wait a minute.” Mike caught his arm. “It’s more than that, isn’t it.”

“What?” There was a catch in Ryan’s voice. “No.” He looked past Mike to Essie, who frowned as she moved toward them. “I’ll talk to Gabby, but now that you’ve vowed to be forthright, here’s your chance.”

Mike frowned. Looking over his shoulder, he watched Essie approach.

“Do you know what you’ll tell her?” Ryan asked, his voice low.

“The truth,” Mike said firmly and moved toward Essie, who relaxed when he approached.

Hopefully, she’d still feel relaxed when she learned what Mike had done.

Ryan strode down the hallway. He hoped the truth worked for Mike. If it didn’t, he’d learn a lesson. It was time for him

to think of others.

Ryan dashed outside and into the falling snow. He wore no coat. Flakes collected in the folds of his suit jacket.

“Shall I get your car for you?” The valet huddled into his heavy coat.

“I’m looking for someone.” Ryan scanned the luxury cars parked in the parking area his parents had created for party guests.

Gabby wouldn’t have driven a luxury car though he wasn’t sure what she drove. He wasn’t sure how she got to the house. His brother had flown the private jet from Denver. Maybe Gabby had come with him.

“A petite woman with long curly hair and dark eyes.” And a laugh that made his heart soar. He turned to the valet who nodded to a car that moved down the driveway.

The light filtering through the car window shone on Gabby, who sat in the back seat. She pushed fingers across her cheek.

A muscle worked in Ryan’s jaw. Mike had broken her heart. Ryan ached knowing she hurt. Had she cared for his brother that much? After he talked to Gabby, he’d tell Mike what he’d done. His brother had vowed to mend his ways. He needed a reminder of the damage he’d caused.

“Bill, can you bring my SUV around?” Ryan watched the ride share’s taillights disappear down the curving drive.

“Right away, sir.” Bill’s footsteps dashed through the snow.

A moment later, Ryan’s SUV was idling at the base of the front steps. He rushed to the driver’s door that Bill held open for him.

“Thanks,” Ryan smiled at him as he climbed inside.

Putting the vehicle into gear, he raced down the drive to slowly closing gates. He looked out at the street but didn’t see another car. How had he missed Gabby?

“Come on,” he said, curbing his impatience as he waited for the sensor to detect his vehicle. Slowly, the gates opened. He drove to the road.

Snow had collected on the asphalt covering tire tracks that traveled both ways. Which way had the car with Gabby driven? He guessed. He was usually right.

Except this time he wasn't. There was no sign of the car.

He pressed the phone icon on his dashboard and called his brother.

“Did you talk to her?” Mike sounded breathless.

Because of what he'd told Essie? Ryan would ask him later. He had to find Gabby.

“No,” he said sharply. “What's her number?”

Mike recited her number. That he knew it by heart made Ryan tighten his jaw.

“What will you say to her?” Mike asked.

“I'll know when I see her,” Ryan said. “I've got to go.”

Ryan drove down the road to the street crowded with tourist and ski traffic. Once he merged into the lane, it would take hours before he reached the highway.

He dialed her number. The echo of the ringing phone filled his SUV.

“Hello.” Gabby's sweet voice made his chest tighten.

“Gabby?”

“This is Gabby. I'm sorry I missed your call. Please leave a message, and I'll call you back.”

Ryan grimaced until the tone sounded. “Gabby, it's Ryan. Call me. I'm sorry about what happened. I didn't want you to leave like this.”

Shaking his head, he took a breath. What had he expected? She had thought Mike proposed, then she'd seen him with another woman. She was hurt. Ryan wanted to help her. He

disconnected the call, then turned on the side road and returned to the house.

He called her several times that night and over the next week. She never called back. After a while, he quit calling. How she returned to Denver, he never knew, but people were always driving between Denver and Aspen and looking for someone to share expenses.

She had left her luggage at the mansion. Through Mike, Ryan had learned her address and had everything shipped to her.

A feeling he didn't understand welled inside him. From that day forth, she was never far from his thoughts.

CHAPTER 23



Gabby was relieved when Novelynne returned to the house. Though Gabby and Novelynne's sons warned her to let Gabby manage the remodel, Novelynne threw herself into the project. She sat in bed surrounded by carpet books, paint wheels and furniture designs and discussed her ideas with Gabby. She agreed with most of Novelynne's suggestions but diplomatically made suggestions when she had ideas that would coordinate better with her other selections.

"Will everything be finished in time for the party?" Novelynne asked after they'd spent an evening on the computer and talking to contractors and suppliers through video chat. She looked worried.

"Yes." Gabby closed the sample books and stacked them in her arms. "It will be tight, but we'll get it done. Now you know what Dr. Stanford said about working on this remodel."

"I know." Novelynne looked through her lashes at Gabby. "But it's been years since I've worked on a project like this. I'm having so much fun. I actually think it's good for me."

Gabby gave a dry laugh. "If anything happens, Dr. Stanford is going to scold you and me."

"I won't let him." Novelynne looked shocked. "I'll tell him that this was my idea, but nothing will happen." She settled against the lacey pillows.

"I hope not." Gabby eyed her. "You gave everyone a scare."

“To say nothing of what I did to myself.” Novelynne’s eyes widened. “The Lord can’t take me yet. I have too much to do.”

“Yes, you do have a lot going on. Now go to sleep. We’ll talk in the morning,” Gabby said.

“Good night, dear.” Novelynne smiled and nodded, then closed her eyes.

Gabby balanced the sample books and switched off the light, then closed the door.

When she stepped into the hallway, movement caught her eye. She looked up to see Ryan striding toward her. Though he stared straight ahead, he had a distant look in his eyes as if he were lost in thought. He untied his tie and pulled it from his collar. His gaze met Gabby’s, and he slowed his pace. His eyes flicked to his mother’s bedroom door.

“Working late, I see.” His mouth tipped.

“As were you.” She lifted a brow.

“Touché.” He stopped in front of her. “As long as my mother remembers Dr. Stanford’s warning.”

“I’ve reminded her. We’re finalizing a few details and double-checking delivery dates. She’s so happy when she’s working on this and the party, I don’t want to take that from her, but don’t worry. I’m keeping track of everything.” She moved past him. “Good night.”

“Gabby.” His deep voice made her hesitate.

“Yes?” She looked over her shoulder at him.

“I hope that means you’re taking care of yourself.” His look was firm. “Susan said you haven’t eaten the dinners she set in the refrigerator for you to reheat for the past three nights.”

“I didn’t realize my actions were being reported.” She looked wary.

“Not reported,” he said, his smile slight. “I had wanted to make sure Mom was eating. Susan said she was but mentioned

that your meals remained untouched.”

“I eat plenty.” Her gaze shifted. “With the holidays coming, I want to make sure I have room to enjoy the menu your mother worked so hard to create.”

“I’d say you have plenty of room,” he said, making Gabby wonder if he were noticing more than the work she did with his mother. That couldn’t be. Ryan cared about one thing—his company. “But if it will make you feel better, I’ll go to the kitchen after I take these to your mother’s office.”

“How about we drop these off together?” He slid the books from her arms and gave her a direct look.

“Ryan,” she said, flustered. “I can carry these.”

“So can I,” he said. “Lead the way.”

Sensing his determination, she turned away and moved down the hallway to the elevator. When they reached the first level, she led the way to Novelynne’s office.

The room was filled with sample books. On a whiteboard, Gabby had drawn floor plan sketches with furniture arrangements. Next to it, she’d tacked photos of chairs, sofas, tables and artwork that Novelynne had ordered.

“You can put those books on that table.” Gabby gestured to the small conference table.

“It’s been awhile since I’ve been in here.” Ryan set the books on the table and looked around. He moved to the whiteboard and studied the floorplans. “You’ve been busy.”

“Your mother has.” Gabby laughed softly. “But within reason.”

“I’m glad she has a project to occupy her time.” He looked at Gabby with such softness, that a lump rose in her throat.

“We should go to the kitchen so you can eat.” Heat rose in her cheeks, and she turned away.

Ryan was a dichotomy. He was head of a company and kept track of all negotiations and finances, but still, he showed concern for someone who needed his help. He remained by her

side when she broke her leg, which shocked her. When she and Mike had discussed marriage, Ryan was adamant that they weren't meant for each other.

Her chest ached remembering how heartbroken she'd been, but when she saw Mike with Essie, she had to agree. Those two were happy together.

"It isn't just I who needs to eat." Ryan flashed a rakish grin that made her heart swell. He took her hand and pulled her close.

His warmth and strength surrounded her. Air stilled in her chest. When she was close to him, she couldn't think. Lifting her gaze to his, she looked into eyes that no longer held that artful glaze. Instead, they were filled with a tenderness that couldn't be from Ryan.

He gave a slight smile, then stepped away. "I'd say we both do."

Gabby blinked. If she had wanted to eat before, she didn't now. When she was with Ryan, she had little appetite.

"Right." She moved from his touch but didn't miss the flicker in his eyes. Turning away, she walked to the door.

In the kitchen, they found an enchilada casserole, cilantro rice and a salad. Gabby heated the casserole and rice in the microwave while Ryan carried the salad and drinks to the small dining room that Susan had set for two. Once everything was on the table, they said a blessing and tucked in.

"How did Mom do today?" Ryan asked.

"Fine. Everything's on schedule for the remodel, which keeps her relaxed," Gabby said. "She's been meticulous about the guest list for the Christmas Eve party. I believe everyone in Aspen has been invited."

"And will probably RSVP." Ryan chuckled. "Everyone clamors for an invitation."

"Which explains why so many people have called." Gabby tipped her head. "She's nearly doubled the number of guests."

“I see.” Ryan nodded. “That should make the caterer happy if he doesn’t pull his hair out first. He always gets tons of referrals when he caterers one of Mom’s parties.”

“I talked to him this afternoon,” she said. “He’s booked through the end of next year.”

Ryan nodded and raised his brows. His phone rang, and he glanced at the screen. His mouth firm he tapped the screen, and the ring silenced.

“You surprise me,” she said with a laugh, then went still. She hadn’t meant to comment on how he conducted his business though until recently he never dismissed a call or anything to do with his company.

“There’s a wonderful invention,” he said with a faint smile. “It’s called voicemail.”

“I know that. Most people do. I didn’t expect you did.”

“Sometimes, it’s useful.” He looked into her eyes. The lines etched around his mouth softened. “Now tell me more about the remodel.”

She hesitated. She hadn’t expected him to be interested in anything except Knight Enterprises, but the sincerity in his eyes said he wanted to know more. They talked through dinner and while they cleaned the kitchen.

Gabby hadn’t realized what a conversationalist he could be. He didn’t just listen, he asked questions and shared a few stories about the parties his parents had hosted when he and Mike were growing up. They were two boys who couldn’t stay out of trouble.

“Does your mother know you did this?” she asked when he told the story of how he and Mike had hidden under the smorgasbord table.

When he thought no one was looking he pinched a few hors d’oeuvres for himself and Mike to munch. Someone snatched his hand and a terrified Ryan stared into the stern face of his father’s partner.

“I thought my life was over.” He gave a soft laugh. “I could feel Mike trembling beside me. As it turned out, Mr. Dankworth became our partner in crime and made sure we had something to drink along with the Oysters Rockefeller, which became our favorite snack growing up.”

“Of course, it would be Oysters Rockefeller.” Gabby laughed. “It wouldn’t be something mundane like cheese and crackers.”

“We liked those, too,” Ryan said in mock defense. His expression turning serious, he glanced at the wall clock. “Because you have a full day tomorrow, it’s time we say good night.”

Gabby tried to ignore the nick of disappointment. She hadn’t expected to enjoy an evening with Ryan. Whenever she’d been with him before, he’d been stern and firm, not like Mike who joked about everything—but then Mike didn’t run the family corporation. Ryan did.

How had the evening passed so quickly?

“To say nothing of you.” She moved through the kitchen. “Starting with those calls you didn’t take this evening.”

“They can wait until morning.” Ryan followed her.

They walked down the hall to the elevator, which they rode in silence to the next floor. How could being with Ryan feel comfortable? He’d always been determined and stubborn. Had she misjudged him?

“How’s the leg?” Ryan asked when they stepped into the gallery.

“Except that it itches like crazy, it’s fine.” She looked down at the cast that exposed her pink toenails. “I’ll be glad to get rid of it next month and put on a pair of skis again.”

“The time will fly,” he said lightly, but the serious look in his eyes said more than Gabby expected. “Maybe we should plan to meet on the slope that day—christen the healed leg.” His voice was softer.

The tumble of thoughts swirling in her head was a confusion that didn't make sense. Last year, Ryan had been her enemy.

After she'd left the party, the driver had taken her to an all-night coffee shop where she'd found a group of skiers who were driving to Denver that night. They didn't question the woman dressed in an evening gown who needed a ride. Eccentric people were the norm in Aspen.

The group drove all night in a raging snowstorm. Ryan and Mike called her repeatedly, but she silenced her phone. She never listened to the messages nor returned the calls.

Ryan stood before her now his gentleness and compassion drawing her to him. He was so different than he'd been last year. Had he changed?

"Good night," she murmured and turned away.

"Gabby?" The huskiness in his voice made her stop.

"Yes?" She didn't face him.

"Last year, when we spoke at the party," he said.

She closed her eyes. She didn't want to be reminded of the worst night of her life.

"You never let me explain why I didn't think your seeing Mike was a good idea," he said.

"I think you did." Her voice was rough as the old pain found a crack in the surface.

"Not everything," he said.

"What?" She turned to him. "You didn't think Mike and I were suited for each other. That was clear."

"Back then, Mike wasn't suited for anyone," Ryan said flatly. "He didn't know what he wanted or why. You and he weren't a good match because I didn't want to see you hurt." His expression changed so much he was almost unrecognizable.

"But that's exactly what you did." She stared at him, stunned.

“Look, I agree I didn’t handle that well,” he said, then shook his head. “No, I totally messed up, but you didn’t give me a chance to tell you why I thought you and Mike shouldn’t be together.”

“You didn’t have to.” She shook her head in disbelief. “You wanted to save that deal with Leroy Fernsby.”

“What?” He looked at her in a way she didn’t understand. “No. I mean, at first, I thought it was the reason. Mike helped me understand the real reason.”

“The reason doesn’t matter anymore.” Gabby exhaled roughly. “You got what you wanted—Mike and Essie together. You and Leroy are business partners. Good night, Ryan.” She turned away.

“I didn’t want you and Mike together, because I didn’t want to see you hurt.” His firm voice pulled her to a stop.

“You have no idea.” She turned to him. The hurt and anger from last year rushed to the surface.

“I had every idea.” Something flickered in his eyes. “I called and texted. You didn’t respond.”

“Because you’d said enough,” Gabby said softly. “There was no point in discussing what I already knew.”

“You didn’t give me a chance to tell you how sorry I was.” His mouth tipped ruefully.

She studied him. Was he sorry? She thought back to the moment when she’d been so mortified she couldn’t leave the party fast enough. She’d known he’d followed her, but she couldn’t stay. She was crying. Spoiling Novelynne’s party would’ve added to the humiliation. Everyone was having a good time. She wouldn’t ruin it.

“My mother said you emailed her to thank her for inviting you,” he said.

“Did she know—” Gabby asked horrified. She had hoped she left before anyone was aware of what had happened.

“No.” Ryan shook his head. “She was so busy greeting guests and managing the caterer she didn’t have time.”

Gabby heaved a sigh of relief.

“I was sorry for the way Mike treated you and Essie,” Ryan said. “I told him he had to make a choice.”

“And Essie was his choice,” she said. The rejection hadn’t hurt as much as it had last year.

“Not at first,” he said.

“You changed his mind?” Her head came up.

