



Three

DADDIES

under the

MISTLETOE

OVER THE TOP POSSESSIVE ALPHA HAREM

KAI LESY

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THREE DADDIES UNDER THE MISTLETOE

A MILITARY REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

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DESCRIPTION

“You three are my clients. We shouldn't cross the line.”
Jason brings his face inches from mine.
***"In that case you're fired, Princess,"* he says before he sweeps me into a**
soul-stirring kiss.

Three rugged ex-marines.
Rock hard bodies.
And filthy rich businessmen.

I've been their favorite personal stylist for years.
But when my ex stirs trouble, they tell him they're my "new boyfriends".
They even invite me to stay in their snowy mountain cabin for the holidays.
I figure it's mere sympathy – my life's a bit in shambles.

Then something insane happens: I find the juicy diary of their old flame.
Her vivid accounts with the irresistible trio make me wonder: ***What if that***
could be me?

Let's just say years of bottled up sexual tension finally come to surface...
and I experience a holiday adventure more thrilling than I've ever dreamed.

I just hope they don't freak out when I reveal a Christmas surprise that
could change everything!!

PROLOGUE

I'm taken to the master bedroom.

It's significance weighs heavily on my shoulders as I walk in, taking deep breaths, trying to quell the building anticipation.

This is it, the night I've been dreaming of. I can't believe it's actually happening.

"Do you trust us?" Matthew asks.

I stand close to the bed, hands at my sides with trembling fingers as the three of them close ranks around me. I nod slowly. "I do."

"Then you will let us take the lead," he says.

"Yes."

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. When he opens them again, he smiles then kisses me deeply. It's a tender kiss, not at all conquering nor dominant, but sweet, loving, and reassuring.

Sully helps me out of my sweater and bra, leaving my full breasts exposed.

My nipples perk, pink and hard under their smoldering gazes, as Jason peels my jeans and panties off me.

Seconds later, I'm naked between them, standing quietly as they admire every inch of me. I used to be more self-conscious about my curves, especially after I was forced to quit tennis, but there is something in their eyes, a muted adoration that I cannot resist.

It fills me with a new kind of confidence that beckons me to open myself up in every way with these men.

"Kiss me," he says.

I cup his face, watching the warmth of his gray eyes melt into something

that may obliterate me if I'm not careful. I kiss him, much like he kissed me, pouring everything I feel into this simple but meaningful gesture.

"Undress me," he says next.

He lifts his arms as I take his sweater off. I have a bit of trouble with his belt buckle, a large oval made of silver.

I run my fingers over the cougar-shaped logo engraved on the front, then pry it apart and unbutton his jeans. They fall to the floor, revealing a rock-hard cock that's begging for my attention.

Behind me, I can hear Sully and Jason removing their clothes. Knowing that all of us are now naked just makes everything that much hotter and harder to control myself.

They help me up and have me sit on the edge of the bed. "Lay back," Matthew says.

It's Jason who goes down on me first. I feel his tongue sliding between my folds as Sully and Matthew bring my knees up.

They take their sweet time massaging my breasts, squeezing them tighter and tighter before they pinch my nipples hard. I whimper from the sweet pain just as Jason slides his fingers into me.

He sucks on my clit, applying just enough pressure to send me over the edge while fingers curl inside, flicking my g-spot until I fall apart at the seams and cry out as the orgasm rocks through me like a savage storm.

Just then, Matthew and Sully take my nipples in their mouths, sucking hard and sending thousands of electrical jolts through my veins as my hips grind against Jason's lips and tongue.

"Oh, God, don't stop, don't stop!" I moan, riding the wave of this shattering climax as it ripples around his capable fingers. "Oh, yes.... Yes!"

My pussy fucking hurts at this point, and I can't wait for them to fill it with what it so desperately needs.

A Few Days Earlier

I never thought I'd resort to using the office supply closet as my master bedroom.

I swear, my inner child is giving me a serious side eye right now.

And can I blame her?

Here I am, living in my place of work for two whole weeks.

No one's the wiser. Not my boss, my coworkers, and definitely not the janitors who can't help but spread all the juicy gossip.

Why this elaborate ruse?

Imagine, if you will: Me, two weeks ago, entering my home to find my boyfriend of four years – initiating a "neighborhood meet-and-greet" in MY bed.

But what stabbed my soul was seeing the two of them sprawled on my beloved bamboo cotton sheets.

Dammit, I miss my beloved bamboo sheets!

Four years tolerating Kieran and his tragic fashion choices. Wasted.

Sure, I could be staying on a friend's couch, but my pride is as tall as a stiletto, and sometimes as painful. That's what happens when you've managed to get by solo your entire life.

Now my glamorous life involves cozying up in a sleeping bag tucked behind the staff break room.

I work at one of the most luxurious fashion hubs, yet I've mastered the art of glamping between haute couture.

Thank heavens for my top-tier ninja skills in managing the CCTV system.

A little camera angle magic here, some footage editing there, and voila! My secret remains intact.

My entire life now fits in one suitcase. It's like a sad rom-com, minus the romantic lead.

There simply isn't any room left for more failure.

My phone rings.

It's Kieran. Again.

The man has the persistence of a dog with a bone, but I'm in zero mood to play his games.

Ignoring the call, I remind myself of tomorrow's agenda: hit the downstairs gym first thing in the morning, pretend I'm working out for fifteen minutes, then make use of the showers.

Talk about a hot mess.

Keeping up this ruse has been exhausting.

"Was that Mr. History?" Phil inquires, arching an eyebrow as he wraps up the day's figures. As the shift manager, Phil has traded tales of heartbreak with me during many late-night shifts.

"Yeah, he still won't leave me alone."

"I can't believe he did what he did, though," Phil replies. "Especially after everything you put into that relationship to try and keep it going."

"Honestly, he did me a favor, I should've ended things a long time ago. We'd been running on fumes for a while."

"You deserve better. I never liked the dude. He was always so into himself. It's time to find someone who deserves your time," Phil says as he tries to comfort me, but then his expression lights up and his posture goes rod-stiff-straight as Etienne walks into the store.

My heart jumps.

Shit what's he doing here? I silently ask myself.

I hadn't factored in surprise visits from the higher-ups into my master plan.

The Sartorialist thrives on its pristine reputation, prioritizing its polished image and elite clientele above employees' personal challenges.

The idea of an employee treating the sales floor as their makeshift bedroom? That would be a PR nightmare.

"Mr. Lacroix, what a pleasant surprise!"

Etienne grins, looking like he's fresh out of "Dapper Gents Monthly." With his navy-blue suit, crisply ironed white shirt, and a red tie that might as

well have its own spotlight, he's truly a sight.

“Sorry to pop in unannounced,” Etienne says in his subtle French accent. He came to the U.S. in his early twenties, but the French flavor is still just as smooth with every word coming out of his mouth. “I won’t be staying long. I just wanted to say hello before I head back to New York for the rest of November.”

“It’s a pleasure to see you, sir,” I say, smiling softly.

“How is everything here?” he asks.

Phil finishes wrapping up and grabs his phone, bag, and coat before coming around the counter to shake Etienne’s hand. “We’re very good, sir. I reckon we’ll have a profitable couple of weeks before the Christmas shopping season even starts,” he tells Etienne.

“I’m glad to hear that,” our boss replies, then looks at me. “And how are you doing, Selina? I trust you’re happy with your position here?”

“Absolutely, sir, thank you,” I say.

He turns to Phil and puts a hand on his shoulder. “How about I take you out for a nightcap before you head home? It’s been ages since we’ve caught up.”

“That sounds nice,” Phil replies, only slightly surprised. “Selina, would you like to join us?”

I force a smile, trying to keep my voice light. “You two should savor the evening. I’ve got a gourmet microwave dinner waiting for me at home,” I quip with feigned enthusiasm. “Still, thanks for the offer. Always a pleasure, Mr. Lacroix.”

I hoped he wouldn’t notice the tremor in my voice. Inside, panic consumed me. The last thing I needed was for him to realize how desperately I wanted to avoid him now that he's back in town.

Etienne laughs, we say our goodbyes, and I watch the two of them leave. I patiently wait for the sound of their footsteps to recede before I prepare to close the store for the evening.

Slowly, I go through the closing protocol, one step at a time.

I turn off the computers and tablets and plug them in for the night. Next, I lock the cases that hold the most expensive jewelry.

Just as I'm about to lock the front door, I spot Kieran's unmistakable figure which looms in the entrance.

He’s radiating disdain and arrogance.

“Why are you here, Kieran? We're done,” I assert, attempting to mask my

unease.

His eyes, sharp and condescending, meet mine. "Selina, you're overreacting. We need to talk."

"Overacting to what exactly?" I counter sharply. "Your latest escapade with Sandra from next door?"

He moves to step inside, frustration evident. "Selina, listen..."

But there's an unmistakable menace in his approach, and my heart races. His towering frame casts a shadow over me, and I realize how vulnerable I am.

"I said, leave."

The door eases open, revealing a trio that never fails to quicken my pulse.

Today, they look especially captivating, and the timing couldn't be more perfect.

Matthew stands tall at 6 feet, his mature dark hair peppered with strands of wisdom. Those penetrating gray eyes, set in a face that's both rugged and refined, hint at tales of Marine exploits and mornings in the gym. Every tailored piece he wears, highlights a physique that's both powerful and graceful. He exudes a command that's hard to overlook.

Beside him is Jason, the embodiment of sun-soaked allure. Standing 6'3", his athletic build contrasts perfectly with that shaggy blond hair and those mischievous blue eyes. Despite his casual, beach-boy demeanor, the tailored edges of his attire showcase an underlying sophistication.

Then there's Sully, the tall, dark, and undeniably handsome of the trio. At 6'5", he's a heady mix of mystery and strength. His dark eyes, sharp cheeks framed by a day's stubble, and his sleek attire give off a magnetism that's difficult to ignore.

Each ex-Marine, with their own brand of charisma, has, for years, occupied my most indulgent daydreams.

Seeing them now, looking irresistibly dashing, it's clear why.

The mood shifts palpably as Kieran's confidence falters in the presence of the three men, and I feel a rush of relief.

"Hey, babe," Matthew says, smiling broadly as he walks past Kieran.

He doesn't bother to acknowledge his presence as he comes toward me.

I'm breathless as he gets closer and then kisses me.

His lips press against mine, beckoning me to soften and open up.

Heat instantly blows through me, my core ignited as I try to understand what's going on while also reveling in this unexpected snippet of intimacy.

“Sorry I’m late, there was a lot of traffic on the interstate.”

“Huh?” I mumble, barely able to discern my surroundings at this point.

“Yeah, we tried to get here earlier, but it’s the weekend and everybody’s in a rush to get out of the city,” Sully says.

He and Jason stand by the door, hands in their jeans pockets as they watch me, flustered and wide-eyed and unwittingly leaning into Matthew.

Kieran, on the other hand, is pale and downright terrified—likely by the fact that another man just kissed me. And not just any man, either, but Matthew Parker, a renowned businessman and future heir of Dawson-Howes, one of the biggest import-export conglomerates in the United States.

“Selina,” Kieran manages, but he can’t find the rest of his sentence anywhere.

“Ready for dinner?” Matthew asks me, as if taken out of a completely different movie and plopped right into this one. “I got us that reservation at Oyster Dream. You’ve been talking about it all week.”

“Oh yeah,” I mumble. “Oyster Dream, right.”

I give Sully and Jason a wandering glance while also admiring their chiseled broad chests and playful eyes.

That’s when it hits me: They must’ve overheard me arguing with Kieran and decided to step in. I look up at Matthew just in time to catch the subtle wink in his eye. I’d kiss him again, but I still can’t move.

My lips tingle.

“Oyster Dream!” I exclaim and quickly settle into my role. “Oh, honey, you remembered!”

“Selina!” Kieran snaps, but the speed with which Sully and Jason turn to face him instantly reduces his frustration. He’s small, all of a sudden, flanked by two tall men with broad shoulders and square jaws, the kind of men who would snap him like a twig if he so much as raised his voice at me again. “I can’t believe this…”

“Who’s the guy?” Matthew asks me.

I shrug. “Nobody. He was just leaving.”

“Selina—”

“Goodbye, Kieran,” I say in a forceful tone, emboldened by the guys’ presence as I give him the coldest side-eye that I can muster.

He takes another second or two, but finally, he gets the message and leaves.

A minute passes in the most awkward possible silence before I’m able to

breathe again.

Matthew's musky cologne works its way through my lungs and tousles my senses, forcing me to take a couple of steps back to regain my grip on the present.

The entire moment was way too intense.

Matthew eyes me intently. "I apologize for my gesture, but I had to sell the whole thing, otherwise he would've taken forever to leave you alone."

"Yeah, I figured as much," I reply, barely able to look him in the eyes.

"Are you okay, Selina?" Sully asks, equally interested in my well-being. I can't help but feel stunned by their care and sudden involvement. I mean, we always have some amazing interactions while they're in the store, but I never imagined they'd stumble into such a scenario and deal with it so efficiently. "We heard you two arguing, and Matthew figured you had a problem that needed taking care of."

"I can't thank you enough," I tell him and Jason, then turn back to Matthew. "We broke up a couple of weeks ago, and he still won't accept it."

"Pretty sure he got the message now," Jason chuckles dryly.

I can't help but allow a short laugh to escape from the back of my throat, as well. Despite the tension and the discomfort, as I look back to Kieran's befuddlement, well, it's funny. Not to mention fully deserved after how he made me feel. My heart is still racing, albeit for different reasons, as I give the guys a curious glance. "What are you three doing here at this hour?" I ask.

"We're sorry," Matthew says. "But we kind of needed some last-minute shopping before we go away for the winter holidays. This place is always our first choice. Would you mind letting these three stragglers in before you close the store tonight?"

"I could never say no to my three favorite fellas," I giggle sheepishly as I motion for them to settle in and shop at their leisure.

As miserable as I've been feeling and given all these emotions burning through me, overwhelming me on every possible level, I could do with a triple-manned distraction right about now.

“So...sweaters you say? What kind?” I ask. “We have casual, formal, some in-between styles, too.”

Matthew leans in, his scent tantalizingly fresh, “Casual. We like to retreat to my Aspen cabin for a good chunk of the winter.”

“Aspen, Colorado,” I murmur, as I picture snow-covered escapes and warm fires.

Sully's affirmation comes with a nod.

I feel the urge to run my fingers through his messy black hair if only he'd let me. His dark brown eyes are practically impossible to read, but sometimes I catch shadows dancing in them.

Nearly a decade older than me, he's the most mysterious among the three, and the subject of plenty of my most erotic fantasies—of which I've had many over the past couple of years.

Cheating on Kieran was never an option, but the fact that I'd been dreaming about these guys should've been a clear signal that my relationship was going downhill.

“Okay, so casual then,” I say, trying to keep my professional head screwed on. “These styles here would suit you best, Matthew,” I point to several neatly piled and folded sweaters made from the finest wool and cashmere blends in deep shades of gray, sand, and a warm off-white I happen to really like. “The earthy tones look great on you.”

Jason comes closer, his eyes never leaving my face. “What about me?”

“Oh, the off-white colors are definitely your thing,” I tell him, offering him one of the sweaters on display to try out in one of our dressing rooms.

Jason is tall, taller than Matthew, with bright blue eyes and a shaggy mess

of blonde hair that often has my heart beating a little faster than usual. The surfer vibe he carries himself with often makes people underestimate him, most of them not realizing that this man used to drive tanks and dodge bullets while serving in the Corps.

I've always prided myself in being able to style each of these men in precisely what works best for them, with what brings out their finest features and adds a hint of timeless charm to their overall style.

"Off-whites, you say," Jason replies, accepting the sweater I offered him. "Let's see if you're right."

"I'm always right," I quip.

Sully gives me a playful nudge, with a teasing glint in his eyes. "I bet you were counting the minutes till you could send your ex-boyfriend packing, huh?"

I chuckle, but his words stir a torrent of emotions within me. I sense he meant no harm, but my vulnerability is amplified tonight. The weight of it all feels crushing.

My vision blurs, and I feel that familiar sting in my eyes. Breathe. Just breathe. Swiftly, I pivot, trying to blink away the tears. "I need a moment," I whisper.

But these men, with their sharp instincts, see right through me.

The facade can't hold.

I sense their concern, even as I present them my back.

That knot in my throat tightens, making it hard to breathe, until Matthew's gentle voice breaks through. "Selina," he murmurs. "Talk to us, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm peachy."

I try to pull away but Sully and Jason are quick to flank me. I'm tiny again, wedged between layers of hard muscle and broad shoulders. "Talk to us," Sully says.

"I'm okay, I promise."

"Selina," Matthew says my name again, and every time, the sound of it rolling off his tongue has the hairs on the back of my neck rising. "Whatever you're going through, you obviously need to talk about it. And since we've come so late in the evening to bother you, causing you to work overtime, the least any of us can do is listen to you."

I look up and realize they're still watching me, still waiting for me to say something.

It's not like the floor is going to open up and swallow me whole, regardless of how attractive that idea might sound this very moment.

"Oh, God.... Where do I start?" I shudder, all of my emotions coming back to the surface like a frothy whirlpool, completely out of control.

I take a deep breath then begin.

"The fact that I broke up with my boyfriend of four years barely touches the surface of the worst part of it all. It's the fact that I walked out of an apartment that I'd been paying rent for without having any kind of backup plan because I just recently paid off my student loan years in advance, not knowing that I'd be splitting up with that jerk a week later. It's the fact that I'm a fashion design graduate who's still working the sales counter at a men's store that I've also been sleeping in for two weeks now, because I've got nowhere else to go. And let's throw in the fact that I can't afford a new place yet, and if my boss finds out, I'll lose my job. It's the fact that..."

My eyes burn as the tears roll down my cheeks, wet and warm and loaded with everything that I've been holding inside for far too long. The guys don't say a word, they just watch me demolish myself, sobbing as I struggle to get through the last part of my statement. "...I'm a complete failure at an age where I should be leading the charge and making the whole world my bitch."

That's all I'm able to say, my shoulders dropping as I finally let go.

I cry my heart out, no longer caring that three older, devastatingly handsome men are watching me and witnessing this pitiful meltdown.

I cry, until I feel Matthew's arms snaking around my waist as he pulls me into a comforting hug.

Without even thinking, I hide my puffy face against his chest, unloading the weight that I've been carrying around on my shoulders. I melt in his embrace as Sully gently moves some of my curly locks away from my cheek and behind one ear, while Jason rests a hand on the small of my back.

"You know, it could be a lot worse," Matthew says once he senses that I'm slowly calming down. I think he can tell from the receding hiccups. "You could be completely homeless. At least you have the store."

"God, Matt, comforting isn't one of your strong suits, is it," Jason scoffs and yanks me out of Matthew's arms but only to hold me himself. It's a different kind of hug, yet I let his warmth envelop and soothe me while Matthew and Sully chuckle softly. "It's going to be okay, Selina. We all have hurdles. Some might seem taller than others. A few might even seem impossible to cross. But you're strong enough to get through this."

“How do you know that? Can’t you see me completely melting down like the most pathetic creature that ever lived?” I blurt out, still eager to chastise myself for having allowed the situation to reach such a critical level to begin with. “I have no idea how to get myself out of this mess, and now look at me. I’m crying in my customers’ arms.”

Sully clears his throat. “It’s perfectly normal considering what you’ve been through. And you deserve better, Selina.”

“We’d like to help,” Matthew says.

I give him a sideways glance. “What do you mean?”

“We’re going away for a couple of months. Why don’t you join us?” he asks.

I’m staring blankly at Matt, unable to leave Jason’s comforting embrace. “Huh?”

“There are plenty of rooms in my cabin in Aspen,” Matthew says. “Come stay with us for a while. You shouldn’t be spending your holidays here, Selina. You’ve been through some pretty traumatic events lately and you need a safe place to gather your thoughts and figure out your next move. I’m offering you the chance to do that.”

“Are you serious?” I ask, slowly but surely the information connecting to the appropriate receptors in my brain.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he replies, holding back a laugh.

All I can muster is a shameful shrug. “I’m just a salesgirl here. I mean... why would you do that for me?”

Matthew, Jason, and Sully exchange glances again. This time, however, I spot a playful glint in their eyes. A sparkle of amusement accompanied by something downright enticing, a curiosity of sorts that has my full attention. Yet when Matthew’s gaze finds me once more, it’s smoldering hot and making my skin tickle everywhere.

“You’re not just a salesgirl, Selina. You’re a woman, a beautiful and talented woman who has been nothing but kind and gracious to us, every time we walk into this place. You’re a human being, first and foremost, who is going through some difficult times. You deserve empathy and a place to rest without having to look over your shoulder every night and without having to worry about losing your job on top of everything else. It makes sense that I can offer you precisely that, at least for a couple of months, until you get your feet back on the ground.”

“Don’t you have some vacation days?” Sully asks.

I nod slowly. “Plenty, actually. Almost two months’ worth.”

“Then talk to your boss and let him know you’re taking time off. You’re exhausted, you need some time to recover, you’re healing from a bad relationship,” Sully says. “It’s not like the store is going to fall apart without you until January.”

“No, not at all. My colleagues are great people, they could definitely fill in for me,” I consider out loud.

Jason smiles and comes closer. Every time the space between us shrinks, I can feel my heart beating faster, wanting to jump out of my chest, if only to be closer to his. To theirs, for that matter. Damn, what the hell am I doing? I should be telling them no, thanks but I can manage. I can, but the better question to ask myself is.... Do I really want to keep doing everything the hard way? Am I not tired of always taking the long road and busting my ass for the smallest respite?

“Then why not take this opportunity?” he asks.

“I’m offering. We’re pretty fun guys once you get to know us,” Matthew adds.

“Oh, I have not a single doubt about that,” I reply, almost laughing. “You’re my favorite clients, truth be told. And you’re all so kind...” Oh no, I think I’m going to start crying again.

Sully gently squeezing my shoulder isn’t helping, either. “We won’t bite unless you want us to.”

“Good grief, man,” Matthew chuckles.

I can’t help but release a good, genuine belly laugh, the tears blinked away and my soul just a little bit lighter as I look up at them and say the craziest thing I’ve ever said in this lifetime. “You know what? I think I’ll do it. I think you’re right. A couple of months away, tucked into the wilderness somewhere nice could be just the fix for me.”

Matthew’s sexy mouth curls into a big smile. “Great. We leave the day after tomorrow.” His expression shifts into a different kind of softness, though. “But you’re not spending another night here, in the store, Selina.”

“It’s not like I mind.”

“That’s not the point. We’re taking you to a hotel for the next two nights, my treat,” Matthew replies.

“No, I can’t accept that, you’re already doing so much!” My ego can’t allow it.

But Jason and Sully flank me, a recurring pattern at this point, making it

harder for me to resist. How can I, when I'm suddenly on the receiving end of such care and attention?

"Selina, we're taking you to a hotel tonight," Sully states, his tone low and firm.

I glance up at him and finally understand. They're not the kind of men who take no for an answer. And judging by the heat spreading between my legs, I'm not really into telling them no, either.

I was expecting a smaller, maybe a three-star kind of hotel. But Matthew clearly doesn't do half-measures. Despite my feeble protests, the guys would rather "chew their own feet off than let me stay at some dingy hotel for even one night," so I am getting checked in at the Raylan Reserve, one of the five-star gemstones in Providence. It's not a huge, corporate kind of accommodation, though. It's one of those luxury boutique hotels with interiors designed by a famous Dutch designer where the lobby chandelier costs more than I'd make in ten years.

"My God, this is too much," I mumble mostly to myself while Matthew checks me in with the receptionist.

Jazz music plays in the background, a melody I've heard before, perhaps at a bar or on the radio. I like it. It reminds me of my childhood, before my parents split up and everything went to hell. Before Maddie died. My sister would've loved this place, she had a penchant for nice and expensive things. Our parents were drilling her about med school, but I'm still willing to wager she would've ended up going into design, like I did. We could've gone to school together, if I hadn't...

Selina, stop. I tell myself to stop whenever my thoughts pull me back to her. That's not a good place to go back to, not when I'm so emotionally fragile. Not when I've already had one meltdown in front of these incredible men.

"So, what about your parents?" Jason asks, casually leaning against the counter while Matthew goes through the check-in process. Sully scans the entire lobby area, his dark eyes analyzing every single movement—he always does that, even when he's in the store. I think it's part of his military training,

something he hasn't been able to let go of. "Would you be able to go back home, if push came to shove?"

"No, that was never an option," I tell him. "My parents split up when I was still in high school. Dad's pretty much AWOL and Mom... well, let's just say we don't speak anymore."

"You're treading into deeply sensitive territory," Sully says to Jason. "I think we all need a few drinks in us before we start talking about our pasts and whatnot."

"I'm sorry about that," Jason gives me an apologetic frown.

I touch his arm as a means to comfort him, but the sensation it brings causes a chain reaction within me. My body instantly responds to his touch in ways I didn't think were possible. It's as if the universe has finally stepped in to nudge me right into their arms. And after everything I've been through, why shouldn't I give myself this moment of goodness, of sizzling sexiness and playful banter?

"It's okay," I say. "Don't worry about it. Really."

"All set," Matthew cuts in, holding up the keycard for my room. "Let's get you upstairs."

"You're doing too much," I insist, albeit futilely.

He laughs as Sully gets my suitcase over to the concierge, and Jason rests a hand on the small of my back as the gentlemen escort me to the elevator. The four of us get in, while the concierge takes the other elevator available. Suddenly, I'm on my own between Matthew, Jason, and Sully. There's barely any room for me to breathe, let alone move. My pulse is racing, my mind drawing up the naughtiest scenarios while my conscience screams at me to cut it out. It's kind of hard, though, considering the way in which all three keep stealing glances at me.

