

HOLIDAY ENGAGEMENT SERIES

THE
Reluctant
FIANCEE



LIZ DURANO

The Reluctant Fiancée

HOLIDAY ENGAGEMENT SERIES
BOOK TWO

LIZ DURANO

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Contents

1. [Summer](#)
 2. [Forrest](#)
 3. [Forrest](#)
 4. [Summer](#)
 5. [Forrest](#)
 6. [Summer](#)
 7. [Forrest](#)
 8. [Summer](#)
 9. [Forrest](#)
 10. [Summer](#)
 11. [Forrest](#)
 12. [Summer](#)
 13. [Forrest](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

[Other Books by Liz Durano](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER 1

Summer

YOU CAN'T JUST TELL *me you need time, Summer. Why wait until now when you had all year to decide? Can you just imagine the fallout from our investors? What about our reputation? We just got through the final round of funding, for crying out loud. What will our investors say?*

I end the replay of Dane Walters' message and toss my phone on the passenger seat next to me. Gripping the steering wheel, I gaze at the snow falling outside my car window, determined to keep going even as a part of me tells me to turn around and go back to Palo Alto where Dane and I are supposed to have a Christmas Eve dinner that's being hosted by one of our big investors.

But I can't do it. I thought I could. I thought I could power through past my trepidation, my fears, and my doubts, but after ending up in the emergency room yesterday, it's clear.

I can't go ahead with the wedding.

And after finally telling Dane I was calling it off only to have him brush it off and say I was going through cold feet and I'd get over it, there's no way I'm showing up at our investor's home for Christmas Eve pretending that everything's just fine.

Nothing's fine.

My phone rings and I see Natalie Valenti's name pop up on the display. She's my best friend who also happens to be my maid of honor. Tapping the answer button on the steering wheel, her voice fills the car via the speakers.

"What the hell is happening, Summer? I just got your email. Is it true? Is the wedding off?" she asks. "What happened?"

“I just can’t do it.”

“Did Dane tell you to join the wives and girlfriends again while he and the other tech-bros hang out together as if you aren’t the co-founder of the company?”

I sigh. It wouldn’t be the first time if he did, but not this time. This time, I won’t be at the dinner party so he doesn’t have to send me away while he and the guys talk business.

No, it’s experiencing chest pains and rushing to the emergency room only to have the doctor tell you four hours and numerous tests later that what you experienced was a panic attack. As if, after ignoring the feelings of dread that had been plaguing me for months, my body finally said enough and hit the panic button.

Suddenly I found myself asking the question I’d been avoiding for months: *Am I really happy?*

The mere thought of the wedding has my heart racing again and I take a deep breath, willing myself to focus on the road ahead.

“I’m sorry for interrupting your holiday, Nat,” I say. “I really should let you get back to your parents. I know how much you’ve been looking forward to spending time with them this holiday.”

“I know you and Dane have been stressed out lately what with the final round of funding and the wedding, but... to cancel the wedding? What happened?”

“I can’t really get into it right now, Nat. Sorry. I’m driving,” I say, forcing myself to focus on the road. I also know if I mention the chest pains-slash-panic attack, she’ll drop everything and fly back.

“Where are you going?” she ask as I try to remember where the heck I am going. Honestly, I don’t know. All I know is that I completely forgot about a reservation I made six months ago until I received the email notifying me I’d missed check-in yesterday. They usually automatically cancel the reservation but a glitch in the system prevented them from doing that and so they’re letting me keep the reservation until tonight. Considering no one does that, I’m taking it as a sign that this is where I need to be tonight or at least, for the next few days.

“I’m driving to the lodge,” I say finally.

“What lodge?”

“The one I booked for Christmas.”

“When did you make this reservation?”

“Six months ago, but I forgot all about it,” I reply. “I do remember reading about their nature workshops online and I reserved a cabin. I might have thought it would be a great retreat for Dane and myself right before the wedding. You know, a time to unplug and all that?”

“On Christmas?” Her tone is incredulous. “What were you thinking?”

“Obviously, I wasn’t.” With everything going on this year, from planning for the wedding and the company going through the final round of funding, it’s been hectic.

“It’s called wedding brain,” she says. “That’s why you’ve got me to take care of all things wedding-related which, if you really are sure the wedding’s off, then I guess I’m off the hook. I just need to let the wedding party know as soon as you and Dane make the news official.” She pauses. “You are making an official announcement, right?”

“Eventually, yes.”

“Does this have anything to do with the final round of funding the company received?” she asks. “Forty mil is impressive, Summer. You must be over the moon... well, outside of canceling the wedding.”

As the company’s general counsel, she’s right, I should be over the moon, and maybe for a moment, I was. Dane certainly was. He hasn’t been able to talk about anything else, and that’s why we’re invited to the dinner tonight. It’s to talk about plans for the company, not to celebrate Christmas. Sure, there’s probably a tree, a grand one at that, but it’s not Christmas if all you plan on doing is discuss business. Just because Kinesis Virtual Reality Systems was voted as one of the top tech companies to watch by major tech publications and lists doesn’t mean you have to work 24/7.

“So what happened?” Natalie’s voice snaps me back to the present. “You never told me what happened that made you call off the wedding.”

“I just can’t go through with it.” The words leave my lips before I can stop myself. “He’s changed, Nat. I barely know him now. Everything is all about business, and I mean everything.”

It’s more than that but I can’t get into it with Natalie right now. How can you tell your best friend that you’re suddenly doubting whether you love the man you’re about to marry, the same man you’ve built a multi-million-dollar business with and are about to marry in a lavish wedding? And for what—because he changed?

Everyone changes.

It’s a feeling that’s been haunting me for months now, ever since we

secured the first round of funding for our startup almost two years ago. His proposal and all the wedding plans only distracted me from what I was truly feeling until I couldn't avoid it anymore.

That's when chest pains (AKA panic attack) landed me in the emergency room.

But I can't tell Natalie about that. Such things wouldn't look good for the company if word got out that the co-founder was experiencing psychological issues. For isn't that what a panic attack is? That something is not right with you mentally? That you can't cope with the stress and demands of your life so how can shareholders trust you to deal with running a company that's just been valued in the millions?

But that's neither here nor there. After calling off my wedding, I'm now heading to some rustic cabin for some time alone to think.

There's a pause on the line and I can imagine Natalie chewing her fingernails with worry like she always does when things are going downhill. "Who else knows about this?"

"Just you and Marilyn, the event coordinator, who's probably freaking out right about now," I reply as the GPS tells me to keep left on the highway. "The official announcement isn't out yet since I just made the decision today. But maybe I should have waited until after Christmas Eve."

"I'm glad you let me know. I just want you to be happy, Summer." She pauses, exhaling. "But can you tell me where this lodge is?"

"I can't remember what it's called right now, but I'll text it to you later. Right now I'm driving so I can't take my eyes off the road."

"You're seriously going there alone? On Christmas Eve?"

I shrug. "Why not?"

"You can't be alone on Christmas Eve."

"Says who?" I chuckle. "I'll be alright, Nat. Don't worry about me."

She pauses, her voice softening. "I know how stubborn you can be, but please be careful, okay? And text me the name and address when you get there. Promise?"

"I will," I say before ending the call, grateful for the silence. Even more grateful that Natalie didn't push.

Red lights flash in front of me and I hit the brakes. Crap. The last thing I need is to get into an accident. I need to pay attention to the road.

I shake my head, forcing myself to focus as the snowstorm seems to intensify, making it difficult to see more than a few feet in front of me. I flick

the switch for my high-beam headlights as traffic moves again, hoping to get a better view of what lies ahead. But all it does is make the snowflakes look like a swarm of angry bees, blinding me even more.

I let out a frustrated sigh and continue driving, hoping that the lodge is close. But it's not like there's anywhere else to go. The highway is the only way up the mountain that goes straight to Lake Tahoe which means I'm heading in the right direction.

I didn't even have time to pack enough clothes for the trip. After my last argument with Dane which led to my decision to call off the wedding, I packed up a weekend bag and left. I managed to buy a few things to eat from the gas station but I'm sure I can buy whatever else I need at the lodge.

The GPS announces my turn, and I navigate the SUV onto a narrower road, the lodge's sign barely visible through the thickening snow. The trees seem to close in around me, their branches heavy with snow.

As I slowly drive down the dirt road, my SUV feeling every dip and pothole, I'm suddenly not sure if I made the right decision. Maybe I was too hasty calling off the wedding and running off. Maybe I should turn around and get back on the road. Maybe I should head to Lake Tahoe instead, and find a room at the resort for the night before making my way back home in the morning.

Maybe it isn't too late to join Dane for Christmas after all and admit that I made a huge mistake and that the wedding is still on.

Frowning, I grip the wheel, my knuckles turning white as the last thought makes me grit my teeth.

No, I didn't make a mistake.

I may have waited until the last minute to pull the plug on the wedding but I didn't make a mistake.

CHAPTER 2

Forrest

ONE MORE CHECK of the building where we store all the snowshoe equipment and I get to enjoy the rest of the evening off with my family before it starts all over again. Not that I mind it at all. I love managing the Soraya and most of all, leading the hikes for the guests throughout the year. The snowshoe hikes during the winter and the trail walks during the rest of the year are among the activities the Soraya Lodge Bed & Breakfast is known for. Sometimes the locals even join in, many of them old friends and neighbors who've watched my sisters and I grow up.

After locking the doors, I whistle for Bodhi, my one-eyed German Shepherd mix. Seconds later, he bounds toward me, his brown and black speckled coat appearing and disappearing in the fresh snow.

"There you are." I ruffle his head with my gloved fingers. "You ready to chow down with Grandma? Because I know she'll be spoiling you as usual."

Bodhi barks happily in response and I laugh. I found him while backpacking in Southeast Asia after leaving the Marines. He'd been a puppy then, missing an eye and clearly undernourished. I took him in and stayed with him until he was better before filing all the paperwork I needed to get him flown home. It took almost a year but by the time I returned home, he was on his way a week later. That was two years ago and for a dog born in an arid climate, he sure loves the snow.

I unsnap the 2-way radio from my belt and press the button. "The guests for the Sunflower show up yet?" I ask as static crackles and Harry Crowell's voice comes on. Harry has worked as a caretaker for the lodge since I was a kid and knows the property like the back of his hand. These days, he's retired

but he still helps out whenever he can since he and his wife still live on the property and my parents have no intention of kicking them out. As far as we're concerned, the Crowells are family.

"Just got in. She's on her way to ya."

I almost ask him what he means by 'she' when we're expecting a couple. That's what it said on the reservation that we should have canceled the moment they were a no-show yesterday. But when they emailed back just before the cut-off time and said they'd be here today, we made an exception. And here we are, end of the day and they just got here. What the hell happened to 2 p.m. check-in?

But I can't complain. It's Christmas Eve.

"Thanks, Harry. I'll take it from here," I say. "Oh, and Merry Christmas."

I take the stick from Bodhi's mouth and throw it ahead of me and he runs to fetch it.

"Thanks, kid. Merry Christmas to you, too," Harry says. "Oh, and Fred said he'll be manning the front desk after eight." Fred is Harry's grandson who's visiting from college.

"Thanks, Harry."

"Don't work too hard, alright? Just holler if you need anything."

A few minutes later, Bodhi and I arrive at the Sunflower, a two-bedroom cabin that's a favorite with guests who like being closer to the trails. It's the farthest cabin from the Main Lodge, the most rustic of all our cabins, and the one that's right across from mine.

As Bodhi runs behind the cabin to sniff around, I kick on the hand-painted sign that bears the cabin's name, still sturdy after all these years. We really should replace it but it holds sentimental value to my parents who insist on keeping it up even though we now have modern signs hanging right above the doors to all the cabins.

In the distance, I hear the growl of an approaching engine, a dark SUV tearing through the snow-covered road. It's going too fast. Headlights slice through the darkness, low beams that aren't enough for the driver to see far ahead. I exhale. Great. A city dweller and it's heading straight toward me.

What the hell?

I wave my arms, hoping the woman behind the wheel who's craning her head forward because she can't see much with her low beam headlights on can see me. "Hey! Stop!"

But she doesn't. At least, not until she sees me at the last minute as I step

aside, the SUV barely missing me before crashing into the old sign my sister painted and finally stopping. Bodhi barks by my side, probably equally angry at what just happened. I hurry to the driver's side, my heart racing. She better have a damn good explanation for such reckless behavior on our property.

Didn't you see the damn sign? I almost say out loud but I don't. Actually, I can't. Because even if I could, I doubt I'd have been able to say a word edgewise, not when the woman behind the wheel is saying two words over and over again.

imsorryimsorryimsorryohmygodimsorry—

Alright. That's four words coming out in one long drawn-out exclamation that I hold up my hands, afraid she's going to pass out if she doesn't pause to catch a breath.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry! I didn't see you until you were right there," she says as she rolls down her window. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Not sure about the sign though." I walk to the front of her car. "Or your bumper."

"Is your dog fine?"

"He's fine."

"Does he bite?"

"Only when someone tries to run him over," I say as she chews on her lower lip. "I'm just kidding. No, Bodhi doesn't bite. He likes to be part of the welcoming committee."

"Bodhi? Like from that surfing movie with Patrick Swayze?"

"And Keanu Reeves and Lori Petty," I say, nodding. "I'm Forrest Peters and I manage the Soraya. Welcome."

"Summer Avila," she says, shaking my gloved hand. "Harry gave me the keys to the Sunflower along with the map." She holds up the official map of the Soraya with the other hand. The map was my youngest sister's idea and it's like one of those maps you get at amusement parks complete with colorful drawings and a caption that says *You Are Here*.

"Welcome to the Sunflower, your cabin for the next five days." I peer inside her car and she follows my gaze.

"What's wrong?"

"Your reservation said two people. Where's your companion?"

"Oh. Well, he's... um, he's late," she replies before rolling up her window and backing up the SUV, revealing the broken sign she ran over half-buried in the snow. I wait until she kills the engine before picking up the

split pieces—one saying Sun and the other Flower—and setting it aside.

“I’m really sorry about the sign. I’ll replace it,” Summer says as she steps down from her vehicle.

At the sight of her, I feel like someone kicked out the chair from under me. Maybe it’s the way her white turtleneck sweater accentuates the olive tone of her neck and her face, the way her long brown hair falls over her shoulders. Or maybe it’s the beige pants that don’t feature a single crease on them or the fact that she’s wearing boots with heels that promptly sink in the snow as she steps down from her car. A city girl through and through.

So what is she doing here?

I clear my throat, forcing myself to return to the present. “Don’t worry about the sign. It’s at least, fifteen years old. Maybe even twenty. We kept it up there for sentimental reasons.”

“All the more reason for me to replace it,” she says as she takes my offered hand and steps up the steps to the cabin.

“You don’t have to. Really.” I cock my head toward the SUV. “Can I help you with your luggage?”

“I didn’t bring much. Just one bag,” she says as I pull open the trunk.

“This is it? For five days?” I take the weekend bag that matches the color of her outfit and carry it to the front door. Judging by light it is, I doubt there’s anything here designed for her to do anything outside the cabin. “I hope you at least brought boots to get around the property.”

“My... companion is bringing the rest,” she replies as I hold the door open for her and she steps inside. “For a manager, you’re pretty nosy.”

“That’s because we don’t offer room service out here. In the main lodge, we have a communal kitchen and a dining hall. We also have coffee, hot water, and vending machines,” I say. “Your cabin does have a full kitchen. You just need to provide your own food.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” she says. “I’ll know where to go if I’m hungry.”

As Bodhi remains outside on the porch, I set her bag down on the floor next to the door. Summer surveys her surroundings, her hands buried inside the pockets of her wool coat. With her clear olive skin and dark almond eyes, her long straight hair falling over her shoulders, Summer Avila is stunning.

She disappears into the bedroom and then the bathroom, checking the water pressure in the sink. She returns to the living room, rubbing her arms to keep warm. “Where’s the panel for the central air?”

I almost laugh out loud. “This is a cabin, Miss Avila. There is no central air.” I point to the wood stove. “There is, however, a wood stove that will do an excellent job in warming up the place.”

I cock my head toward the wood stove in the corner. There’s a stack of firewood in a basket nearby, kindling and all the logs she’ll need for her stay, although I sure hope she knows how to start a fire without burning the cabin down.

Her brow furrows. “What about a heater?”

“If you mean a portable heater, I can bring one from the main lodge for you, but the wood stove does a better job in warming the place,” I say. “I’d have lit up the stove but after you were a no-show yesterday, we figured we’d wait.”

“I forgot about the reservation,” she says. “I mean, we forgot about the reservation.”

“You’re here and that’s what matters,” I say. “Would you like me to light the stove for you?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks,” Summer says. There’s a defiance to her tone, as if I’ve offended her by offering to light the stove for her.

“What time do you think your companion will get here?” I ask as I pull open the door and step outside. “I can wait up for him at the Main Lodge so he won’t get lost trying to find the Sunflower by himself.”

Summer shakes her head, her brow furrowing. “You don’t have to do that. I’ll wait for him.”

“Are you sure? Because it’s no problem at all.”

Before she can reply, my radio suddenly squawks and my youngest sister’s voice comes through after a second of static.

“Where are you?” Harper says in a whisper. “Mariah and Logan are here.”

“Working. But I’ll talk to you in a bit,” I reply, shrugging as I return the radio to my belt. “Sorry about that.”

“I’m sorry for keeping you away from your family,” Summer says. “Thanks so much for all your help, Forrest.”

I glance at the wood stove, the chilliness of the room evident in the steam emerging from my mouth. “You sure you don’t need—”

“I’ll be fine. Really, I’m really not as helpless as I look.” She walks to the door and holds it open for me. Add that to the look she gives me, it’s a clear sign that she wants me gone.

“I never said you were, Miss Avila,” I say, stepping out the door. “I apologize if that’s how it came out.”

“I’m just tired, that’s all. Traffic was crazy coming out here,” she says, sighing. “Anyway, Merry Christmas and good night.”

CHAPTER 3

Forrest

HALF AN HOUR LATER, showered and dressed in a layered ensemble my fashion and lifestyle vlogger sister dropped off at my cabin yesterday, I'm ready to join civilization. At least, Harper doesn't try to make me look like someone I'm not, the grumpy recluse who's decided the rest of the world could go to hell in a hand basket as long as they left him alone on the mountain.

She doesn't give me nice suits or clothes that I wouldn't be caught dead in like the preppy cardigans and pencil-thin trousers a lot of guys wear these days. Instead, she sends me the latest styles of comfortable rugged jeans (with price tags I don't even want to look at), plaid shirts, pullovers in grey, blue or black, and simple outdoorsy jackets. She gets them from designers she meets during her travels and I'm sure she'll be taking pictures of me before she leaves so she can post them on her blog to show the clothes in action, my crazy beard and all.

But I really can't complain. Harper could be like my older sister Emily who complains about everything I wear—and my unruly beard, most of all—every time she sees me. She thinks every man should be like her husband Brad, a university professor who's too formal for my taste. He's funny, though. I give him that.

“But you don't care about the way I look, do you, boy?” I say to Bodhi who watches me from the door, his tail wagging happily.