“No, but when you didn’t return either of our calls or texts, I sat him down and talked to him,” he said. “He hadn’t realized his ambivalence hurt people. He needed to start making decisions. If they weren’t the right ones, he had to deal with the consequences. Mike had always been protected. As his older brother, I felt responsible for him. I protected him too much.”

“I can’t blame you for loving your brother.” Somehow Gabby managed to smile through the pain. As an only child, she didn’t know what it was like to have a brother or sister love her, though she never doubted her parents’ love for her.

Ryan gave her a lopsided grin.

“What did Mike say when you told him that?” she asked, though the look in his eyes made her wonder if Mike did more than his usual shrug.

“He asked me if the real reason I wanted him to step back was because of my feelings for you.”

CHAPTER 24



Ryan had said what had been in his heart for the past year—longer if he included the first time he'd seen Gabby. Her musical laugh and her expressive face captured his attention when he saw her sitting in the restaurant. He hadn't even thought about Mike's interest in Essie, and that her parents and Novelynne were expecting Mike to propose to her.

When Ryan saw Gabby seated next to Mike laughing and joking and enjoying herself, he knew he had to meet this woman, which surprised him. He didn't pursue women. They pursued him. He pursued business deals.

When was the last time he met a woman he wanted to know better? Never.

Looking into Gabby's eyes he saw her confused stare. The color in her cheeks drained.

"What did you say?" she stammered.

How did he explain himself without making everything worse? She hadn't been interested in him. She liked Mike.

"The first time I saw you, I knew I had to get to know you better." His voice was rough, but he'd said what he felt. He couldn't deny what this woman did to him. It didn't matter that she didn't know or care. He had to take the first step—admit that being with her made him never want to be away from her.

"It was at the restaurant," she said remembering. "I was sitting with friends. You and Mike came in. You sat next to me, and we talked."

That was the first night he hadn't thought about work. She'd opened a new world to him.

"You were nice enough, but I thought you were interrogating me to see if I were suitable for your brother." She smiled sadly.

"Interrogating?" He choked.

"Yes." Her laugh was soft. "You asked me so many questions, and you didn't answer any of mine."

"I didn't ask you that many." He scoffed, remembering how he felt when he sat next to her. She was alive and vibrant. "Okay, maybe I asked a few questions, but it had nothing to do with Mike, and how he felt toward you." He gave a short, soft laugh and shook his head. That meeting at the restaurant was the first time they'd seen each other, and already she'd assumed he thought of nothing but his company. She'd been right. "I heard a musical laugh, and I had to find out more."

"Mike had said you like to joke. I don't know what to say." She looked into his face. Her lips parted.

"Maybe I like to joke, but this time I'm not joking," he said.

Why had he said anything? But he'd kept his emotions so wound up inside himself that he needed a release. Because of Gabby. She set him free, and he liked it. He had to tell her how he felt. Where it went from there he didn't know. Too bad for him, it mattered.

"I'm going to bed." Still looking stunned, she moved down the hallway.

He should call her back.

And say what?

He watched until she stepped into her room. The door closed.

He turned away.

Had he made a fool of himself? He, Ryan Knight, who was always in control? Who always said the right thing?

Mike was the one who made mistakes. Ryan was the one who cleaned up the mess.

Since his engagement to Essie, he'd accepted more responsibility and had taken his place in the company, and he'd negotiated profitable deals, which surprised Ryan but made him proud of his brother. Mike was married and would soon be a father.

Ryan had never given Mike enough credit.

Had Ryan given himself too much credit?

Ryan wasn't married. He had no plans for a family.

He'd always strived to make sure he received his father's approval though his father would've loved him anyway. His father understood people made mistakes. He understood that people learned from their mistakes.

Now what, Lord?

He rubbed the back of his neck. If he'd trusted his faith in God, he wouldn't have opened his mouth without thinking. He laughed dryly. For the first time in his life, he said what he felt. He'd given in to his emotions and chased away Gabby.

What had he expected her to do? She'd never indicated she was interested in him. She liked Mike.

He strode to her room. He'd talk to her. He'd explain himself.

He slowed his pace. What would he say? He didn't have an explanation. How could he tell her what he didn't know?

Turning away, he walked down the steps to the gallery and moved down the west wing to his room. Before he said another word, he needed to pray.

He'd shocked her by revealing his feelings.

When he negotiated business dealings, he always had a plan. Why had this affair of the heart been different?

Because he'd never faced this situation before.

If he had ruined any chance with Gabby, he'd accept that. His life wouldn't be any different than it was now, except for the place in his heart where he'd made room for Gabby. Because of his thoughtlessness, that place could remain empty forever.



THE NEXT MORNING, Ryan was surprised and relieved to see his mother sitting at the head of the breakfast table. Essie and Mike sat next to her and studied a tablet opened to a site of educational toys for infants.

Gabby's chair was empty.

"This is a nice surprise." Ryan placed a hand on his mother's shoulder, then moved to the sideboard and lifted the lid to a chafing dish that held cheese omelets. "Are you sure you're not overdoing it?"

"Quite sure." Novelynne sipped her tea. "I called Dr. Stanford's office and told him that because I felt so amazing it was time I had a change in venue."

"He agreed?" Ryan raised his brow in question.

"Eventually, though he made me promise to call him should anything happen," she said.

"Mother." Ryan's eyes narrowed.

Mike and Essie stopped talking and stared at her.

"Don't worry." Novelynne lifted her chin. "I'm taking my blood pressure, temperature and all those other things every hour. I'm doing well, and I dismissed the home care staff."

"Mother." Ryan took a slow breath that calmed his racing pulse.

"It's time." His mother sniffed. "There's nothing for them to do because I can do everything myself."

"Just in case, I'll work from home today." Ryan placed bacon and an English muffin on his plate next to the omelet

and sliced melon. He sat in his chair opposite Mike.

“If you’re staying here to keep an eye on me, you’re wasting your time.” Novelynne tipped her head at him.

“We’ll see.” Ryan flipped his napkin into his lap. He glanced at Gabby’s empty chair, then cut into his melon. “I see Gabby hasn’t made it down for breakfast yet.”

“She’s come, and she’s gone,” Novelynne said simply, then glanced at him. “You look surprised.”

“Me? No.” He set down his fork and sipped his juice. He suddenly had no appetite. He pushed his plate away. “Gabby works for you, not me.”

“Indeed she does, which is why I need to finish and go to my office.” Novelynne smiled at him, then stared hard. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” he said firmly. When he saw that Mike and Essie studied him, his gaze moved between them and his mother. “Why?”

“You’ll have to tell us,” Novelynne said, though she looked concerned.

“There’s nothing to tell.” He checked his watch and rose. “If you’ll excuse me, a matter needs my attention.”

“Should I be involved?” Mike started to rise.

“Uh, no.” Ryan’s gaze shifted. “Not now, at any rate, but soon. I’ll let you know.” He strode from the room but didn’t miss the murmur between Mike and his mother as he strode down the corridor to his home office.

Movement in front of him made him slow his pace.

Gabby walked toward him, a phone tucked between her ear and shoulder. An open sample book was balanced in her arms. A paint wheel dangled from her graceful fingers. She glanced at him and hesitated before smiling and moving past him.

Ryan took the sample book. “Lead the way.” He kept his voice low.

She mouthed her thanks but didn't stop talking into the phone. She walked into the great room. Standing in the sunlight that filtered through the glass wall, she spread the paint wheel and angled it to catch the rays.

Ryan set the sample book on the coffee table and stepped back as Gabby paced in the sunlight. Her gaze shifting between the glass and the paint colors, she examined several shades and tabbed them, then knelt before the sample book and tabbed several carpet squares. Leaning back on her haunches, she spoke a few more minutes. When she disconnected the call, relief swept her face.

"Thanks for your help." She looked at Ryan, her dark eyes shining.

"I'm glad I was there." He was captivated by the light in her eyes.

"Everything's coming together perfectly for the remodel." She rose and reached for the sample book, but Ryan picked it up. Surprise in her eyes, she picked up the paint wheel. "A crew is coming this afternoon to begin the preliminary." She stepped toward the hall, then turned to him. "That's another thing. It's going to get noisy. You should move out so you can get more work done."

"I've lived through my mother's remodels." He smiled. "But I'll advise my mother and Mike and Essie."

"Essie especially." Gabby looked relieved. "In her condition, she'd be more comfortable away from the noise."

"I'll discuss that with Mike and Essie," he said. "Mike has a condo near the ski slope. They can stay there until everything's finished."

"What about your mother?" Gabby frowned.

"I'll discuss that with her," he said. "Though she's never moved out before. She likes to be involved."

"Yes, I've learned that, but because of her condition ..." Gabby chewed her lower lip. "She was just released from the hospital."

“I’ll see what I can do,” Ryan said.

Gabby nodded, then turned away.

“About last night.” Ryan’s voice was rough. He still didn’t know what he’d say to Gabby, but he had to say something. The stiffness between them had become palpable.

“I don’t think we should discuss that.” She took a step back.

“Discuss what?” Novalynne moved through the great room, her blue eyes shining with excitement. She stepped into her office and sat at her desk.

Gabby set the tagged carpet and paint samples in front of Novelynne, who put on her glasses and inspected the samples.

Ryan stilled. Gabby took a breath and glanced at him.

“Well?” Novelynne looked over her glasses at her son.

“We’re going to suggest that Mike and Essie move out during the remodel,” Ryan said, puzzled over what he felt for Gabby.

He knew better than to let his emotions get away from him—that was before he realized he had emotions.

His mother removed her glasses and stared at him for a moment before replacing her glasses and inspecting the samples. “Good idea.”

“I think you should, too.” Ryan looked straight at his mother. He felt Gabby relax at his side.

“What?” She whipped off her glasses.

“You were just released from the hospital.” Ryan eyed her.

“Believe me, I haven’t forgotten, but you know I’m always involved in our family home remodels, and I have to plan the Christmas party.” Her glasses back in place, she studied the samples again. “I’m staying, but if you and Gabby.” She looked at each of them. “Want to move out, I certainly understand. There’s always the guest cottage or the mother-in-law apartment above the garage.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Ryan tilted his chin.

“I think it’s better if I stay here.” Gabby shifted her gaze from Novelynne to Ryan.

“Then the three of us will live happily ever after.” Novelynne spread the samples across the edge of her desk. “Do you like these cool tones, or should I go with warmer shades?”

“Cool tones and warm shades are a foreign language to me, but I like this combination.” Ryan tapped a group on her desk.

“So do I.” Grinning, Novelynne collected the samples and handed them to Gabby. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

Ryan excused himself and moved down the hallway to tell Mike and Essie they might be more comfortable living in the guest condo near the ski area, but front and center in his mind was Gabby Adams.

He was never good at leaving business unfinished, though what he felt toward Gabby wasn’t business. What he felt for her, he’d never felt for anyone. He couldn’t rest until he told her everything.

What would he tell her? He had no idea but he would share everything in his heart.

God help him. He might make a fool of himself but he couldn’t stop.

CHAPTER 25



Though Gabby was excited about the remodel of Novelynne’s house, her mind was spinning as she kept sample patterns, construction crews and furniture deliveries straight.

Almost daily, Ryan drove to the Aspen airport and flew on his private jet to one coast or the other. He usually returned late, so Gabby rarely saw him. That relieved her, but she still prayed for his protection.

She couldn’t forget the look on his face when he’d confessed what he’d felt when they first met. She swallowed. She had always considered him Mike’s older brother who never smiled. When she came to the house, he barely acknowledged her. He was more interested in his phone conversations.

He’d been cordial though aloof toward her. They rarely spoke until the day he told her she wasn’t the right woman for Mike.

Gabby swallowed. She wished she could forget that day, but she should consider it a learning experience. She had fallen for the wrong man. She wouldn’t make that mistake again.

As she worked on the remodel, she talked to her mother almost daily. She talked to Diana several times a week. When Diana told her Sherman had proposed, Gabby had to sit down.

“It’s all over the internet.” Diana sounded surprised. “This is a whole new life for me—dodging the paparazzi. That’s the

other thing I wanted to tell you. We now live in a secure building.”

“You moved?” Gabby’s mouth fell open.

“I had to, but don’t worry. You moved, too,” Diana said. “That’s one of the reasons I called. You have a new address. I’ll text it to you. I wouldn’t abandon you. I wanted to make sure you had a place to stay when you finished that Aspen job.”

“I suppose I should appreciate your keeping us together, but what is this new place going to cost?” Her chest tightened as she braced herself for an astronomical payment. Sherman was rich. Diana would be rich, too, after she and Sherman married. Gabby was not rich.

“It’s the same as what we were paying at the old place,” Diana said excitedly. “You’re going to love it. It has a pool, a sauna and a steam room. We have a fabulous view of the mountains. It will be the perfect place for me to live until Sherman and I marry. After that, we’ll decide where we want to live, but thankfully it won’t be Los Angeles. We’re looking for a place that’s good for raising a family. The other reason I called is to ask you to be my maid of honor.”

“Of course I will.” Gabby was trying to take all this in. “When’s the wedding?”

“This summer. I just texted you a picture of my engagement ring,” Diana said. “Sherman wants to get married soon, so we’re planning something small.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do,” Gabby said.

“You have enough going on,” Diana said. “I have plenty of help.”

The text notification sounded, and Gabby opened the message on her phone to the image of a sparkling diamond ring on Diana’s hand.

“It’s beautiful,” Gabby said softly. Tears filled her eyes. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Don’t cry.” Diana sniffed. “You’ll make me cry.”

“These are happy tears.” Gabby wiped her eyes.

“I’m still floating,” Diana said tearfully.

“I’m sending you a virtual hug now,” Gabby said. “I can’t wait to see you again.”

“I have to go.” Diana gasped. “Sherman’s calling. He’s on location in Tanzania, and he can only call when someone from the village brings a radio to the site.”

“Go, and tell him congratulations for me,” Gabby said. “Love you!”

“Love you, too,” Diana said.

Gabby disconnected the call. She leaned against the pillows piled on her bed. It was late, but the light from her bedroom reflected against the snow falling past her window.

Her best friend was getting married, and to a famous movie star. She hoped Diana and Sherman would live nearby so she could visit.

Gabby’s world was changing. The remodel was nearly finished. Novalynne was focused on the Christmas Eve party, while Gabby worked with the contractors to finish the remodeling details. When Diana had called her, she’d left her notes in Novelynne’s office. She stepped into the hallway. She’d collect her notes, straighten the office, then go to bed.

She reached the foyer as Ryan strode from the hallway beneath the staircases. He unwrapped the scarf from around his neck.

She was struck by the lines around his mouth and the shadows beneath his eyes showing the strain of the trip he’d completed. Had his trip gone well?

His gaze met Gabby’s, and he stilled.

She hadn’t seen him for several days and didn’t know where he’d gone. He hadn’t told her he was leaving, which wasn’t unusual. She hadn’t asked Novelynne where he’d gone, though she’d been in Novelynne’s office when she called him for advice on the guest list.

“Hello.” Ryan’s husky voice was warm and soft, the tone filling her with an emotion she pushed away. She didn’t want to feel anything for this man.

From nowhere, Walter appeared. His eyes flickered when he saw Gabby. He nodded to her.

“I hope your trip went well,” Walter said as he took Ryan’s coat and scarf.

“What?” Ryan jerked his gaze to Walter as if he’d forgotten the butler was standing next to him. “Yes, it was fine. Thank you. I hope everything went well here.”

“It did.” Walter’s smile was slight. He turned away, acknowledged Gabby again, then left.

“Mom said that the remodel is nearly finished, as are the details for the party.” Ryan looked at her with such an intensity she felt on fire inside.

“We’re wrapping things up.” Gabby laughed and was disappointed her nervousness showed. She took a calming breath. “Everything will be ready in time for the party, which should be wonderful. Your mother’s worked very hard on it.”