"You're gonna love the cabin," Matthew says as the elevator doors slide open for us. "It's already snowing, and the slopes will open this weekend for the public."

"I heard it's wonderful in Colorado during the winter," I reply.

"It is. It's one of those postcard-pretty places, and the food is fantastic," he says. "I haven't found a single restaurant in Aspen that falls short in that sense." We reach my room and Matthew slips the keycard into the slot, opening the door for us.

"You can tell how good a restaurant is by their scrambled eggs," Jason adds.

I laugh lightly as we wait for the concierge to bring my luggage in. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I tell him. “Scrambled eggs, huh?”

“Yup. If you can’t make a decent plate of eggs, you’re not gonna do anything else right, either” he says.

Matthew generously tips the concierge, and we enter further into my room. For a moment, I’m left speechless as I look around. The design is astonishing. Simple yet elegant, bold yet subtle in its delivery. The artist in me is swooning at the daring contrasts of red silk wallpaper and cream-colored bedspread, the sharp but equally smooth clash between the ash-wood floor and the wenge wood furniture as well as the stylish touches of lighting—lily-shaped smoked glass wall sconces and spherical gold-spun pendants hanging from the ceiling.

“My gosh, it’s gorgeous,” I manage, now feeding on the decorative details.

“It’s one of my favorite hotels in Rhode Island,” Matthew declares.

“I can’t blame you. I’m speechless,” I reply.

“The red on the walls plays off nicely against your hair,” Jason says, the corner of his mouth twitching subtly. He’s trying hard not to smile, but the warmth of his bright blue eyes still seeps through and melts into my very core.

“Thank you,” I mumble, unable to find better words for what is meant to be a sincere compliment. “I haven’t had much time to... you know, look after myself the way I’m used to.”

“Yes, well, living in a department store kind of takes that away from you,” Matthew replies. “But even so, Selina, you are still beautiful.”

I laugh. “Let’s not go overboard here, I’m a mess.”

“You’re my kind of mess,” Matthew says, moving closer.

The three of them surround me, and the silence accompanying their presence is pure pressure coming down on every inch of my body. I feel naked under their eyes, yet I cannot move. I don’t want to escape this closeness. They offer safety and sweet words, gestures of kindness and the sort of fire that can turn my loins to cinder.

All I can do is breathe slowly as I watch them, as I notice their gazes wandering up and down my body. I wonder what thoughts are flowing through their heads, because their eyes speak silently of raw desire. For a moment, I feel like I’m some sort of forbidden fruit but when Matthew leans down and kisses me, I realize I’m not forbidden. I’m willing and wet.

His tongue breaches my lips, and I taste him fully, savoring every drop of his yearning while Sully and Jason's hands touch me, their fingertips leaving trails of fire in their wake. "You're delicious," Matthew whispers before he deepens the kiss.

He snakes his arms around my waist and pulls me close, nearly crushing me against his muscular chest. Sully is running his hands through my hair while Jason traces a finger down my side, his hand spreading and grabbing my ass. The squeeze is firm but playful, and I'm overwhelmed.

I can't move. I don't want to. I like what's happening.

I don't understand how the three of them can be so in sync with one another, yet I'm responsive to each of their gestures. I'm open and burning up on the inside, my core ignited and begging for more as Matthew kisses my jawline and proceeds to nibble on my earlobe. I whimper softly, my head tilted to the side as he gently nudges me away from Sully and Jason.

The back of my knees find the bed's edge. I've lost my senses entirely. And my work jacket, too. I can't even register the moment when that happened, but I see it on the floor.

Sully and Jason watch us, their eyes dark with longing and their lips curled with mischievous amusement. I should stop this, but I'm dying to know where it leads. And the hunger in the pit of my stomach has nothing to do with food. No, I'm hungry for whatever it is that Matthew intends to give me. His cologne fills my senses as I breathe him in.

A blink of an eye later, and I'm left with only my white sports bar on as he slowly removes my pants.

"Would you like me to stop?" Matthew asks, giving me a smoldering, silvery glare.

I shake my head slowly. It brings a smile to his tender lips, and all I can do is kiss him ravenously, the desperation within me finally snapping. I've been dreaming about him, about all three of them, for a long time. Some of the fantasies were one-on-one scenarios, most of them absurd and chick-lit-inspired, but I distinctly recall a couple that had the three of them going to town on me at the same time. Could this be it? That rare occurrence where the universe actually listens to my desires and delivers?

"Good girl," Matthew growls, grabbing my ass and keeping me close enough to feel his bulging erection against my lower belly. He's huge and hard as a rock, and that alone is enough to send rivers gushing between my legs.

I steal a glance at Jason and Sully. Big mistake. Their jeans are unbuttoned, and they're touching themselves as they watch Matthew and me. The image is so compelling, so sexy, so devilish and I love everything about it. Licking my lips, I smile when I make eye contact with Sully stroking his thick cock, veins swollen as they run along the shaft.

Our gazes lock while Matthew removes my bra and kisses my breasts. As soon as his lips close around one nipple, I gasp loudly, my eyes rolling in my head as I surrender in an explosion of sparks suddenly bursting through me. "Oh, wow," I moan as he suckles harder and harder. It hurts so good, all I can do is hold on to his muscular shoulders, bracing myself for a tempestuous ride.

"Let's get these off," he says, then tugs my panties downward. "Sit on the edge of the bed," he adds with a commanding tone.

I nod once and do as I'm told. Naked and wanting, I sit and watch Sully and Jason stroking themselves, their eyes never leaving me. This is so fucking hot, I worry I might come immediately. The ache between my legs is getting sharper, the need swelling into a ball of pure pressure that is begging for release. But Matthew is just getting started. He nudges me to lay back and goes back to kissing, licking, and sucking my breasts, paying particular attention to each nipple until they're both bright pink and perky with desire.

My breath is lost as he kisses his way downward. He lifts my knees up and spreads my legs.

Jason groans softly, but I can't see him anymore. My eyes are closed as I give in to the passion and allow my nerve endings to tell me the rest of this story.

"Touch yourself," Sully says.

I caress my breasts the same way I would if I were alone and thinking about them. Truth be told, I've done that more than a few times, so the gestures come naturally. I pinch my nipples hard, imagining Matthew's teeth nipping with the same pressure. Just then, I hear the whimper escaping my throat as Matthew's tongue runs between my slick folds.

"Fucking hell, Selina, you're so wet already," he mutters, desire dripping from his voice.

He licks my pussy with impressive care and precision, making sure to slide up and down, up and down, slowly at first as he tests my opening a few times. But then he settles on my clit, his tongue flicking incessantly over it until I start to moan in a steady rhythm.

“Don’t stop,” I demand, reveling in the feel of his lips closing around my swollen nub.

His fingers slide inside me, deep inside me. I hear Sully cursing under his breath. They’re hard and getting off as they’re watching us, and by the stars, I didn’t imagine I’d ever be a part of something so decadent and so hot. Ever.

“DON’T STOP!” I cry out, squeezing my breasts harder as Matthew suckles on my clit and finger fucks me into oblivion. Three fingers go in and out, testing and stretching me. It’s too much. I can’t take it anymore.

“Give it to me,” he says. “Let go, baby.”

“AH!” I almost scream as I feel the orgasm blowing through me.

I’m rocked to my very core, trillions of pulses rippling across the fabric of my being, hips swaying violently against his hand and tongue as he licks me, as he kisses my clit and feeds on every single drop of my climax.

His fingers slowly withdraw. I need more. So much more.

I quiver in the afterglow as I hear both Jason and Sully reaching their own peaks. I love the gruff sound of their orgasms, it’s like music to my ears. What the hell is happening here? Whatever it is, I need it to go all the way. More than once. Over and over and over again until I can no longer stand on my own two legs.

“Mmm, that was fun.”

Matthew says, smiling as he gets up.

My eyes peel open and I see the glint on his lips. “That was... unexpected.”

“I wanted you to get a good night’s sleep,” he replies. “Perhaps you’ll want more when we get to Aspen. Consider this a preview of what’s to come.”

I doubt I’m able to get up at this point, nor do I want to. I’m loving the view of Jason and Sully buttoning their jeans back up, darkness still burning black in their eyes as we look at one another. “I can’t wait,” I manage, my voice weak and raspy.

“We’ll let you sleep and see you the day after tomorrow,” Matthew says. He pulls me up in a sitting position and kisses me gently on the lips. I taste myself, and that just serves to start another fire. The kind of fire I’m going to have to deal with until we get to Aspen. “I’ll send a car to bring you straight to the airport.”

“Rest, in the meantime,” Sully says.

“Good night, Selina,” Jason smiles broadly.

“Night...”

I watch them leave, the door closing behind them with an electronic click. Holy crap, that was incredible. I have no idea how we got from mere kindness and charity to a mind-blowing orgasm, but I am definitely dying to learn more about what they’ve got planned for me. I’m fascinated by how open and playful they are together and how ready I am to be a willing participant.

My heart skips a beat as I begin to wonder... Jason and Sully were watching tonight. But would they ever share me? That’s the kind of food for thought that’s going to make my sleep heavier and my dreams tastier tonight.

We didn't expect things to move so quickly.

Sully, Jason, and I have been friends for years. We served together. We share the kind of bond that very few people in this world have even gotten close to sharing. Our friendship is based on the very hell that we experienced and survived together. It's based on respect, on mutual understanding, on selflessness, and on having our minds open to whatever life decides to toss our way—whether it's an insurgent's makeshift IED or a beautiful woman that the three of us happen to like.

It's been like this for years with us. We were tight in the Corps but even after retirement, after each of us decided to pursue a different career path, we've stayed close. We spend a lot of time together, particularly when we're vacationing in various parts of the world. We party together, we break bread together, and more often than not, we share the women who come into our lives. But never has someone like Selina come along to rattle us to the core the way she has.

We're at the airport waiting for Selina. I had a car sent over to pick her up.

All three of us are still reeling from the night before.

"I like that sound she makes when she comes," Sully chuckles softly, pretending to read something on his phone as we chill in the airport's business lounge area. "I wanna hear more of that in Colorado."

"Chill out man," I tell him. "We need to be careful and ease her in."

"At least she's more than willing," Jason says, equally enthralled as he leans back in his chair. "She was totally into it the other night."

I nod slowly. "Honestly I was elated when she first let it slip that she'd

broken up with her guy.”

That moment lingers in the back of my head. A couple of weeks ago, I’d stopped by The Sartorialist for a suit fitting, and Selina was there to assist me, as usual. The guys and I had been eyeing her for a long time, but we never make a move on women who are involved with other men. Selina was the forbidden fruit until I noticed her scowling while she checked her phone—it had been pinging incessantly during the whole fitting process.

When she mentioned that she’d dumped Kieran, I distinctly remember my heart damn near jumping out of my chest with excitement. Selina had become single, making the three of us downright giddy with the prospect of wooing her. It’s been a while since we last shared a woman, and she’s the kind of girl we’d absolutely enjoy together. With her unruly, curly red hair that flows down her back like a furious waterfall, her piercing, hazel-green eyes and delicious curves in all the right places on top of a feisty and bubbly personality... well, what’s not to like about her?

“But I had no idea she was so down on her luck,” I add, my gaze wandering across the lounge area. It’s a spacious room with frosted glass walls and plasma screens hanging down from the ceiling, giving us live information about the upcoming flights and boarding gates. There are about a dozen other people here, most of them huddled around the bar while others tap away on their business laptops before getting on their flights. Frankly, I’m not a fan of the business lounge but it’s better than the rowdy chaos beyond these glass walls.

“Selina is clearly a proud and self-sufficient woman who’s used to doing things on her own,” Jason says. “I can’t really blame her for walking out the way she did. I probably would’ve done the same.”

“I would’ve punched Kieran’s lights out just for good measure,” Sully adds while crossing his arms. “What an idiot that guy’s gotta be.”

“Lucky for us now she’s free to do what she wants, with who she wants,” I say.

Jason can’t help but smile, occasionally picking at imaginary specks of lint on his plaid blue shirt. He’s already switched to mountain-man mode—wearing a flannel shirt and jeans. “I can’t wait to spend Christmas with her,” he says.

“What did I just say?” I remind him. “We need to keep it strictly physical with her.”

“Yeah, we got that part,” Jason rolls his eyes. “It doesn’t mean we can’t

treat her right. Selina deserves a frickin' break."

Sully agrees. "At least she'll have some time with us in Aspen to gather her thoughts and find a new place. I doubt she'd ever accept financial help from any of us."

"She's too independent for that," I tell him. "I'm surprised she even agreed to spending two months of winter with us in the first place."

"Well, she may be independent, but she is also desperate. How exhausting it must've been to hide out in the store like that," Jason sighs, genuinely affected by her plight.

Among the three of us, Jason is the softie. I try to keep things level-headed as much as I can, while Sully tends to be more detached with the occasional touch of primal. But Jason is the bleeding heart among us. He's the one who reminds us of our own humanity in moments when we're inclined to be overly cynical and even cold. It's a good thing, though. He keeps us balanced. He's a kind and decent man, despite the horrendous things he had to do while we were in the Marine Corps. There are vulnerable moments when I know he is still haunted by the past.

"Let's give her time and space," I conclude after some thought. "I think at this point Selina knows what we want to see happen between us. She should be the one to come to us, willingly. All we can do is give her plenty of opportunities. We can't chase her."

"We can't chase her like we chased Cynthia, you mean," Sully scoffs.

"Hey, we agreed to never speak of her again," Jason reminds him, his brow slightly furrowed.

It's a delicate subject for all of us. It almost destroyed Jason. He almost fell off the wagon because of Cynthia, because of how things turned out. We meant well. We still do. But the truth is that we're not an easy bunch to handle, especially for a woman who is genuinely willing to take the three of us at once. That's rare.

"We can't expect Selina to just accept all three of us in one go," I say. "As I said before, we have to ease her in."

"She seemed pretty open at the hotel," Jason quips, switching to mild amusement. At least he still expertly regulates his own emotions when it comes to unpleasant topics from our past. He does the same with any Mogadishu-related conversations. Somalia was definitely his worst military experience. "I think we've got a winner here."

"I do like how Kieran backed off," I allow myself a dry grin as I revisit

that specific moment. “I never liked how he made her feel.”

We knew he wasn’t right for Selina. I could tell from the shadows that constantly lingered over her beautiful eyes whenever she mentioned him—that mixture of sadness and insufficiency are impossible to confuse with anything else. I’ve seen it in other people, in other couples where one gave everything and the other took everything without giving anything back in return. Kieran wore her out. He made her feel hopeless at times. At least she’s free of him now and we have her for Christmas. Here I am, getting as excited as Jason and Sully after I specifically told them not to get too excited about her.

It’s kind of hard not to. Selina was so responsive back at the hotel. Even when I first kissed her to get Kieran to back off, I felt her opening up to me like a rose in the morning bloom. And her dew is the sweetest I’ve ever tasted. Damn, that woman is hot honey and is just begging to be taken every which way until she’s worn out and fully sated.

“She deserves better,” Sully muses.

“Just for being able to get you out of those raggedy cargo pants you used to always wear, she deserves better,” Jason quips, earning himself a threatening glower from Sully.

“I can still knock your lights out,” he says.

“You could try,” Jason replies, flashing a playful grin.

I clear my throat and lean forward, my gaze fixed on Sully. “Speaking of, how’s your profile working out in the MMA? You said you had a couple of fights scheduled for January.”

“They’re still on. I’ll focus on my core training while we’re in Aspen,” he says. “With a little bit of luck, I’ll qualify for the North-Eastern tournament in spring.”

“I have to say, your training seems pretty effective in treating your PTSD in lieu of actual therapy,” I reply, unable to hide my own amusement. “Although I can always put you in touch with Dr. Kang, if you want.”

Sully shakes his head. “I’m good, thanks. Fighting keeps me disciplined and focused, and the kids at the community center keep me on my toes and in touch with my humanity.”

“Damn, that sounded almost poetic,” Jason says. “But hey, if it helps—”

“I’m okay,” Sully assures us. “I’m good. I promise.”

“Any nightmares lately?” I ask.

He shakes his head again, but the hesitation in his eyes tells me he is

holding some things back from us. I can't blame him. Sully had it worse than Jason and me. I got lucky with my family and so-called prestigious heritage, while Jason developed a sense of self-sufficiency from a young age while working the fields in California with his parents. But Sully got bounced around the foster care system throughout most of his adolescence, and the only place that ever gave him structure was the very place that also gave him deep trauma—the military. He served honorably and dutifully, but it also brought out the worst in him. When we retired, Sully was aimless and rudderless for a while.

I suppose fighting is definitely a better outlet than some other toxic habit. Jason would know. I'm not sure how I got so lucky to keep my head above the water the way I did, the way I still do today. But I would give anything to share some of this built-in balance with my two best friends, if only to make their lives a little easier.

"I told you, I'm good," Sully insists. "Nothing that a couple of hours' worth of punching the crap out of a sandbag won't fix."

"We're going to be okay," Jason says to me. He better understands my concerns.

The three of us failed with Cynthia. We let things get out of control and go too far, and none of us had the courage to do the right thing at the time. Now, the memory of her comes back to haunt us every once in a while, more prominently as the winter holidays approach. It'll be a whole year, soon enough. And we are likely using Selina as a bandage of sorts. It's not fair to her, but I like to think that we're at least helping her while also helping ourselves in the process.

If she does open up to us, if she does accept the three of us, it will change everything. The guys and I have tried dating separately but nothing ever stuck. Us sharing a woman, on the other hand, has worked nicely in the past, despite how it ended with Cynthia. Selina is different, I can tell. She's got that fire in her, the kind of bright flame that has us drawn to her like drunken moths. All we need to do is help her nurture it.

"Yeah, we're going to be okay," I finally say after a long and pensive pause, then check my watch. "She should be here by now."

"We're not boarding for another two hours," Jason says.

I look around and stare at the main lounge door for a while, hoping I'll notice when she walks in. "Yeah, but the car should've picked her up by now."

“There could be traffic,” Sully suggests.

A few moments later, Selina comes in with her luggage in tow and her cheeks red from the effort of dragging the giant thing around on her own. I instantly jump to my feet and walk over to relieve her of a mammoth of a suitcase. She gives me a weak smile.

“Hey,” Selina says. “Sorry I’m late. There was some congestion on the way here.”

“It’s okay. How are you? Well rested, I hope,” I tell her.

We’re joined by Sully and Jason, both of them smiling sheepishly as they measure her from head to toe. Only now do I notice that Selina is not wearing her usual work clothes. I’d gotten so used to the sleek black jacket and black pants with white shirt combo that I barely registered the dark blue training suit she was wearing.

“Yeah, I slept like a baby,” she says, noticing the guys staring. “What? What’s wrong?”

“I never thought a tracksuit could ever look this good on a woman, yet here you are, defying conventions yet again,” Jason chuckles lightly.

Her cheeks bloom in shades of pink as she glances down at her white sneakers. “Honestly, I wasn’t sure what to wear, especially after you mentioned us meeting up here in the business lounge. I had a mind of wearing one of my work suits, but I’m kind of tired of that style.”

“Don’t worry about it. Nobody ever cares what you wear while flying,” I reply. “But Jason is right. You do look marvelous, even in a tracksuit.”

“Thank you,” she mumbles, a smile stretching across her lips. “I can’t thank you enough for everything that you’ve done for me. Everything that you’re still doing, actually.”

Sully moves in and plants a soft kiss on her temple. She freezes and closes her eyes for a moment. I can tell she enjoys each of our affections with equal pleasure. It makes my cock twitch, my blood already simmering as I imagine the zipper of her tracksuit coming down at once. “You don’t have to thank us for anything. You don’t owe us anything,” Sully tells her.

“All you need to do is relax and spend some time resting and getting your life back together,” I say. “You’ll love Aspen, I promise.”

“I can’t wait,” she replies. “I’ve never been to Colorado.”

“It’s definitely one of the best places that America has to offer,” Jason says. “And it’ll be even better with you in it.”

Selina can’t help but laugh, and just the sound of it makes my heart flutter

in ways I didn't think were possible anymore. "You are determined to kill me with kindness, aren't you?" she asks Jason.

"That's the best way," he says.

I can't wait to spend as much of this winter as possible with her. She may appear as a shy and somewhat wary doe with big eyes and a complicated past, but Selina is a beautiful and intelligent woman, a force of nature with just enough drive to make anything happen for her. Life hasn't been kind to her lately, but I know that with a smidge of rest and relaxation, she will lift her head up high once more and eventually reach her full potential.

That flame inside of her... I recognize it because I see it in myself. I see it in Jason. And while Sully may not be so sure of himself, I see it in him, too. Something tells me that Aspen is going to bring everything to the surface—the good, the bad, the lustful. We're going to find ourselves again, and Selina is going to be precisely what we need.

I will do my best to make sure that we're also precisely what she needs.

Breathtaking.

This little corner of winter heartland is absolutely breathtaking.

Matthew's cabin is one of a cluster of ten nestled on the very edge of Aspen, overlooking the Aspen Mountain Summer Road and the already snowy resort town. I didn't expect it to be so white and enchanting in mid-November, but I welcome the views and the overall sense of tranquility that this place is intent on offering.

The mountain rises behind the cabin with its gentle ridges covered in ancient pines—green giants with snow-covered branches and peaks reaching for the cerulean heavens above. The small country road connecting the cabins snakes its way downward into Aspen, and I can't help but smile at the sight of the red mailboxes that line it.

"How do you like it?" Matthew asks as we get out of the airport shuttle. He paid extra to have the driver bring us all the way up here. I certainly didn't mind—the flight was tiring enough.

"This isn't exactly a cabin," I tell him, staring at the marvelous construction. "It's more like a mansion."

He laughs. "Five bedrooms, six bathrooms... yeah, I guess you're right."

"It's beautiful," I say.

And it is. Built on two levels on a solid brick and stone structure, the cabin's façade is covered with long sections of aged logs, while the slated roof rises to make room for a small attic. The windows are large squares surrounded by black metal frames with thick glass and a gray fog blackout effect.

Steam rolls off my lips with every exhale as I admire the quaint front

garden, covered in white. It's littered with gnome statues carved from portly river rocks, each of them smiling and waving at whoever passes by, while the fence is made up of ash-wood planks and painted red. It creates a pretty contrast with the snow and the gray front steps of the house.

Matthew, Jason, and Sully get the luggage inside first, then proceed to give me a tour of the property, starting with the backyard. Not much of it can be seen from the road, but it is sprawling and surrounded by trees and naked buckthorn bushes. "It's brimming with wildflowers in the summer," Jason says as I look around, trying to take each detail in, to memorize every inch of this place that is going to be my home for the next couple of months. "Sully planted some flowers over in that corner," he adds, pointing to the eastern fence. "He had a green thumb phase a couple of summers ago, and to our astonishment, those flowers come back every June."

"What kind of flowers?" I ask Sully.

He shrugs, half-smiling. "I have no idea. They're colorful and pretty."

"That was the selection criteria," Jason laughs.

"And we also have a hot tub," Matthew says as we leave the dormant backyard garden and head up the back porch steps. Nestling underneath the roof is a large, square jacuzzi with a green tarp covering the top. It's tall and big enough to fit a group of at least ten people, and my mind is already flaring up and flying in all directions. "We make frequent use of it during the winter."

"I can imagine," I mumble mostly to myself. I can absolutely imagine spending a cold winter's night soaking in the hot tub with three of the most gorgeous men I've ever had the pleasure of being around. And for the next two months' worth of cold winter nights, chances are that I'll be doing just that.

I snap out of my daydream, mentally kicking away the images of Sully, Jason, and Matthew claiming me in it. I'm escorted inside and shown around the house. Matthew takes his time giving me a brief history of the place. I can't help but admire the ground floor with its generous open floorplan, large kitchen and dining areas, spacious living room and black marble bathroom.

"My great-grandfather built this in the early 1900s," he says as we walk around. "Back then, Aspen wasn't as big or as popular as it is today. Frankly, this whole area wasn't even developed, and the town itself was still about half a mile away."

"That explains the fireplace," I reply.

The mantle is a sculpted splendor made of luscious, gray marble blocks with golden veins running upward, each glinting with the light captured from the gold-brushed chandelier hanging above. Everything in this place was either designed to look gracefully aged or is, in fact, precious vintage. The furniture is new, built on solid wood frames and adorned with handsewn tapestries that imitate the classic Midwestern quilt styles, while the wall art and the giant burgundy carpet are definitely mementos of a past era.

Brass candelabras decorate the mantle, along with several framed photographs of Matthew and who I assume to be members of his extended family. I notice the similarities across the images—his eyes, his strong jawline—it runs through the whole Parker bloodline.

“We have it burning every day,” Matthew says. “I love the smell, to be honest. We have central heating installed but—”

“Yeah, the fireplace definitely has its unique charm.” I cut in.

We move into the kitchen next, where I’m charmed by the vintage-looking cooking equipment and the caramel-brown countertops that play sweetly against the cherry-red drawers and cabinet doors. The flooring is done in a rustic style, with roughly polished stone tiles and thick grout lines, while the walls are painted cream. Simple, but homey and elegant at the same time. I’m enthralled by everything I see—the design was so neatly thought out down to the last detail. I’m looking forward to spending my time here admiring and studying every nook and cranny to better understand the aesthetic ethos behind each choice that the decorators made for this house.

“It’s like a home away from home, so much more than just a cabin,” I say when Matthew takes a break from his history tale. “And you’ve done a wonderful job with the upkeep. It looks pristine.”

