

A man with dark, wavy hair and a serious expression is the central focus. He is wearing a black, long-sleeved button-down shirt that is unbuttoned at the top, revealing his chest and midriff. He has several tattoos: a large heart on his chest, a detailed geometric pattern on his left forearm, and a smaller tattoo on his right chest. His arms are crossed over his chest. The background is a dramatic, high-angle view of a mountain range with a forest of evergreen trees in the foreground. The sky is filled with soft, white and grey clouds. The overall color palette is dominated by the black of the shirt, the greys and whites of the mountains and sky, and the vibrant cyan of the text.

the
OTHER
side
MAYBE

RED WILLOW CREST
BOOK ONE

CASSIDY NIXON

THE OTHER SIDE OF MAYBE

RED WILLOW CREST

BOOK I

CASSIDY NIXON



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello reader!

I'll be brutally honest. If you are looking for authenticity and nuanced character development, you've picked up the wrong book.

I've taken plenty of "creative Hollywood liberties" to deliver the kind of swoon-worthy story that romance junkies crave.

The small town and hip companies depicted in this story are invented and bearing little resemblance to reality. The names have been changed to ignite your heart, not expose actual people. Any similarities are coincidental and flattering to the real-life muses inspiring my overactive imagination.

Hope you have fun time reading Kenzie and Maverick's love story.

P.S. Maverick's mom really loved Top Gun.



Kenzie

"Kenzie, darling, you should really try that yoga class I mentioned," Lita's voice chirps through the phone as I trace the intricate patterns on the marble countertop of my kitchen with my finger. "It'll do wonders for your body and mind. Not that your body needs those wonders. But your mind does."

"I'll check it out," I reply, an anxious knot tightening in my chest as I recognize the familiar sounds in the background. Lita's calling me from the set.

"Come on, a little downward dog never hurt anyone," she teases, her laughter like champagne bubbles. "Besides, it's not healthy to be cooped up in that big house all alone."

I lean against the massive dining oak table. My gaze drifts out of the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the landscape of Hollywood Hills.

My friend isn't wrong.

Chris has been away on business more often than not, leaving me to wander the endless hallways and rooms filled with expensive furniture that holds no meaning now that Strawberry is just a tiny memory.

"Maybe you're right," I concede, though the mere thought of stepping

outside sends shivers down my spine.

"Trust me, Kenz," Lita reassures me, her tone softening. "You deserve to feel good again after... well, you know."

I do know but we do not talk about it.

I can't.

Instead, I swallow hard and pretend that I'm better than I was the last time we spoke. "I just wish Chris were here more often. I thought he would press pause and stick around long enough for us to even have a conversation."

"Have you considered getting back to work?" Lita asks.

"Chris doesn't want me to. "I shift my gaze to the vast French doors framing the smog-covered Los Angeles skyline. "Did I mention that he bought me a resort and we're moving there indefinitely?"

"Wait, what?" Lita's voice rises in disbelief.

"He thinks a change of scenery will be good for me."

"I don't disagree but where is the resort?"

"Some middle-of-nowhere town in Northern Cali on the way to Yosemite."

"OMG. girl!" Lita sounds scandalized. "You're definitely getting your yee-haw on." She laughs.

"He didn't ask me if I wanted to go."

"So he just bought a whole resort without even talking to you about the move?"

"Yep." I sigh, twirling a strand of my platinum-blond hair around my finger. "Apparently, it's some family-owned place up in the mountains that has poor internet and no reliable hairstylist in a hundred-mile radius, and he never bothered to consult me before making such a big decision."

"That would have been very hot if we lived in the last century," Lita admonishes. "He needs to treat you like his partner, not his property."

"Sometimes it feels that way," I admit. "I know he loves me, but it's like I

have almost no say in anything that happens in our lives."

"Sweetie, that's not a healthy relationship dynamic," Lita says firmly. "You need to stand up for yourself and assert your needs. You're not some trophy wife for him to parade around; you're a strong, independent woman who deserves to be heard."

"Thanks," I'm touched by her support, even if there's a bit of bitter truth in what she said. *I have become a trophy wife.* "And remember, I'm always here if you need someone to talk to."

"I appreci—

Lita doesn't let me finish.

"I really have to go, Kenz," she rattles out. "My break is over, and Luxxy will kill me if I'm even a minute late. You know how he is. Total freak. Bye!"

As the line goes dead, I'm left with nothing but silence and the ever-present weight of my own loneliness.

As I stand on the balcony of our six-bedroom home, my gaze is drawn to the winding road below. The sun has dipped beneath the horizon and Hollywood and downtown in the distance are now embraced by the moody twilight.

The air smells like rain, which is a rarity in this city.

I inhale sharply and try to hold the crisp in my lungs for as long as I can before exhaling loudly.

The view from where I'm standing is beautiful but I don't enjoy it anymore.

The distant purr of an engine echoes up the hillside and I watch as Chris's unmistakable sleek black Maserati winds its way toward our home. The car—limited edition—is a symbol of his success and excess, just like everything else that surrounds us.

I haven't seen him leave. I was asleep but I know he'll be impeccably dressed when he climbs out of that car—Armani suits are practically his uniform.

"Love!" he calls, the sound of his commanding voice enters the living room before his six-three. He's tall with tan skin and bold facial features—compliments of his mother, a former Greek beauty queen. He's in his early fifties but of course, no one would know unless they go looking for his birthday online. Plenty of guys in their twenties would probably kill to have his body. The flecks of gray in his dark hair only seem to make him more attractive.

"You're staring out that window again. What's going on?"

"Nothing," I reply, not bothering to correct him. I was on the balcony, not by the window when he drove up, but he's been inattentive to the little things like this for a while now. "Just admiring the view."

"Looks like a storm brewing," he says, peering out at the sky. "Let's head inside before it hits."

"Right," I murmur in agreement as he steers me past the imposing glass doors.

"Did you do anything interesting today?" He leaves me in the middle of the living room, and loosening his tie, makes his way toward the bar.

"Just some packing and then talked to Lita. She's in Europe. We didn't have much time to chat."

"Friends are hard to come by in this town," he remarks, pouring himself a glass of scotch. "It's nice you two are still in touch."

Finally, I muster some courage to talk about the elephant in the room. "Can we discuss your latest purchase?"

"The resort?" Chris takes a sip of his drink. "I know it was a bit of a surprise, but I'm sure you'll love it once you see it in person. It's rustic. Just what you need."

"I'm sure it's beautiful," I say, my voice betraying a hint of bitterness.

"But it would have been nice to be included in the decision-making process."

"Kenzie, you know I make decisions like this all the time," he replies, not quite meeting my eyes. "It's just part of the business."

"Maybe," I concede, feeling my resolve weaken. "But it's not just about the business, is it? It's about our lives together."

"What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing." I shrug noncommittally. "We are partners, aren't we?"

Chris stares at me with his dark hawk eyes and for a second there, I think he's going to tell me to be grateful but he lets out a sigh and says, "You're right, love. I should have discussed it with you first. I'll try to do better next time."

"Thank you," I whisper, not quite believing he means it. "That's all I ask."

"Good girl," he says, walking towards me. "I'm going to hop in the shower now. I'm beat." He leans down and plants a quick, emotionless kiss on my lips. His cologne lingers in the air, a mix of musk and cedar that I once found intoxicating.

Now, it leaves me feeling absolutely nothing.



Maverick

The sun hangs low in the sky, spilling warm hues of orange and red across the forest and mountains and the deck of Ed's cottage. I sit beside him, my gaze lingering on the horizon where day meets night.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Ed says, his gray hair ruffling slightly in the gentle breeze. He is smiling but there's pain in his eyes. "You know, there's still time to back out of the sale," he supplies.

I glance at the old man, searching for the meaning behind his words. "What are you saying?"

"I'd rather give it to you than some city suit." He sighs, looking over the sprawling resort nestled among the towering pines. "It's yours, really. It always has been."

The thought of owning Red Willow is tempting, but the reality of it weighs heavy on my heart. "Ed, I appreciate the sentiment, but we both know that's not possible." I don't have the money to solve the problem of the massive debt caused by the fire a few years back and then the pandemic. "Besides, Sylas would have my head if I took over the resort."

"I don't understand why you two never got along," the old man muses,

his gaze lingering on the fading light. "But if he doesn't want any part of it, then he shouldn't dictate his terms. Am I right?"

"He's your son. He worries."

"And I worry about what'll happen to this place once it's sold to a stranger. What about the people who live and work here?"

"That's exactly why the contract states what it states." That the resort cannot be repurposed and its staff won't be fired. This is the best we can do for the Red Willow family. The other option is grim: bankruptcy.

Ed considered it but I talked him out of it. Sometimes, I regret that I did. Buyers like Christos Caddell don't care about small businesses. They come, shake their wallets, purchase real estate, and then have their minions make dumb decisions about the fate of those struggling places.

"This is the end of an era for all of us," Ed mutters, his gaze downcast, his shoulders slumped.

"Maybe." I attempt to add some cheer to my voice. "Maybe not."

"You sure my offer is not to your liking, son?"

"I have no way of fixing the issue, Ed. You know it." I change the topic then and we talk about the upcoming festival, wondering if the new owner will be fine with it.

As twilight settles around us, the conversation fades, leaving only the gentle sounds of nature.

Eventually, I stand, stretching a little. "I should get going. Long walk back to my cabin."

"Take care, son," Ed says, clapping me on the shoulder.

"See you in the morning," I reply, offering him a small smile before turning and walking away from the cabin he won't be occupying for much longer since he won't be the owner of the resort after tomorrow.

As I set off toward my own cabin on the opposite side of the property, the resort's unofficially adopted dog, Rafe, bounds over to greet me. He barks excitedly, his tail wagging at full speed. I absent-mindedly pet his head as he

trots beside me, my thoughts consumed by the sale of Red Willow and the potential impact on those who call this place home.

I can't help but feel a deep sense of loss, not just for myself, but for everyone who has come to love this place.

But beneath that collective worry lies a more personal fear—one that stems from the memories that have taken root within these grounds. Memories that I will be losing if the new owner decides he doesn't like me.

As Rafe and I keep walking past the picturesque cabins nestled among towering pine trees, I pick up the scent of woodsmoke mingling with the crisp mountain air. Pangs of guilt shoot through me because I couldn't save this place from financial ruin.

Maybe I never deserved Red Willow despite what Ed thinks.

I'm not a huge drinker but tonight I could definitely use a drink. Once I get home I pull out a bottle of whiskey and pour myself a generous glass. The amber liquid swirls as if reflecting the turmoil within me. "I'm glad you're not seeing this, Jo," I whisper.

Rafe whines softly, placing his head on my lap as I take a seat on the worn leather couch. He can sense my unease, my pain. Oddly, he's the only constant in this ever-changing landscape.

"These people better take care of our home, huh?" I tell Rafe, taking a sip and feeling the burn as the whiskey slides down my throat.

I stare out the window and the memories pour forth like a dam breaking, moments of happiness and love intertwined with the pain of loss. I drink more, trying to keep the demons at bay, but they claw at me, nonetheless. Each sip feels like a desperate attempt to hold onto something that's already gone.

"God, I miss her," I whisper, tears pooling in my eyes as I take another swallow.

She would have wanted me to fight for this place.

Rafe nudges my hand with his wet nose, offering what comfort he can as

I continue to numb my senses. The world begins to blur around me, the weight of my thoughts growing heavier with each passing moment. And as the whisky takes hold, I finally succumb to the darkness that has been threatening to consume me all night.



Maverick

The rain patters softly against the windows of the employee break room, filling the air with a calming rhythm. I glance at my watch, noting it's 7:30 AM, time for the staff meeting before the Caddells arrive.

The small room is full of anxious chatter as the entire team of Red Willow Resort gathers around the large wooden table.

The delicious scents of coffee brewed in an old-fashioned percolator and chocolate-glazed morning buns waft through the air as the doors swing and the last few people arrive. There's a selection of other pastries and breakfast treats laid out on a colorful tray in the corner, and everyone's sporting their own mug shaped like a bear's paw. Those were Christmas presents from Ed.

"Alright, everyone," I begin, trying to settle the murmurs of anticipation. "I know we're all a bit on edge about the new owners arriving today, but I want to assure you that I'll do my best to make sure not too many changes happen." That is of course if I don't get kicked out first.

"Speaking of Chris Caddell," Rolly, our laundry manager pipes up, wiping his hands on his apron. "I did some googling the other night. You wouldn't believe how much he's worth."

“They say he owns over a dozen collectible classic cars,” Julio, our gardener, adds.

"City folk." Someone chuckles from the back of the room, eliciting laughter from the group.

"Let them try living out here in the countryside!" another person chimes in as more laughter follows. “We ain’t got a garage big enough for all his vehicles.”

"Alright, alright," I say, trying to regain control of the meeting. "Let's focus on making sure everything runs smoothly today. We do need to make a good impression.”

Suddenly, a loud noise cuts through the laughter, silencing the room. We exchange confused glances before realizing what the sound must be.

I walk over to the window and immediately feel a mix of anger and irritation rising in me.

The Caddells have arrived in the ostentatious black helicopter.

At 7:30 AM on a Tuesday.

"Of course, they couldn't wait for check-out time!" Rolly shouts as if reading my mind. "Come on, let's go greet them," I say, leading the way toward the landing site.

We all hurry outside to see the spectacle, the rain still falling gently around us.

The helicopter's blades whip through the air, slicing through the rain and ripping up grass. It’s a fucking mess when the machine lands on the lawn in front of the barn.

Several terrified faces are already looking out the second-floor windows of the main hotel.

I would be freaked out too if I were promised tranquility and instead,

received a morning straight out of hell.

Rolly elbows me, a hint of annoyance in his voice. "This racket is going to wake everyone up."

No shit. "It already did," I comment grimly.

The helicopter doors hiss open and the two men exit. Christos Caddell is the taller one in a gray suit. I saw his photos online. He stands about an inch or two higher than me. Though he's passed his fifty-first birthday his physic remains trim. His perfectly styled salt and pepper hair is a mess in the wind from the helicopter blades but that doesn't take away from the overall image. And the image screams money.

The second man, shorter and a little younger, is Sergio Close, his right hand. I dealt with him recently during the contract negotiations and he greets me with a nod.

I size up Chris; there is no mistaking him for anything but a city slicker with deep pockets. I don't believe he would know anything about running a small resort like Red Willow.

Let's hope he doesn't try to change everything overnight, I think noting the nervous glances shared among the staff.

But that's not all.

There's a woman.

She is young. And for a moment I wonder if she is the daughter. I think I read it somewhere online. He has a kid from his first marriage.

But then I spot the wedding rings.

So she is the second wife.

The woman gets out of the helicopter last and I'm honestly not sure whether to laugh or be even more irritated by this big city takeover.

Her tiny halter top and white pants are already soaking in the deluge. She's trying desperately to tame her unnaturally white hair—like someone even cares how she looks when it's pouring out—but the wind is merciless and it really gives her a taste of the mountains in the rainy weather.

I note that her husband doesn't offer her his arm for support. She totters on her high heels through the green field, completely unaware of what awaits her.

And I'm a little too nervous myself to notice the looming disaster.

Rafe sees her and, overjoyed by the visitor, races forward with abandon. His muddy paws launch from the ground and target their mark.

The woman shrills in horror as his claws rip through her white outfit, leaving a violent brown stain that mars her perfect appearance.

"Rafe!" someone calls out, beckoning the dog away from Mrs. Caddell.

Fuck, so much for good first impressions.

There's a bit of panicked activity. Caddell seems furious for about two seconds but it's raining so we need to get this party going under the roof.

The introductions commence as we walk toward the hotel and hide from the onslaught of the elements under the entrance canopy. I quickly shake hands with Chris and his entourage.

He does introduce the blonde to everyone as his wife Kenzie while she stands off to the side, a wet doll picking at the dirt stains on her pants.

I don't get a chance to greet her before Chris speaks up.

"Mr. Holt, come by my cottage in thirty minutes," he says. The man doesn't beat around the bush. "We need to discuss some things."

"Of course," I reply, trying to keep my emotions in check. Good thing the Marines taught me how to do that well. "I'll see you there."

"Make it twenty," he barks out.

As the couple walks toward the golf cart that's taking them to their accommodations, I can't help but steal another glance at Kenzie.

She seems a little too young for him.

But then again, who am I to judge?

My heart skips a bit as she turns her head and our glances lock accidentally.

Those deep brown eyes are sad and hollow.

I tear my gaze away, feeling foolish for letting myself be distracted. *Stay sharp*, I tell myself in the privacy of my mind.

Taking a deep breath, I walk toward Caddell's cottage, still irritated by the unexpected, crack-of-dawn arrival. The rain stopped and the air is clean and fresh.

The Caddells are staying in the larger, luxury cabin by the creek. We only have three on the property and they are typically booked by couples who want a quiet romantic getaway in the country.

As I approach, I catch a glimpse of Kenzie on the side deck, wrapped in a large scarf and now wearing clean pants. While she doesn't notice me, I have a pretty decent view, and like the fool that I am, I study her instead of turning the other way. She is of a slight build, with an oval-shaped face and plump lips. And zero tan, which I find odd. From my experience, most people from LA, especially those with money, are addicted to tan. Kenzie Caddell is quite pale and fragile looking. The growing disparity between the wife and the husband only fuels my curiosity.

"Come on in," Chris says, opening the door to his office as I knock. I step inside, trying to keep my frustration in check. I'm still salty over the helicopter arrival. Normal people just drive up.

"Can I offer you a drink?" he asks, gesturing to a bottle of expensive-looking whiskey on the desk.

"Thank you, but it's eight in the morning and I'm working right now," I decline, even though part of me craves the burn of alcohol to help steady my nerves. I don't like that.

"Suit yourself." Chris pours himself a glass and settles into the leather chair. He takes a sip, watching me with cool, assessing eyes. "Now, about that dog..."

"His name is Rafe," I supply, suddenly defensive.

"Whose is it?"

"He's not anyone's dog, really. He just lives here on the property."

"Get rid of him," Chris orders flatly, his voice devoid of emotion.

"Excuse me?" I reply, taken aback.

"Your dog ruined my wife's outfit," he continues, setting his glass down with a deliberate thud. "I don't want him around."

"Mr. Caddell, I apologize for the incident, and I assure you it won't happen again. Rafe will stay away from your wife," I try to remain polite despite the anger simmering beneath the surface. The fate of everyone else working at the resort depends on it. Can't let my emotions fuck it all up. "If it helps, I'm willing to take a cut from my paycheck to cover the cost of her damaged clothing."

Chris laughs, shaking his head. "Mr. Holt, your entire paycheck wouldn't begin to cover the cost of one article of clothing my wife wears." His words are dripping with condescension, and I clench my fists to keep from reacting.

"Regardless," I say, swallowing my pride. "I will make sure Rafe stays away."

The man stares at me as if he wants to burn me with his eyes. "See that you do," Chris replies after a while, raising his glass in a mock toast before taking another sip of whiskey.

The tension between us is palpable, but we both maintain the pretense of civility.

As I leave the office, I can't shake the feeling that this is only the beginning of our troubles.



Kenzie

"This place is unbearable," I tell Chris the following day.

It's been raining nearly non-stop since we arrived and I feel like I'm suffocating in this house, like the walls are closing in on me from all sides.

There's no reception unless I go into the kitchen and stand by the window with my hand up in the air.

There are some suspicious bugs out on the deck.

Yuk.

And my husband doesn't bother to give me a tour or introduce me to people working here properly.

Plus there's a dog.

I'm terrified of pets in general.

And the dog is overly friendly.

And I don't remember how to be friendly in return.

"It's the change," Chris says without looking up from the stack of papers he's reading through. "But it's for the best, love. You'll see."

"Are you serious right now?"

He nods. "Yes."

"I want to leave."

"Sure," he mutters, clearly not paying attention.

"I'm an alien."

"Absolutely."

"Chris!"

Lastly, he tears his gaze from the papers.

"I said I'm an alien."

"I've made us lunch plans for Sunday. Need my wife with me."

Of course, he does.

The car jerks forward as it leaves the resort, and I peer out the window.

The sun is finally out and it's not as dreadful and wet outside anymore and I suppose the thick blanket of trees stretching far into the horizon and the mountain range are impressive but I find all this overwhelming. Instead of feeling relaxed or at ease, a cold dread envelops me when I take in my unfamiliar surroundings.

This isn't the city with its recognizable streets, shops, and people. This isn't a place I'm used to or the place I know. We are strangers to each other. These lands and me.

I glance at Chris as the driver takes us to the horse racing event my husband has been raving about all week. Presently, he's fully absorbed in his phone, dealing with business affairs. My gaze shifts back to the passing landscape outside the window and I watch the hills roll by until my husband is done with his call.

I turn to Chris and attempt to start a conversation. "Who are these investors we're meeting?"

His dark eyes pierce through me, unreadable behind his designer sunglasses. All he says is an ominous reply of, "Important people," before

turning back to the winding road ahead.

“Tell me.”

“Why?”

“I want to be a part of whatever it is you’re doing.”

“Just remember to smile and look pretty.” He pats my knee and returns to his phone to make yet another call.

I suppress a sigh and try to focus on the scenery again. There’s nothing else to do anyway.

If I had any doubt before that I'd be brought along as a mere accessory to his dealings, this doubt is gone when we arrive at the racetrack.

It’s clear Chris doesn’t plan on even attempting to involve me in the conversations that take place.

Apparently, all I’m good for is just being next to him.

I’m bored and I simply watch how the towering stands slowly fill with people. I watch the horses line up on the track, sleek and powerful, ready for action. I watch the flags of various colors flutter in the wind. There are scents everywhere: hay mixed with leather, fresh popcorn, cotton candy, cigarette smoke.

A hint of petrol drifts through the air, mixed with sweat and beer from those who have been drinking all day.

I do try to feign interest as the men I don’t know discuss potential investments. After years of being married to Chris, I still don’t understand the jargon. Not because I'm dumb. I think it’s mostly because he doesn’t let me into his world. He doesn’t really explain anything when I ask either.

Lastly, the track comes alive with the flurry of activity and the main event of the day begins. There's a loud pop that startled me and the horses take off and thunder down the track, kicking up dust.

The stalls are filled with screams.

“They're majestic,” I murmur, my eyes drawn to the animals flying across the track.

“You like them?” Chris pats my wrist and smiles at me but that smile is gone just as fast as it appeared.

“Yes. They are absolutely breathtaking.”

“Indeed,” he replies dismissively.

The drive back to the resort feels even longer than before, the silence between Chris and me a tangible weight. As we approach the property, I spot the huge eyesore of a barn I’ve come to despise ever since I saw it.

Ironically, it stands as a constant reminder of how out of place I feel here.

It looms and looms and looms and grows bigger until it’s covered up most of the sky I see from my seat in the car through the window.

The faded, red boards are usually a striking contrast against the green backdrop of the forests surrounding the resort. Now that the sun has dropped low and is about to disappear and those trees have turned into yellows and oranges and reds, the barn seems to fit in.

“It’s abysmal,” I mutter, trying to spark some kind of conversation.

The thing is big. Like a statement of sorts.

“Apparently, it’s what attracts a lot of clients when they book events,” Chris replies curtly, his gaze fixed on the road ahead.

I look away, biting my lips to keep from saying anything more because his phone rings. He doesn’t like to be disturbed when he’s on call.

As we continue down a winding road through the property, I catch sight of people working around the resort, and there he is—Maverick Holt.

He’s standing near the dark green truck that has seen better days, looking every bit as mysterious as the day I arrived.

His eyes follow the car as we continue down the path and when I look out the window, our gazes lock for a moment.

It’s late afternoon and the sun has painted the entire resort and the

mountains into various shades of red and maybe that's why there's a tiny flicker of flame sparks in the pit of my stomach, the moment our eyes meet. His are sky blue and intense and strikingly different against the backdrop of other colors. They remind me of the Oregon waterfalls in summer. There's also certain darkness in them, the kind that deep loneliness brings.

I think I may know it too.

He's quite tall, almost Chris's height, with broad shoulders and a trim waist, and his raven-black hair is pulled into tight a ponytail at the nape of his neck, but I imagine if he were to let it loose, it'd shimmer down his back like a curtain of silk.

My heart flips in my chest and I force myself to look away.

Why do I care so much about this man?

He's nothing more than my husband's employee.

"Chris," I start hesitantly as soon as he ends his call. "What happened with the dog?"

"He's communal," Chris says dismissively. "He won't bother you anymore. If he does, let me know and we'll get rid of him for good."

"Okay," I murmur, but my thoughts are elsewhere, lingering on the man who seems to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders.

As the car pulls up to our cabin, I can't shake the feeling that life at Red Willow Resort is about to become much more complicated.

Two days later, I'm stirred awake by a brush of fingertips on my shoulder. "Wake up, Kenzie," Chris whispers into my ear and strokes the side of my face. "I have a surprise for you."

"Ugh, what time is it?" I mumble, rubbing my eyes.

"Early," he replies mysteriously. "Come on, get dressed. We're going outside."

Begrudgingly, I slip out of bed and pull on some clothes. As I follow Chris out the door, he instructs me to close my eyes. I obey, placing my hand on his arm for guidance.

As we walk, I listen to the sounds around me—birds chirping in the trees, the gentle rustle of leaves, and the distant murmur of voices. It doesn't sound as horrible as I thought it would.

Adrenaline pulses through my veins. I have to admit to myself that I'm excited. Chris finally giving me some attention after all this time feels like a lifeline being tossed out in the middle of a raging storm.

"No peeking," he says excitedly as I strain to hear hints of noises carried by the wind.

We keep walking.

God, how far is it?

Is he taking me to Alaska?

"Okay, open your eyes," my husband says what seems like three miles later.

I do.

My breath is caught in my throat at the sight before me.

An exquisite white horse stands serenely on the grass on the other side of the fence, its silky mane reflecting the bright morning sunlight.

It's beautiful and I'm speechless.

"What do you think?" Chris places a quick kiss on my cheek.

I stare at the horse for a long time before my gaze shifts from the animal to my smiling husband.

"Chris, this is... a surprise," I begin slowly.

"Do you like her?"

"I do."

"It's yours, my love."

"But why? What's the occasion?"

He chuckles and leads me into the fenced-off area to get closer to the

horse. He runs his hand along its neck fondly. "Consider it an early anniversary present," he says with a wink. "And what better way to make sure you enjoy your time here while I'm away overseas?"

"Wait, you're leaving again?" I ask, disappointment seeping into my voice.

"Unfortunately, yes," he admits. He even has the audacity to pretend to look genuinely apologetic. "I promise it'll be a quick trip. In the meantime, I hired a trainer to come and teach you how to ride."

"Thank you, Chris." I force out a smile. But deep down, I can't shake the feeling that this extravagant gift is more of a bribe than a genuine show of affection.

Animals up close have always intimidated me. Perhaps, it's one of the reasons I left that tiny spec of a town in central Oregon.

I prefer watching, which is what I do once Chris leaves. I visit Snowfall several times but I don't approach. Instead, I stand on the knoll overlooking her pasture and observe her for some time before one evening I gather enough courage to greet her properly.

She's been kept in a paddock on the eastern side of the property and I have to walk a good mile to get there, which is fine because the weather has finally come around and is no longer trying to pretend it's fall when it's the middle of July.

My heart races and my hand trembles slightly as I allow myself inside the paddock.

Fingers hovering inches from her soft, snowy coat, I take a deep breath, reach out, and touch her, feeling a thrill of connection when she doesn't shy away.

"Hey, girl," I whisper, trying to sound braver than I feel. "We're going to

be great friends, I promise."

I hope.

Snowfall whinnies.

The last of the sunlight fades from the sky, as purple and pink hues creep across the resort. One of the staff members drifts by, tending to their nightly duties. I reluctantly pull myself away from Snowfall, feeling the pang of loneliness and irritation that always seems to accompany Chris's departures. The staff member disappears around the corner again, and I begin to walk back toward our cottage. Suddenly, a dark shadow sneaks up at me from the nearest bushes, silent as a ghost. Every hair on my body stands on end.

It's that damn dog again.

Panic sets in and I halt in my tracks, my pulse skittering.

The dog bounds over, wet tongue hanging out of his muzzle, his tail wagging furiously.

I glance around, trying to see if anyone is around while the dog launches his paws at my two-thousand-dollar pair of Levi's.

Hands in the air, I yelp in surprise, momentarily forgetting Chris's assurances that the dog wouldn't bother me anymore.

"Hey, boy, come here," a deep voice calls out, and I look up to see a male figure approaching.

The man is backlit by the disappearing evening sun but I know it's Maverick before his face comes into focus.

He gives me an apologetic smile as the dog finally decides my jeans are of no interest to him. "Sorry about that, Mrs. Caddell. He's harmless, just a little too excited sometimes."

"Can you ask him not to attack me anymore?" I say, my heart still pounding from the unexpected encounter, my words tripping over each other.

Maverick's left brow arches. "I sure can," he says and I swear I catch a hint of mockery in his voice. "But Rafe's a dog. Sometimes, he's got a mind of his own. He's just happy to see people."

Maverick drops into a crouch and scratches the dog behind the ears, and I can't help but notice the way the fading sunlight plays across the intricate feather designs on his muscular forearm.

Chris has no tattoos. He thinks they are brands and his skin is too precious for this kind of abuse. I disagree but he doesn't need to know.

"So, how are you finding life at Red Willow, Mrs. Caddell?" Maverick asks. "Everything up to your liking?"

"It's a little wild, and the cell reception is horrible," I admit, surprising myself with my honesty. "But I'm trying to make the best of it. I'm sure I'll get used to it eventually."

"We have a landline." Maverick stands up and shifts his blue gaze from the dog to me. "Are you planning on staying long?"

"Don't know yet." I clear my throat. "Are you bothered by our presence?"

"We are just simple people doing our jobs," he says cryptically. "Trying to make the boss and his family happy."

"I think you are doing a great job." I have no clue what it is that these people are doing. Chris never cared to explain the intricacies of this business.

But I see Maverick and the rest of the team constantly occupied by tasks. It's only fair to acknowledge it.

"If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to ask," the man says.

"Thank you. Likewise." My gaze lingers on him as he walks away until he's just a dot against the green wall of the massive pines.



Maverick

Tension snakes through the resort staff like a live wire even though no changes have taken place yet. Chris Caddell is hardly ever on the property. He spent maybe a total of four days at the resort ever since his arrival nearly a month ago.

Still, everyone is on edge, waiting for changes to hit. New ownership, new rules, new expectations. And even if he's gone, his presence lingers.

Besides, his wife is here.

Although, I'm not sure how much say she has in his dealings.

Without counting the time Rafe got too close for comfort to the boss's wife, I've only seen Kenzie Caddell from a distance—eating breakfast in the resort's sole cafe, jogging around the perimeter, and making an effort to ride her new horse, Snowfall.

I try my best to stay away.

I try to make sure Rafe does too.

"Some people have too much money," Rolly says, passing by as I'm working on fixing a fence damaged by a recent mudslide. "I heard that horse cost him a quarter of a million."

I don't know where Rolly obtained that information. I don't grace him with a response.

I have a long list of tasks to do.

I'm not going to watch the boss's wife riding a horse.

Even if the visual is tempting.

Okay, I confess, the other night, I asked Google who she was and apparently, she modeled swimwear for a living before she married the man. Typical.

High-maintenance city gal chasing a life of luxury. I've met women like this before. They are pretty on the outside and empty on the inside.

I wipe the sweat from my brow as I hammer another nail into the fence, securing a loose board. The sun beats down on me, and I can feel its heat penetrating my skin, adding to the tension that's already running high at Red Willow.

I clench my jaw and force myself to look away from Kenzie Caddell, redirecting my attention back to the fence.

Why does she have to be here?

And why do I care so much about what she's doing?



Kenzie

I can feel the undercurrent of annoyance in Maverick's gaze as he secretly watches me while working on that fence right outside the paddock.

Objectively speaking the man is an eye-candy. I'm married but I'm not blind.

But that darn dog of his and that permanent frown. I don't appreciate the attitude in general.

Verdict: Maverick Holt annoys me.

With Chris gone and my restlessness growing by the minute, I decide to do something daring for once. Riding Snowfall without the trainer feels like a chance to prove myself.

I don't know if my desire for independence is born out of the subconscious need to show everyone at the resort that I'm not just some spoiled city girl, but I don't try to question it.

Overthinking is not good for me, according to my counselor whom I used to see after... the loss of Strawberry.

"Alright, Snowfall," I murmur one evening, approaching her with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. "Let's see what we can do together."

Her dark eyes meet mine, and she seems to understand my intentions. She allows me to slip the bridle over her head and guide her toward the riding arena. My heart flutters in my chest as I climb into the saddle, feeling both liberated and terrified at the same time.

"Easy now," I whisper, urging Snowfall forward with a gentle squeeze of my calves. She responds immediately, her powerful strides sending a thrill down my spine.

As we move around the perimeter of the fenced-off area, I try to remember everything the trainer taught me about balance, posture, and control.

But without his watchful eye, I still feel a little uncertain.

The wind picks up, rustling the leaves and the grass and causing Snowfall to spook.

"Whoa, easy girl," I plead, but it's too late.

She rears back suddenly, and I lose my balance and along with it—my grip on the reins.

My heart thunders against my chest as I battle to keep the horse under control. But the power of gravity is too strong and I plummet from the saddle like a stone, crashing into the hard ground as shockwaves of agony rip through my neck and down my right leg.

My vision blurs as I gasp for breath, writhing in pain.

Heavy footsteps approach me and a voice that's so familiar grasps my attention.

"Kenzie? Are you okay?"

Maverick's handsome face comes into view, etched with worry.

"Ugh... My ankle," I manage to groan out, struggling against the throbbing ache in my leg. "I think... I messed up."

I attempt to lever myself off the ground but he stops me, placing his hand on my shoulder to steady me.

"No, don't move. You could make it worse." He turns away and sends out

a flurry of words to someone passing by, "Call Jackie!"

"She's already gone for the day!"

He curses under his breath before turning back to me. "Our nurse already left," he explains with regret echoing in his words. "Lie still," he says softly. "Let me make sure we can transport you safely." His eyes scan my body, lingering on my injured leg. Reaching out, he wraps strong fingers around my ankle, testing it for any abnormal movement. Though the touch sends fresh pain shooting up my limb, his grip is surprisingly tender.

Maverick then moves his hands to my head, softly cupping my cheeks and turning my face from side to side as he searches for signs of concussion. His touch is careful yet firm, practiced in the art of diagnosis.

"It's probably best we take you to the hospital," he concludes.

"Hospital?" I struggle to get out despite not being able to draw air into my lungs.

Maverick nods solemnly, then offers me his hand and helps me stand. A searing hot spike of agony radiates from my right leg and I cry out in pain. Unfazed, Maverick scoops me up into his arms and carries me to his truck, telling me reassuringly, "Just hang in there."

The smell of antiseptic cleaner stings my nostrils as I limp into the tiny emergency room waiting area, leaning against Maverick's shoulder. The starkly white walls and harsh fluorescent lighting create an oppressive atmosphere that seems to reverberate in my bones like thunder. My ankle throbs with pain and my neck aches, so I curl up in a chair and shut my eyes to ward off the overwhelming sense of dread that threatens to consume me.

I hate hospitals.

The fact that Chris had gone all out financially for the instructor and the horse, yet I still failed to stay in the saddle, only amplifies my

embarrassment.

Maverick sits beside me, his calming presence a stark contrast to my emotional turmoil.

"I'm sorry if I'm inconveniencing you," I tell him.

"Hey, don't worry about it," Maverick says softly "Accidents happen."