A burst of static crackles from my two-way radio and I hear Harper's sing-song voice crackle through the speaker. “Hellooooo! Anyone there? I swear you take longer than most women I know.”

“Would you rather I look like I’ve been working all day?” I ask, laughing. “Because that’s what I’ve been doing while you guys have been relaxing all day.”

“That’s because we’re busy helping Mom and Dad make dinner,” she replies as I chuckle. I know for a fact that Harper does not cook and my parents normally kick us all out of the kitchen before any celebration. They do, however, let us do the clean-up. “Anyway, get your butt in here because we’ll be starting dinner soon. I’m hungry.”

“Are you taking pictures for your vlog tonight? Because you might need to hold off when we’re all stuffing our faces,” I say. As a vlogger, sometimes Harper forgets when to stop and set down her phone.

“Of course! But I’ll do it before the real eating officially starts. Besides, I wouldn’t worry about you, Forrest, since half of your face is going to be hidden by that beard anyway,” she replies. “It’s such a waste, too, because if I recall correctly, my brother is actually pretty good-looking. Even my girlfriends miss your grumpy face.”

“You’re hopeless, you know that, Harp?” I shake my head. I sure hope she hasn’t matched me up with another friend. The last time didn’t turn out so well, not for me. I fell for Lianne... hard.

“Ah, but you love me anyway.”

“Don’t tell anyone. Anyway, I’ll see you in a few.” Of all my sisters, Harper is the one I’m closest to followed by Mariah, the florist. Emily is the tough-as-nails sister who went to college to be a psychologist but decided to be a stay-at-home mother after she had Jonathan two years ago with her husband Brad.

Growing up with three sisters sure made for an interesting childhood with each sister having her own interest—armchair psychology for Emily, art for Mariah, and for Harper, mimicking her older brother in whatever he did whether it was whittling, hiking, or playing with toy cars. But they also worked well together, especially when it came to fixing me up with one of their friends throughout school and in between my deployments which made for interesting conversations every time I broke up the relationship. They’ve stopped playing matchmaker since Lianne but, heaven help me, Harper still tries.

I grab my keys and step outside. Bodhi follows right behind me, jumping onto the passenger seat in the extra cab, his tail wagging. I shut the door and get in behind the wheel. As I start the truck, I turn to look at the Sunflower

cabin.

With no sign of another vehicle parked near her SUV, I guess Summer's companion hasn't arrived yet.

I ease my truck away from my cabin and start heading for the main house on the other side of the property. I usually walk there but with the snow falling the way it is tonight, there's no way I'm doing that. I also don't know how long I'll be hanging out with my family especially since Mariah is bringing home some guy I've never heard of and I need to interrogate him.

Mariah's new fiancé better not pull the same shit Elliot did, cheating on her with her best friend, of all people. Nothing worse than seeing your sister shut down like Mariah did and I'm glad Elliot and Minerva stayed away for the last two years. Too bad two years is as long as they could stay away for they've finally decided to show their faces in town even when they know they're bound to run into my sister. But then, Elliot grew up next door and as far as I know, there's no law stopping him from coming home to spend Christmas with his parents.

I slow down as I approach Summer's cabin and stop right next to her SUV. I lower the passenger window, squinting in the darkness to get a better look at the chimney.

"Hang on, bud." Leaving the engine running and the passenger window lowered halfway down so Bodhi can stick his nose outside if he wants, I get out of the truck and knock on Summer's door. A few seconds later, a pair of wide brown eyes peer through a gap in the curtains.

"It's me, Forrest," I say as the eyes disappear from the window and the door opens, revealing Summer still dressed in her coat standing in a chilly living room. Hell, puffs of steam are coming out of her mouth.

I don't have to peer over her shoulder to know that the wood stove is not lit. It's why she's bundled up complete with a scarf around her neck.

"Anything wrong with the stove?"

She shrugs. "You tell me. The fire keeps going out no matter what I do."

As I see the lighter, crumpled newspapers, and kindling on the floor in front of the stove with its door slightly open, I've heard the same line before. Usually, it's from guests who have no idea what happens when cold air from the room meets hot air from the flue and the load door is left open because they keep checking on the fire. It simply goes out.

"Have you ever lit one of these things before?"

"Not really. But it's not me that's the problem. It's your stove." She

hooks her index and middle fingers together. "It's defective."

"Defective? How?"

"It just won't stay lit. I've been trying for the last fifteen minutes. No, make that half-hour," she says, exhaling. "I was just about to reserve a suit in Lake Tahoe instead."

Good luck with that. Every place in the area is full.

I'm about to say that there's nothing wrong with the wood stove when I see the bag of chips on the dining table, next to two jars of salsa, and bananas.

Sunflower Cabin, party of one.

"There's no one else coming in tonight, is there?" I ask as her chin tilts up.

"They're coming. They're just late," she says. "Besides, why do you have to know?"

"I need to know these things so I can tell the front desk not to wait up for one more guest to arrive instead of having them wait all night for nothing," I say. "We close the main gate at nine every night and everyone needs a code to get back in."

"Oh." She lowers her chin. "Well, he's late but you can give me the code and I can tell him."

I write down the code on a piece of paper and hand it to her. "Please tell me that's not all you brought along with you." I point my chin toward the chips, salsa and bananas on the table.

"So what if it is?"

This time, it's my turn to exhale. I don't even care about her giving me attitude or if she's on the run somehow. I've spent enough Christmases deployed far away from home to know that there's no way I'm letting a guest spend her Christmas Eve alone with damn chips and salsa, not when my parents make enough food to feed everyone in the lodge every Christmas. "Look, why don't you join me and my family for dinner tonight?"

Summer shakes her head. "I can't do that."

"Why not? We invite our guests all the time."

"It's Christmas Eve. You should be spending it with family, not strangers."

"The moment you are a guest at the Soraya, you are no longer a stranger," I say. "And if my parents find out that a guest is all alone on Christmas Eve, I guarantee you, they'll be sending me back here to get you."

“You don’t even know a thing about me. I also don’t want to impose on them.”

“You’re not imposing at all. I’m inviting you.”

“Forrest, right?” she asks and I nod. “It’s okay, really. I came here to be alone anyway. You don’t have to feel sorry—”

“Who says I’m feeling sorry for you?” I say, shrugging. “But if you don’t want to, that’s cool. I’m sure you’ll be fine out here. Anyway, why don’t I get your fire going and I’ll be on my way?”

As I take a step toward the wood stove, I feel her hand on my arm. “Are you sure it won’t be any problem for you to bring a guest to dinner?”

“Definitely not,” I reply. “Besides, my sister’s bringing home her fiancé and I need a reason not to be too hard on him.”

“So you’re saying you need me,” she says, her eyes narrowing. “You aren’t asking me out of pity just because I’m by myself on Christmas Eve?”

I shake my head. “Of course not. What’s the fun in having chips and salsa by yourself when you can have all-you-can-eat turkey, roast, and ham to go with that wine of yours? Or if you’re a vegetarian, sweet potatoes or green bean casserole. My parents always cook for an army.”

“I’m not vegetarian.”

“Is that a yes then?” I ask and as she smiles, I’m suddenly struck by how beautiful Summer Avila is when she’s not on the defensive.

She even cracks a smile. “Yes.”

CHAPTER 4

Summer

IT FEELS weird to accept Forrest's invitation to join him and his family for dinner but at the same time, there's no point in being stubborn. Chips and salsa, even when paired with one of the best wines on the market, is no match to a home-cooked family meal, especially when my stomach growls the moment I take in the aroma of food wafting from the kitchen the moment we step inside his parents' home.

Even Bodhi knows what's up as he abandons us to head into the kitchen. Forrest gives me a sheepish look just before a beautiful blonde woman lands right in his arms.

"Forrest! Merry Christmas!" Behind her, a dark-haired man with kind blue eyes waits to be introduced.

"Mariah, it's so wonderful to see you again. Merry Christmas, sis," he says as he holds her, letting go a few seconds later to shake the other man's hand as I take a step back to give them some space.

"Hey, man, you brought your girlfriend! Awesome!" Says a lanky man with salt and pepper hair holding a beer in one hand.

"Oh, no! I'm not his girlfriend. I'm a guest," I say at the same time Forrest says that I'm staying at the Sunflower and introduces me to Brad, his brother-in-law.

"Oops!" Brad says, laughing. "My apologies. It's just that we've got love in the air right now. Mariah brought home her fiancé and then Forrest comes in with you." His voice lowers. "And you're kinda his type."

"That's not true," Forrest growls as I tactfully look away, surprised at the feeling of relief that washes over me as well as a dash of disappointment that

I'm not his type. I don't even know why I'd feel that way when he's far from my type as well. Mountain men with long hair past their shoulders and a beard that hasn't seen a razor in years are not my type at all. Sure, there's a protective quality about him that I like or I wouldn't have agreed to join him and his family for dinner.

"I'm Emily," a tall blonde woman with piercing blue eyes says as she holds out her hand. "Don't mind my husband. He gets silly whenever he's around my family. Otherwise, he's Professor X back home."

I shake her hand. "Nice to meet you."

"We were just about to sit down," she says as Mariah leaves Forrest's side and shakes my hand. Beside her is Logan. "This is my sister, Mariah, and her fiancé Logan. And this is Harper. Be prepared for lots of pictures. You just might need to sign a release or something."

"I'll leave you out of my pictures if you want." A young woman with curly dark hair makes her way toward me and gives me a hug. Her gaze lands on the bottle of wine I'm holding. "Oh! Is that for us?"

I nod. "Yes, it is. I see you like Cabernet." I'm glad I managed to snag a bottle from the cellar before I rushed out of the house. It happens to be one of Dane's favorites from a local Napa Valley winery.

"Like it? I love it... well, this one, most definitely. It's one of the best Cabernets in the country," Harper says as I hand it to her. "Since you're not Forrest's girlfriend, I'm going to be your BFF for the evening, if that's okay with you, of course."

I laugh, liking Harper already. In fact, I love all of them. "I'd love that."

"And can I just say I love your outfit," Harper adds, admiring my beige ensemble openly. "It's so effortlessly chic, yet subtly luxurious. You really have that 'stealth wealth' style down. The cashmere of your sweater looks incredibly soft and high-quality, but it's not flashy. And those tailored pants paired with those simple, yet clearly designer flats – it's understated elegance at its best. You make 'less is more' look so sophisticated."

"Please ignore my sister." Forrest steers me past a strategically placed mistletoe near the door. "She does PR for a few clothing brands so she often feels like she has to do a full commentary on one's wardrobe. Even when she really shouldn't."

"So says the man who—I have to admit—looks effortless in the ensemble I prepared for him. And you're welcome, by the way," Harper counters as Forrest makes an unamused face at her, prompting me and the rest of the

siblings to laugh at their exchange.

So this is how it feels to crash the Peters' Christmas Eve dinner, I tell myself as we make our way to the dining room. It feels weird and oddly comforting.

While we're figuring out the seating arrangement, a gray-haired man enters the dining room with a tray of food. "Oh, you finally got here," he says to Forrest as Mariah and Emily move the other serving platters around to make room for the new addition.

"Dad, this is Summer Avila who's staying at the Sunflower. She arrived twenty minutes ago but her companion is still on his way," Forrest says as Mr. Peters shakes my outstretched hand.

"Very nice to meet you, Summer." He beckons for Forrest and me to sit at the table. "I'm so happy you could join us."

"Thank you so much for inviting me."

"It's our pleasure, Summer," he says as a beautiful woman with long hair falling over her shoulders and bangles lining her slender wrists comes out of the kitchen carrying a bowl of mashed potatoes. "Love, this is Summer. She's joining us for dinner."

"Call me Harmony. Have a seat," she says as she sets the dish on the table. "I hope you brought your appetite."

"I have to warn you," Forrest says as he sits next to me with Bodhi sitting on the floor next to him. "We can get pretty noisy."

I grin. "Don't worry. I don't mind it at all."

"So where did you travel from?" Emily asks as Mariah passes a bowl of green bean casserole to me via Logan, her fiancé, who then passes it to Forrest.

"San Francisco," I reply as Forrest slides a serving of green beans on my plate. "I'm staying at the Soraya until the New Year."

"That's awesome. Have you signed up for the hikes?" Brad asks. "Forrest leads some of them."

I shake my head. "Not yet. I just got in an hour ago."

"Oh, now I remember! You were supposed to arrive yesterday, right?" Mr. Peters asks and I nod. "I thought you got here this morning."

"That was another couple, Dad. The Gibsons," Forrest says. "They're staying in the Fern."

"I honestly forgot about the reservation. I only remembered it after reading the email about check-in and check-out times," I say as Harper's

camera on a selfie stick moves in front of me, filming the people on the other end of the dining table who are silently mugging for her. “But I’m glad to be here. Thank you so much for inviting me to join you.”

“I hope your friend makes it here tonight,” Mariah says, her voice soft and sweet. “They’re predicting a few feet of snow.”

“Three,” Mr. Peters adds. “A white Christmas, that’s for sure.”

Harper sets the phone and selfie stick on the table and faces me. “Are you married?”

Emily groans. “Here we go. The interrogation begins.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m not.” Almost, though.

“Have a boyfriend?”

“Harper, can you let our guest enjoy Christmas dinner without interrogating her?” Forrest says, his voice stern. “It’s rude.”

“How’s Lianne?” Brad asks, clearly steering the conversation away from me.

“We broke up,” Forrest replies as everyone turns to look at Forrest.

“When did this happen?” Mrs. Peters asks. “I know she traveled a lot for work but I thought...”

“She was a model,” Brad says, filling me in.

“I ran into her in Milan three weeks ago and she never said anything,” Harper says. “You broke up already then?”

Her brother shrugs. “I don’t have to announce my business to everyone like it’s a social media event, Harper.”

“That’s too bad, man. Sorry to hear that,” Brad says with a straight face as the sisters sneakily give each other knowing looks in a non-sneaky way. I can imagine how crazy it must have been to grow up with all four Peters siblings, with three sisters who can’t mind their own business and one grumpy brother.

“So what type of guy do you like, Summer?” Harper asks, clearly nonplussed. “I should have asked you first before I almost pushed my poor brother on you.”

“Clean-shaven. Crew cut. Fashionable,” I reply as Forrest almost chokes his food. “Preferably someone who lives in the city.”

“So that’s why you don’t know when to use your high beams,” Forrest says and this time it’s my turn to glare at him while his sisters exchange curious glances with each other.

“I know now,” I say. “And I promise to replace the sign.”

“What sign?” Mr. Peters asks.

“The sign for the Sunflower that Mariah painted,” Forrest replies. “She drove over it.”

“It was an accident,” I make sure to add. “But I’ll pay for it.”

“I told you not to worry about it. It’s no big deal,” Forrest mutters, a slice of turkey sitting on his fork in front of him.

“It is to me,” I say under my breath.

For a few moments, silence descends around the table as everyone looks at me and then Forrest and back at me again.

“You guys okay?” Brad asks and I nod.

“Of course. I know I am.”

“Me, too,” Forrest replies before taking a bite out of the slice of turkey on his fork.

“Well, looks like that’s settled.” Mrs. Peters hands a dish toward us. “Care to try the stuffing? It goes well with the gravy.”

From here on, everything is about the food. Despite our sudden snarky exchange, I’m secretly glad Forrest asked me to join his family because I’ll take a homemade Christmas dinner over store-bought chips and salsa any day. All attention is also on the newly engaged couple, Mariah and Logan.

They’ve actually been quiet but now, most of the questions are directed to them—how long they’ve been dating (six months), how long since they’ve been officially engaged (a few weeks), even the moment Logan knew he was in love with Mariah (something about her laughter). I almost feel sorry for the poor guy but he holds his own very well. And he loves her—I can see it in his eyes and I can’t help but feel jealous. The days Dane looked at me like that are pretty much history. That disappeared the moment we made our first million.

As the dinner goes on, I’ve figured out a few things when it comes to the Peters family dynamics. Basically, Mr. Peters is the serious one while his wife is the creative one, talking about crystals and meditation like it’s something everyone should know about.

Among the siblings, Emily is the boss—or thinks she is—while Mariah is mostly quiet, and Harper is all over the place with her phone camera documenting everything. Forrest is just as quiet as Mariah although I can’t help but notice how all the sisters look up to him. He’s got that air of confidence that can’t be faked at all.

“I want to apologize about that exchange earlier.” I turn to see Forrest

watching me.

“What exchange?” I ask. “It was nothing. Just conversation.”

“I didn’t have to be rude about your driving skills. It was uncalled for.”

“Not if it were true.” I chuckle. “I may be a pro on city streets, but mountain roads are another matter.”

“You really don’t have to replace the sign,” he continues. “We’re overdue for new signs anyway.”

For a few moments, we don’t speak. I watch as Forrest sneaks a slice of turkey toward Bodhi only to find that his mother has set a bowl with a few slices in it already in front of him.

“Your family is fun,” I say after Forrest returns his attention to his half-empty plate.

“You mean they’re loud.”

I smile. “I think the word you’re looking for is passionate.”

“They wouldn’t be my family if they weren’t. It’s not every day that we get to see each other so we make up for it any way we can.” He cocks his head toward Emily and Brad who are telling Jonathan to stop mashing his potatoes in his hands. “They live in Colorado. Brad’s a biology professor at the university and Emily’s a stay-at-home mom.” Cocking his head toward Mariah, he continues, “Mariah owns a floral shop and she and her fiancé live in L.A., and Harper here is based in New York although she travels a lot, depending on where the party is.”

“What party?” Harper asks, leaning toward us. I love her shoulder-length hairstyle, her straight blond hair smooth and sleek. Interestingly while Forrest clearly takes after his mother with his dark hair and olive skin, his sisters all take after their father.

“Wherever the next party is. It’s your job, isn’t it?” Forrest replies as Harper rolls her eyes.

“True, but it’s work,” she replies. “In my opinion, the only party that matters right now is this one. Are you having fun, Summer?”

I nod. “I definitely am. This is better than being alone in my cabin.”

“I hope your companion arrives soon,” she says, reaching for my hand and squeezing it. “But if not, we can always hang out.”

I smile. I like Harper. Heck, I like all of them, even the mountain man sitting beside me. There’s just something about him, something that makes me feel safe.

“Is there a shop nearby that sells outerwear?” I ask. “I’m afraid I didn’t

pack for the outdoors. This was... last minute.”

“No need for you to shop, girl. I’ve got clothes you can use, no problem,” Harper says. “I get them through my job and I think we’re the same size so you can definitely use them. Jacket, boots, you name it, I’ve got it.”

“I can’t possibly...”

“Oh, yes, you can,” she says, grinning. “Besides, shops are closed tomorrow since it’s Christmas Day.”

As I open my mouth to object, I remind myself that Harper has a point. “Okay then.”

She beams. “I’ll bring down a few pieces before you return to your cabin.” She turns to Forrest. “Make sure you don’t leave without them, okay?”

“Is she always this bossy?” I ask, grinning as Forrest rolls his eyes.

“She just thinks she is,” he replies. “But she’s right. None of the shops will be open tomorrow and if you want to join the hike, we start early. Before the shops open.”

“I appreciate anything you can loan me until the shops open.”

“She does PR for some fashion brands,” Forrest says, beaming.