“Yes, we’ve discussed some of the details,” he said. “But you’ll know yourself when we have the party next week.”

“I won’t be here,” she stammered.

He said nothing, but her heart pounded as she stared into his eyes. The softness she’d seen the past few weeks vanished. In its place was the arctic glaze she’d seen when she’d first met him. It made her wonder what unrest dwelt in his heart.

Why would he care if she couldn’t attend a party? There would be a couple hundred guests attending. Her presence wasn’t needed.

“I’ve already discussed this with your mother,” she said softly.

“You have other plans?” His gaze studied hers.

“In a way.” She laughed softly. “I have to make a living. I devoted these past few weeks to your mother’s remodel and

haven't had time to schedule future projects. I'll be on the phone while I ride back to Denver and try to line something up."

"Is that all?" He sounded amused.

"Since I've learned that working provides money to buy food and pay the rent, yes, that's all." She shifted her gaze before giving him a direct look.

"And how are you going to get to Denver?" He dropped his gaze to her cast before looking into her eyes.

"I'll check the internet. There's always someone driving to Denver," she said. "I'll find someone who needs a passenger who will share expenses."

"A bad idea." Annoyance flashed in his eyes, then vanished. "Come to the party." He looked about the great room dazzling with the finishes of designer furniture, sparkling marble and original artwork. "Your portfolio will speak for itself."

Gabby's gaze followed his. The remodel had turned out exactly as she wanted and had met Novelynne's standards. Anyone who saw it would know what Gabby could do.

"I still need to stay connected to my network," she said. She wanted to believe that at least one of Novelynne's guests would need her services, but there was no guarantee.

"Not an impossible request." His well-shaped mouth formed that crooked grin. "Does that mean you'll attend the party?"

"I'll think about it." She'd get on the phone tonight and see what connections she could make for a new project. "Attending a party with a cast on my leg is hardly the way I want to celebrate the holidays. I'll decide in the morning."

"That's reasonable. I'm sorry your cast won't be removed until after the new year." He looked sympathetic. "I feel responsible."

"Don't. I have no one to blame but myself." She shook her head. "The next time I want to make my escape, I'll make sure

it's not at a ski jump.”

He nodded, then glanced over his shoulder. “I was on my way to the kitchen to grab a bite. Do you want to join me?”

She hesitated. She hadn't eaten yet. Novelynne had requested a tray be taken to her room, one of her favorite places to dine when her sons couldn't join her for the meal. Gabby used the quiet time to finalize details. She wanted everything to be perfect by the day of the party.

“Thanks, but I'm not hungry,” she said.

Her betraying stomach erupted into a loud growl. She slapped a hand over her middle.

“You should've consulted your stomach before you made that decision.” Laughing, he took her hand and led her through the foyer to the kitchen.

“I'll agree as long as it's something light,” she said.

“At this hour, that is a very good idea. Have a seat.” He nodded to a stool at the breakfast bar.

“I can help.” She'd never been good at watching others work around her. She had to be involved.

“Don't you trust me?” He gave her a challenging look.

“No,” she said simply.

“A fair response.” He laughed deeply. “Though unwarranted. You and I have worked in the kitchen together before.”

“As I recall, you took your cues from me.” She tilted her chin.

“I remember things differently,” he mused and turned to the refrigerator. He gathered several items in his arms and set them on the counter. “Hummus, sliced veggies, cheese, fruit and ...” He reached into the pantry and with a flourish, pulled out a box of crackers. “... the *pièce de résistance*.” He set two plates and two cans of sodas on the counter. He filled glasses with ice then set them next to the sodas. “Mom is pleased with

the way the remodel turned out.” He turned the tray toward her so she could serve herself, then took the seat next hers.

“I’m so glad.” She poured her soda into her glass. “She knew exactly what she wanted. It’s so much easier to work with someone who has definitive tastes. The real test will be what her guests have to say. How was your trip?”

When he didn’t answer, she lifted her gaze to his and saw he studied her. What she’d asked was a simple question yet it was personal—something married couples asked each other.

“It went well.” He looked at her a moment longer, then turned his attention to the tray of sliced vegetables. “I met with a client I have been trying to negotiate with for a couple of years. We finally reached an agreement.”

“Congratulations!” Gabby lifted her glass.

“Thank you.” He touched his glass to hers, but his gaze lingered on her a moment longer before he added crackers to his plate. “I’m ready to move forward with the project.”

As they munched the late-night snack, their conversation turned to some of Gabby’s previous projects. The tiredness in his face eased away. He seemed like a young man who had enjoyed life, enjoyed family and enjoyed friends. What had happened to that man? He was consumed with his company. Had he forgotten how to live?

Gabby shared stories of some of her eccentric clients. They laughed when she talked about an old bachelor who’d inherited a mansion from his parents and had no intention of remodeling until his twenty-year-old fiancée moved in. The elderly gentleman took to wearing a smoking jacket and paid for dance lessons to keep up with the blonde bombshell.

“I’m stuffed.” Gabby leaned back and rested her hand on her middle. “This was delicious.”

“I agree.” Ryan watched her and smiled. “Go to bed. I’ll clean up.”

“No.” She rose from her chair and picked up a tray. “I helped make this mess. I’ll help clean it up.”

“You are stubborn.” He laughed. Picking up another tray, he followed her.

“Look who’s calling the kettle black,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“You’re referring to me?” He touched his chest with mock indignation.

She looked around the room as if searching for someone else, then gave him a pointed stare.

“A conversation for another time.” He lifted his hands, then turned to the trays.

With the kitchen cleaned, they walked to the elevator. When they had talked, the tiredness in his face had eased. Now the lines around his eyes returned. Had thoughts of work crept into his mind?

“You’re thinking about work again,” she said when they stepped into the hallway. Her mouth softened into a half smile.

“Actually, I’m not.” He looked into her eyes, making her catch her breath. What was he about to tell her? “I was thinking how much I enjoyed sitting in the kitchen and talking to you.”

She was too surprised to speak.

“You’ve made me realize something.” He glanced at the ceiling before looking back at her. “When my father ran the company, he still enjoyed himself. He was the same whether he was working or enjoying an evening with his family or friends. I see now he didn’t take himself too seriously. He knew everything was in God’s hands. Each morning he’d go to the office and pray and read scripture. I, on the other hand, have neglected to do that. I did at first, but it seemed to take too much time. I wanted to be ready for the day. Now I see that was how my father prepared for the day. By the time my father was the age I am now, he was married and had two children. Mike is younger than I am but is married with a child on the way.”

“It isn’t too late for you,” she said, though wondered at this man who devoted himself to his company. She understood

why he was still single.

“I’m beginning to think you’re right.”

That made her pause. Was he close to someone? Her body flooded with a moment of disappointment. He was handsome, and he was rich. When he wasn’t thinking about work, he was engaging. Why wouldn’t he be interested in someone? Women had to be interested in him, though she’d never seen him with anyone. She saw now that he could love someone deeply.

She almost sighed. What woman wouldn’t want a man that devoted to her?

“Then I think you should step out and take a chance,” she said. “You do it in business. Why not do it in love?”

“Treat love like business?” He looked thoughtful.

“Not exactly, but the devotion is the same,” she said thoughtfully. “People work hard at their jobs. They don’t realize if they worked hard at love, they’d be successful.”

“And you know this how?” He gave her a curious look.

“I don’t have firsthand knowledge if this works.” Her face went hot. “But it makes sense, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I do.” His voice was low and deep, his gaze direct.

“So go out there and live. Take a chance.” The more she talked, the more she wished she hadn’t said anything. Why was she feeling anything toward this man?

“I will,” he said.

“You will?” She blinked. Did that mean he would bring a date to the party? She felt a sudden and strange sense of unease.

Why did she care?

She cared, and she’d made up her mind about the party—she wouldn’t attend.

“Well, good, you should have fun,” she said.

“I agree.” He studied her. “You have no idea, do you.”

The unleashing of emotions bursting inside her made it hard to breathe.

Looking into her eyes, he touched his fingers to hers, then intertwined them with his own. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed each tip. Each touch was warm and caring and made her pulse beat wildly.

“I see you don’t.” He slid his hands up her arms.

Caressing her back, he pressed his lips to her forehead, then the tip of her nose.

She knew what she wanted more than anything. She wanted those firm lips to touch hers. She melted against the ridges in his chest.

“Gabby ... oh, Gabby ...” The way he said her name made it sound like a song, not the fun name of a carefree girl, who jumped from one frivolity to the next.

Slowly, he wrapped his arms around her. His fingers at her chin, he tipped her face to his. Her heart raced as he dug his fingers into her hair. He pulled her firmly into his arms and slanted his mouth over hers. Her mouth softened beneath his as she relished each touch, tender and gentle, tasting her, taking nothing yet giving himself to her.

Who was this man? Not the hard-charging executive looking for the next deal.

And not the man who had taken her aside and explained that she wasn’t the woman for Mike.

This man was someone she hadn’t known existed. Did he exist?

The ache she felt that night, in the middle of a party when he told her she shouldn’t be with Mike, was a slice across her heart. She hadn’t thought she could hurt so much.

She pushed against him, and he released her. Her breath came in soft gasps. They were both shaking.

“What is it?” The confusion in his eyes mixed with her own.

“I can’t do this.” She choked. “It isn’t right.”

“What isn’t right?” He shook his head. “It feels right.”

“I can’t go by feelings.” Her voice shook. “It has to be what God wants.”

“What?” He looked as if he weren’t sure he’d heard her right.

“I made a commitment. I ...” Her voice failed. Biting her lower lip, she turned and moved down the hall to her room. There was no way to make a graceful exit with a broken leg, but she had to get away. The step thump made her cringe as she hurried from the man who hadn’t just hurt her, he confused her.

And whose fault was that?

Inside her room, she pressed her back against the door. She was an adult with her own business. A moment with Ryan shouldn’t confuse her.

So why did she want to leave? Never had she felt more vulnerable than with this man. He’d seen into her soul. He knew how she felt because she had shown him.

Tomorrow, she’d explain to Novelynne that she wouldn’t attend the party and that she had to leave. Now.

She flushed. She was taking the coward’s way out.

She stiffened. She didn’t care. It was the only way she could save her heart. This man had hurt her once. She wouldn’t risk him hurting her again.

God, forgive me. How do I make this right?

CHAPTER 26



*R*yan stared after Gabby as she rushed down the hall. She stepped inside her room, the click of the door was a slash across his heart.

What have I done, Lord?

For years, he'd thought he was too busy to take time for God. Now he'd proved moving ahead without knowing God's plan hurt those he cared about. He cared about Gabby.

He turned away. Never had he lost control of his emotions.

Except when he was with Gabby. He didn't want to be in control. She was exciting and compassionate. When he was with her, he became someone he didn't know.

But he did know that person. He became the person he'd been before his father died—before the cares of Knight Enterprises changed him from someone who knew the balance between work and his personal life.

Why had he changed?

He went to his room but couldn't sleep. He paced before the windows that illuminated the snow falling to the balcony. He raked his fingers through his hair. If only he could tear the image of a crushed Gabby from his mind.

The only way to do that was work.

Striding through the archway to his sitting room, he sat at his desk and flicked on his computer. His heart lifted when he saw his email cue was filled with several contracts for him to review. He'd happily let anything distract him if it kept him

from thinking about Gabby and remembering how she felt in his arms.

He opened the first email and scanned the redlined document. Grabbing a notepad, he jotted changes for his legal team to make. Still, thoughts of Gabby nudged the edge of his mind. Pushing away from his desk, he pushed his fingers through his hair. He'd never get her out of his mind.

He rose and paced the glass wall facing the falling snow. Standing before the glass, he watched the flakes drift, then catch a breeze and whip into the darkness. In the glass, he caught his reflection, the lines pressed into the corner of his eyes, the grim set of his mouth. Stunned, he could only stare at the man he barely recognized. How he had changed in the years since his father's passing, and he had assumed control of the company. At the time, he looked forward to the challenge. Now he wondered how the role as head of the company had changed him. He didn't remember the responsibility taking a toll on his father.

His father had learned how to balance his life. He had put his family first. Glancing in the glass again, he saw his father's priority—the Bible sitting on his nightstand. The simple answer eased the tension that sank its sharp talons into the back of his neck. His father had put God in His proper place as head of his life.

Turning to the nightstand, he crossed the room and picked up the tome. How long had it been since he'd opened this book? Surprisingly it wasn't dusty, but the staff was in the room almost daily, whisking away any film before it collected. The book fell open to the Book of Galatians.

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

He released a short breath. That was the reason his father had peace. He remembered the gift God had given him—given to all mankind.

Wasn't that what everyone was about to celebrate with the upcoming holiday—the gift of salvation?

He sat on the bed and rested against the bank of pillows. His soul hungered for the words that promised peace, love and hope. As he scanned the words, the pressure that suffocated him slipped into the darkness. For the first time in years, he could easily draw a breath. He relaxed into the comfort of God's perfect rest.



RYAN SQUINTED at the brightness that moved across his face. The warmth comforted him, and he settled into the pillows cocooning him. He felt rested and refreshed as he had as a child and his mother would step into the nursery and scoop him into her arms while she sang a ditty that welcomed the morning.

Morning!

His eyes flew open. The sun's rays peeking over the mountain filtered into his room. Drifting across the carpet, it stroked his face like a caress.

He bolted upright and glanced at the clock. It was nearly eight o'clock. He glanced down and saw that he hadn't changed for bed. He'd slept on top of the covers.

Why hadn't his alarm sounded?

He strode across the floor, shedding clothes in his wake and jumped into the shower. His schedule for the day flashed through his mind as the rainfall shower soothed the tension in his neck and back. He wanted to relax, but he was due at the airport for a flight to his New York office.

A gentle reminder nudged through the cacophony of contracts he had to review and the phone calls he would return. A soft voice asked him if he remembered nothing of the scripture he'd absorbed the night before.

He remembered. The ways of the world could easily slide in and pretend negotiations and deals were important. He'd

hold onto the promise he'd let sink into his soul last night. Everlasting peace gave him the rest he longed for.

There was a solution for everything. He didn't need to fly to New York. He could easily schedule a videoconference. He knew the others who would attend the meeting would appreciate the time saved by not sitting in traffic to attend the meeting. It meant more time to spend with their families.

Relaxing in the peace that filled him and that he'd seen in his father's face, Ryan finished his shower, then dressed casually. When he stepped from his dressing room, the sun had vanished and a blanket of snow drifted past the glass wall of his bedroom. Maybe he'd have time to sneak in a couple of ski runs before his videoconference.

He texted his change of plans to his assistant at his New York office with a list of people she would need to contact, then drummed down the stairs to the small dining room where the fragrance of bacon, eggs and freshly baked cinnamon rolls made his stomach growl.

"And there he is." His mother smiled at him as she spread a napkin onto her lap. She lifted the silver teapot and filled her cup.

"Good morning." Ryan smiled at her, then moved to his chair. He stilled when he saw Gabby sitting across from him. "Good morning," he repeated the greeting and smiled.

He took his seat. When Susan set his steaming breakfast in front of him, he thanked her.

"Good morning." Gabby's smile was wan. Her gaze flicked to his, then away.

Unbidden came the thoughts of when he'd held her. He couldn't forget how perfectly her soft curves fit into the angles of his own body. His face heated. These were not the thoughts he should have in the presence of his mother ... or Gabby.

"You better hurry if you're going to land in time for your meeting in New York." Novelynne eyed him curiously.

"If I were going to New York." He lifted his juice glass and sipped.

His mother stilled.

Gabby's face came up. The uncertainty in her eyes made him wonder what she was thinking. She had nothing to do with his business, though she knew when he left for the airport, and when he returned.

"The matter of this meeting can be discussed via videoconference," he said, feeling relieved. "Data can be transmitted or screen-shared. It's a marvelous invention, the internet."