“Oh, that’s Mrs. Swanson’s territory. She gets all the credit,” he replies. As if summoned, I hear the front door opening with a loud creak, followed by steady footsteps through the hallway. Mrs. Swanson comes in with a bright smile and ruddy cheeks—a big woman with the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen and a sunburnt face. Her mousy brown hair with gray streaks is combed into a tight bun at the back of her head, and a green plaid shirt and wool scarf peeks out from underneath her mustard-yellow parka. On her feet are black mountain boots laced up against forest green cargo pants. Judging by the deep lines on her face and the way she carries herself, I’d say she’s somewhere in her late fifties or early sixties.

“There’s my favorite boys!” she exclaims upon seeing the guys.

But her joy momentarily fades when she notices me. I offer a faint smile and a friendly nod. “Hi, I’m Selina.”

“Selina,” she says, repeating my name as though I’m some kind of exotic creature before she gives Matthew, Sully, and Jason a rather stern look. “So, you have a guest here for the winter.”

“We do, and you’ll love her,” Matthew replies.

As if Matthew’s words were instant reassurance, Mrs. Swanson shifts her focus back on me and offers her hand. “I’m Mary, and it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Selina.”

“It’s a pleasure to be here, Mary,” I reply, briefly surprised by her firm handshake. “And I have to say, you’ve done a splendid job of keeping this cabin as beautiful as it is…”

“Oh, thanks, honey. It takes a little bit of love and a lot of patience,” she replies, and I can’t help but feel like she is actively scanning me for authenticity, as if there might be something off about me, and she’s going to figure out what it is. Maybe I’m just being paranoid but being homeless and constantly looking over my shoulder has affected me on a deeper level. Getting out of survival mode will clearly take some time. “I come out here every day to make sure things are right where I left them. Cleaning is done on a weekly basis while the guys are gone but I have changed the bedding and spruced up the restrooms in preparation for their return.”

“Thanks for getting the place ready on such a short notice,” Matthew says.

“I’d better find that black label whiskey under my Christmas tree this year, boy,” she shoots back with a wry smile. “I’m getting too old for the whole ‘we’re coming this weekend, Mary’ shtick.”

Jason giggles as he puts an arm around her shoulder. “We’re going to take good care of you when you’re too old to keep up with our shtick, I promise.”

“Men,” she says, glancing my way with amusement twinkling in her eyes. “They promise the moon and the stars.”

“We do but we also deliver,” Jason says.

I know Matthew definitely delivers on a certain level. The events of that night at the hotel are forever seared into my memory. More than once, I’ve thought back to that moment while pleasuring myself—I’ve been doing a lot more of that, too. These men have an intense effect on me, and I’ve got a feeling it’s only the beginning. I shake the thought away and give Mrs.

Swanson the most innocent smile that I can muster as she eyes me once more.

“What’s your story, sweetheart?” she asks.

“Where do I begin?” I chuckle nervously.

Matthew comes closer, discreetly taking my hand in his. He gives me a reassuring squeeze as he focuses his attention on Mrs. Swanson. “Selina works at one of our favorite stores,” he says. “And this winter, the guys and I agreed that she deserves a bit of R&R for all the hard work that she has been doing.”

“In fact, Selina is responsible for how well-dressed we’ve been over the past couple of years,” Sully adds, giving me a subtle wink.

“Ah, so I have you to thank for getting these two out of their old jeans and even older tees,” Mrs. Swanson shoots back, nodding at Sully and Jason.

“It was a team effort,” Matthew chimes in.

She claps her hands once, rubbing her palms together to warm herself up. “Alright, then. I left the spare keys on the mantle for you,” she tells Matthew. “If you’ll all excuse me, while I’d like nothing more than to hang out with you for the rest of the day, my lazy dog is waiting for me to come back home with his meat cans.”

“How is old Phil?” Jason asks.

“Still as wrinkly and as moody as you remember him.”

“And still dying to get a bite out of Sully,” Jason laughs.

“Yup. Anyway, I’ll let you kids get on with your day,” Mrs. Swanson replies. “I’ll be up at my house and one phone call away if you need anything, okay?”

Matthew nods and smiles gently. “Thank you, Mary.”

“And it was a pleasure meeting you, Selina. Let’s hope you stick around,” she tells me.

I get the feeling there was supposed to be something added after that statement, but Mrs. Swanson says nothing else, choosing instead to wave goodbye and walk back out the front door. I look to Matthew for guidance, but all I see is a muscle ticking in his jaw. Jason’s smile is rather faded, and Sully won’t even look at me. For a single moment, I worry I might’ve stepped into something unpleasant, but the atmosphere quickly changes back when Matthew takes me by the hand and gleefully resumes our tour of the house.

“Come on,” he says once we hear the front door shut behind Mrs. Swanson. “Let me show you the bedrooms.”

Great.

The bedrooms.

THE TOP FLOOR is delightfully airy and breezy, with warm, pale yellow wallpaper and plush carpets. It has an open loft area looking down at the living room, the bedrooms and bathrooms easily accessed from the surrounding hallway with its antique wooden railway. Each of the bedrooms is decorated in a specific style, and Matthew explains how he worked closely with a separate designer for this part of the house in order to incorporate as much of his original plan into these spaces.

We enter the room that I will be staying in while I'm here. It has a lovely palette of soft pink fabrics against white walls and cedar-wood flooring, with a canopy bed and two gorgeous high-back chairs with intricate floral embroidery covering the wide arms. I love every inch of this room—from the wood-stained credenza and white-washed vanity table with its matching stool to the huge bed with its veiled canopy and overabundance of decorative pillows. It's like a little slice of paradise, a girl's dream translated into something befitting of an elegant princess whose heart is still young.

Matthew, Sully, and Jason are each in their rooms, unpacking and getting ready for dinner. They tell me that there is a delivery service available with one of their favorite restaurants in Aspen, and they always make sure the food arrives fresh out of the chef's illustrious kitchen and on time. I don't mind the time alone, though, because I'm able to really immerse myself into this place.

I crave a hot shower, and the en-suite bathroom is ready to deliver. "Damn, even the bathroom is out of a frickin' fairytale," I mumble as I run my fingers along the edge of a gorgeous, porcelain clawfoot tub with brushed brass fixtures.

It has a suspended curtain to assist with the wall-mounted shower, so I take my sweet time unwinding under the hot water stream before I make use of the lavender-scented bodywash. I'll give Mrs. Swanson credit—she's got an eye for detail and probably some hotel experience for her to be so attentive in these small, but essential choices for Matthew's guests. Even though it was pretty difficult for me to accept this kind of care from the guys, I'm definitely able to enjoy every second of it.

Once I'm fresh and florally scented, I slip into a pair of jeans and one of

my pale-colored turtlenecks—the winter staple in my dresser. Back when I had a dresser. Enjoying the silence and the soft colors of my room, I take my time exploring every corner. I notice the nightstands and wonder what I'll find in the drawers. Magazines. More toiletries. An expensive-looking body oil from an uppity French brand I've seen in some of the Providence luxury stores.

I also find what at first I think is a notebook, but it's actually more of a hardcover diary with a black and silver design. To my surprise, as soon as I flip it open and see the name Cynthia Nordstrom written on the first page, I realize this belonged to someone. She must've left it here.

"It's a diary. It's definitely private," I tell myself. "Maybe I shouldn't..."

Oh, who am I kidding. Of course I want to read about Cynthia. She stayed at this cabin at some point with Matthew, Sully, and Jason. I turn the page and admire her beautiful handwriting, the *g*'s and the *y*'s elegant curls in particular. My lips move as I read the first few lines. Soon enough, my brain catches up, and I'm entranced by her words. I'm trying to build an image of Cynthia in the back of my head, trying to put a face to the name as I imagine what she must be like. Naturally, questions begin to bubble up to the surface as I immerse myself into these pages that I shouldn't even be reading.

"When Matthew first suggested that we should spend our winter holiday up in Aspen, I thought it was too soon," Cynthia writes. *"I thought we were rushing into things, especially with Sully and Jace also joining us."* She called Jason 'Jace.' Who is this woman? It causes a small pang to push through the pit of my stomach. Could I be jealous? After our encounter at the hotel it's possible. Damn, I'm getting deep too fast, and I can't even stop myself. *"Our nights in Providence had always been full of passion and raw desire. I couldn't get enough of them. I still can't. And I know tonight is going to be special. It's our first trip together,"* Cynthia adds. *"I'm nervous and excited all at once..."*

"I've packed only the finest from my lingerie trousseau. I know Matthew loves my crotchless panties the most, so I'm definitely wearing them tonight for dinner. Jace left me roses on the pillow. I can't wait to take him in my mouth for dessert. And Sully... his darkness turns me on so intensely. I love the way he pulls my hair and bends me over. Yes, tonight will be special. We didn't think it would work so well, but it's our second month like this, and it's only getting better."

What the heck is this all about? It hits me like a freight train as I turn the

page and continue reading. My fantasies about the guys were a reality for Cynthia, an absolutely ravishing and decadent reality.

“Dinner was simple. They ordered from L’Argent, their favorite restaurant here in Aspen. Roast beef, sweet and purple potatoes, salads and cheesy bread rolls aplenty,” she writes. “The wine wasn’t my favorite, but Matthew promised he’d bring a different vintage tomorrow. It didn’t matter much, since there was plenty of sherry in the pantry for us to indulge in. I needed a couple of extra shots because they were already looking at me like I was their favorite dessert. The anticipation was enough for my heart to beat faster. I needed something to take the edge off.”

Just reading this has my core humming at a low frequency. In my mind’s eye, I’m there, downstairs, sipping on sherry and letting the alcohol relax my muscles as Matthew, Jason, and Sully move closer, prowling around me like apex predators. And I’m dying to be pounced on. The heat between my legs only serves to confirm what I know at this point. I want them. All three of them. And I’m starting to think I’ll definitely want what Cynthia had.

“They took me out on the back porch, first,” she writes. “We relaxed in the hot tub for a while, talking and sipping on more sherry before Sully grabbed a handful of my hair and turned me around. Jason and Matthew sat up on the edge so I could please them both at once, while Sully fucked me from behind. I loved every second of it. Three strong men who know how to dominate me, know how to bring out the animal in me... no limits, no shame, no fear whatsoever as we explored each other’s bodies and found a slice of heaven up in these snowy mountains. I’m still raw from Sully’s pounding. Jason and Matthew took turns with me afterwards, but Sully... damn, he knows how to rile a woman beyond her own senses.”

I’m wet. I can feel my panties soaking as I put the diary away and realize I’m going to have to join these men for dinner. Whatever Cynthia had, I want it. I’m not sure how to ask for it, though. I have only ever been with one man. Before now I’d never even considered two. Three just sounds insane, but the heart wants what the heart wants.

As I prepare to head downstairs, I can’t help but wonder what happened to Cynthia.

As I arrive downstairs for the evening, I'm stunned by how much of what's happening resembles what I just read in Cynthia's diary only moments ago. Matthew, Jason, and Sully are keeping busy around the long dinner table—setting the plates, the cutlery, the wine and water glasses. Matthew unboxes the restaurant order, filling two large porcelain bowls with creamy butter chicken, stirred vegetables, and steamed Jasmine rice.

I smile as I walk into the dining room, suddenly feeling self-conscious. Cynthia wore crotchless panties and a burgundy silk dress for her first dinner with them. I've got hipster shorts underneath my jeans, but at least I matched them with the same color bra. The turtleneck feels out of place, suffocating. "Hey, guys. Anything I can help with?" I ask.

"Don't worry about a thing. Just have a seat. Dinner is about to be served," Matthew replies brightly.

"You're gonna love this," Sully adds with a cool grin as he helps Matthew bring the bowls over to the table. "It's the best chicken I've ever had."

"And we were stationed in Jamaica for a few months," Jason adds with a laugh. "I never thought I'd find anything better than jerk chicken until we tried L'Argent."

"L'Argent?" I ask, feigning ignorance.

Matthew nods as he takes his seat at the head of the table, to my right. Sully sits across from me, and Jason settles next to him after bringing the wine and the water from the cooler. "It's our favorite spot in Aspen," Matthew says. "The best food in the state, if you ask me."

"He's also friends with the chef, so he gets a generous discount and all

the garlic bread he can eat whenever he's in town," Jason chuckles.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I reply, half-smiling.

Sully fills my glass with sparkling water while I try to decide between tonight's wine options. Red looks good. I read something about the Burgundy region on the label but given how little I know about wine in general, I'll rather just nod at the bottle and let Sully serve me a glass, instead. I'm so nervous. My hands are slightly shaking, and I'm working overtime to keep my movements in check. Jason eyes me intently, his blue eyes burning.

"How are you feeling tonight, Selina?" he asks.

"Oh, much better, thank you. Turns out all I needed was a proper hot shower," I chuckle. "I'm just sorry I didn't have anything nicer to wear. I left most of my stuff back at Kieran's place, and I haven't had a chance to—"

"Don't even worry about it," Matthew cuts in. "When we get back to Providence, we'll figure something out in order to get everything of yours back."

"You don't have to," I say, lowering my gaze.

"We want to," Sully says. "For what it's worth, green suits you perfectly." He's referring to my mint green turtleneck that is currently feeling like a vice around my neck.

My cheeks feel warm. I'm hot all over, actually, trying not to think about Cynthia's diary. It made for a compelling read, and I honestly can't wait to get back to it at some point. In the meantime, however, I decide to focus on the guys and the delicious looking food waiting for us.

"Thank you," I tell Sully and take a long sip of my wine.

He waits for me to express an opinion about what I assume is a good vintage. They all taste the same to me, but the last thing I want is to come across as rude or ignorant in any way, so I offer a smile and an appreciative nod.

"The lady has spoken," Sully exclaims, slightly amused as he proceeds to serve the rest of the Bordeaux across the table.

The food is fantastic. I can see why they love that restaurant as much as they do. The chicken is melt-in-your-mouth perfect, creamy and buttery and perfectly seasoned to exhilarate my taste buds. The stir fry is just the right amount of spicy while the vegetables are still crunchy. Texture-wise, my mouth is in heaven, especially once I add rice into the mix. We barely speak as we devour everything on our plates. We wash it down with water, then wine. And more wine. I never say no to a refill, even if my head is already

lighter than when we first took our seats.

“My gosh, that really was the perfect chicken,” I mumble as I stare at my empty plate. All that’s left is for me to lick it clean because even the sauce is fantastic and not worth wasting.

Jason agrees. “I know, right? Hey, we should try to make jerk chicken one of these days, too. I think we still have all the necessary spices in the pantry.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Matthew says. “We’ll stock up on groceries tomorrow. We can sit down in the morning over coffee and discuss the menu for the next week, at least. If it starts snowing again, it’ll be harder to drive into town but we’ll manage.”

“Have you ever been snowed in before?” I ask.

Matthew nods, holding back a smile. “Yeah, more than once. The blizzards usually start in early December, and when they reach this mountain, they’re already at full volume.”

“We spent ten days in this place, about three years ago,” Sully recounts. “We couldn’t even shovel our way out the door. The snow reached all the way up to the roof.”

“Damn, that was insane,” Jason adds. “I remember I tried to clear the roof one morning, if only to get some natural light into the attic, and as soon as I got started, another snowstorm rolled through.”

“We almost lost you,” Sully laughs light-heartedly.

I shake my head slowly. “I can’t even imagine what it’s like...”

“Imagine white windows and no sunlight for almost ten days,” Matthew says. “At least the electrical grid was untouched. It was just way too much snow, and it wasn’t worth the effort to clear a path when the Summer Road was completely blocked. It took the locals about three days just to clear the belt road around Aspen. Nobody even considered going up the mountain.”

“How did you survive here like that?” I ask.

Matthew smiles softly. “We have everything we need here. I paid exorbitant extra fees to have all the cables and pipes running underground into the Aspen mainframe, and it was worth every penny. The fridge and the two freezers in the basement were fully stocked. We always make sure to have at least two weeks’ worth of fresh or freezer-friendly food when we come here. We also have a month’s worth of dried food in the pantry.”

“Canned everything,” Jason says.

“Plus, the basics. Flour, corn flour, corn meal, rice... the whole shebang.

If the apocalypse starts tomorrow, we'll have a decent head start," Sully adds.

As the conversation progresses, the guys tell me about Aspen's main attraction. Naturally, the sky slopes are the center of attention here. Then there are the saunas and the spa resorts on the northern side of town. The restaurants and the wine bars. The numerous hiking paths that are a joy to follow during the summer but can be dangerous in the winter on account of heavy snow and freezing temperatures. Aspen is a winter wonderland, and I can certainly see its overall, timeless appeal.

Just looking out the window on a fine evening like this, and I'm completely enthralled with this place. The pines are tall, black shadows against the indigo night sky that's riddled with twinkling stars. The blanket of snow covering the backyard shimmers white under the rising moon, and delicate ice flowers begin to blossom in the window corners.

We've demolished two bottles of wine already, but I'm still on edge. Still wondering where tonight will end. Still thinking about Cynthia's diary as I glance back at the dining room and see the guys coming over to where I've settled by the bay window. My heart is racing, once more, as Matthew smiles and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. He's always doing that. Always finding a reason to touch me.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Wonderful, to be honest. Finally relaxed. I can't thank you guys enough for everything that you've done, everything you're still doing—"

"Don't worry about it," he cuts me off. I've said this before, more than once, but I really mean it. I'm still in awe at what they have done, and what they continue to do for me.

Jason nods to the back door of the kitchen. "We're going to relax in the hot tub for a while. Would you like to join us?"

"Um... okay."

It's insane. It's Cynthia's diary, repurposed to my own personal experience. Sully comes back from the dresser incorporated into the bottom of the staircase with thick, plush-white towels and robes, handing a set to each of us. "Hope you don't mind, Selina, but we like to get naked in there," he says, matter-of-factly.

What the hell am I supposed to respond with? Nothing. I've got nothing. I'm wide-eyed and speechless as I watch them take their clothes off. It's hard not to stare when they're so effing gorgeous and uninhibited. Perfectly aware that I'm gawking like a doe lost along the highway, they take their sweet time

undressing while all I can do is clutch my robe and towel tightly, forgetting to even breathe.

Sully is stunning. His military service scars run down his left shoulder and torso—most of them deep gashes and shrapnel cuts, but it's nothing that his fine ropes of muscle can't soften. His broad shoulders and long arms fall gracefully down to his narrow hips. His cock defies me, growing with every second I spend staring at it, but I finally find the strength to move my gaze downward and admire his long, athletic legs. By the time I manage to look up again, I find him watching me, his dark eyes smiling as he puts his robe on.

Jason turns to the side as he gets naked, giving me a glorious profile. Equipped with a California surfer's body and what I assume to be some kind of permanent tan earned from years of living by the Pacific Ocean, Jason is well-built and perfectly toned, his abs beautifully chiseled and his ass plump and firm enough to bounce a bank's worth of nickels off it. He, too, smiles when he catches me ogling him. I'm ashamed of my own shame at this point, but when Matthew captures my chin between his thumb and index finger, I lose my breath and forget what I was ashamed of in the first place.

"You need to relax," he whispers, then plants a soft kiss on my lips. "We're only going to enjoy the hot tub. Take your clothes off."

"Yes, sir," I hear myself reply, though I'm not sure where that came from.

It apparently struck a nerve, however. The good kind of nerve, to be specific, because Matthew's glare is sizzling hot and sending trillions of fiery signals through my bloodstream as I gather the courage to get up and leave my clothes by the window. They've already seen me naked. And the thought alone is enough to reignite my engines.

As if to give me a teeny bit of breathing room, Matthew, Sully, and Jason go outside. I quickly get rid of my clothes and wrap myself in the plushy robe, then join them out on the back porch, momentarily relieved until I see their robes dropping. I freeze, but not because of the cold. It's cold and then some out here, but my body temperature is too high for me to notice.

They get into the hot tub, the water steaming and bubbling.

"Come on, princess, it's perfect!" Jason exclaims with a sunny grin.

"Ah, screw it," I mutter and drop my robe on top of theirs, then climb into the tub with shaky knees. I only have to endure a few seconds' worth of the biting cold against my skin before immersing myself in the hot water. "Ooh, this is amazing..."

"Isn't it?" Matthew agrees, laughing wholeheartedly. "It's therapeutic."

“Yeah, it does wonders for the circulatory system,” Sully says, and I catch the naughty undertone of his statement.

I’m full of anxiety but I don’t want to bypass this opportunity. It feels incredible... not just the hot tub experience but the fact that I’m spending the first of many evenings in the company of these men I’ve only been able to admire from afar. There are still moments when I can’t believe that this is actually happening, and not just a dream I’m going to wake up from. But it is happening. I’m here, away from the maddening world and the troubles that have been hounding me for the past couple of weeks. I need to simply enjoy this ride, as crazy and as exciting as it may be.

“So, the three of you were in the Marines together,” I say, trying to make small talk and properly relax in their proximity. Sitting down certainly helps, and the water keeps me relatively loose, while the rising steam tickles my ears and makes my hair curl at the nape. “For how long?”

“We did about five years together,” Matthew says. “We came from different units, though, so each of us had previous experiences abroad before we were selected for the same unit. It was a good thing, since we had our fair share of incidents and lessons to learn prior to coming together.”

“And when we did come together, we realized that there was this perfect balance between us,” Jason adds. “We could read each other well. Body language, micro-expressions, eye contact... it all came in handy while out in the field.”

“We made a good team, didn’t we?” Matthew says, more of a statement than a question.

Sully chuckles dryly. “Especially when it came to tormenting the rest of our troops.”

“Hey, they hated our guts in the barracks, but they loved us on missions,” Jason chimes in. “They loved you, in particular. Mr. First-Through-the-Door.”

“First Through the Door?” I ask.

They laugh, glimmers of nostalgia lingering in their eyes as they remember the times gone by. “Yeah, Sully was a reckless bastard,” Jason explains. “He’d always be at the head of the group for every incursion. The first to break the door down, the first to take the stairs, the first to jump...”

“Reckless or bold,” Matthew says. “Whichever worked. But we could always rely on him. We still can and do. Everything we were in the Marines is everything we are today, except we’re no longer in uniform and no longer

subject to heavy restrictions.”

“Did you like it? Your time in service, I mean.”

Sully gives me a hard look. He’s not angry, but I can tell there are things about his past that he wants to keep there. “I served proudly. We all did. But it wasn’t something to be liked,” he says. “There’s nothing to like about war and violence. Not after what we saw. What we did.”

“Being in the military has a way of bending a man’s morals,” Matthew explains, his brow furrowed. “You think you’re doing the right thing, you romanticize the entire experience before you even get on the plane. But once you get there, once you’re in the thick of it, once you realize how much of yourself you’re going to leave behind on the battlefield... it hits different.”

“We had to become monsters in order to protect others from different monsters,” Sully says, staring at the water bubbling in front of him. “Monsters, all the same.”

Matthew sighs heavily. “It’s over. We did our jobs. We fulfilled our duties. We’ve got different lives, now.”

“Maybe you have a different life now, Mr. Inheritance,” Sully shoots back, bitterness dripping from his voice as he looks at Jason and adds, “Mr. Starting Over.”

“Hey, you’ve been a constant force since the day you got back,” Jason tells him. “Your path is just different from mine or Matthew’s.” He glances my way, realizing that I’m present and listening to this exchange with wide, curious eyes and a knot in my throat. “While Matthew decided to take over his father’s business and I started my own in Providence after we left the service, Sully had a slightly longer adjustment period. But he’s come leaps and bounds since. He’s one hell of a fighter, and the kids he trains at the community center practically worship him.”

“I live and breathe violence, even today,” Sully says. “Though I suppose today’s version is in some way beneficial.”

I can’t help but reach underwater and place my hand on his shoulder. As soon as he feels my touch, Sully turns his head, smoldering embers radiating from the dark pools of his eyes. “As long as you feel good and at peace with who you are and what you’re doing, nothing else matters,” I tell him. “Were it not for my job at The Sartorialist, I probably would’ve lost all hope a long time ago. Having a passion in life, any kind of passion... that’s what truly matters. It motivates you, it keeps you going, it gets you out of bed in the morning. Doesn’t it?”

“It does,” he nods slowly, his gaze set on my lips. “As bloody as it can get sometimes, I like what I do. I enjoy the violence.”

“Or maybe you enjoy having an outlet where you can burn off the violence,” I suggest. “You don’t strike me as the kind of person who likes hurting other people.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t.”

Matthew smiles, then laughs until the rest of us are staring at him, wondering and waiting for the punchline. “Remember when we raided that stash house in Mogadishu? Al’ Shabab’s place?”

“Oh, man,” Jason bursts. “First-Through-the-Door here almost didn’t make it out alive.”

I look to Sully, noticing the amused twitch on his lips. “What happened?” I ask.

“We were supposed to raid a stash house in a really bad area. We had intel that the particular gang in charge of that neighborhood was funneling drug money to the local warlords, which made it harder for us to help keep the current government going,” he says. “What we didn’t know was that they were keeping women and children in that stash house, as well. They used the kids as drug mules and they had the women in charge of weighing the packets before they split them into sellable doses.”

“Sully forgot the whole purpose of our mission when he stumbled upon the kids,” Matthew says. “I will never get over the look on his face when he saw them. He may come across as a rough, hard man by nature, but Sully’s soft side is the sweetest you’ll ever find.”

“I was pretty sure you were going to adopt a bunch of those kids and bring them back to the States with you,” Jason tells Sully.

“We had the women and children staying with us at our barracks for a couple of days before the Somalian social services took charge and relocated them to safer places,” Matthew adds. “During that time, Sully spent every minute he could spare playing with the kids. Football, checkers, dolls...”

“Dolls?” I giggle, trying to imagine Sully in that particular frame.