“I even dress my brother. I call it Mountain Man Chic.” As Harper points to her brother’s ensemble, he rolls his eyes.

“Oh, please. It’s clothing.”

“It’s fashion,” her sister insists as Mr. Peters catches everyone’s attention by tapping his spoon against his wine glass.

“I’d like to propose a toast,” he announces, his voice carrying a warmth that fills the room. The chatter around the table ceases as everyone turns to face him, glasses in hand.

“To good company,” he begins, his eyes twinkling as he looks around at each of us. “To family, both born and found. We may not all share the same blood, but we share the same heart.”

“To family,” the others echo, raising their glasses.

Reaching for her husband’s hand, Emily adds, “And to love. May it find us in all forms and in the most unexpected places. To the love that binds us as family and to the new loves that enter our lives.”

“To love,” we all repeat, our glasses clinking together.

Mariah lifts her glass higher. “To beauty - in the world around us, in the simple moments, and in each other. May we always find joy in the little things that make life truly magical.”

Harper, ever the life of the party, grins widely. “And to friendship! To old friends who just happen to be right here and to new ones who’ve just joined this crazy ride.” She looks at Logan and at me, a playful smile on her lips.

“To friendship,” we all chime in, suddenly aware that Forrest is watching me. As I turn to look at him, he looks away, petting Bodhi sitting next to him.

I look away, guilt filling me. I shouldn’t be attracted to him but I am. Maybe I’m getting carried away with the love in the air. It’s palpable, contagious. As I join in the toast, I tell myself it’s Christmas and I’m simply enjoying myself, riding the high that comes with being surrounded by the Peters family.

But I also can’t deny how Forrest’s presence has calmed my chaotic world. His quiet strength and gentle demeanor stands in dark contrast to Dane’s relentless ambition and intensity. Where Dane is a storm, an energy I thrived in when we were building the company, Forrest is the calm afterward. Where Dane is a flurry of activity and noise, Forrest is peace and quiet. It’s this difference, this breath of fresh air, that seems to draw me to him.

Maybe I’ve been longing for something more meaningful than board meetings and business milestones for some time now and I just didn’t realize it until this moment.

Suddenly there’s a stirring at the other end of the table as Jonathan shrieks happily.

“Do you want to say something, Jonathan?” Emily asks as we all turn to look at him.

He nods, his face suddenly serious. “I go poopoo.”

CHAPTER 5

Forrest

AFTER SURVIVING my nephew's surprise announcement at the table followed by his parents' quick and coordinated response (my sister Emily does run a tight ship), dinner resumes again. While Harper and Summer get into a conversation about San Francisco, I spend time getting to know Logan, Mariah's fiancé.

He's a mechanic, a position which pleases my dad to no end. Finally, a future son-in-law who just might help get his restored Fleetside truck running before year's end. Logan even shares a popular YouTube channel with his twin brother where they record their road trips, riding Norton vintage motorcycles throughout the country.

My sister's tastes in men have definitely changed since her disastrous relationship with Elliott, and it's one I certainly harbor no complaints over. While Elliott had been my best friend growing up, what he did is something I can never forgive. I was finishing up the final leg of my backpacking trip through Asia when I heard that Mariah had walked in on him and her best friend getting it on. I came home so fast that Elliott didn't know what hit him the moment I ran into him.

My fist.

But that's history now. What matters is that my sister's engaged again and Logan is a definite improvement. He also looks like he's madly in love with her. I know the look.

Been there, done that, and never doing it again.

When it's time to take Summer back to her cabin, Mom makes sure she's got enough food to last her the rest of her stay, including a fresh loaf of

bread, and bottles of water.

“We have complimentary breakfast in the dining room, but this will save you a trip since you’re staying at the farthest cabin from the Main lodge,” Mom tells her. “The only thing missing is probably coffee.”

“Forrest can always drop that off in the morning,” Harper teases as I glare at her.

“She can get her own coffee, Harp,” I mutter as I help Summer carry the leftovers to the truck. She may not even like coffee.

“Don’t forget about the hike. It’s one of the best things about the Soraya,” Brad says. “Forrest should get you set up, no problem.”

“You’ll love the views, Summer, but don’t let us force you to do anything you don’t want to. You’re our guest,” my dad says.

“I love being your guest, Mr. Peters. But I am looking forward to joining the hike.”

Mom rests her hand on Summer’s shoulder. “I hope your companion arrives soon. Any time you want some company, our door’s always open.”

She smiles. “I’m sure my companion will be here in the morning. Thank you so much for a lovely dinner. Merry Christmas.”

After another round of goodbyes, Summer, Bodhi, and I finally make it to the truck.

“Sorry about that,” I say as Bodhi jumps into the back seat.

“No need to apologize for anything. I had a lot of fun.” She climbs into the passenger side. “I’d take your family any day over spending Christmas Eve alone in the cabin.”

As I close the passenger door and walk around to the driver’s side, something tells me that Summer’s “companion” is probably not showing up at all. Her calling him or her by that term is too impersonal. Add the fact that she arrived with so little luggage, barely enough for a weekend stay tells me this trip wasn’t planned at all, even if she reserved the cabin six months ago. Maybe she did forget all about the reservation, like she said over dinner. But if so, why come all the way out here anyway by herself?

When we arrive at her cabin, I help load the leftovers into the refrigerator, add one more log to the fire, and head toward the door. Bodhi is still inside the idling truck, warm and content as he watches us from the back seat.

“Thank you for tonight. I had a lovely time,” Summer says as she walks me to the door. There’s a genuine note of warmth in her voice and I can’t help but feel a twinge of satisfaction knowing I played a part in her enjoying

the evening.

“It was my pleasure,” I reply, lingering at the doorway. “I’m glad you could join us. It wouldn’t have been the same without you.”

There’s a moment of silence between us, filled with unspoken words and glances that linger just a second too long. I’m acutely aware of the crackling fire behind her, casting a warm glow that dances across her face.

“I hope your companion arrives soon,” I say though the words feel hollow as they leave my mouth.

“Yeah, me, too,” Summer says, smiling. “You know, tonight made me realize how much I needed this. The quiet, the simplicity, your family’s warmth. It’s been... it’s been a long time since I felt this... connected.”

I take a step closer. “You’re always welcome to join us. For dinner, the hike, anything. If you want, I can show you the view this cabin is known for in the morning.”

“I’d love that,” she says, craning her neck as the sound of carols fills the air. Somewhere in one of the cabins, a family is singing carols.

“I almost forgot.” From inside my jacket, I pull out a small Christmas tree wood carving and hand it to her. It’s a simple tree that stands seven inches tall painted green with colorful round ornaments of different colors. Red, yellow, blue, orange.

Summer’s eyes widen. “Did you make this?” When I nod, suddenly feeling sheepish, she smiles a smile that reaches her eyes. “It’s beautiful.”

Dad taught me whittling when I was around ten and while I enjoyed creating something out of pieces of wood, I set down the chisel when I enlisted in the Marines. It wasn’t until I returned home for good that I picked it up again, even taking formal lessons from two woodcarvers in nearby Rosemont. Since then, I’ve carved simple pieces like owls and whales to intricate ones like one of Bodhi sitting in attention, his ears perked up and the fur extremely detailed that’s currently sitting on some collector’s shelf in Manhattan.

The piece Summer is holding in her hand is one of my simple ones but it might as well be a masterpiece. “Thanks. It’s just a tree.”

“It’s not just any tree. It’s my tree,” she says, her eyes sparkling for the first time tonight. “Thank you.”

My throat tightens. “You’re welcome.”

For a brief moment, the world seems to stand still, where the possibility of something more hangs in the air like the soft snowflakes outside. But I

remember the promise I made to myself earlier tonight. I can't let myself get too close, not when our worlds are so different.

I step back, breaking the spell. "Anyway, goodnight, Summer, and Merry Christmas."

She leans toward me and plants a kiss on my bearded cheek. "Merry Christmas, Forrest."

The faint press of her lips against my thick beard sends a jolt of electricity through my body, the scent of jasmine and orange blossom hitting me deep in my belly.

I clear my throat. "I'm... I'm going."

I turn and walk back to the truck and get in. Bodhi sits up, his ears cocked as if sensing something. Maybe something different about me.

"Still me, bud," I say as I ease the truck out of the parking spot. "Let's go home."



"You up? I need a favor."

Harper rubs her eyes as she peers at me in the semi-darkness. "What time is it?"

"Four."

She groans as she sinks back down against the pillows on top of the couch. She's supposed to be sleeping in her old bedroom but she must have fallen asleep on the couch while editing her videos last night.

Lucky for me, it saved me a trip going up the stairs to her room.

"What do you need?" she asks. "You can't have misplaced your key since you're in here."

"You still know how to cut hair?"

Her eyes narrow. "Why?"

"I need you to give me a new look."

Her eyes narrow even more. "Does this have anything to do with the guest last night, by any chance? Summer?"

I exhale, tired of the back and forth. I also haven't had my coffee yet so my patience is running thin. That and barely getting any sleep because my mind has been on the very same guest. "Can you do it or not? I just want a new look for Christmas Day."

She swings her legs off the couch, yawning and stretching her arms above her head. “But I warn you, once I start, there’s no going back. No regrets, okay?”

“None,” I confirm.

She rubs her eyes again and heads towards the bathroom, rummaging around for her old hairdressing scissors and some shaving equipment. I follow her, sitting down on a stool. Harper clicks on a bright light, positioning it so it illuminates my face.

“Geez, Forrest. When was the last time you had a proper shave? You look like you’ve been living in the woods.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I have been living in the woods. That’s the charm of the Soraya, remember? Rustic,” I joke, but she doesn’t laugh. Instead, she starts spraying my hair with water, combing it through before taking the scissors to it.

As she works, there’s a comfortable silence, only broken by the soft snipping of the scissors and the buzz of the clippers. It isn’t until she begins applying shaving cream to my face that she speaks again.

“I’m sorry to hear about Lianne.”

“Even you knew we wouldn’t last, Harper. You said it yourself. We were opposites.” I sigh, the memories flooding back. “Lianne loved the city. Correction: cities. She thrived on the energy, the endless possibilities, walking down the runway. It made her feel alive, limitless while here... she felt trapped. She said it was stifling, so we agreed it would be better to go our separate ways.”

She sighs. “Love’s never easy, is it?”

“But I think she’s happier, and so am I. Life moves on.” Even Mariah moved on, bringing Logan with her to meet the family.

“Speaking of moving on, at least you won’t look like a mountain man anymore.”

I chuckle. “Thanks to you.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” Minutes later, she steps back, admiring her handiwork. “There, all done. New look, new beginnings. New man.”

As I gaze at my reflection in the mirror, I touch my now smooth face, running a hand through my much shorter hair. It feels strange but also exciting. “Thank you.”

She winks. “I’m sure Summer will love this new look.”

“I’m not doing it for her.”

She stifles a yawn. “Sure, you’re not.”

I scowl, but it’s playful, and she knows it. “Whatever.”

“Now go and let me clean this up before someone thinks Big Foot broke into the house.” She disappears in the hallway for a few moments and returns with a broom and a dustpan. “You do want to surprise everyone, right?”

As I unclip the towel she draped over my shoulders, I pause to stare at my reflection in the mirror again, feeling like I’m looking at a stranger. He looks so different clean-shaven, like a younger version of me who hadn’t yet deployed to strange lands.

That is until you see his eyes. He’s seen stuff he can never talk about.

“Admit it, Forrest,” Harper says, chuckling. “You like it.”

“Yeah,” I confess, “I do. Thanks, Harp.”

She waves me off, grinning. “Go get her, tiger.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” Her laugh rings through the hallway as I walk away, trying not to let her teasing get to me. But deep down, there’s a flutter of excitement I can’t ignore.

I head to the dining room and make coffee, relieved to be doing something routine to get my mind off Summer. I set out individually wrapped pastries behind the glass counter, then arrange the fresh fruit platter, ensuring the vibrant colors of strawberries, kiwi, and blueberries pop beautifully against the porcelain dish.

I glance at the vintage clock hanging on the wall – it’s still early, but the soft light filtering through the lace curtains tells me it’s going to be a beautiful day.

Hell, it already is.

CHAPTER 6

Summer

MERRY CHRISTMAS! *You forgot to text me the name of the lodge where you're staying at and I'm about to report you as missing.*

Still nestled under the thick covers, I yawn as I read Natalie's message, realizing I completely forgot to send her the information about the Soraya last night. If I'd spent the evening alone, I'm sure I would have remembered.

What if Forrest hadn't invited me to join him and his family for Christmas dinner?

Now that would have been such a downer. I can see it now. I'm sure I would have been able to do a lot of the thinking I'd planned to do but I'd have been miserable, probably opening my laptop and losing myself in code and market research. But I like that I didn't have to do that. Instead, I got to meet the Peters family and experience one of the best nights ever. In fact, my cheeks haven't recovered from all the smiling.

I text Natalie the name of the lodge and pray she doesn't cut short her visit to L.A. to come over. As much as I love her company, I'm enjoying my time away from everyone. It's the first time in month—no, years—that I'm truly alone and not feeling the least bit lonely. I'm also discovering a part of me I've almost forgotten, one that misses the simple pleasures of having dinner with a happy family and not a single cell phone in sight—well, except for Harper while she was filming at the start of dinner but she put it away and I don't recall seeing it for the rest of the evening.

I chuckle. For a vlogger, she sure slacked off there. And I'm glad she did.

I scroll through all my Christmas greetings from friends and colleagues who haven't yet heard the news about the wedding being canceled. That

means Natalie hasn't told anyone and Dane hasn't either.

Speaking of Dane, there's not a single message from him, not even in reply to the Christmas greeting I'd sent him last night before I went to bed. I'd done my best to be cheerful, sending him a colorful Merry Christmas emoji, but he's probably still upset with me and I can't blame him. He'd been looking forward to seeing all our investors, treating our wedding like a business meeting instead of a personal event.

A knock on the door snaps me out of my thoughts and I bolt upright.

Crap! Is that Dane?

I pull on a sweater and hurry to the door. He did know about the reservation since I'd mentioned it to him when I first made it (he'd thought it was cute before returning to the numbers on his laptop screen), but I didn't tell him I'd actually use it when I walked out of our house. I just told him I needed to be alone.

At the door, I pause to take a deep breath, reminding myself I didn't do anything wrong so why the heck am I feeling guilty?

Goodness, Summer, just open the door and get it over with.

"Good morning, Summer," A man holding a steaming thermos in his hand says the moment I pull open the door, a sheepish yet familiar smile on his face. "Hope I didn't wake you."

I peer at him. The eyes look familiar but everything about him tells me I don't have a clue who he is. "I think you have the wrong cabin. I'm..." My voice fades when a dog barks behind him and I see a one-eyed dog that looks suspiciously like...

"Bodhi?" I look at the man who looks like he just stepped out of a Loro Piana catalog. Where'd all the plaid from yesterday go? "Forrest? Is that you?"

"Who else could it be?" he says, his breath visible in the cold air. "Brought you some coffee. Figured you might need it."

I step aside to let him and Bodhi inside the house, the cold air rushing in with them. "Is this one of Harper's picks for you?"

He nods. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yeah, but it suits you perfectly." As much as his mountain man look yesterday grew on me, Forrest's new look, hair cropped short and buzzed along the sides and his beard completely gone revealing a chiseled jaw and a dimple in the middle of his chin, reveals a gorgeous man hiding under all that hair, someone who actually would fit right in my world.

As I close the door, Forrest hands me the thermos. “Hope it’s not too early to show you the view that your cabin is known for. After you’ve had your coffee, of course.”

“What happened to your beard? And your hair?”

“I thought it was time for a new look.” He frowns. “Is it bad?”

“It’s not bad at all. No, it... looks great,” I stammer. *You’re gorgeous*, I almost say out loud. “Thank you for the coffee, by the way. I thought the Soraya didn’t do room service all the way out here.”

“I came from the main lodge and figured I’d stop by and drop off the coffee since your cabin doesn’t have any,” he says. “Saves you a trip to the main lodge.”

I take down two mugs from the cupboard. “Would you like to join me for coffee before you show me the view?”

He grins, “I’d love to.” He pauses, hurries back to the door, opens it, and brings in a shopping bag. “I almost forgot. Harper asked me to give this to you.”

He places the shopping bag on the kitchen table, and I peek inside to find an assortment of winter clothing. There’s a jacket, a pair of gloves, a woolen hat, and even a pair of boots, still with their fashion tags on, minus their prices. “This is so generous of Harper. Please tell her I said thank you,” I say, feeling a wave of gratitude. It’s a relief to know I won’t be completely unprepared for the winter conditions outside.

“I will,” Forrest assures me, taking a seat at the small kitchen table while I pour the coffee into mugs. “She enjoys doing stuff like this. She’s always been the fashion-forward one in the family.”

“You have no idea how much I appreciate all this.”

Forrest nods, accepting the mug I hand him. “Thanks.” He takes a sip, his gaze meeting mine. “How did you sleep last night?”

“Surprisingly well. Must be all that turkey,” I admit. “But it’s also this place. It has a way of calming the mind.” And boy, did my mind need a lot of calming.

“It does,” he agrees, a soft smile playing on his lips. “The mountains have a unique way of putting things into perspective.”

We sip our coffee in a comfortable silence, the warmth from the mugs spreading through our hands. I can’t help but steal glances at Forrest, noticing how different he looks without the beard and long hair. The clean-cut appearance suits him, bringing out a certain softness in his features that was

hidden before.

“So, about this view,” I venture, setting my mug down. “Is it a long hike to get there?”

“No, not at all. It’s just a short walk from here. You’ll love it,” Forrest assures me. “The lake looks completely different when it’s frozen over. It’s like another world.”

The thought of seeing a frozen lake up close excites me. I’ve never experienced anything like it before, being a city girl through and through. “I can’t wait,” I say, genuine enthusiasm in my voice.

Finishing our coffee, we bundle up in the winter gear Harper provided. The jacket fits perfectly, and the boots are surprisingly comfortable. Forrest leads the way out of the cabin, and we start walking toward the lake.

Along the way, Forrest tells me about the different trails around the lodge, his knowledge of the area evident in every word. As snow crunches under our boots, I listen intently, fascinated. He has the most soulful blue eyes.

He throws a stick for Bodhi to fetch, the dog’s playfulness making me laugh as he returns to nudge the stick against my hand.

“He wants you to throw it,” Forrest says and I do, grinning broadly as Bodhi bounds after it.

When we reach the lookout point, the view that greets me is breathtaking. The frozen lake stretches out before us, the surface glistening under the morning sun. The mountains loom in the distance, their snow-capped peaks majestic against the clear blue sky.

“This is incredible,” I breathe.

“I’m glad you like it,” he says softly. “It’s one of my favorite spots.”

We spend a few moments just taking in the view, the beauty of the landscape a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of city life. And although I’ve been to this area with Dane to ski, I feel a sense of peace at the Soraya, a tranquility I’ve never felt before.

And then there’s the man next to me gazing at the lake below, his face happy and serene, as if he knows where he belongs and it’s right here.

“What did you do before you started managing this place?” I ask as he takes the stick from Bodhi’s mouth and throws it.