"I should say," Novelynne said slowly. "Though it's been around for a while. Are you just now realizing its attributes?"

"What I'm realizing is that there are better ways to use my time and that of my associates," he said, regretting that he hadn't made use of technology until now.

He conducted the business that his father had created, but his father lived in a pre-technology age. Had videoconferencing been more advanced, he would have used it. Time was a commodity he cherished—especially when it came to his family.

"Bravo, now if you could explain that to Miss Adams here." His mother sighed. "She's determined to return to Denver today, and in this weather." She waved dismissively at the snow falling past the mullioned windows.

He glanced at Gabby. The flush of color rising in her cheeks made her beautiful and filled him with a warmth he hadn't felt in years.

Clearing his throat, he shoved that thought away. He had to prepare for meetings. As welcoming as thoughts of Gabby were, he didn't need the distraction.

"Is that so?" He smiled softly. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable, and he didn't want her to leave.

After last night, he realized that being near her was a temptation to set his passion free—not the lifestyle he'd ever lived and he wouldn't start now, no matter how alluring this woman was.

“It’s as I told you last night.” She seemed to appreciate his understanding. “I need to use my connections to line up more work. I only get paid if I work.”

“And having this portfolio at your fingertips isn’t enough to keep you here?” He tipped his head toward the great room.

Through the archway, the glossy marble reflected the twinkling Christmas lights that his mother liked to have on day or night.

Novelynne watched the conversation between him and Gabby as if she were watching a tennis match. Her phone rang, and she glanced at the screen.

“It’s Ona.” She picked up her phone and rose. “I need to take this,” she said and moved from the room.

“If you’ll excuse me.” Gabby laid her napkin on the table.

“You didn’t answer my question.” Ryan kept his voice low.

“I thought about your suggestion.” With her graceful hands, she fingered the napkin. As if realizing what she was doing, she dropped her hands into her lap. “And I thought about what happened afterward.”

“I never meant for that to happen.” His mouth tightened.

“That’s the problem with emotions.” The softness in her eyes reminded him of the sensation he was trying to ignore. Instead, it rose inside him, hot and unwanted. “They can easily be unleashed and take control.”

She was assuming the responsibility that had been his until he gave in to her dark eyes and sweet spirit, something God had created for His purpose, not to be taken selfishly by any man.

“What happened last night will never happen again.” He sat up straight.

The shame inside his chest made him determined to manage what emotions he’d always controlled before. Easy when Gabby wasn’t around him. Because of him, she wouldn’t be around him. She’d leave.

“Easy words to say, but the temptation is there.” She lifted her gaze to his. “On both sides. It’s better if I leave.”

Her words struck deep. On both sides. What did she feel for him?

“Gabby—”

“I have the most wonderful news.” Novelynne burst into the room, deflating Ryan’s attempt to ask Gabby to explain herself.

His stomach did a tumble and a roll like being knocked off a surfboard while enjoying Malibu waves. He’d get Gabby back on topic once his mother shared her news. He needed an explanation. He turned his head to Novelynne.

“Ona, Marie and Heather can’t wait until the party to see the remodel. They’re coming over now to check the finishes because Ona and Heather are interviewing interior designers for their remodels.” Her face glowing, she smiled at Gabby. “How wonderful that you’re here to discuss what they want.”

CHAPTER 27



Gabby's stomach dropped to the bottom of a dark pit, then bounced into her throat.

Novelynne's friends were coming to the house—the mansion—now? Her gaze shifted to Ryan. She didn't know why she looked at him. The smile curving the corner of his lips made it clear he wasn't going to plead her case before his mother.

“As much as I'd love to meet your friends.” Gabby smiled sweetly. “I should leave before the roads become impassible. I'll leave my information with you so they can contact me at their convenience.”

Confusion flickered across Novelynne's face.

“You're going back to Denver so you can contact your network to line up more work, yet you have two potential clients coming here, but you'll leave without meeting them and maybe miss an opportunity ... or two.” Ryan looked thoughtful as if he were trying to determine the logic of her decision.

Why indeed, and why did he have to make so much sense? Arguing that point would make her look foolish. Would she rather trudge over the mountain pass in a snowstorm as opposed to selling her expertise to two of the wealthiest women in Aspen?

What do I do, Lord? Look like an idiot or accept the challenge?

If God would protect her heart, she could manage. She glanced at Ryan, who looked handsome with his hair carelessly styled. His open-collar shirt and jeans didn't hide his affluence, but he looked relaxed. He was the temptation she didn't need, but she hated to disappoint Novelynne, who was excited to share Gabby's expertise with her friends. She wanted to help Gabby grow her business.

Gabby would meet with the women, then leave. Meeting with them was no guarantee they'd hire her, but she could hope for the best and pray God's protection around her heart.

"Exactly," Novelynne spoke in her firm but gentle voice.

"All right." Gabby rose. "I'll get my laptop, make a few notes, and then I'll be ready to meet with them."

"Wonderful." Novelynne's eyes glowed with eagerness. "I'll have Susan prepare tea," she said and rushed from the room.

"Gabby." Ryan's tone was ragged.

Her heart leaped. Why did he look at her that way?

"I'm going to get ready." She rose.

He did, too, but his mouth flattened. Whatever he intended to say, would remain unspoken—for now.

She rushed from the room and down the hall to the elevator. In her room, she collected the items she used so clients would understand the quality of work she'd offer them. With everything stowed in her messenger bag, she took the elevator to the main floor, where she heard voices.

"And here she is." Novelynne smiled when Gabby walked into the great room. "Come join us, dear. Susan set a plate for you in front of the Sheffield chair."

The tea service and a tiered serving dish filled with petits fours and finger sandwiches sat on the coffee table in front of the sofa and armchairs where the women sat. Novelynne made introductions.

Ryan wasn't with them, which made Gabby's heart sink with swift disappointment, but because of his upcoming

meeting, he would prepare for that.

“Thank you. Because I have your undivided attention, let me show you some of the finishes I offer while you enjoy these refreshments,” Gabby said.

She opened her laptop. With the excitement she felt whenever she could share the possibilities with a client and describe what she could offer, she explained how she approached a design project, then scheduled times when she could meet the women in their homes.

Feeling relaxed, she chatted with the women about their families. Despite the snowfall, the women had the polished Aspen look. They were all proud grandmothers and shared pictures of smiling toddlers who adored their grandmas.

“It won’t be long before I’ll be sharing pictures of the newest member of the Knight family.” Novelynne looked longingly at her friends’ family pictures. “That’s another addition to Gabby’s portfolio.” Novelynne stood. “You won’t believe what she did in the nursery.”

The women rose. Chatting excitedly, they followed Novelynne up the stairs. Gabby took the elevator and met them in the nursery. Novelynne’s friends were impressed with the work she’d done. Heather wanted to start working on her remodel immediately and made an appointment with Gabby at her house later that day.

After the women left, Gabby moved through the foyer to Novelynne’s office. A warmth covering her made her look up. Ryan stood in the gallery. The way he looked at her made her struggle against emotions that longed to be free.

“Tell me.” His smile teasing, he moved down the stairs. “Was meeting Mom’s friends more promising than a drive over the pass in a snowstorm?” He stood in front of her.

“You know it was.” She gave a short laugh, then looked into blue eyes that were warm and exciting and showed the soul of a man she felt drawn to. “Thank you,” she said, her voice husky.

“I can’t take credit for all the work you did.” He looked straight into her eyes. “You’ll learn that when my mother is pleased with something, or someone, she makes it known to her friends.”

“For that, I’m grateful.” Her face heated beneath his intense gaze. She turned away. “I have to—”

“Gabby—” he said at the same time.

She turned to him. He lifted his hand to her cheek.

She braced herself for the touch that would send her pulse racing. She stepped back. She felt betrayed by her own emotions. Caring for Mike had caused her pain. She wouldn’t lose control over her feelings again—especially with a Knight man.

“I have to go.” She turned and moved down the hallway to Novelynne’s office.

“Gabby, wait.” Ryan’s voice was ragged.

She didn’t stop. She was too vulnerable. That Ryan didn’t follow her confused her more. She had to make up her mind. Did she or didn’t she want him in her life?

Distance between her and Ryan saved her emotions from spinning into turmoil. She had enough to think about. The confusion she felt when she was with Ryan complicated her inner battle.

In the office, she set her laptop on the round conference table and tried to push thoughts of Ryan from her mind. Through the internet, she connected to her home computer and compiled ideas that she wanted to present to Heather. She had just emailed the contract to Heather and printed the portfolio when her phone rang. She glanced to see Heather’s name on the screen.

Her pulse jumped. Taking a calming breath, she pressed the speaker icon. “Hello?”

“Gabby, darling, where are you?” Heather asked. “We have work to do. How soon can you get here?”

“We need to sign the contract.” She kept her voice steady. She was used to pushy clients. She’d learned to hold her own.

She looked out the window. The gently rolling lawn that stretched to the garden was covered with snow. She’d call a ride service and arrange for someone to drive her to Heather’s home.

“A contract? Is that all?” Heather gave a short laugh. “Bring it with you. I’ll sign it when you get here.”

“I emailed it to you,” Gabby said. “Why don’t you review it now, then call me if you have any questions?”

“I’m signing it now,” Heather said. “You should get it soon.”

Gabby checked her email queue. The email from Heather appeared. She opened it to the signed contract. She leaned back and exhaled roughly. She had a signed contract to remodel Heather’s house.

It would be more convenient to stay in Aspen while she worked on Heather’s remodel, but where would she stay? Not with the Knights. It didn’t feel right to live there while she worked for someone else. She was using Novelynne’s office.

Looking online at space available, she found an apartment near the town center that would be available that weekend. She filled out the online paperwork.

She stepped out of the office and into the hallway—to Ryan wearing his insulated ski pants and his ski patrol vest. His cheeks were ruddy from the cold, which only made his blue eyes more brilliant.

His eyes met hers. His gaze lingered. Stepping to the side, he swept his arm indicating she should pass.

“Excuse me.” With a slight smile, she stepped to the side.

“Mom said Heather sent you the signed contract. She asked you to her house this afternoon to discuss ideas with her.”

“News travels fast.” Gabby laughed with surprise.

“This is a small town.” Novelynne moved toward them. “I hope you don’t mind that I shared the news with Ryan. This is so exciting.” She stepped into her office and sat at her desk.

“That’s fine, but with this new business arrangement, I think it’s better if I move out of your home.”

“And why is that?” Ryan looked bemused.

“Because I’ll be working for someone else, and I’m using your mother’s office.” Gabby looked from Ryan to Novelynne.

“You’re not working for just anyone.” Novelynne frowned. “You’re working for my friend Heather.”

“And I appreciate your helping get me her business, but it would be easier if I had my own place,” she said. It would be easier for her to keep distance between her and Ryan. When she was near him, she didn’t trust her heart. “I found some short-term rentals online—”

“Why?” The corner of Ryan’s mouth tilted in question. “If you’re staying in Aspen, you should remain.”

“Ryan is right, dear.” Novelynne gave her a motherly look so similar to the ones she’d received from her own mother over the years. “We’ve plenty of room.”

“But it’s going to be crazy with Mike and Essie moving back, then I’ll be coming and going all day long,” she said.

“Meaning you’ll drive.” Ryan’s voice was soft, but his eyes were probing.

“I’ll have to go to Heather’s house, and I’ll need to visit contractors, so I’ll need transportation,” Gabby said and wondered what point he would make.

“And how will you drive?” He and Novelynne looked at the cast covering her leg.

“Aspen has ride-share networks.”

“That’s nonsense,” Ryan said. “You’ll spend time waiting for rides.”

“I don’t see any other option.” Gabby shrugged.

“Tristan can drive you,” Novelynne said, referring to the family chauffeur.

“I can drive you,” Ryan said as if the matter were settled.

“You?” She tilted her chin.

Novelynne seemed too surprised to say anything.

“It’s the perfect solution since I’m working on a deal with Heather’s husband promoting his latest invention,” Ryan said. “Going to their home will give me a chance to see his latest prototype firsthand.”

“Why do you want me to stay here?” Gabby asked, surprised by his determination. “The party’s coming up. The contractors just left, but now you’ll have the caterers, the florists and the decorators swarming the house.”

“You think one more person is going to make a difference?” He laughed, an easy sound yet filled with self-assurance. “People coming in and out of this house is nothing new. Between workers and guests and everyone in between, you’ll be one of the crowd.”

“What Ryan says is true, but there is another reason.” Novelynne tipped her head at her son.

Gabby’s heart picked up speed wondering what Novelynne would say. She had worked hard to hide her feelings for Ryan, but unbidden came the memory of what it was like for him to hold her close and kiss her.

Ryan’s face remained unreadable as he looked at his mother and waited.

“It’s the right thing to do.” A sheen filled Novelynne’s eyes. “When I was in the hospital, you were there for me. What kind of a friend would I be to you if I let you live in a vacation rental while you worked for my friend Heather? I’ve seen some of those rentals. They’re hardly ... never mind. If you don’t know, I’m certainly not going to tell you.” She gave a firm nod of her head. “No, you’ll stay here.” She turned to her computer. When she saw Gabby staring at her in stunned surprise, she arched a brow. “Anything else?”

“No.” Gabby shook her head. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now it’s time to think about that party.” Novelynne studied her computer monitor. She looked at Gabby. “What do you plan to wear?”

“Wear?” Gabby asked weakly. She’d come here on a ski vacation. She hadn’t brought anything to wear to a party. She’d planned a casual vacation. How had she gone from a snowsuit to needing a dress for a Knight party? On her budget, she couldn’t afford a dress appropriate for an elegant party. “I didn’t bring anything to wear to a party, but I could ask my roommate to—”

“I have a better idea.” Novelynne’s eyes brightened. “I have an appointment with my consultant this afternoon. He’ll be stopping by to advise me on what to wear, and makeup and hair and all that.” She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “We’ll get some ideas from him of what you can wear. He’ll be meeting with Essie as well. I have plenty of dresses in my closet that I’ll never wear again. We’re close to the same size. A little tuck here, a little tuck there, should do the trick. How long do you plan to be at Heather’s?”

“Most of the afternoon, but you don’t need to go to all this trouble.” Gabby felt embarrassed.

She didn’t want to be a charity case. That Novelynne would have her consultant meet with Essie made sense. Essie was her daughter-in-law.

Gabby was someone she hired to design her home. The closest she’d come to being a relative was her and Ryan’s fake engagement and that had put Novelynne in the hospital.

“I’ll have Theo come at four this afternoon. Will that be enough time for you?” she asked.

“Plenty,” Gabby said, amazed at how quickly her life had changed during what should have been a short ski vacation.

“Good.” Novelynne typed into her computer, then pushed away from her desk and rose. “Let’s have lunch,” she said and strode from the room.

Ryan stepped to the side to let her pass.

Gabby turned to follow Novelynne.

“Gabby,” Ryan said, his voice ragged.

“Coming?” Novelynne’s smile was bright when she looked over her shoulder at them.

Gabby pressed her lips together and followed Novelynne.

How was she going to survive another week in the Knight household—with Ryan?

And how would she survive the drive to Heather’s house—with Ryan?

Your strength, Lord. That’s the only way I’ll make it.

CHAPTER 28



The afternoon was a whirlwind with Ryan driving Gabby to Heather's house to plan the remodel. Heather's husband, Yale, was excited to show Ryan the chip he'd patented and took Ryan to his studio to show him its capabilities. Ryan felt like a kid as he watched in amazement at what the device, which was smaller than a pinhead, could do.

Watching the light in Gabby's eyes opened a new world for him. She enjoyed life, and she enjoyed people. Discovering people's needs and how to meet them drew people to her—drew him to her. He didn't want to be away from her. Hadn't he proved that by canceling all in-person meetings and using videoconferencing?