“The girls liked their dolls,” he shrugs. “Who was I to tell them they couldn’t play with dolls after a whole crew of Marines shattered their way through the house, guns cocked and ready to kill anybody who so much as sneezed?”

“My point is,” Matthew continues, “Sully doesn’t like violence, no matter what he says. He might be remarkably good at it, and he has found a way to

build a career upon it after the service. But he truly doesn't like it."

"It makes sense," I reply. "An outlet, clearly."

Matthew gives me a long look and smiles gently. "I'm gonna hit the sack, soon," he says. "It's been a long day, and I could use a good night's sleep. You take all the time you need out here, Selina. You deserve all the rest and relaxation you can get."

"Yeah, I think I'm ready to go to bed too," Jason sighs, planting a kiss on my cheek before getting out of the hot tub.

I'm not sure what shifted between us, but part of me was hoping we'd get busy like they did with Cynthia. Yet I'm left with Sully in the quiet of the night, the moon shining above us as we listen to the receding footsteps of Matthew and Jason. Was it something I said? No, I think they really are just being nice and polite. And I'm sure they are tired, it's been a long day.

Well this sucks.

I'm tired of white gloves. I want something nasty and wily and barebacked, shameless and rough, something that'll make my cheeks burn red and my pussy sore. Damn you, Cynthia, and your overly detailed diary. I never should've looked through it.

"I'm not rushing," Sully says after a long and rather tense silence. "It's been a while since I've been able to enjoy this tub."

"I don't blame you," I giggle softly. "It's something else, so relaxing."

"Truthfully, I think the guys sensed that I wanted you all to myself tonight."

That came out of nowhere and knocked the air from my lungs. I lose myself in his dark eyes as he moves in closer, like an alligator closing in on his prey. Except I'm not looking to run away. Oh, no, I'm soft and gooey on the inside as he comes at me. His lips find mine, and he kisses me deeply, hungrily. Our tongues clash and wrestle, swirling and tasting.

The chemistry is instant, fireworks exploding as our bodies collide underwater.

He pulls me into his arms, holding me tight as he deepens the kiss, ravenously consuming me as I surrender unto him. His heart thuds against mine, his breath ragged as he draws his head back for only a second to look into my eyes. I feel as though he can see my very soul, as naked as my body before him.

"Do you have any idea how fucking wonderful you are?" Sully asks me, his gaze softening for a moment. A smile stretches my lips as I try to look

away, but he has me entangled. “I’ve been wanting to do this from the moment I first saw you, Selina.”

His lips nearly crush mine. We feed on each other, devouring the spicy sweetness and relishing the faint taste of Bordeaux. A storm is about to unleash in a hot tub on the back porch of a cabin, hidden on a mountain’s ridge. As the wintery scene sets around us, as the night gets colder, Sully and I boil in the steamy water as we surrender to our deepest and darkest desires.

I run my hands through his black hair, fingertips tingling as they reach the back of his neck and explore the smooth curves of his muscular shoulders. He lifts me up and I wrap my legs around his waist, his finger still inside and joined by others as he explores, stretching and teasing freely. His thumb presses into my clit, creating small circular motions that send jolts of lightning through my body.

“Oh, yes,” I gasp, my hips swaying as I feel the tension thickening in my lower belly.

He grabs me by my hair and pulls my head back, leaving my neck exposed. He trails tender, wet kisses downward, nipping along the way before he climbs on the underwater bench to lift me higher above the water level. My breasts meet the icy winter air, nipples instantly perking and turning reddish-pink as Sully kisses them, taking his sweet time to suckle each until I’m close to losing my mind.

I hold on to him, fingernails digging into his arms as he works me closer to the edge, index and middle finger curling inside me. Yet as soon as he feels me clenching, ready to explode, he pulls his hand back and grabs my breast, squeezing tightly as he takes my nipple in his mouth. This time, however, his teeth graze it gently, playfully, yet sharply enough to force a whimper out of my throat.

Before I even register the shift, he lifts me again and glides inside me, his magnificently giant cock filling me to the brim and stretching me to the point where I swear I can see stars expanding before my very eyes.

“Dammit, woman, you were made for this,” Sully groans, giving himself a moment to adjust.

I tighten my grip and hold on for dear life as he starts thrusting. The water laps at us as he fucks me harder, deeper, faster. I kiss him, running my tongue over his lower lip.

He brings his hand back down between us, determined to destroy me as he finds my swollen nub aching for his touch. I lean against the edge of the

tub as he takes me, ruthlessly pounding into me, ripping moans and cries of pleasure from my chest as I feel every glorious inch going deeper, his girth stretching me wide while his thumb applies just the right amount of pressure to break me open.

“Oh, God, don’t stop, baby!” I cry out.

“I’m just getting started,” he growls and goes harder, harder, harder...

The orgasm rocks me to the core, bursting in an astonishing array of colors as I ripple outward. My skin sizzles, my heart thuds frenetically as Sully takes me deeper, faster, ever faster. I can barely hold on as I ride the wave of passion until I nearly pass out. But he meant every word he said—he is just getting started.

Still soft and gushing from my climax, I find myself turned over, my knees on the underwater bench as Sully grabs me by the back of the neck and takes me from behind. Cynthia’s journal comes to mind, and I imagine Jason and Matthew offering their thick cocks for me to suck on. My tongue comes out, tasting the wintry air as Sully fucks me beyond the realms of the known and the unknown. I revel in every thrust and welcome him deep, as deep as he can get.

Good God this man is big and loaded enough to leave my pussy raw and sweetly aching by the time he’s done with me. I try to breathe as his grip on the back of my neck tightens.

“Give it to me,” I beckon him, and he delivers.

He brings a hand around and between my legs. My clit responds immediately, eager to unfurl another round of ecstasy as he flicks it relentlessly. As if having intercepted one of my most depraved thoughts, Sully moves his hand from my nape forward, slipping a finger in my mouth. I suck on it, thankful and thirsty, so he adds the middle finger, too. I slurp on both as he intensifies his pounding, fucking me until we both come loudly, wildly, mindlessly.

I feel his seed bursting, his cock throbbing, and my pussy pulsating in the throes of an intense orgasm. He never stops thrusting, giving me everything he’s got and more. We barely register the moon hiding behind a cloud, the steam of our breath fogging the view as we descend from our own intimate, precious heaven. “Don’t leave me yet,” I mumble, trying to recover my senses.

“I’ll stay inside you for as long as you want me, baby,” he whispers in my ear.

He holds me close, arms covering my naked, sensitive breasts. I love the feeling of him nestled between my folds. Even as his erection fades, Sully is still a big man. My muscles are soft, my skin tender where he bit it. My pussy is sated, my core experiencing a new kind of energy as I try to become acquainted with this new environment. It's so good—so hot and frosty at the same time—I don't want it to end.

Sully is passionate and rough, but I love everything he has to give me. His touch is gentle and careful, his eyes always scanning me, always making sure I'm enjoying every second. We kiss, lazily this time, before I lean back against him, utterly depleted of energy.

"Let's get you in bed for the night," he says, scooping me up in his arms.

I can't even fight him on this. He's so strong and steady as he gets us out of the tub and quickly inside. I keep my arms around his neck, lovingly soft against his muscular torso as he climbs the stairs and brings me to my bedroom. My eyes droop slowly, and he kisses me on the lips before he sets me on the bed.

"I didn't think I'd be so tired," I say, already sinking into the mattress.

He runs a hand down my belly, his hand cupping my tender folds for a moment. "I'd like nothing more than to fuck the rest of this night away with you," he says, "but we've got a whole winter ahead, and I need you rested for everything I want to give you."

"You've already given me so much..."

"There's plenty more, Selina. Plenty more of me, of us... just for you."

Our gazes lock in the darkness of my bedroom, the moon slowly escaping the cloud's cover and casting its pearlescent glow through the tall window. It's a promise of what's to come in the many nights ahead, and of what he, Matthew, and Jason may have planned for me. I wish I could just tell him, right now, that I want the three of them to take me, to do whatever they want with me. I'm his. I'm theirs.

"Sweet dreams, Selina," Sully says, leaning in for another kiss. He leaves one on my breast, too. "Make sure you dream of me tonight."

"I'll make sure to touch myself, too."

Where did that come from? When did I become so brazen? It doesn't matter. He definitely enjoys it, a devilish grin slitting his face as he straightens his back and pulls the blanket over my naked body. I giggle sheepishly as I watch him leave, the door closing behind him with a subtle click. Exhaustion has finally caught up with me, and I know I have only a

minute or two left in me to contemplate tonight's events.

Sully claimed me. He took me, and I gave myself to him wholly and happily. I love the way he turns me on and then inside out. He fucked the pain away from my heart, and I completely forgot who I am in that hot tub. I need more of him. More of this. More of them. I'd expected Matthew to take things further tonight, but Sully was a wonderful surprise instead.

I want to stay in this moment for as long as I can was my last thought before drifting off.

Last night was incredible.

We'd hit it off so quickly, so smoothly, and Selina answered the call with every bit of grace and passion she had in her. I knew she was special from the moment we first met her. The stolen glances. The way she'd look at us whenever she thought we weren't looking. The light in her eyes coming on, bright and golden as soon as we'd walk into the store. I'd been waiting two years for a moment like last night. For a chance to lose myself inside her and feel her lips on mine.

She's a dormant volcano, bubbling hot on the inside. Soon enough, she will find her uninhibited release. And when that happens, I want to make sure I'm there as well as Matthew and Jason. We're determined to make her ours. It's rare to come across a woman like her. It's even rarer for the three of us to like a woman as much as we like Selina. There is something about her, a shade of sweetness mingled with burning spice that makes the blood run faster through my veins. On one hand, she lacks the experience that her predecessors had when it comes to taking three men at once, but on the other hand, her physical and emotional response to each of us speaks volumes.

"I imagine you slept well," Matthew chuckles as we settle in the living room with our coffees.

Jason made a fire first thing this morning so we'd be able to enjoy a warm space before we head out to the slopes later. We didn't imagine there would be such an abundance of snowfall this early in the year, but we're not ones to complain—it means we get extra time to ski and snowboard our asses off with the extended winter.

"Oh, like a baby," I reply with a cool grin. "Although I figured you'd be

the one to stick around last night. Especially after that little stunt you pulled with her back at the hotel.”

“That wasn’t intentional, if I’m being honest,” Matthew says. Jason smiles as he takes a long sip from his black porcelain mug. “She looked like she needed to unwind, particularly given her recent living conditions. It was literally the least I could do, to, you know, make her feel better.”

“It seemed to make her feel more comfortable with us,” Jason notes. “She’s not the shy type, but she’s not gonna jump in our arms straight away, either.”

“Selina needs time,” I tell them. “Patience, care, kindness.”

“Loyalty,” Matthew sighs. “I could’ve torn Kieran’s head off the other night, just for making her cry. The fact that she had nowhere to go still boggles my mind. And then he had the audacity to come to her workplace? Unbelievable.”

I shake my head slowly. “She’s hyper-independent, man. That comes with some caveats. She has a hard time accepting help from anybody. I’m still surprised she agreed to join us for the winter.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” Jason says.

“It’s more than that,” Matthew replies, a smile testing his lips. “She’s into us. Big time. I could tell from how responsive she was at the hotel.”

“I can further confirm that after last night,” I say, stretching my arms out as I sink into the sofa. This is, by far, my favorite spot in the entire cabin. I don’t know where Matthew got the seating from, but it was designed to make a man feel like he’s back in his mother’s womb. Soft yet firm enough to keep you still and comfortable for ages. Warm but not suffocating. Just right. Perfect. “The chemistry is definitely there and so is the willingness. I think we can make it work.”

Outside, the sun is rising, casting a bright glow over the pristine snow. The pine trees look heavy with their white dresses, but the ice flowers in the window corners have begun to melt, courtesy of the cabin’s central heating system and the fireplace. I briefly let my mind wander as I listen to the logs crackling while the orange flames consume them. We needed this break after a long and strenuous year. I needed it the most, truth be told. There’s too much on my plate and very little energy left to deal with it. The holidays always strike hard, right to my core.

I thought Matthew would spend at least one winter with his family. I’d thought the same of Jason—he was always a big fan of the California winters

that he grew up with. But no, they're both here, with me, again. I can't thank them enough.

"We need her to be the one who comes to us with the request," Matthew says after a moment's worth of deep thinking. He is particularly cautious about Selina, and I understand why. I'm tempted to follow suit, but after last night... damn, every fiber in my body is crying out for her. "Selina has to say it."

"I agree," Jason says. "We don't want another Cynthia on our hands."

As soon as her name rolls off his tongue, the hairs on the back of my neck rise, and both Matthew and I give Jason a heavy, dark glower. "Don't ever mention her again," I tell him. "Not in this place. And not with Selina under the roof."

My reaction is visceral but within reason. They both know why.

"Sorry," Jason sighs. "I was just trying to... ah, hell, it doesn't matter. You're right. I'm sorry."

"I think she wants us. Selina, I mean," I tell them, eager to get past the discomfort. "Otherwise, she never would've allowed Jason and me to be in the hotel room that night."

Matthew nods slowly. "We've got all winter to make this happen."

"Something tells me we won't need that long," Jason chuckles softly.

As if summoned, Selina comes downstairs. For a second or two, I find myself breathless in her presence. She's wearing jeans and a gray sweater. Nothing fancy, nothing posh, nothing over the top. But her red hair is combed over one shoulder, a ruby cascade flowing and capturing the morning sunlight's rays as she walks past the eastern windows. And her breasts—full, delicious morsels I'm dying to taste again—bounce slightly with each step despite being firmly nestled in a soft bra. Her hips sway as she joins us in the living room.

"Good morning," Selina says, her cheeks pink, her bright eyes searching our faces.

I can't help but smile as she takes a seat next to me on the couch, while Jason dashes into the kitchen and returns with a coffee mug for her. Steam rises from the hot drink as she gives him a thankful nod and takes the first sip. I'm stuck watching her lips press against the mug, wishing I were the coffee sliding down her throat and soothing her heart.

"How'd you sleep?" I ask.

Selina's smile makes my heart skip playful beats. "Like a baby."

“Good, because we’ve got a full day ahead of us,” Matthew says.

“Okay. What’s it full of?” she asks.

“We’d like to hit the sky slopes, for starters,” he replies. “The first snow is my favorite even though it’s softer, but the temperature has been consistently low, and there’s more coming in the next couple of weeks. This first layer is great just to warm up for the season.”

“The ski slopes it is, then. Except I’ve never skied in my life,” she says, laughing lightly.

“Oh, right, you used to play tennis,” Jason remembers. His gaze softens whenever he glances her way. I get it. I totally get it.

With any other woman, I might’ve felt a pang of jealousy. But with Selina, it’s different. She’s so easy to be around, so sweet, kind, and funny, despite the hardships she has endured. She’s the type of woman that appeals to us, not someone who is all-consuming and possessive. The difference between being with someone like her versus being with Cynthia is staggering. I can only hope that what happened with Cynthia will remain a part of our past that will never spill into what we’re trying to now build with Selina.

“Yeah, all the way through high school. Well, until I was sixteen, to be specific,” Selina says, lowering her gaze. It’s obviously a sensitive topic, but Jason can’t help himself.

“Why’d you stop? Didn’t you like it?”

“I loved it,” she sighs. “A knee injury forced me to retire and focus on school, instead. It just about killed me to give up tennis, my whole life was on that court. But then I found fashion design and I guess every rejection that the universe throws your way is, in fact, a redirection.”

That’s seems to be more of a brief summary of what she went through. I’d recognize that pain of defeat anywhere, that sense of uselessness and insufficiency before one finds another way through life. I felt it when I left the Marine Corps and found myself aimless, without purpose. Fighting and violence had made sense. So I figured out a way to build something with it, something that doesn’t destroy, something that disciplines and empowers, instead. I think that a similar thing happened with Selina when she got into fashion design. It gave her the meaning she’d lost when they told her she could never become a professional tennis player.

I am looking forward to every single moment that we’ll spend together. And like Matthew said, we need to be patient for her to fully open up to us.

It's a matter of when, not if, judging solely by how warm and relaxed she has become in our presence.

* * *

A COUPLE of hours go by on the principal slope before Matthew and I retire to the Ashton Bar for some mulled wine while we watch the skiers wear themselves out. It's almost noon, which means lunchtime, and certainly the skiers are all working up quite the appetite, Selina, in particular. Jason is teaching her how to ski, and I haven't laughed so hard in ages.

Matthew and I sit by the window, overlooking the slopes. We can see Selina struggling to remain upright on her skis while Jason rolls alongside, keeping an eye on her, and guiding her how to move her arms and legs, keeping her core tight. Yet Selina always manages to lose her balance and land on her round, plump ass. Not much of it is visible through the thick, lilac ski jumpsuit, but I had my hands on it last night, and I remember the feel of her flesh, the bounce, the round curves and the deliciousness awaiting in-between.

"How can she be so light-footed and still manage to fall like that?" Matthew chuckles.

"Give the girl credit, at least she keeps at it and doesn't quit," I reply.

"Yeah, she's got the right spunk in her, that's for sure."

I look around, noticing the people sharing the Ashton Bar with us. It's mostly tourists who have come in for the weekend, but it'll get more crowded the deeper we go into winter. The bar is stocked with an impressive variety of wines and bourbon, various flavors of hot chocolate, cappuccino and coffee, and the bistro cuisine is light but locally sourced. Maybe the four of us will grab a bite here before heading back to the cabin.

The bar was built in the early 1980s to accommodate a growing flux of tourists in need of a place to stop and rest before jumping back on the slopes. Its interior is walnut wood, with an abundance of vintage framed posters and photos covering the walls. The seating is simple but elegant, with plaid textiles and solid wood tables, and the smell of mulled wine and cinnamon lingers in the air at any given time.

"I do want to help her find a more permanent solution when we get back to Rhode Island," Matthew says after a long sip of his wine. "I can't let

Selina live out of a suitcase any longer.”

“She won’t accept any kind of charity.”

“It’s not charity I’m thinking about. Remember that apartment I had downtown?” he asks.

I nod slowly. “The two-bedroom, right?”

“Yeah. It’s currently unoccupied since I bought the house. I haven’t rented it out yet, but it’s been fully renovated,” he says. “I was thinking I could rent it to her. No need for a deposit and the monthly rent would be below the market, just until she gets back on her feet. Paying off her student loans ahead of time was a monstrous effort to begin with.”

“She deserves room to heal and rest,” I agree. “You could present it to her and see what she says. Just emphasize that it’s not a freebie or anything.”

Matthew smiles, staring at the dark burgundy wine in his mug, chunks of caramelized orange and cinnamon sticks floating on the surface. “I didn’t think anything would actually happen between us. Even after she split up with Kieran. Selina always seemed to be this inaccessible creature that I was dying to touch but couldn’t.”

“You held back last night.”

“I did. I don’t know why. It’s not like I didn’t want to.”

“You’re falling for her. Pretty quickly, might I add,” I reply with a grin.

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Pot, meet kettle. Same goes for that dweeb out there still trying to teach her how to ski without potentially breaking her neck.”

We laugh and let the conversation flow organically as we keep watching Selina with Jason. He is so patient and kind with her—then again, Jason was always the sunny one in our outfit. Very little about him has changed over the years, and his kindness and good spirit never faded. I can see it in his eyes, the feelings swirling, swallowing her whole. And I can see it in Selina’s eyes, too, the affection and the brightly-spirited energy that flows between them.

She is all smiles and giggles, even when she falls and he helps her get back up on her skis. Then she frowns and bites her lower lip whenever Jason touches her back or her waist. I spot the flickers of desire that burn beneath those smiles and giggles. She focuses on skiing for as long as she can before she and Jason exchange glances, and she loses all focus, slips and drops once more.

That’s the issue out there. She can’t concentrate on skiing when he’s close to her. It would be the same with me, the same with Matthew. We do

have an effect on her, that much is obvious. And there's no denying that she, in turn, has an effect on us. I like it.

My gaze wanders to a small group of people on the other side of the slope. They've just come up the mountain, and they're watching the others slide down, skis swaying left and right as they pick up speed. However, there's one person in particular that has grabbed my attention. The familiar face hits me like a hammer to the chest, like a brick over the back of my head. "Matthew," I whisper, unable to look away from her. Even from afar, it's impossible not to recognize her.

"What is it?"

"Cynthia," I manage.

Clearly, it's her. The long, brown hair flowing from under a plush, off-white winter hat. The piercing, dark brown eyes. The full, glossy pink lips. The energy emanating from her—the tension rising and eating away at everyone around her. Despite the thick winter clothes she's wearing, I know my eyes are not deceiving me.

Matthew follows my gaze. "Where?"

I search his face but I don't see the same dread that I'm feeling in this moment. I shift my focus back to the scattering group of people. She's gone.

"She was there. It was her," I tell him.

"I don't see her. We haven't heard anything in a year," he says. "I doubt she'd come back here."

"I know what I saw."

He gives me a stern look. "Let's keep it between us for now. Selina can't ever know. It'll destroy us."

That much we can both agree on. The ghosts of the past never return with good tidings nor innocent intentions. We did wrong on plenty of levels, but the kind of relationship we're trying to build with Selina can be our second chance, an opportunity for us to do better, to *be* better. It will inevitably blow up in our faces if we let the past bleed into the present.

Matthew is right. Selina can never know.

It's only four in the afternoon, and already I'm exhausted.

I needed today; I need all of this, every day, for as long as winter lasts. Frankly, I don't want it to ever end. It feels so good to get away from everything—my life, my job, my chaos. For the first time in what seems like forever, I get to simply unwind and 'play stupid games and win stupid prizes,' as the saying goes. My muscles are sore, my thighs and calves burning as I peel the clothes off my body and sink into the tub filled with hot water and lavender essence.

The guys are downstairs, getting ready to drive to the store and do some grocery shopping. The weather forecast predicts a snowy December looming just around the corner, so it's good to be as prepared as possible for when the inevitable blizzard does hit the Aspen mountains. I don't mind the alone time, besides, Jason needs a breather after everything he had to endure with me out on the ski slope. The man has the patience of a saint while I'm the proud owner of two uncoordinated feet. I shouldn't be so out of shape, but after I had to leave tennis behind, it became easy to avoid making time for fitness.

I should get back into it, eventually, if only for my future health. Until then, I'll just settle into this steaming, fragranced water and let myself relax while I read a few more pages out of Cynthia's diary. I've got at least a couple of hours on my own, so I might as well indulge in this new, guilty pleasure.

"Oh, man, this feels good," I mutter as the heat seeps through my skin, gradually unwinding me like an old, beat-up clock.

Careful not to get any of the pages wet, I flip open the diary and pick up right where I left off. I paused right after the hot tub episode, so I'm dying to

know what else she did with them. The more I read, however, the clearer the differences between Cynthia and me become. She was brave and uninhibited, completely open to everything they wanted to give her. Though I want the same, I just don't know how to ask for it. *"We spent the past couple of days skiing. I'm quite good, though nowhere near as skilled as Matthew,"* Cynthia writes in swirly letters and hard-pressed punctuation. *"They have been nothing but warm and funny, and extremely affectionate. Our night in the hot tub has certainly changed things for the better between us. Sully is pretty intense, and sometimes I feel like he doesn't enjoy sharing me as much as the other guys, but he plays along. It's the only way that this is going to work between us. I do like it when he gets a little jealous, though. That's when he starts to pull my hair and yank my head back. He loves biting me, with just enough force to leave hickeys here and there. I wear them like badges of honor."*

I pause and glance down at my shoulder where Sully's mark lingers from last night. It's a crimson cloud that makes my core quiver as I remember the way he claimed me, the way he bent me over and filled me to the brim, the hot water lapping at our naked bodies while I took everything he had to give me. Almost automatically, I keep one hand on the diary, holding it up so I can continue to read while my other hand goes downward.

There is pressure gathering between my legs, and the lavender bath water is making me loosen up, maybe a little too much. I need some self-care while Cynthia tells me about her night.

"After dinner, we settled in the living room to play cards. Jason is an excellent Texas Hold 'Em player, but I'm better. He didn't know that, and when Sully and Matthew realized what was going on, they decided to up the stakes with a game of blind kissing. The winner of the pot would be on the receiving end of anonymous kisses. They'd have to guess who did the kissing. If they failed, they'd be kissed again and again until they get it right. Naturally, I won the poker game, and Matthew took out one of his silk ties to cover my eyes. I was already hot and my panties were already drenched.

"They took turns, and I had to rely solely on their scents to try and figure out who was kissing me. I purposely said the wrong name a couple of times so they would kiss me again. I don't know how long it was before Matthew caved in and nearly ripped the clothes off me so he could eat my pussy whole. I was blind-folded the whole time as they took turns kissing that set of lips, too. I was more than eager and happy to feel their tongues lapping and

testing my folds. My clit was as swollen as a kidney bean, begging for attention.”

Wow. I need a deep breath as my fingers find my own nub all tender and ready to cause a chain reaction through my whole body. I imagine the entire scene but I place myself at the center of it, not Cynthia. I imagine being on my knees, breasts pressed against the couch as Matthew grabs me by the ass and dives right in. The memory of that night at the hotel makes it infinitely easier for me to pleasure myself while dreaming of his tongue sliding and flicking and pressing in all the right places.