I glance over at him, taking in the genuine concern etched onto his face.

I honestly thought he hated me but the man dropped everything he was doing and drove me here.

Deep down I'm grateful.

The waiting room is small and there are just a couple of people here. An elderly couple and a mother with a toddler. I shift in my seat to ensure the child is not in my line of vision. Then I mentally cross my fingers that we don't have to spend all night here and that I don't have a concussion.

"I feel so...stupid," I confess.

"You're fine," Maverick replies. "Trust me, I've seen worse," he chuckles, attempting to lighten the mood.

"Really?" I ask, curious to know more.

"Yep." he nods. "Once had a guy fall out of a tree trying to impress a girl. Broke both his legs and his pride."

Despite my pain, I find myself amused by the story.

We share a quiet giggle. Maverick's laugh is subtle but infectious and in that moment, I realize how much I've missed this simple human connection.

I wish it was my husband taking me to the hospital, not some stranger who doesn't like me much. But Chris is overseas.

"Kenzie Caddell?" a nurse calls out. She motions for me to follow her, and I struggle to my feet, wincing at the pain in my ankle.

"Here, let me help you," Maverick offers, deftly slipping his arm around my waist for support. His touch sends a shiver down my spine, and I can't help but lean into him as we make our way to the exam room.

An hour later the doctor enters the room with a solemn expression on his face.

He glances at the X-ray results before turning to me with a reassuring smile. "You do not have a concussion."

I breathe a sigh of relief and glance at Maverick, who's been sitting with me all this time.

Our gazes lock and I feel warmth spreading through my stomach.

Uh-oh.

This is not good.

"As for your ankle," the doctor goes on. "It's just a sprain. You'll need to rest it for a few days and avoid putting any weight on it."

"Thank you," I say, my voice shaky with gratitude.

I guess I'm not riding Snowfall any time soon.

"Of course. Take care, Mrs. Caddell," he replies. "The nurse will have your discharge papers."

Maverick extends his arm. "See, not so bad." I cling to him for support and limp out of the examination room.

We pick up my discharge papers and slowly make our way out of the hospital to his truck.

The cool night air is a welcome reprieve from the sterile hospital environment, and I breathe it in deeply, somehow feeling more alive than I have in months even though the painkillers haven't kicked in yet.

I don't hate the stars above us. And I don't hate the scent of pines.

"How are you holding up?" Maverick checks, as he pulls the door open for me.

"Better now that I know it's only a sprain," I admit, climbing into the passenger seat.

"Good. You had me worried there for a minute," he says, starting the

engine.

"Me too," I agree, laughing nervously.

We fall into a comfortable silence, the hum of the truck's engine filling the space between us.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" I venture after a while.

"Sure."

"What's a Red Willow Festival?"

The other day, right before Chris's departure, I overheard him discussing it with Sergio. My husband didn't seem too thrilled about it.

"It's a food and music festival showcasing local talent," Maverick explains. "Everyone who lives in or near Beaver Crossing is invited to participate."

"Sounds fun."

"It is." Maverick is silent for a few minutes as if thinking about the words he plans on saying to me next. When he speaks, his voice is laced with a bit of tense sadness. "It's a tradition started by Ed's family—they used to have a single day when they thanked everyone who lived and worked on the resort. Over time, it's grown, and now the guests of the resort are welcome to attend."

"Am I invited too?"

"Of course," he says immediately. "It's a celebration of our shared history as a community."

"You mentioned everyone is invited?"

"Yep."

"Then who's going to work the property during the festival?" I ask, genuinely curious.

Maverick shrugs. "Officially, the resort is closed for the day, but we kinda wing it. Everyone pitches in if the guests need anything. We make it work."

The pills take hold of my body, numbing me from the inside out as he pulls up in front of my cottage. My head is a dizzy blur, and I can feel

everything spinning around me like a carousel gone mad.

"Do you need help to get inside?" he asks, reading himself.

"No, don't get out. I'm good." I fling myself out of his truck before he realizes that the meds are really doing a number on me. It's not embarrassment this time that scares me away, it's the memory of his strong arm wrapped around my body and that warm sensation at the bottom of my stomach that screams "danger." "I really appreciate your help tonight," I blurt out, my tongue hardly listening.

"Anytime," he replies, frowning. "You're sure you'll be okay?"

"Positive." I nod, hobbling toward the stairs.

As the car pulls away from the cottage, a wave of loneliness washes over me. Chris' absence is like a gaping wound in my chest and I can't think anything but that the space next to me should have been filled by my husband and not Maverick Holt.



Maverick

The next day is my day off, and I head into town to run some errands. Among my tasks, I pick up Ed's medication refill at the local pharmacy and pay a visit to the old man.

Ed has moved off the property and now stays in a small cabin just outside of town, waiting for Syllas to come and take him to San Francisco.

When I pull up to the property, I find the old man sitting on the porch, staring wistfully at the view of the mountains.

"Hey, Ed," I call as I approach, holding up the small paper bag from the pharmacy.

"Good to see you, son," Ed says warmly, his eyes crinkling in a genuine smile. "How's the new boss?" he asks as I settle into an empty chair next to him.

"He's all right," I reply. "Gone most of the time." I don't mention the wife even though she's been occupying my mind ever since the horse-riding incident. I haven't seen her around and I'm wondering if she's okay.

"That's good." Ed nods in agreement.

"You're coming to the festival, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"Good!"

He sighs. "Could be my last Red Willow event."

He's not wrong.

Sylas is adamant about taking his father into the city to keep him close... And that's understandable. Ed is seventy-six. He should be enjoying the rest of his days in peace.

As Ed and I continue to chat about the resort, Old Joe, a rancher who lives nearby, ambles over to join us. The three of us sit together and shoot the shit for a while.

"Been seein' some strange folks lately," Old Joe mentions casually, scratching his beard. "Hangin' around the borders of my property. Look like city people, if you ask me."

"What exactly do they look like?" I ask inquisitively.

"Well," Old Joe starts slowly. "They all dress real fancy-like in suits and shiny shoes... not exactly what you'd expect out here. Suspicious folks."

I furrow my brow with concern. "Call me if you need anything, alright?" I tell him.

"Yep." Old Joe nods. "Not sure what they're up to, but I don't like it."

I tuck this information away, wondering if these strangers have any connection to Chris Caddell.

After all, who else could it be?

As I'm about to take my leave a couple of hours later, my resolve strengthens—I'll do whatever it takes to protect this place and its people.

"Take care, Ed," I say as I head to my truck. "I'll be keeping an eye on things."

"Thanks, Maverick. You're a good man," Ed replies, his voice full of gratitude and trust.

I turn up the music and I drive back into town while evening settles over the small valley, painting the sky in deep shades of crimson and violet. It's

pretty outside but I feel a little restless after my conversation with Old Joe.

I'm hungry too and I decide to kill two birds with one stone, so I seek food and solace in the familiar atmosphere of Lone Bear, the only bar in Bear Crossing.

It's still early for the dinner rush when I step inside, the door creaking shut behind me.

There are a couple of local guys playing darts and there's a baseball game on TV. Its low drone in the background is punctuated by shouts of frustration from a single spectator, Tiny Mick. He's a burly man in his fifties and a huge Giants fan.

"Hey, Maverick," the bartender greets, pouring me a whiskey without needing to ask.

I nod my thanks and take a seat, absently playing with one of my leather bracelets as I sip my drink. "How's business, Coop?"

"Decent," he supplies. He's a fellow veteran His real name is Riley Cooper but he prefers Coop. Nickname stuck with him since his days in the military. He's also the owner of Lone Bear. "How's the new ownership?"

"So far not too bad. Not many changes."

"Hopefully, it'll stay that way."

"Hopefully," I agree.

"Want to order some food?"

"Yeah. I'm starving, man."

Coop hands me the menu and after scanning it for a few minutes, I get my usual, chicken pastrami sandwich and medium fries.

"You should try the burger next time," Coop suggests.

"Why mess with a good thing?"

"You're too predictable." Coop barks out a short laugh and disappears into the kitchen to tell Stacy to prep my sandwich.

The dim lighting and the chatter of the growing crowd provide some sense of comfort as I slowly eat my modest dinner, but my thoughts keep

drifting back to Kenzie Caddell.

Should I stop by her cottage to make sure she's okay?

Woah, Mav!

You better put an end to this before it's too late.

"Hey there, handsome," a sultry voice purrs off to the side, drawing my attention away from my food and drink.

A local gal, Denise slides onto the stool next to me, her eyes studying me with interest. "You look like you could use some company."

I give her a tight-lipped smile, hoping she'll take the hint and leave me be. But she persists, leaning closer and letting her fingers brush against my arm.

"Come on, Mav. You've been alone for too long," she whispers, her breath warm against my ear. "Let's go somewhere more... private?"

"Sorry," I respond, trying to maintain some level of politeness. "I'm not interested."

Denise is a beautiful woman in her early thirties, with bright red hair and curves in all the right places. She has been the object of desire for many of Beaver Crossing's men. I think if the circumstances were different, I wouldn't have shied away from her offer. We could have had some real fun together. But I can't bring myself to engage in any sort of physical intimacy, not when the memory of Jo still lingers so vividly in my mind. Even all these years later.

Denise seems taken aback by my refusal. "Are you sure, Mav?" she asks insistently. "I'm not trying to get you to marry me. Just wanting to help you release all that tension." Her fingers slide to my neck, massaging my tight muscles there.

"I appreciate the offer," I say politely, guiding her hand from me as gently as possible and placing it back in her lap where it belongs. "But I'm really good."

Eventually, she slinks away, leaving me to my food and my thoughts.

I get a refill on my drink. Then another one.

"Closing up, Maverick," the bartender announces, snapping me out of my reverie sometime later.

I finish the last of my whiskey, drop some cash on the counter, and make my way to my truck. It's getting late but I'm buzzed, so I opt out for a quick nap in my vehicle before returning to the resort.

I'm not risking getting DUI.

The shuteye helps.

I'm sober when I wake up around 1 AM.

As I lie in bed once I get to my cabin, my thoughts drift to Kenzie again.

God, I don't want her in my head.

Still, I sift through the images of her in the ER, remembering how vulnerable she looked. She was messy with disheveled hair and clothes and somehow that made her seem real.

It's an image that stays with me as I finally fall asleep.

Days pass before Chris returns to the resort, his arrival marked by a flurry of activity.

Thankfully, he doesn't bother with the resort business.

My stomach lurches as Rolly takes me aside in the break room one evening. He rubs his fingers over his stubbly chin and says, "Mav, have you heard something about this new boss of ours? He's talking about canceling the festival."

I tear my gaze away from the clipboard I'm holding and gape at him. "That's news to me," I reply cautiously. But knowing Rolly... He's a huge gossip, so I take everything he tells me with a grain of salt.

He exhales heavily and scuffs his shoe on the floor. "It'd be a real bummer if it gets canceled. We've already ordered the band and catering..."

I give him an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry—I'll get to

the bottom of this.”

But before I find a chance to actually speak to Chris Caddell about the matter, an opportunity for conversation turns up when I accidentally bump into Kenzie.

It's right outside the paddock the day after Rolly drops the bomb about the festival. I come by to check on the fence I repaired and Kenzie is there, staring at Snowfall.

"I guess I'm not riding anytime soon," she says with a small smile as I approach with my toolbox in hand.

"Plenty of other things to do here. Waterfalls are the strongest right now. Although, you may want to take it easy for another few days." My voice is softer than usual. "I haven't seen you outside. How are you feeling?"

"Better, thank you," she replies, her stride still a little unsteady as she takes a few clumsy steps forward. "Still a bit sore, but healing."

"I'm glad."

We stand at the precipice of goodbye when I decide it wouldn't hurt to try and find out about the festival and its uncertain fate through Kenzie. "Folks aren't happy with your husband's decision. Word is he might cancel the festival. Do you know if that's true?"

My gaze locks into hers, and she looks up at me with those big sad intense eyes and asks quietly, "Would it be better if he didn't?"

A depth of unknown emotion in her gaze threatens to drown me and I glance away as I reply without hesitation. "Definitely. It brings people together and creates a sense of unity among the employees and guests and the locals in general. Everyone's been waiting for this event for months now."

She nods thoughtfully and says, "I'll see what I can do."

Then we part ways.



Kenzie

Boredom gnaws at me, creeping into my veins as I stare out the cabin window. Chris is away on business again, and my ankle, though improving, still aches with every step. One thing is for sure: I'm not riding Snowfall anytime soon. If ever.

I'm terrified of breaking my bones.

The vast, untouched nature—specifically the looming granite mountains surrounding the cabin somehow only amplify my loneliness.

In an attempt to distract myself, I turn my attention back to researching colleges. It's been years since I've thought about higher education, but now the idea of learning something new feels urgent, like a fire burning inside me.

There's a knock followed by the creak of the door.

"Good morning, Mrs. Caddell," Helen, our housekeeper assigned to our cottage, chimes as she enters.

"Morning, Helen." I tear my gaze from my laptop. "How are you?"

I don't talk to her when she comes by, but today the need for some human interaction is too strong.

"Keeping busy," she replies sternly, bustling around with her cleaning

supplies. "But it's good to keep busy, isn't it?"

I can tell she doesn't like me much. No one actually does at this resort. Except perhaps, Maverick Holt. Or maybe he pretends to be nice to me because of Chris. And because of the festival.

I watch the housekeeper from the corner of my eye while surfing the net for more college info.

"You've been working here a long time?" I brave a question.

"Twenty years, believe it or not," Helen says with pride.

"Wow, that's a long time. I heard your kids are in college?" I ask, drawing from the snippets of conversations I'd overheard during her previous visits when she discreetly picked up a few phone calls.

"They are." She smiles fondly. "Down south. In San Diego. All grown up and flying the nest, my two little birds."

"Is Maverick a good manager?" I probe, immediately wanting to take it back. But it's too late. "He seems to really enjoy working here."

Helen pauses, considering the question while giving me a side-eye. Yep, asking her about him was a mistake.

"He's great at what he does. Your husband should keep him around. Maverick knows the resort better than anyone."

"Really?"

"Absolutely." Helen continues to dust. "Should've been his anyway," she mumbles, almost too low for me to hear.

"What do you mean?" I ask, puzzled by her comment.

Helen's eyes widen as she realizes her slip-up. "Oh, nothing, dear." She quickly moves away from the living room and into the kitchen, busying herself with her cleaning duties.

I shut my laptop and rise up from the couch to follow her under the pretense of needing water.

I'm intrigued.

Helen avoids my gaze. "I'd better go get some more towels for you, Mrs.

Caddell," she says coldly and leaves only to never return. Instead, another housekeeper comes back to finish the job and collect her cleaning supplies thirty minutes later.

So much for human interaction.

With a sigh, I return to my laptop and continue researching colleges.

The moment Chris steps through the door several days later, his dark eyes scan the room, taking in my presence. I can tell he's been traveling out of state, possibly into another time zone; there's a tightness around his eyes that speaks of fatigue. But that's of course nothing Botox won't take care of.

"Chris," I greet him, trying to sound welcoming to mask my anxiety. "How was your flight?"

I'm wearing a brand-new designer dress and the diamond earrings he bought me last summer. This is my pathetic attempt to keep our marriage alive.

Chris responds with a curt "Productive" before pressing a frigid kiss onto my cheek. He disappears into the bathroom without a backward glance, leaving me alone as the sound of running water fills the air.

The shower is like a ticking clock counting down until he leaves again.

Later at dinner when the two of us are sitting at the table on the deck, I take a deep breath and bring up the topic I've been so scared to discuss. "Hey, I was thinking... about the festival. I know you consider canceling it, but I hear it's a long-standing tradition here at the resort, and I think it would be such a shame to let it go."

He hesitates, his gaze burning into me as he looks up at my face from his plate. "If you want to keep it going that badly, fine."

"Thank you," I reply, surprised that he agrees without argument. My head swims with thoughts of college, and I finally build up the confidence to

mention it. "There's something else I wanted to talk about... I've been doing research into a few colleges—"

The moment I utter the word college, Chris's face contorts.

"Colleges?" His voice booms, incredulous. "Now? Don't you think you should be focusing on this family instead?"

My heart jumps in my throat as I try to defend myself. "Chris, I'm just trying to find something for myself," I stammer, shaking slightly under his gaze. "If you don't like the idea of me getting back into modeling, then I want to do something else with my life."

"Of course." His dark eyes narrow. "Always thinking about yourself. What about what I want, Kenzie? Have you even considered that?"

My chest tightens and rage rises within me. "Of course I have!" My voice shakes with emotion as tears prick my eyes. "But I can't just give you another child on demand." With a loud thud, I throw the napkin laid out on my lap onto the table before jumping up to my feet.

Chris just stares at me, jaw clenched and nostrils flaring.

"I'm not hungry," I snap before storming out of the cabin without another word.

The chill of the evening air wraps around me like a vise, squeezing tighter with every step I take. My heart hammers in my chest until all I can smell is the musky mixture of pine and dirt in my nostrils.

I'm not enjoying nature at this moment and I would give anything to be able to get an Uber and just leave this place.

I try to tell myself that things will be better soon, that I'm just emotional and unstable because of Strawberry, but this pure undiluted rage at Chris won't go away.

My steps quicken despite the nagging ankle.

As I unknowingly reach what appears to be the opposite edge of the property, the area housing several smaller cabins reveals itself. The rustling of needles against one another and the sound of my footsteps on dead leaves are the only noises; that is until Maverick's silhouette comes into view.

He's seated at a lone BBQ area tucked away in the shadows of the towering pines, with flickering distant light casting his image in and out of focus. The scent of smoke and char wafts through the air, joining with the fragrance of evergreen needles and pinecones scattered around him. It's as if he's taken refuge in a secret garden hidden from the rest of civilization.

His intense blue eyes stare off into the distance, a six-pack of beer resting on the table next to him.

"Mind if I join you?" I ask hesitantly, part of me not really wanting to intrude and part of me craving company.

"Sure. Take a seat." He pats the bench beside him, a bit of concern flickering in his eyes as he notices my limp. "But you're late for dinner."

"I ate, but thanks."

"How's your ankle?"

"Better," I reply, settling down beside him.

He offers a beer and we drink silently at first.

"How long have you been working here?" I ask eventually. I remember what Helen said earlier and I'm curious why she thinks the resort should have gone to Maverick but I don't have the guts to ask him directly.

"Started right after college."

"What did you major in?"

"Business."

"Where at?"

"Berkeley."

"Really?" My curiosity is peaked.

"Why?"

I shrug.

"I don't strike you like the college type?"

"Frankly, not really."

"Don't judge the book by its cover." He takes a swig of his beer and continues to stare into the darkness enveloping the forest around us.

"Why work here and not somewhere in a big city?"

"Not everyone with business degrees is like your husband and wants to own the world. Some of us have to run the small places too."

"I didn't mean to—" I realize I'm not sure what I meant. "I'm sorry if I come off...insensitive."

Maverick is quiet for a long time. And I watch the wind ruffle his hair streaming down his broad back. The sight makes me tingle all over and my fingers ache to touch the silky flyaways but I'm not drunk enough to allow myself to do it.

"That's where I met my wife," Maverick says lastly, his voice deep and low and with a bit of rasp.

He takes another swig of his beer.

I drink mine too. My heart is pounding in my chest. "Is she not in the picture?" I ask carefully, checking his hands even though I already know the answer. He wears no ring and there's no trace of it on his finger either.

"She's gone," he responds simply and then looks at me.

"I'm sorry." I don't know what he means by gone and I don't dare to pry. The topic seems too personal.

It's quiet again and minutes tick by as we continue to drink.

"Enough about me." He breaks the charged silence between us. "Tell me about your modeling career." He tosses more beer down. "How was that?"

"Exciting at times. I've got to meet some really cool people, people I'd admired while growing up, but ultimately... Chris didn't want me to do it anymore," I confess, then add, "He wanted a family." I don't elaborate because I'm not ready to talk about Strawberry out loud.

Maverick nods, his gaze unfocused. He's clearly buzzed and asks a more

daring question that startles me, "What's it like, being married to someone twice your age?"

"Chris is not twice my age," I protest right away. He is after all my husband. It's only fair I protect the image of our marriage. "It's twenty-three. The age difference. I'm twenty-eight."

"Ok, fine," Maverick corrects himself. "What's it like to be in a relationship with someone much older?" He grabs another beer from the pack. "I'm not judging. Just curious how it works with the age difference is all."

I hesitate, then decide to be honest since he was honest with me earlier. "I'm not sure it's working at this point." It's the alcohol talking, of course, not me. "And I'm tired of trying."

He looks at me, his expression intense as he drinks in my designer dress and my expensive earrings. His voice is husky when he says, "You don't need to try. You're already beautiful. Chris is a lucky bastard."

Something crackles between us, heavy and electric. But just as quickly as it appeared, Maverick retreats, abruptly standing up and muttering some half-assed excuse about needing to get up early.

My heart hammers against my ribcage as I step back into the cabin, and my cheeks flush from the heated encounter with Maverick.

The air inside feels oppressive compared to the chilled night outside, and Lita's words reverberate in my head.

He needs to treat you like his partner, not his property.

A white-hot rage builds within me at the thought of confronting Chris who is nowhere in sight. As I make for the bedroom, I hear voices coming from the study. Chris and Sergio are deep in conversation, quite late into the night.

I stop dead in my tracks just outside the door and listen.

"...been a real pain lately," Sergio grumbles, frustration seeping into his tone. "He still refuses to sell."

"Up the offer..." Chris says, voice firm.

"You don't think we've already tried that? The old man is stubborn like a mule."

I'm not *that* drunk but as I strain to focus on their conversation, the words slip and slide away from my grasp like greased eels.

It's not unusual to find my husband bent over his laptop at 3 AM with coffee cooling next to him. That's what happens when you handle billions. Chris works twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Still, something about this oddy-times meeting sets me on edge.

Their voices drop to a whisper and I fail to hear what they are saying. Despite all my effort, not one word is decipherable.

I take a step back from the study door, still wanting to confront Chris, but then I pause.

The timing doesn't feel right.

When I wake up, Chris is gone and his side of the bed is cold.

I don't think he slept at all. And if he did it wasn't with me.

I go through the motions of my morning routine as if on autopilot, dragging myself into the kitchen to pour myself some coffee.

I go see Snowfall around lunch and as I'm strolling through the resort grounds, I notice Maverick approaching with a determined expression. He's carrying his toolbox. His hair pulled into a messy bun at the nape of his neck, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up, revealing the rest of the tat with the feather designs.

It's a dream catcher.

His piercing blue eyes full of intent that contradicts the rest of his defensive body language lock onto mine, and for a moment, I feel a shiver course through me.

Not good, Kenzie.

Not good at all.

His lips press into a tight line as he nears me.

"Hey, about last night," he begins, his voice rough and laced with... regret. "I shouldn't have said what I said. It was disrespectful of me."

I feel... disappointed.

I do not think it's normal.

"Which part?" I ask. Wait. Was that playfulness in my voice?

He hesitates and then adds, "I would appreciate it if you kept it between us." A small smile of embarrassment graces his lips. "I don't want your husband to fire me."

I study him for a few heartbeats. My mind replays our vulnerable exchange yesterday and the undeniable tension that had surged between us. Then, I reply quietly, "My husband doesn't need to know."

The words hang heavy in the air, and the charge of electricity from last night returns with an intensity that makes my breath catch. We're standing close enough for our shadows to meld together, creating an almost tangible connection on the ground.

I realize I'm in big trouble.

I want to ask him questions. About Berkeley. About his tats. About his job.

I want to know everything there's to know about this man.



Maverick

On my next day off, I head over to Ed's cabin with a sense of purpose.

He's leaving and could use some help packing, so I make it a priority over my personal errands.

The sound of my boots crunching against the gravel pathway is drowned out by the gentle rustling of leaves overhead as I walk over to the porch and climb the rickety stairs. When I reach his door, I knock softly, and it creaks open under my touch.

"Hey, Maverick," Ed greets me from across the room, his gray hair tousled from packing. "Come on in."

I step inside and glance around at the mess of boxes and belongings strewn about the living room. "Looks like you've got your hands full here, Ed."

"You bet."

I roll up my sleeves and try to make sense of Ed's packing technique. The old man is a riot. He doesn't even label anything. Looking for stuff when he gets to Frisco will be hell. "When's Syllas coming?"

"Tomorrow," Ed replies, taping shut another box.

"How long is he in town for?" Sylas Irwin is a city boy, who hates it here. I'm surprised he didn't send his boyfriend instead.

"A couple of weeks to help me settle things before we head off to the city."

"Did he put an offer on that condo he was going to get you?"

"He did."

Ed pulls out his cell phone I bought him last year to show me the photos.

"Looks nice," I tell him as we flip through the photos. Sterile and with no character but it's clean and spacious enough, exactly what Ed needs.

"Eh." The old man shrugs. "It'll do."

"He's a good son," I say, picking up a stack of books and placing them in a nearby box. Ed and Sylas may not see face to face but Sylas has always been protective of his father, especially after Jo left us.

As I work alongside Ed, my thoughts unwillingly drift to Kenzie. The guilt gnaws at me like a persistent itch I can't quite scratch away.

An hour later when most of the smaller items in the living room are boxed up and we are seated on the couch, I've finally mustered up enough courage to breach the topic.

"Ed," I begin, pausing to choose my words carefully. "There's something that's been... bothering me lately, and I could really use some advice." My heart races as I prepare to bare my soul to him. I don't know how he'll take this.

"Lay it on me, son" He sets the tape gun aside and turns his full attention to me. "What's on your mind?"

I swallow hard, trying to find the courage to continue. "There's a woman..."

"Ah." A sad smile lights up his face. "Been waiting for you to tell me this for a couple of years now," he admits.

"Not sure if I have the right to have these feelings though."

"Why?"

Because she is married. "Can't let Jo go."

Ed listens intently, his eyes filled with understanding. After a moment, he nods and says, "Maverick, I know my daughter meant the world to you, and she'll always have a special place in your heart. I would want nothing more than for you two to be happy together, grow old, and give me a bunch of grandkids. But life doesn't always work out the way we hope."

"No, it doesn't."

"She's gone now, and you need to let yourself live. She would want you to."

"I'm not sure I remember how."

"Don't give me that bullshit." He pauses, then adds, "You know, I've always considered you my son and I'll still consider you my son when you marry another girl and visit me with your kids. You've done more for me and this resort than my own kid, who doesn't want any part of this business."

His words are kind, offering a balm to my aching heart. I nod, absorbing the advice he offers.

"Thank you, Ed. It means a lot to me. I'll...I'll try."

Later that night, I lie in bed, staring at the wooden ceiling of my cabin and reflecting on Ed's advice. My thoughts are a tangled web of emotions, weaving between desire, guilt, and uncertainty. I roll over and close my eyes, but sleep eludes me.

Kenzie's words from earlier echo in my mind. Her husband doesn't need to know. A shiver runs down my spine as I wonder about her unusual interest in me.

And the interest is mutual.

I'm sensing there's more to her than meets the eye.



Kenzie

With my arms folded across my chest, I stand on the balcony of our cottage and I watch the flurry of activity in the distance. The resort is preparing for the festival later today. Colorful decorations fall like rain from above and pepper the tables set up at the edge of the meadow. People scurry around like ants readying their hive for winter.

Later when I stop by the cafe to get a snack, I pass the barn and the scent of roasting meat wafting through the air is making my mouth water. I'm hungry, I realize. Really hungry. It's strange because I haven't felt hunger—or any other emotions for that matter—in a long time now.

There's laughter everywhere and the hotel staff seems to be so excited you'd think it's Christmas and not some weird local tradition. Men carry crates through the crowds, women wheel carts filled with trays of food, kids dash between legs to escape being trampled by a teenager on break from his duties setting up the seating area. Spotting a young girl trying to untangle a flag that had been tied too tightly together, her mother rushes over and helps her out. The child giggles as they set it free and then waves it triumphantly into the air before running off.

"Mrs. Caddell, how ya doing?" Rolly asks me as we meet on the tight path around the lawn. He's one of those hotel employees who always seems to be around Maverick when I want to get close to the man.

"I'm doing fine," I answer. "How about you?"

"Great!" He thumps his stomach with a smile. "Can't wait for tonight's feast. You should come too! We got some local delicacies lined up."

He obviously doesn't mean it when he says "come", but I know he's aware that being courteous to his boss's wife is no small thing.

"Maybe," I tell him and start walking in the opposite direction.

"Well, in that case, see you there, Mrs. Caddell!"

He marches off to run his errands and I head back to our cottage with a croissant I just bought. My mind is fixated on the BBQ.

The music drifting up toward me from one of the cabins during my walk is a stark contrast to the silence that has settled between Chris and me as of late.

We still haven't talked about what happened the night I ran out on him during dinner.

I suspect he's giving me the silent treatment as part of the punishment but I don't have any plans to give up the idea of college.

Now that he's clearly against it, I want it even more.

In the evening, I make my way down to the festival, the energy of the crowd enveloping me as I join in the celebration. Most guests and stalls with merch congregate around the barn.

Grabbing a fruity cocktail from one of the bar stands, I sip on it while wandering around, watching local families and guests of the hotel enjoying themselves.

There's a band too, a four-piece ensemble that takes the small stage

around seven and plays a series of lively country tunes. The sight of couples dancing hand in hand only amplifies my loneliness.

I'm not going to lie, the only person I kinda want to talk to is Maverick.
But he's nowhere in sight.

"Miss, miss!" a teenager calls me over to one of the stalls with food. They are grilling the meat right in front of the customers. I'm tempted immediately to buy a plate of something very dangerous looking—rice, potatoes, steak bites.

Accepting a plastic fork and knife from the teenager, I stand off to the side near a small round table and a series of wooden posts and pick at the hot food while watching people pet Rafe, who bounds through the crowd, eliciting smiles from everyone he passes.

When he is level with me, I muster up my courage and I reach down to pet him too. His wagging tail tells me he doesn't hate me.

"Hey, wanna try some?" I toss a small piece of steak at him.

He snatches it out of the air.

"Risky, move, Mrs. Caddell," Maverick calls out, emerging from behind the wall of bodies. "You'll have to adopt him if you feed him."

"Oh!" I straighten up. "Was I not supposed to feed him?"

"Only if you don't plan on making it official." Maverick leans his shoulder against a wooden post.

I search his face.

"Just kidding," he says. "But y'know, jokes aside, that stuff ain't even real drinks."

My face feels hot as he gestures to the glass with the tiny umbrella in my hand.

"Ahh... just too many of 'em, I guess," I mumble.

Maverick gives me a warm chuckle. "That's what happens when you drink fake alcohol."

He exudes wild energy and looks effortlessly charming in his worn-out

pair of snug jeans and black shirt. For once, his hair cascades down his shoulders and back like a river of ink, tossed by the wind and catching the sunlight just right when he turns a little

My heart skips a beat, and I can't help it—I'm drawn to him by some inexplicable force.

I don't even think he's my type. He's a little rough around the edges but he makes my blood roar in my vein in a way Chris has never done.

Kenzie, you should walk away before things progress any further.

But instead, I go all in.

"Quite the event you guys have put together here," I say trying to sound casual.

"Couldn't have done it without the whole team," he replies modestly, flashing me a smile that makes my knees weak. "But thank you. It's always nice to bring people together and see them enjoy themselves. This is a small town, small community. They are grateful to your husband for allowing us to continue the tradition."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Thank you too," he says quietly.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" I ask, taking a sip of my cocktail and picking at the potatoes on my paper plate.

"I am." He nods. "What about you? Is Mr. Caddell not going to attend?"

"Mr. Caddell is out of state," I supply. "Business."

"He's gone a lot, your husband," Maverick says, lowering his voice to a sensual rasp and I'm sensing he's not asking this to be polite but for an entirely different reason.

That tiny flame that has been flickering in the pit of my stomach ever since I laid my eyes on this man for the first time comes to life like a California wildfire during dry season.

My eyes lock on Maverick's. "He's a busy man," I whisper, my words lost in the noise of the festival.

"I would imagine."

We are quiet for a minute, simply staring at each other and I'm lost in that smoldering blue gaze of his, like a shipwreck after a storm in the vast ocean. I can't find my way back to the shore, to the safety of the land. And I'm not sure I want to.

"Wanna take a walk?" he offers matter-of-factly.

And I know there's a masked meaning behind that offer.

"Sure."

We wander through the crowd for a bit, until we find ourselves on the fringe of the festivities under the shadows of the large oak tree, stretching its branches far and wide and concealing us from the people.

My cocktail is empty and Maverick grabs us two fresh beers from the stand nearby.

When he hands me the bottle, our fingers brush by accident and I yank my hand away faster than acceptable. Because the touch sets off something in me. Something forgotten, something primal.

He is quick to catch on. His eyes rake my face, darker than usual.

"It's nice," I say, needing to distract myself from the dirty thoughts that all of sudden begin to cram my head—thoughts of Maverick Holt naked.

"It is," he agrees.

"So—" I take a sip of my beer—"are you really having fun, Mr. Holt?"

"You don't have to call me that." he smiles.

"Mr. Holt?"

He cringes. "I'm a simple man."

I doubt it. There's absolutely nothing simple about him.

"How was it? Going to Berkley?" I ask.

He takes a second to respond. "Interesting. Why? Do you have your sights on it?"

"I don't think I'll be returning to modeling," I confess. "I am considering college."

"Why not? Because of your husband?"

"Yes and no. I guess I lost passion for it."

"It happens."

"I want to try taking some classes instead."

"Is there something in particular you want to study?"

"Not sure yet. I thought of photography. Or design. I've always been wondering what it's like to be on the other side of the camera. But I'm still looking into other areas."

Maverick nods but says nothing, just continues to drink his beer.

"Why business?" I inquire.

"Wanted to help Ed with running the resort."

"Ed?"

"The previous owner of Red Willow."

"I see. You two were close?"

"Yes."

There's more but he doesn't say it out loud and I don't ask. Instead, I stick to the topic we are discussing. "Berkeley is hard to get into..."

He glances around the festival. "Yes, it's quite competitive. I wouldn't have made it if not for the state grants and GI bill."

"You served?"

"In the Marines."

Yes, definitely nothing simple about Maverick Holt.

Our eyes meet again and I'm melting under his piercing blue gaze. There's an intensity there that I can't resist anymore, and it pulls me deeper into this moment.

"Tell me something, Kenzie Caddell," Maverick says suddenly, leaning in closer. "Does your husband ever spend time with you?"

It's daring and it's an invitation to something more, something dangerous and I reach out and touch his hand and my skin burns where our fingers connect.

The mix of beer and cocktail makes me a little dizzy as well.

"It's too crowded here," I mouth at him and start walking across the lawn and toward the barn. The grass, longer in places, tickles my ankles but instead of irritation I feel giddy.

He follows me, a silent shadow that smells like fire and bergamot.

My pulse quickens as I leave the noise of the festival behind.

The laughter and music fade, giving way to the buzz of the crickets in the nearest copse of pine trees.

Soon, I find myself in a secluded area behind the barn.

With my heart pounding in my chest like a drum, I take Maverick's hand and draw him to me.

The world seems to shrink, leaving only the two of us in this hidden corner.

"Kenzie..." Maverick whispers, his breath warm against my ear. "Are you certain?"

It's sweet that he still asks for my consent after he so boldly suggested to get in trouble together.

The strong contours of his body pressed against mine send a whole lot of pleasant shivers down my spine.

"Shh," I reply, placing my finger on his lips. I've been wanting to feel them for days now and they're softer than I thought they would be. Softer and warmer.