“I was in the Marines,” he replies and for a moment I wonder if that’s all he’s got to say, his jaw clenching. “Then I backpacked throughout Southeast Asia and found Bodhi. Brought him home and we’ve been here ever since.”

“The lodge keeps you busy.”

He nods. “There’s always something that needs to be done. Hikes, nature walks, workshops, making sure the vending machines in the dining hall are always full and fresh coffee.”

“The coffee was amazing.”

“Thanks,” he says. “And then there are things that need to be fixed here and there. We have the main lodge and then there are the cabins, like the one you’re staying in. But from spring to fall, we’ve got the A-frames on the other side of the property, too. One-room dwellings that are popular with the nature workshop attendees.”

“You’re busy all year round.”

“We’re open all year round.” He pauses as Bodhi returns with the stick in his mouth and drops it in front of him. Forrest picks it up from the snow-covered ground and throws it again. “My parents raised all of us right here and we know the property like the back of our hands. Well, at least I still do, Not sure about my sisters since they’re all living elsewhere now, though. But Mom and Dad were getting older and I wanted them to travel the world for a change, take a little break, so I told them I’d take over.”

He pauses and turns to look at me. “What about you? What do you do?”

“I co-own a company based in Silicon Valley. It’s...” I pause, memories of trips Dane and I took to even more stunning places but all we talked about was business instead of taking in the view, breathing in the crisp air, and listening to the crunch of snow beneath our boots or the sounds of birds chirping in the trees. “It’s... nothing like this.”

“Do you at least enjoy it?”

I think for a few moments. “I used to.”

“Is that why you’re here alone?”

“My companion’s running late,” I say quickly, realizing what Forrest is hinting at, that he knows no one else is coming to join me, that I’m really here by myself. But I’m not ready to let him know that. Not yet. “Anyway, maybe we should head back to the cabin.”

I turn away from the view and back toward the path where we came from. A group of people are making their way up the path, probably with the same idea to enjoy the view.

“Sure,” Forrest says before whistling for Bodhi who scampers toward us with the stick in his mouth.

As we start our walk back to the cabin, my phone vibrates in my pocket

and I glance at the screen to see Dane's name flashing. Speak of the devil.

"Do you need to get that?" Forrest asks as I slip my phone back into my jacket pocket.

"No, I can call them back later."

When my phone rings again a few seconds later, I know I have to answer the call. "I'm sorry, I need to take this."

He nods understandingly, giving me space as I answer the call. "Dane," I greet, my voice guarded.

"Dane," I answer, bracing myself for his usual cold efficiency.

"Summer, I see you've decided to take a little holiday. Interesting timing," Dane's voice cuts through the line, laced with a thinly veiled irritation.

I try to keep my voice steady. "I needed some space to think, Dane. What's going on?"

He doesn't waste any time. "It's about the company. Your recent... decisions have made it clear to me that your priorities have shifted. It's become apparent to me and the board that your involvement in the company is no longer beneficial."

"The board?" I feel a chill run down my spine. "What are you saying, Dane?"

"I'm convening a meeting with the board of directors," he says, his tone deliberate and measured. "I'll be proposing to remove you from your position. You've become a liability, Summer. Your focus is obviously not on the business anymore."

His words sting, but I fight to keep my composure. "A liability? Dane, I co-founded that company with you. Up until yesterday, you and I were working at the office until we had that talk and it became clear to me that getting married right now will only make the problems between us worse. But just because I've decided to call off the wedding doesn't mean you can push me out of the company. Our company."

"Actually, I can," he retorts coldly. "Your recent actions, including abandoning the company at a critical juncture for a personal retreat, demonstrate a lack of commitment. It's a minor personality flaw, as you might say, being too focused on personal matters and not on the business."

His use of 'minor personality flaw' hits hard, a mocking echo of my own reasons for leaving. Why is he using such impersonal language? "Dane, this is unfair. We started this together. Our personal problems have nothing to do

with our company.”

“Business isn’t about fairness, Summer. It’s about making tough decisions. You’ve made yours, and now I’m making mine. Your departure from the company will be finalized as soon as the board convenes. Consider this a courtesy call.”

The finality in his voice leaves no room for argument. He’s already made up his mind. Maybe his ego couldn’t take it. I get that we’re going to face a lot of embarrassment when the news about the wedding being called off becomes official but that shouldn’t affect the company in any way.

“Dane—”

“There’s nothing more to discuss,” he cuts me off. “I suggest you use this time to consider your future outside the company. Goodbye, Summer.”

The line goes dead, leaving me standing in stunned silence. Remove me from the company all because I dared cancel the wedding? This isn’t a business move at all; it’s a personal attack, a punishment.

The sound of Bodhi barking at birds in the trees snaps me out of my thoughts. Taking a deep breath, I compose myself and walk back to where Forrest is waiting, concern written on his handsome face. “Everything okay?”

I force a smile. “It’s fine, just business stuff.”

He frowns. “On Christmas Day?”

“Yeah,” I say, shrugging. “Why don’t we head back?”

As we walk back in silence, I’m grateful for Forrest’s respectful distance, giving me space to collect my thoughts. Despite Dane’s attempts to ruin my day, I’m determined not to let it get me down.

I was so happy.

Returning to the cabin, Forrest pauses at the door. “If you need anything, just let me know. I’m just across the way,” he says. “In fact, I’m planning on making hot chocolate later and I’d love it if you could join me.”

“You don’t have to entertain me, Forrest.”

“I’m not,” he says. “I’m having it whether you’re there or not but if you’re free...”

“I’d love to join you.”

“Great. I’ll see you later then.” The dimple in his chin deepens as he smiles. “No pressure.”

“How does six sound?”

“Perfect,” he says.

As he turns away, I grab his wrist. He turns toward me, his brow

furrowing.

“Thank you, Forrest,” I say. “For everything.”

“You’re very welcome.”

As I watch him and Bodhi walk away, I hate that I’m feeling giddy over the thought of seeing him again later today. I hate that the butterflies in my belly are fluttering like crazy and my heart is racing. He’s definitely a distraction in light of the events of the last twenty-four hours. Between deciding to call off the wedding and Dane’s outrageous threat to kick me out of our company, I definitely need it.

CHAPTER 7

Forrest

SOMETHING HAPPENED with that phone call. I just know it.

It wiped out the smile that had been radiating from Summer's eyes from the moment she opened the door this morning, and I hate that someone out there has the power to take away her joy.

I shouldn't allow myself to be caught in something that's clearly none of my business. Summer's a guest and I never get involved with our guests. She's also clearly out of my league. She owns her own company, for crying out loud. A tech company at that.

We don't even have anything in common.

But just because she's more comfortable in the boardroom than the backwoods doesn't mean she and I can't be friends. Have a nice conversation over hot chocolate. Maybe a holiday movie, if she's into that.

Yep, it's better to keep things professional.

I can do that.

Bodhi and I drive to the main house ten minutes later. From the looks of the wrapping paper strewn about the room, I've missed the opening of presents. Everyone's already seated at the table.

I pull up a chair and sit down with Bodhi settling on the floor behind me. That's when I notice the silence and everyone staring at me like I sprouted two heads. Except for Harper, of course. She's smiling from ear to ear.

"What?" I ask.

"What happened to your beard?" Dad asks.

I shrug, unfolding my napkin. "I shaved it off."

"What happened to your hair?" Mom asks.

“Harper gave me a haircut,” I reply, pausing. “Why are you all staring at me like that? Don’t you guys like it?”

“Of course, we do, son,” Dad says. “It’s just... just a surprise, that’s all.”

“For someone who hasn’t cut hair in years, you still got it, kid,” Brad says before high-fiving Harper. “Awesome job. Now we’ll have to chase all the women away from Forrest.”

“Or maybe we shouldn’t. I bet he’ll love it,” Emily says as I glare at her. “Or maybe not.”

“Logan, I was hoping you could check out the truck after breakfast,” Dad says, clearly shooting his shot with a mechanic in the house. “Unless you and Mariah have plans.”

“Definitely, sir,” Logan replies, grinning. “I was actually hoping you’d let me check it out.”

“I like this guy,” Dad says, rubbing his hands together as he turns to Mom. “Today might be our lucky day, love. Where would you like to go?”

She blushes. “Wherever you want to go, darling.”

Everyone laughs as Mom and Dad do their thing which is simply being sweet to each other until one of the kids objects. Today, it’s Emily who pretends to cover her ears as they continue to say sweet nothings to each other.

“How’s Summer doing this morning?” Harper asks a few minutes later.

I take my time to chew my food. “She’s well.”

“How’d she like your new look?”

I shrug. “She was okay.”

Brad’s eyes narrow. “Are you and Summer—”

“No,” I say. “I just checked on her to make sure she wasn’t having issues with the wood stove.”

“Did her companion arrive?” Mariah asks and I shake my head.

“Is she joining you for the hike tomorrow?” Harper asks, a knowing expression on her face that I wish I could wipe away.

“I have no idea.” I slice a piece of sausage and feed it to Bodhi. “If she shows up, she shows up.”

“Look, Uncle Forrest,” Jonathan announces as he holds up a carved wood plane. “It’s the Red Baron!”

Emily had told me that Jonathan loved Snoopy’s arch-enemy, the Red Baron so I figured I’d whittle a version just for him, complete with a rotating propeller.

Emily reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. “He loves it so much, Forrest. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sis.”

After breakfast, I join Dad and Logan in the garage to work on Dad’s Chevy Cameo Fleetside truck. While it’s been restored down to its bright red finish, it doesn’t run yet. And that’s where Logan’s expertise comes in. Dad is so excited to have a mechanic as a future son-in-law that he’s giddy with excitement as Logan checks under the hood, his dream of driving the truck around Auburn Springs, known for its Gold Rush roots, within reach. He could have had the truck running a long time ago but he’s always put family and the lodge first.

“Can you turn the ignition?” Logan asks as I sit behind the wheel and turn the key. As he listens to the sound of the sputtering engine, I almost feel sorry for the guy. The pressure to fix the truck must be intense, but he’s a good sport.

After an hour of tinkering, Logan finally figures out what’s wrong and with one tiny bolt that he puts in, the engine comes to life. Dad is so ecstatic that he runs back to the house to get Mom so they can take a ride into town with it. It’s like watching two teenagers on their first date but that’s my parents for you.

They’ve always been the model of what I’ve wanted my own relationships to be—two people who couldn’t be any more different but somehow they make their relationship work.

With the whole Peters family complete—a future brother-in-law included—the sight of Dad’s old truck purring in front of the garage as Mom grabs her coat and hat makes the holiday even more perfect than it already is.

Maybe too perfect.



The first sign that things aren’t as perfect as they seem happens while I’m getting everything set up for my evening with Summer. Hot chocolate’s on the menu and I’m aiming to impress with a list of toppings she can choose from, from chocolate shavings to peppermint candy canes and even chai. I just need to make sure to be casual about it, as if I’d always had everything on hand.

Hell, I've never added chai to my hot chocolate before but apparently, according to some online hot chocolate aficionado, it's guaranteed to impress.

With half an hour to go before Summer shows up, there's a knock on the door. It's Mariah and her eyes are swollen from crying.

"What's up?" I ask as she walks in. For a moment, I expect Logan to follow after her but he's nowhere to be seen.

"I made a huge mistake," she blurts out before I can ask her where Logan is. She then proceeds to tell me the truth and as the words spill out, I listen, not saying anything.

I can't even judge her. I know how she feels and while I may not approve of what she and Logan did, I understand.

"Please don't tell me I should have known better," she says, sighing. "I already feel terrible as it is."

"Don't worry. I won't." I head to the kitchen and open the refrigerator door. "Care for hot chocolate? I was just about to make some."

Ten minutes later, Mariah sets two mugs next to the stove. "What made you shave your beard off and cut your hair?"

Still stirring the hot chocolate on the stove, I shrug. "It was time for a change."

"Is it because of Summer?"

I scoff. "Does everything I have to do revolve around a woman?"

"It is a drastic change, Forrest. One minute you're Mr. Mountain Man and the next, you're America's Top Model."

"It's temporary. All that hair will be back. Just wait," I say, chuckling. "I didn't realize my family was so invested in my looks. I thought you liked me because of my charm."

We're sitting at the table enjoying our mugs of hot chocolate when there's a knock on the door and Harper walks in, followed by Cooper, the new guy. It doesn't take long for Emily, Brad, and Jonathan to show up a few minutes later, and right behind them, Mom and Dad.

"I knew they were all in here, my love," Dad says as he holds the door open for Mom and she steps inside, stomping her boots on the doormat.

I swear they're telepathic sometimes, knowing exactly where each member of the family is every time they come and visit. We may not see each other as often as we'd like but we're inseparable whenever we're together.

Suddenly I find myself thinking about Summer and the fact that she's by

herself during Christmas. I didn't want to pry so I didn't ask, but where's her family? What about her parents? Does she have any brothers and sisters?

And where's her damn companion? I'm not even going to pretend I haven't looked out my window all afternoon, expecting someone to arrive and park next to her SUV. The mere thought of him showing up makes my chest tighten.

As much as Summer did her best to look like the phone call was business as usual (Yeah right. On Christmas Day?), it wasn't a good sign.

She's hiding something. I just hope she knows she can trust me to do whatever I can to help.

I exhale, forcing myself to be present as my family reminds me why I returned home to stay for good. I came here to find peace, tranquility, and—for a time when Lianne convinced herself this was the life for her, too, until it wasn't—love.

This life is definitely not for everyone. Certainly not for someone like Summer.

CHAPTER 8

Summer

HOURS LATER, I finally switch off my laptop. I can't believe I've spent most of Christmas Day reading and rereading the company's bylaws and shareholder agreement and talking to Natalie. I hated having to interrupt her holiday but as general counsel, that's her job no matter what time of day.

This is Silicon Valley we're talking about here. Nothing stops even if that's exactly what I've done since I got to the Soraya.

I feel so bad for what's happening. As if having to handle a canceled wedding wasn't bad enough, now she has to work through the holiday when she should be enjoying time with her parents. But work is work, and right now, she's the most crucial member of my team, someone who's actually on my side.

But this attempt of his isn't going to fly, Summer, she'd said. That I can tell you right now. As much as Dane thinks he can do whatever he wants, he can't kick you out of your company that easily. All because you canceled the wedding. Sheesh, now I see why you did what you did.

But can he? I asked, worry evident in my voice. *That's what I worry about.*

Not unless he convinces the board with lies, and the board members know you've worked your ass off for the company, Natalie said. If I have to fly back sooner, I will. Just say when.

No, I can't let you do that, I said. Stay with your parents per your original plan, Nat. I can take care of myself.

Let me know if you need anything, she said before we said goodbye. Unless I get the memo about this meeting he's threatening you with, I'll see

you in a few days.

But Dane has already set the wheels in motion. I've received beleaguered texts from board members about the emergency meeting he's called for, two of them assuring me they won't be there and they won't be voting to get me removed.

It's Christmas, for crying out loud, Daniel Drexel said right after I got off the phone with Heath Kheiron, both of them major board members. They've been there from the beginning, believing in what Dane and I were building. Whatever issues you two are having in your personal life should have no bearing on the company.

Still, I should get in my car right now and head back to Palo Alto but I also know if I do, then that means Dane won. He'd succeed in intimidating me. Sure, I would have done it in a heartbeat if the situation were different. Old me would have packed up and left the Soraya without a second thought.

But I'm no longer the same woman who came here on Christmas Eve. Something happened at the dinner with the Peters family. Something shifted. I felt it while watching them interact with one another. The love in the air was palpable, and I wanted that, even if just for one more day.

So I'm staying put.

Besides, I've got a date with a man who went from mountain man to yuppie overnight, making a part of me that thinks he did it for me utterly giddy. It's wrong, but I'm tired of putting business and reputation first all the time. I want to know what it feels like to live for once.

To feel free.



Twenty minutes later, I'm standing in front of Forrest's front door, about to knock.

Only I can't.

I'm suddenly nervous. Giddy, my heart racing. It's been a long time since I've felt this way and I hope I don't make a fool of myself once I'm inside.

But it's only for hot chocolate. It's not a board meeting where my business partner is going to try his darnedest to kick me out of our company.

I take a deep breath and knock. It's now or never.

If I assumed Forrest and I would be alone, nothing's farther from the truth

the moment he opens the door.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you had company,” I stammer as everyone I met last night except for Logan turns to look at the door, many of them surprised to see me. “I can come at another time—”

“You’re exactly the person I was expecting,” Forrest says as he beckons me inside, helping me out of my coat before I can object. His voice lowers to a whisper as he continues, “In fact, you’re the only person I was expecting but there’s been a little emergency.”

“Oh no, is everything okay?” I ask as he hangs my coat behind the door.

“Everything’s fine. Come in.”

Someone gets up and offers their chair for me while another hands me a mug of hot chocolate. Someone I’ve never met before slides a bag of marshmallows toward me.

“Hi there. I’m Cooper.”

“What happened to Logan?” I ask as everyone exchanges glances.

“Let’s say he’s the actual fiancé,” Brad says as everyone shushes him before giggling. When I look at Forrest, confused, he shrugs.

“I’ll tell you later.”

Harper clears her throat. “Looks like Forrest had movie night planned for the evening.” She points to a stack of DVDs on the coffee table, her expression teasing as she continues, “But I suspect he didn’t have all of us in mind when—”

“You know, I just remembered I have to relieve Harry at the front desk,” Mr. Peters says as he gets up, followed by his wife.

“And I have to bake breakfast scones for tomorrow’s breakfast.” She glances at her watch. “Ooh, how quickly time flies when you’re having fun.”

“And I promised to help Mom.” Emily gets up from her chair, casting a pointed glance at Brad who’s about to take a bite of a candy cane. “You, too, dear.”

“I have to pack,” Mariah says, gathering the empty mugs from the table and taking them to the sink.

“Just leave them there and I’ll take care of them,” Forrest says.

“Cooper and I have to go, too. He’s offered to help me edit my latest post.” Harper grabs Cooper’s hand as they all head toward the door.

“But I just got here. You don’t have to...” I begin to say but stop when Harper brings her index finger to her lips.

“Hopefully we’ll see you tomorrow at the hike. It’ll be fun,” she says as

one by one, they step out the door after quick goodbyes and goodnights. “Until then, have a good evening. Ta-ta!”

When the last one walks out the door (Brad with Jonathan who waves a peppermint candy cane at me), I turn to Forrest, perplexed. “Was it something I said?”

With his hands in his trouser pockets, he shakes his head, chuckling. “Not at all. It’s just my family being weird.” He closes the door and walks me to the table. “So what toppings would you like for your hot chocolate?”



Half an hour later, we’re sitting on the couch watching a Christmas movie while Bodhi sleeps on the rug next to the fire, but I’m not paying attention. How can I when there’s a palpable tension in the room whenever Forrest looks at me as I’m trying my best to act like I don’t notice?

“I love your family,” I say as he dips his hand in the bowl of popcorn. “They’re real.”

“They can be overwhelming sometimes but it’s mostly when everyone’s in one place at once.”

“Like tonight?” I giggle. “When you invited me over for hot chocolate, I didn’t expect to see everyone.”

“I didn’t either.”

“I hope I didn’t chase them all away.”