“I lost count of the orgasms they gave me before I felt Jason’s cock going in and spreading me wide,” Cynthia writes. *“Matthew got underneath so I’d straddle him. I had two of them inside me, and it was incredible. I couldn’t even move as both Matthew and Jason fucked me deep and hard, stretching me beautifully while Sully had my mouth. I’ve never done something so insane and so wonderful, so depraved and so intimate at the same time. It was incredible. They shared me, they took turns, they flipped me every which way and I took every single drop of their passion until the four of us passed out on the furry carpet by the fireplace. It was so hot and liberating... I want more.”*

As the orgasm rocks me to the core, as the ripples flow outward and I hear myself moan with pleasure, I understand that I, too, want more. More of them. *All* of them. The diary drops to the floor as I rub my clit into a sweet madness until I’ve squeezed every drop of my yearning, if only for a few hours before dinner comes along. And then, I will tell them. I just need to summon up the courage to do it.

Damn you, Cynthia, for making me want something so badly that I’m ready to renounce my old and rather shy ways. But on the other hand, thank you, for pulling me out of my comfort zone. I needed this.

* * *

The more I get to know Matthew, Sully, and Jason, the more fascinated I am by how different and yet alike they are. Their personalities are remarkably distinct—Matthew embodies leadership, so balanced, reserved, and cautious, keenly aware of what he says and how he says it, making it hard for me to

figure him out; Jason is sunny and lighthearted, carefree and playful, but there's still a wounded side of him, one that he doesn't show to just anyone; and Sully, damn, he's like a storm in a jar, all that intensity just aching to be unleashed somehow, to consume and obliterate everything in its path. But together, they're in perfect balance.

Kind, courteous, naughty as hell.

Jason cooked dinner tonight. A generously-sized pot roast with rosemary potatoes and a yogurt dip that I can't get enough of. The dessert was store-bought but well chosen—a raspberry trifle that goes perfectly with the white wine we've sampled so far. I had assumed I'd stuff myself full, given how hungry the ski slope had made me earlier, but the little self-pleasing episode in my bathtub kind of clamped down on my appetite. I don't mind, though. Something tells me I'm getting some savage treatment later, and I'm looking forward to being sated in an entirely different kind of way.

"You'll master the slopes eventually," Matthew laughs as Jason recounts my fifth fall, bringing me back into the moment.

I'd lost count of how many times my ass landed the wrong way, but Jason had clearly been keeping track. "Either that, or the slopes will master me," I reply with a giggle and finish my glass of wine.

"You actually did good out there," Sully says as he offers me a generous refill.

"You did," Jason insists. "Others usually give up after the first or second fall, but you stuck it out, like a brave soldier."

I shrug, my cheeks burning while my gaze wanders across the dinner table. They're all wearing loungewear in different shades of gray, dark green, and navy blue. Their sexy, square jaws are dusted with five o'clock shadows, and fatigue shades their eyes. But there's also a hunger in them that has been keeping my blood flowing at higher temperatures than usual—my body responds before my mind even has a chance to process their overwhelming presence.

"Thank you. I tried my best. And Jason, you're a terrific instructor. So incredibly patient."

"You made it fun," he says with a wink.

"By falling on my ass in every possible way, yeah, I know," I reply, returning the wink.

The wine flows freely as dinner progresses and the conversation deepens. I'm getting to know these men on another level in such a short time. For two

years, they were the strangers I drooled over from afar, the forbidden fruit that I could never get my hands on. But here I am, in this beautiful house with them, all three within my reach, and more than willing to touch me back. It's rare to fall into such fortune, and the more I read about them from Cynthia's diary, the more intrigued I become.

"How about you, Jason?" I ask once the conversation switches back to our professional lives while we clean the dessert off our plates. "You said you run a boat rental business, right?"

"That is correct," he replies, his messy blond hair framing his tanned face. It brings out the sky in his eyes, and it's making me tingle all over. "I had some money saved up from my time in the service, and as soon as we got back, I decided to settle in Providence and buy a couple of boats. I didn't know the business would do so well, if I'm honest, but the charters in particular have been a tremendous hit."

"Plus, it keeps him out at sea a lot," Matthew adds.

"There's nothing I love more," Jason states.

"And that explains the permanent tan despite you now being a Rhode Island resident," I giggle.

Sully laughs, then gets up and collects the last of the plates, which he then deposits into the dishwasher before returning to the table with another bottle of wine. "Jason's Californian spirit can never be quelled nor dimmed," he says. "The rest of us might look as pale as ghosts in midwinter, but this man is still a whole stick of caramel crunch, as you can see."

"Oh, I can definitely see the caramel crunch," I blurt out, damn near licking my lips as I look at Jason.

He immediately notices and flashes his signature grin as he leans back into his chair. I feel small and shy all of a sudden, surprised by my own words and the shamelessness with which I uttered them. I used to be a lot more reserved in my past life—that period of time prior to leaving Kieran—but I've left that part of me behind. That entire relationship feels like eons ago now. It's as if I've only just discovered the better parts of life after having spent too much time wasted in a familiar but comfortable darkness.

"What shall we do with the rest of our evening?" Jason asks, his eyes never leaving me.

I'm not sure if he's asking me or everyone present, but I offer a shrug, just in case. "Whatever you guys want to do, I'm down." Again, where is this courage coming from? It's the wine. It must be the wine. Or maybe these

three incredible hunks really have awakened the woman that had been dormant within me the whole time. Maybe it's the real me talking for once.

"Careful what you wish for," Matthew says.

His deep gray eyes are filled with dark shadows that burn through me as his lips stretch into a lazy smirk—the kind that tells me he's waiting for the next opportunity to pounce on me. I'm but a doe caught in the headlights, my legs weak and my heart fluttering madly as I begin to understand precisely where tonight will end. I need the courage to say what I want, I need to push through and make my wishes known. Cynthia didn't have to ask, it seemed, and I admit, I'm a bit jealous of her.

"What's the worst that could happen?" I laugh, albeit nervously and once again surprised by how easily I'm getting myself wedged right between the lions' sharp teeth.

Sully exhales sharply as Matthew gives him an amused nod. He gets up and goes upstairs for a minute's worth, while Matthew and Jason escort me into the living room.

"Let's get comfortable, for starters," Jason says.

He and Matthew sit on the couch, while I'm settled into one of the two high-back chairs, closer to the fireplace. I listen to the wood crackling, enjoying the warmth on my face as the fire consumes its way through a fresh pile of logs. I'll never lose my love for the smell of burning wood in the middle of autumn or winter.

Sully returns with a green silk scarf and a smile on his handsome face. My spine tingles as I recognize the intention, and I damn near lose my breath as I realize what's about to happen.

"Allow me," Sully says as he comes over and ties the scarf over my eyes. "It's not too tight, is it?"

"No," I whisper, barely able to sit upright at this point.

Knowing they did the same with Cynthia, the mere anticipation of what might happen tonight sends rivers of excitement gushing through my loins. Could this be it? The moment I've been waiting and yearning for the most? Or is it just another one of those teasing nights meant to prolong my desire and my torment at the same time?

Suddenly, my sweater feels too thick, my jeans too tight. Hell, even my feet can't stand the socks anymore. But I manage to keep it together, as I let the darkness envelop me while my ears twitch and my nostrils flare, picking up every sound and scent around me. I catch a whiff of the fireplace mingling

with Sully's strong cologne. I hear one of them getting up from the couch. I hear my own breath falter as Jason's voice soothes my senses.

"Just relax," he says. "We're going to play a game of blindfolded kissing."

"Oh? What's that?" I innocently ask. I'm overwhelmed by the moment, by the anticipation of what's about to happen.

"Each of us will take turns kissing you, and you have to guess which of us it was. If you get it wrong, the same guy will kiss you again until you get it right, then the next fella can have his turn," he says, amusement chiming in his low, sweet voice.

"Okay," I mumble. "I think I can handle that."

I'm not sure I can do it without begging for more, but I guess I'll just wait and see where this leads. I suppose I already know, but I'm still working up the courage to speak up and make sure I get my triple whammy tonight. I don't think I can go another evening without indulging in what Cynthia had.

"Are you ready?" Matthew asks. He's getting closer, his cologne musky and sharp. Dominant with hints of leather, while Sully's is green and fresh, like a whisper from the wild forest outside.

Jason's carries hints of honey and lemongrass, like a lazy summer morning. His is the closest and strongest. I think I can tell who's going to kiss me first.

"I'm ready."

Silence follows for almost a minute, my lips parting slowly as they wait to be kissed. Finally, someone kisses me. Softly at first, barely testing my barriers before he deepens the kiss, slipping his tongue through. A moan escapes from my throat as I welcome the taste of him with subtle undertones of white wine and raspberries. It's the summer scent that gives him away.

"Jason," I declare, my pulse already racing. I don't need to remove my blindfold to know it was him, to actually see him as he teased me the way he just did. Every fiber in my body seems to recognize them long before my eyes do. "Definitely Jason."

"Damn, that was good," he says, but his voice is a smidge lower, broiling with desire.

Silence again. Though that's the point, I shouldn't be able to tell where any of them are. As soon as I draw a shaky breath, one of them kisses me. My heart sings, my core catches fire. I'd recognize these lips anywhere—the curious and commanding tongue, the unforgettable taste. Our tongues meet

and swirl around playfully, liquid desire pooling between my legs.

“Matthew,” I manage as he pulls away.

They’re not taking turns. Sometimes Matthew kisses me twice, sometimes Sully does. Then Jason. There is no order, only sexy chaos, but I manage to guess right most of the time. When Sully kisses me once more, I hold back a smile and say the wrong name on purpose.

“Jason.”

“Wrong,” Jason says.

Sully captures my mouth in a hungry storm, and I open myself up entirely. This has been going on for at least fifteen minutes, and I’m so wet, aching for so much more... I can barely keep myself conscious as Sully possesses every part of me.

“Sully,” I whisper against his lips. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Are you okay?” Matthew asks, concern etched in his voice as he comes closer.

I exhale sharply and bring my hands up to my chest, fingers clutching my breasts as I lose control over myself. “No, I mean yes, I just can’t take it anymore. I want you, all of you. Right now. Tonight. Please, I can’t...”

For the longest of seconds, I hold my breath. I don’t know why, but part of me is expecting a refusal of sorts. Perhaps they’re not ready to take me in such a way. Or maybe they aren’t yet convinced that I can handle it. Perhaps they don’t think I’m as strong or as willing as Cynthia was, and while I can’t mention her name without giving away the diary she left behind, I am desperate to show them that I can, in fact, handle it. That I am as strong and willing as Cynthia was, if not more.

Every part of my body cries for them. I want to be stretched and possessed, consumed and devoured, until there’s nothing left but a glimmering afterglow shiny brightly in the shape of a very satisfied woman. As I await their decision, I pinch my nipples through the sweater and the lacy bra underneath, feeding the flames already roaring between my legs.

I'm taken to the master bedroom. Its significance weighs heavily on my shoulders as I walk in, taking deep breaths, trying to quell the building anticipation. This is it, the night I've been dreaming of. I can't believe it's actually happening.

"Do you trust us?" Matthew asks.

I stand close to the bed, hands at my sides with trembling fingers as the three of them close ranks around me. I nod slowly. "I do."

"Then you will let us take the lead," he says.

"Yes."

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. When he opens them again, he smiles then kisses me deeply. It's a tender kiss, not at all conquering nor dominant, but sweet, loving, and reassuring.

Sully helps me out of my sweater and bra, leaving my full breasts exposed. My nipples perk, pink and hard under their smoldering gazes, as Jason peels my jeans and panties off me. Seconds later, I'm naked between them, standing quietly as they admire every inch of me. I used to be more self-conscious about my curves, especially after I was forced to quit tennis, but there is something in their eyes, a muted adoration that I cannot resist. It fills me with a new kind of confidence that beckons me to open myself up in every way with these men.

"Kiss me," he says.

I cup his face, watching the warmth of his gray eyes melt into something that may obliterate me if I'm not careful. I kiss him, much like he kissed me, pouring everything I feel into this simple but meaningful gesture.

"Undress me," he says next.

He lifts his arms as I take his sweater off. I have a bit of trouble with his belt buckle, a large oval made of silver. I run my fingers over the cougar-shaped logo engraved on the front, then pry it apart and unbutton his jeans. They fall to the floor, revealing a rock-hard cock that's begging for my attention. Behind me, I can hear Sully and Jason removing their clothes. Knowing that all of us are now naked just makes everything that much hotter and harder to control myself. My pussy fucking hurts at this point, and I can't wait for them to fill it with what it so desperately needs.

"Get on your knees," Sully tells me.

I oblige, eager to listen and execute their commands. It feels wonderful, relinquishing control in this way. No man has ever managed to turn me into a submissive woman, but it was about damn time I came across the right guys to flip that stubborn switch. As soon as I'm on my knees, Jason and Sully move to stand beside Matthew, but Matthew is the first to offer me his flesh.

"Take it." he says, watching hungrily as I open my mouth and wrap my lips around the engorged tip. I taste the precum as I suck him off, allowing him to go deeper and deeper each time I slide my mouth down his shaft. Relaxing the back of my throat, I manage to take most of him in, gagging as he grabs my head and keeps me in place, unable to pull back. "That's it, baby, relax, relax..."

Oh, fuck, this is so hot. I love receiving him like this, I love feeling his cock twitch in my mouth and down my throat, pulsating with ravenous desire. As soon as he lets go, I pull back and take him in again, hungry for more.

After a few minutes of ravenous sucking, Matthew pulls away and I turn to take Sully in my mouth next.

It's a stark but sizzling contrast. Sully's cock is thicker, the veins throbbing along the shaft. I gently massage his balls as I take him in, sucking and licking the whole thing before I deep-throat him, as well. He groans harshly and thrusts himself further, knocking the air out of my lungs, over and over again. This ultimate surrender is savage but desperately needed, at least judging by the desire dripping from between my legs. I feel the heat sliding down my thighs.

I take Jason's cock in one hand, while I allow the other to wander downward. I find my clit swollen and ready for a tempestuous relief, and I'm just about to work myself over the edge as I suck Jason off with unprecedented hunger. He's long and not as thick, but there's enough of him

to fill me to the brim when it's his turn to fuck me. It's all happening tonight. I like the taste of him, slightly salty as I press the tip of my tongue against the head.

"Fucking hell, Selina," he groans, running his fingers through my hair as I slurp and swallow him whole.

"Now it's your turn," Matthew says, taking my hand away just as I'm about to make myself come. "You're ours tonight. We're going to play with you, baby."

"Play with me, then, because I'm ready to explode," I reply.

They help me up and have me sit on the edge of the bed. "Lay back," Matthew says.

But it's Jason who goes down on me first. I feel his tongue sliding between my folds as Sully and Matthew bring my knees up. They take their sweet time massaging my breasts, squeezing them tighter and tighter before they pinch my nipples hard. I whimper from the sweet pain just as Jason slides his fingers into me.

He sucks on my clit, applying just enough pressure to send me over the edge while fingers curl inside, flicking my g-spot until I fall apart at the seams and cry out as the orgasm rocks through me like a savage storm.

Just then, Matthew and Sully take my nipples in their mouths, sucking hard and sending thousands of electrical jolts through my veins as my hips grind against Jason's lips and tongue. "Oh, God, don't stop, don't stop!" I moan, riding the wave of this shattering climax as it ripples around his capable fingers. "Oh, yes.... Yes!"

Sully slides his hand through my hair and grabs it, yanking firmly as he shifts upward and gives me his cock for another tasting session. I gladly take him, as Jason gets up and glides inside me. I was right, his length is more than enough to please me. I can feel him fill me up deep. He presses his thumb against my clit as he starts fucking me hard and fast.

I try to focus on Sully's magnificent erection but Matthew keeps sucking and licking my nipples, biting the skin here and there until a trillion sensations come over me at once. I'm not even sure where my first orgasm ended and where the second one began, but I am rocked to the core and overwhelmed... utterly lost in so many beautiful sensations that I literally lose track of whose cock is where.

"Selina, you're a dream come true," Matthew groans as he turns me over and takes me from behind. My feet are on the floor, now, and I'm bent over

the bed's edge.

Jason sits in front of me, and I suck him off, delighted to taste my own sweet juices in the process while Sully watches us closely. He licks his lips, biting into the lower one as I look at him and ask for him. "Come here, baby," I tell him. I barely recognize myself. I don't even know who I am anymore, but as Matthew fills me wholly and savagely pounds into me, I know I'm right where I need to be.

He grabs me by the back of the neck as he takes me harder and deeper. I cry out as his hand comes around my hip and abuses my swollen nub until another orgasm breaks me wide open. "Oh, God, yes! Yes, don't stop!" I cry tears of unadulterated joy as I surrender unto him.

Matthew may be the courteous and self-controlled type on the outside, but in the bedroom, he's the complete opposite. He's nasty and possessive, harsh and dominant, and I love every fucking second of it. I love his grip on me, the feel of his massive cock stretching me with every thrust.

"I'll never get tired of this," Sully says when it's his turn.

I end up servicing Jason and Matthew at the same time as Sully brings my right leg up, my knee resting on the edge of the bed while enters me. He's the biggest, saving himself for last as he moves slowly at first. He almost comes across as gentle in the beginning, easing in while I've got both Matthew and Jason by their splendid cocks, tasting myself on both, licking and sucking ferociously until I feel them twitching. There's an explosion coming soon, I can sense it.

Sully's fingers dig into my hips. He goes hard and deep and fast enough to have me screaming in raw pleasure, but then Matthew takes over again, claiming me before I even get a chance to register the shift. He's going hard, holding me close with one hand around my waist and the other around my neck as he lets loose.

"Open your mouth," Sully demands, stroking himself until my lips part. "Ah, that's it, baby, look at me."

I look up, fucked out of my mind from behind as Sully releases himself in my mouth. He's salty and delicious. I swallow every drop, feeding on the frenzied look in his almost black eyes, now hooded and simmering with something warm and sweet, kind and soft. Jason's next. I barely catch a moment's breath as I lock both hands around his cock and suck him until he comes. I swallow it all once more, delighted to receive the fruits of his ecstasy while Matthew explodes inside me.

Feeling the heat shoot through me, my core unleashes one last orgasm to match his in tempo.

“Oh... Ooohhh!” I hear myself wailing as Matthew thrusts deeper—it’s like he’s searching for the very center of my being, my pussy squeezing him dry. My heart sings songs I’ve never heard before as I look at these men and everything that they’re doing to me.

I am their toy, theirs to play with as they wish. And they are mine, filling every need and making my blood run white-hot with every kiss, every touch, every whisper, and every glorious inch. I’ve never experienced anything like this.

The happiness I feel is indescribable and absolute. The relief is out of this world; it’s as if my body and soul have melded into one. The unity is exquisite, and Matthew’s final thrusts have my flesh trembling as the adrenaline recedes.

Soon, the afterglow will follow.

But the night has only just begun. “You are ours tonight,” Matthew whispers in my ear.

“I’m yours for as long as you’ll have me,” I gasp, struggling to breathe again.

White stars twinkle in my eyes, a drop of Jason lingering in the corner of my mouth. I lick it off and smile at him, while Sully tucks a lock of rebellious red hair behind my ear. His touch alone is enough to ignite tiny little fires beneath my skin.

“We’ll have you all night, to start with,” Sully says.

Let tonight drink us dry and leave us limp, glowing and sweating until we run out of breath and are unable to move. Let tonight be the first of many and let the following nights give me more and more. I want two of them inside me. Even after all they’ve just done to me I’m already hungry for more. It’s always more with these three.

JASON

The wintery morning sun finds us sleeping in the same giant bed in the master bedroom, our bodies glazed in the honeydew afterglow of last night's lovemaking. I feel as though I've released a kiloton of pressure by losing myself inside this marvelous woman—my heart is as light as a feather, my cock already hard and aching for more. Selina is dangerously addictive, and I should know better, but I can't help myself.

She sleeps beside me, one leg thrown over mine. Matthew sleeps to her left while Sully lets out a soft snore to my right. But Selina, damn, with her full breasts and nipples perking up as they meet a fleeting ray of sunshine that dashes through the window, her skin soft and peachy, strawberry-colored bruises here and there... all of them are love nips, and she wears them proudly. I watch her chest rise and fall slowly with each breath. I wonder what she's dreaming about as the corner of her mouth twitches subtly. A sleepy smile that makes my cock jump.

Her hair flows over the pillows in shades of ruby red, rather messy and wavy after last night's debauchery, but I like it. How did we get here so quickly? I wanted her from the moment I laid eyes on her, and the guys did, too. I wanted her even more once we learned she'd split up from that loser boyfriend of hers. But I imagined it would be a while before she came to us, regardless of how much we made it clear that we wanted her. Selina never ceases to amaze me, and that is something I might as well start getting used to. My gaze follows the curve of her hip as she stirs in her sleep.

How can I not fall for her when she has opened herself up to me, to us, in the ways that she has? It takes a special kind of woman to look at the three of us and smile delightedly as she welcomes us into her soul and her body. I

can't resist the urge to indulge in the decadence of this moment as I move downward and gently part her legs.

I listen to the sound of her breath as I admire the pink, luscious folds of her pussy. Selina deserves a good wakeup call, and I can't think of a better way than to go down on her. I slide my tongue through, teasing the clit until I feel it swelling. She moans softly, suspended somewhere between her dreams and reality. Her hips sway slowly as I penetrate her with one finger, then another, and curl them both inward while I suckle on the tender nub of raw nerves that's begging for my attention.

"Jason," she whimpers as her eyes peel open as she sees me, already aroused past the point of no return. Her juices flow freely, and I lick every drop as I finger-fuck her pussy into submission. "Oh, God, yes... right there, baby..."

The sounds wake Sully up just in time to find her gasping for air as I feel her clench, tightening around my fingers in the anticipation of a sweet release. He's already hard, his gaze darkening as he watches her unwind in the throes of sheer pleasure. Matthew lifts his head just as I slide a third finger in and work her into a throbbing orgasm.

"That's it, honey, give it to me," I tell my beloved as I feel the ripples flowing outward.

I keep my mouth closed around her clit, licking and sucking until she has nothing left to give. "Oh, wow, that's one hell of a way to wake up," Selina giggles as she comes down from her climax, beads of sweat trickling down her temples.

"I'm going to make us some coffee," I tell her, smiling. "I'll leave you in Matthew and Sully's capable hands while I do that."

"Come back quickly, baby," she replies.

I'd like nothing more than to fuck her throughout the morning, but she deserves a good pampering after all the hard work she put in last night. Besides, my friends are more than capable of keeping her busy and sated until I get back. I pull myself away as Sully gets busy with her breasts and Matthew rolls over, his erection twitching with excitement.

Looking forward to an intimate session alone with her, I make my way downstairs and attempt the coffee making process. I remove the lid from the vintage coffee tin and set a paper filter in the machine. I can hear the rising sound of her rhythmic moans from upstairs.

It's making it difficult for me to concentrate. Selina screams in pleasure

as another orgasm rocks her to the core. I can hear it as clearly as if I'm right there with them. I hear her gasping for air and Sully's harsh moans, and I quickly realize coffee can wait.

My cock hurts desperately for her.

I rush back upstairs and pause in the open doorway of our master bedroom so I can watch the scene unfolding before my eyes. Selina's on all fours on the bed. Sully's watching her and stroking himself while she fills her mouth with Matthew's cock, sucking him off like there's no tomorrow. I thought she'd take longer to get used to the situation, but her sexual instincts are sharper than any other woman's we've been with, and we've had our fair share of adventure lovers who thought they could take the three of us at once.

"We'll have that coffee later," I manage and climb onto the bed, positioning myself behind Selina.

Her ass is gloriously round and parted as she spreads her knees wider for me to admire a glistening pussy that yearns for me. "Take me, Jason," Selina says, before she goes back to Matthew's monstrous erection.

"I'll take you every which way, darling," I reply and put the tip of my cock against her clit first.

Pressing it gently, I listen to her deepening moans as droplets of arousal sneak downward and slide down her tender folds. She's got one hand wrapped around Matthew's cock and her eyes on Sully's as I go in. She takes a sharp, deep breath as I fill her. Her pussy stretches neatly around me, swallowing me whole as I take her.

"I want you both," Selina says, beckoning Sully to come closer.

I grab her hips and pull her backwards so she can rest on her knees while I thrust in and out. She's giving both Sully and Matthew pleasure with her mouth, sucking and licking them ravenously while I feel myself slipping closer to the edge. Fucking hell, I haven't felt this good since... since last year, since Cynthia, but Cynthia feels like a distant and bitter nightmare. She doesn't compare to Selina, to the sensations she produces in every fiber of my being.

My fingers dig into her hips as I pound her harder and harder, skin slapping skin as her glorious ass bounces with every thrust. To think I almost fell off the wagon because of Cynthia. To think I could've missed out on these incredible moments with Selina. The past needs to stay there. The shadows will eventually cover it. The memories will ultimately fade away.

The climax finds me almost unprepared as I go deeper and faster. The

release shudders through me just as Matthew and Sully both come at once, filling her mouth and splashing her beautiful face with drops of their unbridled passion while I spill my seed inside her. Damn, I'll never stop loving this hot, creamy feeling whenever she tightens around my cock and squeezes me for every fucking drop.

Sweat drips down my face and shoulders.

And the day has only just begun. At this rate, we're going to wear ourselves out before Christmas.

SELINA

I t's almost mid-December, and I never imagined I'd feel so comfortable, so safe and happy without a place of my own. I'd imagined chaos and misery would hold on to me longer, but Matthew, Jason, and Sully have gone out of their way to make sure I'm perfectly taken care of, in every possible way. I would've considered happiness to be an abstract term not that long ago. I don't anymore. It's real and tangible, and it flows through me like liquid sunshine.

I can't control whatever happens in the future. I can only control how I react to whatever life decides to throw my way right now. I intend on making the most of this complex and peculiar relationship that has been developing between us.