I allow myself to get lost in this whirlwind of emotions encompassing me right now, in this dangerous stolen moment.

He reaches up and takes my hand, turning it to be able to kiss the inside of my palm.

I realize for the first time in years, I'm alive. Every part of me is on fire.

"There's no going back, Kenzie," he husks out.

"Who said I want to go back?"

I guess that's the only reassurance he needs.

His mouth comes down on mine, hungry and claiming and as our lips meet, a fierce current surges through me, awakening every nerve ending in my body.

His hands, large and firm and a little rough, skim around my sides and roam my back.

Then Maverick nudges me in the direction of the wall.

The barn's wooden boards press against my back, cool and uneven.

When I come up for air between the kisses, the scent of hay and earth fills my nostrils.

"Tell me you need this as much as I do," Maverick rasps out, pulling away just enough for our eyes to lock. "Tell me." His voice is full of demand.

"I do." My heart is loud and racing in my chest and I think it may run away if I don't hold on to it. "I've been dreaming of what it would feel like to have you inside me."

I shouldn't have said that but oh, well. Beer and loneliness don't mix well.

"Have you now, Mrs. Caddell?" He drags his lips over my collarbone.

I tangle my fingers in his hair, then pull a little. "Is the fact that there's a Mr. Caddell not scaring you away?"

He hisses against my skin and cups my ass, very confidently. "That just makes me want to undo you even more."

Heat pools between my thighs and something inside me shifts, igniting a spark that quickly grows into a roaring flame. As our lips meet once more, a firestorm of desire washes over me. Our breaths mingle in the cool night air, heavy with the heady and thick scent of arousal.

I shove at his chest a little to be able to see his face. It's beautiful, a little unruffled, and with a bit of stubble. "I need you to fuck me," I plead. "Here and now."

He slams me back against the barn, his hands skimming my hips and pulling up my skirt with urgency.

There's intensity in his every move that leaves me breathless.

I'm shaking with need when his finger brushes over my panties, pushing them to the side. One finger slides into me without a warning.

"More," I gasp out, head rolling back.

"I don't want to hurt you if we go too fast," he growls against my neck.

"What if I want to be hurt tonight?"

That's all he needs to hear apparently.

Another finger pushes in, pumping furiously. Then the third.

I'm riding his hand shamelessly, writhing against him in heat, trying to get him as deep as possible while he is fumbling with his zipper. My moans grow louder and he presses his palm over my lips to muffle my cries that are blending with the rustle of the wind through the trees all around us.

My ankles cramp up and I'm on the edge of something. I can feel it coming at me from afar.

Maverick withdraws his fingers and groans. "Let me come with you."

I lift one leg and wrap it around his rock-solid thigh. God, he's all lean muscle and sinew. Just the thought of his cock inside me has me trembling with pleasure.

"Are you on the pill?" he asks.

"Yes. I'm good."

I realize there are other things we should discuss but their importance doesn't matter right now.

He palms my ass and lifts me up, steadying me against the wall.

His cock, already free and standing at attention, finds my folds and pushes in.

It's big, bigger than I've known in the past. It's also possible that I'm out of practice and things down there have become smaller because Chris and I haven't had sex in over a year.

But I don't really care about Chris right now.

What I do care is Maverick's cock between my thighs, hot and pulsing. He thrusts into me with a wild rhythm, stroke after stroke.

"Harder." I release a moan and he slaps his hand over my mouth again, pistoning into me with relentless savagery until he's a sweaty mess and until the world falls away and until the risks and consequences of our actions are mere shadows in the background, silenced by this overpowering primal force.

As our desire reaches its peak, we cling to each other, riding the waves of ecstasy that crash over us both. And when the storm finally subsides, we collapse against one another, spent and sated. My back is still pressed to the wall and his chin is resting in the crook of my neck, the rasp of his stubble stinging a little.

"Fuck," is all he says, his voice low and hoarse.

Fuck, I think too.

I just had the best sex of my life.

With the man who is not my husband.

The scent of pine needles and fresh mountain air surrounds me as I escape the festivities and rush over to the cottage. My head is pounding, and so is my heart. And there's still a trace of Maverick's cum inside me. My panties are soaked too and I will probably have to throw them away.

It's not real, I tell myself, *what just happened*.

It was just a sum of alcohol and bad decisions.

Nevertheless, it happened.

His cock was in me and we didn't use a condom and I loved it.

My pulse races as I search for an explanation of the events that just unfolded. It's like the dam has broken, and now I'm finally breathing, like I've been trapped underwater for too long. My mind knows it's wrong to feel this way, especially for another man. Regardless of how hard I soap my skin in the shower later that night, nothing can erase the memory of Maverick's body pressed against mine.



Maverick

The morning sun pierces through the cracks in the blinds, casting long shadows across the clothes-strewn floor. I lie on my back in my bed, the memories of last night's heated encounter with Kenzie replaying in my mind like a movie scene. The way her body moved against mine, her tiny, desperate moans echoing in the darkness as she rode my hands first, then my cock—it turned me on like a flip of a switch would turn on a light bulb.

But as much as I hate to admit it, there's an undeniable weight of guilt pressing down on my chest. It feels as if I'm betraying my marriage with Jo. Even when Jo's been dead for over six years now.

I force myself to get up and face the day, my body still aching from the dirty rendezvous behind the barn, particularly my legs. They are sore since I haven't done acrobatics like this in a hot minute.

I stumble my way to the stables, trying desperately to clear my mind of Kenzie. But her image is burned into my consciousness: that wild white hair, those deep brown eyes, that smooth pale skin, that delicious mouth. I can feel her presence follow me like a plague, and no matter how hard I try to rid myself of it, it stays with me.

It's maddening. She's the boss' wife, after all.

But I guess this little fact only adds more excitement to the mix.

The scent of hay and horses is comforting, grounding me in the present moment when I arrive with my toolbox in hand.

Of course, she's there. She doesn't see me at first. She's talking quietly to Snowfall and I take a second to just watch her from afar, to admire the subtle, elegant curves of her body. She's the athletic type rather than voluptuous, with narrow hips and toned legs that seem to go on and on. I have no idea why I never noticed it before, or that tiny opening between her front incisors. It's those little details—the ones that could be perceived as imperfections—that make her stand out above all other women in my memory.

My last sex was impersonal. It was a hookup that happened in the bathroom of Lone Bear after one too many shots. I don't even remember her name.

Kenzie turns my way and I'm a fucking goner.

She smiles softly as she is headed over to me while my breath is caught in my throat.

Get your shit together, Mav.

I can't find the courage to return that smile because the sound of my beating heart is a clap of thunder in my ears.

"Hey," she says when she approached me,

I draw a deep breath and decide to try and fix this clusterfuck before it's too late. "Kenzie..." I stutter, attempting to regain my composure. "What happened last night... It was a mistake." *Yeah, keep lying to yourself, buddy. You wanted it.*

"Really?" There's no one here but us and horses and she takes a few slow steps towards me, positioning herself close enough for her sweet scent to reach me. My cock stirs in my jeans.

"You didn't seem to think so at the time," she murmurs.

"Look, I was drinking," I say defensively, trying to justify my actions.

"You were too."

"I wasn't that drunk," Kenzie whispers, her lips just inches from mine, her eyes filled with a dangerous mixture of desire and adrenaline. She slips me something.

I drop my gaze and see a key card to one of the hotel rooms.

"Room 15. Meet me there at 11 PM."

And then she's gone.

My fingers close tightly around the key card, the plastic digging into my palm. The temptation is overwhelming, but I know that giving in to Kenzie would only lead to more heartache and regret. I can't betray Johanna's memory like this. With a heavy sigh, I make up my mind—I won't go tonight.

Because this is dangerous.

Later that day when I'm on a short break in my cabin, I decide to call Ed and check on him. My fingers hover above the screen of my phone as I hesitate for a moment, wondering if he'll be able to hear the guilt in my voice. I know he said he wants me to move on but still...

Taking a deep breath, I tap his contact information and wait for the call to connect.

"Hello?" a voice answers, but it isn't Ed's. It's Sylas, Johanna's younger brother, who hates my guts. The tension between us is palpable even through the phone.

"Hi, Sylas," I say, trying to keep my tone neutral. "I was calling to check on Ed, see if he needs any more help. How's he doing?"

"Fine," comes the curt response. "He's resting."

"Good, good. I just wanted to make sure he was all right." I pause for a moment, unsure how to proceed. "Listen, man, I know we haven't always seen eye-to-eye..."

"Save it, Maverick," he interrupts sharply. "I don't need your pity or your concern. Just do your job and leave us alone."

The hurt stings, but I swallow it down and focus on the reason for my call. "Tell Ed I called and that I'll be stopping by to see him. All right?"

"Fine," he replies, the word filled with irritation.

My heart is heavy with the weight of our strained relationship. "Take care, Sylas," I say and press the green button to end the call before he can respond.

The phone slips from my hand and lands on the bed next to me. I lay back against the pillows and focus on deep, even breaths.

The rest of my workday passes by in a haze, my mind constantly drifting back to the key card hidden in my pocket, weighing heavier with each passing hour. By the time night falls, I find myself standing outside room 15, my resolve wavering.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, and slide the key card into a slot to open the door.

The room is dimly lit, a single lamp casts long macabre shadows across the dark green walls. Kenzie is already there, perched on the edge of the bed, her eyes meeting mine as I hesitantly close the door behind me and stand with my hands at my sides and my heart beating wildly in my chest.

We're both sober now, and the silence that hangs between us is awkward, full of unspoken words.

"Hi," she says softly.

"Hey."

She stands up then, and with deliberate movements, she begins to undress. My eyes can't help but follow her hands as they smoothly glide over her body, unbuttoning her blouse and slipping it off her shoulders. She

unhooks her bra, discarding it to the side, and steps out of her skirt until she's standing before me in just her panties.

My gaze darts to her breasts. I don't know why I'd expected them to be fake but last night when I felt them, I could tell they were real. They are not big, but round and perky with bright pink nipples that are drawn tight, a sure indication of her wanting the repeat of last night.

My pulse races, desire surging through me despite the guilt gnawing at the back of my conscience.

"Kenzie..." I begin, but my words trail off as she crosses the distance between us. "Frankly, I don't know what I'm doing here."

"You do, Maverick."

I swallow past the lump in my throat.

With determination set in her gaze, she takes another step, erasing the space between us completely, then reaches for my zipper to lower it with a single tug. Her hand slips into my boxers and finds my cock.

Everything else is white noise.

I inhale sharply. My brain short circuits and shuts down and all my blood surges south.

"See," she murmurs seductively, wrapping her palm around my dick. She strokes me slowly; long, measures, and practiced movements.

She knows how to please a man, a thought flashes through my mind.

I clench my jaw to suppress a groan but I don't even know why. No one will hear us here.

"You like this?" she asks. "Don't you?" Her tongue darts out of her mouth, brushing over those plump lips I plan on seeing around my cock later on. Right now, I need to fuck her. Fuck her so I could get her out of my system.

I grab her shoulders. "Let me show you what I like." I spin her around and push her toward the bed. She falls forward, hands on the mattress, ass in the air and on the display.

Okay, then.

I shove my jeans down my thigh and then grab her panties and rip them apart. There's not much fabric to begin with but I don't want it in the way.

She is exposed now and at my mercy.

There's pre-come on my cock already as I slide it between her legs, teasing her a little and slicking her folds.

This need to ruin her, to take her apart, to see what's inside is so overwhelming, I can't control it.

I lean forward a little, sink my hand in her hair to fist it roughly. "Say you want me to fuck your tight perfect cunt, Mrs. Caddell."

"I want you to fuck my cunt," she breathes out.

"Beg me."

"Please... Maverick... Fuck me... Fuck my cunt."

"On your knees." I nudge her a little further on the bed and position myself right behind her, my cock at her entrance, leaking and ready for action.

Her ass isn't big but it's round and firm and I palm it with one hand.

Kenzie whimpers when I slide my index finger over her ass, circling that tight ring of muscle. I don't know why suddenly I want to do all these dirty things with her.

"Anybody ever fucked your asshole, Mrs., Caddell?" I whisper in her ear.

She is trembling in my grip as she nods.

"Do you want me to?" I ask.

"Maybe," she rasps out. "Do you plan to?"

"We'll see," I reply and guide my cock into her pussy, then thrust up and pull back. Thrust up and pull back.

She meets my strokes with the expert movement of her hips, her fingers clawing the hotel bed sheets.

The fucking is wild and loud and dirty and I realize I've never felt anything like this in my life.

"Come on," she urges, her voice scratchy from all the moaning. "Harder."
My hand on her upper back, I reach over to move the pillow into the center of the bed, then force Kenzie down. Her face is now buried into that pillow.

She's on edge, sweaty and panting, and I can tell her orgasm is near.

I decide to go a little further.

I slip my hand in between her cheeks and taunt her sensitive area there.

"Ah," she cries out when I press my thumb down.

"Yes or no," I ask.

"Yes...yes..."

I spit on her crack and carefully slide my finger into her asshole.

She whimpers.

Her body stretches around me, hot and tender.

I pump into her with my cock, my thumb firmly inside too.

"Wanna come with you," I tell her between my own moans.

"Give me more," she cries out, fucking herself on my thumb.

God, this woman is filthy and insatiable and I can't get enough. A part of me almost wants to give her asshole my cock instead of my finger but part of me sort of wants to leave this for later.

There's no later or next time, a warning flashes through my head but I shut it immediately.

My mind fractures into millions of pieces and I can sense the orgasm coming at me like a tidal wave.

A cry rips past my lips, blending with Kenzie's yelp.

I feel her when she climaxes, her body clenching around my cock and finger tight.

We fall on the bed, spent and covered in cum and sweat, breathing heavily and trying to get some oxygen into our burning lungs.

We lie afterward in silence for some time, our limbs tangled together.

As the adrenaline slowly fades away, I study her messy appearance; her

hair that started to show a hint of real blonde at the roots and not that acidic white, the beauty marks scattered across her shoulder and neck, the black mascara smeared across her flushed cheeks.

"I like you like this more," I tell her, my fingers tracing lazy patterns on her skin.

"How?" she asks, curiosity lighting up her eyes.

"Disheveled. Corrupted," I reply. "And properly fucked."

"Interesting choice of words, Maverick."

I've removed my shirt and we are on our sides, looking at each other. Kenzie's gaze wanders to my tattoos and she begins peppering me with questions about their meanings.

"What's this?" She lifts herself up and reaches over to touch the old, fading ink on my back. "The Marine Corps emblem," I explain as she runs her nails over the contours and then drops back on the bed. "I got it right after I enlisted. Was young and brave and wanted to mark my accomplishment."

"Do you regret getting it?"

"No, it's not the best artwork, but it's a reminder of the years I served."

"What about this one?" She points at the lion tattoo on my ribcage.

"This was the epitome of drunk, young, and stupid. Got it on a whim, I think it was somewhere in the Middle East."

"You went to the Middle East?"

I nod. "Mmm." I don't necessarily like to reminisce about those days. They weren't the easiest. They were days we didn't think we were going to live to see the sunrise and there were people we lost. People I still miss. People who come to me in my nightmares.

I don't know if Kenzie senses my unease or simply doesn't care, but she moves on to the next tat—the intricate dreamcatcher that holds special significance due to my heritage. It's the Native blood in my veins on my mother's side. Sure, it's diluted by the Irish blood, which is what gave me my blue eyes, but sometimes, I can feel it in me—this call from deep within,

connected to this land and these people and these mountains. It's one of the reasons why I never wanted to live anywhere but in this place.

"It's my favorite," Kenzie says, touching the webbed threads of the dreamcatcher.

"My grandfather on my dad's side was from Mexico. He met my grandmother shortly after he crossed the border and then they got married and had my dad. My grandparent on my mother's side grew up on the rez up north not far from the Nevada border.

"It's a small, barren place in the middle of nowhere with no opportunities. My mother didn't like it there, so she moved away to LA. That's where she met my dad, but after he died, she was having a hard time, so she made me stay there with my grandparents."

"How old were you?"

"I was nine."

"You lost your dad at such a young age?"

"He had cancer. He fought with everything he had but in the end the disease won."

I have no clue why I'm telling her these things about me, these things about my family and about the period of my life that was so low, I wanted to drown myself in the Benton Hot Springs.

Kenzie listens intently, her eyes never straying from mine.

"What's the story behind that?" she asks about the shattered heart.

I swallow hard, feeling a piercing ache in my chest. I hastily divert her attention. "Remember when you arrived here? On that helicopter, wearing those high heels? In the rain."

She chuckles. "Yeah, I bet that caused lots of gossip around here!"

"I seriously thought you had some loose screws."

"You did?"

"That was quite an entrance."

"Believe it or not but I wasn't born in the city."

"Where are you from?" I ask her, trying to mask the sudden tension in the room.

Her eyes cloud over, and she takes a deep breath. "Oregon," she replies softly. "A little town in the east. My dad still lives nearby."

I know this is just sex. She's starved for it. So am I. But as we share a few things about each other, I can't help but memorize those little facts I learn about her through the conversation. Before long, our bodies are once again drawn to one another, desire flaring hot and bright as we give in to our passion.

Though I know it's wrong, I can't bring myself to pull away from that intoxicating warmth of her embrace. And so, with every touch and whispered word, we continue to weave ourselves deeper into the tangled web of desire and deceit.



Kenzie

The next few days feel like an eternity. Maverick is nowhere to be seen, likely avoiding me or busy running the resort. Our paths only cross a few times and always in public places.

Then my husband returns from his business trip and I know that another clandestine rendezvous at the hotel room will remain a deep-seated fantasy.

The second Chris steps through the doorway, a wave of guilt rushes up like an avalanche, crushing me in its vice-like grip. The coils of remorse strangle me tighter and tighter, squeezing any breath of freedom from my lungs.

The urge to be a good wife overwhelms me as he draws nearer for a kiss. But the kiss is mechanical, devoid of emotion—as if it's something done out of obligation rather than love or passion.

My determination to find Maverick hardens as I see Chris completely absorbed in his work for the rest of the week. He spends all his time in meetings and talking on the phone, barely casting a glance my way. All traces of guilt evaporate from me as my importance diminishes in his eyes. Why should I feel sorry when he can't even be bothered to notice me?

Then one evening, as I come out to the kitchen to grab some water, I overhear chatter coming from the room my husband converted into his office. He's been having lots of those late-night meetings recently.

I halt in my tracks and hear him speaking with Sergio. Their voices are low and intense, something about the difficulties they're facing while trying to buy more land.

"Find some discreet people to take care of it," Chris orders, frustration evident in his tone. I can't quite grasp what he means, but something about the conversation leaves me uneasy.

As if they are sensing that I'm outside, one of them shuts the door close.

Several days later, I decide to drive into Beaver Crossing's outlet for some shopping, just to escape the tension at home. I spend hours strolling through each little shop, looking at jewelry and fabrics and leather goods.

I'm browsing through racks of clothing, the sound of hangers gliding against each other lulling me in a trance, when I hear the salesperson whisper urgently into his phone, "It's true. Old Joe's ranch got hit hard last night. Someone busted through the gate and all the horses ran away." With a shudder, I look up. Everything is as quiet as ever, but I can feel my heart lurching in my chest.

Apparently, this seemingly idyllic town has problems of its own.

I'm unsure of what to make of the news, but I decide not to pay much attention.

Instead, I find myself drawn to the rack in the rear where several locally made items literally call my name. The overwhelming urge to purchase them sends a wave of exhilaration through me, an emotion that I haven't felt in a long time. But this pleasure quickly fades away as guilt sinks in—I'm spending money of the man I'm cheating on.

No, do not think about it.

I simply shove the thoughts and the guilt away and divert my attention to a soft, knitted scarf, a couple of dresses stitched by hand, and a pair of brown cowboy boots. These pieces feel different from my designer wardrobe, not as perfect or delicate, but I want them.

So, I buy them.

When I return to Red Willow later that evening and step inside the cottage, Chris is on the couch, reading something on his iPad. His tie is undone and slung across his shoulder. And I'm surprised to see him being anything less than one hundred percent.

"Hey," I tell him, releasing the shopping bags to the floor.

"How was your day?" he asks, setting the iPad aside.

"Just got out into town."

"Did you have fun?"

I'm not certain how to respond to that. So I just shrug.

Chris rises from the couch and approaches me.

He reaches over to touch my shoulder and with one swift movement of his hand slides the strap of my sundress down. "We haven't made love in a long time."

A full-body shudder washes over me. *He knows.*

"I'm not in the mood, Chris," I tell him while taking a careful step back.

He wraps his arm around my waist and presses his lip to my cheek. "I can get you in the mood, love."

I feel absolutely nothing. "Please, stop."

He slides his mouth lower, to my neck.

"Chris, stop." I push him away and look him right in the eyes. "I don't want it."

I don't want it with you.

His face contorts, gaze darkens.

"Make up your damn mind, Kenzie!" he snaps. "You want attention, but

when I try to give it to you, you're being a fucking diva!"

His words sting but I'm tired of being used as a prop. "I said I don't want you!" I wiggle out of his grasp. "I'm taking a guest bedroom." My voice is loud and firm and full of determination and finality.

Enraged, Chris grabs my arm tightly and yanks me to him.

My anger is white-hot and livid and I'm not able to contain it. I shove him in the chest with both hands.

Startled, he stumbles back half a step. I'm honestly surprised he moves at all. He's a wall of muscle and his temper—that I credit to his Greek blood and horrible family genes—only intensifies the explosive mix that Christos Caddell can be when he's upset.

And he's upset now.

"Bitch," he mutters, then raises his hand and slaps me across the face.

It's never happened before and I don't know if it hurts because of the shock or because he means to hurt me. One thing is for sure: the blow is strong. Black dots pepper the edges of my vision. I lose my balance and crumble to my knees.

Chris stares at me from above for a few heartbeats as I sit on the cold floor with my palm over my burning jaw. I'm stunned by his actions and don't have it in me to retaliate now.

Silently seething, he exits the room, leaving me shaken and alone.

Needing to be away from Chris, I find myself leaving the cabin too and wandering through the resort grounds for what seems like a good hour.

My face still aches and I've developed a dizzying headache and I desperately need to talk to someone but I can't just stop a random resort employee or call Lita. I forgot my phone at the cottage when I ran out.

I know Maverick lives on the premises. I've never been anywhere near his

cabin but I've seen the map of the resort a while back and I remember the staff accommodations are on the other side of the property.

Unknowingly, I'm walking toward Maverick's cabin. I know it's risky, but I crave his company. I have a feeling he won't pass judgment.

There's just one cabin that's occupied when I get to the destination. I can see the light in the windows.

Come what may.

Slowly, I approach and raise my hand to knock.

But as I stand at his door, hesitating, he opens it before I decide what to do, eyes widening in surprise.

Immediately, my breath is caught in my throat.

I forget all about the pain.

Maverick's shirtless and his hair is loose and streaming across his tanned skin. And that body. He's all muscle and ink and very hard to resist to be stared at.

"Kenzie, you can't be here," he whispers urgently, standing on the threshold like a guard. "If someone sees you..." It's clear he doesn't want me inside.

"I'm sorry." Embarrassment washes over me. What was I thinking? "I didn't know where to go?"

He arches a brow.

"Chris and I had a fight," I offer a small, pitiful smile. "And I needed a moment away from... him."

"I don't think it's wise—you being here." There's an edge in his voice that makes my heart crumble.

"I just wanted to talk," I plead, trying to keep my voice steady.

He hesitates and that hesitation seems to go on and on before he finally relents and lets me in.

As I step into his cabin, the awkwardness between us grows bigger.

Closing the door behind us, he brushes his palms over his worn-out jeans

and says,

"Do you want a drink?"

I move further into the room and take a second to study it, wondering if it tells me something more about its occupant than I already know.

The place is a little messy with clothes and boots scattered around the living room. A laptop sits on the kitchen table next to the mug half-filled with coffee that I assume is cold. It's obvious a female hand hasn't touched anything here in a while. There are some old photos above the fireplace that look like family photos. But I don't get a chance to see them better.

"Kenzie?" Maverick husks out, stepping closer to eliminate the distance between us. He reaches out to take my chin with his palm. His touch is gentle when he tilts my head to the side and looks at my cheek. "What happened?"

As I glance at our reflection in the mirror on the wall, I see an angry bruise forming on my face where Chris hit me.



Maverick

I hover close to her face, my voice quiet but insistent, my hand palming her jaw carefully. "Tell me what happened," I demand, my eyes narrowing at the unmistakable fresh bruise that's quickly spreading across her cheek. She fidgets and turns away from me, refusing to meet my gaze.

"Kenzie...Did he do this?" I feel anger coming up to the surface.

"It's nothing, Maverick," she replies. "It was... It was just one of those nights. We had a fight. I left to cool down."

"Half your face is purple." I grit my teeth, trying to control the rage suddenly gurgling inside me. The thought of that asshole hurting her like this makes my blood boil. My fist clenches at my side, and I have this unexpected urge to hunt him down and break his face.

"Does your husband hit you?" I ask, my voice thick with both concern and fury.

"Don't."

I snatch my T-shirt from the chair and yank it over my head, fire raging in my veins. I stalk to the door with a searing mission in mind—to go to the Caddell's cottage to face the fucker and teach him a lesson.

"Stop, Maverick." Kenzie grasps my arm and tries to stop me. "Are you insane? He'll know."

Her words hit me like a sucker punch. I halt, my teeth grinding together so hard they may break.

"I don't want to get you in trouble," she says quickly, finally looking up at me. "And I can't get him to find out about us...Whatever it is that happened between us. But if you waltz in there like this"—she motions at me at her hand—"all pissed off, he'll know."

Her eyes are pleading, and I force myself to take a deep breath and calm down.

"Alright," I say reluctantly, my jaw still tense. "But if he ever touches you again, I swear..."

"Let's not talk about it right now," she interrupts, her voice wavering.

I nod, respecting her wishes but still struggling to contain my wrath.

"It's not why I came here."

As my anger slowly subsides and takes a back seat and my rationality returns behind my brain's wheel, we move to the rear deck of my cabin. It faces the woods and it's private and no one can see us here unless they specifically hide in the forest to spy on me, which is unlikely.

The moon is rising from above the pines, painting the forest with a pale silver light, and the trees are alive with the eerie sound of hooting owls and howling wind, and I take a moment to just breathe and inhale the scent of the forest as I lean against the railing.

As I sneak a glance at Kenzie, standing to my right, I can't help but admire the way moonlight reflects in her white hair.

"Can I ask you something personal?" I finally brave the question I've been wanting to ask this woman ever since the moment she stepped out of that black helicopter.

She nods. "Yeah."

"Why are you still married to him, Kenzie?" I watch her as she stares out

into the forest.

She hesitates before answering. "My father has Alzheimer's," she admits quietly. "Chris is paying for his accommodations at a facility. Without him, I wouldn't be able to afford it."

"Is that the only reason?" I probe gently. I can see the sadness and frustration in her eyes, and I want to understand what's holding her back.

"I didn't marry him for his money, if that's what you're asking. I married him because I loved him. We clicked when we met. He courted me. It was fast but it was for real. Things happened during our marriage and we grew apart."

"But if your marriage is broken, why stay?"

"Honestly," she turns to me, "I don't know. During my modeling days, I made good money," she confesses. "But it's all gone now. Chris and I signed a prenup, so if I leave him, I won't have anything. And my father..." Her voice breaks, and I can see the weight of her decision bearing down on her.

"Are you going to keep being with him just to support your father?"

I understand this decision of hers partially. I would give anything to have my own dad near but I'm also stumped.

"If you made money with modeling, why not get back to it then and leave your husband?"

"I guess I'm still trying to figure it out."

I sense there's more to her marriage to Chris but I don't press for it.

We stand in silence for a moment, letting the sounds of the forest fill the space between us. The conversation shifts towards other topics that aren't so depressing.

"Have you made up your mind about what you want to study if you go to college?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood.

A dreamy smile tugs at the corners of her mouth and her eyes sparkle with enthusiasm as she declares, "I think I'd love to teach."

"What's stopping you, then?" I inquire, genuinely curious.

She stares out into the woods again, her expression turning somber once more. "I am," she admits softly. "I'm the one who stops myself."



Maverick

I'm busy for the next few days and I don't get to see Kenzie, but I can't get her out of my mind. I shouldn't be thinking about another man's wife and deep down I know it but the sight of her bruised cheek has etched itself onto my brain and no matter how I try to pretend I don't care, I do.

"Mav? You good?" Rolly's voice drags me out of my reverie.

"I'm fine," I lie. I'm anxious as fuck for some unknown reason.

We are in the resort's laundry facility, deep down in the basement. We're surrounded by rows of ten stainless steel washing machines and dryers, all gurgling and whirring away as they sanitize the bed linen from the south wing's hotel rooms.

"We need to do something, boss," he growls as his eyes zero in on the fraying blankets. "These aren't gonna cut it for much longer."

I share his frustration. The fire a few years back left us crippled and broke; we were unable to even update most of our damaged at a time equipment until now.

"Right. I'll go see Yolanda," I reply, running my fingers over the fabric. Her family has been supplying us with quality products for decades and her

designs are extraordinary. But first, I have to run these numbers past the higher-ups. *Well, past the new owner.*

Before I can say another word, Rolly interrupts me.

"Hey, did you hear about Old Joe?" His voice carries a hint of dread that instantly sets my heart racing.

"No." Fear courses through my veins like an electric current.

"Someone busted open the gate and all his horses ran away," Rolly informs me, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

Rage bubbles up inside me and I clench my fists tightly at the news. This is the last thing poor Old Joe needs right now. "Any idea who did it?"

"No," Rolly replies, shaking his head sadly. "But I don't like it one bit."

Neither do I.

Things like this don't happen around here.

I drive out to Old Joe's ranch after lunch.

Heading down the highway, I veer off onto a two-lane road and weave through acres of farmland and woods before coming to Beaver Crossing. A faded sign on the outskirts directs me to Old Joe's place. In passing, I spot Ed's cabin further down the road and contemplate stopping by, but old memories of my last—quite unpleasant encounter with Syllas come flooding back and decide it's best not to add more stress to my already stressful day.

I park at the end of the long driveway and walk briskly toward Old Joe's house. The sun beats down mercilessly from above. The summer is in full swing. It's hot as hell during the day.

I knock on the front door several times but am greeted with silence.

I walk around the house and continue down the winding path through his property, plowing through the field, up to a pasture. It's so hot, my shirt is sticking to me and I wonder how the old man isn't having a stroke trying to work outside in this boiling heat.

"Hey, Joe!" I call out, spotting the old rancher near his damaged fence. He turns to face me, his weathered forehead creased with concern.

"Afternoon', Maverick." His voice is weary but steady. "I reckon you heard about this mess too."

"Sure did," I reply, looking over the broken fence. "What happened? Did you see anything?"

"Was too dark, couldn't make out nothin'," Old Joe admits, shaking his head. "But I'll tell ya, somethin' strange is goin' on. This ain't the first odd thing that's happened lately."

"Really?" I check the toolbox standing on the ground and fish out a hammer and a few nails.

"Yeah." He sighs. "Got an offer for my property a while back," he reveals, his eyes narrowing.

"No kidding?" I inspect the broken fence, running my fingers over the splintered wood until I meet the jagged edge of a nail sticking out of the plank.

"Said they wanted to buy me out." There's a spark of defiance in his rusty voice. "But I ain't sellin'. Not now, not ever."

"You know who made the offer?" I feel a sudden chill crawl down my spine.

"Couldn't tell ya. Just some fancy city folk." Old Joe spits into the dirt, his expression resolute. "One had that... whatchamacallit? A birthmark next to his eye. Good looking fella but nasty."

"Hmmm." I note the information and continue working on the fence.

"They can go straight to hell. This land's been in my family for generations."

"Good for you, Joe," I say firmly. "You hold onto it."



Kenzie

It's maddening—this obsession with Maverick Holt.

I mistakenly thought that this was just sex. But I can't get the man out of my mind. His touch, his scent, the way he makes me feel alive again. The way his presence alone fills me with desire to do things I haven't been wanting to do since before Strawberry.

He reminded me of who I used to be and I'm desperate to reclaim that lost part of myself.

But that fire between us has ignited a rift between Chris and me.

We've been sleeping in separate bedrooms. Partially because my husband knows I'm still pissed at him for slapping me and partially because I can't make myself share a bed with the man I'm not attracted to anymore.

Besides, I'm afraid of what Chris might discover if we are spending time together. I'm terrified that he'll just see right through me, will discern every dark secret by simply looking into my eyes.

And I can't let that happen.

That's why I avoid them both as much as possible.

I avoid my husband.

And I avoid my lover.

I'm confused.

One day during the week, when Helen, the housekeeper, arrives to clean the cottage, she peeks at me with a scrutinizing gaze as she goes on with her tasks. I can't help but feel that she's watching me, her eyes drilling into my very soul. It's like the woman is trying to dig out every dirty fantasy I have about the manager of this resort.

She knows.

No, she doesn't.

She knows. She probably saw you two.

No one saw us. Shut up!

"Love?" Chris calls from his office later that evening when it's just the two of us, his voice pulling me from the book I'm reading on my Kindle.

I reluctantly rise from the couch, dread slowly slithering through my veins. "Coming." I take a deep breath before entering the room.

My husband is in his chair, the desk is strewn with paperwork, the computer is on and there are spreadsheets on the screen.

He knows.

He's going to pull the plug on the payments for your father's accommodation.

"Look at this," Chris says, holding up his iPad.

I can't read his face. Slowly, I approach the desk, my heart thundering in my chest.

"You like it?" he asks, his tone warmer than usual and I'm so nervous I can't tell what the intent is behind all this. Typically, I'm good at figuring him out but my mind has gone blank.

I stand next to him, still on high alert but as I glance at the iPad, I realize the screen displays a digital flyer for a party—my twenty-ninth birthday party.

Chris rises to his feet and positions himself behind me, trapping me between his body and the desk.

I swallow and say nothing.

"I'm sorry about our fight." He leans in, his breath tickling the back of my neck. But he doesn't touch me. His lips only linger close to my skin. "Let me make it up to you, my love." His hands slip around my waist and I force myself not to flinch. "I promise this will be a night you'll never forget."

"Thank you," I murmur, trying to hide the dread in my voice. His late apology feels like a band-aid over a gaping wound.

"Will you forgive me?" he asks, his chin resting on my shoulder.

"Of course," I lie, swallowing the bitter taste of resentment and fear that threatens to rise in my throat.

The sound of gravel crunching under tires signals Chris's departure on another business trip. I stand at the window, watching his car shrink into the distance until it disappears altogether.

Finally.

I breathe, a mix of relief and anxiety settling over me.

I'm not certain how I was able to function around him these past few days. Every time he approached me, my stomach churned.

An hour later, when I get out of the shower, the front door to the cottage slams open, startling me.

I throw on a bathrobe and I rush out into the living room, my heart hammering away.

There stands Maverick, looking pissed as hell. His eyes are dark and stormy, a far cry from the brilliant sky blue they usually hold, and I can tell he's not at my place for pleasantries.

"What are you doing here?"

"I know he's gone," Maverick states, his voice rough.

Sick panic sets in. "That's worse," I cry out. "You can't be here when

Chris isn't. What if one of the resort employees sees you?"

"You care about that now? When I come to you? But when you came to my place, it's fair game then."

"That's not—" I toss both hands in the air, unsure of what else to say because he's right.

"We need to talk," Maverick says, his voice strained with anger.

"Okay." I'm still confused by his sudden appearance and fury.