Forrest shakes his head. “You didn’t. But now it’s just us.”

“Is that okay?”

“It is.” His expression turns serious as he takes the bowl of popcorn from my hands and sets it on the coffee table. “Did you ever hear from your... companion?”

This time I can’t sidestep the question. It’s painfully clear that no one is joining me anytime soon and I can’t think of any reason to avoid giving him an answer.

“I did,” I reply as a flash of disappointment crosses Forrest’s face. “But he’s not coming. He was never coming. I just didn’t want to tell anyone right off the bat that I’d come alone. I didn’t want anyone to feel sorry for me.”

“It’s perfectly alright for people to travel alone.”

“Not on Christmas Eve and even you thought so or you wouldn’t have

invited me to join you for dinner,” I say. “But I’m glad you asked me. Last night was one of the best nights of my life.”

He smiles. “I’m glad to hear that.”

For a few moments, we don’t speak as the movie continues to play even though I’m not exactly paying attention to it. But I do like sitting next to Forrest.

“The mountains seem to mean a lot to you,” I say as I tuck my feet under me on the couch.

He nods, his eyes reflecting the fire’s light. “After the Marines, I needed somewhere peaceful. The Soraya has been my sanctuary.” He sighs. “Not a lot of guys are lucky enough to come home to this.”

“It must have been a big adjustment, coming from such an intense lifestyle to... this.”

He smiles, a hint of nostalgia in his gaze. “Funny how much I wanted to get out of here when I was younger. I wanted to see the world. Then I saw it... and all I wanted was to get back.”

“I think I’m starting to realize that,” I say softly. “In my world, it’s all about the next big thing, the next goal. But here, it feels like it’s okay to just... be.”

His expression softens as he turns to me. “Sometimes we get so caught up in chasing things, we forget to live.”

“I’ve been feeling that more and more lately. The more time I spend inside an office creating programs that bring nature into one’s home, the more I realize it’s not only wild but I’m missing out on actually being out there myself. I’ve been missing out on life... and I didn’t even know it.” Until now.

“I’m not going to argue with you there. Nothing can ever compare with the original.” Forrest gently takes my hand. “But maybe that’s why you’re here. Maybe it’s time for you to start living. Like, *really* living. Walking on snow, picking wild berries, breathing in crisp clean air.”

“Or enjoying a mug of hot chocolate with you,” I whisper as the air between us crackles with tension as Forrest’s brow furrows. Great. Why the hell did I have to say that? “I’m sorry. I...”

The kiss that comes takes me by surprise... but only because I never thought it would ever come. But now that it’s here, I realize how much I’ve been craving it. His lips are warm and soft, and I can feel his breath on my face as he pulls me closer.

All my conflicting emotions about Dane and my failed engagement melt away as Forrest's kiss takes over my thoughts. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him in even closer, deepening the kiss. It's like all the passion and desire I've ever felt is pouring out of me in this moment, and I never want it to end.

But eventually, we pull away, our breathing ragged. Forrest looks at me with a mix of surprise and hunger in his eyes, and I can't help but return his gaze. For the first time in a long time, I feel alive.

"Wow," I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeah," Forrest replies, a smirk playing on his lips. "I've been wanting to do that for a while now."

My cheeks heat up as I laugh, idling feeling the tension dissipate. "Then why did you wait so long?"

A smirk plays on his lips. "I like taking my time."

For a few moments we don't talk, our attention back on the movie that I'm barely paying attention to. I turn to look at him. "Forrest, I have something to tell you."

"Sure."

"I'm supposed to get married in five days," I blurt out as Forrest turns to look at me, surprised. "But... but I called it off before I came here."

He frowns. "Yesterday?"

"I should have done it sooner." A lump forms in my throat as I nod. "But I waited too long."

Forrest lets out a low whistle, his eyes filled with a mix of surprise and concern. "Why did you call it off?"

"For reasons I didn't want to acknowledge until I hit a wall." When Forrest's brow furrows, I add, "I ended up in the Emergency Room thinking I was having a heart attack. Chest pains, chills, difficulty breathing. Only it wasn't a heart attack. It was a panic attack and that's when I knew."

"What led to it?" There's no judgment in his question, just a genuine concern as if he wants to understand me better.

I take a deep breath. Even I haven't admitted the truth to myself, constantly blaming everything on Dane's gradual obsession with money. But as the saying goes, it takes two to tango. "Dane--that's his name. I've known him for about eight years, since Stanford and we built a company together out of our studio apartment. Coding, programming, 3D modeling... that kind of stuff. We went from being professional partners to romantic partners and then

to scheduling a wedding like it was something on our calendar to-do list.”

“So you’ve known him a while. You’re comfortable with him.”

“We are. Or we were.” I nod. “We were a scrappy tech company. We worked hard, day and night, no holidays sometimes. Our days off were spent working because it made us happy.”

“What changed?”

“Success. Money. Watching your net worth grow from a few hundred dollars to a few million,” I reply as Forrest’s eyes widen. “More than a few million.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“But somewhere along the way, we mistook what we had for love, or at least, that’s what I think,” I continue. “The cars, the trips to tech conferences, standing in front of billionaires, even a four-bedroom house in Atherton with its four-car garage although we were barely home to appreciate it.”

“I’m going to play devil’s advocate and say what if you’re simply experiencing cold feet,” Forrest says. “Getting married is a big decision.”

I think for a few moments. “Just because you feel comfortable with someone doesn’t mean you love them. Like, *really* love them. Or are in love with them? Maybe on the way to success, we changed. His priorities did and so did mine.”

“What are your priorities?” Forrest asks.

I sigh. “Before I got here, I would have told you that my priorities were a consistent upward trajectory for the company, beating earnings expectations, increasing our market share, and constantly staying ahead of the competition.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know anymore,” I murmur even though I think I do. I want what Forrest shared with me last night: a family who laughs together, who rallies around one another. I want a home, one that’s filled with warmth and love. I want the feeling of being loved and appreciated for just being me and not because of what my LinkedIn profile says I am.

“What are his?”

“Everything I just mentioned regarding the company, only it’s 24/7. He couldn’t turn it off,” I reply, chuckling. “It’s like we were in this never-ending race, always looking for the next big breakthrough, the next investment opportunity. It was exhilarating at first, the thrill of success, of making a name for ourselves. But after a while, it became all-consuming.”

I pause, collecting my thoughts. “I remember this one night, we were supposed to have dinner together, just a simple meal at home which had become rare because we were always on the go. But we got a call about a potential investor, and he just left. Told me we couldn’t afford to miss opportunities, no matter what. “ I sigh. “I sat at the dinner table alone, staring at two plates of food that went cold. That was the moment I realized something had shifted. Our company, our success, it wasn’t just a part of our life anymore. It was our life. And we’d lost ourselves in it.”

Forrest listens intently, his expression sympathetic. “Sounds like you were living for the company rather than with each other.”

“Exactly,” I say, feeling a weight lift as I speak the truth aloud. This isn’t something I could even tell Natalie, so I kept it all in. “We stopped being the couple who dreamed of changing the world with our technology. We became CEOs of a high-flying company, more like business partners than life partners. I missed the days when we celebrated small victories with cheap pizza and bad wine, not just because of what we achieved but because we did it together, for us.”

“And the wedding?” Forrest asks gently.

I sigh, a hint of sadness in my voice. “The wedding became another project, another milestone for the company’s image. It wasn’t about us anymore. It was about how it looked to the outside world, and how it would be perceived by our investors and the media. Dane was obsessed with the guest list and how it would appear to everyone that we’d made it.”

I pause, hating to admit what comes next. “I realized I was more in love with the idea of us as this couple who started a tech company together and made it grow to what it is now than the reality of us as a couple. That is if you took away the company, we no longer had anything in common. And that’s not fair to either of us.”

Forrest nods, understanding in his eyes. “It takes courage to admit that and even more to act on it”

“More like a panic attack that manifested itself as a heart attack, at least to me,” I say, feeling a bit more at ease. “I just want to find what’s real again, you know? Something genuine, something that’s not measured in likes, shares, or market value. That’s why I came here, even if I forgot all about the reservation until I received your reminder email. I needed to find some peace, some clarity.”

Forrest smiles, a warm, reassuring smile. “Well, you’ve come to the right

place for that. The mountains have a way of stripping things back to what's essential. Nature doesn't care about your net worth or your company's market share. Out here, it's just you and the world in its most honest form. If you decide to join us tomorrow for the snowshoe hike, you'll see it for yourself."

"I'd love that."

"So the wedding is off."

"Yeah. Or at least, until Dane and I come up with an official statement for our guests." I pause, sighing. "I'm just trying to figure things out, wondering if I'm doing the right thing."

"Sometimes the hardest decisions are the most scary ones to make," he says slowly. "It's easier to take the route that's more familiar even when you know it no longer makes you happy."

"You make me happy," I whisper. "This makes me happy, sitting here not watching a movie we're supposed to be watching and having this... this time together. But I think I need to take things slow."

"We can take things at your pace." Forrest tucks a loose lock of hair behind my ear. "I'm not going anywhere."

We settle back into the couch, the movie playing on but I'm barely registering the details. I know the ending anyway. There's another ending I'm starting to get more invested in, the one we're in.

I just hope it's going to be a happy one.

CHAPTER 9

Forrest

“ALRIGHT, everyone, let’s get those snowshoes on and get ready to hit the trail.” I clap my hands together for emphasis as the guests eagerly comply, the sound of buckles clicking and straps tightening filling the air. “If you need assistance, just holler. Besides myself, we’ve got Fred and Hannah here to help you.”

At the front of the group, Harry’s grandson who’s visiting for Christmas raises his hand. He’s majoring in computer science at UC Berkeley. A few feet away, Hannah Scott is already helping someone tighten the straps on their snowshoes. She’s a yoga instructor and often holds certification classes at the Soraya in the spring and summer. In the winter, she helps out with the hikes.

As I adjust my snowshoes, I’m glad they’re with me on this hike. With Summer joining us, I don’t know if I can focus on leading the group by myself.

I haven’t stopped thinking about her since Bodhi and I walked her back to her cabin last night. I shouldn’t be getting too attached to a guest who, by her own admission, is still trying to figure things out.

Like getting married.

Still, I feel a buzz of excitement at the thought of seeing Summer again, wondering if she’ll enjoy the hike as much as I hope she will.

As the excitement among the hikers builds, I see Summer approaching wearing the winter gear Harper lent her. Bless my sister for knowing the right colors that complement Summer’s dusky features, her brown hair peeking from under her knit cap.

“Good morning, Summer. Ready for your first snowshoe hike?”

She nods, her eyes sparkling. “As ready as I’ll ever be.” She bites her lower lip. “I have to admit, I’m a bit nervous. I ski but I’ve never snowshoed before.”

“Snowshoeing is a great way to experience the mountains in the winter,” I say. “Far different from the skiing you must be used to, though.”

She grins. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“Honored you’re doing it with me.”

Like the kiss last night.

She blushes at the double entendre but as much as I’d want to keep going—flirting like I’m back in high school trying to impress the head cheerleader—I’ve got work to do.

“Ready to go?” I ask as she and the rest of the group answer with a resounding yes.

As we begin the hike, I lead the group onto a well-trodden trail that winds through the snowy forest. The Sierra Nevadas are a wonderland this time of year, with each tree branch dusted in white and the air so fresh it almost sparkles.

Summer stays close, and as we walk, she asks about the different trees and animal tracks we come across. I point out a set of small, delicate tracks. “Those are from a snowshoe hare. They’re well adapted to the snow; their large feet act like natural snowshoes.”

“Just like us then,” she says, her gaze following the tracks until they disappear into the underbrush. “Our company creates virtual reality worlds like this and the end product can be so convincing. But nothing can ever replicate the real thing.”

“I sure hope not.”

“It’s like a whole other world out here,” she murmurs.

I’m relieved she brought the conversation back to the real world, a reminder that we come from such different worlds. “And it’s full of history too. Did you know this area was a hotbed during the Gold Rush?”

“Really?” Her interest is piqued.

“Yeah. Prospectors flooded these mountains in the mid-1800s, all hoping to strike it rich. There are still remnants of old mines and settlements around here,” I say. “During the 1860s, the area even experienced large-scale deforestation because of gold and silver mining. Building the mine shafts and hotels required tons of timber.”

“That’s terrible.”

I nod. “This area has been in my mother’s family for generations but it was passed on to her aunt who didn’t have any children and so she left it to my mother who managed to convince Dad to uproot their life in San Francisco and live out here. And they’ve been here ever since.”

As we walk, the scent of pine fills my nostrils, grounding me in the present moment. The sound of crunching snow beneath our feet creates a rhythmic melody, punctuated by the occasional chirp of a bird or the distant call of a squirrel. Bodhi trots happily beside us, his wagging tail dusting the snow from low-hanging branches as he passes.

“You must have had such an idyllic childhood,” Summer says as I chuckle.

“I did until I hit the dreaded teen years and all I wanted was to get out of here and experience the world,” I say. “I did just that when I joined the Marines but after seven years, all I wanted was to come back home. But not before backpacking throughout Asia first.” I pause, whistling for Bodhi who runs toward us. “That’s where I found this guy and brought him home with me.”

“What about you?” I ask a few minutes later. “Where did you grow up?”

She chuckles. “Would you believe New Jersey?”

“How come you don’t pronounce it like New Joisey?” I ask, laughing.

“Because locals know better. Only tourists say it like that.” As she speaks, her accent emerges, the word better sounding like beddah.

“I like it,” I say, grinning. “You should do it more often.”

“I’ve lost most of it, but I’m sure it’ll come back when I visit,” she says, giggling. “My parents’ siblings still live there.”

But even as she speaks, I can almost hear it coming back before she clears her throat, as if signaling that the show is over. She’s back to being Summer Avila, a sophisticated city visitor.

“It’s a long way from Jersey,” I say as she nods.

“It’s been a wild ride but sometimes I wonder what I’ve sacrificed along the way.”

“Like what?” We’ve been walking slow that we’re now lagging behind everyone.

“Time.” She sighs. “Time with loved ones, time to breathe, time for... this.” Summer gestures to the snow-covered forest surrounding us. “It’s been so long since I’ve allowed myself to just enjoy life. It took a trip to the...”

she pauses, then shrugs. “Never mind.”

I want to prod her and find out what she was about to say but something tells me not to. She’s already revealed so much. “You’re not alone in feeling that way. Running the lodge can be pretty demanding, too. But moments like these help me remember what’s truly important.”

“Connection,” she whispers as she stops to look at me.

“Exactly.” My voice is barely audible as we stand there in the stillness of the woods. The air around us seems to crackle with unspoken energy, and I find myself wanting to reach out and touch her. Bridge the gap between us.

Maybe lose myself in her almond eyes and kiss her.

Without thinking, I take a step closer to her, the heat from her body beckoning me closer. Summer’s eyes widen slightly but she doesn’t move away. I can tell she feels the same pull between us.

“Sometimes, it’s hard to explain,” I say softly, my voice barely above a whisper. “But when you’re with the right person, it just...feels right. Like you’re finally home.”

“Is that what it is? I was wondering why it felt so familiar.” Summer’s lips curve into a small smile, and she nods, her eyes never leaving mine. “It’s been a while since I’ve felt anything like it.”

Taking one more step, I close the distance between us, my lips meeting hers in a kiss that ignites a wildfire within me. Summer’s response is immediate, her arms wrapping around my neck as she deepens the kiss, her tongue tangling with mine. Every nerve in my body is on fire, and I feel like I’m drowning in the heat of her lips against mine.

Suddenly I pull away, gasping for breath, and rest my forehead against hers, my fingers trailing gently down her cheek. “This might sound crazy but I think I’ve fallen in love with you, Summer,” I whisper, my heart racing.

Her eyes widen in surprise, but then a smile spreads across her face, and she presses a soft kiss to my lips. “It is crazy, but I think I’ve fallen in love with you too,” she murmurs against my mouth.

We stand there for a moment, lost in our own little world, before Hannah’s voice breaks the spell.

“Hey lovebirds, you better catch up or you’ll miss the view!” she calls out, her laughter ringing through the woods.

Summer and I break apart, both of us blushing but unable to stop grinning. We hurry to catch up with the group, our hands lingering close together as we walk.

We reach a clearing that offers a panoramic view of the surrounding peaks, their tops glistening in the morning sun. I watch Summer as she takes in the view, her face alight with wonder. While most of the guests take out their phones to document the view, Summer chooses not to follow suit.

“It’s breathtaking,” she says as I gaze at her profile. “No phone or camera can ever capture its true colors.”

“The mountains have a way of putting things into perspective.”

We take a moment to enjoy the silence and the beauty around us. I can see Summer relaxing, the tension of the past few days melting away like the snow under the sun.

“Look over there.” I point to a group of delicate birds flitting among the trees. Their movements are graceful, their plumage shimmering with an iridescent sheen. “They’re purple finches. See their white and brown streaks down the breast and dark brown coloring on their back?”

She nods, her eyes widening as they dance a mesmerizing display against the snowy backdrop. “They’re beautiful.”

You’re beautiful, I want to say as I gaze at her, captivated by her big brown eyes. “They sure are. The Sierra Nevadas are home to a variety of bird species. It’s a birdwatcher’s paradise, even in winter.”

“I should hire you as a personal guide one day,” she says and I find myself catching my breath.

“Anytime.”

She smiles. “I’ll remember that.”

As we continue along the trail, I remind myself to focus on why I’m here. I point out different features of the landscape, this time for the rest of the hikers, describing to them the way the snow clings to the north side of the trees, and the patterns of frost on the pine needles.

“Is it true that there are hidden treasures out here?” someone from the group asks.

“That’s what they say.” I point to an area behind us, just beyond the ridge. “A lumber company train with payroll on board derailed not far from here. It’s believed a strongbox containing five hundred double eagles and two hundred eagles went into the lake and has never been recovered.”

“Did the Gold Rush prospectors come through here, too?” Someone from the group asks.

“Came through here, yes, but not to stay. Just to pass through before they settled in the areas below closer to the rivers,” I reply. “But just because they

simply passed through hasn't stopped stories of hidden treasures still buried out here."

"That'll be around seven hundred grand in today's money," an older man wearing a bright red scarf says, his eyes wide with awe.

"Guess you better start learning how to scuba dive, Walt," a woman who I guess is his wife says as the group chuckles.

Summer eyes me suspiciously. "Hidden treasures? Really?"

"Legends and lore. Part of the area's mystique," I say. "Although some treasures don't have to be hidden at all. Some happen to be standing right in front of you."

A blush creeps on her cheeks as she laughs, a sound that warms me more than the midday sun breaking through the clouds. "I can say the same for you, Mr. Peters."

As the laughter from the group fades, the trail narrows, weaving through a densely wooded area. The snow here is deeper, untouched and pristine, glistening under the sun's sporadic appearances. I lead the way, mindful of the slippery spots hidden beneath the white blanket.

"I'd watch your step here," I caution, glancing back at Summer.

Just as she nods in acknowledgment, her foot catches on a hidden root under the snow. She stumbles, a sharp gasp escaping her lips. Instinctively, I reach out, my hand clasping hers firmly.

"Got you," I say, my voice steady, but my heart racing.