We spend our days skiing or cooking, sometimes driving around Aspen exploring the more remote parts of the region. We spend our nights together, either one of them taking turns to warm my bed or the four of us unleashing the sweetest and spiciest heaven in the master bedroom. Either way, I'm constantly sated and tender, with the occasional hickey and love mark to keep me company throughout the day.

We've enjoyed each other in almost every area of the house and sometimes, during an ordinary day, when I least expect it, they will take me in the living room, making my deepest desires a reality while a fire constantly burns in the fireplace. Needless to say, I've come to know what each of them likes, what turns them on, and what I have to do in order to relish their orgasms, to listen to the raspy groans slipping from their throats as they come. It's the sweetest sound and has become my favorite kind of music.

There's never been a boring moment or a conversation lacking depth and

essence between us. The better I know these men, the more attached I become. It's a dangerous situation considering there's three of them and only one of me. This formula may work for now, away from Providence and the world that's waiting to further chip away at my resolve, but I can't imagine continuing this when we go back home. *Home*. I don't even know what that looks like for me anymore.

I'll figure something out, I always do. The money I'm saving by staying in Aspen will go toward a deposit on a new apartment. Mr. Lacroix has been kind enough to grant me an extended holiday this winter, though he still checks in with me via email once a week, and he drops the occasional extra line via text if he needs my advice on something regarding the upcoming collection for *The Sartorialist*. Given my academic background, he knows I'm able to offer some valuable insight, and the mere thought that he values my opinion is enough to put a smile on my face. It's nice to get this kind of validation from someone I admire and respect.

But I'm not thinking about going back just yet. There's still at least a month of wonderful decadence awaiting right here, in this beautiful place that seems like a slice of frosty heaven tucked away from the rest of the world. The woods behind the cabin are thick and always covered with snow, the majestic pines barely allowing any sunlight to come through. I don't mind though. It's like walking in the shadows of giants.

My phone rings. I switch it to silent and put it away. It's my mom. I haven't spoken to her in a couple of years, and I don't intend to rekindle that relationship anytime soon. Dad learned that the hard way the last time he showed up at my place unannounced, right before he checked himself back into rehab. If there is one thing I've come to terms with, it's that my family ceased to exist without Maddie, my sister. The minute she passed away, it was over. It was a hard pill to swallow, and perhaps I should've spoken about it with a therapist at some point. Someday... when I'm not stressed out of my mind and can allow the therapy to actually work.

The only thing I can do right now is focus on my own well-being. Mom bailed on us and moved to Florida to lose herself in the arms of hippies who like to smoke various green things and eat the fruits and vegetables they grow in their commune. She has found a measure of peace there, but I will never forgive her for leaving me behind, for not considering me important enough to be a part of her life. Dad took it the hardest. He lost his favored daughter, then his wife. Once I was the only one left, he was so deep in the bottle he

couldn't even see straight anymore. I needed years to give myself new meaning in their absence. I'm amazed that they're still trying to reach out to me, expecting me to answer, after how they treated me.

Maddie would've been furious with them. She's probably been tossing and turning in her tomb for years, now. She never would've allowed them to discard me and leave me behind the way they did. At least neither of them ever directly blamed me for her death. It was an accident, but she was driving that night because of me. No one ever said the quiet part out loud but I heard it, anyway. Maybe it's why I was so quick to rush into a relationship with Kieran. I needed emotional safety and comfort, not realizing I was only walking into more of the same.

But it's remarkably different with Matthew, Sully, and Jason. They see me for who I really am. They admire and respect me, and they always make sure I have everything I need.

"Have you eaten anything?" Matthew often asks me.

"Do you want more coffee?" It's Jason's favorite thing to say in the morning, especially after he goes down on me and rocks my world to the core.

"You need to sleep, baby," Sully says whenever we cuddle after a lovemaking session in his bedroom or mine.

I'm so well taken care of. Appreciated. Cherished. Made to feel like the woman that I truly am, with all my shades and colors and complications. They don't care that I'm practically homeless and struggling. They don't care that I've yet to gather any prospects for a promotion at The Sartorialist, despite my good professional relationship with Etienne. They don't care about anything that ultimately doesn't define me as a human being, and it is such a strange concept for me to wrap my head around.

It's so nice here, especially during the first part of the day when the sun is coming up and manages to shine a bit of light through the tear-shaped clearing just half a mile east of the cabin. I can see the country road snaking through the trees ahead, along with the snippets of windows and bushy landscapes of neighboring homes. It's quiet, with most of the forest animals keeping their distance from the more populated areas of the mountain. The bears have gone into hibernation, and only a few straggling deer remain.

I take a deep breath and welcome the sharp winter air into my lungs. It's soothing and refreshing—there's nothing like the December cold to slow my senses down just long enough so I can actually enjoy these moments of peace

and solitude. The guys are probably out on the slopes again. The heavy snowfall from recent days has made skiing even more popular, particularly with throngs of out-of-state tourists coming into the area. The holiday season has begun, and it's the first time in a long time that I'm actually looking forward to it. A month ago, I would have dreaded the very thought. Funny, how life throws you for a loop when you least expect it, and this time it just so happens to be a good kind of loop.

It makes my experience all the more beautiful and terrifying at the same time, because I fear something will come up and ruin it somehow. Maybe it's just my survival instinct holding on to me. My paranoia. The sudden sound of a twig crackling to my left has me spinning on my heels. As I look, my heart jumps for the briefest of moments then quickly settles at the sight of a young woman in a pale blue ski suit.

"Oh, hi," she says, smiling broadly. A beautiful woman in her late twenties, I reckon, with long, dark brown hair styled in two braided tails. Her sharp face and piercing brown eyes are framed by a white fur hat that matches her snow boots—I recognize the high-end brands without even blinking. She belongs on the cover of a beauty magazine. At least she's nowhere near as threatening as a sullen bear, which is what I'd thought had caused the sound less than a minute ago. It's not rare that the animals prematurely wake from their winter slumber due to hunger. "I didn't mean to scare you," the woman adds. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I was just so deep in my thoughts, I didn't notice anyone coming," I reply.

"Yeah, I get it. These woods are a great place to get your mind lost in, aren't they?"

She lovingly looks around, a twinkle of recognition lingering in her gaze. It's as if she's been gone for a long time and she's only just returned to a realm that is very dear to her heart. I can't help but smile, despite the slight tug in my heart. There's an underlying coldness about her that I can't identify. Maybe it's that same annoying paranoia I've grown used to. The overthinking part of my brain that warns me against everybody and everything.

"Do you live around here?" I ask as we stand several feet apart.

She shakes her head slowly. "I only come around for the winter, but I still miss it throughout the year. Especially this past year..."

"How so?"

“Let’s just say it was a difficult year,” the woman chuckles nervously. “Are you on holiday?”

“Yeah, me and my friends, actually. We’ve got a cabin west of here,” I say, not wanting to sound like the charity case that I know myself to be, even though the guys have repeatedly pointed out that they love having me around, and that they’re not taking any kind of pity on me. I guess my ego insists on pooping on things. “How about you? Do you rent or do you own something down there?” I ask, nodding at the cabins farther behind her.

“My parents have a couple of them,” the woman says. “They rent one out, but I always take the second cabin for myself. Who are your friends? The ones you’re sharing a cabin with?”

“I’m not sure you know them. Matthew Parker. Sully. Jason. They hang out in these parts for the whole of winter,” I reply.

The woman eyes me intently, lips pressed into a thin line. I cannot read her for the life of me until she smiles and waves around her. “Isn’t this beautiful? There will be a blizzard coming, though. I think toward the end of this week. You should keep an eye on the forecasts from now on,” she says. “The last thing you wanna do is be out here, even if it’s just half-a-mile from Matt’s cabin, when the blizzard hits. You’ll get stuck and snowed in before you can even make your way toward the road. Everything just vanishes.”

“Wow, that sounds kind of scary...”

“It is. I got lost once as a kid in the middle of a snowstorm. Almost died,” the woman replies with a heavy sigh. “I was lucky, though. My dog found me before my parents and the rescue folks did.”

“I imagine lucky doesn’t even begin to cover it,” I say, trying to picture her as a scared little girl, lost in these snowy woods, alone and struggling not to freeze to death. “How long were you stuck out here?”

“I’m not sure, maybe six or eight hours,” she says. “But don’t worry. The guys will plow the whole mountain down to find you. Matt knows the area like the palm of his hand.”

This is the second time she calls him that, which compels me to ask a simple but what I think is a logical question. “Oh, so you know my friends, then?”

“You could say that, yeah.”

The smile she gives me is rather unsettling. But my discomfort is short-lived as a tall man in a khaki winter suit joins us from the cabin area behind. “There you are baby. I thought I’d lost you,” he says to the woman, love

glowing in his bright blue eyes.

He strikes me as the kind of dashing former football team captain who peaked in high school but still made it into Ivy League, somehow. He's broad-shouldered and conventionally handsome, with a square jaw and a dimple in his chin, short blond hair, and the kind of smile that most women would kill to wake up next to every morning. I guess I'm the lucky one, thought, to have my three sizzling hot ex-Marines, instead. But what did this woman mean by 'you could say that, yeah,' I wonder.

"I was just out for a walk," she tells her boyfriend. "Come on, let's go grab lunch. I'm famished."

"You and me both," he replies, taking her hand in his as they walk back to the cabins beyond the woods. "I'd kill for a juicy steak right now."

The woman gives me a wave and one last glance over her shoulder. "I'll see you around," she says.

"Yeah," I mumble, watching them go.

I suppose everybody knows everybody around here, especially those who come every winter, year after year. Matthew has had the cabin for a long time, and the woman just said she's been a regular in these parts since she was a kid. It makes sense that their paths may have crossed once or twice. Aspen may be a popular destination for the holidays, but it's still small enough to leave room for familiarities here and there.

* * *

JUST BEFORE DINNER, I curl up with Cynthia's diary in the chaise by my bedroom window. Outside, Sully and Jason are cutting up more firewood, and I absolutely love stealing glances at them while also reading about them. They have the dirtiest minds I've ever come across—I had no idea that anybody could do what they did with only a bowl of strawberries and a jar of honey. I'm absolutely jealous of Cynthia's experiences, to be honest. She had them inside her, all three at once, repeatedly. I've read so much about it that I'm constantly wet as I imagine those scenes unfolding in my mind's eye.

This is it, I decide as I watch Sully's axe come down to split a large log in two. Jason gathers the pieces and loads them into a metallic basket, waiting for Sully to deliver a few more before they bring them inside. Matthew is in the kitchen, preparing dinner. I offered to help but he insisted that tonight's

dishes are something he wants to make on his own. It must be something dear to his heart, otherwise, he would've let me assist him. I don't mind—I get to spend an extra hour reading more about them from the words of another woman who stayed here before me, though at times, it makes me feel like I'm just another chick that they've banged together.

But the deeper I delve into these pages, the clearer it becomes that their relationship was slowly beginning to fizzle out. I can sense the hesitation in some of these paragraphs, the tension lurking between her and the guys, even though I can't yet identify the reason behind it. I do, however, reach the conclusion that it's time for me to grab the bull by the horns tonight and state my wish loud and clear. I want the three of them in me, I want them to fill me up and claim me until I'm spent and left without any strength. I want them to stretch me and consume me like they did her. I want the memory of Cynthia to disappear so I can become the center of this winter. It's a selfish thought, but I think I've earned this indulgence.

There's a box on my bed that I've yet to open. Matthew bought it for me from a lingerie store in downtown Aspen—a luxury boutique of Italian provenance, judging by the elegant letters swirling across the lid. After a long shower and lotion pampering, I finally open the box and examine the lingerie set. It's made of black lace and black silk with tiny red bowties. The cups are sheer, and the panties are crotchless. Just the way I like them.

“Oh, Matthew, you know me so well,” I giggle as I put the whole ensemble on and admire myself in the floor mirror.

I leave my hair down, falling in generous curls over one shoulder. I add a touch of red lipstick for contrast, but the black lace does most of the work for me. The silk straps hug my figure in all the right places, my breasts slightly struggling against the fabric while my pussy breathes delightedly below. I slip into a red satin robe and tie it tightly around my waist, proceeding to go downstairs barefooted and slightly wet. Screw dinner. I want my men to be the greatest hors d'oeuvres I'll ever experience in this lifetime.

Walking into the kitchen at just the right time, I find Matthew taking the pot roast out of the oven, the fragrance of herbs and chili oil filling the whole room and sending my senses on a culinary joyride. Sully and Jason come in with the firewood, but they freeze on the spot when they see me. Matthew nearly drops the pan, and I can't help but smile.

“I think we can leave dinner for later, if you don't mind,” I tell them.

“Selina, this is... unlike you,” Matthew replies, but he is definitely

intrigued. His lips curl up in a devilish smile as his gaze wanders up and down my body.

Sully exhales sharply. “Holy hell, woman, are you trying to kill us?”

“No, I just want something I haven’t had the courage to ask for until now,” I reply, slowly untying my robe to reveal the gorgeous lingerie awaiting beneath.

Jason clears his throat, unable to say anything.

“And what’s that?” Matthew asks, his gaze fixed on my body, the gray of his eyes dissolving into pitch black and burning embers.

“The three of you in me, at the same time. No more taking turns. I’ve got room for three, and I need everything filled tonight,” I declare, astonished by my own courage.

A second passes in heavy silence. Then another. And another, as the guys only stare at me with a mixture of smoldering arousal and disbelief. Gradually, their expressions shift into the realm of excitement, grins slitting their faces as they leave everything they were doing and decide to pounce on me. Matthew kisses me on the lips. Jason peels the robe off so he can kiss my shoulders. And Sully grabs my ass, squeezing and slapping it playfully as I giggle with excitement.

“Who do you want in your mouth?” Matthew asks, licking my lower lip.

I look to Sully.

He smiles, biting the inside of his cheek.

“Master bedroom?” I reply, heat pooling rapidly between my legs as my nipples perk up.

“Lead the way, princess,” Matthew says.

I’m just about to do that, their hands lingering on my body and their cocks shamelessly bulging through their jeans, when the doorbell rings. Almost instantly, the fire that has been burning in my chest simmers down. I can feel the heat of the moment slipping through my fingers, and I fear I may lose the spark that brought me this far.

“Hold on,” Matthew says, frowning slightly.

“Want me to warm up the bed?” I reply, half-joking.

“We’ll handle that in a second,” he shoots back, already headed for the door.

Jason puts the robe back over my shoulders. “Just in case,” he whispers and drops a kiss behind my ear. It sends fluttering sensations down my spine as I wrap myself up and lean into him.

We leave the kitchen and join Matthew in the entryway just in time to see who dropped by unannounced. I feel my eyebrows arching upward as I recognize the woman from the woods. This time, she's wearing a tight woolen dress in red and black stripes, and a short fur coat on top. Gold bangles and earrings jingle with each movement as she gives Matthew a broad smile. Her boyfriend is right beside her, looking around as I can almost hear the wind blowing between his ears.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Matthew blurts out.

I'm stunned by the aggression in his voice. Only now do I see the anger gathered between his shoulder blades, the stiffness of his frame and the way in which he holds the door open—tight enough to turn his knuckles white.

"Is that any way to greet an old friend?" the woman replies, her voice high and sweet as honey. It feels disingenuous even to me, and I'm not sure what to make of it.

But then I feel Jason stiffen like a brick wall beside me. I see the icy darkness in Sully's eyes as he glares at her. The woman seems unbothered by their collective reaction, though. She's still smiling and breezy and ever the friendly neighbor as she takes a step forward. Almost instantly, Matthew takes a step back, as if terrified to let her get closer.

"What's going on?" I whisper to Jason.

He doesn't hear me. Or he can't hear me. I'm not quite sure. But the air in the house has suddenly changed. It's loaded with unspoken words, dark tension, and the kind of muted fury and guilt that makes me want to do a double take at every person standing before me. The woman then glances my way and waves as though we've been buddies forever.

"Hey, you! I told you I'd see you again."

Matthew gives me a terrified look. "You've met?"

"In the woods, earlier today. Why?" I ask. "What's going on?"

I'm getting nervous at this point, and I hate being on the outside looking in, especially when it comes to three men who have come to mean a whole lot more to me than most other people. I feel as though the safety and the peace of my haven here is about to shatter into a billion pieces, and I am nowhere near prepared for the downfall.

"I never got to introduce myself," the woman says and gives me a wink. "I'm—"

"Cynthia, you're not supposed to be here," Matthew cuts her off.

But the name has already reverberated across the room. It hits me hard in

the chest like a hammer. It knocks the air out of my lungs and the sense out of my mind as I swiftly understand who this woman is. *Cynthia*. The notorious Cynthia, whose diary nobody knows I've been reading. The Cynthia who was once the center of Matthew, Sully, and Jason's universe, if only for a winter season.

The one woman I know who can disrupt and destroy everything I've managed to build here just by showing up. And the reality comes back to bite me like a hungry great white shark. I can almost feel its jagged teeth tearing me apart.

SELINA

The name I never thought I'd hear in this cabin. The one person I genuinely feared because of how close, of how intimate she was with my men—MY MEN—not that long ago. My heart is beating so fast, my pulse is racing, and every single one of my insecurities rears their ugly head as I make myself smaller between Jason and Sully. They never leave my side, but Matthew's shadow looms large across the room as Cynthia giggles and hands him a bottle of what appears to be a very expensive champagne.

I could never afford a vintage like that.

"I brought this as a winter-warming gift," she says, rather nonchalant and uncaring of the tension she has caused within our nest. "Lance, my boyfriend here, and I have taken one of my cabins for the holidays, and I figured it would be nice to drop by and say hello sooner rather than later."

"Hey, guys," Lance says, waving at us.

Matthew gives him a nod of acknowledgement but doesn't bother to shake his extended hand. "Nice to meet you," he says instead, his voice flat and cold.

"So, um, you guys are friends, huh?" Lance asks, clearly unaware of what is obviously a much more complicated history than what I've read so far from Cynthia's diary.

"The best of friends," she declares, her eyes never leaving Matthew. "We've had so much fun during previous winters here."

I look to Sully but he doesn't notice me, he's too busy staring at her. Jason is licking his lips in a nervous manner I've never seen before. I want to scream at the top of my lungs and stop this dreadful charade from unfolding, but the misery currently blanketing my heart is too heavy. My tongue is tied.

“Thank you for the champagne,” Matthew mutters.

“Only the best for my three favorite gentlemen in the whole of Aspen. Hey, Sully. Hey, Jason. You two look fantastic. The winter air does wonders for you, doesn’t it?” Cynthia says, waving at the guys but neither responds.

“How long will you be staying again?” Matthew asks. He gives me a quick side eye, and I can see the guilt swirling in the gray pools of his sad eyes.

“Just for the holidays. Lance and I met earlier in the summer. We have so much in common,” Cynthia replies.

Lance snorts a dry chuckle. “Yeah, we both used to love mixing pills and booze at the same time.”

“We met at rehab,” she says. “He’s been a ray of sunshine ever since. We’re both healed and so happy together. I really just wanted you guys to meet him. I hope you’re also happy and thriving, as well. You are, right?” Damn, she actually looks worried as she asks that of Matthew.

He offers another slight nod. “We’re alright, thanks for asking. I really wish you’d reached out first.”

“Oh, you were in the middle of something,” Cynthia responds as she looks my way. Shit, now I feel naked and exposed in my flimsy silk robe and the even flimsier lingerie underneath. The cold grin she gives me sends shivers down my spine. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. My apologies.”

“It’s fine,” Matthew replies.

“Let’s have dinner one of these nights before the first blizzard hits,” she says. “Lance and I will bring the wine. I know you guys have your favorites, but we found this fantastic cabernet while on a trip through Napa Valley in August... I brought a bottle back just for you.”

Matthew looks at me once more, and all I can do is give him a weak smile. It feels as if my whole world is about to fall apart, crumbling brick by brick until the prospect of going back to Providence becomes a clearer outline on a foggy horizon. I breathe in Jason’s musky scent and struggle to hold on to his presence, but leaning against him feels like the most inappropriate thing I can do in this moment, considering the impact that Cynthia’s return has on these guys.

I literally wish my head were as empty as Lance’s obviously is. Ignorance really is bliss.

“We’ll let you know,” Matthew finally says.

“I’d love to know more about Cynthia from her friends,” Lance replies

with a beaming grin. “There’s so much she hasn’t told me yet. I’m sure you guys have all the nitty gritty details on this goddess of a woman.”

“Oh, honey, you flatter me,” she laughs, playfully slapping his shoulder as he snakes an arm around her waist and pulls her closer. I notice she only has eyes for Matthew, and the joy she exhibits in his presence makes me feel uncomfortable. A fifth wheel to an ensemble that clearly had a greater impact than what I read in her diary. “Seriously, guys, let’s do dinner. How about Friday? I’d love to just catch up and see how you’ve been.”

“Fine, let’s do Friday,” Matthew caves in with a strained smile.

“Fantastic. Don’t cook, though. We can just order something from Vespucci’s, okay?”

“Vespucci’s?” Lance asks, somewhat confused.

“It’s a new Italian place that opened up downtown. They have the best seafood on this side of the state,” Cynthia replies. My gosh, she sounds so excited and vivacious. No wonder they were nuts about her, so deeply enamored by her that they shared her the way they did. She never had to ask them like I just did.

“It’s set, then. Friday night.”

“Friday night,” Matthew sighs.

“I’ll see you guys then,” she quips, then glances my way one last time. “Maybe we’ll run into each other again if you’re out for a walk. That part of the woods is lovely during the day, isn’t it? Sorry, I never asked your name.”

“Selina,” I manage.

“Selina. What a pretty name,” she replies.

Before I can mutter thank you she grabs Lance and leaves. Almost immediately, Matthew slams the door shut and locks it three times, then turns around to look at me. He appears absolutely devastated, and I can tell it’s going to have deep and severe complications for our still-young and fragile dynamic. I can smell the end coming from a mile away.

“Selina, I think we need to talk,” he says.

I remind myself that I am not supposed to know who Cynthia is, despite the sharp ache currently tearing through my heart. I force myself to smile softly, my eyes stinging with tears as I try to keep my composure. “What’s up?” I ask, my voice breaking.

“Cynthia isn’t just a friend in the traditional sense, she never was,” he says. “We were involved with her.”

“Oh. Okay,” I whisper.

Jason lets a heavy sigh roll out of his chest. "It's kind of complicated."

"Not really," I reply bluntly. "There was clearly something going on between the four of you. Something big enough to rattle you to the core upon seeing her tonight."

"Selina, it's not like that," Matthew tries to say, but I've already turned and decided on a perfect exit for my wounded heart and bruised ego without revealing the fact that I've known about her all along. I wave the three of them away and head for the stairs. "Selina, wait."

"No, it's cool," I reply, my voice trembling as I run upstairs. "I'll see you guys tomorrow, I'm not hungry tonight."

Sully tries to come after me but Jason pulls him back. "Selina!" Sully calls out.

"Let her be," I hear Jason say.

I'm crying my soul out as I lock myself in the bedroom and fall to the floor. I didn't expect any of this to happen. Everything had seemed so perfect, so smooth and light-hearted. The sex was extraordinary. The tenderness with which they've given me thus far cannot be ignored or denied. There is something happening between us, something sweet and profound and insanely intense. But we've fallen prey to the ghosts of a Christmas past and given everything that is already going wrong in my life, I'm not sure I'll be able to deal with this.

My first instinct is to run back to Providence.

But to where?

SELINA

Minutes later, the guys are knocking on my door. My vision is hazy, and I feel awful and insufficient, beaten down somehow, and I know it all has to do with the return of a woman they probably thought was gone for good. Part of me is perfectly aware of how people and relationships work, and that I should listen to what Matthew, Sully, and Jason have to say. But the other part of me, the part that has always felt as though I was never enough—not at home, not at work, not in any relationship, for that matter—is screaming and crying her heart out at the realization of a reoccurring pattern.

“Selina, please, open the door,” Matthew calls out. “I can’t let you go to bed like this.”

“Just leave me alone. I will see you in the morning,” I reply between sobs.

“I will break this fucking door down if I have to!” Matthew snaps.

Sully chimes in. “We’re all here, Selina. We can’t... just please open the door.”

“No.”

I hear Matthew cursing under his breath, then Jason gets closer to the door and knocks three times. “Selina, please. We feel horrible about what just happened.”

“I promise I’m okay, there’s... there’s nothing for you to worry about,” I manage, trying to will the tears away and failing miserably.

“You certainly don’t sound okay,” Jason says. “Open the door, baby, let me see for myself. Otherwise, we are going to break it down. And that would be a shame. It cost a pretty penny, as Matthew will attest.”

I can't help but smile. I know it's his way of making light of the situation. It's awkward for everybody, I'm aware of that, too. My emotional response is too powerful and too intense right now. My connection to them ultimately trumps everything else; however, and I somehow find the energy to pull myself up from the floor and rearrange the robe around my waist. I take a deep breath and open the door to find the three of them standing in the open hallway, looking as though they've just lost their puppy down a well. Gah, it breaks my heart to see them torturing themselves like this. Exes in general are such a tricky business.

"Oh, Selina," Matthew sighs at the sight of me.

"I must be a mess," I mumble, lowering my gaze.

He comes in and takes me in his arms. I'm helpless in his embrace, soft and shuddering as I remember the comfort and safety that he has always given me. Why was I running away from this? Why is it my first instinct to pull back whenever I feel my balance threatened?

"Cynthia was a part of our lives about a year ago, but we ended it," he says.

I shake my head and hide my face in his shirt. "I don't want to talk about her."

"Selina, we just didn't expect to see her, that's all," Sully says as he comes closer. "We didn't know she'd come back to Aspen. We didn't exactly end things on a friendly note with her."