"Your husband is up to something, and it stinks," Maverick declared. "Someone's trying to force Old Joe into selling his land when the man doesn't want to sell." Maverick's eyes bore into me, demanding answers I don't have. "And I'm certain it's Chris. Strange things started to happen in this town after you two arrived."

I'm not following but I don't appreciate the accusatory tone. "And why is that pissing you off so much that you have to break into my place?"

He seethes, hissing through clamped teeth, "Why?" His mouth twists. "There's a good chance your husband employs methods that aren't quite legal to obtain what he wants."

"What do you care what my husband does?"

"You know what, MacKenzie Caddell?" Maverick lets out a bitter chuckle and takes a step back. "You're a spoiled brat who does nothing while your husband forces people out of their homes they've lived in all their lives!"

I feel my face flush with anger. "But you liked fucking this spoilt brat, didn't you?"

He seems lost for words, startled by my daring comeback. Then, he says, "Yeah, I did. But that's not illegal, is it?"

"Depends on how you look at it, Maverick." I walk over to him, erasing that space, that charged, screaming emptiness between us. "Adultery is a serious crime in some parts of the world." I look up at him and our gazes lock.

We stare at each other for a long moment and it feels like we are now

engaged in a battle of wills. Suddenly, our argument heats up, words flying like daggers between us. It's maddening and intoxicating all at once and I don't even know how we end up moving on from discussing crimes and cheating to discussing actual fucking.

"Did you really come here to talk about my husband's affairs or was it just an excuse?" I ask boldly.

"Are you serious right now?" He rolls his eyes. *Maverick Holt rolls his eyes.* It's cute as hell.

"Very." I place my palm on his chest, directly over his heart, and lick my lips.

There's a fire between my legs and it needs to be put out.

He swallows, his Adam's apple rolling under his skin and I want to kiss it. Badly.

I savor the moment for just a second, our faces barely an inch apart, our scents mingling.

"You want to fuck me." I press my mouth to the bare patch of skin right above the collar of his shirt.

He shudders and lets out a throaty moan that tells me everything I need to know; he wants this as much as I do. "Kenzie... it's really not a good idea." His voice is thick and doesn't sound like him at all. It sounds like the voice of a man starved for a woman.

"You said it yourself," I murmur against his neck. "Chris is gone."

His hand slips to my hip and then cradles my ass.

I draw back a little to be able to see his face.

His eyes are dark and hooded and his expression is pained. "Kenzie..." He shakes his head, very unconvincingly so.

"Tell me later." I place my index finger against his lips to silence him and with my other hand find his zipper.

His eyes close shut and he groans when I slide my fingers into his boxers and grab his cock. He grows hard right there in my palm.

The tension builds until it snaps, our anger morphing into something different, something raw and urgent.

Maverick pushes me back and I take careful steps until we end up in the hallway.

"Which is the bedroom you two are sharing?" Maverick husk out, his breath comes short and heavy.

I point at the door at the end of the corridor and he steers us there. My pulse is uneven and fast and there's a fluttery sensation in my belly that I don't ever remember experiencing with Chris. I know what we're about to do is wrong but it feels so right and I don't want to think about the consequences at all. Whatever guilt tries to resurface, my roaring desire drowns it out.

As soon as we are inside, we tear at each other's clothes, desperately seeking skin-to-skin contact. There's a rustle of fabric and leather and the sound of Maverick's boots hitting the floor.

The air crackles between us as I'm nudged toward the bed. My back hits the silk spread and I prop myself up on my elbows and take a moment to enjoy the view of Maverick Holt standing above me. His naked, inked body is a work of art. I like that he is fit but not overly muscular; lean with long limbs and a narrow waist that flares to wide shoulders currently backlit by the midday light streaming through the window.

"I wanna see you with your hair loose," I say, biting my lower lip.

He reaches behind his head and pulls the tie off his hair and it spills around him like a dark halo.

Heat flares and pools between my legs at a sight.

I must be broken. This is the bedroom I share with Chris and Maverick and I are about to have sex on the bed that's supposed to be sacred to my marriage. It feels like a defiant rebellion against everything that's been holding me back.

Screw it.

Screw Chris.

Maverick drops to his knees at the base of the bed, grabs my ankles, and drags me toward the edge to rest my legs over his broad shoulders.

I'm exposed and I should be feeling self-conscious and may be shy. Instead, something swoops in my stomach. The sick anticipation of what comes next has my mind spinning.

When he slides his tongue against my pussy, electricity runs through every inch of my skin.

I toss my head back, my muscles unable to listen to the commands of my brain.

"You're fucking drenched, Mrs. Caddell. Drenched for me," Maverick says, then laps at my opening, dragging his lips over my clit just right. The angle. The pressure...

Oh God!

"You want me this much, huh?" he teases in between his ministrations.

"Mmmm."

"You want me to fuck you this much? You want my cock this much?" he presses, returning his devious mouth to my pussy.

Waves of pleasure wash over me. I can feel the climax but Maverick pulls away for a moment and pushes me toward the center of the bed.

His body hovers above mine, strong and solid and strangely familiar, like I've known it all my life, even though I only saw it properly once.

"Does your husband not eat you out, Mrs. Caddell?" he whispers against the shell of my ear, running his palm between my legs, taunting me even more. I'm soaked there. Soaked and throbbing.

"Do we have to talk about him right this second?"

"You're right." He brings his lips to my breast and nips at my nipple. "We don't."

I cry out. The bite is gentle but my nerve endings can't take this anymore. I'm burning up and I need to come.

"Please," I breathe out.

"Please what?"

"Want your cock inside me."

"Do you now?" He smirks at me from above, brushing the crown over my entrance, spreading the slickness.

I nod.

"Okay." Something flashes in his eyes. "You asked for it. You can't take it back." He sinks into me with one powerful stroke, down to the hilt.

There are stars dancing around the edges of my vision when he pulls out and slams into my pussy again. It's angry with a bit of pain but it's the kind of pain I like.

"You're so fucking tight," he rasps out into my cheek, kissing it between the words, "No one's fucked you in a long time."

I don't have the mental capacity to grace his statement with any kind of commentary. I only have enough functioning brain cells to tell my legs to wrap around his hips as he continues to drill into me, filling me with his magnificent cock.

"I can only imagine how tight your ass will be when I own it."

That sends me over the edge.

I've never been crazy about anal. I tried it with a couple of partners when I was in my early twenties because everyone in the industry seemed to rave about it. I tried with Chris too but he's not exactly enthusiastic about exploring when it comes to sex. Only when it comes to his acquisitions.

But with Maverick... With Maverick, I want to do all these dirty things I've seen in porno videos. It's like he's awakened the side of me I didn't know I had. And I'm not certain yet whether I like that side, but it sure as hell feels good.

Feels wonderful actually.

"This turns you on," Maverick growls. "The filthy fucking."

"And you like it."

He doesn't respond. Instead, he changes the angle and drives every inch

of him into my pussy like his life depends on it, the head of his cock hitting something deep inside me and I unravel.

I fall apart and lose myself for a brief moment and when I come back to my senses, Maverick is atop me, breathing heavily. His cock is soft and out. There's cum everywhere, sticky and hot and leaking from my pussy and I reach down into the space between our bodies and dip my finger into the slickness.

The corner of Maverick's lips tilts up. "Put it all the way in," he orders, voice shot.

I have no idea how he does this to me. I just came and I'm exhausted but I shiver anyway and another surge of heat rushes through my limbs because of his words.

"You should say please."

"Please, MacKenzie. Put it into your cunt." He lifts himself up a little and shifts to the side to make room.

I do as he says and slip my finger inside, into my body. It's still warm and wet and sensitive and loaded with his cum and if I touch my clit with my thumb, I can feel the tiny ripples of pleasure.

"Looks to me like you need more," Maverick says, putting his own hand between my thighs. His finger slips in, joining mine. "Let's have you come."

He pumps, guiding me. His rhythm is slow at first but gradually grows faster. He shoves the second digit inside and I moan from the tantalizing ache of the stretch. "Put another one, Kenzie," he orders, his lips grazing my ear.

I don't know if it will fit but I do it anyway.

"Fuck yourself," he pants.

I push against four fingers and he curls those fingers—his that guiding my own too—and they brush over a spot I didn't think existed.

And God, I burst open like a dam.

Back arched and off the mattress, I thrust my hips forward and do what he tells me to do—I fuck myself with our joined fingers until I crest another

climax.

It's possibly the dirtiest thing I've ever done but I don't feel bad about it or embarrassed.

Afterward, as we lay tangled in sweat-dampened sheets, I catch Maverick looking at me with softened eyes. He's relaxed and the sunlight streaming through the half-closed blinds falls across his smooth, bronzed by tan skin in the shape of stripes.

"Hey," he says all of a sudden. "I hope I wasn't too much."

"What do you mean?" My heart is beating like a hummer again.

He lifts his head and props it with his hand, his other hand pushes a sweaty strand of hair from my face.

"I mean the sex." He cups my cheek, the same one Chris has hit. "You'll tell me if it's rough?"

"I like it rough," I whisper. "When it's with you."

He doesn't reply. He just studies my face for a long time. His fingers skim to the roots of my hair which are in desperate need of a touch-up because my natural color is showing and it doesn't match the color I've been dying my hair into for over seven years.

"Sunflower," Maverick murmurs.

"What?"

"Your real hair color." He smiles weakly. "I like you better like this," he adds. "That platinum blonde is... acidic."

Sex with Maverick is mind-blowing and sometimes I wake up at night, wanting more than anything to ride his cock but it's not the sex that I'm thinking about all the time, it's what he said about Chris buying up properties in the area. Those words haunt me for days. The thought of being complicit in Chris's shady dealings gnaws at my conscience and when Chris returns

from his trip, I approach him with newfound determination.

I have a plan. I just need to execute it.

It's crappy and I'm not even sure what I'm looking for but I can't just sit still. I have to do something and that something includes learning the operations.

"Can you talk?" I ask as I enter his office one morning.

"Sure." He glances up from his laptop. "What's going on, love?"

"I want to get involved with the resort," I say, trying to sound confident and meeting his gaze unflinchingly.

He bursts into laughter. "You? Really?"

"What's so funny?"

He rises slowly from his chair and strides over to me until he is standing over me, looking down with a gaze that could set fire to this cottage. He rests both hands on my shoulders. "Kenzie, love. You don't know a single thing about property management. How about some other hobby?"

"Seriously, Chris. If I can't go to college, I need something to occupy my time. I can't be stuck in this house day after day, waiting for you to come back from another trip."

"Look," he says sternly, "I understand you want to try something different. But managing properties?"

He's trying to shake my new-found confidence and I'm hating it. "Someone has to keep an eye on things here while you're gone," I press.

It's a hard, oppressive silence inside the office for a few heartbeats.

"Alright," Chris lastly relents, still chuckling. "I'll have Sergio think of something for you."

"Thank you."

He marches back to the desk, then says, "What on earth are you wearing?"

I glance down at my dress. It's the one I purchased at the local shop the other day. It's soft, made of cotton with large blue flowers and cute little

owls. I didn't know why I bought it but it called to me when I was browsing through the racks and I like that it has character.

"Don't I give you enough money to buy decent clothes?" Chris mutters. His phone rings and that's a cue for me to make my exit.



Maverick

On Monday, I'm called to a meeting in the resort's main office, and as soon as I step inside, I can feel electric tension pulsing through the air.

My first thought is that Chris Caddell found out about the activities between his wife and me.

But it's not him that I see. It's his assistant, Sergio.

The man, always impeccably dressed and poised, sits at the head of the table, his sharp eyes fixed on me.

"Mr. Holt," he greets me with a tight smile. "Please, have a seat."

"Is everything alright?" I ask, my gut churning with unease.

I don't like this.

The last time I was called into a meeting like this, Ed told me he was about to lose Red Willow.

"Everything is fine," Sergio assures me, but there's something in his tone that doesn't sit well with me. "Mrs. Caddell has expressed interest in becoming more involved with the resort since she's staying here indefinitely. We think it would be beneficial for her to attend the daily meetings you hold with the staff, so she could get a sense of operations."

My heart drops to my stomach.

Being in one room with Kenzie Caddell while the rest of the staff is present is a time bomb. I will slip if I'm not careful. I can't control myself with her for some reason. I don't know why but she has awoken all these forgotten emotions in me that have been long dormant. And they are like a raw wound right now.

"And we'd like you to show her around," Sergio says, his voice, cold and callous, delivers the final nail in my coffin.

What. The. Fuck.

My throat fills with dread.

I swallow.

"Do you understand the assignment, Mr. Holt?"

"Of course," I nod, trying to keep my expression neutral. But my mind is racing, memories of Kenzie and me tangled together in her bedroom making it hard to focus.

Sergio sidles around the desk to get closer to me. "And remember, Maverick," he adds, tone dropping to a low, dangerous whisper, "she's the boss's wife. Keep your hands to yourself."

The threat is subtle, but I understand it perfectly. My jaw tenses, and I force myself to nod again.

"Understood."

Unfortunately, the train has already left the station.

My hands have been all over Kenzie Caddell, including inside her.

The first meeting with Kenzie comes sooner than I expect. I don't even get a proper warning except for a very stern email from Sergio the night before, informing me about Mrs. Caddell officially starting tomorrow. My stomach somersaults as I re-read the email to make sure I'm not hallucinating it.

The next day, she enters the break room wearing a two-piece suit that both flatters her stunning figure and screams money. And it definitely costs more than what I get paid for a month of work here. And I can tell by the looks on the employees' faces that they're either baffled or amused.

I mean, who the hell wears a pencil skirt in this part of California anyway?

I take a deep breath and address the room, my voice echoing off the walls. "Everyone," I announce, straightening the collar of my shirt with one hand, "this is Mrs. Caddell." I gesture to her with my other hand. "She'll be joining us from now on."

"Nice to meet you all," Kenzie says with a polite smile, but I can see the uncertainty flickering behind her eyes.

The staff members stare at her with various emotions. Some shuffle their feet, others glance quickly in her direction before turning away. There are a few quiet hellos but no one seems very enthusiastic about the boss's wife present here. The air in the room thickens with tension like soup on a hot stove. It's as if everyone's waiting for someone to break the silence or make a move. Finally, after what feels like hours, Rolly clears his throat and begins speaking, "Does that mean, we can get new linen sets for the south wing?"

"And the new coffee maker?" Jenny pipes up. "This one is pre-ice age."

Kenzie looks like a deer in the headlights. "I can certainly find out—"

"Alright, everyone!" I call. I have to raise my voice. "Settle down."

They all frown at me collectively but pay attention.

"We'll get to this eventually," I explain, and then start talking about the agenda for today.

Once the morning meeting commences and all the staff goes off to do their tasks, I tell Kenzie, "Are you ready for a tour?"

She nods. "I am."

"Alright, but I'm warning, we're going to be doing a lot of walking to the place where the golf cart won't get you."

"I'm fine with that."

"Not in those shoes." I shake my head. "Follow me."

In my office, I pull out a pair of sneakers from the bin on the storage shelf and hand the sneakers to her.

She puts them on, expression sour but determined.

Then I give her a rundown of the resort's inner workings, explaining the basics of our operations, then I explain what I will be showing to her. As we begin the tour, I can't help but be hyper-aware of the distance between us, the unspoken tension that lingers like a rain cloud.

But I do like the activity.

I haven't done a resort tour in a while and I'm truly enjoying it.

With every step we take, I carefully guide Kenzie through the complex tapestry of operations that breathe life into this picturesque haven nestled in the Northern California Mountains. I explain the delicate dance of balancing guest satisfaction, the meticulous care given to the landscape, and the behind-the-scenes efforts that make this place what it is.

As we stroll along the cobblestone paths leading down to the small set of rental cabins in the northern part of the resort, I can't help but sense the charged atmosphere between us, the unspoken tension weaving a web of anticipation. It hangs between us as if a gathering storm, crackling with desires and emotions yearning to be acknowledged.

Unfortunately, I can't kiss her silly in front of everyone and everything. She's someone else's woman.

At least on paper.

I have to maintain a professional demeanor. Instead, I continue to talk about Red Willow and its rich history and conveniently omit the information about Ed being my father-in-law. I'm not ready to talk about *that* bit yet.

Once we're done with the outside, I take Kenzie into the bowels of the resort, the laundry, the kitchen, the supply storage rooms. She's a trooper. She doesn't flinch even when I show her where the dumpsters are and how exactly

we handle recycling.

As our tour progresses through the afternoon, I find myself getting more and more unsettled by Kenzie's presence.

I don't know how I'm going to do this with her by my side day after day. She's like a drug and I've become a certified junkie.

I thought after I fuck her brains out, that itch will be scratched and I'll be done with her for good.

Instead, I crave more.

"Listen," I tell her as we wrap up the tour later in the afternoon, "I need to make a trip into town later to look at the new linen designs and some decor for the rooms. Do you want to join me? It'd be a great experience for you," I add. "You'll get to see the shop where we buy all the fabrics used in the resort."

"Sure," Kenzie replies hesitantly. "I'd like that."

"Great," I say, trying to keep my voice steady and professional. But inside, my heart races at the thought of spending more time alone with her.



Kenzie

The truck rumbles beneath me as we drive along the winding road to Beaver Crossing. Maverick's strong hands grip the steering wheel, his knuckles white and his feather tattoo peeking out from under his rolled-up sleeves.

Although I have to suppress my admiration of him, I continue to steal glances at his features—his high cheekbones, sharp jawline, and strong nose. He's a spellbinding blend of cultures and I think I could stare at his profile all day.

"Have you always lived in this area?" I ask, trying to make conversation and fill the silence between us.

"Mostly," he replies, eyes on the road. "I traveled a bit when I was in the Marines. And of course, I was away in college after, but I always knew I wanted to return here. There's just something about this place..." His speech trails off and I have a feeling there's more but he doesn't say anything for a while.

"I'm getting used to these mountains," I say, gazing at the lush green hills around us. Out in the distance, the granite slobes reach up to the blue sky dotted with fluffy white clouds.

"The mountains are the best part," he says. "But it's also the people. They're genuine, hardworking folks who look out for each other."

"Yeah...You won't find that in LA," I admit.

"I'm sure most who move there are after big things."

"And you can lose touch with reality when you're chasing those things."

"Did you... lose touch with reality when you were there?"

"For a long time, I thought I was fine. It's a difficult task to keep your humanity while in the entertainment industry, especially if you want to make good money and a name for yourself. You kinda just have to shut down that part of your brain and think numbers and end goal and you end up forgetting why you wanted to do it in the first place after being in the grind for some time."

We continue talking about random things—our favorite movies, places we'd like to visit—and soon enough, we arrive at Beaver Crossing.

As we reach a quaint shop tucked away between two red-bricked buildings at the end of the street with various stores, he and I exchange glances before stepping inside. I put on my shoes back and feel better. The sneakers were comfortable but they don't go with this outfit. And this is sort of my first time in town on an official resort mission.

In the shop, an elderly woman with rosy cheeks welcomes us warmly as she greets Maverick by name.

I'm introduced as Mrs. Caddell.

Maverick chats with the woman for several minutes as I listen to their conversation and survey the fabric samples that adorn the walls of the shop. My gaze drifts from one pattern to another until I eventually recognize some of the more familiar ones from my cottage or other locations around the resort.

The second stop is a stationery store where we buy a box of printing paper and some other items for the office.

"Why not order online?" I ask as we browse through the tightly stacked

shelves. "Saves the trip."

"It's a fifteen-minute drive," Maverick says, grabbing a pack of pens. "And it supports the local businesses. Folks here need to eat too."

I only nod and follow him to the register where the tiny, ancient woman rings us up with a grin on her face.

We stop by the nursery too where Maverick spends at least a good thirty minutes staring at plants.

I feel really stupid in my Valentino shoes next to him while he's thinking about enhancing the resort's landscaping.

"Boring, huh?" he says as we climb into his truck later on.

"I'm trying to learn new things."

"Running a resort isn't glamorous."

"I never thought it was."

After finishing our errands, Maverick offers to grab some food before returning to Red Willow and we head to a local restaurant.

"Hey, Mav!" The owner greets us as we walk in. He's a middle-aged man with a warm smile and a hearty laugh. "Long time no see." His eyes dart to me, curious "Who's your lovely companion?"

"This is Mrs. Caddell," Maverick introduces me. "She's learning the ropes of the resort operations. We were just running some errands in town."

"Bet you're hungry?" The man laughs and hands me his hand for a shake. "Maverick here is a workaholic. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," I reply, returning his smile.

We're seated at a cozy table near the window, and when our food arrives, I try to relax and enjoy the meal.

"I hope this is to your liking," Maverick says, pointing at my plate loaded with steak, mashed potatoes, and coleslaw.

The meal is simple and reminds me of home. Sometimes, I find that those memories of Oregon that I loved—when my mother was still alive—are slowly fading away, becoming muddy and I'm terrified of the day when they

become just a blur in my mind.

"It's delicious," I assure Maverick, taking a bite of the juicy steak and diverting my attention to the present.

We continue eating in silence, but the unspoken tension between us only grows stronger. I can't ignore the magnetic pull. Slowly, I slip out of my shoe and slide my foot up his leg, gently brushing against his knee under the table and then between his thighs.

He looks up from his plate with a glint of surprise in his eyes but doesn't tell me to stop.

"How about you, Mr. Holt?" I ask innocently, my foot still teasing him. "Are you enjoying your food?"

"Very much," he says, his voice low.

"Is it the only thing you're enjoying?"

He continues to stare, his fork stuck in midair.

I love this. I love how this little game affects him. All of a sudden he's lost his composure.

Thank god the tablecloth is long enough to cover up my ministrations under the table.

Maverick attempts to keep a cool expression while he's shoving the food down.

Five minutes later, he's asking for a check and paying the bill.

I don't think I've ever had a meal this short.

Once we're outside, Maverick says, patting his pockets, "Do you want for this to come out? Because if you keep on doing this—" he doesn't finish that sentence. "Damn, I must've left my wallet inside," he mutters instead, frustrated. "Wait here for a second."

He thrusts the truck keys into my hand and rushes back into the restaurant. As I step toward the vehicle, I hear a voice from behind me.

"Excuse me, MacKenzie Caddell?"

I spin around to see a woman. She's in her mid-thirties, pretty, with bright

red curls. She's wearing a pair of jeans, a white T-shirt that says something a can't read, and a wrinkled cotton jacket that's seen better days.

My warning bells immediately go off.

"Hi." The woman smiles and extends her hand for a shake. "My name is Irene Kovac from *The Standard*. I was hoping to talk. Do you know anything about your husband orchestrating a case of vandalism at one of the local properties?"

I was hounded by reporters before. They are usually after Chris and they are typically from some tabloid. *The Standard* isn't that type of newspaper. They are after other kind of stories. Real stories. Not trash. In any case, I don't talk to reporters. No matter the publication. Chris told me not to when we started dating.

"I'm sorry," I say, startled. "I can't help you."

"Can't or won't?"

"I'm not the person to talk to." I fumble with the truck keys, looking for the right button to unlock the door.

"Think about it," she urges, stepping closer and slipping her business card into my hand before walking away.

I just stand there with my gaze transfixed on the card until I hear footsteps.

"Who was that?" Maverick asks, motioning at the figure disappearing behind the row of cars.

I quickly hide the card in my pocket. "Uh, just some city person who got lost," I lie, not wanting to drag him into yet another problem that comes with Chris Caddell.

We get back in the vehicle and head out toward the resort.

The truck's interior is filled with the scent of Maverick—bergamot, freshly cut grass, gasoline, pine needles from the forest outside, and old leather from the seats.

I roll down the window and the warm summer wind whips through my

hair as Maverick's truck speeds down the winding road, carrying us farther from Beaver Crossing. The sun has begun its descent, throwing long shadows across the green landscape and the woods look pretty and mysterious.

There's music blasting from the speakers, some upbeat rock song and I savor the feeling of freedom that washes over me. I can't remember experiencing something like this with my husband. At least not recently. Perhaps, when we just got married, and even then, our relationship always felt... like a wire ready to snap.

Emboldened, I rest my feet on the dashboard and lean back into the seat and my pencil skirt slips down my legs, leaving my thighs bare.

"I'm not wearing any panties," I tease.

"I think you're lying," Maverick grits out, his eyes firmly on the road.

"Wanna bet?"

"Whoever wins gets one wish," he declares.

"Deal."

His strong hand reaches over to rest on my thigh. His touch is electrifying and my breath catches in my throat. I glance at his profile. "Scared to lose?"

"I don't want to get into an accident."

"I think you should pull over."

Maverick's grip tightens on the steering wheel as he glances at me quickly before turning his attention back to the road. "You're playing with fire, MacKenzie."

"Am I?" I ask. I can tell he's just as eager as I am. The growing bulge in his jeans speaks volumes.

Without another word, he steers off the road and drives further into the woods, tearing through the forest with one purpose.

When we're far enough to be concealed by the trees, he abruptly slams on the brakes, and we skid to a stop in an empty clearing.

Maverick turns off the engine. The only sound is the rustling of leaves in the wind, distant birds chirping in the trees, and our hurried breathing.

Clambering onto his lap to straddle him, I press my lips against him hungrily. A deep moan rumbles from his chest and I feel his desire for me swelling through every inch of us.

It's a hungry, desperate kiss, born of hours and hours of pent-up tension and I can feel his cock pressing against me through the thin lace of my thong, and I grind against him, wanting to feel more.

"You lost," he says, slipping both hands to my ass to cup it, his fingers pulling on the strip of fabric between my cheeks.

"You get to use your wish now."

"I'll keep that wish for later," he murmurs against my lips. "Right now, I'm going to satisfy your wish."

He kisses me hard again, his tongue plundering my mouth, exploring it greedily. His fingers find their way easily between my legs. I gasp at the touch, at the sudden invasion of his hands and he slips his fingers inside my thong, right up to the core of me, and strokes my slick, swollen nub.

His movements are so swift, so sure that I'm gasping in seconds.

My thong is torn apart and tossed to the floor with one frenzied motion. My skirt has rolled up around my waist and I'm left bared to the summer air.

With each gasping breath, my hot exhales wash over his neck as I sink down on his cock without hesitation. An electric jolt of pleasure runs through my body.

And then I ride him. I ride him until we are both on the brink of explosion.

I lose all sense of time, of place. All that exists is the heat, the desire to be as close to one another as possible.

"Fuck, baby. I'm gonna come," Maverick growls and I quicken my pace, trembling as an orgasm makes my entire body shiver and my toes curl.

His fingers dig deeper into my ass, my clenching walls milking him until his cock throbs inside me and he spills himself into my hot, tight pussy.

We both gasp for air, our bodies slick with sweat, our hearts racing.

When we're done, he leans back against the seat, his face red with lust, his eyes dark with it.

"If you're not careful," he says, "you'll get used to this."

"I already have."

Maverick studies me intently, running his fingers through my mussed hair. "You know"—his voice is softer all of a sudden—"you should wear something less... opulent. The employees at the resort won't trust you otherwise."

I nod, taking his advice to heart. "I'll keep that in mind."

The next day, I follow Maverick's advice and dress more casually, wearing my hair braided and donning a pair of boots, a shirt, and a skirt I bought from the locals.

Surprisingly, as I scan my reflection in the mirror, I realize I feel more like myself than I have in a long time.

Maverick gives me a knowing smile as I join him in the break room.

I get some nods of approval from several employees too.

A box of freshly baked goods I made an effort to pick up from the bakery right outside the resort also helps.

As I continue shadowing Maverick throughout the day while he's handling day-to-day operations of the resort, we exchange casual conversation, discussing trivial things like movies and music and life, but the electricity between us remains undeniable, stronger than ever.

Why am I feeling like this?

Why won't this obsession go away?

And then Maverick pulls me aside after we stop by the front desk and says, "How about a break?"

He shows me a key card in his palm.

Room 15.

"It's not occupied," he husks us as we stand in the alcove near the ice machine somewhere on the first floor. I can hear the distant chatter of the reception, people checking in. Adrenaline roars in my veins.

It's dangerous but that only makes it all the more exciting.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Mr. Holt?"

"Definitely." He looks around and, once satisfied, grabs my hand and leads me to the elevator. Moments later, we are standing in a room we used for a secret rendezvous just days before.

It's irresponsible—this tryst in the middle of the workday. We've gone insane. We fall into each other without hesitation.

Our lips crash together and I tumble back against the bed, dragging Maverick with me. My skirt is already hiked up around my waist, my panties long lost to the floor, and my wrists are captured by his powerful hands.

His cock slides inside me and he thrusts deep, taking me with one stroke.

"You feel so good," I moan.

"So do you," he growls, and I feel the tension in his muscles.

He fucks me hard, his cock moving faster and faster, each stroke harder and harder. I'm panting and whimpering, my body writhing and shuddering beneath him.

When he comes, I come too, crying out his name.

He collapses on top of me, gasping.

"That was..." he pauses to inhale a lungful of air, "short but great."

"I agree."

Afterward, we lay tangled together on the soft bed, our breathing slowly returning to normal. We continue talking, diving deeper into our lives, our likes and dislikes, and everything in between.

I learn a lot of interesting things about Maverick Holt through these post-sex chats.

For example, he prefers DC over Marvel comics, but keeps a box of old

X-Men comics in his closet for reference. He doesn't have Netflix because "who has the time to watch shows while there's so much nature to explore?" His favorite color is green because it's the color of the forest. The little indentation in the skin on the side of his forehead is from an accident with a deer ten years ago on one of the trails up in the mountains.

I notice another small scar, stark against the smooth skin of his inner forearm.

Maverick stops dead in the middle of his sentence and looks at me, a tiny smile on his face. "You're staring at me," he says. "Like you're trying to solve a puzzle."

I reach out and trace the scar. The skin is rough, like someone dug a niche into the flesh as opposed to a clean slice.

"What is this from?"

"Afghanistan. Shrapnel," he says simply.

I remain silent for a while, unsure of how to react or what to say. I don't want to appear nosy by asking sensitive questions like his ancestry or his reason for joining the Marines.

I'm also getting the distinct feeling that he doesn't like talking about his time in the military in general.

"I'm sorry," I finally whisper.

"Why?"

"I don't know. But if something ever happened there...where you were back then, then I'm sorry."

"It's a job. Treating it differently will drive you crazy. You're just hired to follow the orders."

Now that he's breached the topic, it seems appropriate, so I ask carefully, "Did you ever feel that you were protecting foreigners when you were in the military?"

There's a pause. He sighs. "I'm proud of who I am but my blood is diluted. My mother was Native but my father's mother was Irish. I can't be

angry at some white dude for something his ancestor did hundreds of years ago. It's not his fault. It's the land that I'll always protect first. The land was here before us and it will be after we're gone."

"I think you're beautiful," My fingers run along his hair, spread out on the pillow.

He doesn't respond. He takes my hand and kisses the inside of my palm and for a long moment, we are quiet.

"Kenzie," Maverick says suddenly, his voice serious. "Leave Chris."

The request takes me by surprise, and I'm unable to respond right away. A thousand thoughts race through my mind, but there's one thing I know for certain: I've never felt this good with Chris as I feel with Maverick.

Even if it's just sex.

Or is it?



Maverick

I'm home and it's late.

I pour another glass of whiskey, the smoky liquid swirling in the tumbler as I try to drown out the thoughts that have been plaguing me all evening. The warmth it brings to my chest offers a small reprieve from the cold feeling settling over my heart. It's been hours since I asked Kenzie to leave Chris, and I still don't understand why the hell I did it.

In a moment of sheer madness, two words tumbled out of my lips, and now nothing can take them back.

She was pretty clear that her marriage to him is more complicated than just a couple of signatures on a piece of paper. She's in deep because of her father.

I understand it partially.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, running a hand through my hair.

I still can't shake the image of her bruised face and the inability to do something—to protect her from him—is driving me mad. In my heart, I know Chris isn't right for her, but who am I to tell her what to do?

I glance around my dimly lit cabin, the shadows cast by the flickering

candles on the coffee table seem to dance and mock me. They remind me of the darkness that I'm trying to escape—the darkness that threatens to consume me.

I try to shake off the feeling of helplessness, but it's like a weight on my shoulders, dragging me down.

I take another swig of whiskey, the burn reminding me that I'm still alive, even if I feel like I'm drowning.



Kenzie

I stand by the window of the cottage, clutching the loose fabric of my sweater around me like a shield. I emailed Maverick's work email and announced that I'm sick and need a few days. Chris is spending his days in the office. He had someone come out to install the hot spot because he needs uninterrupted and fast internet to work and he's now talking on the phone or in Zooms from dawn to dusk while I've done everything I can to keep my distance from both of them—my husband and the man I'm cheating on my husband with.

With Chris currently at the resort, it's dangerous to be sneaking out to see Maverick or even be in one room with him, but my dumb heart aches with the memory of our stolen moments together—the sex, the talks after the sex, even the tense silent moments filled with each other's unspoken secrets.

I'm living a double life, I realize. On one side, there's a man who indulges me with everything and anything that money can buy, a man who I'm supposed to love and be loyal to. On the other side, there's Maverick, the man who is a mystery and who made it clear he is emotionally unavailable, a man who makes me feel alive and seen in ways Chris never could.

But this can't go on forever. I know I have to make a decision soon. The

longer I stay in this limbo, the harder it becomes to choose.

Leave Chris?

And then what?

Ever since he spoke those words, my world has been shattered into a million pieces.

I was content with my life before I met Maverick Holt. It wasn't marital bliss but at least I had structure.

Now I know that I've been lying to myself for the past two years. My marriage died along with that tiny flicker of new life.

I was kidding myself when I thought Chris and I would work out our issues that came after that loss.

Now, his presence is suffocating, and I find myself re-evaluating everything I thought I knew and liked about my life. The expensive clothes, the designer jewelry, the extravagant trips—none of it brings me any real joy.

Leaving him would be so easy if not for Chris's money that pays for my father's accommodation at the facility where people can look after him. And I can't take care of him on my own unless I move back to Oregon where rent is cheap and where minimum wage jobs can support the two of us. But, then he'll wander off again and God knows what could happen to him then. I can't bear the thought of losing him. He was a shitty father after my mother's death. Drunk and irresponsible but he's all I have left.

"Love," Chris's voice breaks through my thoughts, and I turn around to face him. "You've been awfully quiet since I got back."

"Sorry, I've just been... thinking," I reply, forcing a smile.

"About what?" he presses, his dark eyes searching mine, almost as if for any sign of weakness.

"Nothing important," I say quickly, averting my gaze. "Just missing you while you were gone."

I hope my lie is convincing enough, but deep down, I know that I'm only fooling myself. Maverick has changed everything, and there's no going back.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Sort of." *Right, I still have to keep up with my charade of being sick.*

As Chris strides back to the office, he gives my oversized sweater and ripped jean shorts a once-over but says nothing.

"Are you wearing that?" Chris asks suddenly, eyeing me as we are getting ready to go to breakfast. "You have an entire closet full of designer clothes. Why wear this garbage?"

I look down at the dark-green cotton dress I purchased yesterday in Beaver Crossing in the small clothing store where I shopped last time. It hugs my curves in all the right places and offsets my skin tone and hair. But most importantly, it's comfortable. It doesn't feel like I'm wearing five thousand dollars. It feels like I'm wearing an actual dress.

"It's locally made" I supply, trying to sound casual. "If we're going to live here, I'd like to contribute to the community."

"We're not here to make friends," he replies, his eyes narrowing. "Unless you're trying to impress someone. Are you?"

"I don't know what you mean by this," I deadpan but my heart is pounding in my chest.

He knows something.

The tension in the room is palpable as Chris studies me, clearly disbelieving my words. But after a moment, he seems to let it go, waving a dismissive hand.