"Thank you," she breathes out, her hand gripping mine tightly before I let her go.

"Want to do this again tomorrow?" I ask. "Just you and me?"

Her face brightens. "I'd love a personal tour."

I grin. "Tomorrow then."

"Does include room service? Coffee delivery, perhaps?" She asks. "Because someone spoiled me with delivery on my first day here."

I laugh. "I missed bringing you coffee today, didn't I?"

"Just kidding. But yes, it was nice having it delivered," she says. "It adds a personal touch to everything that the Soraya has to offer."

"We can offer a whole lot more than that," I say. "Although we only offer it to very special guests. VIP."

The smile that lights up her face takes my breath away. "Oh, I'm definitely looking forward to that."

The rest of the hike passes in a blur, my mind consumed by thoughts of

Summer. As we return to our starting point by the equipment shed, I feel a pang of regret. I don't want this day to end.

"Thanks for coming, Summer," I say, turning to her. "I had a great time."

"I did, too. I can't wait for my personal tour tomorrow." She's about to say something else when a white Tesla SUV pulls up in front of her cabin. The smile on her face disappears as a tall blond man steps out. Even from this distance, his imposing presence is unmistakable.

"Summer!" he calls out, and as she turns to look back at me, there's no mistaking the look of disappointment on her face.

"It's Dane," she says, her face falling. "I... I have to go."

"Would you like me to go with you?" I ask as I help her out of her snowshoes.

"No, you don't need to but thanks," she says. "Thank you for the hike, Forrest. I had fun."

I watch as Summer approaches him. The air between them is tense, even from where I stand. I feel a pang in my chest, a mixture of disappointment and frustration, as I watch them talk.

As I gather the bulky snowshoes from the hikers and stack them in a neat pile, my gaze betrays me. I try to keep my focus on the task at hand, but it's impossible not to take notice of Summer and Dane talking outside her cabin.

Dane stands tall and imposing, his shoulders squared as he speaks with a calm yet powerful presence. He's gesturing sharply, slashing the air as he emphasizes every word.

Summer's body is rigid with tension as Dane speaks, her arms held tight against herself in a defensive embrace. She rocks back and forth on the balls of her feet, her stance alternating between strength and vulnerability.

My chest tightens as I watch them, the snowshoes in my hands feeling heavy. As if sensing the shift in my mood, Bodhi lets out a low whine and nudges against my leg with his nose. I glance down at him, offering a half-hearted smile and a gentle pat on his head. He looks up at me, his one eye filled with a canine understanding that's both comforting and disquieting.

The snowshoes clink softly as I stack them, the sound a mundane backdrop to the maelstrom of emotions churning inside me. I steal another glance at Summer and Dane, noticing now how Summer's head tilts, not in acquiescence, but in a guarded, almost skeptical assessment of Dane's words.

The tension between them is almost palpable, even from this distance. It's a visual contrast of power and resistance, of domination and defense. Dane,

with his relentless, imposing demeanor, and Summer, with her quiet, dignified poise.

As they finally head into her cabin, my hand pauses in mid-air, holding a snowshoe. A sense of finality washes over me. The closing of the door feels symbolic, a barrier rising not just between Summer and Dane, but between Summer and me.

I finish my task in silence, Bodhi staying close by my side. The last of the hikers leave with thanks and smiles, unaware of the internal storm they're leaving behind. I'm left alone with my thoughts, the cold mountain air now a stark reminder of the distance between Summer's world and mine.

"Everything okay?" Hannah asks as she takes the snowshoe I've been holding and sets it on the rack next to its mate.

"Yeah, everything's fine."

She cocks her head toward Summer's cabin. "Guess her companion finally got here."

I take a deep breath. "Yeah, he finally did." I follow her and Fred out of the shed and lock it, thanking them for the help before briefly going over the next day's scheduled hike that's already booked up.

"You wanna hang out later?" she asks. "They'll be decorating the Town Square for the New Year's Eve celebration. Maybe you could stop by the shop. I have a feeling you could use the company."

Hannah and I have known each other since fifth grade when her mother, recently divorced, moved back to Auburn Springs where her family owns and runs the Coffee Cup Cafe. She's good friends with my sisters although she's more of the outdoorsy type than any of them.

"I'll think about it," I reply, though my mind is elsewhere. All I can think about is Summer and the man she's with. The man who's taken her away from me, even if we never had anything to begin with.

I can't help but feel a sense of possessiveness over her, a need to protect her from anyone who might hurt her. But it's not like Summer and I are together.

I'm just a guy who took her on a hike. A guy whose world is the opposite of hers. Nothing more.

CHAPTER 10

Summer

THE DOOR to my cabin closes with a soft click, leaving Dane and me in an uneasy silence.

He's impeccably dressed in the quintessential style of a Silicon Valley tech bro, exuding a sense of calculated casualness that's all too familiar in the tech world. His outfit, carefully chosen to strike a balance between professionalism and the laid-back ethos of the tech industry, features a crisply ironed, button-down shirt, its sleeves rolled up just so, paired with designer jeans that toe the line between trendy and functional.

But what used to give me comfort seeing him like this is doing the opposite. His presence feels imposing, almost suffocating.

"So what have you got for me that I have to see?" I ask, my voice steadier than I feel as I shrug off my coat and hang it behind the door.

Dane reaches into his briefcase and pulls out a stack of documents, slamming them on the dining table with a resounding thud. The papers look official, adorned with the familiar logo of our company.

"These are written testimonials from our board members," he begins, his voice cold and measured. "They support my decision to convene a meeting to discuss your... unique situation."

He chuckles dryly. "You do realize how this is going to look to our investors and all our guests." Dane's expression hardens as he shuffles the papers, aligning them with meticulous precision. "We're at a pivotal moment with KQRS. The Section C funding we've secured is just the beginning, but this... our personal situation, it's casting a shadow over everything we've built."

I cross my arms, trying to steady myself against the onslaught I know is coming. “Our personal situation?” I echo, the words tasting bitter.

“Yes, Summer, our ‘situation’,” Dane emphasizes, leaning against the table. “You calling off the wedding, it’s not just a private matter anymore. It’s a public spectacle. Investors, partners, the media—they all see it as a sign of instability, not just in your personal life, but in the company as a whole.”

I can’t help but scoff. “Since when did our relationship status become a barometer for KQRS’s stability?”

“Since we became the face of the company,” Dane retorts, his eyes locked on mine. “Our story, the couple who built a tech empire together, it’s been a cornerstone of our brand. But now, with the wedding off, it raises questions. Questions about our commitment, our unity as leaders.”

I feel a surge of frustration. “You’re saying that our worth to the company, to the world, is tied to whether or not we’re walking down the aisle together?”

Dane sighs, passing a hand through his hair. “It’s not that simple, and you know it. The narrative of us as a power couple is integral to our image. This sudden change... could cause ripples, doubts. Investors could see it as a red flag, a sign that perhaps the company isn’t as stable as we claim.”

I shake my head, disbelief and anger swirling within me. “So, what? We stay together for the company? For appearances?”

“Not stay together,” Dane clarifies, his tone firm. “But we need to maintain a united front. And right now, Summer, your presence as CEO is a liability. It’s drawing too much attention away from our work, our progress.”

My heart races, a mix of anger and hurt. “You really want me to step down.”

“It’s the logical step,” Dane says, almost as if he’s trying to convince himself. “For the company, for our investors. It’ll give KQRS a chance to stabilize, to move forward without this... distraction.”

I feel a coldness settling in, the realization that Dane sees our relationship, our history, as nothing more than a business strategy. “And what about me? What about what I’ve contributed to this company?”

“You’ll still have a role, just not as the CEO,” Dane insists. “It’s for the best, Summer. For both of us.”

The words hang heavy in the air, a stark reminder of how far we’ve drifted apart. The Dane standing before me is a far cry from the man I fell in love with, the man who shared my dreams and ambitions. Now, it’s clear that

those dreams have diverged, leaving us on opposite sides of a chasm too wide to bridge.

As Dane waits for my response, I realize that this isn't just about stepping down as CEO. It's about stepping away from a life that no longer feels like my own, from a relationship that has lost its soul. But even if that's the case, no way am I letting Dane Walters rewrite my place in our company's story without my consent.

"You talk about the company as if it's a separate entity from us, as if it's something we serve, not something we created," I say. "Our company was built on our ideas, our passion. It wasn't built on our relationship status."

Dane shifts uncomfortably. "It's not that black and white, Summer. You know how the business world works. Perception is reality, and right now, the perception is that our personal issues are bleeding into the company."

"And you think me stepping down will magically fix that perception?" I counter. "What message does that send? That I'm the weak link? That I'm the one to blame for our personal issues?"

"It's not about blame," Dane insists. "It's about what's best for KQRS. Our investors are nervous, our employees are talking, and our competitors are watching. We need to show stability, strength."

I shake my head, the clarity of the moment striking me with full force. "No, Dane. What we need is to be honest—with ourselves and with everyone else. I won't be a scapegoat for our issues, and I won't step down to maintain a facade. KQRS was as much my dream as it was yours, and I won't let it be tainted by this... charade."

Dane's eyes narrow, a mix of frustration and surprise. "So what? You're going to fight this? Drag the company through a public battle?"

"I'll do what I need to do," I say firmly. "I'll fight for my place in KQRS, for the values we started with. And if that means stepping into a legal battle, so be it. I won't quietly step aside to protect an image that's already shattered."

As Dane gathers his documents, he pauses, his eyes locking with mine in a final, calculated gaze. "One more thing," he says, his voice edged with a cold certainty. "I have here written testimonials from all the board members, and I mean all of them. They've agreed to vote in favor of removing you from your position."

The revelation hits me like a physical blow. Betrayal and disbelief war within me. "Mr. Drexel and Mr. Kheiron? That can't be true," I say, my voice

barely above a whisper. “I spoke to them. They assured me they wouldn’t support such a move.”

Dane shrugs, a flicker of indifference crossing his features. “Things change. In the business world, alliances shift. Right now, the board sees you as a liability, and they’re acting in what they believe is the company’s best interest. I came here to make things easy for you but you refuse to see reason.”

I feel a surge of anger, mixed with a deep sense of injustice. “So this is it? You’re using our personal issues to manipulate the board against me?”

“It’s not personal, Summer,” Dane replies, his tone dismissive. “It’s about the future of KQRS. And right now, the board agrees that the future is better secured without you at the helm.”

He turns to leave, but I find my voice, fueled by a newfound resolve. “I won’t accept this, Dane. I’ll speak to the board myself. I’ll make them see the truth.”

Dane pauses at the door, a cynical smile playing on his lips. “You can try, Summer. But you’ll find that in the end, it’s results that matter, not sentiment. Good luck. Oh, and Merry Christmas.”

With that, he exits, leaving me alone with the weight of his words and the stack of damning documents on the table. The finality of the door closing echoes through the cabin, a symbolic end to what we once shared.

As the door closes behind him, a mixture of emotions churn inside me. Betrayal, yes, but also a burning determination. So Dane thinks he can use our past to control my future but he’s wrong. I built KQRS as much as he has and I won’t be ousted so easily.

From the window, I watch Dane drive away in his expensive electric SUV, leaving behind the serene, snow-covered landscape where I’d found a sense of calm, a respite from the boardroom battles that await me in the city.

Before that panic attack sent me to the emergency room, I’d allowed myself to be ruled by the same things that continue to drive Dane, driving him to travel three hours to get me to step down. : beating earnings expectations, increasing our market shares and constantly staying ahead of the competition. Keeping up appearances for our investors and the public.

But there’s more to life than beating earnings expectations or staying ahead of the competition. And it’s right outside my window, from the family next door enjoying a snowball fight to a group of older couples returning from their hike. And there’s Forrest throwing a stick for Bodhi to chase as he

heads out of view toward the main lodge.

The fight that awaits me in the city won't just be for my position at the company. It'll be a fight for my integrity, my values, and my vision. Dane may have the board's testimonials, but I have something he'll never understand—the conviction of knowing I'm fighting for what's right.

As the fire crackles behind me, its warmth a stark contrast to the coldness of Dane's betrayal, I know that this is just the beginning. A new chapter in my life is about to unfold, and while the path may be uncertain, I'm ready to walk it with my head held high.

But first, I need to call my general counsel and cut her vacation short.



"The meeting's been scheduled for tomorrow," Natalie tells me over the phone a few hours later. "I just received the memo and I'll be flying in later tonight."

"I'm so sorry about this, Nat," I say. "I know how much you were looking forward to spending time with your parents."

"Eh, it's not like they live on the other side of the country so they don't mind," she says. "You can't just roll over and let Dane dictate the terms here. You're a co-founder, and you have rights. I've been keeping tabs on all board communications. I have a fair idea of what's been going on. Plus, as general counsel, I have access to a lot of information that can help you."

I feel a wave of gratitude wash over me. "Thank you, Natalie. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"We've got a lot of work to do before the meeting," she continues. "First, we need to review your shareholder agreement and the company bylaws. We need to know exactly where you stand legally."

I nod, even though she can't see me. "Got it. What else?"

"We should also prepare a statement for you, outlining your contributions to the company and your vision for its future. It's important to remind the board of your value, beyond just the current situation."

I grab a notepad and start jotting down notes. "Okay, I can do that."

"There's more," Natalie adds. "We need to consider the worst-case scenario. If the board does vote to remove you, we should be ready to negotiate your exit. It's important to protect your interests, financially and

professionally.”

My heart sinks at the thought, but I know she’s right. “I understand. We’ll need to discuss my shares and any severance.”

“Exactly,” Natalie agrees. “But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We’re going to fight this, Summer. You’ve put too much into this company to walk away without a fight.”

Her words are exactly what I need to hear. “I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

“We’ll meet first thing in the morning to strategize before the meeting,” she says. “I’ll bring everything we need.”

“Thanks, Nat,” I say, feeling a renewed sense of purpose. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

As I hang up the phone, I feel a mix of nerves and excitement. The stakes are high, but I’m not alone. I have Natalie, and I have my own determination. Whatever happens at the meeting, I’m going to stand up for myself and for the company I helped build.

I spend the rest of the day preparing, going over every detail Natalie mentioned. I’m ready to fight for my place in the company, for my future. I pack my things and load up the SUV, setting aside the clothes and boots that Harper had loaned me inside the cabin door.

As I look at the cabin across the way, I take a deep breath. I hadn’t planned on saying goodbye but I have no choice.

As I reach Forrest’s cabin, the night is quiet, the only sound the crunching of snow under my feet. The lights inside are dim, perhaps already out for the night. I hesitate outside his door, gathering my courage to knock. After a moment’s pause, I rap softly against the wood, holding my breath for a response.

But there’s no answer. I knock again, a little louder this time, hoping he might just be asleep and not too far gone into his dreams. Still, silence greets me, and a sinking feeling settles in my stomach. Maybe he’s out on a late walk, or perhaps he just can’t hear me.

Disappointment washes over me. I had hoped to see him, to explain things face to face. I wanted to tell him how much these past few days have meant to me, how they’ve changed me.

I find a piece of paper in my pocket, scribble a few hurried lines by the light of my phone, and slide it under his door.

Forrest, I had to go back to the city for a board meeting. Thank you for everything. - Summer

It feels inadequate, this brief goodbye left on a scrap of paper, but it's all I have. As I turn to leave, the chill of the night seems colder, the darkness a bit deeper.

I leave Forrest's cabin with a heavy heart, the note I slipped under his door feeling like a feeble attempt at closure. My breath forms little clouds in the cold night air as I walk back to my cabin. I take one last look around, trying to memorize every detail of this place that has unexpectedly become a part of me.

As I drive away from the cabin, I stop at the main lodge, hoping maybe I'll find him there. But the lobby is empty except for Harry, the part-time manager I'd met when I first arrived. He looks up from his desk, surprised.

"Summer, I didn't expect to see you. Heading out?"

"Yes, I have to get back to the city for a meeting. I just wanted to say goodbye to everyone," I reply, doing my best to mask my disappointment.

Harry's face falls slightly. "I'm afraid you just missed them. The Peters stepped out for the evening. They're in town helping set up for New Year's Eve."

I nod, feeling another wave of disappointment wash over me. "Oh, I see. Well, could you please let them know I said goodbye? And thank them for me, for everything."

"Of course, I will. They'll be sorry they missed you," Harry assures me, his kind eyes reflecting understanding.

"Thanks, Harry. And thank you for everything. My stay here was more than I could have hoped for," I say.

"You're always welcome here, Summer. This place has a way of staying with people. Don't be a stranger," he replies, with a warm smile.

I nod, a lump forming in my throat. "I won't be."

At least, I'll try.

CHAPTER 11

Forrest

ALTHOUGH THE LODGE is fully booked until after the new year, it feels empty, like a hollow shell of its former self. It's strange how the absence of one person can leave such a gaping void, and yet, without Summer here, it feels as though an essential part of the lodge has vanished.

She only stayed for two days yet it feels like I was with her for a lifetime.

I miss the sound of her laughter and the sight of her big brown eyes gazing back at me. I miss the feel of her lips against mine when I kissed her for the first time,

Maybe it's the absence of her laughter, the lack of her presence. Maybe it's the sight of her big brown eyes and the feel of her soft lips against mine when I kissed her for the first time.

Summer's sudden departure left a void and I can't shake the feeling of loss that's clung to me since I came home that night to find her cabin empty.

But I'm not surprised. With Dane coming for her, why wouldn't she leave to return to him? He's from the world she knows so well, even though she may have felt something missing. Still, how on earth can life in the backwoods beat the life of luxury that awaits her in the city?

So I've been trying to keep busy, to distract myself from thinking about her. There's always something to be done around the lodge anyway although today, my heart's not in it. My mind keeps drifting back to the note she left, the words she wrote in a hurried scrawl. It was a goodbye, but it felt unfinished, like a conversation interrupted.

Bodhi senses my mood, his one eye watching me with a mix of concern and loyalty. He's always been good at reading me, better than most people.

“Come on, boy,” I say, patting my thigh. “Let’s head to the main lodge. I’m sure there’s something we can do there.”

The vending machine should need to be restocked. If not, I can always whittle new toys back at my cabin. Hannah did tell me they sold out of my current stock at their shop.

The crunch of the snow under my boots is a familiar sound, one that usually brings me comfort. But today, it’s just noise in the vast silence of the wilderness. Bodhi trots beside me, his breath misting in the cold air.

As we walk, my thoughts turn to Summer and the brief moments we shared. Her laughter echoing in the cabin, her eyes lighting up at the sight of the mountains, her hand in mine as we walked through the snow. It felt real, it felt right. But maybe it was just a moment in time, not meant to last.

As I reach the main lodge, the door opens and Harper and Cooper step outside, laughing over something she said. For two people who met because of a little understanding on Mariah’s part three days ago, they sure seem to be getting along well. Even my parents have allowed him to stay in the house, giving him Mariah’s old room.

“Hey stranger,” Harper says as Bodhi bounds toward her. “Cooper and I are heading to San Francisco for the day. Want to tag along? You could use a change of scenery.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got stuff to do.”

“No, you don’t,” Mom says as she steps out the door. “Your dad and I got this. Take the day off.” She whistles for Bodhi who promptly abandons Harper and runs toward her. “Go and have fun in the city, Forrest. You’ve been working too hard lately and you need a break.”