That makes me want to read more from her diary and figure out what happened. I should just ask them, but my instinct is flaring, warning me to steer clear of sensitive topics and Cynthia is clearly that. It was obvious by the deafening tension she caused from the moment she showed up at the door. I wonder if she accosted me on purpose earlier. Or maybe we truly just happened to cross paths.

"But you're here with us now, and we're here with you," Jason adds. "And the past is right where it's supposed to be."

"I really don't want to talk about her!" I blurt out.

My own emotions are too much for me to handle right now. The discomfort of seeing her as opposed to just reading about her. The past may be just that, but I got a glimpse of it tonight right after I told them about my deepest and darkest desire. If this wasn't the universe's way of telling me something, I don't know what is.

Matthew's hold on me tightens, his arms closing around my waist like a

boa constrictor. “Look at me,” he says, his voice low and rougher than usual.

I do just that, meeting his gaze, and find myself hypnotized by the shadows beneath his long, black lashes. He kisses me deeply, his tongue breaching my feeble defenses. Within seconds, I’m melting into a puddle as Jason and Sully flank me, their hands running up and down my body. I lose track of who’s where, of my skimpy outfit, of my own presence in this moment as they shower me with kisses.

My mouth, my ears, my cheeks, my neck and shoulders, they all get a loving treatment. Lips pressing, tongues licking, teeth nipping here and there until I feel my nipples poking through the black lace. I’m completely defeated. My mind draws a blank as I try to remember the anger and the helplessness that brought me upstairs in the first place. Cynthia *who*? What diary? None of that matters anymore as Sully grabs my ass and squeezes, then playfully slaps one buttock.

I whimper as Jason pulls the silk robe off me. Once more, I’m standing in nothing but the lingerie, desire dripping down my thighs as Matthew’s mouth makes love to mine. I groan softly as Jason cups my breasts, fingers deftly focused on my nipples. The pinch is slow-building and firm, prompting me to pull away from Matthew’s lips so I can kiss Jason, instead.

Sully’s hand slips between my ass cheeks and finds the crotchless part of my panties. The fabric is already soaking wet, his fingers slipping inside as my juices glaze them. “Oh, God,” I gasp as he roughly finger-fucks me into a ravenous frenzy.

“Come here,” Matthew commands me, taking my hand and pulling me away from an already mind-blowing foreplay. He guides me out of my room and into the master bedroom. It’s where the four of us are supposed to be tonight. It’s where we were meant to be tonight, before the interruption. But we’re here now, and that’s all that matters in the moment.

“You wanted something,” he says as he takes his clothes off.

I have a hard time looking away from his stiff cock, deliciously big and thick enough to make my pussy ache. “I still do...”

“You’re getting it tonight,” Jason whispers in my ear as he and Sully are quick to join us. “You’re getting the three of us inside you, baby.”

“Ask and we shall deliver,” Sully growls and grabs me by my hair, yanking my head back so he can freely lick, kiss, and nibble on the side of my neck.

Matthew smiles as he watches the scene unfold before him, while Jason

gets naked and climbs on the bed, standing upright as he holds on to the wooden frame of the canopy. A devilish smile slithers across his face, wholly uncharacteristic against his warm, blue eyes. Then again, there's always that tinge of sweet danger whenever we get intimate. It's as if their darkest, most decadent selves emerge behind these doors, and I'm always there on the receiving end. There's nowhere I'd rather be.

They dominate me, they control me, they have me in every which way, and the surrender is downright addictive.

"Take this off," Sully says as he unclips my bra, tossing it on the floor. "It's nice and all, but I need to feel you, all of you."

He cups my breasts in his hands, squeezing softly at first as he trails wet and sloppy kisses down my neck and shoulder. We watch as Matthew sits on the bed's edge, then lays back between Jason's legs. I can't help but smile as I realize what it is that I'm about to do. I lick my lips as I get closer with Sully behind me.

"I should work on this, first," I say as I take Matthew's cock with one hand, giving it a subtle squeeze until I feel it twitching, the thick veins pulsating along the shaft as a droplet of precum blossoms at the reddened tip.

"You should," Matthew replies.

I take him in my mouth, tasting him shyly at first. I lick the saltiness from the tip and then slide him down my throat, relaxing my muscles as I try to get as much of him as possible. Listening to the sound of his ragged breathing, his tormented moans as he watches me suck him off, I become increasingly more aroused while Sully massages my breasts and wedges his cock between my ass cheeks, moving slowly so I can feel him getting bigger and thicker against me.

Jason caresses my face, admiring my work on Matthew before he gently clasps my chin and beckons me to look up at him. "My turn, sweetheart."

"Your turn."

He slides into my mouth, gloriously long and hard, and I suckle on him like it's my favorite lollipop, while my hands focus on Matthew, stroking him closer toward a peak of primal pleasure. Sully gets down on his knees and kisses my wet pussy, his tongue slipping between the slick folds. I moan loudly as his hand comes up, the middle finger pressed against my clit, teasing until crackling tension gathers in the center of my being.

"Take it all, Selina," Jason beckons me. I soften the back of my throat as he goes deeper.

I can barely breathe but I can't get enough of him. I love losing the air in favor of feeling him inside me like this. Matthew's groans tell me we're reaching a point of no return, but the cataclysmic event is only just starting and it's about to unfold, to sweep us off our feet and shatter us entirely. Sully's fingers dig into my thighs.

"Oh, right there, baby, right there!" I cry out as an unexpected orgasm blows through me.

He flicks my clit as the sweetest release unravels through my body, his tongue licking my pussy and tasting every drop of ecstasy that now flows freely and shamelessly. I hear him growling with unbridled pleasure as he takes everything that I have to give before he moves away and I climb on Matthew's cock.

"We'll go easy, honey," Sully says.

I hold my breath for a moment as Jason takes my hands and positions them on his muscular thighs. Taking note of the faint scars from his years in active duty, I hold on tightly, fingers delighted by the feel of his soft skin. I have to hold on to Jason as he fills my mouth again.

But the best part comes when Sully climbs on the bed behind me and carefully goes in, spreading and stretching my pussy wide so he can share it with Matthew. The sound of their voices is like music to my ears, moans of raw pleasure and sizzling desire, of primal instincts and mindless passion as I am shared evenly between three men.

Jason hangs on to the canopy frame as he glides in and out of my mouth, as crystalline tears roll down my cheeks. I shift some of my weight onto my knees for both Matthew and Sully to pump me full. It hurts so good... I never thought it would feel like this. Nothing of what Cynthia wrote in her diary even comes close to this incredible sensation.

"Oh, God," I moan as I take a quick breath, just before Jason goes back in.

I welcome him, gladly sucking as Sully and Matthew pound into me, harder, deeper, and faster. I'm stretched so thin yet I don't want them to stop. Every nerve ending in my body has caught fire, and the blaze is spreading as Matthew's thumb slips between and shamelessly presses my swollen nub. It's all I can do not to fall apart, brick by brick, as the orgasm crushes me, dismembers me, rocks me to the core.

Ripples explode outward, and I scream out their names as the three of them fuck me.

Harder. Deeper. Faster.

Sully has me by the back of the neck with one hand, while the other fondles my breast as he thrusts into me like a dark, all-consuming savage. Matthew holds me by the hip as I rock back and forth, taking more of him and Sully in the process. Jason is the first to surrender, his cum shooting down my throat. I moan delightedly as I swallow the full load, the saltiness lingering on my tongue while I feel his muscles twitching in the release.

I'm still coming down from my own orgasm when both Sully and Matthew finish inside me. The physical and emotional impact is overwhelming as they hold me tightly in the very last moments, fucking me deep and hard, thrusting and filling me to the brim, freeing themselves as our bodies and souls merge together. My lips are still closed around Jason's cock, and the entire moment is divinely sublime. It's unbelievable.

My mind is liberated. My body is scattered into trillions of sparkles across the universe. My pussy is tender and swollen and beyond sated. My heart is singing a concerto of its own as we ride this devastating wave, as we surrender to the fate and melt into each other, losing our senses and our minds in the process.

I know without a shadow of a doubt I want more of this, forever.

More tonight, and every night that I have left to breathe in this world. It's gone beyond physical with us—we're bonded in something amazing together, deep and emotional, instinctive and organic. It's more than just a fling. It takes trust and intimacy, it takes a special kind of... love, perhaps...? for me to open up like this, to let these men sweep me off my feet, to let them dominate me into this reckless submission until I'm all theirs.

"I'm all yours," I moan as the afterglow glazes our naked, sweaty bodies in the shimmering moonlight that slips through the window. "All yours."

"You are," Matthew whispers.

"Ours," Sully adds.

"Forever," Jason sighs deeply.

Forever. What a sweet and dangerous word that can be. Screw going back to Providence anytime soon, that concept flew out the window the moment I opened the bedroom door. *Forever*. A hard word to believe. Tonight I choose to believe it, though. Tonight I'm theirs, all theirs. Tonight and forever.

MATTHEW

We got deep so fast.

I thought Cynthia's unexpected return had most certainly destroyed everything, but Selina surprised me last night. I didn't expect her to ask for it, for all of us, for everything we wanted to give her from the very beginning. But then she did, even putting on that gorgeous lace set I got her. It was meant to be a treat, something to boost her self-confidence, something for her to wear at some point this winter. I didn't imagine she'd use it as fuel for the colossal amount of courage it took for her to ask.

Last night was unreal—better than anything I've ever experienced before. Selina makes Cynthia become part of a faded memory from a past I no longer wish to revisit. I am not in the habit of making comparisons, yet I can't help but notice how much more of a woman Selina can be, even when she's at the lowest point in her life. She is perfectly attuned to all of us in body, mind, and spirit. Selina functions on the same frequency as we do, a vibrating supernova upon which Sully, Jason and I are fortunate enough to feed, to thrive on, to grow on.

She makes me want to be a better man. I never imagined I'd feel this way about a woman again. Cynthia damn near destroyed me and my friendship with the guys. I shake my head slowly as Jason comes over to the kitchen counter with a fresh pot of coffee. It's not even 7 o'clock yet, but none of us could sleep any longer. We left Selina upstairs in the master bedroom. She needs all the shuteye she can get after the work she put in. A good woman deserves her rest.

"What are we going to do about Cynthia?" Sully asks. He's been sulking by the window for the better part of the morning. "She won't be going away

anytime soon.”

“Last night was just the beginning,” Jason sighs, settling on a stool next to me.

I can feel his gaze fixed on my face, reading my micro-expressions to try and figure out where my head’s at. Half of my brain is still focused on the goddess sleeping in the master bedroom. I can still feel myself inside her, pulsating as her heat envelops me, as her unspoken love floods my heart. But the other half is gazing toward the wretched past that almost destroyed us last night.

“We’re going to have to be careful however we proceed,” I finally reply.

Outside, a lazy sun is rising over the woods, blades of morning light cutting across the snow. Rebellious flakes linger before the occasional gust of northern wind scatters them away. There’s a snowfall coming, but we still have a few days before the first blizzard hits. It’s going to be a rough winter up here, though I don’t mind it. Hell, I’d rather we get snowed in. For months. That way, Selina doesn’t have to go anywhere and Cynthia stays away, ideally snowed in at her own place, half-a-mile away which in blizzard snow is sort of the equivalent to an uncrossable ocean. I think we’ll hit the slopes again later. I need to get some of this anxiety out of my veins before we settle back with Selina by the fire tonight.

“However we proceed?” Jason asks, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“Well, it’s not like we can pack up and leave,” I reply dryly. “I’m not letting anybody run us out of this place, not when Selina needs it so badly. Not when she needs us so badly. Granted, we also clearly need her.”

Sully nods once. “Then what are our options? Cynthia will come over on Friday for dinner with... what’s-his-face.”

“Lance.”

“Some doofus who has no idea what he’s getting himself into,” I say, shaking my head in dismay.

Jason chuckles bitterly. “What are the odds that she’s really with this guy? That she has actual feelings for him.”

“Slim to none.” Sully agrees. “She wasn’t good to us, she wasn’t good for us. We weren’t good for her, either. At the end of the day, we only have the four of us to blame. But she was fixated on us and judging by her demeanor last night I really can’t see Lance sticking around for much longer. He seemed like a ruse for Cynthia to integrate herself back into our lives. And the fact that she just happened to have ‘crossed paths’ with Selina earlier in

the day has me doing a double take here.”

“Yeah, I’m not buying the accidental encounter either” I say.

“Alright, so the question remains the same. How the hell do we handle this? Our relationship with Cynthia was beyond toxic. It could’ve ended much worse, and we all know it. It was a frickin’ trainwreck from beginning to end, and now she’s circling back, hungry for more. How do we protect ourselves, and how do we protect Selina from her?”

I give Jason a long and tired look. “We can’t exactly tell Selina the truth. We share a lot of the blame here, and frankly, I don’t want to lose her because of what happened with Cynthia.”

“I get it,” he says.

“We can’t exactly hide Selina away, either” Sully points out. He comes to the counter to refill his mug, adding sugar and cream with slow and precise movements. Sully is very specific about how he takes his coffee. “Cynthia has already found a way to get to her.”

“We can stay close to Selina and make sure she’s never out walking alone,” I suggest. “But at this point, other than keeping Cynthia at arm’s length, I don’t know what else we can do.”

“Not without crossing some legal boundaries,” Sully exhales sharply and rolls his eyes.

Out of the three of us, Jason had the hardest time after the ordeal with Cynthia, but Sully is the one still nursing one hell of a grudge. I can’t exactly blame him, given how it turned out. It took a hell of a lot of patience and self-control to pull us back together, and there were several moments where I feared miserable failure. Things never should have gotten as far as they did; all we wanted was a woman for the three of us to love and cherish without any envy, fear or concern about the future. Cynthia was a pretty dream until the reality of her finally crashed into us.

We almost burned with it.

“Whatever happens next, Selina can never know the truth,” I warn the guys. “She can never know what happened.”

“I’m not sure we can avoid it,” Jason says. “Cynthia seems determined to haunt us.”

“Maybe. But who says we have to let her in?” I reply with a cold smirk.

Sully scoffs. “So, what, do we just lock the door on Friday and pretend we can’t hear her knocking? I’m pretty sure we don’t want Selina to see us cowering like spineless sacks of—”

“Hey, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here,” I reply. “We can still do dinner on Friday as long as Lance is still coming with her. We’ll keep the conversation at an amicable level. And whenever she tries to slip into the past, we pull the conversation away immediately. For Selina’s sake as well as our own.”

“You’re really into her, aren’t you?” Jason gives me a wry smile.

I can’t help but mirror his expression as I lean back in my chair. “Like you’re not completely smitten yourself. And don’t even get me started on Sully here.”

“What’s not to love about her?” Sully grins, but it’s not the kind of grin I often see on his face. There is warmth in his dark eyes, hope in his voice, and light where deep shadows used to reside. Whatever Selina is doing to him, it’s a good thing. It’s good for Sully, it’s good for Jason, and it’s certainly good for me, otherwise we wouldn’t be so hell-bent on keeping her safe and out of Cynthia’s reach. “Selina needs peace and quiet out here. Not the poison of a past we’re not even involved or interested in anymore.”

“I agree,” I tell him. “So, we’ll go ahead with dinner but we’ll keep it fiercely platonic. And if Cynthia is brazen enough to insist on scratching wounds we’ve worked so hard to heal, we can show her the door before she even considers going any further.”

Jason curses under his breath. “I don’t like that we’re so vulnerable with Selina here. And I absolutely hate the effect that Cynthia has on us.”

“Selina comes first, no matter what,” Sully replies. “We need to keep her safe and happy. She deserves it.”

“And we deserve peace of mind,” I say. “Let’s see how Friday unfolds. Maybe Cynthia will surprise us and she’ll be decent and normal.”

It’s not impossible, but history does have a way of teaching us that people rarely change at a fundamental level. Cynthia’s core is pure poison. It’s in her nature, and I don’t have a lot of faith that’s she’s changed.

The stakes are higher and far more precious with Selina. For the first time in what feels like an eternity, I’ve got someone I feel is worth fighting for— tooth and nail. I know the guys feel the same way, otherwise we never would’ve done what we did last night. We wouldn’t have allowed ourselves to be so open and vulnerable, for things to happen as quickly as they have with Selina.

I worry about her. I want to see her happy and thriving. But how can I protect her from Cynthia when I’m not even sure that I can protect myself?

SELINA

Dinner with Cynthia and Lance wasn't as weird as I thought it would be, and I have a feeling it surprised the guys, as well. Whatever happened between them last year must've stayed there, in a time that no longer exists. She seemed pretty attached to Lance and he's definitely crazy about her, he was dotting on her every second, making sure she had everything she needed without Cynthia ever having to say a word.

Truth be told, Matthew, Sully, and Jason are the same way with me. I'm never hungry or thirsty, definitely never lonely or sexually or emotionally unsatisfied. A couple of weeks have passed since Cynthia's return to Aspen, and while there is still tension occasionally caused by the mere mention of her name, things seem to be progressing in a more positive direction. My relationship with the guys is evolving to a new and intriguing level. Physically, we're a perfect match, like pieces of the same puzzle that were lost in different boxes over the years.

Emotionally, they each respond to me differently, and I draw that emotion from them differently, too. Matthew is still my rock, the man I go to for advice and comfort. He never lacks an answer or an encouraging word, and if he ever finds himself unable to assist me, he always nudges me toward Sully or Jason instead. There are days when I can't help but imagine building a family with this man, and it fills my heart with feelings I didn't think I'd ever get to feel.

Jason is my sunshine, my endless fountain of smiles and lighthearted jokes, or dirty puns and laughter. Nothing is ever too serious with him, but when he does have to leave the giggles aside, he steps up and exposes his very core—a strong man with clearly defined values and sharp boundaries. I

like the contrast, though I always fall back into the warm and silly side of him.

In terms of strength, Sully is my go-to. Not only for physical but also mental strength. The level of self-control that this man displays on a daily basis is truly impressive. Most importantly, he is the shadow I like to hide in whenever I'm overwhelmed. The way he grabs me, the way he holds me tight and claims me when I need it is so hot and feral, I love it. He's unpredictable, and he makes my heart skip numerous beats.

When the three of them come together, I surrender wholly and without hesitation because I feel safe and cherished, desired and appreciated, on every level.

This is by far the most beautiful winter I've lived through, and Christmas is just around the corner. We went through one blizzard without much ado. Granted, everything was fully stocked, and the power lines didn't suffer any glitches for the three days that we couldn't get out. All we could do was sleep, eat, and screw each other senseless in between watching reruns of old procedural cop shows or reading books that Matthew has collected in the living room library over the years. I've recently discovered Raymond Chandler, and I have to admit I'm fascinated by the tension of his novels. I never would've read this guy before and it's just one more way in which being around my ex-Marines has changed me. My ex-Marines. Holy hell, it has gotten to this point where I freely call them mine.

Despite finding better reading material, I haven't stopped skimming through Cynthia's diary. We've had a couple more encounters out on the slopes since that Friday dinner, and she has been nothing but nice to me. Part of me remains wary and particularly cautious, though I'm not sure why. The guys won't talk about her, no matter how many times I try to bring it up. And I wouldn't dare ask her, either.

Luckily I have her diary so while Matthew, Sully, and Jason are out on the slopes this morning, I pour myself another cup of joe and retreat back into my bedroom, nestled by the window with Cynthia's words in my lap.

It's snowing, quietly and beautifully. Generous flakes fall in loose clusters settling over a seemingly eternal blanket of white that covers the forest floor and the cabin's backyard. I'd go for a walk again, but I'm still sore from yesterday's skiing session. I'm getting better, but I have a long way to go before Jason feels comfortable enough to let me take the slopes on my own. This rest day is welcomed.

“All good things must come to an end, someone once said,” Cynthia writes in her diary. It’s strange for me to read this stuff, now that I have a face to put to the author’s name and words. Though I can’t ignore the subtle pangs of jealousy, I find comfort in the thought that I’m now the one sharing the master bedroom with these guys. *“I didn’t think I’d smell the finale so quickly, though. It’s been getting harder to be around them, particularly on our foursome evenings. Sully doesn’t like it when Matthew and Jason take me at the same time. More than once, he has nudged Jason and Matthew out of the way so he can have me to himself, leaving me to suck them both off instead. When we’re alone, Sully is rougher, firmer, and while most of the time I like it, there are moments when he can be quite intense.”*

I can see Sully being intense. I do remember one time, the other night, when Sully took me from behind while I handled Matthew and Jason with my mouth. But I loved it. I loved every damn second of it. And they didn’t seem to mind it, either. I’m getting wet now from just the memory of that moment, the way Sully ran his fingers through my hair before grabbing a handful and ramming into me, filling me with his burning essence.

“But it’s Jason I’m most worried about. He has been coming around my bedroom at night more often than the other guys. He has repeatedly said he’s tired of sharing me with them, but when I lovingly told him that we’re the best when it’s the four of us together, he walked away, red-faced and furious,” Cynthia writes. *“He came back four hours later, drunk as a skunk. It was a shock to me. I thought he’d been sober for a year or more... for him to fall off the wagon like that he must be going through something. The problem is I am horribly turned off by such behavior, so I locked my bedroom door to keep him from coming in. He did try but I ignored the knocking, pretending to be asleep. It was so awkward and shameful. We met downstairs at breakfast this morning. I’m not sure he remembers any of it, but he could barely look me in the eyes.”*

I’ve seen Jason’s gaze lingering over the wine glasses now and then, but he always makes sure to only fill his with sparkling water or cranberry juice. He’s currently been sober for a year now—which sounds a lot like what Cynthia just noted—so I can’t help but wonder if this is some kind of cycle that the guys are going through when they’re sharing a woman. It sounds weird and rather toxic. Certainly not something that would be good for me, but without their version of events, I can only rely on what I read, on what I see and hear.

“There are times when I don’t really feel safe here anymore,” she adds on another page, dated a couple of days later. “I know they would never hurt me, it’s not that. But there is tension between them. Twice now I’ve walked into the living room, not realizing that there was an argument going on. Matthew has been nothing but kind and gentle to me. It’s Jason and Sully who are starting to worry me. I should’ve known they’d become possessive and jealous, even though we agreed from the very beginning that the four of us would be together. I agreed because I wanted them all, each for their own magic...”

Doubt slithers its way into my heart as I continue reading, associating her account with instances of my own where I have felt that there were words left unspoken, desires left unnurtured, and dreams tucked away under a mumbled ‘it’s fine, don’t worry about it.’ Could Cynthia have been right all along? Is my relationship with them doomed to repeat the same pattern? I can’t talk to them about it. They’ve made it irritatingly clear that discussing Cynthia is not an option.

In the meantime, Kieran is still texting and trying to get a hold of me. I’ve resorted to blocking his number. My dad called to ask me about my holiday plans. He’s still in rehab, but he wanted to get out for a couple of days. I told him to stay there and not worry about me. Mom hasn’t bothered to respond to my last message, so I think I’m done checking up on her as well. If there’s anything I’ve learned from my time spent here in Aspen, it’s that I don’t have to cling to the people who aren’t good for me, no matter who they are.

I deserve better, and it’s time for me to start treating myself accordingly. No more lowered standards. No more useless effort to prove myself worthy of love. I am worthy. And Maddie’s death shouldn’t have changed that. I deserved my parents’ love and affection then, and I certainly deserve better now. So maybe I should be careful with the guys, too. Matthew, Jason, and Sully may have the best intentions in mind, and I may be falling in love with them—which is a huge problem given the circumstances—but I need to protect myself by any means necessary.

Perhaps I’ll start by paying more attention. I’ll keep reading Cynthia’s diary. If I feel us getting any closer to the demise currently unfolding between these pages, I will figure out a way to extricate myself from the situation and head back to Providence.

Assuming that I can. Judging by the ache in my heart whenever I think about it, I’m worried it’s going to be a lot harder to do than it is to say.

SELINA

There's another blizzard coming tomorrow night. The forecast isn't looking great for the rest of the week, either. We may be snowed in for longer than three days this time, and I'm worried it'll become the perfect breeding ground for anything that has been festering over the past couple of weeks. I've been extra careful around the guys lately. Around Jason and Sully, in particular. There are subtle changes in their behavior, changes I probably wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't read about them in Cynthia's diary.

I try not to worry about it too much, but that's the trouble with doubt—it slips through, it festers, and if left unattended, it develops into a whole new voice in the back of my head, whispering and feeding my fears. It sucks me dry of my physical and mental energy, making it harder for me to sleep or to even look at my men the same way. I'm starting to regret ever touching that journal, yet I can't stay away from it, either.

I decide to go outside and take some photos of the forest behind the cabin. There's a macro function on my phone camera that yielded pretty interesting results of last night's dinner and drinks. And as my memory unravels those events, I begin to see certain moments more clearly. One that has lingered in particular is of Jason staring at Matthew's wine glass. He's licking his lips, ever so slowly, but in an anxious manner. The air between us has been rather loaded since Cynthia's return, and while they do their best to keep everything running smoothly, I'm observing kinks in their armors, micro-fissures that may widen over time.

I worry about them.

Making my way down the mountain side, the snow midday up my calves,

I carefully follow a path and snap photos of anything and everything along the way. A gnarly old oak root jutting out of the white, crunchy blanket like a serpent before it disappears below again. A handful of acorns left next to a boulder, frost settled on one side like a transparent glaze. The temperatures shift drastically between the day and the night in Aspen, so it's not uncommon to come across patches of ice here and there. The light amplifies its crystalline top layer, so I'm compelled to photograph it.