"We're late for breakfast."

Honestly, I was surprised when he told me the other day he wanted to have breakfast together. Outside. In the only fine-dining restaurant at the resort. He hasn't looked at me once ever since we arrived here but now he suddenly cares what I wear and that we are seen together by the staff.

The thing about my husband is he never does anything unless he has an agenda.

There's a car waiting for us outside the cottage even though it's only a mile walk and the weather today is nice, a little cloudy and breezy and not too hot. Perfect for a stroll.

But no, we have to get into a limo.

Everyone has to see us driving through the property.

As we walk up to the restaurant, I can feel the weight of Chris's stare on me, scrutinizing my every move.

He knows.

He knows.

He knows.

"Love," he begins, pausing to sip his coffee once we're seated at the table by the window. "I've arranged for Laurel Nouveaux to come up from LA today to take your measurements for your birthday dress."

"Really?" I ask, trying to sound grateful and excited while my mind races with anxiety.

I'd kill to have Lauren Nouveaux design something for me.

Five years ago.

I couldn't care less now.

"Of course," he replies smoothly, a hint of menace hidden beneath his smile. "You deserve the best."

My heart clenches as I realize what he's doing—he's determined to show off, to establish his ownership over me. And as much as I wish I could stand up to him, refuse his lavish displays of control, I know that I can't risk it. Not when my father's well-being depends on his money.

And the entire situation—the inevitability of it—makes me sick to my stomach.

"Thank you," I manage to say through gritted teeth, praying that Maverick won't see me with Chris.

I don't want him to.

Chris's smile widens. "It's the least I can do for my beautiful wife."



Kenzie

I stand in the living room of the cottage as Laurel fusses with the fabric samples for my dress. Her assistant Emma kneels by my feet, taking my measurements and jotting them down on a clipboard.

The sun filters through the curtains while I'm watching my reflection in the full-length mirror. Laurel's like a little sparrow, hopping from topic to topic with overbearing enthusiasm, her energy a total opposite to my indifference. Currently, she prattles on about the latest trends in evening gowns.

I tune her out. I don't want a lavish birthday party or an expensive dress, I realize. But I've learned it's easier to go along with Chris's whims than fight him.

Helen is here today and she's in the kitchen, sweeping and mopping with her usual frown. I can tell she disapproves. When I catch her gaze in the mirror, I offer a weak smile. She huffs and continues with her cleaning duties.

"Kenzie, dear, you have such a lovely figure," Laurel says, her hands expertly measuring my waist. "Even though you're no longer modeling. This

dress is going to look stunning on you." She glances up at me, her eyes seem warm and genuine but I know that's what Chris's money bought me along with the garment.

"Thank you. Honestly, I'm not much into parties these days," I confess, my voice unenthusiastic. I don't have it in me to be acting in front of her.

"Ah, well, sometimes we just need a little push to get out there and enjoy life again," she replies. "Besides, Chris mentioned that you could use some cheering up."

"Ah, that sound like my husband," I say absently.

"You're a lucky woman to be married to such a caring man. Hold on to him."

Lucky, huh?

Finally, Laurel steps back with a satisfied grin. "Perfect. This dress will be stunning on you."

I force a smile, though dread coils in my stomach at the thought of being paraded in front of Chris's friends and business partners like a prized possession. And chances are Maverick will see me like that, like a piece of meat on another man's arm. "Thank you, Laurel. I appreciate you coming all this way."

"Of course, darling. Anything for the Caddells." Laurel air kisses my cheek and sweeps out of the cottage, trailed by Emma lugging her supplies.

The moment the door closes, Helen creeps over from the kitchen.

"I know it's not my business," she says, voice dropping to a low hum. "But you need to stop leading him on, Mrs. Caddell."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say, feigning confusion, though my pulse kicks into a gallop.

"You know exactly what I mean, Mrs. Caddell." She stresses my last name. I think for a reason. To remind me who my husband is.

"Dear," she says, advancing a bit. "I've been around long enough to see when two people are sneaking around. And you and Maverick... well, it's not

subtle."

My heart races, and I can feel my face flush with guilt and embarrassment.

"Don't do this to him," she whispers, pulling something from the pocket of her apron and handing it to me. "He's suffered enough." I realize it's one of the leather bracelets Maverick wears. "He lost his Johanna—god rest her soul—then he lost this place. Is it not enough that you two took what was rightfully his, the only reminder of what he had with Johanna? You're now trying to force folks out of their homes here for some real estate project."

The info dump confuses me for a second. "Why would you say we took what was rightfully his?" I ask, trying to piece all the details together.

"Because this place was supposed to be his," Helen reveals. "He was married to Ed's daughter. He's Ed's son-in-law."

"Ed?" Where have I heard this name?

"The previous owner. Mr. Irving."

Finally, I'm starting to understand. That's what Maverick meant when he said his wife—Johanna—was gone. She died.

"It's in bad taste, Mrs. Caddell," Helen continues, "For you and your entourage to swoop in, turn our lives upside down, and then leave in a few months. Because that's what's going to happen. And Maverick will be devastated. Losing Johanna nearly destroyed him. We don't want to see him hurt again when you go back to the city."

"I didn't know," I whisper, feeling a mixture of sadness for Maverick and shame for my own actions.

"You're an outsider," Helen drives the point home. "No one's going to tell you anything here, Mrs. Caddell. Especially when your husband isn't exactly a saint."

The sun drops beneath the horizon, throwing an eerie yellow glow over the resort and the pines look like they are on fire as I slip outside under the pretense of going for a walk. Chris doesn't say anything. Just nods at me with his eyes on the paperwork and continues his work.

My steps lead me to Maverick's cabin as if of their own accord. The cool evening air bites at my skin, but it's a welcome reprieve from the suffocating tension inside the cottage.

My heart pounds in my chest with each step, anxiety and anticipation swirling within me. His leather bracelet is in my fist. I'm holding it tightly.

I find him on the porch, staring into the darkness and nursing a glass of amber liquid. Whiskey, probably. When he sees me approaching, a myriad of emotions flit across his face—surprise, longing, regret.

"You shouldn't be here," he says somberly.

"Can we talk?"

Bottle in hand, he strides to the door, gesturing for me to follow him inside.

I do, the weight of Helen's words from earlier bearing down on me.

He's a widower and my husband took the only thing his wife left him.

I feel like shit.

"Look, Maverick," I begin when we're in the cabin, my voice shaky. "I'm sorry about... Johanna and about Chris."

He stiffens at the mention of his late wife, taking a swig from the whiskey bottle before setting it down on the table with a heavy thud. "I don't want to talk about her?" he says quietly, his gaze intense.

"You never want to talk to me about anything," I hiss out, wringing my hands, his bracelet still in the curl of my palm.

"Why?"

"Because I'm here to listen."

"Why, Kenzie? So you could take my secrets to your husband?" he snaps, his voice a frustrated rumble.

"No." I continue to wring my hands because I realize I don't know how to do this—how to console someone or how to be there for someone. Chris has never needed me for him after Strawberry. "I'm just... sorry for your loss," I stammer through the words awkwardly, "And I want you to know that if you need someone to talk to, I'm here." I reach out to touch his arm, but he pulls away.

The rejection stings, even though I know I deserve it.

"Don't you get it? I don't want your pity."

"It's not pity I'm offering. It's support." Because I know how hard it is emotionally when you're grieving your loss alone.

"Why are you here, Kenzie?" Maverick's obviously drunk. He's unsteady on his feet.

"Ed was planning to give you the resort—" The aborted sentence hangs in the air and immediately, I want to bite my tongue.

"And?" His mouth twists into a scowl. "How does that concern you?" His voice cracks on the last word.

"Right, I'm just a fuck."

We stare at each other, our gazes engaged in a wild dance and I swear I glimpse the raw anguish in his eyes before his expression shifts and becomes a mask of pure unadulterated rage.

"My past is none of your business. This"—His hand bounces between our chests—"is just sex. Nothing less. Nothing more. If you're here because you need to talk to someone, get a fucking therapist, Kenzie."

I flinch at his words, but I can't say I didn't expect them. Plus, he's drunk.

"Fine," I spout, my mind working overtime, trying to come up with something caustic but he speaks before me.

"You're nothing but a spoiled pretty thing whose husband is bullying the locals into selling their land."

Anger rises in my chest, momentarily overriding the guilt. For a second, just for a second, I thought that maybe Maverick Holt is a decent man. But

he's proving me wrong. "And you're a moody jerk and a liar."

I'm so pissed. At him. At Chris. At Helen. At Laurel and her assistant. At the entire world.

I slam his bracelet on the table, then grab the first thing that my hand finds—a bottle of whisky—and throw it against the floor.

The liquid spills and the glass shatters, shards scattering like a spider's web across the floor.

"You're an asshole," I growl, unable to control the volume of my voice. "You're a fucking asshole," I repeat, my voice rising with each syllable.

Breathing heavily, Maverick snatches up the tumbler from the table and hurls it with every ounce of his strength against the wall. A million pieces raining down like burning stars as he takes a step forward to close the distance between us.

Jaw clenched, he's towering over me and I can feel his rage.

"Are you going to hit me now too?" I cry out, my chin lifted, my hands balled into fists.

All he does is just glares at me and I crumble under the intensity of his piercing blue gaze.

I can't take it anymore, so I ran out of his cabin and head back to the cottage I share with Chris.



Maverick

I don't exactly remember what happened as I scan the mess in my cabin when I wake up in the middle of the night. The alcohol has released its hold on my mind and I'm now sifting through the fuzzy memories of the fight Kenzie and I had right before she stormed out of my place, all furious.

Memories of her expression—shifting from vulnerability to frustration to anger—flash in front of my eyes.

I was an asshole.

But it was more than that.

I got angry.

I got angry because...

Because what?

Because it felt like she wanted more than just a fuck, Maverick.

The realization has me shudder.

Kenzie Caddell was supposed to be a distraction. Instead, she occupied every part of my mind and won't leave me alone.

My legs barely hold my weight as I drag myself to the bathroom to take a cold shower. My head throbs but I force myself to wash up and then clean the

cabin before I go back to bed. The bracelet she returned goes back on my wrist as a reminder that I need to be careful.

I only catch a couple of hours of restless sleep before my alarm wakes me up.

I get ready for work, hoping that Kenzie and I won't cross paths today.

She's been absent these past few days. The official excuse is sick but there have been people coming and going. Contractors. To handle preparations for her birthday party. I assume she's been occupied with those.

But I guess I'm out of luck because when I show up at the break room for the daily meeting, she's already there, a paper coffee cup in one hand and bagel in the other and Rolly is telling her one of his crazy stories.

Her head is bent, but I know she's listening to him when she tosses her head back and laughs, a wide grin creasing her face. She looks younger and carefree.

It takes only a second for the smile to be wiped off her face.

She sees me and when our gazes meet I notice that her eyes are bloodshot and hollow.

This is going to be a long day.

Working alongside Kenzie after yesterday's fight is hell, the tension between us substantial. I can't shake the fragmented memory of last night's argument, and I'm finding it nearly impossible to focus on my tasks.

With each passing minute, as I replay the words I threw at her, I realize how wrong I was to just let her leave.

"Hey, could you hand me that clipboard?" Kenzie asks in a strained voice as the golf cart drives us past the pond. Samson is behind the wheel and he doesn't pay us any attention.

I pass it to her without meeting her gaze, feeling the weight of our unresolved issues. So far we've been able to keep civil.

"Thanks," she murmurs, barely audible over the rustle of leaves in the breeze.

From the corner of my eye, I catch glimpses of her as we continue driving down the field and towards the barn, her blonde hair catching the sunlight and her delicate hands moving with practiced precision.

We have to talk, but our interactions are stilted and the gnawing guilt in my chest only grows stronger and stronger.

During meal break, she eats with the rest of the staff. That's something she started doing soon after I told her to stop wearing overpriced clothes to work. She caught on pretty fast that she had better chances if she was one of them. Some employees warmed to her a little.

But today, she only tosses some lettuce around her plate with her fork and then trashes the rest of the food.

We stay in awkward silence as we run errands later on, the tension around us so thick that I can taste it. And I don't like it. I don't like it a single bit.

We stride through the northern wing of the resort's main hotel, our bodies so close that I can feel her breath on my neck. I think this is when I realize I've had enough.

I glance around warily, my heart pounding in my chest. I reach out, my hand tightening on Kenzie's as I tug her through the deserted hallway and toward the door.

"What are doing?" she hisses out, but there's no resistance.

I duck into a narrow utility closet off to the side, pulling her with me and close the door with a quiet click.

The darkness instantly envelops us, swallowing us whole in its silent secrecy. Kenzie trembles against me, her breathing shallow and fast.

"Kenzie," I start, my voice cracking with emotion. "I'm sorry about last night. I was drunk and I was an asshole and I shouldn't have let you go like that. I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry."

My heart thumps hard in my chest while I wait for her to respond.

There's a long pause and then she moves, her palm finding my jaw.

"What is it about you, Maverick Holt," she says, her voice barely a

whisper, "That makes me want to run to you even after you made it abundantly clear you don't care."

"I can't be like this—mad at each other."

This is definitely more than just a fuck.

She steps forward to erase whatever little space left between us, her lips just a millimeter away from mine. Her breath hitches.

My muscles tense as her warmth embraces me, drawing me in. I look down at the outline of her face, and I know. I know what I want. Even if this desire goes against my every rule.

And I'm going to get it.

I crush my mouth with hers, the contact immediate and heated.

She moans as I pull her into me, wrapping my hands around her small waist.

The kiss is frantic, hungry. I'm lost—we're lost—in the taste of her lips, the slide of her tongue. My need for her is almost painful to the point where it's unhealthy. I don't remember wanting a woman this badly before.

I push her against the wall and cup her cheeks. "Can I see you tonight?"

I don't know why... Yet.

Nevertheless, she nods, conveying a reckless willingness to take the chance.

Our game is high-stakes now—we can't turn back even if we wanted to.

Let's just hope our luck holds out this time.

The sun sinks low in the sky and hides behind the mountains as I walk up to Ed's cabin. The scent of freshly cut grass lingers in the air, and the sound of birds chirping their evening songs fills my ears. Despite the beauty surrounding me and the promise of seeing Kenzie later tonight, anxiety gnaws at my insides.

"Hey, Maverick," Sylas greets me as he opens the door, his face guarded. "Come on in." He doesn't like me but he always plays nice in front of his father.

"Thanks, man," I say, stepping inside. "How is Frisco?"

"Still standing," Sylas supplies and retreats to the other room to give us some privacy.

Ed looks up when he hears my footsteps, beaming at me. He sits in his favorite armchair by the fireplace, the one piece of furniture still not packed or sold. There's a book open on his lap; a hardcover edition, no Kindle for this old-school reader.

"Good to see you, son," he says warmly, the net of wrinkles around his eyes deepening. "Sit down, make yourself comfortable."

I take a seat across from him, trying my best to relax. "Wanted to come by and say goodbye before you leave."

"I expect you to visit me."

"Of course."

Ed sighs and sets his book aside. "Take care of yourself, Maverick," he says once the silence between us has stretched long enough to be uncomfortable.

I run my fingers through my hair, the anxiety thick in my throat. "I will, don't worry."

"And don't forget," he smiles, "You still owe me grandkids." He jerks his chin toward the room where Sylas has gone and adds in a low voice, "God knows when my other kid steps up and decides it's time to become a father."

I chuckle at his comment, grateful for the break in tension. "I'll do my best, Ed, I promise."

He nods. "I know you will. And I'm proud of you, Maverick. You're a good man."

I feel a lump form in my throat. "Thanks, Ed. For everything."

We chat for a while about the resort and how things are going. It's during

this conversation that Ed casually says, "Did you hear about Henry Sullivan? He sold his land." Ed shakes his head. "Never thought I'd see the day."

I feel uneasy. Can this be a coincidence? Henry Sullivan first. Old Joe next? People around here don't sell their land easily; it means more than money to them. "Really? That's...unexpected."

Ed nods, sensing the tension in my voice. "Yes, it is. But times change, I suppose."

Yes, because Christos Caddell owns real estate here now.

We continue talking for a few more minutes before I stand to leave. "It's getting late, so I better get going." I lie because I still want to stop by Henry's place before it's too dark. "Take care of yourself, Ed. And enjoy your retirement in San Francisco."

We hug, our embrace lingering a moment longer than usual. As Syllas walks me out of the cabin, I can't help but feel a sense of sadness wash over me. Ed's leaving, and the fate of Red Willow is on shaky ground.

"Thanks, man," I tell Syllas when we're on the porch, extending my hand for a shake. "Hope you don't mind me visiting in the future."

"Listen," arms folded on his chest, Syllas starts, "stop putting ideas in my father's head." A firm edge to his voice. "My sister is dead and there's nothing left here for him except for heartache. So don't involve him into your affairs. You hear me?"

I withdraw my hand. "You don't like me, huh? Never did."

"Damn right, I don't like you. I don't understand what my sister saw in you in the first place. I never thought you were the right fit for her. And I think you know that." His words cut deep.

"Maybe you're right," I admit quietly, staring out at the fading sunlight. "But she loved me, and I loved her."

"Did you?" he challenges, his eyes narrowing. "Because from where I'm standing, all you've done since she died is drag Ed down with you into your hole of self-pity and alcohol."

"Look, Sylas, I—" I try to defend myself, but he interrupts me.

"Johanna believed in you, Maverick. She saw something in you that I never did. But instead of honoring her memory by moving forward, you've wasted your potential in a bottle."

His words sting like salt in a wound, and deep down, I know there's truth in them. That's why I can't find the words to argue, and instead, I just stare at him, at his determined face.

"Do something about it," he hisses out. "For your own sake."

As I leave Ed's house, the weight of Sylas's words settle on my shoulders, mingling with the unease from the news of the land sale.

My heart tells me there's more to the story than meets the eye, and I have a feeling that finding the truth will be far from easy.

I squint against the last of the sunlight lingering in the west as I approach Henry Sullivan's ranch fifteen minutes later, my boots kicking up small clouds of dust with each step.

"Hey, Maverick," Henry calls out from his porch. "What brings you around these parts?"

"Hey, Henry. Wanted to check on you." I give him a nod and look around. "I heard about you selling your land."

"Signed the papers last week." He throws his hand in the air.

"How come? You grew up around these parts."

Henry sighs, his shoulders slumping. "Yeah, well, times change, I guess. It's not what it used to be. These new water regulations are killing me. There's just not enough to sustain my livestock anymore."

"What are you talking about?" My inner warning bells go off immediately.

"Been hit with penalties for exceeding my allocated water quotas."

"Penalties?" I ask, furrowing my brow. "How did you exceed the quota? Don't you have timers working?"

"Vandals," he grumbles, shaking his head. "Someone broke one of my

pipes out in the field a while back. Water ran all night before I noticed it. That put me over the limit. Happened more than once."

My gut churns, his words only fueling my suspicions further.

"Maybe I'm just paranoid," Henry admits with a bitter chuckle. "But it feels like there's something bigger going on. A few other folks in the area told me they are considering selling."

My heart races at this new information, and I can't shake the feeling that there's more to this than just bad luck and unfortunate circumstances. I rub my temple, my mind racing with possibilities.

"Mind telling me who else is considering selling?" I ask.

"Declan Pierce and that other fella up by the Willow Springs. Dvorak."

"Who's the buyer?"

"Ah, some Zenith Holdings. At least that's what's on the contract."

"You know who you dealt with?"

"All attorneys. None of the folks I've seen before."

"Thanks, Henry," I say, looking him straight in the eye. "Have a good night."

As I leave Henry's ranch, my resolve strengthens. There's definitely something fishy going on. This isn't just about land sales anymore; it's about protecting the people and the community. And if there's even a chance that Caddell is manipulating the situation, I won't stop until I expose them.

For the first time in a long while, I feel a sense of purpose coursing through my veins, replacing the numbness that had settled there since Johanna's death. It's a bittersweet realization. As much as I'm driven by a desire to help others, I wonder if this new mission will also serve as a means to escape the ghosts of my past.



Kenzie

The night sky crackles with stars, and the full moon bathes the resort in an ethereal silver light when I slip out of the cottage late at night.

Even though Chris sleeps in a separate bedroom, it's risky but I can't find a good explanation for this insanity that is Maverick Holt's hold on me.

I do have an explanation for Chris in case he finds out I left the cottage. It's simple. I'm visiting Snowfall. She'll never be able to corroborate my story, but she'll never be able to tell on me either. It's a win-win.

The trees sway gently in the wind, their shadows dancing across the grounds as I make my way through the resort, hoping no one will see me. My heart races with exhilaration, fueled by the desire to escape this stifling marriage and seek solace in Maverick's arms. And with each step, a delicious mixture of fear and anticipation swirls in my veins.

The scent of pine and damp earth fills my nostrils and it feels as though nature itself envelops me in its warm embrace.

I'm alive, I realize.

I'm alive and I can see all these things surrounding me, all these things I couldn't see before.

As I approach Maverick's cabin at the edge of the property, I find him standing in the doorway, his shirt unbuttoned, revealing the inked, muscular chest and abs. His hair is loose, his skin is illuminated by the moonlight and he's beautiful, in a rugged and mysterious kind of way.

A shiver runs down my spine—not from the night air, but from the intensity of his blue gaze that locks on me as I approached the small porch.

"Hey," I whisper, climbing the stairs.

He says nothing, just steps inside the cabin, the door left open as an invitation to follow him.

My heart continues to pound in my chest as I cross the threshold and find myself immersed in a warm, familiar room lit by several candles. If this isn't romantic than I don't know what is.

The air is heavy with the scent of bergamot and musk, and the sound of Maverick's breathing is the only thing that breaks the silence.

I close the door and stand there for a moment, unsure of what to do before Maverick reaches out his hand and pulls me towards him. In one swift move, he wraps his arms around my waist and crushes his lips against mine. Mouths meet in a greeting.

Our kiss is rough and urgent, feverish craving, with sharp teeth and soft tongues. His hands are a wildfire that burns my skin as he slams me onto the couch. I don't have the willpower to push him away; I want this. I'm consumed by lust.

In the semi-darkness, his body presses against mine, and I feel a sick thrill of excitement as his palm slides up my thigh. The couch beneath me groans as if unhappy about the turn of events.

"I can't help it." He drags his lips up my neck. "I can't get you out of my head," Maverick whispers, his mouth on me again, his words spoken between urgent, demanding kisses, "MacKenzie Caddell."

A full-body shudder rushes through me when he says my full name.

"Then stop trying." I tilt my head to give him better access to my throat.

His mouth travels over my collarbone, and his hands are everywhere, exploring my body. Through the thin dress I hastily threw on before leaving the cottage, I can feel the roughness of his fingertips against my skin, and a subtle, pleasant pain. His cock in his jeans is hard and pressed into my thigh, a dirty, delightful preview of what's waiting for me.

"I have," he murmurs against my shoulder, his lips leaving a wet imprint. "I don't possess the willpower to resist you anymore." He draws the fabric of my neckline to free my breasts, his tongue a devious little thing playing on my nipple. "Or your body." One hand slips between my legs. "Or your sweet tight cunt I'm going to own again."

My breath hitches when I feel his fingers pushing my panties aside. I'm dizzy from the realization of how much he wants me. I want him just as much and I'm too turned on to be worrying about the foreplay.

I reach for his belt buckle. "Other things of mine you'd like to own tonight?" I ask.

"That's a dangerous game you're playing," he warns me, his voice hoarse, "Mrs. Caddell..."

"I know," I whisper, sliding my hand inside the tight confines of his jeans, feeling the smooth skin of his cock through the cotton of his boxers. "Take these off, Maverick."

He stands up and shoves his boxers and jeans down his legs, never taking his eyes off me. There's raw, primal hunger that emanates from him. It's in his gaze and in the jerky, hurried movements of his hands as he removes the last of his clothes, including the shirt.

I slip off my panties and push my dress up, then spread my legs. "Come here," I tell him, my voice sounding low and commanding. I don't recognize myself.

He doesn't need to be told twice. He positions himself on the couch between my thighs and thrusts into me with one powerful stroke. Our eyes never leave each other.

We don't speak. We don't make any sounds other than the wet sound of his cock sliding in and out of my cunt, my moaning and his labored breathing.

The pool of tension in my lower belly is slowly growing and my body tenses, every inch of it buzzing with aching pleasure.

He grips my thighs, using the leverage to take me faster and harder. "Come on, baby... Come for me."

Baby.

It's cheesy and even a little trashy but I like it when he calls me that. I like it more than being called Mrs. Caddell.

Maverick doesn't let up. He drives me over the edge, his fingers digging into the flesh of my legs as he pounds into me.

When I come, I bite my lips to prevent myself from yelling his name. I know nobody will hear us but it's a hard habit to break. The orgasm is powerful and overwhelming, a rapture that courses through every part of my sweaty body.

When the spasms subside, Maverick pulls out. There's cum on my skin, hot and sticky. His head drops to my shoulder, his hair falling across my skin. He's breathing heavily, his chest rising and falling as I rake my nails over his back.

There's something there, between us, some sort of connection that's intense, almost feral.

"You want more?" he asks, his lips near my ear.

"Do you have it in you?" I tease, my pulse uneven all of a sudden.

"I'll give you as much as you want," he growls, "as much as you can handle."

He nudges my clit with his thumb, then draws circles around it. It drives me insane as I feel myself building again.

"Look at me," he says, his voice low and gruff.

I do and I see a wild, burning light in his eyes.

I don't know if that's a good thing or not.

"Do you want it?" he asks. "Do you want me to own everywhere? Every tight hole of yours."

I nod, unable to form words. My heart is thrashing.

With a primal groan, Maverick flips me over and pulls my ass to the edge of the couch, then kneels on the floor behind me.

Blood roars in my veins.

His tongue laps at my ass cheek, inching closer and closer to my opening.

"Trust me?" he asks against my skin, his voice husky and filled with desire, his palms on my thighs.

"Yes," I breathe out, surrendering to him completely, my head burrowed into one of the cushions.

He teases that small ring of muscle with his thumb until I'm squirming, then he licks me there. The coarse stubble of his jaw grazes against my skin, making my toes curl. He presses the tip of his tongue into me, a wicked weapon that drives deeper into my ass, wringing a soft scream out of me.

My legs wobble as the pleasure overwhelms me, and I have to grip the back of the couch for support.

"You like that?" he asks. "You like being owned like this?"

"Yes."

"Good," he says. "Because I'm going to fuck that tight little ass of yours and make you come until you can't take it anymore."

When I'm slicked enough, he enters me with a finger and the slow, wet friction of him against my tight, delicate channel is almost too much to bear.

He's relentless, fucking my ass with his finger, pumping it in and out of my hole and driving me insane with pleasure until he's stretched me enough to take his cock.

The tension coiled around my core is building into another orgasm.

Almost there, almost...

Just when I'm about to come, he pulls the finger out.

I moan from the absence of him.

"Shhh." He spreads my ass cheeks gently. "Not yet." He taps the tip of his cock against my opening and I have to hold my breath.

He draws out the moment, making me ache for him.

"Not yet, baby." Then he thrusts himself into my ass, his cock sinking into me, inch by thick, rock-hard inch, impaling me until he's fully inside me.

At first, the pain from the stretch is unsettling. It feels like my body is splitting into two, Maverick's cock in my ass shoving the air out of my lungs. I have to bite the back of the couch, my fingers clawing the cushions, my knuckles white.

"Tell me if it's too much," Maverick murmurs between his labored breaths, his voice thick with lust and something else that I can't identify.

It is too much but I want it. I want all the agony that comes with this ownership.

"Keep going, please," I plead, needing it, needing to be destroyed.

Maverick slowly pulls out and thrusts back in and the initial discomfort subsides. "Like this?" he asks into the back of my neck, his teeth grazing my skin.

"Yes," I moan out. Every nerve ending in my belly, my cunt, and my ass are on fire from the friction as he continues to draw his cock in and out and a little quicker, lastly hitting a whole new spot inside me.

"Oh God, that's good," I gasp, my stomach clenching from the overabundance of pleasure. "Right there, yes, right there."

The sensation is so intense, I want to come and I want to throw up. My muscles are trembling and my toes are curled, my body filled with the most agonizing euphoria I've ever experienced.

"I can feel you so tight and so hot and so willing around me." Maverick's voice is gruff, his cock sliding into me, ruining my ass with long, deep strokes. "You're mine now, Kenzie."

He grips my waist, his fingers digging into my flesh, pulling me back

against him with every thrust. I clutch the couch, trying to steady myself but it's too much.

He yanks me against him until my back hits his damp chest. He's pounding into me with everything he's got now. The angle is different and I feel the climax building slowly but surely until I'm hanging on the verge, my body craving the release.

"Please..." I breathe out, "Please..."

"Yes, baby," he grunts.

His cock swells inside my ass, his breathing growing ragged.

A crippling orgasm ripples through me as he reaches out with one hand and strums my clit.

"That's it," he growls. "Come for me."

My pussy spasms and I scream, my inner walls milking him and squeezing him. I feel the warm, wet splash of his cum in my ass, filling me. No, branding me.

He falls forward and we collapse into a heap against the back of the couch, his cock is still inside me but soft and spent and he's like a hard blanket shielding me from the world.

My mind is devoid of all thoughts and floating and my body is shaking as I'm coming down from this intense high.

I'm vaguely aware of Maverick slowly withdrawing his cock from my ass and curling his strong arms around me. His lips press against the nape of my neck and I think he's going to say something but he doesn't.

For a long time, we simply remain like this until we are lucid enough to know this position isn't the most comfortable, so we slide down to lie on the couch.

It's late and I know I have to get back to the cottage before Chris notices I'm

gone. He doesn't have the tendency to wake up in the middle of the night but the fear is still there, deep down, at the very bottom of my consciousness.

The crickets outside chirp softly as we lay entwined on the poor, cum-dirtied couch. The lingering scent of sex fills the cabin, tethering me to the present moment.

Maverick's fingertips trace lazy patterns on my arm, our breaths mingling in the dim candlelight while I rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

"Are you alright?" he asks all of a sudden, his voice soft, a total contradiction to the wild sex we just had.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Just want to make sure I don't cross the boundaries."

I quip, "That train has left the station long ago—you're balls deep in the boss's wife!"

"Nice one." He chuckles, then serious, "You know what I mean. Sexually."

"No. I trust you won't hurt me or do anything I don't like." Truth is the man can read me like an open book. All the things I've been wanting to try with Chris but never had a chance I've tried with Maverick. My husband believes he doesn't need to put any kind of effort into an "activity that is dedicated to one thing only—making babies."

"You're going to be my undoing," he whispers as if to himself.

Things linger between us, things unsaid, things we'll have to talk about sooner or later, and I know I'll hurt when that conversation comes. I don't think I can ever prepare myself for that heartache.

"So, Oregon?" Maverick strokes my hair, his calloused fingers gentle, and it doesn't feel like just sex anymore.

"Yes."

"How come you don't ever talk about it?"

"My last years there weren't very memorable....Or I guess they were, but

those aren't the memories I want to keep." The words spill out of me, raw and unfiltered.

"I'm sorry."

"I had a happy childhood," I confess. "Until my mother passed away. I was fourteen. My father has never been the same after her death. I left as soon as I graduated high school."

"What's your last name? Not your husband's. Yours?"

"Rivers."

"MacKenzie Rivers," he says as if trying it out. "You used a pseudonym before you got married? When you modeled? MacKenzie Mack."

"How—" I lift my head to look at him. "You looked me up?"

"Of course I did. Just because we are far away from the civilization here, doesn't mean we don't know how to use the internet."

"Never even crosses my mind, Mr. Berkley, to think of you and Google not being friends. I'm just surprised is all."

"How did you get into modeling?"

"My mom was obsessed with beauty pageants. She signed me up when I was a kid and I won some."

"You did?"

"I was a cute kid."

"You're still cute."

"Thanks."

"I mean it." He rubs his thumb over my lower lips and it definitely does not feel like fuck only. It's more than that. "So you just continued that line of work?"

"Sort of. I won an audition for a sneakers campaign for a big brand when I was in high school. Signed a contract. Left for LA after graduation."

"You weren't scared?"

"Of what? Life?"

"Just being on your own."

Silence falls over the room.

"Kenzie," Maverick begins softly, his voice hesitant yet resolute. "There's something I need to ask you about your husband."

My pulse speeds up. "Sure, what's on your mind?" I respond, looking at the shadows playing across his strong features.

Maverick swallows hard, his eyes revealing a storm of emotions. "I've been hearing some troubling things about cases of vandalism around Beaver Crossing. I do believe Chris is involved."

I'm not certain how to respond to that. I thought I knew my husband but after he hit me, it dawned on me—I only knew what he wanted me to know.

"Someone's been pressuring the locals into selling their land, which is oddity in itself in these parts. And when they refuse, strange things happen to their properties. I think he might be using someone else, someone local to do the dirty work."

His words send a chill down my spine, making me shudder involuntarily. I knew Chris could be cold and ruthless in business, but this...this is something else entirely.

"But you're not certain." There is still a part of me that wants to stay true to the man. I'm his wife after all, even if our marriage is pretty much a sham at this point. Once we were happy. Once we wanted to have a big family.

"No, I'm not certain," Maverick supplies. "I don't have the proof but I'm almost positive it was Sergio who came to see one of the ranchers with the offer. The description matches."

"And you want me to do what?" I ask.

"Have you ever heard him mention Zenith Holdings?" Maverick presses on carefully, watching me intently for any flicker of recognition.

I shake my head, my heart heavy with doubt and confusion. "No, I haven't. But he doesn't exactly talk to me about his dealings. Is that why you were so pissed at me yesterday?"

"Ah... that." Maverick sighs and tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

"I didn't mean to scare you. I'm sorry about that."

That loaded silence again and I can't take it anymore. I ask him directly. "You want me to spy on my husband?"

He's quiet and the time stretches on. His hand reaches over to cup my shoulder. "If you're not comfortable, forget I mentioned anything."

I hesitate, unsure of what my next step should be. The thought of betraying Chris frightens me, but so does the possibility of turning a blind eye to his misdeeds.

You're nothing but a spoiled pretty thing whose husband is bullying the locals into selling their land.

A knot forms in my stomach, tightening with each passing second.

"Okay," I finally agree, my voice trembling slightly. "I'll help you. I'll see if I can find out what's going on. But I'm not making any promises."

"Thank you, Kenzie," Maverick says, relief evident in his voice. He pulls me closer to him, the warmth of his body soothing my frayed nerves. The candlelight flickers in his blue eyes as they remain locked on me.

Instinctively, I know I can trust him, but still, a fraction of me wonders why I keep coming back to him. Is it the thrill of the forbidden, the desire to be wanted, or something deeper?

As we lie tangled together in the dimly lit cabin, I can't help but feel that I'm on the precipice of something life-changing—a journey that will either lead me to salvation or utter ruin.



Maverick

I jump out of bed before the sun rises, feeling a wild energy pulsing through my veins even though I hardly slept. Kenzie left sometime in the middle of the night but her presence still lingers in the air, my cabin smells like sex and perfume. In those moments yesterday when I fully possessed her, when she made herself completely vulnerable and let me inside, I felt a burning desire to march straight into Chris's cottage and verbally stake my claim on her.

There's no denying that she's become mine in every way imaginable. On paper, she may still be his but in my gut, I know she belongs to me.

"Dumb fucker," I curse at myself as I drive down to Willow Springs to check on Dvorak's property. "You're asking for trouble."

I can't help it through.

I can't stop feeling all these emotions.

Even as I park my truck not far from the fence that surrounds the Dvoraks' field and trudge through the tall grass, my phone in my hand.