“The city is the last place I’d want to be,” I mutter even as I feel my defenses crumbling. But they’re right. I need a change of scenery, a brief escape from the lodge and memories of Summer.

I don’t even understand how I let her get under my skin but it’s too late for that. It’s done but I know time will help get rid of this yearning to see her again.

An hour later, we pile into Harper’s car with me behind the wheel because no way am I letting my baby sister drive. I tried that once, a long time ago and once was enough. Maybe she’s gotten better since then but I’m not about to find out.

As we leave Auburn Springs, I watch the landscape transition from the tranquil beauty of the mountains to the bustling energy of the city two hours

later. Skyscrapers tower above us, their reflective windows glinting in the sunlight as people rush past on crowded sidewalks, every one absorbed in their own lives. The contrast between the serene life I've chosen and the fast-paced world that is Summer's is stark, a reminder that we belong in different worlds.

Harper and Cooper go about their errands while I park the car and wait until they're done. From what Harper has told me, Mariah had originally hired Cooper at the last minute to pretend to be her fiancé for Christmas but when a winter storm back east grounded his flight, her friend Logan stepped in as the replacement.

Everything would have been fine and dandy if Cooper, who'd lost his wallet and phone at the airport, hadn't shown up the following day anyway which threw Mariah and Logan's charade into chaos. And now here we are, with my baby sister helping Cooper get his identification papers in order so he can fly back. I'm sure there's more to their story but it's not like me to be nosy.

The idea of pretending to be in love with someone is foreign to me although I could have sworn Logan was in love with my sister and she was with him. Right now, she's busy working on a New Year's Eve wedding so I hope they've at least returned to being friends again.

Suddenly the passenger door opens and Cooper climbs in the back seat, envelopes in hand.

"That was quick," I say as Harper settles beside me.

"We're efficient," Harper says, grinning. "It also helps that Cooper can drop names like it's no one's business."

"Any names I'd recognize?" I ask as Harper shakes her head.

"I don't think so. They were more East Coast names, really," she replies. "By the way, I was thinking since we got done early, mind if we make a quick detour while we're here?"

"Where to?" I ask as I start the car.

"I've always wanted to check out Palo Alto."

I stiffen at the mention of Summer's world. "I don't think that's a good idea, Harper."

But Harper has a mischievous glint in her eye. "Come on, Forrest. It's just a quick detour. Besides, you might find it interesting."

Reluctantly, I agree. I'm not going to lie. After everything Summer told me, I looked her and Dane up and she was telling the truth. They did start

KVRS four years ago and in the last two years, their company has grown exponentially and with the final round of funding, we're talking hedge funds, private equity firms, and investment banks getting involved. It's definitely outside of my wheelhouse, but I get it.

As we drive through the streets of Palo Alto, I feel a growing sense of unease. The high-tech buildings, the people in business attire, it's all so foreign.

Isn't it beautiful?" Harper breathes beside me, her eyes wide with wonder. "There's just something about this place that feels so... alive."

We round a corner, and suddenly, I find myself face-to-face with my past. There, standing proudly among its peers, is the unmistakable glass façade of KVRS—the tech company that Summer had built alongside Dane. A wave of conflicting emotions washes over me as I take in the sight before me, both awed by her accomplishments and heartbroken by the distance that now lies between us.

"Wow," I whisper, my fingers instinctively gripping the steering wheel. "It's even more impressive than I imagined."

"Right?" Harper exclaims. "And to think we had a tech mogul having dinner with us mere mortals."

"I wouldn't go that far, Harp. Summer's just like you and me."

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah, right." She pauses, her eyes widening. "Why don't we go inside?"

Before I can protest, Cooper agrees. "We're here so we might as well."

For a second, I hesitate, unsure if I'm ready to face the reality of Summer's world head-on. But as I catch a glimpse of the sleek glass building that houses her company, my curiosity gets the better of me. "Alright," I agree reluctantly. "Just for a minute."

We step out of the car and are immediately hit by the city's energy, a stark contrast to the serenity of Auburn Springs. The air buzzes with an electric hum that can only be described as ambition personified.

The moment we step inside the lobby, I'm immediately impressed by the interior—sleek lines, high-tech displays, and an air of quiet efficiency. It screams success and innovation, as intimidating as it is impressive.

This is Sumner's world.

My gaze is drawn to a portrait on the wall and I catch my breath. One is Summer, looking confident and professional in a tailored suit, the very picture of a successful tech entrepreneur. Next to her is another portrait, this

one of Dane, both exuding a sense of power and achievement.

Yet there she was, alone on Christmas Eve.

As we're taking in the surroundings, an employee approaches us. "Can I help you?"

"We're just, uh, looking around," Harper says smoothly. "We heard a lot about KQRS."

The employee nods, a hint of pride in his voice. "It's an amazing place to work. Our co-founders, Miss Avila and Mr. Walters, have built something incredible here."

I nod, my throat tight. "Yeah, it looks like it."

He looks at me and Harper, then decides to share a bit more. "You know, Miss Avila's story is quite something. She lost her parents in a house fire when she was in college. This company," he gestures around, "became her solace. She and Mr. Walters have been through a lot together."

Harper and I exchange a glance. This piece of her past sheds new light on Summer, on her drive and dedication. It's a story of resilience and determination, and I can't help but feel a surge of admiration for her.

But as much as I sympathize with her past and admire her strength, it only reinforces the gap between our worlds. KQRS is more than just a company to Summer; it's a part of her, a testament to her journey, her struggles, her victories.

"In fact, they're getting married in two days," the man continues as Harper shoots a glance at me, frowning.

"Thanks for telling us," Harper says, her voice soft.

We leave the building, the weight of what we've learned hanging between us. As we walk back to the car, I realize that the last thing I want is to take Summer away from this. Her world, KQRS, Silicon Valley—they are as much a part of her as the mountains are a part of me.

The drive back is quiet, each of us lost in our thoughts. As the familiar landscape of the mountains comes into view, a sense of relief washes over me. This is where I belong, amidst the snow-covered peaks and the quiet of the wilderness.

I'm grateful for the glimpse into Summer's world, for the time we shared, but I know now that our paths are meant to diverge. She belongs in the world she's built, a world of innovation and success, and I belong here, in the quiet simplicity of the mountains.

As we pull up to the lodge, Harper gives me a knowing look. "You

okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

She reaches over and give my hand a squeeze. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? She was a guest, nothing more.” I toss her the keys and open the door. “Thanks for asking me to tag along.”

Stepping out of the car, I take in the crisp mountain air. The lodge, the mountains, the endless sky—this is my world. And as I look out at the beauty surrounding me, I feel a sense of peace.

Summer will always be a part of my story, a beautiful chapter in my life. A beat, a blip on the screen. But it’s time to turn the page, to embrace the life I have here. The mountains are my home, my solace, and my future.

As I walk towards the lodge, Bodhi bounding up to greet me, I realize that sometimes, letting go is the only way to move forward.

And who knows what the future might bring?

For now, my happiness is right here.

CHAPTER 12

Summer

“YOU DOING OKAY?”

I turn my head to see Natalie striding toward me as I stand in front of the elevator that will take me to the top floor.

“I’m good. You?”

I’m early but I know everyone is already in the conference room, probably discussing their plans for the company once I’m voted out.

Only that’s not about to happen. I’m not going down without a fight.

“Nervous,” Natalie replies as the doors slide open and we step inside the elevator. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

I can’t either but such is life. Maybe I made questionable choices a few days ago to leave for the Soraya Lodge without telling anyone. We’re no longer unknowns in the tech world and I should have at least let someone know where I was.

But there’s no point in regretting such choices now. It’s done and here we are, about to attend the meeting that will get me kicked out of the company I helped build. Dane rescheduling the meeting until the majority of the board could attend had helped me prepare for the meeting but it’s also done the same for his team.

The doors slide open and we step out, my back straight, my chin held high. If I’m going out, I’m doing it on my terms.

“Ready?” I ask as Natalie nods.

Taking a deep breath, I push open the heavy mahogany door and step into the boardroom. The air is thick with tension, as if the room itself is holding its breath. My heart races in my chest but I steady my steps. I can’t show any

sign of weakness.

“Good morning,” I say as board members look up from their leather-bound chairs, their expressions guarded.

As I take my seat at the head of the table, I can’t help but notice Dane sitting across from me. His tall, broad-shouldered frame seems even larger than usual, but his hazel eyes, usually so confident, avoid mine entirely. He’s always been a master at concealing his emotions but today, there’s an air of smugness about him that I find unsettling although he hasn’t glanced at me once.

“Is everyone here?” he asks, getting up from his chair to address everyone in the boardroom. “Very well. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Let’s begin,” the chairman says, her voice clipped and professional. She sets a stack of papers down on the polished table, her manicured nails tapping against the wood. “We’re here today to discuss Ms. Avila’s future with the company, given recent events.”

I swallow hard, feeling my throat tighten. This is it—the moment I’ve been dreading and preparing for ever since I called off my wedding to Dane and fled the city without a word. The decision had been impulsive, driven by an overwhelming sense of suffocation that left me gasping for air. But now it feels like the weight of the world is crashing down on my shoulders.

“Before we proceed,” another board member interjects, “I’d like to remind everyone of Ms. Avila’s many accomplishments as CEO. Under her leadership, our company has seen unprecedented growth and success.”

“Thank you,” I manage, my voice barely more than a whisper. The acknowledgment is gratifying, but it does little to quell the knot in my stomach. This isn’t just about my career – it’s about proving to myself that I can stand on my own two feet, even when the ground beneath me is crumbling.

The meeting continues with the usual formalities and introductions, but soon the real discussion—my future at KQRS—takes center stage. I listen as Dane presents his case first, citing my recent absence and the sudden calling off of a major event (basically, our wedding) as examples of my supposed instability and unreliability.

“My fellow board members,” Dane begins, his voice steady. “We are at a crucial juncture. After acquiring the final round of funding, the eyes of our investors and the market are on us. Stability, both in leadership and vision, is paramount.”

I clench my fists under the table, bracing myself for what's to come. I know Dane's tactics—he's going to paint me as a liability, a loose cannon who could jeopardize the company's future.

“Miss Avila's recent actions, her abrupt departure during a crucial time have raised concerns,” Dane continues. “Concerns about her commitment to KVRS, her ability to lead. We need a unified front, and unfortunately, Miss Avila's behavior has been anything but unifying.”

Murmurs of agreement ripple through the room. I take a deep breath, reminding myself to stay calm. I knew this wouldn't be easy, but I'm not going down without a fight.

As Dane concludes his arguments, painting a picture of a company at risk due to my so-called unpredictability, it's my turn to speak.

I stand, my heart pounding in my chest. “I respect what Mr. Walters has said, and I understand the concerns raised. But let me be clear: my personal life and the decisions I make outside of this boardroom do not diminish my commitment to KVRS.”

I look around the room, meeting the eyes of each board member present. “Yes, I called off our wedding, what Mr. Walters considers a ‘big event,’ and yes, I took some time away. But those decisions were about my personal well-being, not my professional responsibilities. If anything, they have given me a clearer perspective.”

I talk about my contributions to KVRS, the sleepless nights, the code I've written, and the deals I've closed. I remind them of the vision Dane and I shared when we started this company, a vision I still believe in and am committed to. I've rehearsed this speech countless times in the last two days and I should know it by heart.

But as I speak, I can see the doubt in some of their eyes. Dane's words have left their mark, and I'm fighting an uphill battle.

The meeting drags on, with board members voicing their concerns and opinions. Some support me, recalling my dedication and achievements. Others echo Dane's concerns about stability and image.

As the meeting nears its end, Dane takes the floor once again. “I understand the loyalty some of you feel towards Miss Avila. But we must think of the company first. Our move forward given the final round of funding is critical, and we cannot afford any semblance of instability or drama. We need a leadership team that is fully committed, not one that's distracted by personal issues.”

His words hang in the air, heavy with implication. I feel a knot in my stomach, realizing that things are not looking good for me. Despite my defense, despite my plea, Dane's narrative seems to be taking hold.

As the boardroom's tension mounts, the screen at the end of the table flickers to life, signaling incoming calls. Hedge fund manager Daniel Drexel and billionaire Heath Kheiron appear on the screen, their faces framed within the digital window. My heart leaps with a mixture of hope and apprehension. Their presence could change everything.

"Apologies for the interruption," says Daniel, his voice calm yet firm. "I've been following the proceedings remotely as my family and I are in Zurich for the holidays. But it's imperative I contribute to this crucial discussion."

Heath Kheiron, the other member on the screen, nods in agreement. "Given the gravity of the situation, we couldn't remain silent."

Dane's composure falters slightly, a crack in his confident facade.

"Miss Avila has just presented her case," one of the board members in the room informs them. "And Mr. Walters has raised some serious concerns regarding her stability and commitment to KQRS."

Daniel leans forward, his gaze piercing. "I've heard Dane's concerns, but before we proceed, I need to address something troubling. Dane, you mentioned having written testimonials from us supporting your stance, correct?"

Dane nods, a hint of uncertainty in his eyes. "Yes... yes, that's correct."

Heath interjects, his tone sharp. "That's where we have a problem. Neither Mr. Drexel nor I have provided any such testimonials. In fact, I was not even consulted."

"Neither was I," Heath says as the room falls into a stunned silence.

As my heart races, relief and disbelief mingling in my chest, Dane's face turns red, his jaw clenched tightly as the implication of both men's words sink in.

Dane stammers, trying to regain control. "I... I may have misunderstood. But the sentiment remains the same. Summer's recent actions have caused concern among the leadership and the investors."

Daniel doesn't buy it. "Dane, fabricating our support is a serious accusation. It undermines the very fabric of trust and integrity upon which this board operates."

"Mr. Walters," the chairman says icily, "would you care to explain why

you misrepresented the opinions of your fellow board members?”

Dane falters for a moment, his eyes darting around the room as if searching for an escape from the sudden scrutiny. “I... I made an assumption based on previous conversations with Mr. Drexel and Mr. Kheiron,” he stammers, struggling to regain his composure. “I apologize if I misunderstood their intentions.”

“Your apology is noted,” the chairman replies, his voice dripping with skepticism. “However, this raises serious concerns about your integrity and motives in this matter.”

The board members exchange glances, the weight of the revelation evident in their expressions. Dane’s credibility is crumbling, and with it, his argument against me.

Heath adds, “I’ve always known Summer... Miss Avila to be dedicated and driven. Her track record speaks for itself. We should not allow personal biases to cloud our judgment.”

The discussion that follows is intense, with board members openly questioning Dane’s motives and integrity. The atmosphere has shifted palpably in my favor.

As the meeting draws to a close, the chairman, who has been quietly observing the proceedings, finally speaks. “It’s clear that this issue is more complex than initially presented. Miss Avila’s contributions to KQRS are undeniable, and the allegations of instability seem to be unfounded, especially in light of the recent deceit uncovered.”

He pauses, looking around the room. “Given these revelations, I propose that no immediate action be taken regarding her position in the company. Instead, we should focus on healing and moving forward as a united team.”

Nods of agreement ripple through the room. Dane looks deflated, his plans unraveling before him.

As the meeting adjourns, a wave of relief washes over me. I’ve won, not just for myself, but for the integrity of the company. One by one, board members approach, offering congratulations and apologies for doubting me. But even as I act graciously through it all, I’m numb, unable to believe that I had to fight for my integrity and dedication.

And for what? All because Dane felt offended by my decision to call off the wedding?

Suddenly I need air.

“I’ll be outside,” I say as I head toward the elevators, Natalie right next to

me.

“That was unbelievable,” Natalie says as I allow myself a moment to savor the win, my heart still racing. That Daniel and Heath believed in me is a win I can never repay them enough for. I’d met Daniel through an analyst I’d met during our initial search for funding. Through Daniel, I was introduced to Heath Kheiron, a billionaire based on the East Coast who’s married to a woman from Auburn Springs which happens to be where the Soraya Lodge is. In fact, she’d been the one who recommended the Soraya to me over six months ago. It had been such a fleeting recommendation that I’d completely forgotten about it.

What a small world we live in.

And then there’s Forrest.

I’d forced myself not to think about him the last two days. With more pressing matters to attend to, I didn’t have a choice, but that didn’t stop him from infiltrating my thoughts. His blue eyes, his deep voice, his five o’clock shadow against a square jaw. The way his kiss made me forget all my troubles, making me wish life was much simpler. You grew up, fell in love, and lived happily ever after.

Suddenly I stop and Natalie almost walks right into me.

“What’s wrong?” She asks as I stare at one of the monitors in the security station. No, it can’t be him.

But it is him.

Wearing a rugged, weather-appropriate outfit that seems to blend seamlessly with the Northern Californian winter, Forrest stands in stark contrast to the sleek, corporate backdrop of our company lobby. He’s clad in a sturdy, dark green waxed canvas jacket that’s clearly built for the outdoors, yet its fitted cut gives him a casually polished look. Underneath, I can just make out the hint of a thick, cream-colored wool sweater, the kind that speaks more of nights by a cabin fire than boardroom meetings. His jeans are practical, dark-washed, and devoid of any pretension, worn with a pair of well-made, leather hiking boots.

Suddenly, the victory in the boardroom, the stress of the last two days fade into the background. There’s just Forrest and all seems right with my world. It’s too simple, yet it’s not. I barely know the man yet he’s unexpectedly become part of my world even when he couldn’t be any more different from everything I know.

“Oh wow, do you know him?” Natalie asks, her eyes glued to the monitor

as Forrest starts walking toward the exit with Harper and Cooper.

He's here. He really is here.

I rush to the elevator. There's still time to catch him, to talk to him. To hear his voice and listen to him tell me that everything will be alright.

That I picked the path of least resistance and didn't let go of the life I knew. Only because I can't.

The elevator doors slide open but I don't step inside. The footage is a few minutes delayed anyway. By the time I'll make it downstairs, he'll be gone. He'll go back to his world of mountains and finches and snowshoe hares. Of family that made me feel like I belonged.

And what the hell am I going to do once I do catch up with him? I've just won a significant battle for my company but the war is far from over. There's still so much to be done, so many pieces to pick up.

"Hey, you alright?" Natalie asks as the doors slide close in front of me. "Did you want to go to him?"

I turn to her. "I... I don't know."

But I do know. I do want to go to him and drive back to the lodge if he'd let me, but I have work to do. As much as I want to chase after Forrest, KVRS needs my attention. This victory is fragile, and I can't let personal emotions distract me from securing my future here.

"I'm going to sound really kitschy but if it's meant to be, love will find a way," she says as I chuckle.

"It's definitely kitschy, but you're right."

"Everyone's waiting for you," she says, pulling me away from the elevator.

We head back to the boardroom, where a smaller, impromptu meeting is already taking shape. Dane and his team are nowhere to be seen but I don't care. I'm still here and that's what matters.

Natalie and I spend the rest of the day meticulously going over contracts, shareholder agreements, and company bylaws. We discuss strategies to ensure my stake in KVRS remains protected and how to prevent any future attempts by Dane or anyone else to undermine my position.