When Ryan drove Gabby back to the Knight mansion, she spent the time on the phone contacting suppliers and contractors. He had hoped this would be the opportunity for him to confess why she and Mike shouldn't be together. She had to know the truth.

Now he realized he hadn't known his brother. He hadn't taken the time. All he cared about was making the family business a success. In the process, how many people had he hurt?

His father had already made the business successful. He could've followed his father's plan and still achieved great strides, but Ryan wanted *his* mark on the business. He didn't want to live in his father's shadow. He had his own ideas of how to conduct business. His methods earned him accolades.

For what?

After dinner, Ryan thought he and Gabby would have a quiet moment when he could explain to her his reasoning for her not to marry Mike. He lost his chance when Gabby rushed to Novelynne's office and had a videoconference with Heather about the finishes she'd chosen.

Now he knew how his mother and brother felt when he'd been too busy with the company to take time for them. He could've guided his brother the way their father had guided him. Instead, Mike sought the company of friends—young people like him who needed guidance but didn't receive it, so they sought their own direction for their lives.

Thinking less about work and seeking God's direction had opened Ryan's eyes to God's purpose for him—God wanted everyone to know Him. Believers lived by example and shared the Good News.

When he went to bed, sleep didn't come. His mind filled with the light in Gabby's dark eyes and her musical laugh.

He needed to get her out of his mind. The hurt he had caused her was something only God could heal. He had tried, but he saw in her eyes the wound was too deep. He glanced outside. It had stopped snowing. The moon was a bright disk in the dark sky. Maybe a walk outside would be the jolt he needed to clear his head.

In his dressing room, he changed into thermal pants and a sweater, then pulled on a jacket. He opened the top drawer where he kept cufflinks and tie tacks he hadn't worn since he'd decided to change his in-person meetings to videoconferencing.

Sitting in the middle of the drawer was the velvet box he'd tried to ignore since he and Gabby had confessed their ruse to everyone. When the jeweler had delivered the ring box to his home, he'd shoved it into the drawer, but he hadn't forgotten it. It was on his mind what it had felt like when he saw the ring on Gabby's elegant finger.

His heart pounded hard and fast as he remembered that moment. When Gabby tried on the ring, it didn't feel like a joke. It had felt real. He had thought to return the ring, but why? It hadn't brought him happiness. He wouldn't wish the misfortune this ring carried on anyone. Engagements were a time of joy. Instead, the ring would be his own memory, which had lightened his heart briefly.

Fake engagements? His chest gripped. He had never wanted the engagement to be fake.

He hadn't seen Gabby in a year and now they'd been thrown together. He didn't just see her all day. Everything about her played in his mind. He couldn't forget her look, her smile, her scent.

Opening the box, he looked at the ring. It glistened as it had in the jewelry store. He felt a connection remembering that moment. His desire to be closer to Gabby confused and captivated him. Their relationship felt real and held the promise of more. Buying the ring had been a commitment, even if it were one-sided.

To what he didn't know. There was nothing between him and Gabby except the pain he'd caused.

She'd made it clear that a relationship with Ryan wasn't what she wanted. She didn't trust him. When he tried to explain what he'd felt when he first saw her, he saw the surprise in her eyes, but then she laughed. Mike had told her Ryan liked to joke.

He wasn't joking now. He hadn't been joking then.

His phone rang. Glad for the interruption, he slipped the ring into his pocket and glanced at the screen—his London office. He answered the call and tried to focus on the matter his advisor discussed, but his mind wouldn't release thoughts of Gabby.

How many mistakes had he made with her that he couldn't correct?

Had he made a mistake with Gabby? Maybe not. When he looked into her eyes, he wasn't convinced.

After finishing the call, he stepped into the hallway and moved down the stairs to the terrace.

The night was brilliant with a full moon sitting on the horizon. The heated pavers had melted the snow. Radiant heaters positioned along the terrace's perimeter melted the night chill making it comfortable enough to stand outside.

He stepped through the French doors. The cool air brushing his cheeks made his blood rush, but he welcomed the briskness. It freshened his mind and made him alert. He stepped to the rail and looked out at the snow-covered lawn, whose walkways were illuminated by bollard lights.

A gasp turned his head. In the shadows stood Gabby looking pale, her full lips parting.

"I'm sorry." She crossed to the French doors. "It's so cold outside, I didn't expect anyone else."

"We're Coloradoans." He lowered his voice, hoping to ease the tension in her face. "The cold makes us thrive."

"I should've guessed that." She laughed softly. "I'll give you some privacy."

"You're one person," he said, his smile slight. "You're hardly invading it."

Uncertainty flickered in her face before the confusion cleared. "Still, you came here looking for solace. My being here won't give you that. I'll leave."

"Is that what this is going to be? A discussion of who stays and who leaves?" He turned to the darkness. Her presence was soothing—for him—but not at the cost of her discomfort. "If you need to go, I won't keep you."

He heard her hesitate. When her footsteps moved across the pavers to the door, his throat dried. He hadn't wanted her to leave. He wanted to talk to her—and say what? He didn't know. The more he talked, the more he could see in her eyes he was pushing her away. He'd finally pushed her far enough.

His phone rang. Digging into his pocket, he glanced at his phone screen. His London office again.

Something else popped from his pocket. It hit the pavers with a delicate chime. In the darkness, a flash caught the terrace lights before leaping into the night.

The ring!

His heart hammered. Why had he put it in his pocket? With a sickening jolt, he realized that losing the ring meant he'd lose the connection with Gabby.

“What fell?” Gabby’s concerned voice cut through the tension twisting his stomach.

“The ring,” he said flatly. He dropped to his knees and skimmed his hands over the pavers.

His phone stopped ringing, then started again. He silenced it. He’d return the call later.

“What ring?” she asked confused, then he heard her quick intake of breath. “The engagement ring?”

“Yes.” He lifted his gaze to hers.

“I thought you had returned it.” She knelt next to him and glided her hands over the terra cotta tiles.

“I changed my mind,” he said. He felt her surprised stare and looked into her questioning eyes.

“Why?” Her hands stilled.

“Because I wasn’t ready to let go.” He looked back at the pavers. “It doesn’t matter now. First, I need to find the ring.”

“I see it,” Gabby said.

Looking up, he saw her reach to a mound of snow trapped beneath the stone balustrades skirting the terrace. Her fingers flicked away the flakes then clasped the delicate band. Sitting back on her haunches, she lifted the ring to him.

He was glad to have the ring back, but he didn’t want it in his pocket or sitting in his dresser drawer. He wanted it on Gabby’s finger. He opened his palm. She placed the ring in the center of his hand. He shoved it into his pocket. Would there be time later for him to place it on her finger?

“Thank you,” he murmured. He took her hand. Rising, he brought her with him. He held her close and looked into her eyes.

She lifted her gaze to his. She felt comfortable in his arms—more than that. In his arms was where she belonged.

“Oh, Gabby,” he said, his voice low with emotion. Tenderly, he tasted her lips. A sweet longing swept through his body. “You’ve no idea what it’s been like for me to be this close to you and still feel the barrier between us. I love you.”

Words he’d never uttered in his life slipped from his tongue. He felt relief knowing he’d freed what had been trapped in his heart.

She gasped softly. His heart raced. She tipped her face to his.

“I’ve never said those words before.” He gave a short laugh and lifted his face to the sky before looking at her again. “I’ve never felt anything like this. It’s freeing.” He bent to her again.

“Ryan.” The way she said his name made him frown. She pressed a hand to his chest.

Something was changing. A moment ago, she was returning his kisses, seemingly as captured by the moment as he was. The look in her eyes made his breathing slow. She hadn’t said she loved him, but she felt something toward him. He sensed it. Had she not realized it yet?

Everything took time. He’d been in business long enough to know that, though falling in love could hardly be compared to business.

He waited. Her touch said more than words, expressing a deep feeling that could only be love. Maybe keeping that ring had been for a good reason after all.

“Yes?” He kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose. Heat rushed through him as he slanted his mouth over hers.

“I can’t.” Her voice was ragged.

He lifted his head and frowned. He hadn't asked her to do anything.

"Nothing's changed." She looked into his eyes with such sadness, he felt an ache in his chest.

"It doesn't have to." He smiled and smoothed a hand across her cheek.

"I'm talking about my commitment to God." Clearing her throat, she stepped from him.

He felt adrift as his hands slid down her shoulders and rested at his sides. "I would never want you to change that. It's part of who you are."

"It needs to be part of who you are." She was ashen and tense, a pulse beating in her throat.

"It is." He was glad to share that with her. "I've been thinking about what's been different between my father and me. I remember how he started each day. He and my mother began the day with prayer. When he arrived at his office, he'd read scripture. I've started doing that."

"That's a start." Her generous mouth spread into a tentative smile. "But God's Word has to go deeper than just reading it every day. It has to be engrained so that the world doesn't snatch the promise in God's Word away."

"I know you have a relationship with God," he said tenderly. "I would never interfere with that."

She shook her head sadly and dropped her gaze. "Not intentionally. I can't be with someone who doesn't believe as I do."

"I believe in God," he said. How did he make her understand?

"Who is your god? Sometimes, I think it's Knight Enterprises."

"My family's company is important to me." He looked at her, trying to understand. "Is that so wrong?"

“Unless God is number one, you and I aren’t meant to be,” she said. “I made that mistake with Mike. Now I know better. I won’t make that mistake again.” She turned and walked into the house.

He wanted to call to her, but her parting words struck him deeply.

Mike had changed this past year. Ryan had never expected Mike to give up friends and parties and devote himself to Essie and to God. Instead of jetting around the world to meet friends in the Alps or on his yacht, he’d started a foundation that had searched the world to help those in need.

Ryan had a foundation, too, but he wasn’t involved in it. He’d hired a team to manage the operations while he reviewed fundraising and finances. The foundation had won awards for rushing into areas and meeting needs. He hadn’t gone. He had enough to do with running Knight Enterprises. He accepted the awards.

He wasn’t the one who should’ve accepted the awards. His team did the work.

How did he get a relationship with God so wrong? His father had understood. Why couldn’t he?

Then he saw. Gabby had made it clear she could only be with someone who put God first. His father had put God first. Ryan had mistaken his father’s commitment to God for devotion to his company, but that was how God used him—through the company. God spoke to his father through His Word and prayer. Ryan had read scripture because he thought it was the right thing to do.

Now he would listen.

He felt his pocket. The ring’s prongs brushed his fingertips through the fabric of his jeans. Disappointment was hot in his chest, but that was his fault. If he’d listened to God, he could’ve saved himself from the disappointment.

It may be too late for him and Gabby, but for now, he’d put God in charge of his life. Gabby was the only woman he’d

ever wanted. If God had another plan, he'd wait for Him to reveal it. Whatever it was, he knew it would be God's best.

CHAPTER 29



Gabby fought down the ache in her chest as she stepped into her room. She had thought she'd understood God's place for her in the Knight household. She knew this was a place where God could use her. What she hadn't expected was to lose control over her emotions.

She sat on the bed and squeezed her eyes tight. She had tried not to feel anything for Ryan, but God help her, she did. Had she not tried hard enough?

Forgive me, Lord.

She leaned against the bank of pillows and opened her Bible. If ever she needed to be close to God, it was now. She didn't know how long she read God's word. When she felt a warmth covering her face, she opened her eyes to sunshine peeking over the mountain. Looking around, she saw her Bible had slid off her lap and lay by her side.

Sitting up, she mentally reviewed her schedule for the day. This morning, she'd meet contractors at Heather's house while they discussed the remodeling project then submitted bids. That afternoon, Novelynne's dressmaker would come to the house and measure her for alterations to the dress Novelynne had given her. Yesterday, when Gabby met with Novelynne's fashion consultant, he had said the dress was perfect for Gabby's figure and coloring. Gabby hadn't wanted to accept it, but Novelynne explained that she'd never wear it again.

She dressed quickly, then took the elevator to the main floor. Moving down the hallway, she heard voices coming

from Novelynne's office. She was about to go in when she heard Ryan's voice.

After last night, she wasn't ready to meet him again. Walking away from him was one of the hardest things she'd ever done, but she knew it was right. She'd stepped out of God's plan when she'd fallen for Mike. She bit her lower lip. The price had been too high. She'd hurt God, even though forgiveness was hers for the asking. Taking her eyes off God felt like walking in the desert, and she'd hurt herself. She wouldn't risk her heart again.

"We could lose all this tomorrow." Novelynne's voice floating through the open doorway made Gabby still. "God has blessed us, but for His purpose, not ours."

Gabby looked around. She didn't want to walk past the doorway. Novelynne and Ryan would see her. She didn't want them to think she was eavesdropping. She took a step back. She'd take the back hallway to the small dining room.

"Dad never let the company take over his priorities," Ryan said. "He read and prayed every time he stepped into the office."

"He's a good example of letting go and letting God," Novelynne said.

"And I'm not." Ryan exhaled roughly. His voice moved as if he paced. "The company has always been my top priority. When I was younger, I thought I'd be just like Dad. I wouldn't just run the company. I'd marry and have a family. You look surprised."

"I am." Novelynne took a calming breath. "I've never seen you show interest in any woman, until now."

"Meaning Gabby." He laughed dryly.

"That's exactly who I mean."

"I never met a woman I wanted to be with until I met Gabby," he said. "Here's the dichotomy. I want to be with her, but she doesn't want to be with me. She won't be with someone who doesn't put God first."

“I know,” Novelynne said.

“She told you?”

“No. I knew she was struggling when she thought she was in love with your brother,” Novelynne said. “I prayed that God would open her and Mike’s eyes. I didn’t want to see her hurt, but she’s a strong woman. She knows her priorities now, and you’re not it.”

“That’s putting it bluntly.” Ryan snorted softly.

“It’s the only talk you understand,” Novelynne said simply. “It’s time you find out God’s plan for your life.”

“And if it isn’t Gabby?”

“Then have faith that God has a better plan for you,” Novelynne said. “Now let’s have breakfast before it gets cold.”

Gabby pressed fingers to her lips. Would Ryan take to heart what his mother had shared? She hoped so even though it would mean she and Ryan would part ways. When she and Mike broke up, knowing God had a better plan gave her hope.

She backed away and moved down the back hallway to the small dining room.

“You’re the first one here.” Susan smiled and set a plate of sliced fruit, yogurt and granola in front of her.

“Thank you, Susan.” Gabby smiled at the bright-eyed woman. She poured herself a cup of tea. “I believe the others will be along shortly.”

Voices sounded from the main hallway. Novelynne stepped into the dining room and smiled. Ryan followed her.

“Good morning, dear.” Novelynne took her seat at the head of the table. “I hope you’re ready for another busy day.”

“I believe so. I’m looking forward to it.” Gabby sipped her tea and smiled. Her gaze flicked to Ryan, whose firm stare stayed on her until he sat at the table.

“Good morning.” Ryan sat across from Gabby. He flicked his napkin onto his lap.

Gabby wanted to return the greeting, but the words caught in her throat. Forcing herself to relax, she nodded. She didn't miss Novelynne's curious gaze as she looked from Gabby to her son. She waited while Susan served her and Ryan.

"This smells wonderful. Thank you, Susan." Novelynne smiled at the cook.

Ryan thanked the cook, too.

"Heather said that this morning you and she will meet to finalize the finishes she's chosen." Novelynne sipped her tea. "She's very excited."

"I'm looking forward to meeting with her," Gabby said and felt Ryan's glance. "She's selected some beautiful designs. I think she'll be pleased with the results."

"How will you get there?" Ryan's voice was soft. He hadn't touched his breakfast. He rested his hands on the table and gave her a direct look.

"I'll call a ride share—"

"Since I'm going that way, I'm happy to take you," he said. Instead of the determined look he'd given her in the past, he gave her a slight smile, then sliced into a melon ball.