I stride along the perimeter of the land that belongs to another local rancher and look around. At first, all seems fine but as I continue to trek further down the hill, I notice something. An unmistakable trace of the tire

tracks in the grass. Why would someone drive where there's no road?

I have my answer almost immediately—only if that someone is up to no good.

I pull up the camera on my phone and snap some photos.

The next evening, I step outside my cabin with my phone in hand again. This time not to take photos. I draw a deep breath as the cool night air fills my lungs. The disappearing sun has set the trees and the mountains on fire, creating an ethereal atmosphere that for some reason takes me back to my childhood days. It's in moments like these that I feel closest to my roots.

As I skim through my contacts, another memory shoves itself into the forefront of my mind—the three months I spent on the rez after my father's death, three months in the middle of nowhere, on the piece of land forgotten by almost everyone.

That's where I met a scrawny kid Gabriel Anderson. He goes by Hawk these days and got mixed up with the wrong crowd, and now he runs with a local biker gang. He's not the person I should be talking to but my options are slim.

Determined to get some answers, I dial a number I haven't called in years.

"Haven't heard from you in forever, man," Hawk grumbles when he answers. "This better be good."

"I need a favor," I say, cutting past the bullshit of pleasantries.

"It's been what? Five or six years? And you want a favor?" He barks out a low, raspy laugh. "You still owe me twenty bucks for that 49ers game back in ___"

"Yeah, yeah. I remember. I'll Venmo that to you."

"You're still a prickly motherfucker, Holt."

We exchange a few words, then Hawk says, his voice betraying a hint of

curiosity, "I heard the resort got bought by some dude from LA."

"Yes."

"You still there?"

"When Ed was selling, I made sure he added a few terms to the contract. The current staff would remain unless there was clear performance-based cause for termination, and the boss seems to have his hands full with something else."

"And that favor you want?"

"Got a situation brewing. I have reason to believe the new owner may be involved in shady dealings to force locals to sell their land. There's something going on but I've hit the wall. I was hoping your boys might be able to find out more."

Hawk is silent for a long moment. "You're asking me to get involved?"

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important," I insist. Hawk likes to keep his distance from me but I have no one else. "Innocent people are getting hurt. Local folks. Old Joe's ranch's been vandalized. And someone busted Henry Sullivan's irrigating system. He's been buried in water over-usage fees and ended up selling to cover those fees. Come on, man. For old time's sake."

He sighs. "You always were a stubborn son of a bitch. All right, I'll put out some feelers, see what information surfaces. But this is as far as I go. My boys and I aren't looking to make a powerful enemy."

"I understand. Thank you, man. I appreciate it."

"Yeah, well, you still owe me those twenty bucks," he says gruffly. "I'll be in touch if anything turns up."

The line goes dead. I stand in the twilight, wondering if I've made a mistake by involving Hawk and his guys. But I was out of options, and this is too important to ignore. I have to find out the truth about Christos Caddell's reasons for wanting to own Red Willow, no matter the cost.



Kenzie

As I watch the resort staff scurry around in the next few days, making preparations for my birthday party, a knot of anxiety twists in my stomach. I can't shake the feeling that something is off, and the tension between Chris and me only serves to heighten it.

We still sleep in separate bedrooms. The air between us crackles with unspoken emotions and secrets as we try to navigate our way through this new, unwelcome reality. The reality where I know my husband is not who I thought he was.

He's the man who would raise his hand on a woman and he's also possibly the man who would use illegal means to get what he wants. And I'm determined to figure out what that is.

"Kenzie, are you even listening?" Chris snaps from the couch, pulling me back from my thoughts.

"Sorry, I just... I'm just thinking about the dress," I lie, forcing a smile onto my face. The truth is, I couldn't care less about the monstrosity Laurel is preparing for me. I'm also terrified of Chris discovering my affair with Maverick or noticing how I'm constantly peeking into his office. My heart

paces at the mere thought of what he would do if he found out.

"Everything will be perfect," Chris says dismissively, his dark eyes scrutinizing me. "Now, why don't we check on the table settings, love?"

"Right, of course," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

The problem with investigating Chris is that he's almost always in his office and a week after I told Maverick I'd help, I still don't have anything. I'm almost ready to give up when one morning, my husband finally leaves for a business meeting, taking Sergio with him.

Once inside his office, I flop into his leather chair and slowly scan the desk for any clues about his recent land acquisitions. My hands shake as I rifle through the papers, praying for a lead. Chris has OCD. He likes his things in a specific order, so I need to ensure I put it all back the way it was when I came in. Otherwise, I'm screwed.

Thirty minutes into my investigation, I still don't know what I'm searching for. I pick up and read through every single piece of paper and but I don't understand the legal lingo. Neither do I see the name 'Zenith Holdings'.

My self-confidence crumbles. I'm stupid. If I had gone to college, I wouldn't be sitting here struggling to make sense of these documents.

I take a deep breath and slowly turn the lock on the drawer, my heart pounding in anticipation. Shaking, I pull out the pile of documents from the inside and search desperately for the one I'm looking for—Zenith Holdings.

Bingo!

It's at the very bottom, tucked away in some forgotten corner. Grasping my phone tightly, I snap pictures of every page, each click echoing like thunder against my eardrums.

Once I'm done photographing, I slip the document back at the bottom of the pile and feel something strange stuck to the side of the drawer. Unable to

resist temptation, I pull out a folder and gasp when I see what's inside—a map with 3D images. My pulse races as though someone lit a fire in me, and I quickly snap photos before sliding everything back into place. Then I close the drawer and hurry away, my mind turning over with questions.

I stand in front of the mirror, staring at my reflection. While Laurel and Emma fuss over me. Laurel's creation is pretty. The soft fabric clings to my body like a second skin, accentuating my curves, showing off my cleavage, and making my waist look slimmer. My hips curve out underneath the pleats, the skirt shifting with each movement I make. It reminds me of the way moonlight dances on water.

It's pretty and it feels like a cage around my body.

"Kenzie, you look absolutely gorgeous," Laurel gushes as she steps back to take in the full effect. "This dress was meant for you."

"Thank you, Laurel. It's exquisite," I say, shifting my gaze away from my reflection. But beneath my fake appreciation for the beautiful gown lies the gnawing anxiety that has plagued me since I discovered Chris's secret business dealings.

My findings only solidify my decision to leave him.

I don't know how or when but I know our paths are no longer going in the same direction. I just need to figure out how to pay for my father's accommodations.

"Is everything all right?" Laurel asks, her brow furrowing with concern. She noticed I haven't been myself lately which is not good. It's too early for me to show my cards in this game I'm playing.

"Just nerves," I admit, forcing a smile. "You know how it is—big party, lots of expectations."

She smiles. "Twenty-nine is not a death sentence, sweetie."

As we continue with the fitting, adjusting here and tucking there, I can't stop wondering if this gown will be the last beautiful thing I wear before my world comes crashing down. Chris is up to something. I can sense it. He's been strangely nice as of late.

"Your husband is going to be speechless when he sees you in this," Laurel says, unknowingly pulling me from my thoughts.

"Is he now?" a deep voice says from behind me, and I feel my heart drop into my stomach. Chris stands in the doorway, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes travel up and down my body, taking in every inch of the shimmering gown.

"I didn't hear you come in," I stammer, struggling to regain my composure.

"Clearly," he says with a smirk, his gaze still locked on me. "You look... breathtaking, love."

"Thank you," I reply, my voice barely more than a whisper. Despite the fear that clenches at my chest, I can't deny the thrill of his compliment. As twisted as our relationship has become, there's still a part of me that craves his approval.

"Laurel, I think we're done here for today," Chris announces, never taking his eyes off me. "We'll see you at the party."

"Of course, Mr. Caddell," Laurel says, gathering her things and leaving the room.

As soon as the door clicks shut behind her, my mind begins to race with thoughts of Maverick and the possibility that my husband knows I'm cheating.

That only scared me more.

But for now, I must focus on maintaining appearances and surviving this birthday party in one piece.

"Chris, about the party..." I begin, searching for words that won't betray my true feelings. "Do we have to invite that many guests?"

Do we have to celebrate it at all?

"Relax, love," he interrupts, stepping closer to me. "We have people do all the work. You just need to show up and look pretty." And with that, he leaves me standing alone, my heart pounding like a drum, and my future uncertain.



Maverick

I watch Kenzie from a distance. Her hair that's starting to look more real day by day reflects the sunlight as she walks across the resort grounds. She glances around nervously as Rafe approaches her. Gingerly, he pets him before slipping away towards the woods.

I follow quietly, my heart beating wildly, my boots crunching against the thick carpet of pine needles on the forest floor.

I grabbed a small backpack with a few things as well before I left.

As we make our way up the mountain, I feel the weight of responsibility for Kenzie's safety on my shoulders. I hate that she has to go back to that cottage every night. One thought of them sharing the bed or him touching her has me sick to my stomach.

For someone so delicate and sophisticated, Kenzie is pretty confident on the trail.

Thirty minutes later, we reach a secluded spot overlooking the valley where the resort is sitting. While Kenzie is enjoying the view, I spread out the picnic blanket and arranged the food I brought along.

"Wow," she says softly, her eyes widening as she takes in what I've

prepared. "This is... almost as if we are on a real date."

"It could be," I reply, offering her a warm smile, but my gut twists. Still, I allow this lie. For her. Not for me.

We sit down on the blanket, and she hesitates for a moment before diving into the food. Which is simple. Just a couple of oranges, fresh bread from the kitchen, some cheese, and soda.

Still, she savors each bite, her eyes closing in pleasure. There's something about watching her enjoy her food that puts me at ease. It's like for a moment, everything else fades away and I can see this—us—years from now. Together.

But then, reality hits me like a freight train.

"I'm sorry I put you in this position," I say.

Kenzie sets the bread aside. "You didn't. I agreed to help."

I shake my head. "No, not just this. I mean everything. Chris, the danger you're in, the fact that you have to sneak around like this." I pause, taking a deep breath. "It won't end well for either one of us if he finds out. But you're the one living with him and if he hit you once, he'll do it again."

She looks away, her face tense, her brown eyes filled with anguish.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," I whisper.

She returns her gaze to me. "I can take of myself, Maverick." Pause. "Remember I told you how my father sort of lost it after my mother's death?" She absently plucks at the blades of grass.

I nod. It was very vague as if she didn't want to share the details.

"He checked out," she goes on. "Completely. For four years, I lived with an alcoholic. Mostly, he was just not there, but he could get aggressive too. Not with me. Just in general." She pauses. "So I know how to live with hot-tempered men who tend to underestimate me." She smiles a sad smile.

"You shouldn't have to."

"Life doesn't always go the way we plan. We have to make the best of it... I always thought that my father would just waste away from alcohol, but

Alzheimer's got to him first. His health started to decline once I left for L.A. A few years after my move, I got a call from a family acquaintance back in my hometown. My father was found on a side of a highway. Delirious. When I asked him what he was doing there, he said he was looking for my mother's earring. That's when the doctor told us he wasn't going to get better and he would need constant supervision. I had no choice. I couldn't take care of him and work. It was either or. I put him in a home."

Kenzie stops talking and takes a deep shuddering breath.

My heart aches for her, and I can't help but reach out to touch her hand. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you," she replies, her voice barely audible. "It's just... sometimes I don't know what to do. With my father's illness and Chris... I feel trapped."

"Leave him," I say, my voice firm but gentle. "Chris isn't good for you. He doesn't see you. You deserve so much better." Then I add, "I still have a wish. I'm using it now."

Her eyes widen a little and she pulls her hand back. "And what would I do after leaving him, Maverick? I have no job, no money of my own, and my father needs care. I can't just walk away."

What the fuck am I doing? She's just sex. "I won't leave you. We'll figure this out. I promise. Cody Bolero has a cousin who works at the hospital. He can help look for a reliable caregiver."

She hesitates, her eyes locked on mine, searching for the truth within them, trying to understand if I'm going to keep my word. Finally, she tips her head. "Okay. But if you want my help figuring out what Chris is doing, I have to stay with him for the time being."

"He is dangerous, Kenzie."

"So is riding a bicycle if you don't know how to do it." She pulls out her phone and texts me the images of the papers she found in his office. When she'd done, I take the device from her and punch in my number, then call it so I have hers.

"Kinda makes no sense here." She chuckles. "Reception is crap."

"People don't come to Red Willow to talk on the phone."

"Tell that to Chris." She rolls her eyes. "So why is it Red Willow Crest?"

"I see that peak?" I motion at the tip of the tallest mountain lingering behind the trunks.

"Hmm."

"That's why."

She pinches at the bread, then sends the piece in her mouth.

"Listen, I'm glad we can stay in touch." I pause to clear the lump in my throat. "You can also just text me... whenever." I return the phone to her.

She peers up at me through her lashes and my heart thunders in my chest like a drum. "Alright." There's a long moment when we both stare into each other's eyes. Then she breaks the silence by saying, "But we use aliases." She types on the screen in front of her, then presses it closed, handing it back to me. "You'll be Eliza."

"Who will you be?"

"I'll be *John*," she replies with a cheeky smile.

"Another thing we should do is install locator apps on our phones," I tell her, scanning through the app store on my phone. "This way, if anything happens to either of us, we'll know where the other person is."

"Good idea. Which app do you recommend?" she asks, her eyes reflecting both appreciation for my foresight and fear for what could happen.

"Try this one," I say, selecting an app Rolly uses to keep track of his nephews. 'SafePath.'"

As we download and set up the app on our phones, I can sense the growing trust between us. We're both taking risks, but we're doing it together. In this instant, I realize that our connection runs deeper than just attraction—we're two lost souls, seeking refuge in each other's company.

"Okay, it's done," Kenzie says, looking up from her phone. "Now we'll always know where the other is."

"Perfect," I reply, locking my phone and slipping it into my pocket. "We should head back now. We don't want to arouse suspicion."



Maverick

Foggy twilight cloaks the town as I pull into the parking lot of Lone Bear a few days later. The temperature has been dropping and it's finally not so hot. The neon sign above the bar flickers like a firework display. A quarter mile down the road, the Grateful Dead's music seeps from the building.

Today is a lady's night and there's a small crowd of locals congregating by the entrance.

I spot Hawk right away. He's a hard man to miss. Six feet of muscle and ink. The only patch of skin that's still untouched by the needles is his face. Hawk leans against the hood of his Harley, his forehead creased with lines of concern. I park beside him and stretch my legs, feeling the ache in my muscles from a long day of work.

"Evening, Mav," Hawk greets me with a nod, straightening up.

Just like me, his Native blood is visible in the bronze sheen of his skin, the slight arch of his nose, and the depth of emotion in his dark eyes that seemed to hold a lifetime of stories. Even though, he's only thirty-four.

"Hey, man." I approach him and I bump his fist with my own—a greeting we've known and practiced since our days at the rez. "Any news?" I ask

impatiently, my voice rough from fatigue. The weight of responsibility for keeping the people of Beaver Crossing safe presses heavily on my shoulders. I know it's not exactly my problem. But if I don't look into it, who else would?

"Let's talk inside," Hawk suggests and starts walking toward the bar.

Inside, we slide into a booth, the vinyl seat squeaking beneath us. I glance around, taking in the peeling wallpaper and faded photographs of hunting trophies. It's a far cry from the luxury of the resort, but it feels real, honest. It feels like home. All of it. The darts corner. The faded pool tables. Coop laboring behind the bar. Even drunk Pete who's had one too many and is ready to pass out.

"Looking good, Maverick," Hawk croaks, waving to the waitress.

He orders us drinks and when the gal leaves, I lean forward and ask, "Alright, what have you got for me?"

"Seems like some local kids from Summit's Den have been paid by some dude no one around here knows."

"Shit."

"I know. I wouldn't get involved."

He's right. Summit's Den is a hangout for local lowlifes and kids who run away from home. No one knows where these guys hide but the rumor is they camp somewhere on the mountain and they deal firearms. I guess money is tight and they now vandalize properties too.

"I appreciate it, Hawk."

"Always happy to help, my friend," he replies, a genuine smile touching his lips.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I fish it out, relieved to see Kenzie's name on the screen. I've been thinking about her all day. I'm a goner and I can't help it anymore. I don't want to fight it either. That's why I texted her earlier that I wanted to see her.

The text I just received from her says she'll come.

"Hey, give me a sec," I say to Hawk, quickly typing out a message to Kenzie to let her know I'll be back from Beaver Crossing around eleven. Then I add,

Can you meet me at my cabin tonight? The key's hidden under the doormat.

Her reply is almost instantaneous.

Of course, I'll be there. Be safe.

I like her text and then slip the phone into my pocket.

"Everything okay?" Hawk asks, his dark eyes filled with concern.

"Uh, yeah. Just making some plans for later." I can't help but smile, heat blooming in my chest at the thought of seeing her again.

"You seeing someone?" Hawk looks surprised.

"Ah, sorta."

"Alright," Hawk grins. "If you don't want to tell me, then don't."

"I will. Just not today."

The truth is I don't want to jinx what Kenzie and I have. I don't even know what it is. But I'm already terrified of losing it.

The night has spread out a tapestry of twinkling stars in the sky and it's a beautiful drive as I steer my truck along the winding road back to Red Willow, the anticipation of seeing Kenzie again coursing through me like electricity.

The tall trunks of the trees on either side of the road cast an eerie gloom, their thin branches swaying in the soft night breeze. As I drive around a bend, headlights suddenly flash in my rearview mirror. Two hulking dark SUVs accelerate up close behind me.

A spark of fear ignites in my stomach. Something is off.

Before I can make a move, one of the vehicles slams into my side, sending gravel flying as it forces me off onto the shoulder of the road. My heart thuds against my ribcage as I fight to keep control of the wheel and finally manage to skid to a stop.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, gripping the steering wheel tightly. I glance into the side mirror, trying to make out their faces or any insignia on any of the vehicles, but darkness envelops them.

The doors of the SUV parked further ahead swing open, and two large men step out, their features obscured by the night and the masks. One more climbs out of the second SUV.

They approach my truck, their voices low and menacing.

"Get out," one of them—carrying a baseball bat over his shoulder—orders, his voice dripping with malice.

"What the hell do you want?" I demand, unbuckling my seatbelt and stepping out of the truck.

My pulse races, adrenaline surging through my veins. I scan the area for anything that might be used as a weapon if needed. If the Marines have taught me anything, it's to stay alert and focused in uncertain situations. And it's clearly the case right now.

"You like messing around with someone else's property?" another thug snarls, his eyes cold and unyielding.

"What the fuck is this about?" I ask, squaring my shoulders and tensing my muscles, ready for whatever's coming. I'm suspecting someone was tailing me when I went to do a little investigating near the Dvoraks' ranch.

The first thug lunges at me. His fist connects with my jaw, and pain explodes through my face. I stumble backward, barely maintaining my footing.

The second thug roughly shoves me against the truck, and I grit my teeth to remain standing. The assault is unexpected, but I try to brace myself. The third assailant slams his fist into my gut, knocking the wind out of me. My

knees buckle as I double over in agony, gasping for breath.

They keep hammering me with blows, but I manage to dodge a few punches before one of them grabs me from behind. They restrain my arms, and all I can do is brace for what's coming next.

When they finally finish their brutal attack, I lay face down on the cold ground, my body aching with pain and my mind reeling from shock. For some reason, the memories of Afghanistan resurface.

A shadow lingers in the corner of my eyes, reminding me about the present.

"Don't touch what doesn't belong to you," one of them taunts me before disappearing into the blackness and the SUVs speed off into the night.



Kenzie

I pace the length of Maverick's cabin, my heart pounding in my chest like a caged bird. I glance at the clock on the wall and bite my lips—the hands seem to mock me as they creep forward.

He was supposed to be here an hour ago.

"Where are you, Maverick?" I whisper, my breath fogging the windowpane as I peer out into the darkness. The last couple of days have been gloomy and the wind howls outside, rustling the branches of the pines that surround his cabin. It feels as if nature itself is screaming its concern for him.

My phone vibrates with a text, and I snatch it up, praying it's from Maverick. But my hope deflates as I read the message from Lita. She's asking when I'll have time to FaceTime. I force a smile and reply with a simple "Tomorrow" before tossing the phone onto the couch.

"Come on, Kenzie," I mutter, pacing again. "He's probably just running late or got caught up with something in town." My voice sounds hollow, even to my own ears, and I can't shake the growing unease in my gut.

I don't talk to myself often but I find that it calms me a little, calms my

racing mind.

Several minutes later, I grab the phone from the couch, and with trembling hands, I dial Maverick's number once more I have saved under the code name 'Eliza'.

It rings and rings, each tone puncturing the silence and amplifying my fear. When it goes to voicemail, I choke back a frustrated cry and leave another message.

"Hey, it's me again. Please call or text when you get this. I'm really worried about you."

The moment I hang up, I bury my face in my hands and stand like this for god knows how long. This isn't like him; he wouldn't keep me waiting without a reason. A gnawing suspicion takes root in my mind—something must have happened to him.

Remembering the locator app we both installed on our phones, I pull mine out and open the app. My hands shake as I input his information, my breath catching in my throat when his location appears on the screen.

"Beaver Crossing Hospital?" The words tumble from my lips, my heart seizing in terror.

I grab my jacket and purse, my mind racing with a thousand different scenarios, each more horrifying than the last. As I step outside, the cold wind bites at my cheeks, but it's nothing compared to the icy grip of fear that holds my heart hostage.

"Please be okay," I whisper to myself, locking the cabin door behind me.

I tear across the sprawling grounds of the resort, pushing my legs to their very limits as I search for someone who can help me. It's late and the place is empty and devoid of life. My breath is coming out in short, ragged heaves, and I barely register the fear that Chris may be growing suspicious of my

whereabouts.

Something forces me to keep going.

The cold bites into my cheeks like a thousand tiny needles, but it's nothing compared to the frigid grip of fear that tightens around my heart.

"Excuse me!" I call out, my voice catching the attention of a young staff member who's handling trash. He looks up, the expression on his face mirroring my own concern. He is vaguely familiar. I remember seeing him during meetings in the break room. His name is Jared.

"Mrs. Caddell?" he says, halting in his tracks. "Is everything okay?"

"I need help," I tell him, fighting to keep my voice steady. "I need to go somewhere and I need to get there right away. Can I borrow the keys to one of the resort vehicles?"

"Of course," he replies, his eyes wide with alarm. "Let me grab them for you."

As he disappears inside the building, I pace back and forth, my thoughts consumed by the possibilities of what could have happened to Maverick. Why is he at the hospital? Is he hurt? My chest tightens at the thought and my stomach churns.

Jared returns, keys jingling in his hand. "Here you go, Mrs. Caddell," he says, pressing them into my palm. "Can I help you with anything else?"

"Would you keep it between us?" I murmur, my fingers closing tightly around the cold metal.

"Sure thing." Understanding crosses his features.

With a nod of gratitude, I sprint toward the parking lot, my shoes crunching loudly against the gravel.

Slipping behind the wheel of the SUV, I take a deep breath and try to steady my shaking hands. I haven't asked God for anything in a long time but as I start the engine, I offer up a silent prayer for Maverick's safety. "Please be okay," I whisper, my voice barely audible above the hum of the engine.



Kenzie

The drive to Beaver Crossing is agonizingly slow, the dark unfamiliar roads forcing me to navigate with caution. The world outside the SUV seems to fade away, replaced by a landscape of fear and uncertainty. Every passing moment feels like an eternity, each mile stretching out before me like a vast, unending gap.

As I approach the hospital, my heart pounds so hard I can feel it in my throat. I park the vehicle haphazardly in one of the empty spots and rush inside. The sterile smell of antiseptic and disinfectant fills my nostrils as I hurry to the reception desk.

I despise hospitals.

I haven't stepped foot in one ever since my *accident* last year.

"Excuse me," I say, nervously tapping my manicured nails against the counter. "I'm trying to see if Maverick Holt is here."

The nurse gives me a once-over. "Are you a relative?"

I shake my head.

"Then I can't give you that information."

Desperation claws at me as my mind races.

"He's my... my friend," I say, faltering slightly at the end. "It's important. Please."

The nurse raises an eyebrow but seems to soften a little.

"Please," I repeat, trying to summon my acting skills. I wasn't a high-paid model in LA for nothing. Photographers used to praise my range of emotions.

The nurse sighs. "Okay." She lowers her voice. "But if anyone asks, I wasn't the one to help you." She directs her gaze to the computer. "What's the name again?"

"Maverick. Maverick Holt."

"Give me a moment." Her fingers fly over the keyboard. "Yes, he is here. He was brought in in an ambulance. Room 214. Just take the elevator to the second floor and follow the signs."

"Thank you. Thank you so much," I breathe, offering her a shaky smile before dashing toward the elevator.

I step into the cold room that holds Maverick. My heart lurches at the sight of him lying so still on the hospital bed as I take in the extent of his injuries. His face is battered and bruised, one eye swollen shut while the other is closed. Wires and tubes snake from his arms, monitoring his vital signs. He looks broken, a shadow of the strong, fearless man I know.

I shuffle my feet and fumble with my sleeves before approaching him. I think I'm scared to see something I won't be able to unsee, but while I'm trying to make up my mind, he slowly opens his uninjured eye and a flicker of recognition enters his gaze.

"Hey there, beautiful," he murmurs, his voice weak and raspy but warm. "I guess I kept you waiting, huh?"

Relief washes over me. "Only a little," I reply softly, trying to hold back sudden tears that threaten to spill. "What happened?" I dart toward the bed

and perch on the edge.

"Ran into some trouble on the road," he says, wincing as he shifts in the bed. "But don't worry, they didn't break anything important."

"But who would do something like this?"

Before I finish putting two and two together Maverick says, "I think your husband knows."

My stomach drops to my knees. Panic starts to bubble up inside me as I try to think of what to do next.

"Hey, stop." Maverick reaches out to take my hand. His has a large purple bruise all over it. "I can see it on your face. Let's talk about that a little later," he says, his one blue eye meeting mine with a mixture of pain and reassurance. "Right now, I just need to know you're okay."

"Of course I'm okay," I whisper. "But you... you're in a hospital."

"Sorry about that," he smiles weakly, his fingers tightening around mine. "I promise, it won't happen again."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I didn't expect them to jump me this time." A mysterious smirk appears in the corner of his mouth. "I will be next time."

"There better not be a next time," I declare, anger flaring in my chest.

The night air is thick with tension when I enter the cottage at four in the morning. It feels colder, less welcoming than before—as if the walls themselves sense the turmoil within our marriage.

I tiptoe through the living room, careful not to make any noise that might alert Chris to my return. I don't make it to my bedroom—Chris's silhouette emerges from the shadows.

Fear grips me as he strides over to me and says, "Where have you been, love?" His voice calm yet cold and I can sense the underlying venom.

"Out," I reply evasively. "Needed a walk." Despite the darkness inside the cottage, I avoid eye contact, naively hoping he'll accept my answer without further inquiry. He's been awfully nice as of late. So perhaps, we'll just go our separate ways. But deep down, I know better than to expect mercy.

"Is that all you have to say?" His tone shifts, the anger bubbling beneath the surface now unmistakable. It's then that I feel the sting of his hand against my cheek, a slap so hard it knocks me to the ground. "You think I don't know about your little secret?" He drops into a crouch and palms my chin. "You deserve this for cheating on me."

Then he rises and yanks me to my feet along with him.

As I cradle my throbbing face, Chris continues. "I'm willing to forgive you because I understand you're not in your right mind after the miscarriage. Let's put it all behind us and start from a clean slate. I want nothing more than a family with you." His words are polite but they are poison.

"Fine," I choke out, the word tasting bitter on my tongue.

Frankly, I want to scream at him, to tell him that I never cheated on him. You can't cheat on someone you are no longer in a relationship with. And Chris and I stopped being a couple after we lost Strawberry. We are just two roommates now. But I know that will only make things worse if I try to make him understand that we are over. Instead, I just nod my head numbly and give him what he expects, feeling like a prisoner to my own life.

"Good," he says curtly. "Now go get some rest. We have a lot to talk about in the morning."

As I retreat to a separate bedroom, Chris's parting shot rings in my ears like a death knell. "If you're no longer my wife, I'll stop paying for your father's bills."

The morning light streams through the window and across my bruised face as

I study it in the mirror. I hesitate, gripping my phone tightly as I wrestle with the decision to call Irene Kovac. Her business card lies on the bedside table in front of me and I've been staring at it for thirty minutes straight, if not longer.

My heart aches at the thought of losing the financial support Chris provides for my father's accommodation, but I can't ignore the fact that he's been raising his hand on me quite often or the many livelihoods at stake or the danger Maverick faces.

I'm a bad wife, a bad mother, and a bad daughter.

The least I can do is try to be a decent person.

"Enough," I whisper to myself, steeling my resolve. *I have to do this.*

I dial Irene's number, and after a few rings, her voice flows through the line. "Irene Kovac?"

"It's Kenzie. Rivers... Ah, sorry, Caddell."

"Kenzie? How are you?" She pauses and I guess she reads people *that well*, because she immediately asks, "Is everything all right?"

"I've thought about your offer and I've made a decision. I'm willing to help but I don't want my name revealed and I need to know this is confidential. This is just between you and me. Not the entire roster of *The Standard* and me."

"I understand. You don't have to worry about that," she reassures me. "I keep my sources safe."

I nod, even though she can't see me. "One last thing. If I'm going to do this for you, I need something in return."

"What is it?"

"A divorce attorney? Someone who is discreet, can work quickly, and is able to fly out to meet me in Beaver Crossing."

"Consider it done," Irene assures me.

Screw you, Chris. If you think you can slap me around, you're wrong.

"Kenzie!" Chris calls out, his voice echoing through the spacious living room. "Come here for a second."

Tensing up, I find him in the bedroom, hastily packing a suitcase. Clothes are strewn across the bed, and I can sense the urgency in his movements.

"What's going on?" I ask, my heart racing with anticipation of his response.

"An emergency business deal came up out of state," he explains, zipping up his suitcase with a firm tug. "I have to leave immediately."

"Right now?" I inquire, trying to maintain a calm demeanor despite the whirlwind of emotions raging inside me.

"Yes." He sighs, pausing for a moment to look at me intently. "I know you probably worry about your party but I wouldn't miss it for the world. I'll be back as soon as I get this deal closed."

"Okay," I reply, nodding slowly. My mind races, considering the opportunities his departure presents. Maverick has been stuck in his cabin, recovering and on medical leave from work and everyone has been buzzing with rumors since the news about the attack on him hit the masses. I haven't been able to see him in days. I wouldn't dare to sneak out with Chris here.

"Can I trust that you'll behave yourself while I'm gone?" he asks, his tone deceptively kind but I wasn't born yesterday. I can sense the accusation in it and the threat.

"Of course." I force a smile.

"Good," he strides over and places a kiss on my cheek. It's perfunctory, devoid of emotions.

He then picks up his suitcase and walks towards the door. The sun is setting behind him, smearing shadows across the room and painting the sky in hues of amber and violet. It feels like Mother Nature herself is orchestrating a dramatic farewell.

"Call Sergio if you need anything," Chris instructs as he opens the front door. "He'll handle it." What he really means is that Sergio is watching me.

"Alright," I respond, examining his silhouette framed by the fading sunlight. "Safe travels."

"Thank you, love," he replies before stepping outside, letting the door close behind him with a resounding thud.

I stand there for a moment, my thoughts a turbulent storm of relief, fear, and hope. The silence of the house weighs heavily on me as I process what has just transpired.



Maverick

The sun pours through the curtains, bathing everything in gold in the small living room of my cabin. The weather is fucking nice and I'm stuck inside. Great.

Currently, I'm on the couch, flipping through the channels on TV. I managed to drag myself out of my bedroom without anyone's help this morning and it's definitely a win. Not counting Rafe who comes and goes as he pleases through the doggy door in the back, I have a whole lot of other visitors.

Yesterday, Julio and Sofia came to clean my cabin. Today Rolly stopped by before his shift and dropped off some bagels with cream cheese. For lunch, I plan on getting something delivered but I haven't worked up the desire to look at my phone. Either way, I can't have Helen cook for me anymore.

The pain in my chest throbs with each inhale, a constant reminder of the beating I took several days ago. My body feels like it's held together by duct tape and willpower alone and I wince as I attempt to sit up.

My ribs scream too. But the worst is the knot on the back of my skull—it

feels swollen to the size of a baseball. I find it ironic that it was the baseball bat's blow that gave it to me.

My landline has been ringing nonstop, making it impossible to get some decent sleep. I ended up unplugging the damn device.

The only person I want to talk to is Kenzie.

I think of her constantly, her smile, her laugh, the way she makes me feel alive again. It's been so long since anyone stirred me up the way she does.

Unfortunately, she only texted me twice since that night in the hospital when she appeared in my room all freaked out. It was at that moment that I knew she and I aren't doing this because the sex is just so good. The sex is good. I won't deny it. She's adventurous and is not ashamed to ask for things she wants to try with her partner. But what moves me the most is her complete trust in me.

That's why when I finally end up picking up a phone, I call Cody Bolero.

"Hey man," he says. "Heard you took a beating last week."

"Some thugs."

"You alright?"

"I'm on the mend."

"What do I owe the pleasure?"

"Wanted to see if you can hook me up with your cousin. I was wondering if he still volunteers in that care facility down in Robinson."



Kenzie

I glance around nervously as I step out of the cottage, my heart pounding against my chest. I've been keeping my distance from Maverick these past few days for a number of reasons.

Firstly, I don't want to put him through another stressful situation by showing up at his place with a bruised face.

Second, Sergio has been residing in my husband's office almost every day, which is suspicious. Chris usually takes his lapdog with him when he leaves. Unless of course, Sergio has something more important to do here. Like taking care of all those secret land acquisitions.

As I walk through the woods toward Maverick's cabin, carrying a takeout bowl of soup from the restaurant, I drink in nature's beauty surrounding me. Sunlight filters through the leaves, casting dappled patterns on the ground below. The grass is green and dotted with small flowers and the trunks are covered by soft moss. The forest is stunning and I don't know how I haven't noticed this before.

The sound of a twig snapping underfoot startles me, and I spin around, ready to defend myself with my soup against an unknown entity that just

moved behind me.

But it's just a squirrel, scurrying up a tree.

I shake my head at my own paranoia and continue on my way, eager to reach my destination.

Maverick's cabin emerges in the distance, and as I make my way toward it, I keep to the edge of the path, trying to stay hidden from view but I'm not certain it works. My desperation to reach him is making me reckless and while the risk feels worth it, I've already been spotted by several resort employees.

"Top of the morning to you, Miss Kenzie." Julio, one of the gardeners, greets me with a smile as I almost bump into him when he appears from behind a bush.

"Gosh, you scared me, Julio." I rest my hand on my chest.

"Sorry, Miss Kenzie."

"It's okay." I try to sidestep him, ready to be on my way.

The man narrows his eyes slightly. "You wouldn't happen to be headed towards Mr. Holt's cabin, would you?" He drops his gaze to the Skyline Tavern bag in my hand.

"Yes," I admit hesitantly. "Wanted to check on him."

"Tell him I said hello." He glances back at my face.

"Of course."

The gardener continues to stare, his body on the path preventing me from moving further.

"Is something wrong?" My pulse quickens.

"Folks at the resort have been talking," Julio says, his voice low, almost a whisper.

"What about?"

"You and Mr. Holt."

"I don't understand what you mean by this," I deadpan, but my heart is thrashing against my ribs.

"That man has been through enough. It's nice that you care for him." Julio points at the soup. "But some say that there might be something going on between the two of you. Something that your husband may not approve of. And when he finds out, we all will be punished."