As we work, my thoughts keep drifting back to Forrest. The image of him in the lobby, so out of place yet so compelling, lingers in my mind. Natalie's words echo in my ears—maybe love does have a chance.

But for now, duty calls. I focus on the task at hand, determined to come out of this stronger and more prepared than ever. While I don't know what's

in store for me in the coming days or months, or even years, I need to make sure everything's in place in the event when I do decide to seek a life like the one I got to experience days ago.

For all I know, it's just a blip on the screen of my life. A distraction, nothing more.

Only at the thought of Forrest and his kind eyes, my heart has been saying otherwise.

At least, it's hoping.

The meeting concludes with a clear plan of action, and as the board members disperse, there's a sense of collective achievement.

Natalie turns to me, her expression thoughtful. "You know, I've been thinking. The way you looked at that guy in the monitor earlier... you never looked as happy as you did then. Weird."

I scoff. "Why weird?"

"Because you never let yourself feel what you really want to feel... until that moment." She shrugs. "I don't know. That look on your face... it stayed with me. Too bad you have to take care of other things first."

This time, it's my time to shrug. "Priorities, remember? There's at least two days' worth of work that needs to be done after today's fallout with Dane. And I can't just walk away to go after something that may not even be real."

"True, but sometimes even that can wait. I'm sure we can work something out, given that it's the new year and all," she says. "And everyone did take time off for the... um, wedding."

I frown. "What are you saying, Nat?"

Her gaze is steady as she meets mine head-on. "Life's simply too short, Summer, to not be happy."

CHAPTER 13

Forrest

NEW YEAR'S Eve in Auburn Springs is a sight to behold. Twinkling fairy lights wrap around the trees that line the town square, while garlands of holly and ivy adorn every lamppost. You could almost imagine yourself in a postcard with how quaint it is.

On the stage, the band plays a lively tune, the notes bouncing off the snow-covered ground filled with revelers waiting to greet the new year in a few minutes.

But as beautiful as the scene is, my heart isn't in it. I try to force myself to be present, to enjoy the moment but all I can think about is Summer and the news I read earlier today while Harper and I were shopping for supplies for the lodge.

The paper was from San Francisco, probably left by a tourist who no longer had any need for it. A few days old, its technology section featured news that caught my attention the moment I saw the headline.

KVRS Founders Secure Multi-Million Dollar Deal, and below it, Summer and Dane looking triumphant in an undated photo. Although there's no mention of a wedding, I have no doubt they're probably married by now although I don't remember hearing Summer say whether it was scheduled for New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. She could be married by now or she'll be Mrs. Dane Whatever-His-Name-Is tomorrow.

But what does it matter now? We never did have a chance. So we kissed. No big deal.

"Forrest!" Someone calls out in the distance and I see Hannah approaching, her breath forming a small cloud of frosty air as she sidles up to

me. Her crimson scarf wraps snugly around her neck, a stark contrast to her pale skin. “You came!”

“I tagged along with Harper and Cooper.” I cock my head toward the crowd of people in front of the stage dancing to the music the band is playing. “They’re over there somewhere.”

“Third wheel, huh?” she elbows me playfully as I roll my eyes.

“I don’t think they’re a couple.”

“Yet.” She laughs. “Have you seen them together? They can’t keep their eyes off each other.”

So did my other sister Mariah and her ‘fiancé’ Logan and it turned out to be all pretend, I almost say out loud but of course, I don’t. As far as everyone’s concerned, they’re still together and who knows? Maybe they’ll have the guts to tell each other how they really feel for each other.

“I can drive you back to the lodge if you want,” Hannah says as she links her arm through mine. “Until then, why don’t we get you into the spirit of things.”

As we weave through the crowd, the scent of cinnamon and nutmeg teases my senses. One of the booths sells hot cocoa and Hannah steers me toward it.

“Here,” she hands me a cup of steaming hot cocoa, the heat seeping through the cardboard sleeve warming my numb fingers. “This should help.”

“Thanks.” I take a tentative sip, the bittersweet chocolate melting on my tongue.

“There they are!” Hannah points to Harper and Cooper dancing in front of the stage, my sister ready to greet the New Year with a sparkling tiara on her head. Not to be outdone, Cooper is sporting a ridiculous pair of glasses to match her tiara. When they see us, they wave but keep dancing.

I’m glad they’re getting along—too well, actually and I just hope he doesn’t break my sister’s heart. There’s been enough broken hearts at the Peters home lately.

And maybe that’s why Harper didn’t mention anything about our Palo Alto trip to our parents. No sense in opening that can of worms. We shouldn’t have gone but I’m also glad we did. I got to see the place where Summer belongs, and it’s not here in Auburn Springs.

Maybe in a different lifetime, we were meant for something more but not this one.

“Ten minutes till midnight!” someone shouts as the crowd cheers.

“Come on, Forrest, liven up,” Hannah says, trying her best to get me into the spirit of things as I take her empty cup and toss it in a nearby trash can along with mine. “How about a dance?”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll pass,” I reply. With midnight fast approaching, the crowd’s starting to get to me. They’re getting rowdier, noisier. Happier.

Suddenly Hannah tugs at my arm and points towards the edge of the square. “Look over there!”

A woman wearing a beige coat and matching beret emerges from a black SUV, her figure silhouetted against another car’s bright headlights as it drives by.

My heart skips a beat, but I quickly dismiss the thought. No, it can’t be her. She’s probably halfway around the world, celebrating with Dane. I start to turn away, telling myself it’s just someone who resembles her when the woman moves further into the light and the world around me comes to a sudden, screeching halt.

Summer? My heart is pounding in my chest as the woman looks around as if searching for something.

Someone.

And then our eyes meet and she smiles, raising her hand in a slight wave. My heart stops, the noise around me fading into the background.

She’s here. In my world.

But why?

Summer starts walking towards the square, weaving through the crowd of people—families and couples—eager to greet the new year. But I barely notice them. All that matters is her.

Beside me, Hannah watches me carefully. “You should go to her. You know you want to.”

“You gonna be okay?”

She laughs. “Of course. I’ll be at the Mine Shaft if you guys want to stop by.” With that, Hannah kisses me on the cheek. “Happy New Year, Forrest. Now go get her.”

As Hannah walks away, I begin weaving through the crowd toward Summer, my legs doing their thing. One step, and then another, drawn to her as if by an invisible force. As I make my way through the crowd, my focus never wavers from her face. She’s just as beautiful as the first time I laid eyes on her.

So this is how it feels to fall in love.

When I finally reach her, it takes all my willpower not to pull her in for a long deep hug.

“I went to the lodge and your parents told me you might be here,” she says, her gaze following Hannah’s form disappearing in the crowd. “I hope I didn’t interrupt anything.”

“Hannah’s a friend,” I say, my heart racing. “But what are you doing here? I thought you’d be married by now, or at least be with...”

“Dane?” A soft laugh escapes Summer’s lips, tinged with a hint of sadness. “I called off the wedding the day I came here and my decision hasn’t changed, and that includes being with him.”

“But I thought you left because he—”

“I left because I had to save my position in the company I helped build. I had responsibilities to shareholders to do the right thing even if it meant leaving without saying goodbye. I just couldn’t tell you that,” she replies, looking away wistfully before focusing her gaze on me again. “I did see you in the lobby the other day.”

“It was Harper’s idea. I didn’t want to go, but I’m glad I did.” I pause. “You have a good life in Palo Alto, Summer. You have everything you’d ever need.”

“I don’t have you or your family or the Soraya,” she says, her expression wistful. “We didn’t have enough time to get to know the details of our lives before I had to leave, but I hope we’ll have all the time in the world after tonight... if it’s okay with you.”

If it’s okay with you.

Why is she asking me for permission? “Of course, it’s okay with me. It’s always going to be okay,” I murmur, my chest tightening as I remember the tall building with her portrait hanging in the lobby. “I just hope I can give you the world that you’re used to.”

Summer strokes my cheek, the beginnings of a beard already growing. “Oh, Forrest, but you already have,” she murmurs. “These last few days really brought it home that I don’t need a lot of money to be happy. I don’t need to see my name on a building or be included in a list of successful people under thirty and all that to be happy. What I do need is someone who accepts me for who I am and not for what I bring to the table. I need someone who reminds me that I’m enough.”

“Because you are.”

“I need someone who makes me happy. And that’s you.” She glances at

the crowd near the stage where Harper and Cooper have stopped dancing but are watching us. “Your family is a big plus, too,” she adds, chuckling.

Behind us, the crowd starts to count as the seconds tick by, drowning out whatever I want to say. I bring my hands to Summer’s face, my thumbs tracing the outline of her cheekbones.

Her next words are a gentle whisper, yet they resonate with the weight of a profound truth. “I want to explore the world that made me so happy—your world, the Soraya. And most of all, with you... if you’ll have me.”

In that moment, every doubt, every fear, every reason why it couldn’t work, dissipates like mist in the morning sun. “Oh, Summer, there’s nothing I want more.”

The countdown begins. Ten seconds winding down one second at a time.

“Five! Four! Three! Two! One!” The people in the town square shout in unison, their words drowned out by the sound of noisemakers and the band playing *Auld Lang Syne*. “Happy New Year!”

The final seconds before midnight seem to stretch out like an eternity, each tick of the clock heightening the tension in the air. But all that disappears the moment I capture Summer’s lips with mine. The world fades away, leaving only the two of us in this perfect moment. The kiss is tender, at the same time electric, charged with the energy of new beginnings and the promise of what lies ahead.

I pull back slightly. Summer’s eyes are dark and luminous with emotions, fireworks reflected in her pupils. “Happy New Year, Summer,” I whisper.

“Happy New Year, Forrest,” she breathes, her fingers tangling in my hair as she pulls me in for another kiss. This one is more urgent, more intense, as if we’re both trying to convey everything we feel for each other that we didn’t get to show a few days earlier.

I can taste the sweetness of her lips, feel the softness of her hair between my fingers. Her scent surrounds me, the familiar aroma of her perfume that I have come to love, a mix of jasmine and sandalwood with a hint of vanilla.

“What about your company?” I ask after I pull away, the perfection of the moment reminding me that there’s more to this than her coming back to me.

“I can work remotely anywhere,” she says, chuckling. “What do you think I was doing in the cabin while you were busy working?”

“I’m going to have to insist that you take breaks though,” I say. “You know, to stretch your legs and get some fresh air. All work and no play can make Summer a dull girl and we can’t have that.”

“I expect you to take care of that part,” Summer says. “Besides, you promised me a private tour and I’m still going to hold you to it.”

“How does a New Year’s Day hike sound?” I ask as Harper and Cooper excitedly make their way to join us.

“Perfect.”

Epilogue

SUMMER

A YEAR LATER

JUST A FEW MORE LINES OF code and I'm done for the day.

That's what I tell myself as my fingers dance across the keyboard, inputting the final pieces of the puzzle into my latest program. A soft smile graces my lips as I hit the 'save' button, feeling a sense of accomplishment wash over me.

Thank god we had the fastest network installed on the property or I wouldn't be able to do my work for KQRS and have the best of both worlds. From my window, the snow-covered landscape is a Christmas postcard come to life, the coziness of the lodge and the scene outside wrapping me like a warm blanket.

It's been a year since I arrived at the Soraya to fulfill a forgotten reservation on Christmas Eve, a year since I met the man who showed me there was a world beyond the boardroom. It's almost surreal, thinking back to how lost I felt when I first arrived at Soraya Lodge, escaping from the chaos of my former relationship and life in the city. But as the snow gently falls outside, I feel a sense of peace that I've never experienced before.

The contrast between my previous fast-paced life and my current existence is striking. Instead of being consumed by stress and deadlines, I now wake up each morning to the sound of birdsong, greeted by the gentle rustle of leaves outside my window. It's as though the natural world around me has breathed new life into my soul, nurturing my creativity and allowing it to flourish.

"Good boy, Bodhi," I say softly, reaching down to scratch his ears as he lays at my feet, preferring the coziness of the cabin to the cold of the outdoors. At least, until Forrest whistles for him and he'll be wanting to go outside.

His ears perk up at the sound of someone knocking on the door.

"Hey, love," Forrest calls from the doorway, his rugged beard framing his warm smile. As much as I loved seeing him clean-shaven, I realized I preferred him like this. My mountain man with a heart. "How's your day going?"

“Great.” I swivel in my chair to face him as he approaches. “I finished the app.”

“Congratulations. I know how hard you've been working on it,” he says, wrapping his arms around me. I love the smell of pine and cedar that clings to him, a reminder of the world outside that I've fallen in love with. “I figured you were still working but everyone's already at the house. Ready to join them for dinner?”

“Yup.”

Our unique living arrangement may raise some eyebrows—me residing in the charmingly modernized Sunflower cabin while Forrest continues to live in his cabin across from mine, even though we're dating—but it works for us. We have our own spaces to retreat to, yet we're never far from each other's comforting presence.

It had taken a lot of convincing Mr. and Mrs. Peters that I'd pay to stay at the Sunflower long-term. They'd have let me stay for free if they had their way but I couldn't do that. Interestingly, while I could have had the cabin modernized with central air, except for a state-of-the-art security system, I've kept the place the way it is.

I learned how to build a fire on the wood stove and actually love it. There's something comforting about a wood fire and I love that I can set a pan with herbs in water and have it scent the space, too. Right now, I've got slices of orange and sticks of cinnamon simmering on the stove, giving the cabin a warm, inviting aroma. I even repaired the sign that I ran over, gluing the two parts together and applying a coat of varnish to seal Mariah's design further.

As I slide into the passenger seat of Forrest's truck, Bodhi bounds up and hops in between us, his tail wagging furiously as he nuzzles against my leg. Over the past few months, I've grown to love this dog nearly as much as Forrest does. Some nights he even stays at my cabin with me although Forrest is usually there, too.

Everyone is gathered at the main house when we arrive—his parents who are still in the kitchen making the finishing touches to the menu which includes roasted turkey, pot roast, homemade pies, and countless dishes that make my stomach rumble with anticipation. There are Emily, Brad, and Jonathan along with a new addition, two-month-old Celeste nestled in Emily's wrap, Mariah and Logan whose engagement happened right here at the Soraya back in February, and Harper although she's not filming anything

this time. I want to ask her where Cooper is but I refrain, wanting to wait until she tells us herself.

My hand finds its way into Forrest's as we stop beneath a mistletoe, our fingers intertwining as we exchange a knowing look. Funny how this time last year he walked me right past it, and rightly so. We'd just met an hour earlier.

"A kiss, perhaps, under the mistletoe?" he asks as I nod and everyone cheers.

I lean in, my heart racing as I close the gap between us. Forrest's lips are soft and warm against mine, and I can taste the hint of peppermint from the candy cane he'd been munching on earlier. The kiss is sweet and gentle, but there's an underlying passion that I know all too well—we've been together for a year now, after all. As we pull away, I catch a glimpse of desire flickering in his eyes.

"I think I'll have to steal another one of those later," he whispers, his voice low and husky.

"Steal away, Mr. Peters," I say, giggling as he leans in for another kiss, this one more heated than the last.

The sound of someone clearing their throat breaks us apart, and we turn to see his parents standing in the doorway, their eyes twinkling with amusement. I flush with embarrassment, but Forrest just grins and takes my hand, leading me toward the table and pulling a chair out for me.

The evening passes in a blur of laughter, good food, and warm conversations. I find myself drawn to Forrest's family, each one welcoming me into their fold with open arms. It's a feeling of belonging I've never experienced before, and I revel in it, soaking up the love and warmth of the Peters family.

As we finish our meal, Forrest stands up, his hand in his pocket as he clears his throat.

"If I could have everyone's attention, there's someone in this room I'd like to ask a question," he says, his voice booming through the room. Silence descends over the room as Forrest begins, "Summer Avila, will you marry me?"

"Oh, for the love of..." Mariah whispers, tears welling in her eyes as the entire room erupts into cheers and shouts of romance. It's always been the most emotional one of all the siblings.

I smile, tears welling up in my eyes as I nod, unable to speak past the

lump in my throat. “Of course I will, Forrest!” I say, beaming from ear to ear as he slips the ring onto my finger. It’s set with a large emerald in the middle of a gold band, and it sparkles as the candlelight reflects off of its surface.

“I’m so happy for you,” Emily says, wrapping me in a warm hug as Brad shakes Forrest’s hand, slapping it in a manly handshake. His parents rush over, their faces beaming with joy for us. Even Bodhi seems to sense the happy occasion, wagging his tail and jumping up to lick my face.

“It’ll be interesting to see which cabin you’ll end up settling in,” Brad says, grinning. “I’m all for tech though, so you know what I’ll be choosing.”

“I like Forrest’s cabin, personally,” Harper says. “But I also like Summer’s.”

“Why don’t we step outside for a minute?” Forrest takes my hand, leading me outside into the snow-covered yard. The cold air nips at my cheeks, but I barely feel it as I’m lost in the moment.

“I knew from the moment I met you that we were meant to be together,” he says, his voice soft and husky. “I love you more than anything in this world and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

“I love you too, Forrest,” I say, my heart overflowing with emotion. “And I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

We kiss again, the cold air forgotten as we lose ourselves in each other’s eyes. It’s been an interesting journey so far this year. But at least, even with the struggle I had to go through with Dane trying to kick me out of the company we started, it all worked out. Even he has found love again.

But it’s my future with Forrest that matters from here on. It stretches out before us, filled with adventures, laughter, and moments of pure joy just like this one. I know that there will be challenges along the way, but as long as we have each other, we can overcome anything.

As we pull away from the kiss, I catch a glimpse of something in the distance. It’s a shooting star, streaking across the sky in a brilliant display of light. I gasp in wonder, feeling Forrest’s hand tighten around mine as we both make a wish.

“What did you wish for?” he asks, his voice filled with curiosity.

“I wished for a lifetime of love and happiness with you,” I reply, smiling up at him.

Forrest leans in, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “You already have that,” he says, his voice low and tender. “And I promise to make sure that it never fades.”

We stand together for a few more moments, watching as the shooting star fades into the night sky. For the first time in my life, I feel like I have everything I need—a loving partner, a supportive family, and a future that's filled with hope and promise.

As we head back inside, hand in hand, I know that our life together won't always be easy. But I also know that we have something special, something that will help us weather any storm that comes our way.

I glance over at Forrest, taking in the way his eyes sparkle in the firelight, his hand warm and reassuring in mine. At this moment, I know that I've found my forever. And I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with him, the man I love.



Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Summer and Forrest's story!

Harper's story will be released in early 2024 so keep an eye out!

If you'd like to be among the first to know what I'm publishing next, sign up for my newsletter at lizduranobooks.com/subscribe.

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About the Author

Liz's start in storytelling got its rocky start in 8th grade when the "play" she was writing landed her in the principal's office for being a bit on the NSFW side. She has since majored in Journalism and Advertising only to realize once again that she'd rather write stories about people falling in love and getting into trouble, though not necessarily in that order.

When she's not writing about her muses, Liz loves spending time with her family and drinking way too much coffee. She lives in a tiny century-old house a few blocks from the beach with her family, a Chihuahua, and way too many books.

You can follow Liz's book adventures by visiting lizduranobooks.com or follow her on Facebook at @lizduranobooks.