Novelynne lifted a quizzical gaze to him.

"Thank you, but I don't mind calling the ride-share," Gabby said.

She wondered at the change she saw in his eyes. She'd seen that before—in her own father's eyes when he'd dedicated his life to Christ. He'd been dedicated to his military career and had ignored his family. He was near a breakdown when he realized the vanity of working hard without God as his partner. He still worked hard but placed God first. He had learned to dwell in God's peace.

Shortly after his commitment, he served an overseas tour. That was when God took him home. Heat rose in Gabby's throat remembering the day the notification officers came to their home. Her mother had known, though she hadn't said

anything. Her eyes red-rimmed, she gathered Gabby into her arms.

Gabby's heart ached knowing she wouldn't see her father again in this life but was relieved her father had listened to God's still small voice. She'd see him one day.

Was the change she'd seen in her father the one she now saw in Ryan?

Deep regret weighed in her chest. Ryan had hurt her, but he'd apologized. It was time to put the past where it belonged and ask God to lead her. She would return to Denver soon and wouldn't have to fight these unrestrained feelings that struggled to take over.

Why this test, Lord? You know I'm not ready.

The familiar scripture roared past her eardrums.

Be still and know that I am God.

She knew this scripture was the preface for God being God of all people, but she had a problem that was trivial compared to what was going on in the world. She needed strength to fight the attraction to the man who had hurt her, though she saw now that God had used him to open her eyes.

"Maybe not necessary, but because I have a meeting with the management members of my foundation, I'll take you there. It's on the way," Ryan told Gabby as if the matter were settled.

"I appreciate that, but—"

Novelynne's phone rang. "It's Yvette." She rose. "She needed some information for the dress she's going to alter for Gabby to wear to the party."

"Should I go with you?" Gabby started to rise.

"This won't take long." Novelynne waved her into her chair. Her phone to her ear, she rushed from the room.

"I'm sorry." Ryan's voice was rich and deep.

"For what?" Gabby's eyes lifted to his.

“Because we’re now alone, which isn’t what you wanted,” he said.

“This is your home.” Somehow, she kept her voice level. “I’m a guest. It isn’t what I want that matters.”

“It will always matter.” The look he gave her was firm, yet tender—which was a surprise.

Looking into his eyes, she saw something had changed. The determination hadn’t left. He still had the look of someone who knew what he wanted and how he’d get there, but there was also compassion. Something she hadn’t noticed before.

“There, that’s settled.” Novelynne breezed into the room. “Yvette will be here this afternoon to measure you and the dress. I sent her some pictures, and she’s already sent me sketches with her ideas to update the piece. I think you’ll love what she has in mind.”

“Thank you, but I thought the dress looked great as is,” Gabby said.

“It’s Christmas.” Novelynne fluttered her hands. “A season of fresh starts, joy and goodwill.”

“Thank you,” Gabby repeated. The remodeling of a designer gown that had to have cost thousands, was more goodwill than she expected. The entire family’s generosity knew no bounds.

“Your breakfast is cold, ma’am.” Susan reached for Novelynne’s plate. “Let me fix you another.”

Novelynne tasted her food thoughtfully, then smiled at the cook. “It’s fine.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I have some calls to make.” Ryan laid his napkin on the table.

He smiled at his mother before shifting his gaze to Gabby. The smile was still there, but something else lingered. Rising, he strode from the room.

Air rushed into Gabby’s lungs, drawing a curious look from Novelynne.

“I should get ready for my meeting with Heather.” Gabby stood.

“Be sure to tell Heather I said hello.” Novelynne smiled. Her phone rang. Her eyes bright, she answered it.

Gabby nodded and moved from the room. How was her life changing so quickly? She’d finished the remodel for Novelynne’s home. She was working on Heather’s home now. After the holidays, Ona would begin her remodel. She was used to searching for projects for her interior design business. That these projects had been gifted to her was an answer to prayer. She thanked God, but she should also thank Ryan.

He stepped from his office, a warm jacket in hand. The heat in his gaze was so intent it was as though he touched her. Stepping to the side, he swept his arm indicating she should pass.

She moved, then hesitated.

“I was thinking about what you said.” She turned to him.

“About?” He frowned.

“You had offered to drive me to Heather’s.” Already she felt more relaxed giving him the chance God gave to everyone.

“It still stands.” The lines around his eyes softened.

“I know.” She smiled, feeling relieved as the pain in her chest crumbled.

She’d held onto the hurt that Ryan had never intended. She had used it as a shield to protect her heart. It had prevented her from letting any man into her life.

“I accept your offer.” She released a slow breath. It hadn’t hurt to realize Ryan only wanted to help her. “I need to get ready for my appointment with Heather. I’ll just be a few moments.”

“I’ll wait for you. I have something to discuss with Mom, but it won’t take long. I’ll meet you in the foyer.” The tenderness in his eyes released a hot flood of emotion.

“I’ll get my things,” she said and turned away before the heat stinging her cheeks embarrassed her more.

When she reached the elevator, she breathed freely.

Putting the past behind her had broken the shackles that bound her heart.

What did the future hold?

She wouldn’t think about that. Her mind was on God. He could take care of the rest.

CHAPTER 30



After Ryan finished his meeting with his foundation, he stopped in town to do some last-minute Christmas shopping. He made arrangements to have the gifts wrapped and delivered to his home, then returned to Heather's house. Heather was all smiles when she answered the door.

"You're just in time. The supplier just left." She stepped to the side, giving him room to enter the foyer.

Gabby stood at the entrance to the library and buttoned her coat. When she lifted her gaze to his, the rush of sensations flooding his chest left him stunned.

The color rising in her cheeks made her creamy skin glow. Her dark eyes rounded when she lifted her gaze.

Heather seemed to notice. Normally talkative, she hesitated, then chatted about the designs she couldn't wait to complete in her home. Ryan heard nothing she said.

Gabby reached for her messenger bag.

"Let me." Ryan moved next to her and picked it up.

"Thank you." She smiled softly.

Suddenly Ryan felt like he was back in school and offering to carry a girl's books. Thinking about someone and not his company had a freeing feeling.

"I take it your meeting with Heather was productive?" Ryan asked as he guided his SUV down Heather's twisting driveway. He turned onto Main Street.

“It was, which was such a relief.” Gabby laughed softly. “We were able to schedule start dates. Everything should be finished by New Year’s Eve, which works well for Heather as they spend the Christmas holiday on their yacht.”

Ryan glanced at her. He liked the light in her eyes—something he wished he could capture and hold close. For now, he’d make it a memory.

She looked out the window at the streets decorated for the holiday. Shoppers and tourists moved up and down the sidewalks, but he noticed none of that. He wanted to watch Gabby. Reluctantly, he paid attention to the traffic.

He turned off the crowded street to the winding road that led to the Knight estate. Gabby said little, making him wonder what was on her mind. She said everything went well during her meeting with Heather. He had thought to comment, but he’d wait. If she wanted him to know, she’d say something. That was what he’d learned about Gabby. She spoke her mind.

The door to the garage where he parked his vehicles slid open and he guided his SUV into the bay.

“Leave your things here, and I’ll bring them in.” He climbed out of the vehicle. Moving to her side, he opened the door and offered her his hand. He liked the feel of her small hand in his palm. “Careful,” he said when she turned away.

She nodded, then looked back at him. “I have something to say.”

He found it hard to breathe and waited. She’d been quiet for a reason. Now he’d know why.

“I haven’t given you a chance.” Her mouth curved in regret, she looked into his eyes. “You apologized for what happened last year when you told me that Mike and I would never be together. I was hurt.”

“I know, and for that I’m sorry,” he said trying to quell the pain that rushed in. He’d never forget the look in her eyes.

“I didn’t give you a chance,” she said. “I assumed you were uncaring, but these past few weeks that I’ve spent with you, I’ve seen who you are. You’re not mean. You’re

concerned about your family, and you protect them. I'm sorry I didn't give you a chance."

"Gabby—"

"No, let me finish." She lifted a hand. "There's something else. I can see it in your eyes. I know you've always cared about your family, but it's as if you care about more than just your family. Something's changed."

"My father taught me a lesson a long time ago, but I was too consumed with the company to realize it." He looked into her dark eyes that held so much hope. "Now I know what made my father a success. He didn't put the company first. God was first."

Her eyes filled. He couldn't resist the compassion in this woman's eyes—the windows to her soul. Slipping his arms around her, he held her close. He was glad she let him. He stifled the release threatening to climb up his throat. He didn't want to frighten her.

"Don't be sad." He rocked her gently.

"I'm not." Her voice quivered. "These are happy tears."

"I'm happy, too." He tipped his head to hers. "I've discovered what gave my father joy, though he had tried to explain it to me. I was too consumed with the ways of the world to listen. Now, I know. It was so simple. I put Christ first in my life. It's like the missing piece of the puzzle. Now I can see everything fall into place. The other gift is that you understand what happened. I didn't want you to hate me for the rest of your life."

"I didn't hate you." She looked horrified.

"Whatever you want to call it, I knew I didn't want you to harbor ill feelings towards me."

"That won't happen."

He looked into her eyes. The growing desire he'd tried to stifle since he'd seen her on the ski slope unleashed itself. Giving in to the sensation, he pulled her to his chest and

slanted his mouth over hers. The taste of her, the feel of her, made him lose himself in the feelings that fought for freedom.

She melted against him, her mouth softening beneath his, her hands clinging. The garage was cold, but the passion pouring through him reached a boiling point. His heart pounded knowing this was what he'd been waiting for. He hadn't been interested in another woman because none came close to this woman in his arms.

"I love you, Gabby," he said, feeling the freedom he'd felt when he expressed his love for her the other night.

"I think I've always loved you," she said breathlessly.

He stilled and looked into her eyes.

"When I left that night, I thought I'd be hurt seeing Mike with Essie, but it was you who consumed my thoughts," she said. "I had thought you didn't want me with Mike because *you* didn't like me."

"I've always liked you—more than liked," he said, his voice ragged. "I could see the light in your eyes and wanted that. I didn't realize until last night that the light I saw was God. He used you to draw me to Him."

Her face fell.

"What is it?"

"We finally understand each other, but now I have to leave."

"No," he said firmly.

"I have to." She stuttered a laugh. "I still have Ona's house to remodel, but after that, I'll need to return to Denver."

"You have your own business," he said. "You can work from anywhere. You can work from here." He waved a hand toward the house. "Say you'll consider that option."

"But I can find a short-term lease."

"No lease," he said firmly. "There's plenty of room here. You can stay."

“I think we should discuss this with your mother.” She looked hesitant.

“I will, but I own this place.”

“You do?” Her eyes widened. “You said nothing about the remodel. You should’ve been involved in that.”

“I’m no good when it comes to decorating.” He laughed. “That’s why my mother took over. Every few years, she’s ready for a change, so I give her free rein.”

“I hope you like the result.” She looked hopeful.

“I do, but the important thing is that my mother does. She worked hard all her life. She deserves to be happy,” he said sincerely.

“She is that,” Gabby said with relief.

The door to the house opened.

“There you are.” Novelynne stood in the doorway. “I saw you drive in but expected you to come in by now.” Her gaze moved from her son to Gabby wrapped in his arms. “Oh.”

“I, uh ...” Gabby blushed and stepped from Ryan.

“Hi, Mom.” Heat poured through Ryan, he let his hands slide from the small of Gabby’s back. He tightened his jaw at the chill rushing in to steal her warmth. Turning to his mother, he forced a smile.

“Now I know what’s keeping you.” A knowing look replaced Novelynne’s surprise.

“It was a ...” Gabby spoke hurriedly, then stopped. Her gaze shifted to his as if asking for a logical reason for her to be in his arms.

There was only one reason. In his arms was where she belonged. Unspeakable joy rushed through him like a mountain spring runoff. He ached to hold her again, but he’d wait. He didn’t want to embarrass her further. Nothing embarrassed his mother. Having raised sons, she’d learned to expect the unexpected.

“We were on our way inside,” Ryan said lightly and looked at his mother.

“Take your time,” she said drolly and closed the door.

“Let’s go inside,” he said. “There’s no point in our continuing this conversation in this cold garage, though I can easily turn up the heat out here.”

“What’s the point?” Gabby gave a wry laugh. “Your mother was young once. She isn’t naïve. I’m sure after raising you and Mike, she’s learned more than she ever wanted to know.”

“Hey, I was the picture of decorum,” Ryan said with mock indignity.

“I’ll take your word for that.” Gabby laughed. She took his hand, her tender touch filling him with a sensation he’d never felt before. He wanted to be close to Gabby.

Ryan unloaded Gabby’s things from the back end. When they walked into the house, the quiet moment he wanted to steal away with her was interrupted by his mother’s announcement that dinner was ready.

Mike and Essie had returned to the house and were anxious to catch up on the latest news, though Ryan and Mike spoke or texted several times a day. In the time that Ryan hadn’t seen Essie, he was surprised that her stomach seemed larger, but why shouldn’t it be? She was carrying a child—the first grandchild for both sides of the family.

Essie laughed at the shock on his face, though he had thought he’d concealed it.

“He’s growing by leaps and bounds.” She rubbed a hand over her stomach.

“He?” Ryan lifted a brow.

“In the generic sense.” Essie looked fondly at her stomach. “We don’t know what we’re having.”

“I think that’s wonderful,” Ryan said softly.

“That’s how it was for thousands of years.” Essie smiled. “We thought we’d do it this way this time. Who knows? We may change our mind for the next one?”

“The next one?” Ryan laughed in surprise.

“We have to give him a playmate,” Essie said as if that were the only logical explanation. “I don’t want him to be an only child. He’ll grow up caring for others, starting with his little brother or sister.”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate that,” Ryan said.

“I can’t wait for him to arrive,” Essie said, and her eyes brimmed. “You’ll have to excuse me. It’s all these hormones. They’re making me emotional.”

“Oh, honey.” Gabby moved in and hugged her. “That’s perfectly understandable.”

Ryan rubbed the back of his neck. He was glad Gabby knew what to do. He sure didn’t. When he saw his brother’s perplexed expression, he understood that Mike didn’t know what to do either.

“It’s all new, and it’s all exciting,” Gabby rocked Essie back and forth.

“It is that.” Essie laughed through her tears. “We’re so excited about the way you decorated the nursery. Baby Knight is going to love all the colors and the characters decorating the walls. I’ve been reading books about how to make our baby brilliant, and most recommend doing what you did. It’s good brain stimulation.”

“I had learned that, too.” Gabby looked into her eyes. “That’s why I chose that theme.”

“Come, everyone.” Novelynne stood in the archway leading to the formal dining room. “It’s time to eat. We can talk babies to our hearts’ content in there.”

The three women huddled together as they moved into the dining room.

“Things are about to change.” Mike stood next to Ryan, but he watched his wife and the other women step into the

dining room.

“Big time.” Ryan laughed dryly. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it.” Mike strode toward the dining room.

Ryan hesitated. His brother ready for fatherhood was something he’d never expected.

Was he?

He wasn’t even ready for marriage.

The feel of Gabby in his arms made him pause. He was ready for Gabby in his life, but how long would she stay? She’d told him her plans—finish Heather’s remodel, then Ona’s. After that, she’d return to Denver.

The few weeks she’d spent at the Knight estate had made him comfortable, but she wouldn’t always be here.

And when she left?

The emptiness rising in him made him take a breath. He couldn’t let that happen. He had to give her a reason to stay.

CHAPTER 31



The Knight home was buzzing with holiday cheer and finalizing the details for the Christmas Eve party as Gabby worked with Heather on her remodel and helped Ona make decisions on the finishes for her home. When Gabby found a spare moment, she was on the phone lining up future projects for the new year.

As much as she liked interior design, it wasn't a guaranteed paycheck. If she didn't work, she didn't get paid.