"You're wrong," I lie. I have to deny it for Maverick's sake. "There are just baseless rumors. People love to talk, don't they?"

"Indeed, they do," Julio agrees. "But sometimes there's a kernel of truth in those rumors."

I don't respond, feeling my heart race even faster now.

"Take care, Miss Kenzie," Julio says with a knowing smile. "And give my regards to Mr. Holt."

"Thank you, Julio," I reply, trying to hide my anxiety behind a smile.

I step into Maverick's cabin, cradling the bag with soup carefully in my hands. The air inside is warm, with a faint scent of pine and antiseptic.

Maverick is on the couch, surprise on his face evident. There's a TV playing in the background and an unfinished mug of coffee on the table nearby.

"I hope you like chicken soup. It was the only soup they had on the menu at Skyline Tavern today." I kick off my shoes. "Thought it might help you feel better."

"I love chicken soup," Maverick replies, managing a small smile despite the pain he must be feeling. His dark hair falls across his shoulders, framing his bruised face, but it's his eyes that captivate me—bright blue, alive and filled with gratitude.

"Let me help you sit up," I offer, placing one hand under his arm while keeping the other on his shoulder for support. Together, we ease him into a more comfortable position against the pillows.

"Much better," he says, wincing slightly as he settles in.

"Do you mind?" I gesture toward the kitchen and he nods. I rummage through the cabinets to find some dishes, then pour a generous serving of chicken soup into a bowl and microwave it.

"So, how did you know I like soup?" Maverick asks while I'm preparing utensils.

"Everyone likes soup when they are recovering," I reply playfully.

When the food is hot enough, I set it on the coffee table and move the table closer to the couch. I have no idea how to care for a sick person and I'm just thinking on the fly.

As Maverick takes a tentative spoonful, I can't suppress my anxiety. I wring my hands, waiting impatiently for him to say something. "Good?"

"Delicious," he confirms, his eyes meeting mine. "Thank you."

I'm glad.

"Hey. You don't have to hover. Sit down. Eat with me."

"Sure." I flop into a chair. "Honestly, I'm not hungry."

"Keep me company then?"

I nod and try to shift the focus away from the elephant in the room. "I noticed your record collection earlier. You have quite a taste in classic rock."

"Ah, yes," Maverick smiles, sipping at the soup between sentences. "Music is a great pick-me-up, especially the classics." He pauses and looks at me. "This is actually my wife's collection."

I wait, my pulse is a staccato beat in my ears. He's never really brought up his wife before.

"She inherited her taste from Ed," Maverick continues, his eyes filled with melancholia. "He was a huge Led Zeppelin fan. While other kids listened to NSYNC and Backstreet Boys, Jo and I spent our high school years listening to Zeppelin albums on repeat. And Fleetwood Mac. Stevie Nicks' voice is just... magical." Maverick's eyes light up with enthusiasm and I'm sensing that this is the time for me to remain invisible. This is the time for

him to talk about *her*. "As for me personally, I've always been a fan of The Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd. My old man liked them. I don't have very vivid memories of him but I remember him spinning The Stones constantly. Drove my mother mad. I guess, when I found out Ed liked the same bands, it made me feel like... I had a father again. There's just something about that era of music that speaks to me."

Maverick stops talking and returns to sipping his soup, his eyes searching my face.

"Is your mom still alive?" I ask.

"She lives in Seattle. I have cousins there. They've been wanting me to move out there as well to be with the rest of the family but I don't think I can leave this place behind."

"Because of your wife?" I guess.

He nods. "Jo and I went to Beaver Crossing High together. We'd already been dating when I enlisted. I couldn't afford college and joining the Marines was my best chance. She waited for me. Wrote me letters.

"We got married at twenty-four. After I was discharged from the Corps. We were happy here. Ed loved having us around, helping with the resort. And then, a few weeks before her thirties birthday, she died. She was in the parking lot, loading up groceries into the truck and I was at work. She just dropped dead. And I wasn't there when it happened."

Maverick stops talking.

I feel the heaviness in the air as he takes another spoonful of soup. I want to say something, anything to make it better, but I'm at a loss for words. Instead, I sit in silence, letting him summon the courage to continue.

"Music has this incredible power to connect us all, to connect past and present," he whispers. "No matter our backgrounds or experiences. It's universal. I guess what I'm trying to say is that even though she's gone there's a piece of her left here."

"Why did she die?" I choke out.

"Aneurism. The doctors told me there was nothing I could have done."

"I'm sorry." My heart breaks for him. "I had no idea."

"It's not your fault." Maverick shrugs, but I can see the pain etched into his features. "That's why I'm still here. Because some of the best moments in my life happened here. I got married here. I loved here. I was loved here." He carefully pushes the bowl away and sets the spoon on the coffee table. "And for a long time, I thought that those memories and Johanna were synonymous but there are other memories now." He searches my face. "With you."

I freeze, my heart beats so fast I'm scared it'll wear itself out. I don't know what to say. I don't want to ruin the moment. Maverick's eyes lock onto mine, and I feel like I'm drowning in them. The raw intensity of his gaze is overwhelming.

He takes a deep breath and continues, "Johanna and I were high school sweethearts. We made it through everything—my years away in the Marines, her years away in college. Ed losing his wife and her mother. We built a life together, and I believed we'd grow old side by side." His voice cracks, and he pauses to collect himself. "But then, when she died suddenly, it was so unexpected... I didn't know how to cope with the loss. I don't think I still do, but..."

Tears well up in my eyes as I imagine the immense pain he must have felt. "Maverick, you don't need to—"

"Just hear me out, okay?" he presses, his expression nervous, if anything. "For a long time, I felt like I was trapped in a whirlwind of emotions, unable to escape. But it's been years and when you came here, when you came to Red Willow, I began to realize something important."

"What's that?" I ask gently, rubbing my eyes with my fists.

"Change," he says, looking directly at me. "It's terrifying, but it's also necessary. I've been stuck in the past, unable to move forward. But all these changes happening around me—the resort, my new responsibilities, and you," he hesitates, his eyes searching mine, "—they've made me realize that I need

to start living again if I want to keep up with life. And I don't want to do this if you're not part of this."

Warmth spreads through my chest at his words. "Maverick, I—"

"MacKenzie Rivers," he interrupts. "I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that I want to move on. And I want to try doing that with you." His eyes are intense, filled with hope and vulnerability. "I care for you. I can't deny it any longer. I know you belong to someone else, but that someone else doesn't deserve you."

My heart races as I take in his confession, my own feelings mirrored in his gaze. "It's an ambush—what you're doing right now."

"Listen," he says, his voice serious, "I know your father needs to be looked after and I when told you I would not have you dealing with this alone, I meant it. Please leave him. Leave Chris."

We sit there for what feels like an eternity, the forest whispering softly in the background through the semi-open window.

"I need to tell you something," I finally confess. If we are going to do this, then we need to be honest with each other and this man has just poured his heart to me. I can't keep this secret from him, especially because it concerns the people he cares about.

"There's a reporter," I say. "Her name is Irene Kovac. She writes for *The Standard* and she approached me regarding Chris."

Maverick's face immediately tenses.

"She's been investigating his acquisitions and I think she could use your help. You're a local and you know more about what's going on here... with the land."

"Have you already shown her the documents you found?"

"Not yet but I plan on..." I pause, waiting for Maverick's reaction.

Maverick's eyes darken, jaw clenched tight, expression unreadable as he processes the information.

"I'm meeting with her tomorrow," I supply. "If *The Standard* has been

looking into my husband's dealings, it means they are certain illegal means are involved. Chris is a powerful man and he won't go down without a fight."

"Meet with Irene," Maverick finally says. "Show her what you found and find out what else she knows."

"Will you help then?"

"I will think about it."



Kenzie

My hiking boots crunch against the dirt and pebbles of the trail, as I breathe in the crisp mountain air. The far-off sound of birds in the distance is soothing, but I'm too preoccupied to really take it all in. While the scent of wildflowers and pine trees follows me on my trek, my thoughts are filled with nervous anticipation for the upcoming meeting with Irene.

The folder is hidden beneath my jacket, its contents damning; photos that I had no choice but to print out.

My paranoia had taken over and made me hard copy all the evidence I discovered in his office just in case. But my realization came in a little too late.

Truth is I'm scared Chris will find out about me talking to the reporter. I'm regretting exchanging these messages with Maverick and him sending additional snapshots to me. It's like we're begging to be traced and it wouldn't surprise me if Chris tried to obtain transcripts of our texts or bug my phone. That's why getting the sordid contents of my husband's shady business methods to Irene digitally is out of the question.

"Kenzie, here," Irene calls out from behind a cluster of aspen trees, her

voice muffled by their rustling leaves. "Next time we should pick a spot that doesn't require walking up the mountain. Apparently, I'm out of shape." She steps into view, unruly red curls pulled back in a messy ponytail, a determined look in her green eyes. "Hey."

"Hey," I reply, trying to match her confident tone. "Sorry about that hike."

I don't know how she does it. It's like being a firefighter if you ask me. Instead of running away from trouble, she seeks trouble out. For a living.

Irene takes a deep breath and fixes her gaze on me. She doesn't waste any time, getting straight to business. "Do you have the materials?"

I nod and pull out the folder from underneath my jacket and hand it to her.

She flips through the file slowly, pausing to study the images of a broken fence, graffiti-covered walls, and tire tracks in the grass. "What are these?" She glances up at me, her forehead creased in confusion.

"Maverick—" I pause and begin again, "the resort's manager took some photos of the vandalism on the properties around here. He believes Chris had something to do with it."

For the first time since I tied the knot with the man, I'm embarrassed to call him my husband. I didn't think this day would come. Yet here we are.

Irene scans my face. "Interesting. So, not only did you know, but the resort's manager knew too?" Her voice is thick with suspicion.

"He was the one to point it out to me," I supply.

"I see."

"Why are you looking at me this?"

"Like what?"

"Like you're judging me."

"I'm not judging you, Kenzie. It's not my job. I understand that you're in the midst of a difficult situation."

"Why did you approach me? Why not Sergio? Or his ex-wife or his

daughter."

"Oh, I've tried to approach his ex-wife. She didn't budge. She's loyal to him like a dog."

I draw a deep breath. "If he finds out that you received these files from me, I'll be in big trouble." I stress the last two words, hoping she would read between the lines.

"I get it. Don't worry. I don't reveal my sources unless they want to go on record."

"I can't."

"What about the resort's manager? Would he consider getting involved? He could provide valuable insight, being a local and all."

I hesitate for a moment, thinking of Maverick's sad blue eyes and protective nature. "I'll ask him," I promise. "You should also look into Summit's Den."

Irene immediately pulls out her phone and types up some notes. "And I assume, the resort manager told you to tell me that."

I nod, then add. "I can't be gone long. I work, so I need to get back to the resort."

"Of course," she replies with a wry smile before disappearing back into the trees, leaving me with my racing thoughts and the whispering leaves above.

I have no idea if what I'm doing is wrong. It feels like I'm betraying Chris. But it also feels like I'm finally starting to figure out what I actually want from my life and how I want for my future to look. And Chris isn't part of that future.

The next morning, I'm startled awake by a phone call. The number is unfamiliar, but I recognize Irene's voice immediately when I answer.

"Kenzie," she says, her voice quivering slightly, which is an oddity of its own that has me nervous instantly, "I hate to bother you so early, but things kinda went bad last night." Again, she doesn't let me speak. She gets right down to business. "I need to know if you've talked to the resort's manager yet. Can he go on record or assist in finding someone who will? The clock is ticking on this thing."

"I'm sorry, I haven't had a chance to speak to him yet." My heart races, concerned by her tone. Truth is, Julio's words the other day scared me. Even with Chris absent, people still gossip and Sergio is still here. And rumors of me and Maverick doing something behind my husband's back right now aren't convenient. "What happened?"

"Last night some thugs cornered me in an alley. Told me to stop digging around and leave town. Didn't name your husband but it's obvious since he's the only one I'm investigating here."

My blood runs cold at her words, my chest tightening. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she replies. "I know some self-defense. Didn't have to use it, but they made their point. We don't have much time. I really need someone on board as soon as possible."

"Can't you go to the police?"

"I'm a reporter, Kenzie. All I can do is nudge the right people in the right direction."

"Alright." My voice is steely with determination. "I'll talk to him today. Can you lay low for a while or something? Maybe stay in the hotel room."

Irene laughs. "Oh hon, I'm not the type to stay still for long."

Then she kills the call.

Things are moving too fast all of a sudden. Maybe even too fast for me to catch up.

After my talk with Irene, I slip out of bed and dress quickly. My heart pounds against my ribcage as I make my way through the resort, the early morning sun spilling light across the lush gardens and meandering paths. In the distance, the mountains, half covered by pines and half bare, stand tall and proud.

I realize even with danger lurking just beyond the peaceful facade, the beauty of this place takes my breath away.

I don't even know when I started liking it here. It just happened one day. Maybe it has something to do with Maverick Holt. Maybe not.

I chose to walk instead of using the golf cart because it helps me think and I'm sweating by the time I reach the main hotel. The lawn has been looking like a box of Legos for a few days now with the event crew working on preparing everything for my birthday party Chris commissioned.

I push open the door to the lobby and head straight to the reception desk. Maverick is there, leaning over Krissy's shoulder and giving her some instructions while she's typing something into the computer. When he sees me, he straightens up and a frown appears on his forehead. He can read me, he can read my unease.

"Good morning, Mrs. Caddell," he greets me as I approach them, his eyes a mixture of warmth and concern but his voice is calm and professional.

Krissy grins up at me. "Morning, Mrs. Caddell. I love your dress."

"Thank you. It's from Stitches 'n Styles."

"Oh God, Mary and Andrea make the best clothes in the entire valley," the receptionist gushes.

"Can we talk?" I ask Maverick when Krissy is done with her questions about dresses people wear in LA.

"Of course." He comes out from behind the desk and we head to his office, doing our best to maintain a respectable distance to avoid feeding gossip. But I don't think it works. Every single hotel employee gives us either a curious or judgmental stare.

It's worse than the walk of shame.

The door to Maverick's office is closed, so he unlocks it with a key. Inside, he motions for me to sit down on one of the two chairs and takes the other chair himself.

"What's going on?" he asks, his eyes fixed on mine.

"I'm scared," I reply. "Irene called me this morning. She got threatened by some thugs last night. They want her to stop investigating and leave town. She said they didn't name Chris specifically but she's not working on anything else."

Maverick's eyes darken with anger. "So he's ready to use all means necessary, huh?"

"She asked me if you could go on record. She's looking for someone local. Besides, a publication like *The Standard* has more resources than we do."

Maverick inhales sharply and looks around.

"Are there camera's here?" I ask, my pulse quickening.

"No. I disconnected them."

"What should I tell her?"

Maverick slides the chair over to close the distance between us and leans forwards to take my hands. His scent hits my nostrils and I find myself momentarily distracted by his presence. I feel a sudden urge to be closer to him, to feel the warmth of his body against mine. Without thinking, I lean in and press my lips to his. It's not one of those filthy kisses we share when we are unhinged with desire and primal need. It's a soft kiss, filled with tenderness and comfort. A kiss that says everything without words about what could have been between us if circumstances were different.

When I pull back, Maverick stares at me for a few heartbeats before speaking, "I'll meet with her." He takes another deep breath as if steeling himself for something. His blue eyes bore into mine, a storm of emotions swirling within them. "You know I'd do anything to protect this place,

Kenzie... And you."

"Thank you." My chest swells with gratitude and some other emotion I'm not able to put into words yet.

Maybe we can finally get to the bottom of this before people get seriously hurt.

"Don't risk it anymore. Don't try to meet her outside the hotel. Alright?"

"Alright."

I pull out my phone. "Let me text her."

"Kenzie?" He touches my wrist gently. "But we need to be cautious. You said she thinks she's being followed?"

I nod, biting my lip. "Yes. We need a plan to meet without arousing suspicion."

"Absolutely," he agrees, his jaw set in determination. "How about during your birthday party? There will be plenty of distractions, and your husband will be preoccupied. I'll find a way to slip away and meet her at the hotel."

"Sounds good," I quickly type up a text Irene:

Maverick agreed to meet you. Let's do it during my bday party.
Meet at the hotel.

Her response comes almost immediately.

Great, thank you! See you there.

"Done," I announce, putting my phone away.

Maverick reaches out and takes my hand again, his warm touch is reassuring and is sending shivers up my spine. "We'll get through this, Kenzie. I promise."

I really hope so.

I glance at the clock on the wall of the break room, the ticking second hand a

reminder that it's for me to leave. Evelyn, our activity instructor who is seated across from me, is chatting up a typhoon. Apparently, she went out on a date with some guy from two towns over and he attempted to steal a kiss before the night was over.

"On a first date!" Evelyn puffs indignantly, chewing on her energy bar. "Can you imagine?" She clicks her tongue in annoyance while the rest of the girls are devouring her story with their mouths agape.

I tune her out, my mind running through my afternoon plan while I shove the last of my pastrami sandwich into my mouth, then grab my purse and excuse myself.

"Are you leaving, Mrs. Caddell?" Clara, one of the receptionists, catches me in the hallway.

"Yes. Would you tell Maverick I have some shopping to do for my party if he asks about me?" I try to sound casual. And I sure hope he doesn't ask.

"Mr. Caddell went all out for your birthday," Clara gushes.

I wish I wanted this party as much as half the staff working at the resort.

As I start the car, a sense of dread fills me. Chris's return looms large in my head like storm clouds on the horizon.

The drive to Beaver Crossing is scenic, but I can't truly appreciate the splendor of the lofty pines or the vibrant wildflowers dotting the roadside. My thoughts are consumed by the task ahead—meeting the divorce attorney Irene connected me with.

"Focus," I whisper to myself as I tightly grip the steering wheel of the non-discreet resort vehicles. The last thing I want is to lose control now that I'm so close to getting what I want.

I glance at the rear-view mirror as I clear the city limits to ensure I'm not followed.

Doesn't look like it.

I've also had my phone shut off for the greater part of the day because I suspect that if Maverick knows the locator app trick, Chris could have one

installed to track me. Or he could use the Find My Phone function all Apple devices have.

Upon arriving in Beaver Crossing, I find the restaurant in question tucked between a bookstore and a coffee shop. I take a deep breath, preparing for the upcoming conversation, and step inside. The place is tiny and intimate and has those old private booths with worn-out benches and flowers adorning the tops of the backrests.

I notice a man in a suit sitting in one of the booths all the way in the corner and away from the traffic. He's staring intently at his phone, his fingers moving rapidly over the screen. I hesitate, wondering if he's the attorney I'm supposed to meet.

A sense of unease creeps up my spine as I make my way over to him.

He looks up as I approach, his eyes searching my face. "MacKenzie Caddell?" he asks, his voice low as if he doesn't want anyone to overhear him.

My panic abates a little. I appreciate his discretion.

"Rockwell Finch?" I ask in return.

He nods.

I slide into the booth across from him.

"I understand you are in a delicate situation," he begins, pulling out a dark folder.

"Did you prepare it?" I whisper nervously.

"I did exactly what we discussed over the phone. All you need is your husband's signature and it's done."

That evening, I sneak out of the cottage and take a shortcut through the woods to Maverick's cabin. It's the last chance for us to spend time together while Chris is gone and I intend to make the most of it. I plan on sleeping

over.

I put on my best lingerie, take a shower, and do my hair.

I don't want to lie to myself anymore about this—about what's going on between Maverick Holt and me. It may have started as sex but it has evolved, it has grown into something bigger. Something that gives me butterflies.

The cabin is warm and is filled with the aroma of homemade food when I arrive.

"I'm making beef stew," Maverick whispers, pulling me into his arms as soon as he shuts the door behind me.

"I had no idea you cooked."

"Sex and property management isn't the only thing I'm good at." He smiles and gestures for me sit on the couch.

"Would you like some wine?" he offers.

I nod. I'm a little nervous because of his meeting with Irene tomorrow.

Maverick retrieves a bottle from one of the cabinets, pops it open, and pours me a glass.

"What about you?" I inquire, tasting the drink.

Something flits across his face. "I'm sticking with this." He points at the bottle of Gatorade on the kitchen counter.

I stare at it for a second. An ugly memory of our fight punches its way into the forefront of my mind.

Suddenly, I get it.

"I can do Gatorade too," I begin.

"It's alright, Kenzie." He looks me in the eyes. "It's not... I'm not..." His shoulders slump and he glances up at the ceiling. "I didn't like myself that night."

I know which night he's talking about. I didn't like myself then either.

"I don't want to be that man anymore," he explains.

"I understand."

The conversation ends here. There's not much to say and I'm sensing that

he didn't invite me over tonight to have a discussion about his flaws.

I have plenty too.

So it's wise we end it here.

While I'm nursing my wine, Maverick is laboring in the kitchen and it's a perfect opportunity for me to watch him in action.

He moves with a practiced ease, his body fluid and graceful as he tends to the dish simmering on the stove. I take this moment to admire him properly—his broad shoulders and toned arms flexing as he stirs the pot. It's an intimate action, observing him work like this. I feel like I'm getting a glimpse of a side of Maverick Holt that he doesn't show to just anyone.

I have the urge to come up to him and rest my head on his back, to press up myself against that powerful, inked, body.

"Like what you see?" he asks, catching me staring.

Wine has hit me in the head and I blush and avert my gaze like an eighteen-year-old "Yeah, everything's great. It smells delicious."

He grins, happy with the compliment. "It should be done soon. I bet you're hungry."

I nod, feeling my stomach growl in response. "Starving." I set the wine aside and rise up.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I want to be a part of this moment.

Maverick turns towards me with a smile. "You can taste the stew and tell me if it needs anything else." He offers me a spoonful of stew and I taste it, relishing in the flavors.

"Hmm." I close my eyes. "The man after my own heart."

Maverick laughs softly. "So it's good?"

"Delicious," I reply with a satisfied smile.

"Well, that's fortunate for me! If you didn't like the stew, I'd have had to make breakfast in the morning."

"Don't worry, I'm sure your breakfast-making skills are on par with your cooking."

"I don't know about that but I do make a mean cup of coffee."

"Oh. now you have my attention!"

"Just wait until you taste the freshly ground beans I get from Central America. It'll make Starbucks blush!"

"You really do have all the skills!"

Maverick lowers his voice to a sexy rasp as he continues to stir the stew. "I like to think so."

"What other hidden talents might you be hiding? Can you juggle? Can you paint?"

"Nah, nothing like that. But if there's anything else in this world that needs fixing or sorting out, just give me a call and I'll take care of it!"

We're quiet after that for a second and I stand there, staring at him again. Then the realization hits me. We just had a conversation and that conversation didn't involve Chris or his wife or Irene. Or the resort. It was the kind of chat a real couple would have.

Maverick looks up from the pot and says, "You should know by now that I'm always after your heart, Kenzie Rivers."

These are not the three magical words most people tell each other when they commit to something but it's enough. Enough for me. I can feel the importance of every sound leaving his mouth.



Maverick

The heat of the fire from the fireplace radiates on my skin as I turn to face her. We've been sitting here for some time now, but it feels like mere seconds when I'm with her. I don't understand when this happened, when it went from a *fuck* to all these feelings inside my chest.

"It was delicious," she says and my heart flutters. "You're an amazing cook."

I can't resist giving her a small smile as I nod in acknowledgment. But I know that there's something pressing on both our minds, something that we haven't yet spoken about. So instead of answering, I plunge straight ahead.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow?"

Her entire body tenses up and I feel like an idiot for bringing up such a subject. She's gone through so much already, more than a woman should ever have to face. But then she turns her gaze towards me, her honey-brown eyes swimming with a mix of pain and determination.

"Yes," she whispers.

A wave of protectiveness washes over me and before I know what I'm doing, my hands are reaching for hers and squeezing tight.

"I won't let him hurt you again. I promise."

And suddenly everything changes—our eyes lock together, all sound fades away in the background. I can only think of one thing in this moment—lean forward and claim her lips with mine. Our kiss scorches through me like an intense flame—hot, passionate, burning with desire.

When we finally pull apart from each other, my voice is hoarse with emotion as I whisper softly, "Since we'll be preoccupied all night... I don't like leaving dirty dishes."

"Me neither," she responds in a low voice that sends shivers down my spine.

Grabbing each other's hand, we leap up with purpose, knowing what must be done next.

We move in a frenzy, the sound of pots and plates clashing together echoing in the cabin. Soon enough, the kitchen is spotless, but our energy hasn't faded. Instead, it's been redirected elsewhere.

I lean over and murmur into her ear, my hands skimming down her body and to her legs, "Now, onto the interesting part."

She is surprised when I heft her up and swing her around. A joyous shriek rings out from her and she clasps her arms around my neck and twines her fingers through my hair gathered at the back of my head.

I walk us into my bedroom, which I've earlier decorated with a few candles.

As I slowly put her back down, I cup her face and search her eyes, then say, "I want to try something different today."

"Shall I expect a pair of handcuffs and whip?" She bats her eyelashes at me and licks her lips.

I press a quick urgent kiss to her mouth and whisper, "Not that."

"Well pray tell then, Maverick Holt."

I love when she's this playful and unburdened and I love that it's me who gives her this. "I don't want for this to be just sex anymore."

"It's not and you know it."

"Not the part that's happening between us but the physical part." I swallow, my hands still cradling her cheeks. "I don't want to *fuck*. I want to make love."

My heart races as I'm waiting for her to respond. In my peripheral, the shadows from the candlelight dance across the walls of the cabin. The same cabin that's seen me broken and grieving and drunk. It's time to change that.

It's all up to Kenzie now.

"Yes." She breathes out shakingly, placing her small hand on my chest as if to feel my heartbeat. "I'd love that."

We start taking off our clothing, leaving it in a heap where we stand. Our movements are in sync like a well-oiled machine. Like we'd done this before and we had but differently.

We slide into bed together, skin to skin, and I cover her body with mine, intertwining our fingers above her head.

We kiss slowly and passionately, our tongues exploring each other mouths as if this is the first time they meet. I move my hands down her body, mapping out the shapes of her curves with small loving touches as soft moans escape from us both.

Kenzie's back arches in pleasure and when she wraps one leg around me, it feels like *déjà vu* once again for we have been here before but never this way—never without a filter to bind our freedom. Now there are no restraints between us save for that everlasting bond between two partners who connect on every level: mentally, emotionally... spiritually.

She gasps as I press my cock into her and groans in relief when her body opens up perfectly to mine.

I drag my lips over hers in a slow sensuous trail and back, teasingly licking the corner of her mouth before pulling away completely to look her in the eyes.

"You're perfect," I whisper, my voice is thick. *For me.*

"You're perfect too," she murmurs between her moans as I push into her slowly.

We both find a desirable rhythm that could only be described as nirvana—like moments where time pauses for us without notice or warning—just pure pleasure at its finest.

With every measured thrust from me comes another tiny moan when she rocks against me.

Waves of desire surge through my veins, setting fire to everything inside me, making me ache for more, making me ache for something new—to take her to ecstatic heights she's never been to, to show her what it could be like between us if she's completely mine. Physically. Emotionally. *And on a goddamned paper.*

She tilts her hips upwards, letting out a groan that sends an electric spark downtown.

I pick up my pace and we move together entwined in each movement—at times faster or slower but always connected—not needing direction because following instinct is second nature between us when it comes to physical pleasure.

Our bodies peak at the same time sending wave after wave through us until we crash into nothingness, until finally, we met with an explosive orgasm, crashing around us like fireworks on New Year's Eve.

I collapse beside her while we catch our breaths from such an intense moment. There's cum all over me and I know that I'll need to eventually get a towel to clean us up, but we just lay there quietly for a few minutes in complete harmony, enjoying the tiny aftershocks of the orgasm until I find the strength to speak out softly, "Vanilla wasn't so bad."

Kenzie rolls over to her side to look at me. "It goes up to my top five right next to *fucking like animals.*"

I let out a laugh and sink my hand into her hair. She stopped dying them and there are now several inches of sunflower blond and I love how it

compliments the honey brown in her eyes or the tan she's finally getting on her skin. She's slowly returning to who she is—a country girl. My country girl.

We've taken a shower and changed the bedsheets and it's after midnight and we should be sleeping but I'm guessing it's the fear of tomorrow that keeps up awake.

"Tomorrow," she whispers out of the blue, "I'm going to ask Chris for a divorce."

I'm stunned by her declaration. "Are you sure?" I prop myself on my elbow and scan her face.

"Positive. I can't keep doing this. I can't keep lying to him and use his money while being with you. It makes me feel dirty and cheap. If I don't love him anymore, then it needs to end." There's determination in her voice I haven't heard before.

My thoughts drift to how our lives will change forever tomorrow, but tonight we have each other. "He's going to make it difficult, Kenzie." I reach out to touch a strand of her hair.

"He is. I'm expecting that, but I'm handling it."

There's a long pause, then Kenzie mutters, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For coming here, for upending your life." Her gaze meets mine. "And I don't mean just you but everyone in the resort and in this town."

"It's not your fault he brought you here."

There's a hint of sadness in her eyes. "Do you know why I called her Strawberry?" she asks, her voice quivering now. "Because she was the size of a strawberry when I found out I was going to be a mom."

My heart sinks as I notice tears building up in her eyes.

"I'm not certain why exactly I thought it was her. I just did. They were the best three weeks of my marriage. Chris was so excited he'd be a father again. Then one night, I woke up in a pool of blood and she was gone. Chris wasn't there when that happened. He was away on another business trip. I didn't take it well. Neither did he. We fell apart and I got depressed. I passed out in a bathtub after taking too many pills. I'm still not sure if it was an accident or on purpose. This was when Chris decided a change of scenery would be good for me. Shortly after he bought Red Willow, allegedly for me. Or at least I'd like to believe he valued me and my pain more than his desire to own all the land in this county. I don't know what to think anymore."

The silence sinks all around us again.

"I'm at a loss. I don't know what to say, baby." I brush my finger over a tear that falls down the side of her cheek.

"Don't say anything. Hug me."

I do as she says, I pull her to my chest and embrace her tightly.



Kenzie

The soft glow of the morning sun filters through the curtains of Maverick's bedroom.

"What time is it?" I ask as he picks up the cell phone from the nightstand.

"Quarter to seven," Maverick replies. The sheet slips over his body as he slowly gets up and walks across the room to grab fresh boxers from the drawer.

The sight of his naked body sends a current through my entire being. Every inch of him is perfectly sculpted—from the broad muscular shoulders to the thin waistline and all the way down his long, toned legs. The tantalizing lines between each muscle ripple over every inch, begging me to reach out and caress them.

My breathing quickens as I study every intimate curve and I'm hungry and greedy for a taste for him all of a sudden. My pussy clenches with need.

"Come here," I call as he fishes out a T-shirt.

He turns to me, one eyebrow arches. "Really?" he asks, that mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Come here," I urge him.

He strides across the room and kneels on the bed, towering over me now, a man who knows what's about to come next. His hair, undone and messy, streams over his skin. His mouth twitches ever so slightly when his eyes meet mine; the lust that radiates out of them sends shivers down my spine despite the heat rising within me. I push aside the covers slowly before leaning back on top of Maverick's pillows.

"Fuck my mouth," I tell him.

He's hard and there's pre-cum on the tip of his crown as he inches closer, his hands gripping the headboard above my head. "Don't mind if I do." And then he slips his cock past my lips and into my mouth. His strokes are tentative at first, explorative.

I grasp his ass with one hand and guide him, my other hand pleasuring myself.

The taste of him is divine—all man—like nothing else I've ever experienced before—sweet but heady all at once and sending waves of electricity coursing through every nerve ending inside me, building up even more hunger than what had started this whole thing just moments ago.

His moans seem to be louder each time he thrusts into my mouth—encouraging me to take him whole, to open up to him, to submit to him. And I do, I deep-throat him while I wantonly finger fuck my pussy, erasing Chris from everywhere in my body.

And then after we come, I leave his cabin properly satisfied to orchestrate one last charade before Christos Caddell and I go our separate ways.

I enter the cottage through the back. My eyes wander around the room, taking in every detail, until they land on an object that has me panicking—Chris's suitcase.

My heart lurches with a mix of dread and annoyance. He's back early. His

flight was supposed to arrive at noon.

I can't help but feel sick to my stomach. I wish I had more time to prepare, more time to mask the evidence of my night with Maverick. More time to collect my bearings.

"Good morning, love," Chris says, entering the room with a fake smile plastered on his face. His eyes roam over my body, making me feel exposed and vulnerable, even though I'm fully dressed. "Were you out somewhere at this hour?" There's a hidden threat in that question.

"I went to see Snowfall," I lie.

I wonder if he can smell another man on me. *Another man's cum on me.*

He strides over, all six-three of his explosive personality and hot Greek blood. "I couldn't wait to come back and celebrate your birthday with you," he says, his voice low and I can't tell if he means to seduce me or scare. You can never tell with Chris Caddell.

"Thank you," I mutter, forcing a smile and avoiding his gaze. He bends down to press a lingering kiss on my forehead. It takes all my willpower not to recoil from his touch.

"Are you excited?" he asks, his now voice dripping with forced sweetness. He's trying to mask his true intentions. I've seen enough of his darker side lately to know that something is off.

"Sure," I say, attempting to sound enthusiastic. "It's going to be quite the event."

"Only the best for you, my dear." He steps closer, his body aligned with mine, his mouth near my ear and his arm wrapped around my waist. He slips his other hand to the back of my neck and fists my hair roughly, yanking my head down so hard, I see stars in my eyes.

"Do you like when he shoves his dick into your cunt, huh?"

He presses me up to his chest and pulls at my hair again, forcing my neck to crane so far back that I'm terrified of what may happen if he goes further. I can feel my muscle and skin and tendons sobbing with protest but the roar of

the pulse behind my ears is so loud I can't think straight.

In that moment, I'm overcome with a paralyzing fear. With one flick of his wrist, one new move from the master manipulator Chris Caddell, he could hold me hostage in whatever world he wants me to live in.

"You like it when he fills your holes? Whore?" he hisses against my neck. "I can fill your holes too. All your holes, love. I can fuck your dirty cheating little cunt until you beg me to stop. I can fuck your mouth too until your brains are so fucked up you forget him or any other man you've ever been with in your short insignificant empty life."

He pulls back and releases my hair, pushing me away with an almost gentle motion before stepping back. "I hope you remember who your real master is, MacKenzie."

I feel filthy and not in a good way.

I'm a married woman yet I shit on my own vows by breaking the oath with another man. I allowed another man to own every part of me.

"Am I a bad person, girl?" I ask Snowfall as I sink my fingers into her soft mane.

She snorts gently, her way of responding without speaking.

"He does that," I whisper to her. "He gets under people's skin like he just got under mine."

I run my fingers down Snowfall's velvety nose as she lets out another quiet nicker, telling me she understands.

I'm conflicted between the person I was before meeting Maverick and the person I am now. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

To that, Snowfall nudges my shoulder with her muzzle as if she's silently pushing me toward the decision.

"I know," I tell her. "Chris has given me so much... including you. But

he's a scary man. What must be done will be done."

The quiet around us is burdened by worry and fear of what will happen if I can't hold it together anymore? My stomach twists at the thought that I may have lost control over my own life. Yet there is also a liberating sense of freedom that comes from letting go and just allowing the uncertainty wash over me like a warm wave on an endless shoreline.

My gaze shifts out towards the horizon as hot tears prick at my eyes; they blur everything until all I can see is the decision I need to make.