Yvette came to the house again to make the final alterations for the dresses Gabby, Essie and Novelynne would wear to the party.

Essie sighed when Yvette realized the dress had to be let out to accommodate her growing stomach.

"Maybe I should wear pajamas." Essie stared at her reflection.

"Nonsense." Gabby moved to her side. "You're going to be beautiful."

"This year I'll settle for presentable." Essie looked at Gabby, who wore the sparkling gown Novelynne had given her. "You're going to steal the spotlight."

"Thanks." Gabby laughed. "But that will be hard to do with this cast on my leg. Thanks to Yvette's dressmaking skills, no one will notice the cast."

"How much longer do you have to wear that thing?" Essie frowned.

“Until the end of January.” Gabby made a face. “I’m stuck with it through the holidays.”

“Both of you ladies will be beautiful at the party.” Novelynne stood between them.

She looked elegant with her graying hair swept from her face. The rhinestones on her champagne-colored gown caught the light and flashed.

“You are the one who looks fabulous.” Gabby smiled at her. “Your gown is gorgeous.”

“I do think it turned out rather nicely.” Novelynne turned left, then right. “Come now. Let Yvette check for any adjustments, then we can talk about the party.”



IT WAS LATE when Gabby turned off her laptop. She’d finalized the details of what she and Ona had decided for her remodel. She’d matched the descriptions with the photos and emailed the attachment to Ona. Tomorrow, she and Ona would meet and review the samples Gabby would take to her house.

Ryan had said he’d drive her to Ona’s house. He had scheduled another meeting with the board for his foundation. They were reviewing grants to be disbursed next year.

She rose and stretched, then glanced at the clock. She rolled her eyes. It was nearly midnight. She was used to working hard, but if she weren’t careful, she’d wear herself out. Novelynne and her mother had warned her about working too hard.

“You don’t want to turn into your father,” her mother’s tone was filled with worry for her daughter. “He thought he was invincible.”

“Don’t worry. My broken leg has shown me I’m anything but,” she said with a laugh. “You know how it is in my business—feast or famine. As long as I have the work, I’ll take advantage of it.”

She was glad to have the work and the distraction. Because Ryan was traveling less, she saw him more. Their feelings for each other were plain, but where did they go from there? They were living in the present. They hadn't discussed the future.

"Just promise me you'll be careful," her mother said, her concern making Gabby miss her. She'd spend Christmas with friends.

Gabby was glad to be included in the Knight family celebration, but after the holidays, everything would change. Though she and Ryan had confessed their feelings for each other, they hadn't even made plans to see each other after she left.

Her heart weighed heavily in her chest. Would she and Ryan have a long-distance relationship? She had friends who had tried that. Sadly the relationships didn't last. She and Ryan didn't have a relationship. Once she left Aspen, she couldn't live her life waiting by the phone. If God didn't have a plan for her and Ryan, she would accept that—no matter how hard it was.

She had to accept that now. It would hurt too much living more than a hundred miles away from him and realizing he'd moved on.

The house was quiet when she stepped into the hallway. Moving down the hallway, she caught the twinkling lights of the Christmas decorations in the great room. She stepped beneath the archway and took in the idyllic scene that would be filled with guests tomorrow night—Christmas Eve.

Novelynne couldn't stop talking about the party and contacted the caterer several times a day to review the details of the affair.

Essie worked with Novelynne to distract herself from her discomfort. With her due date approaching, she looked forward to the baby's delivery.

Gabby stared in awe at the twinkling lights. Stepping into the great room, she turned in a circle and took in the scene. Though she would miss being with her mother on Christmas

Day, she looked forward to spending the day with the Knights. Never had she seen such beauty. The view from the glass wall that overlooked the mountain added to the splendor.

Looking along the glass pane, she was surprised to see a shadow silhouetted against the outside light. Touching fingers to her lips, she took a step back.

Ryan looked over his shoulder at her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered hoarsely. “I didn’t think anyone else would still be up.”

“I couldn’t sleep.” The feeling in his voice made her still. “And you?”

“I was in your mother’s office finishing a report for Ona,” she said. “Your mother’s going to be busy with the party tomorrow, and I wanted to have time to help her.”

“She’ll appreciate that,” he said.

“I appreciate all that she’s done for me.” She looked past him to the view. “This is beautiful. The perfect view for Christmas.”

“Yes, it is,” he said, though he didn’t look at the view. He looked at her.

She stood next to him and looked at the twinkling stars. How she wished she could stay here. Because that wasn’t possible, she’d cherish the memory.

“Look, a shooting star.” Ryan wrapped an arm around her and nodded to the dark sky.

She watched the star streak across the sky, leaving a tail in its wake, but it wasn’t the beauty of the dark sky that made her heart pick up speed. It was the comfort in Ryan’s embrace. How easy it would be to believe there was more in his touch than this moment. It would all end after the holidays.

She stepped from his warmth. His curious gaze grazed hers. For one heady moment, she wanted to be close to him, feel his arms around her.

“What is it?” The moonlight streaming through the window cast a shadow over his angled features.

“It’s late.” She tried to still the turmoil rising in her chest. “Tomorrow’s going to be hectic with the caterers and the guests.”

He studied her a moment.

“Good night.” Turning away, she moved toward the elevator.

She heard him shift and closed her eyes. If he called her, she’d return, but she had to be careful of her heart.

Stepping into the elevator, she released a ragged breath. She should’ve felt free. Instead, she felt trapped in the tug-of-war of knowing she was right to walk away yet longing to remain in Ryan’s embrace.

Her strength was in God, not her feelings for Ryan. Taking her eyes off God would hurt her worse than she already felt. Once she left Aspen, when she no longer saw Ryan, her heart would have the memory of being near Ryan.

She would trust in God.

CHAPTER 32



When Ryan woke the next morning, he still couldn't forget his confusion at the change in Gabby. He knew she had feelings for him, yet she was growing distant. Had he said something? Done something? He couldn't remember. Last night, he'd been too stunned to ask. He loved her. He wanted to be with her. If she'd changed her mind about him, he had to know. When he saw her this morning, he'd ask. He'd rather know the truth no matter how much it hurt.

Glancing at the clock, he sat up. He had a conference call with his New York office in thirty minutes. He'd been so consumed with wondering about the change in his and Gabby's relationship, he'd forgotten his business obligations. He'd never done that before.

After a quick shower, he dashed downstairs to grab a piece of toast and an orange before moving to his office.

The florists dragging floral arrangements through the service entrance made him slow his steps. His mother dashed about the room while Essie directed the florists to the areas where the arrangements would be displayed. Gabby stood by the glass wall and showed the sound engineer where to set up the platform and the sound equipment for the musicians who would perform that evening.

As if feeling Ryan's stare, her gaze shifted. When she looked into his eyes, she hesitated.

Her hair a cloud of curls about her head, she looked like a dream in a loose top and jersey slacks that concealed her leg

cast. His pulse roaring in his ears drowned out all sound.

How she learned to move gracefully in the cast, he'd never know. He didn't notice the cast unless she wore capris, which exposed it. On her other foot, she wore flats so she never limped.

One of the engineers said something to her, and she turned away.

Ryan exhaled roughly. Any chance he could talk to her before the party seemed slim. She and his mother would be working with the decorators and the caterers. His mother's hairstylist and makeup artist would arrive to make his mother, Essie and Gabby dazzling by the time the guests arrived.

He turned to his mother and was surprised to see she watched him, a knowing look in her eyes. He shoved that thought from his mind. She may be his mother, but she couldn't know what he was thinking. He moved through the workers toward her.

"Do you need my help with anything?" He glanced about the room that was buzzing with activity.

"Everything's under control," she said airily. "Don't you have a call with your New York office?"

"Yes," he said amused that his mother still felt the need to monitor him, but wasn't that what he was doing to her? If he were totally honest with himself, he'd admit he wanted to be near Gabby, which would be difficult because she moved from one side of the great room to the other, then into the kitchen helping the decorators, the sound engineers, the florists and the caterers set up before they left and the house returned to its normal peaceful existence. "When my assistant notifies me, I'll take the call."

"Good, because my team and I have everything under control here, but I can put you to work," Novelynne said.

"After my conference call, I'm ready to help." He smiled at his mother.

When he finished his call, he returned to the great room and helped the sound engineers set up and test the speakers

and the microphones.

As quickly as the crews arrived, they left. The place was quiet, except for the caterers, who were busy in the kitchen readying the wares for the evening smorgasbord.

Novelynne's fashion stylist, hairdresser and makeup artist arrived late afternoon, taking his mother, Gabby and Essie upstairs to his mother's suite where the primping and the fussing would begin.

"Who knew women had to go through so much just to throw a party," Mike said. He and Ryan watched the three women move down the hallway to the elevator. "It's mind-boggling that they need to do more than throw on clothes."

"I like that they do more." Looking at his brother, Ryan curved the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah?" Mike looked thoughtful. "I guess I do, too."

Essie turned and blew a kiss to Mike and grinned.

Mike pretended to snatch it out of the air and press it to his heart. Ryan was glad Mike had found love with Essie. He laughed until Gabby looked over her shoulder at them. Her smile wide, there was excitement in her eyes until her gaze met Ryan's. Her smile dimmed a notch. Looking away, she followed the others around a corner.

"What's going on with you and Gabby?" Mike gave his brother a curious look.

"I wish I knew." A heaviness in his chest, he didn't want to talk about something that seemed to slip away from him.

How did he keep Gabby in Aspen? She had her life. She was determined to make her interior design business a success.

He couldn't blame her. His life had been focused on expanding his family's corporation.

For what? He had rejected any personal future for the sake of the company. Now he was looking at what he wanted his future to hold. She was walking away. If he didn't make a decision, she'd be out of his life forever.

He couldn't let her go.

"Let's test the sound equipment." Ryan tipped his head at his brother.

"Yeah." Mike's eyes brightened as they did when they were kids and instigating a venture guaranteed to make their parents panic.

They jumped onto the dais. Ryan grabbed the mic and posed like an aging rock star. Mike turned on the keyboard and pressed out a few chords.

"Okay, boys." Novelynne stood at the rail surrounding the gallery. Her hair in rollers, a green mask covered her face. Ryan could never get used to the things his mother did to look beautiful. He thought she was beautiful already.

Essie stood next to Novelynne and giggled. Ryan grew disappointed when Gabby didn't join them.

"You've determined that the equipment works," Novelynne said. "Now behave." Her head lifted, she turned away.

Essie grinned at Mike, then followed.

"I guess that's the end of our rockstar career." Ryan set the microphone into the holder on the stand. "Hope you enjoyed it."

"I think I'll stick to finance," Mike said.

"Good choice."

Ryan spent the rest of the afternoon in his office until it was time to get ready for the party. In his dressing room, he slipped on a crisp white shirt, then reached into his top drawer for a pair of cufflinks. His fingers brushed velvet, and he stilled.

The ring.

The fake engagement ring.

What he felt for Gabby wasn't fake. He'd never been more aware of his feelings for a woman than he felt for Gabby. With each passing day, he felt her slipping away.

He wasn't ready to let her go. He'd never be ready.

Taking the case from the drawer, he set it on top of the dresser. He opened the box. The diamond caught the overhead light and cast rays about the room. It was beautiful like the woman who had worn it.

His mind a turmoil, he closed the box and turned away to finish dressing. Moving back to his dressing room, he swept his hand over the dresser for his pocket items when his hand touched the box again. If he couldn't have the woman, he'd have the next best thing. He dropped the box into his pocket.

Once dressed, he moved down the stairs to the great room where Novelynne directed the caterers. His mother smiled when he stepped into the room.

"Everything looks perfect, Mom," he said and stood next to her.

It looked like a movie set with the decorations casting soft light about the area. The aroma of freshly prepared entrées filled the room. The musicians stood on the dais and filled the space with softly played Christmas carols.

Essie wore a pale blue sheath and sat on a sofa next to Mike, her hand resting on her stomach.

Ryan was disappointed Gabby wasn't in the room. Was she still getting ready? She never seemed the type to take a long time to get ready. Her style was more *au natural*, which he liked. There was nothing about her he wanted to change.

She breezed into the room, servers in her wake as she discussed the entrée table and the dessert table. Her one-shoulder gown caught the lights and floated like clouds around her ankles. Her natural curls framed her face making her angelic. The rush of emotion he felt swept air from his lungs.

Lifting her gaze to his, she stilled. The servers behind her came to an abrupt halt. Confusion in their eyes, they looked from Ryan to Gabby.

Gabby's smile slight, she greeted Ryan, then turned to the servers. She led them to the tables lining the dining room where an ice sculpture of Santa's sleigh sat in the middle of

the table. A fountain on the dessert table flowed with chocolate.

Ryan followed her. He wanted to catch her alone before the guests came pouring into the house.

“Ryan?” His mother called from the foyer.

He turned. His brother stood next to Novelynne and greeted guests.

Duty called. It was time to welcome everyone.

Looking back at Gabby, he watched her talk to the servers. As if feeling his stare, she lifted her eyes to his, before turning back to the dessert table and motioning to the caterers how the entrées should be arranged.

Ryan moved out of the dining room and crossed to the foyer. Guests in their finest filled the great room with conversation and laughter. The servers moved through the throng, their silver trays carefully balanced as they offered hors d’oeuvres and drinks to the guests.

He fell into conversation with friends, but Gabby was never far from his mind. She turned heads as she moved gracefully among the guests, her laughter musical as she mingled. He was aware of her every move. It was later in the evening when he realized he hadn’t seen her in a while. Her elegance made her stand out in a crowd, so he knew he hadn’t overlooked her.

Moving among the guests he slipped into the dining room, then the kitchen where a worried head caterer rushed to him to ask if everything was all right. Ryan assured him it was, though he still wondered where Gabby had gone.

To her room? Was she not well?

Movement on the terrace caught his eyes. Curious, he stepped through the French doors to the decorated plaza that was warmed by radiant heaters. The tension in his shoulders eased when he saw Gabby standing near the stone balustrade that rimmed the area.

Other guests chatted in intimate gatherings about the patio. Gabby must have heard them greet Ryan because she turned to him.

“Looking for some quiet time?” He stood next to her, the fragrance of her skin making his blood warm.

“The party is wonderful. I’ve met some amazing people.” She smiled at him, then looked over the lawn lighted by the walkway lights, their bases ringed with boughs and twinkling lights. “I wanted to get a breath of fresh air before I returned to the party.”

The conversations surrounding them silenced. Ryan looked around to see the other guests had gone inside.

“Are you ready to join the party?” She turned to the door.

“No,” he said simply making her still.

She lifted her gaze to his.

“What’s after this?” he asked. When she frowned, he said, “You’re almost finished with Heather’s remodel. You’ve arranged everything for Ona’s remodel so you can work remotely, then what?”

“I return to Denver,” she said with a shrug. She turned back to the unmarred snow covering the grounds. “This has been a wonderful experience. Something I’ll never forget.”

“Nor will I,” he said with feeling.

Her breath catching, she lifted her gaze to his.

“Gabby.” He laced his fingers through hers. “Don’t leave.”

“I can’t stay,” she said with restrained surprise.

The pulse fluttering in her throat made him want to press his lips to her soft skin.

“You’ve been kind enough to open your home to me, and I appreciate that, but I have to return to Denver. I have clients scheduled, and I’ve arranged meetings with them.

He groaned inwardly. How many times had he focused only on business? What had he missed because of his

misplaced priorities?

“What if I could offer you something to make you stay?” he asked. One look into her dark eyes and he could no longer control the feeling fighting to be released.

“I don’t see how unless you have another property that needs to be remodeled.” Her gentle laugh stilled, and she became serious. “Do you?”

“No, at least not property.” He gave a soft laugh. There was so much he loved about this woman.

Love.