As I step into my designer custom dress, the luxurious fabric hugs my body in the most sensuous way. Laurel has gone out of her way to create something timeless. It's a beautiful gown, one that would make any woman feel like royalty, but I can't shake off the feeling of discomfort.

A makeup artist Chris hired and whose name I didn't care to remember hurries around me, busy at work with the curling iron and various other tools she needs to create an impeccable look for the night. Every stroke of her brush against my fresh makeup line is fast and rushed but not careless. She's determined to get it just right.

I take a deep breath and try to focus on the moment at hand—meeting the guests starting to gather outside.

Chris has already left to entertain some important people and I have a suspicion he's only throwing this shebang because he needs to lock in some tricky deal during the festivities.

"Can I have a minute alone?" I tell the makeup artist and Laurel's assistant who came to "oversee me trying out her boss's masterpiece."

Once I'm alone I pick up my phone and try calling Lita. She just scored a gig in New York and is probably busy but I'm hoping to hear her familiar voice.

"Kezn! Hi!"

"Hey—"

"Hon, sorry. I'm on set. I can't talk right now," she speaks dismissively, sounding a little off. "Rain check?"

The disappointment of not being able to talk to her burns through me like a hot blade. It's the first time in years she doesn't remember it's my birthday. I close my eyes and fight away the sudden tears threatening to fall.

I hear Sergio's voice from outside, signaling the arrival of a limo Chris sent for me. Taking one last glance at myself in the mirror, I quickly grab my clutch with trembling hands and exit the room.

When I get into the car, it smells faintly of leather and mint. My pulse kicks into overdrive when I see Sergio climbing into the limo with me.

"Have you been promoted to babysitter now?" I say grimly.

"I'm here to help you," he replies, his voice smooth and fake.

I look out of the window, my fingers circling the crease in my dress. "I don't need your help."

The truth is his presence is an inconvenience.

I have to get a hold of Irene to make sure she's arrived at the hotel safely and got a room where she'll be meeting Maverick later on—just as soon as Chris's party gives me some breathing room.

Irene and I switched to using some Russian messenger app I downloaded to my phone. It would be nice if Chris's lapdog didn't breathe down my neck while I'm trying to make a dent in my soon-to-be ex-husband's empire.

"Chris thinks otherwise," Sergio replies to my earlier quip.

"I can think for myself." I never talk back to Sergio but I'm tempted to do so now. After all, he won't be around for much longer. If what Maverick told me about his involvement in land sales is confirmed, Irene will rip him to shreds.

I don't feel sorry for the man. He shouldn't have bullied the locals in the first place.

We don't exchange any more words for the remainder of the ride, but his presence annoys the hell out of me.

The sun has begun its flaming descent behind the mountains as I step out into the warm fresh air when the limo reaches its destination.

The expansive green space in front of the hotel has been completely transformed beyond recognition.

The entire area has been decorated with magnificent flowers, vibrant colors, and luxurious fabrics. An exquisite fountain stands as the centerpiece of the space, delicately spouting sparkling water into multiple pools and streams the contractors have been working on all week. The string lights glimmer overhead in the setting sun, still turned off because there's plenty of daylight so far but I imagine it'll be pretty when they go on.

As far as I can see, there are beautiful white tables set with gold cutlery. They are surrounded by trees that dance gracefully with every whisper of wind. The guests are dressed in their finest designer outfits, drinking and chatting. I don't know any of these people. Some faces do look familiar. I met a few when Chris took me with him to his business dinners. But they are not my friends. He didn't invite any. The only person I'd love to have here is Lita. But Lita is in New York. She's working on a week-long campaign for an up-and-coming lingerie designer from Germany.

The party is well underway, and the atmosphere is something out of a fairytale. Just not mine.

As I walk toward the lawn, my stilettos clicking over the tiles laid out across the grass, I can feel the strangers' eyes on me. I'm recognized instantly as Chris's wife. Nothing less. Nothing more.

My hair is judged.

My makeup is inspected.

My dress is admired.

No one cares about how I feel or what my hobbies are or what I like for breakfast or even the type of sex I enjoy.

No one gathered here, around this red worn-out, decorated monstrosity of a barn.

But Maverick Holt does.

He knows and he cares and I'm not going to let Chris play me again like he did earlier.

I'm here for a mission now; not for entertainment or show-off purposes.

I cross paths with many different people from varying backgrounds—old money socialites mingling with art collectors; tech millionaires discussing their investments; actors promoting their latest works—all walking around carefree while sipping cocktails made by expert bartenders who are working hard behind a long counter filled with top shelf liquors.

My phone pings in my clutch and I glance at it as I continue to weave through the crowd, avoiding getting close to Chris.

Got a room. Waiting, Irene's speech bubble reads when I check the messenger app.

Anyone followed you?

Not that I noticed, she replies.

I inhale and pick up a glass of champagne from the waiter passing by with the tray. I have to stay sharp but I'm nervous. I've only been able to see Maverick from afar. He drove by the party in the golf cart ten minutes ago.

"Love," a voice comes from behind. "You're here."

My heart turns to stone inside my chest and I shove the phone back into my clutch and snap it closed. That little purse has my entire future in it. I can't show my cards before Maverick meets with Irene.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Chris says with a smile when I spin to face him. He leans closer, his mouth grazing the shell of my ear. "The least you can do is behave yourself in front of our guests."

"Your guests, Chris," I whisper.

"I have a surprise for you later on," he whispers back, the threat behind those words evident and my skin crawls.

"I have a surprise for you too."

He takes a step back and offers his hand, then says in a voice loud enough for others to hear him, "Can my beautiful wife grant me a dance?"



Maverick

Red Willow has never been just a workplace for me or those coming to stay here.

It's a getaway to another world perched on the edge of the small vibrant valley at the foot of the Molo Mountain. It's a less-known destination near Yosemite, which is what makes it beautiful. There's less traffic and that creates a tranquil, private atmosphere.

Families, couples, and friends from all over the state flock here for weekends, reunions, retreats, and celebrations of all sorts. The cozy lodges and cabins tucked along winding paths have seen countless milestone moments: engagements under fairy lights, weddings in the garden gazebo and around the famous red barn, anniversaries, and reunions spanning generations.

This place is more than a resort—it's a peaceful yet festive sanctuary where cherished memories are born and deep connections are made.

And I'd be lying to myself if I said I didn't care what happens to Red Willow Resort if Chris Caddell ends up going through with his plan. Whatever it is he's intending on doing with all this land around the resort, I

won't allow it. I won't allow for Jo's memories and Ed's legacy to be swept under the rug.

This place is etched in my soul, forever intertwined with the people and moments that have brought joy and meaning to my life and the lives of many others. And I want to add more moments to the ones that Red Willow has seen. Moments with MacKenzie Rivers.

All that separates me from it is the last piece of the puzzle, the piece that Irene Kovac has promised to put where it belongs.

I just have to come up with a plan to escape for a second, but that's tough with the wires sparking and fraying insulation around me. The main power line in the north wing has shorted and if I can't fix this—and quickly—the lights in the entire hotel will go out.

"This party was a bad idea," Dean, one of the on-call maintenance guys says, handing me my goggles as I shrug on the gloves. "You'd better be careful with those." He means the wires.

He's not wrong. It's looking like the Fourth of July fireworks all over here.

"Tell that to the boss," I grumble under my nose, slipping on the goggles and plucking the right tools from my kit to work on separating the live wires.

With steady hands, I strip away the damaged sheath, carefully twisting together the bare copper ends.

"You heard from Rodrigo?" Dean asks, eyeing the people scattered all over the lawn. The large willow tree is obstructing the view of the party partially but I'm on the ladder and I can see guests twirling to the live band. This little soiree Chris Caddell threw for his wife—not for much longer, hopefully—is drawing all the electrical power. Whoever he hired to get this flashy get-together set up didn't know what they were doing and our regular maintenance guy who'd be able to fix this problem quickly called in sick. So it's up to me now to ensure the entire resort doesn't lose power.

"No," I tell Dean and pause only to refer to the wiring diagram, double-

checking each connection before securing it with electrical tape.

"Those city contractors never have any idea what they're doing out here in the sticks," he scoffs.

"You live in these sticks, man."

"And I love it." He laughs. "Ain't gonna sugar coat it though."

"Alright, tell me about it over coffee tomorrow. Now give me more tape."

Every few minutes a shudder runs through the line, a reminder of the fragile hold I have on the power still coursing through. But I keep at it, ignoring the beads of sweat gathering on my brow. This work demands my full attention.

Just then I catch a sight of Kenzie out on the lawn, her designer dress is all glitter in the setting sun and I can't stay away. I turn and watch the festivities from a distance, my heart twists with unease. Chris hovers next to her like a hawk, his arm possessive on her slender waist.

I swallow and switch to my task. Another junction sealed, another length of frayed wire replaced, and slowly the flickering lights above me steady once more. Only then do I pull back with a sigh, surveying my handiwork. For now, the connection holds.

"Hey, Maverick..." Dean scratches his beard as I hand him my toolbox and get down the ladder. "I don't mean to pry but folks around the resort have been saying things."

I stare down at him from above, freezing two steps above ground.

"You know about you and the boss's wife."

"And is that your business how?"

"People are starting to notice what's going on between you two," he warns me. "If her husband catches wind, things can get ugly."

"Just mind your own business," I snap in reply.

"Suit yourself," Dean says before walking off on another call that comes through his walkie-talkie. I watch him for a second, then get off the ladder and check my phone. There's a notification. I received messages from both

Kenzie and Irene twenty minutes ago. Irene is in room 315. She's waiting for me there.

Finishing up something urgent will be there soon

, I type up a quick text to the reporter. We're using some messenger app she told Kenzie about to avoid Chris tracking us. He can easily request transcripts of Kenzie's texts from the phone provider. They are after all married. And the less evidence he can dig up on us coordinating behind his back, the better. Although something tells me he knows a lot more than he lets on. The man is a snake.

"Hey, you Maverick?" a voice interrupts my thoughts.

I turn to see a man in a uniform I don't recognize. "That'd be me."

He gestures with his thumb over his shoulder. "Was just told by one of your guys there's an issue with some of the cabins under construction up by the Willow Point."

"What issue?" I ask. The resort has been crawling with these city contractors hired by Chris Caddell to prepare the party. Half of them don't know their foot from their ass.

"He didn't say. Just asked me to find Maverick."

"Alright." I head for one of the golf carts. Willow Point is all the way on the other side of the resort, over three miles away from the main hotel. Not a quick walk.

"I'm happy to come with if you need an extra pair of hands," the contractor offers. "I know resources are tight with the party and all."

I don't have the time to think too much. He is right. "Sure." I climb behind the wheel. "Get in."

He joins me on the golf cart and we weave through the garden and past the lodgings, leaving the noise of the event behind us. The sun is almost gone and we are minutes away from twilight.

"Did my guy tell you if it's a serious issue?" I ask, hoping for more

details.

"He said nothing Maverick can't handle," the man replies with a chuckle. "I'm sensing you're the real boss around here, huh?"

"I know a thing or two about this place, yeah. Grew up here."

We continue in silence until we crest the hill and enter the less populous part of the resort sprinkled with towering pines and fat sequoias that soon hide the sky completely. This is the very foot of the mountain and the land begins to incline. The golf cart struggles when we reach the next hill.

Most cabins here are nestled away from everything and we used to rent them out to those wanting total privacy but they've been damaged by a mudslide a few years back. Many are still a work in progress, skeletal frames exposed to the elements. Several have been almost finished. Fresh wooden walls, windows still boarded up so no one tries to sneak inside and undo everything that's been done to return this portion of the resort back to how it was before the damages.

"You sure this is the right place?" I ask as the man gestures me into one of the cabins that's near completion.

"Positive." He nods and waves his hand but remains static while I step cautiously over the uneven floorboards.

"Where exactly is the problem?" I ask, scanning the area for anything amiss, feeling a little annoyed because I have a commitment and this is looking like some prank now.

"Right over here," he says, pointing toward a dark corner.

As I move closer to inspect it, a sudden force slams into my back, sending me stumbling forward. Before I can react, the door slams shut behind me, and I hear the click of a lock. I pound on the door, my fists aching with each strike.

"Hey!" I shout. "What the hell!"

I can hear some noises right outside, then a distinct smell of gasoline hits my nostrils. Panic rises in my chest. "Let me out of here!"

There's no response, only the faint sound of footsteps crunching on the forest floor as the man retreats away from the cabin. But as I do, I catch the scent of something even more sinister—smoke.



Kenzie

Maverick hasn't responded to my last five messages and my heart races with worry for him as I find a quiet spot behind the barn and text Irene, hoping she might have heard from him. Or maybe he's already made it into the hotel.

My fingers tap nervously on the screen, each second dragging on like an eternity.

When I see another "delivered" notification, I slump against the wall of the barn, completely oblivious to the fact that this dress isn't going to survive it if I rub against old wood with chipped paint.

The memories of Maverick and me having sex in this very spot what seems like a lifetime ago flash through my mind.

Desperation pushes me to dial Irene.

"Are you insane?" she chastises me. "Didn't we agree not to call each other directly? You know very well what your husband is capable of."

"Have you heard from Maverick?" I ask, fighting back the dread that threatens to consume me.

"Sorry, no word from him," comes her reply. Somehow, I'd hoped she'd have better news. "I got a text that says he's tied up with something urgent

but that was more than then forty-minutes ago."

"Okay."

"Try not to panic. I'm here. I got a room until tomorrow. I'll wait."

"Chris knows."

"What?"

"He knows Maverick and I are sleeping together... We are together." I don't know why I tell Irene this but I can't keep it. Oddly I trust her with this information.

"Fuck me, Kenzie," she mutters. "I wish you would have told me earlier."

"Would it change anything?"

"Hell yes. Men like Christos Caddell don't let indiscretions like this slide. He's bitter and when a husband is bitter and has money, he can resort to bad things."

I don't like the sound of that. "What do I do?"

"You do what you planned on doing? Have him sign off on that divorce paper and whatever another thing you needed that lawyer for."

"Okay." I kill the call and rest my head back against the barn; my mind continues to spin.

With a deep breath, I force myself to focus and return to the party. Determined, I clutch the purse with the divorce papers tightly in my hand and look for Chris among the drunken crowd of guests. As I make my way past yet another cluster of people, I realize they are the employees. Chris has invited the staff too as a sign of good faith. I think it's just a trick on his part but I have no time to overanalyze this bit. I pull Helen aside and ask in a hushed voice, "Have you seen Maverick?"

"No." The housekeeper shakes her head, her expression clearly not one of approval. "I know he and Dean were working on the main power line in the north wing earlier."

"Thank you." I've spotted Chris in the center of the lawn by the fountain. He's surrounded by admirers and business colleagues, laughing at some witty

remark. It's sickening how easily he can charm them all.

"Excuse me," I interrupt. "I'd like to get some alone time with my husband." I try to keep my voice steady as I pull him away toward a quiet corner of the impeccably decorated fake garden that will be disassembled tomorrow.

"I didn't think you would be in the mood for a quickie." He grins lightheartedly, but I see the calculating gleam in his eyes as we step into a small gazebo. It's wrapped into vines and flowers and we are away from the prying eyes here.

I rip the Band-Aid off because if I take my time, I'll never work up the courage to say all that I want to say. "I need you to sign these." I pull out the papers from my clutch and thrust the documents into his hands.

He arches one thick brow. "Excuse me?" His gaze darts from me to the pages he's holding. They are bent along the middle because I had to stuff them into my purse and the corners are a little ripped but that shouldn't affect their validity. "Divorce papers? And you want the resort too?" He laughs. "And a million dollars. And that damn horse." He laughs. "Need I remind you we signed a prenup, love? Besides, if you want to divorce me, don't expect me to make it easy for you. Do it through the court." He pauses and attempts to return the documents to me. "Oh wait. You also cheated on me."

"You and I both know this marriage never meant shit to you, Chris," I spit out. "The moment I stopped being pregnant, you changed. You never saw me as anything more than just a human incubator for the next Caddell heir. The resort and the money is a parting gift and assurance I won't go to the police and tell them you are an abusive son of a bitch."

"Go right ahead. No one is going to believe you."

"I have witnesses who will support my words, witnesses who have seen my bruises."

Chris withdraws his hand suspended in the air between us, still clutching the papers. "You're mouse going against the lion, MacKenzie." He shoves the

other hand into the pocket of his perfectly ironed pleated tux pants, his posture almost too relaxed. "You're plotting behind my back. You don't think I don't know it."

"I know you know it, Chris. Sign the papers," I say.

"Who's your witness? Him?" He chuckles. "If that's the case, you won't have a witness for long."

Dread coils around my heart. "What did you do?"

"You know this is an old place, right? You heard they had a fire a few years back? That's what drained all their resources. That's why the old man had to sell."

A chill runs through my spine. I stand still for a moment, feeling the heaviness of despair sink in. I realize I have no choice but to bet everything on the piece of information I conveniently withheld from both—Maverick and Irene. It's time to show my cards to Chris and see what he has—a winning or a losing card. If he has the upper hand, I'm screwed. We're screwed.

"When Irene Kovac publishes her piece," I begin, my fists at my sides, my nails digging into my palms so hard, I can tell I'm going to draw blood eventually. "...All her article is going to do is give your reputation a slap on the wrist. You'll be able to take care of it. I'm sure you can afford to buy *The Standard* to make it go away."

Chris looks down at the papers, then back at me.

"But if you don't give me the things I want and if one of us is hurt—if something happens to me, Irene, or Maverick—a package with evidence will go out to every single state and federal agency responsible for preserving wildlife," I pause to take a deep breath, "And your little golf project will never see the light of the day. Not here, not in any other state or country."

I can tell I hit the home run.

Chris's face is too calm, but his gaze speaks volumes. It's dark and angry. "Fine." He pulls out his cell phone and a pen from the inner pocket of his tux.

He always carries a pen to sign deals. Now, he's going to give me my freedom back.

"Sign them, Chris," I repeat, my voice stronger. "Or you'll find out just how much damage a mouse can do."

I stand my ground, refusing to let him intimidate me any longer. The power dynamic has shifted, and for the first time, I can see fear in his eyes as he reluctantly rests the papers on the bench.

I glance down at my phone, hoping to see a message from Maverick, hoping that whatever Chris had in store for him won't be happening because we had a deal. But the app is still worryingly silent.

"Congratulations, you're a rich woman now, Kenzie," Chris finishes leaving his signature on the documents, throwing the pen on the floor. It's the only sign of anger he shows. Phone pressed to his ear, he steps out of the gazebo and tells whoever is on the line, "Light it all up."

My heart feels like it's being squeezed in a vice. "Where's Maverick?" I shout as I follow him out into the garden, stuffing the signed papers back into the clutch.

Chris slows his pace and glances at me over his shoulder. "I'm afraid I don't know."

"You promised!"

"I did what you asked me to do, Kenzie." He spins toward me. "What more do you want? I even gave you that damn horse."

"Snowfall was always mine. You gifted her to me. Now I want you to tell me where Maverick is or that package is going out tomorrow."

"Willow Point." He shrugs, making the pleats on his tux stretch with movement. "Wherever is it." He starts walking briskly but not towards the party. He's walking away from it. He's leaving, I realize.

"If anything happens to him, Chris," I mutter as I hurry to kick off my stilettos, "I swear I'll make you pay."



Maverick

Fuck! How could I be so stupid, I think to myself as I stumble through the swirling chaos, choking and coughing from the heat threatening to consume me. The quickly thickening acrid smoke sears my nostrils and burns the back of my throat and I have to rip a portion of my work shirt to put it over my mouth and nose.

My vision clouds with tears, and I blink rapidly, trying to navigate the burning cabin.

Above me, I spot flames already lapping at the edges of the walls—vengeful demons, consuming the dry wood like paper. Smoke billows from within, curling out in shifting fingers that reach for me like hungry ghosts.

My fist pounds against the boarded-up window. "Anyone out there?" My voice is an ugly rasp, barely audible after screaming for what felt like a goddam eternity. Desperation sets in as I frantically inspect each window, searching for an exit.

My heart's pounding in my chest as the buried memories of my past in the Corps flash through my mind, mixing with the haunting image of Jo, who's long dead but judging me now from beyond the grave for not being able to

save this place, to make it whole again.

The heat washes over me in a relentless wave, dragging me under. I'm back in the desert, surrounded by the firestorm and twisted metal—fellow soldiers calling for help as the flesh melts from their bones. I sink to my knees, the crackle of flames transforming into machine gun fire. I grab my rifle, ready to engage the enemy, but nothing is as it seems. Through the haze I realize I'm back at the resort, red blaze enveloping the unfinished cabin. I slam my eyes shut, fighting the voices and visions that pull me under. *I'm not there anymore.* That life is gone. I take a deep, rasping breath of scorching air and force myself to stand.

I can't die here, not when I've finally found someone who understands me, who sees past my walls and into my wounded soul.

I slam my fist against the wall and force my vocal cords to work. "Anyone out there?!"



Kenzie

I've been everywhere at the resort when I shadowed Maverick—the utility rooms, the kitchen, the basement, the laundry, Ed's old cabin he occupied for over forty years while he lived here with his family and took care of this place until Chris came and took it.

I've been everywhere but Willow Point. Maverick only mentioned that it was under construction due to the mudslide.

I don't even know where it is.

The boisterous party that has taken over the lawn seems like a nightmarish scene, now spreading all over the property. A cacophony of drunken laughter and vertigo-inducing country music blares through speakers while I rush past the clueless guests.

I'm barefoot in my ridiculous Laurel Nouveaux dress that's starting to fall apart in places. I'm searching desperately for a familiar face. Helen. She was just here. Along with Rolly. But I come across some European investors Chris invited. One of the men slurs something at me and tries to grab my ass when I ask him if he saw any of the staff members who were presently occupying this very spot.

I feel hopelessly alone amid the clamor, with no one sober to turn to, and the event staff is all contracted. They have no clue about the layout of the resort.

I run away from the cackling, clinking glasses, and shattering bottles and toward the main hotel.

I'll ask the receptionist.

That's when I feel it.

My foot knocks against something hard, the sharp edges digging into my skin. I jump at the sudden contact and stumble backward, blinking through the bright tears accumulating in my eyes. Mostly from shock rather than physical agony. When I glance down at the sole of my left foot, I see a speck of blood. It's starting to throb but I take a deep breath and continue toward the lobby, weaving past the throng of limos and vans, lined up in front of the building.

I don't make it inside.

Rafe, the resort's dog, bounds over to me, barking up at me urgently.

The creature terrifies me even more than the prospect of riding Snowfall again. He nudges my ankles and pulls at my dress.

"Not now!" I cry out, trying to take my skirt away from him. I don't understand why he is not listening. I've seen him listening to everyone at the resort.

"Stop it, boy," I yank at the fabric again and it rips.

Rafe barks again and tugs on my dress once more, now clearly insisting we go in the direction opposite of where I need to go.

"What are you doing?"

"He's wanting you to follow him," Julio shouts, emerging from around the corner. "He always does that."

"Julio!" I cry. "Thank God. How do I get to Willow Point? Immediately. It's urgent."

Julio looks both confused and concerned. I'm barefoot and in a dress

that's looking like a rag. Then the gardener gestures for me to follow him and we both run down a winding path and toward the lonely golf cart parked further down. "Get in," he says, climbing behind the wheel.

Rafe continues to bark up a storm.

But before we get anywhere, another resort employee comes running over, gaze panicked. "Julio, thank God I found you!" he shouts. "The power's out in the whole hotel. That goddamned party! Maverick is nowhere to be seen. Dean needs your help in the electrical room right away."

Julio looks apologetically at me. "I'm sorry, Miss Kenzie." He hurries to get out of the golf cart. "I have to go help with this or we'll have a big problem."

The reality of my situation sinks in.

"But Maverick—"

He doesn't let me finish, waving a hand in the direction I barely register. "Just head east and over the hill, then turn left and follow the path over another hill. I'm really sorry," the gardener says again as the two men begin sprinting down the road leading toward the hotel.

I slip behind the wheel and I take a deep breath.

Rafe barks again and paced forward, then turns to look at me as if waiting for me.

He's wanting you to follow him.

"Okay, fine," I tell the dog, realizing how stupid this may look but I have no one else to rely on. "Show me the way, boy! And it better not be a joke!"

The engine roars beneath me as I push the accelerator to the floor with my bleeding foot, my knuckles white with tension. The urgency of the situation courses through me like a live wire, and I can feel the weight of every second slipping away.

"Please be okay, Maverick," I whisper, my voice barely audible above the noise.

Ahead, Rafe is a blur of fur against the backdrop of greenery, charging at

full speed, like a bullet.

As I round the bend, the distant flames come into view, an ominous beacon amidst the darkness of the night.

An icy shiver courses through my body despite the warm weather. My heart races, each beat pounding in sync with the rapid drumming of my thoughts.

The golf cart rattles beneath me as I force it down the winding path leading up to several cabins, all on fire.

"Maverick!" I yell as I pull up to the nearest cabin, tires screeching when I come to a halt. Leaving the cart behind, I race towards the inferno, feeling the heat singe my skin even from a distance. Panic threatens to overtake me, but I force it back down, gritting my teeth in determination.

"Maverick!" I shove at the first door while my eyes are looking for Rafe.

I hear him whining a little further down. He's in front of the cabin at the very end of the path where gravel meets grass. He's running in small circles, barking loudly.

I rush over there. "Are you sure, boy?!" I reach the cabin and pause for a moment to turn away from it and let my face cool down.

Rafe furiously nudges my feet with his muzzle, whimpering, as if he knows there's not much time left.

"Locked!" I gasp, my hands trembling as I yank at the door handle. "Why the hell is it locked?"

My eyes dart to the boarded-up windows, that must be remnants of the mudslide's destruction.

"Maverick!" I pound on the wooden walls frantically. "Maverick! Are you there?"

"Ken...zie..." comes the response from the inside, muffled by the chaos around us. "Kenzie?"

He's inside.

"Stay with me!" I urge. "We'll get you out."

But how?

My eyes dart around in panic, searching for a way to breach the door separating us. Desperation fuels my instincts as I spot a glimmering stone amidst the debris nearby, its jagged edges catching the flickering light.

Without hesitation, I seize the stone, its weight solid and reassuring in my trembling hand.

"I'm at the front door!" I shout. "Just follow the noise, Maverick!" Adrenaline courses through my veins as I bring the rock crashing against the lock.

The lock resists, stubbornly clinging to its duty, but I refuse to yield. Sweat trickles down my forehead, mixing with the soot and grime, as I relentlessly pound on the metal barrier.

Next to me, Rafe keeps on yipping and somehow I find his presence calming.

I'm not alone. He's just as invested in saving Maverick as I am.

Finally, the lock gives way, shattered under the force of my assault.

I push the door open and immediately have to protect my face with my arm. The billowing smoke and intense heat welcome me into the treacherous embrace of the burning cabin.

Through the haze, I spot Maverick, disoriented and weakened, his form a mere shadow not far from the door. He almost made it. The inside is hell with flames licking up the walls and the ceiling. But determination propels me forward and I rush to his side.

I grab at his torso and wiggle my hands underneath his arms. "Maverick!" I call out, my voice shot from all the screaming. With every ounce of strength I possess, I maneuver his limp body towards the exit, dragging him over the floorboards, fighting against the oppressive heat that threatens to devour us both.

One step at a time...

I don't feel the pain in my foot and don't remember all the curse words I spout.

I have one goal and it's to save him.

Gasping for breath, I collapse outside, my arms cradling Maverick's motionless form. I search for signs of life, my trembling fingers reaching his neck to locate his pulse. It's weak but it's there.

Rafe, our loyal companion, whimpers anxiously. He nudges Maverick's hand with his wet nose, offering comfort in his silent way.

As I stroke the dog's head with my soot-streaked hand, I whisper "He's gonna be okay." But before my words can even settle, a distant shriek of sirens pierces the night air.



Maverick

My entire world narrows to the sound of Kenzie's voice, calling out to me from somewhere beyond the curtain of fire that surrounds me. Her words are like a lifeline, pulling me back from the brink of unconsciousness as I struggle to stay awake, to keep moving.

"Kenzie," I croak, my throat raw and dry from the heat. "I'm here."

"Hold on, Maverick!" she shouts back. "I'll get you out!"

There's another sound, mixed with her strained voice. Just as desperate. It's Rafe. I can hear him barking on the other side of that wall.

"I'm... near the—" A cough cuts me off, wracking my body with pain and stealing the last of my breath.

"Stay with me, Maverick!" Kenzie pleads. "I'm almost there!"

Through the thick cloud of smoke, I can hear the pounding of the stone against metal, each crash like a gunshot in my head.

"Love... you," I whisper, the words slipping out as if they have a life of their own. And even with my mind muddled by the haze of pain and smoke, I know it's true. I love her with everything I have left, and that love is the only thing keeping me alive right now.

In another life where I haven't met her yet, going out with the flames would have been easy. But I have given my word to Jo and to Ed once—I promised to keep their legacy alive and I promised I'd keep Kenzie safe from Chris.

I can't go just yet.

It's not my time.

But my senses slip in and out—one moment I hear Kenzie complaining about my weight and then pleading to stay awake. I'm being dragged. My body is hauled and wrenched. Then I feel soft touch on my neck. It fades away and I'm floating in darkness again.

"Damn it, Maverick, don't you dare give up on me!" she screams, her voice closer now.

"Ma'am, step aside and let us do our job," a man says firmly.

From the corner of my eye, I catch the sight of spinning red. Firefighters. I pass out in peace.

When I come to my senses, I find myself lying on damp grass, the cool air a balm to my scorched skin. The taste of ash lingers in my mouth, and my throat feels raw from coughing and screaming for help. Kenzie is by my side, her face streaked with soot and tears.

"Thank God, you're awake!" she exclaims, her eyes shining with relief.

"Thanks to you," I whisper, wincing as pain radiates through my body.

She places a finger to my lips, silencing me.

Around us, the police and the fire departments assess the damage, their faces pensive and somber. One of the guys has already set up the perimeter with the yellow tape.

I realize we are inside the taped-off area because I spy Rolly and Helen and Julio a little further away, trying to get past the police officers.

"He's our manager," Julio waves his hands, clearly unhappy he can't be near me.

I open my mouth to tell one of the paramedics checking on us that my staff shouldn't be kept away, but Kenzie shushes me, placing a gentle hand on my chest. "Don't try to move too much and don't talk. Your throat and your body need rest."

I close my eyes and let her presence soothe me. For a few seconds, we just stay still in comfortable silence, the crackling flames replaced by the sound of the firefighters' voices as they do their jobs.

"But Chris—" I begin and look up at her.

"Chris doesn't get to control our lives." She smiles widely. It's the first time I see her smile like this. Unburdened and real. "Not anymore." Another victorious grin. "He signed the divorce papers and gifted me the resort and Snowfall."

"What?" I must be confused. With all the shady land acquisitions around Red Willow, this man would never give up the resort.

"Granted the asshole and his right hand vanished into thin air," Kenzie adds, exasperated. "But he won't bother us anymore."

"Okay, lovebirds!" Darius, the local paramedic I've met before towers over us, hands on his hips, a smirk on his face. "Let's get you guys out of this mess and back to the land of the living, huh? They can check you out some more back at the hotel, Holt. But I reckon, it's nothing but some smoke in your lungs. Marcy over there, says your bones are all intact."

Bones are the last thing I care about. I'm just glad Kenzie is fine and that fucker has signed the divorce.

As far as the rest goes, we'll figure it out. Together, I hope.



EPILOGUE

Kenzie

We are standing at the edge of the resort where a month ago what appears to be an arson destroyed most of the work that has been done to these cabins to repair them after the mudslide.

Maverick and I are surrounded by tall pines and we are holding hands as we stare at the charred carcass of the building where he was trapped the night Christos Caddell made an exit from Red Willow once and for all.

Rumor has it he commissioned a helicopter to pick him up somewhere outside Beaver Crossing and take him to Panama. But no one knows for sure if that happened or where he is at the moment.

His PR rep has been pretty busy fighting off the press—*The Standard* published Irene's piece the day following the fire at the resort. And that piqued FBI's interest.

But those are his battles to fight. He's a divorced man now.

We are done and we are going in different directions.

I don't know what exactly lies ahead. College of course but perhaps, not this year. There's something more important that I have to do before I commit to myself and my own dreams. I need to help Maverick fix what I broke.

I shoulder some of the blame for Chris's attempt to burn down Red Willow and murder Maverick.

It's my fault I took Maverick's hand that night by the barn and then gave him that key to Room 15 and insisted he came.

"Kenzie, are you sure about this?" Maverick's voice drags me back to reality as he asks a question, concern etched on his face. His piercing blue eyes meet mine when he looks up from the document he's holding in his hand and he searches my face for any hint of doubt.

The sun—low and obstructed by the tree trunks paints the portions of the sky with shades of pink and orange and it's beautiful. The crisp evening air brushes against my skin, carrying with it the scent of pine and damp earth and... home.

I take a deep breath and let the serenity of this place fill me.

Maverick released our clasped hands. "Kenzie, this is a very generous gift." He continues to stare at me. "Are you sure?"

I nod. That weight on my shoulders is gone now. "Yes. This place has given me so much—a purpose, a chance to heal, to find myself again. But it's always been yours. And it should remain yours for as long as you want it."

"I don't know what to say." A smile tugs at the corners of Maverick's lips, but he doesn't respond. Instead, he raises his eyes to the sky, watching the flickers of sunlight that remain. His eyes fill with tears, but he doesn't let them fall. He blinks them away.

"Kenzie, I..." Maverick begins, clearly touched by my gesture.

"Please, Maverick," I interrupt, placing my hand on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath my fingers. "You're the one who's made this place special." My voice is a low, raw with emotion whisper. "You've shown me what it means to truly care for someone and something." I need to tell him these things. I've been waiting for a month to work up the courage. I know he knows how I feel. I have my own cabin but I spend all my time at his and what we have is special and doesn't require any labels. Yet, it's important I

voice all the thoughts that have been occupying my mind as of late. "I was drifting through life until I came here. I took what was given to me but I never fought for something I loved because the only thing that I truly loved was taken from me. Then I met you. It was the wrong time but I took a chance—we took a chance—and it's turned out to be the best decision I've made in my entire life. I love you, Maverick Holt."

He takes my hand in his, his eyes glistening with unshed tears again. "I can't thank you enough, Kenzie," he murmurs, pressing my hand to his lips. "I love you too."

"Think of it as a new beginning for both of us," I say, smiling through my own tears that are sudden and flowing freely. "And no matter what happens, even if we don't work out, this place belongs to you."

"Don't say nonsense like this," he pulls me into a tight embrace and we stand like this for a while until he slips the resort deed into the back pocket of his jeans and murmurs, "Speaking of new beginnings. I found accommodations for your father two towns over. We'll be able to come and visit whenever we want, and I think it'll be good for him to be close to you."

"Thank you," I whisper, feeling overwhelmed. "This means so much to me."

As the last light fades from the sky, I wrap my arms around Maverick, holding him close.

Together, we stand on the precipice of a new life, one filled with love and purpose. The darkness may still linger at the edges, but with Maverick by my side, I know we can chase it away and bring hope to the community we've grown to cherish.

Want to take a peek at Maverick's and Kenzie's future? Grab [bonus content here](#).

Want to read more love stories set at the picturesque valley near Red Willow Crest? Check out [*Ava and Ryder's story next.*](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cassidy crafts sizzling stories of love, lust, and true connection in the modern world. Her spicy romances offer readers moments of heart-stopping joy and passionate escape within sexy-yet-heartfelt realistic fiction. She lives on planet Earth with her four laptops and a coffee maker always on the ready.

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