He never thought it could feel so good.

“You said you loved me,” he said.

“I do,” she said cautiously, “but that doesn’t change my obligations.”

“If you leave we’ll have a long-distance relationship.” He watched her.

“Yes,” she said, the corners of her mouth turning down.

“Why so glum?” He touched a finger to her chin and lifted her face to his.

“I’m not a child. I know the success of a long-distance relationship.” She released her breath slowly. “They don’t last.”

“Then let’s not have one,” he said.

“I think it’s better that way,” she said. “Let’s go inside and ___”

“Better what way?” Frowning, he shook his head.

“That we not have a long-distance relationship,” she said simply.

“As in no relationship?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s easier,” she said. “You’re free to do as you please as am I.”

“No, you misunderstood.” Clasp ing her hands, he pulled them to his chest. “I don’t want a long-distance relationship because I don’t want to be away from you. I want you here with me, or I’ll go to Denver to be with you.”

“If you come to Denver, you’ll be flying to New York or Aspen to conduct business.”

“If it means I’ll be with you,” he said.

“What are you saying?” she asked tremulously.

“Four weeks ago, we told everyone we were engaged.”

“Don’t remind me.” She looked away. “We had to tell everyone the truth and when we did, your mother suffered from exhaustion. She ended up in the hospital.”

“Thankfully, she’s recovered. That engagement may have been fake, but this isn’t.” He slipped his arms around her and pulled her close. “Marry me, Gabby.”

“What?” Her mouth fell open.

“Is that a yes or a no?” Heat flooded his chest. He had to know.

“We’ve already decided we can’t have a long-distance relationship, and I can’t stay in Aspen.” Her gaze implored his.

“You can stay here if we’re married ... that is if you still love me.” He looked into her eyes.

“I ... I ...”

“I’m holding out for a yes, Gabby,” he said.

“Yes, I love you. Yes, I’ll marry you.” She relaxed in his arms.

The tension in his shoulders eased away.

“You’ve made me so happy.” Pushing his fingers through her hair, he cupped her head, then moved his hand over her back in a comforting caress. He pressed her cheek to his chest. “You had me worried.”

“That I didn’t love you? You’d never have to worry about that.” She lifted her face to his.

The release of emotions he'd been holding back surged through him. He slanted his mouth over hers. Pulling her into his arms, he tasted her sweetness and relished her soft curves.

"There's one more thing." He pulled away.

The groan she released echoed inside his chest. He didn't want to let her go, but he had to perform the final act. He pulled the ring box from his pocket. Lowering himself to one knee, he looked into her eyes and took her hand.

She pressed a hand to her mouth and watched as he slid the ring onto her finger.

"Now it's official." Rising, he held her close and kissed her warm lips.

A door opened and the volume of conversations rushed over the patio.

"It looks like you finally decided what you wanted." Novelynne's voice made them break away from each other.

Ryan looked at his mother, confused.

"You proposed," she said. "It's about time you admitted what you wanted, which is you, dear." She looked at Gabby. "I was hoping he'd stay away from the company long enough to realize what his priorities were."

"Mom?" Mike stood in the doorway, his face white. "It's time."

Novelynne frowned, then she, Ryan and Gabby gasped. "The baby."

Mike nodded.

"Where's Essie?" Ryan grabbed Gabby's hand and strode across the terrace.

"She's upstairs." Mike was breathless. "I'm going up to get her suitcase. I called the doctor."

"We'll take my SUV. I'll drive." Ryan's hand firmed around Gabby's as he rushed past Mike and into the great room.

“You’re not going anywhere without me.” Novelynne marched into the room.

Mike followed and closed the door.

“Mom, you have guests. Stay here and enjoy the party,” Ryan said. “We’ll call you when the baby arrives.”

She looked at him as if he were crazy.

He lifted his hands in acquiescence. “We’ll take my car.”

“What’s going on?” Leroy Fernsby stood at the door, his wife Agatha at his side. “And where’s Essie? We haven’t seen her for a while.”

“She’s upstairs changing,” Mike said. “I’m going up to get her now.”

“Why is she changing?” Agatha shook her head as if trying to understand.

“Because she’s going to have a baby.” Leroy looked at his wife, then at Mike. “Am I right?”

“Yes, you are.” Mike’s mouth tipped, then he stilled as if realizing he was about to become a father.

“Grab your coats, everyone.” Ryan extended his hand toward the foyer where Walter held their coats. “If we don’t leave now, this party will be more interesting than anyone had planned.”

CHAPTER 33



Gabby couldn't sit still as she and Ryan paced the waiting area of Essie's private hospital suite. Novelynne and Essie's parents had agreed to remain at the party and await word for the arrival of the first grandchild.

It seemed like hours since Essie had gone into delivery. She and Ryan said little, though Gabby prayed everything went well.

The door to the delivery area opened. Gabby and Ryan stilled. Mike appeared in the doorway and removed his mask.

"It's a boy." He smiled though he was pale with exhaustion.

"Congratulations!" Ryan grabbed his brother's hand and shook it, then hugged him and slapped him on the back. "How's Essie doing?"

"Fine." Mike wiped his brow. "Exhausted. I don't know how she did it. I sure couldn't have done it. She and the baby are resting now. I'm going back to her. When I can, I'll bring him to the window so you can see him."

"Take it easy." Pure joy filled Ryan's face. "We can wait until she and the baby are ready. Did you pick a name?"

"Yeah, Hamilton Leroy, after our dad and Essie's dad." Mike's face glowed.

"He'd like that." Ryan's voice filled with emotion. "Did you call Mom yet?"

“Yes, she’s thrilled.” He laughed softly. “She put me on speakerphone while she made the announcement to the guests. Everyone cheered so loudly they made Hamilton jump. And she told everyone that you and Gabby are engaged. We left so quickly you didn’t have a chance to tell anyone.”

Gabby and Ryan looked at each other, then laughed.

“Everything happened so quickly, I’d almost forgotten.” She looked down at her hand and looked at the diamond that sparkled in the recessed lighting.

“Looks like we have double the celebration.” Ryan took her into his arms. He nuzzled her ear, his warmth making her glad she’d be in his arms for the rest of her life.

“I’m going back to Essie.” Mike smiled at them.

“Sorry.” Ryan stepped away. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

Gabby dropped her gaze and blushed.

“I’ll let you get back to whatever you were doing.” Mike cleared his throat and laughed.

“Call me when you’re ready for me to come and take you and your family back to the house,” Ryan said.

“I will,” Mike said. “We can’t wait to introduce little Hamilton to his new home. He’s going to love that nursery.”

From the open doorway came a baby’s soft cries, then Essie’s soothing voice.

“Sounds like he’s awake,” Mike said. “I’ll see you in the morning.” He stepped back into the suite. The door closed slowly.

“Now we can finish what we started.” Ryan turned to her and took her in his arms.

“What’s that?” Gabby giggled but was surprised to see a lighthearted side to Ryan. Since she’d known him, he rarely revealed that side of himself.

“Our engagement, then our wedding.” He glanced at the closed door behind him. “And whatever comes after that.”

“Something tells me I’m going to like that part.” She lifted her face to Ryan.

He slanted his mouth over hers. Her heart raced as he dug his fingers into her hair, filling her with his love. When he lifted his head from hers, they were both shaking.

“We better plan this wedding soon. I don’t know how much longer I can wait.” His eyes were filled with promise as he looked at her.

“I’ll see what I can do.” She couldn’t tell him she felt the same way, but he could probably tell.

“We both will,” he said gently and kissed her again. “I can’t wait to start our new life together.”

He kissed her with the passion she longed for. She wanted to savor it—make it last.

These kisses would last. Thankfully for the rest of their lives.

EPILOGUE



One month later, Gabby stood at the top of the stairs at the Knight estate dressed in a simple white dress. She and Ryan had planned the wedding to take place after she had her leg cast removed.

She clutched a bouquet of roses and prayed for strength to walk gracefully down the steps to the great room of the Knight mansion. All her life, she'd bravely faced every obstacle in her path. Now she was about to face a new life with the love of her life—Ryan Knight.

She stared down at the small gathering seated in the rows of white chairs. Blue and white hydrangea decorated the first chair in each row. The soft music of a string quartet lifted to the gallery. When the music changed to the Bridal Chorus, the guests lifted their gazes to Gabby and rose.

Ryan stood between the minister, Pastor Chuck, and Mike. Behind him, the glass wall overlooked the ski slope. The sun in the blue sky filled the room with brilliant light. He looked at Gabby and grinned.

Her heart pounded like a war drum. She was about to marry the love of her life.

Diana led the way down the stairs. Sherman sat with the other guests, but he only had eyes for Diana. When they reached the foyer, Gabby followed Diana down the aisle, where Novelynne sat on one side and Gabby's mother, Linda, sat on the other. She clutched a handkerchief and smiled as Gabby moved past her to Ryan.

Essie held a sleeping Hamilton.

The ceremony went quickly as Pastor Chuck helped Gabby, then Ryan recite their vows. When they faced the guests, and Pastor Chuck announced them, husband and wife, everyone cheered and clapped.

Baby Hamilton woke with a start and looked around, then grinned. He seemed to like the celebration.

While Gabby and Ryan greeted guests, the caterers rushed in and arranged the chairs around tables. Gabby and Ryan sat at the bridal table on the dais with their families and wedding party. After the cutting of the cake and the tossing of the bouquet and the garter, the guests slipped away. The caterer removed the reception remains before quietly slipping out of the service entrance to their waiting vans.

Ryan removed his jacket and loosened his tie. Gabby loved seeing him in this relaxed pose. Since their engagement, he had relaxed more. Though still focused on the family company, he seemed to take himself less seriously.

“Congratulations, honey.” Linda hugged Gabby, then Ryan. She dabbed her eyes. “I’m sorry your daddy wasn’t here to see this day. It would’ve brought him great joy.”

“Oh, Mom.” Gabby tried to still the emotion rising within her. “At least you were here. That has brought me the greatest joy of all.

“I agree,” Novelynne said. “It would’ve been a great day for my Hamilton, too.”

At the sound of his name, Mike’s son squealed excitedly.

“I’d say baby Hamilton enjoyed himself.” Ryan slipped an arm around Gabby’s waist and held her close.

“He had a great time.” Essie looked up from the sofa where she cradled Hamilton in her arms. “I’m surprised he’s still awake. “I would’ve thought this long day would’ve worn him out.”

“I think he’s getting his second wind.” Gabby watched the baby as his attention darted to the people moving around him.

“Oh, no.” Mike collapsed next to Essie. “That means another long night for us.”

“Us?” Essie’s brows shot up. “You’ll be sound asleep while I pace the floor.”

“I help,” Mike said in feigned shock.

“If you’re awake.” Essie looked at the others. “This man can sleep through anything.”

“That’s true,” Novelynne said. “Ryan, on the other hand, was a light sleeper. He was afraid he’d miss something.”

“Is that so?” Gabby looked at her new husband.

“I’m sure that’s hyperbole.” Ryan shook his head. “I’m as normal as anyone.”

When Novelynne and Mike gave him a shocked look, he said, “I am.”

“It’s been a long day,” Novelynne said and moved to the stairs. “I’ll see everyone in the morning.”

“We’re going, too.” Mike scooped Hamilton in his arms, then helped Essie to her feet before following his mother.

Linda kissed Gabby’s cheek, then hugged Ryan before climbing the stairs to her guest room.

Alone in the great room, Ryan took Gabby in his arms and kissed her with a passion that raised goose bumps along the curve of her neck. “I’ve been waiting all night to kiss you like I’ve wanted to for months.”

“Hmm. I can get used to this.” She kissed him.

“Then let’s start right now.” He scooped his arms behind her knees.

She yelped when he lifted her to his chest. Taking the stairs two at a time, he strode down the gallery to his suite of rooms—now their suite. In his room, he pulled the pins from her hair. They dropped and scattered to the floor, her hair coming loose beneath his fingers.

He breathed in when her curls tumbled to her shoulders. He gathered her in his arms and lowered her to the bed. She was shaken by the desire that stirred within her when he touched her. Closing her eyes she savored the love and passion that she and Ryan would share for the rest of their lives.

Christmas ...

For Gabby, the year flew by. Christmas morning took on new meaning as she and Ryan gathered with the other family members to celebrate the holiday and the blessed birth of Jesus. Gabby's mother, Linda, had joined them, too.

It wasn't just Christmas, it was Hamilton's first birthday. The bakery had delivered the birthday cake yesterday. Now it sat in the kitchen waiting to be destroyed by a rambunctious one-year-old.

Hamilton's morning was busy. He had just learned to walk and was excitedly toddling about the room while examining the decorations and the gifts piled beneath the tree.

"Someday you'll realize this is your birthday, too." Mike scooped the baby into his arms and blew on his stomach.

Hamilton giggled, then stirred in his father's embrace anxious to examine the colorfully wrapped packages. Mike set him on the floor and patted his bottom as he rushed to the treasures waiting to be explored.

Essie sat on the sofa, swollen stomach revealing the impending birth of her and Mike's second child.

"Thankfully, this one won't be a Christmas baby," Essie had said when she'd announced the news. "But we'll have another winter baby."

"That's wonderful." Gabby was delighted. "Hamilton will love having a playmate."

"What about you two?" Novelynne lifted a brow as she looked from Gabby to her son.

Gabby and Ryan exchanged looks. They had waited until Linda had arrived so they could share the news with everyone at once.

“Don’t tell me.” Novelynne sat up straight. “How long have you known?”

“You’re expecting?” Linda sat on the sofa, a teacup in her hands. It trembled, and she set it on the silver service.

“About a week.” Ryan laughed. “And I can’t tell how hard it’s been to keep this a secret, especially with Gabby running to the bathroom every few minutes. We wanted this to be our Christmas present to everyone so we could share the joy with all of you at the same time.”

“Oh, honey, that’s the best Christmas present yet.” Linda rose and sat next to her daughter. With tears in her eyes, she hugged her. She pressed her head to her shoulder.

“Now, Mom, don’t cry. This is good news.” Gabby looked into her mother’s eyes.

“It is.” Linda wiped her eyes. “These are happy tears.”

Hamilton moved to the sofa and lifted his gaze to Linda. Concern in his eyes, he spoke his baby gibberish, then held out a Christmas ornament to her.

“Are you here to comfort me?” Fresh tears sprang into Linda’s eyes. “What a sweetheart you are!” She gathered him to her lap.

“And he’s busily undecorating the tree.” Mike gave a dry laugh. “We’ll have to keep an eye on him.”

The celebration continued with gift opening and friends dropping by to share holiday cheer.

Hamilton refused to nap and collapsed after Christmas dinner. The day was filled with joy and celebration as Gabby and Ryan shared the blessing of the holiday with those they loved and gave thanks for the eternal gift of salvation.

Gabby was sorry for the day to end, but as she and Ryan climbed into bed and he wrapped her in his arms, she gave thanks for God’s blessing and the man who held her—the man she would love for the rest of her life.

MERRY CHRISTMAS, dear Reader!



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Love,

Laura

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of California, Laura Haley-McNeil spent her youth studying ballet and piano, though her favorite pastime was curling up with a good book. Without a clue as to how to write a book, she knew one day she would.

After college, she segued into the corporate world, but she never forgot her love for the arts and served on the board of two community orchestras. Finally realizing that the book she'd dreamt of writing wouldn't write itself, she planted herself in front of her computer. She now immerses herself in the lives and loves of her characters in her romantic suspense and her contemporary romance novels. Many years later, she lived her own romantic novel when she married her piano teacher, the love of her life.

Though she and her husband have left warm California for cooler Colorado, they enjoy the outdoor life of hiking, bicycling, horseback riding and snow skiing. They satisfy their love of music by attending concerts and hanging out with their musician friends, but Laura still catches a few free moments when she can sneak off and read.