The deeper I focus, the more I distract myself with the occasional warbler or wandering squirrel in search of food, the farther away I get from the cabin and the guys. I do need the space, though. The time alone. The room to breathe and analyze things so I can hopefully come to the conclusion that I am overthinking everything as usual. But the look on Jason's face from last night persists at the center of my consciousness, along with a whispering fear that he is close to a fall. Too close for his own sake. Matthew did mention once that if Jason slips off the wagon again, it'll be a lot harder to bring him back.

"Hey, you!" Cynthia's voice echoes from about fifty yards to my left. At least she didn't startle me this time. I turn to see her coming over, clad in a deep red ski suit and thick black snow boots. Her long brown hair falls down her back, while a furry hat covers her head and brings out the deep brown of her eyes. In this angle of light, she reminds me of a bleeding deer that just escaped the clutches of a ravenous wolf, though I'm not sure why. The look in her eyes seems serene, almost kind if not for the shadows that I have yet to interpret, the hesitation that seems to follow her everywhere. "I figured I'd make noises from afar so as not to scare you again," she adds with a giggle as she hops over a cluster of tree roots. "What are you doing out here in this cold?"

"Oh, just taking some photos," I reply, smiling softly. "I was getting bored back at the cabin."

"I know the feeling. Staying in Aspen for longer than a month can get boring sometimes, and there aren't enough streaming movies and TV series' to get you out of that rut."

"Or books, for that matter."

Cynthia laughs. "Precisely. How have you guys been lately? Haven't seen you in a while."

"We're fine. We've just been hanging out, sleeping, eating, hitting the slopes... you know, the usual winter holiday shenanigans," I reply, feeling

my cheeks burn a little brighter.

“You guys are really close, aren’t you?”

There is warmth in her eyes, but the tone of her voice sends subtle shivers down my spine. “We’re very good friends,” I tell her. “And they have been nothing but kind and generous to me.”

“They take care of their woman, that’s for sure,” she sighs deeply, glancing to the side. “Matthew, Jason, and Sully are wonderful men. I know them well enough to say that with certainty. Really... wonderful... men.”

“That they absolutely are,” I reply.

Why do I feel so inadequate in front of her? I don’t get it. Granted, she is a gorgeous woman, the kind one might see on the cover of beauty magazines or dominating the runway in some sleek haute couture outfit that would turn any head. Or reigning over the red carpet at a posh Hollywood event. She’s effortlessly glamorous—her skin always perfect, her hair always silky, and her lips always glossy.

She’s perfect. A vision to behold, with golden brown blush highlighting her sharp cheeks and just enough smoky eyeshadow to make it seem like she just stepped out of a movie, yet she comes across as naturally beautiful. And intense. She is definitely intense, I’ll give her that. Compared to Cynthia, I feel like a run-of-the-mill salesgirl that tumbled out of Providence and right into Matthew’s winter cabin. Then again, I suppose that is precisely what I am.

“I’m glad you’re all getting along,” Cynthia says after a moment. The silence was starting to get awkward; I just don’t know what to say to this woman. I know more about her than she’d ever tell me herself yet she has no idea that I do. “The guys deserve someone to give them the peace and the affection they so deeply need. They’ve been through hell and back, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Their past lives as Marines. Selina, they saw things out there on the battlefield that we can’t even begin to imagine. They had to do terrible things for their country, for those they were trying so hard to protect. The kind of trauma they survived... it changes people, even the most strong-willed. Surely, you’ve come to know them well enough at this point to understand what I’m trying to say here.”

I stare at her for a few seconds, wondering if I should bring up the diary. No, because then she will probably assume I’ve read it. The guilt is too much

to bear, but my ego won't let me go down that easily. Instead, I force a half-smile, thinking about everything she just said about my men.

"They don't talk about their service that much," I say. "I suppose it's not exactly dinner conversation material."

Cynthia gives me a surprised look. "They were pretty candid about it with me in the past. It helped me better understand their trauma and their bond, in particular. It's not every day that you see three men so close together and happy to share a woman equally."

She knows. She knows I'm getting the royal treatment. Of course she knows, since she, too, was once on the receiving end of the same. My expression makes her giggle.

"Relax, Selina, we're adults," Cynthia says. "It's obvious they're into you, and that's great. Like I said, they need it. They probably need you more than you need them."

"You think?"

"I'm sure of it. The guys are strong and self-sufficient by nature. And their friendship is one hell of an emotional support system. But nothing compares to a woman's touch, especially one who's strong and brave enough to handle the three of them at once." She pauses, briefly narrowing her eyes at me, searching my face for something though I'm not sure what, exactly. "I suppose you have your alone time with each of them, too. Right?"

I nod once. "Yeah."

"Just make sure your time together in the master bedroom takes up the majority of your interactions," she says, a sad smile fluttering across her beautiful face. "Matthew is well-balanced, but Sully and Jason can get... possessive, sometimes."

The words from her diary come back to haunt me, but I can't let her see or even suspect that I may very well know what it is she's talking about. "How was your experience with them?" I ask.

"What do you mean?"

"I assume you were together at some point. All of you."

Cynthia smirks and points back down the mountain where she hiked from. "I need to get back to Lance. He gets anxious without me, especially during the day," she says. "It was nice chatting with you, Selina. I'll see you guys around."

"Oh, okay."

I watch her walk away, but the weight currently stifling my heart has

become unbearable. Her hips sway in bold red against the snowy backdrop as she makes her way back down to her cabin, somewhere beyond those old pine trees. I hear birds singing nearby—little instruments hidden in the evergreen branches, trilling their lives away in the wintery silence while I try to figure out what to do next. Something tells me there's more in that diary for me to find, more signs to pay close attention to.

There's an oddness about Cynthia in person that I didn't pick up from her writing. A certain air of knowledge and suspicion, a shadow lingering over her shoulders whenever she mentions Jason and Sully. Her gaze softens when she talks about Matthew, but there's something I can't put my finger on, an unknown that I can't leave alone.

It may be over between them, Matthew has made that clear more than once, yet I still have this nagging feeling that it may not be as final as he says. At least not for Jason and Sully, and the thought of having to emotionally share them with another woman doesn't sit well with me. If anything, it only exacerbates the anxiousness that I've been feeling since she first showed up at the cabin with that vintage champagne and that big, bright smile on her face.

I wonder if she's told Lance about them. He clearly didn't have a clue that first time she came by, nor during the slightly awkward dinner that followed. Hasn't he noticed any of the fleeting looks, the stolen glances, the muted sighs that leave her chest whenever her gaze meets Matthew's? I noticed. And it bothers the hell out of me.

She and the guys had a deep and intimate connection, much like the one I share with them now. I'd probably feel the same if it were to end, only for us to meet again a year later. The thought of it ending makes my very soul hurt on a whole new level. It's scary because I never wanted to fall so deep, to depend on them in such a way. It was supposed to be a fun and sexy winter getaway. A crazy fling that would take my mind off my financial troubles and Kieran. A moment's respite while I got my crap together and set some money aside for a deposit on a place of my own once I got back to Providence.

What I didn't expect was that the thought of a future without Matthew, Jason, and Sully in it would make my heart hurt so bad. I don't want this to end. I don't want to be like Cynthia. I simply cannot bear it.

JASON

It's getting harder each day.

I don't want to think about Cynthia, but all the hurt that I was left with after it ended has bubbled its way back to the surface, and old habits are starting to taunt me. Demons of days long gone have returned, drawn closer by the smell of my vulnerability, by these open wounds I thought had closed on their own. It's not love that haunts me anymore, my heart is stubbornly stuck on Selina. She burrowed her way in there and refuses to leave.

The agony I experienced after Cynthia is a ghost that refuses to leave, and her return to Aspen has only made things worse. Not too long ago, I'd have numbed it with liquor. I'd have started with wine, of which there is plenty in Matthew's cabin. He wanted to keep the place dry for me, out of respect. Yet I insisted that he and Sully continue with their lives and habits. It wasn't fair then, and it still isn't for me to take away from their enjoyment simply because I can't control myself.

After the wine, I would've opened a bottle of whiskey. Matthew keeps a couple of single malts in a cabinet in the living room. I've been eyeing those for days, constantly telling myself that I don't need it, not a drop. Dulling the pain won't make it go away, and as bad as it feels, sitting with my emotions and facing them has always gotten me through. But that doesn't seem to be working today. I'm tired. Tired of fighting the past, tired of reprimanding myself, of hating myself for what happened with Cynthia, for how things degenerated into something that is downright unforgivable. My own honor code makes it hard for me to coexist with myself while Cynthia is here, in Aspen.

Hiding within Selina isn't helping either. There are moments when I close

my eyes while her lips are lovingly wrapped around my cock, and my mind begins to play its filthy tricks on me. I end up imagining Cynthia in her place, and by the time I release myself in Selina's gorgeous mouth it's too late. I'm already miserable for having disrespected her in such a fashion. She deserves better, and all I've done is prove I'm unworthy of her love and affection.

I know she's the one for me, for us.

But what happened last year was clearly left unresolved. A gaping wound we'd hoped time would heal on its own. That's the thing with wounds, though, they tend to fester when left unattended. I should've remembered that from my years of active duty.

I'm at the Elk Shack, one of Aspen's cozier bars, nursing a lemonade. I'd hoped the citrusy taste combined with honey and a scandalous amount of mint and crushed ice would drag my mind away from these intrusive thoughts. I could barely look Selina in the eyes last night. This morning, as she stirred beside me in bed, I only wanted to disappear. I wanted the floor to split open and swallow me whole. This woman gave herself to me, to us, and we're allowing the ghost of Cynthia to ruin everything. Damn her.

There's music playing in the background, a soft, mellow country song I've heard plenty of times on the radio, but it's hitting hard in this moment, maybe it's the singer's pained voice or the twang in his guitar. Whatever it is, it's making it difficult for me to focus on this wretched lemonade. I should hit the slopes again. My skis rest in the corner, just a few feet away from my booth, striped in red and green and silently beckoning me to get up and put my body to better use. The cold air outside should knock some of this anguish out.

But my feet won't listen. They're drilled into the wooden floor as I glance around and observe the handful of customers currently cheering full pints of beer and oversized mugs of mulled wine as they talk and plan the rest of their holiday season. Christmas is so close, I was expecting themed music to be playing, but I'll take the cowboy's mellow bitterness over the sweetness of carols and jingling bells. Look at them, look at all these people, laughing and celebrating without a care in the world.

They know nothing about the hell we've endured.

The wars we fought for their comfort and benefit. The people we killed in order to keep them fat and safe and happy. Our own souls for theirs, for country and duty. And just when I thought I'd vanquished my demons upon returning to the states, just when I thought I had a good business to focus on

and a new life to start in Providence, along comes Cynthia, turning everything upside down. Maybe if we tell Selina the truth, she'll understand. Perhaps it will make some sense as to why we're so apprehensive, so tense, so unable to be ourselves around her anymore.

I know Selina can feel it, the difference in our behavior. The shadows lurking and nipping at our necks, desperate for pain and blood. It's only a matter of time before she's scared away by our inability to reconcile with the past. We should've done better by Cynthia. Seeing her so breezy and friendly doesn't sit well with me. I know it's a lie. I know she hasn't forgotten any of it.

"Fuck," I mutter as I see her and Lance coming into the shack. It's as if my thoughts summoned her somehow. As if I wasn't dealing with enough already.

Glancing down at my lemonade, I give my phone a quick peek, praying that someone might call—one of the guys handling my charter boat business while I'm away for the winter; Sully; Matthew; Selina; my folks back in California. Hell, anybody will do. I need to stay busy while Cynthia and her new beau do their thing. What are they even doing here, anyway? Cynthia always called this place a dingy dive bar. So beneath her, the Hamptons-bred princess.

"Jason!" she squeals excitedly upon noticing me.

"Crap," I whisper and force myself to smile as pleasantly as possible.

She waves at me, and I nod in response. To my horror, Lance takes his seat in one of the spare booths by the window, already flipping through the menu, while Cynthia stops by the bar then comes over with a couple of tequila shots in one hand and a mulled wine in the other. The menacing smile on her face comes with flashes of red-hot danger as she approaches. I could just run out of here. I should. But I'm paralyzed. She's getting closer.

"Hey, stranger, long time, no see," Cynthia says as she sits across the table from me.

"What are you doing?" I ask, my tone cold and flat. Contempt seeps from every pore on my skin as she makes herself comfortable and downs the first tequila shot, a grin splitting from ear to ear. I used to see her as the most beautiful woman in the world, yet all I see now is an ugly creature with poison for blood.

"Having a drink with an old friend. What does it look like I'm doing?" she replies, her eyes never leaving my face.

My sweater feels itchy all of a sudden. “Having a drink in front of a sober man. On purpose.”

“Said man is hanging out at a bar where they sell rivers of alcohol,” Cynthia shoots back. “I’m just doing what most people in bars do. Don’t blame me for your inadequacies, Jason. It’s very unbecoming.”

There she is. The real Cynthia. The scheming bitch who almost ruined a bonded friendship with her conniving and her lies. We aren’t exactly innocent, either. There were four of us in that relationship, and not a single saint in sight. I shake my head slowly.

“What’s your endgame, Cynthia? You’re not here for the winter holidays,” I say. “You’d rather be somewhere hot and sunny. You never liked the snow as much as you’re pretending you do.”

“Lance wanted a traditional Christmas, and I was able to oblige. I love my man, so I’ll do anything for him. That’s something none of you understood. How much I can love. How deeply.”

The mask she’s been wearing since she first showed up a few weeks back is finally starting to crack. I’m not sure what triggered it, but I only hope it’ll fall apart before she’s able to do any more damage. Hell, who am I kidding? My lips feel dry. My mouth is made of cotton as I watch her swallow the second tequila shot, licking her lips at the end for good measure. No salt, no lime, just raw tequila. The smell is downright inebriating, and I can feel myself sliding deeper into the darkness.

“Why won’t you just leave us alone?” I ask. “You had your fun.”

“I’m still having my fun. Did you really think I’d go away for good? You can’t be that naïve.”

There it is. A subliminal hint at the manipulative, ultimate goal. She is definitely playing at something, and she has sharpened her claws in the year that she’s been gone. “You should’ve stayed away,” I tell her. “You’re not welcome at our cabin anymore, for starters, so don’t even think about inviting yourself over for dinner again. For Lance’s sake, maybe work on your issues so you don’t end up destroying a guy who is clearly crazy about you.”

“And I’m crazy about him,” Cynthia replies, but the lack of enthusiasm in her voice tells me she’s lying through her pearly white teeth. “As for your abrasive tone, I don’t care for it much. Aspen is a big place, Jason. I am free to go wherever I please and speak to whomever I want. Oh, and before I forget, I’ve come to gather that you and the boys haven’t been exactly forthright with Selina about us. She should know what she’s getting herself

into, don't you think?"

"You stay away from her," I hiss. The anger is getting the better of me, and I don't know how much longer I can control myself. "You're toxic, Cynthia. And you've done enough harm already. Move on and leave us be."

"I can't do that. Not while the three of you still think you can get away with what you did," she replies, the coldness in her eyes like a vice on my throat. The threat is real, and I can no longer ignore it. "I think Selina should be made aware of the monsters she's sharing a bed with."

"Cynthia, I swear to God, if you do anything I'll—"

"You'll what, tell her yourself?" she laughs bitterly. "Don't be ridiculous. You knew what I wanted, and you denied me, Jason. You, Sully, Matthew... you turned against me and broke me beyond repair."

"We were trying to help you."

"Bullshit. You were helping yourselves," she shoots back. "And that was a conscious choice. It's fine, though. I've grown a lot since. I've healed. And now, I've come around on behalf of karma herself. I will get what's mine, sooner or later. Jason, if there's one thing you seem to have forgotten about me..." She pauses to take a long sip of her mulled wine, notes of burnt orange peel and cinnamon hitting my nose... "It's that I am unstoppable once I make up my mind."

"Dammit, Cynthia, you're playing a dangerous game here."

"No more dangerous than what you and the guys are trying to play with Selina. Do you really think this setup of yours is meant to have a happily ever after?" she sneers. "Don't be a child, Jason. It will never work. It will only end in tears and misery. I'm only looking out for you, even if you don't see it."

"You're only looking out for yourself." I tell her. It's hard to even breathe in her presence.

The true side of her emerges slowly, like a dying sun over a jaded horizon. The reality of our past, of how little any of it meant in the end. I didn't think I could despise a person as much as I despise Cynthia. What a fool I was, to think she'd actually changed. What a fool I was, to think she's actually with someone new and moving on with her life. It puts us in a whole new kind of danger, because we can't lose Selina. We've only just found her.

Cynthia exhales sharply, giving me a contemptuous look. "I was fond of you, Jason. I gave you everything, remember? My body, my heart, my soul. What's happening now is simply a consequence of your actions. You can't

stop fate.”

“What do you want, Cynthia? What will it take to keep you away from us?”

“You can’t afford what I want,” she smiles broadly. “I’ll take it myself, though. I don’t need your help.”

She gets up, having just finished her mulled wine. She leaves the empty mug and tequila glasses under my nose as she goes back to Lance and says something that has him nodding and agreeing to leave the bar a minute later. What burns the most is that she doesn’t even bother to give me one last look as she goes out the door.

It wasn’t a threat nor a promise. Cynthia made it clear that we’re due for a reckoning and that she has come to collect. I need to tell the guys about this immediately. We need to talk things through and figure out a way forward. I’m not even sure if leaving Aspen earlier than planned would resolve the situation. Cynthia is resourceful and connected. She will come for what she feels she’s owed, even if it means stepping all over Selina in the process.

I can’t let that happen.

“What the hell am I gonna do?” I ask myself, tears stinging my eyes as I make my way to the bar. It’s a legitimate question at this point. What am I going to do, when I’m not even able to leave the past behind. I live with the ghosts in my head and the ache in my heart because I don’t know any other way. Sooner or later, I’m going to disappoint Selina.

I might as well do it now, before she gets any deeper.

“Do you want another lemonade?” Rusty the bartender asks me. I’ve been coming around long enough for him to remember me and my non-alcoholic preferences, but he isn’t surprised or taken aback when I give him my answer.

“A double shot of Irish whiskey.”

I might as well drown in the whiskey and dull myself so I won’t feel the pain when Selina inadvertently realizes how weak I truly am. Cynthia just proved it, simply by taking a seat at my table.

SELINA

Come midnight, I find myself sleeping alone. Matthew retreated to his room with a book for the evening, and Sully appeared withdrawn and closed off. I tried to get him to stick around so we could watch something from the streaming bundle but he just kissed me softly and went to bed early. Jason went out, and I'm sure that's another reason why the guys were partially gloomy, they're concerned about him. He's been on edge lately and I can tell he's not in a good place.

I've tried talking to him, but he just puts on a sunny smile and tells me everything is okay. This whole Cynthia issue is clearly eating away at them, and I feel helpless. I want to help them, but I don't know how to do it without revealing that I know more about their relationship with Cynthia than I've let on.

The chat earlier with Cynthia hasn't eased any of my concerns, either. If anything, it made a few of them worse. After tossing and turning for a couple of hours, I get up and go over to the window. I watch the full moon rise over the forest, now a diamond-studded mass of sleeping trees and delicate slopes. It feels like the calm before the upcoming blizzard—all is quiet and beautiful and still. It's as if time itself has surrendered unto this moment.

The sight before me is calming, and I could spend an eternity admiring the snow dressing the ancient pines, the rabbits darting here and there in search of food, the moonlight shining a pathway through the trees. There's a sense of simplicity here that I never experienced while growing up in Providence. Here, I can relax and be myself.

Selina. Former tennis prodigy. Former kid sister. Former daughter. Now a grown woman with a messy life but decent career prospects, and three men

who enjoy spending most of their time doting on her and ravaging her in every possible way. A wandering soul who only wants a family and enough stability to focus on building a better future for herself. I'm me, in all my imperfect glory, simply a human being in need of love and affection.

Yet this simplicity has recently come under fire with Cynthia's arrival. Perhaps her intentions are pure, but I do hold her responsible for the upheaval that is happening. It was easier before she returned. Jason's smiles were more sincere. Sully was much warmer and softer toward me. And Matthew didn't need as much time alone as he does now. She had a massive impact on them, the kind of impact they can't bring themselves to discuss with me, and it leaves me on the outside looking in, wondering if I will ever be enough.

It's an ugly feeling, this insufficiency, this sense that I may have to work harder for the kind of love that should come freely and easily. It doesn't make sense.

What does make sense, however, is if I treat myself to a slice of that leftover New York cheesecake I put away in the fridge earlier. I don't normally go for midnight snacks, but given recent events, I think I deserve a little treat. I've been getting hungry more often lately. It must be the fresh mountain air. Quietly, I leave my room and go downstairs.

I rummage through the fridge and fix myself a plate, adding a couple of crostini with hummus and cherry tomatoes while I'm at it. Dinner was light and delicious, and without Jason joining us, we were left with plenty of leftovers. There's more for him to eat when he comes back, so I don't feel too guilty about loading up now. My soul is craving comfort food and I'm happy to oblige. I settle at the counter island and eat in silence, my mind wandering back to Cynthia and my earlier conversation with her.

Their combat trauma from serving in the Corps and their inability to maintain the relationship with Cynthia was never much of a concern for me. I'd thought nothing of it until she spoke about it this afternoon. Once again, going back to Providence is a looming possibility, though I haven't got enough saved up for a deposit yet. I need at least another month to be able to afford something nice and closer to work. Kieran's place put a hole in my wallet on account of the commute, so I figured I might as well pay a little bit more every month but spend less on gas, instead.

By the time I get to the cheesecake I've been thinking about for the past hour, the sound of the front door opening and closing has me sitting up straight. I listen carefully to heavy boot falls on the hardwood floor and harsh

breathing. It's Jason, I quickly realize, so I get up, forgetting all about my snack as I rush into the hallway to see him.

"You're back!" I exclaim but freeze when I find him wobbling in the foyer as he struggles out of his boots. The smell of whiskey and tequila hits me like a hammer, and as soon as he turns around to look at me, I understand the tragedy of the moment. "You're drunk..."

The words left my mouth as soon as they formed in my mind, and the shock caused them to just roll out of me unfiltered. Jason smirks, his blue eyes hazy and bloodshot as he glances sideways at me. "The wagon was shoddy," he chuckles, as he struggles to get out of his coat.

"How did you even get back up here?" I ask, different scenarios running through my head. "You had the car, didn't you?"

"Well, I didn't park it in the mailbox, MOM."

I know he's trying to make light of an incredibly awkward and difficult situation. I remember the whole 'falling off the wagon' dance from years growing up with my dad, after Mom left us. More than once, I watched him stumble through the door and try to be funny about what was clearly another episode of him caving in. Those memories have long since slipped into the darkness of a past I never wanted to revisit, but seeing Jason like this is making them come back and with them, the painful feelings.

Repulsion. Disappointment. Heartache.

I thought better of Jason. I thought he was stronger than this.

"Are you okay?" I ask, wondering if I should get closer.

He shakes his head. "Nope. But I'm gonna be. I just need to sleep it off. What are you doing up at this hour?"

"I was hungry. Where have you been?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Jason laughs nervously, then runs a hand through his messy blond hair. He hasn't shaved in a couple of days, and while I usually enjoy the feel of his sandy stubble against my fingertips, it's making him look rather disheveled after hours spent drinking himself senseless. He looks at me with a sly look in his eyes. "Seeing as you're up, why don't you and I make the most of it?"

He chuckles and comes closer, but with him comes the alcohol vapors that I recognize from my own broken home. My stomach churns as disgust gathers in the back of my throat. I can barely look at him, and I don't want him to feel rejected, but there is no way this is going to happen right now. "Maybe you should just get some sleep," I try to say, but he closes the

distance between us and kisses me.

“We’ll sleep after I’m done with you, baby...”

“Jason, please don’t,” I manage, gently pushing him away. “This is not alright, and we both know it.”

He stares at me, disbelief glowing furiously in his eyes. “I should’ve known it would get to this. Fine, Selina. Just take your judgement and go to bed.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just—”

“Listen, toots, if you’re not gonna let me have some fun with you tonight, there’s a bottle of single malt stashed away in the living room that will,” Jason snaps and brushes past me. “Actually, there are two bottles but I’m going to show restraint so you don’t think I’m a complete failure.” He stops by the sofa and gives me a long look over the shoulder. “Only a moderate one.”

“Jason, please—”

“No, no. I get it,” he waves me away. “Go. I’m fine.”

“Jason—”

“I said I’m fine!”

The thunder in his voice startles me. I forget all about my plate in the kitchen and any other thought I’ve been nursing this evening. The sight of Jason binge-drinking is enough to destroy my appetite and bring tears to my eyes as I nod slowly and run back upstairs. As if that wasn’t bad enough, I lock the door behind me, something I’ve never felt the need to do before. Damn Cynthia and her wretched diary, it’s like a frickin’ oracle, foreseeing the very downfall of the one good thing in my life.

Yet as much as I despise that damned book, I end up reading more from it as I sit by the window and turn the night light on. I’m shaking like a leaf as I flip through the pages, wiping the tears away in order to keep my focus on the scribbled words. I can hear Jason fumbling around downstairs, and I’m pretty sure the guys can hear him, too, but nobody comes out to check on him. They probably realize what’s going on. They’ve probably known since dinner, when Jason still wasn’t home, and that is why I ended up going to bed on my own.

“Sully’s mood has gone south,” Cynthia writes. “After Jason’s drinking episodes, Sully has gotten harsher, colder. He appears soulless. Almost threatening. It’s hard to describe this sense of danger I feel when I’m around him. It developed in subtle, almost unnoticed stages. He’s been letting this

rage inside of him eat away at everything that is good in his heart, and Jason's issues have reverberated across to him. The helplessness of watching his friend suffer like this... the helplessness of having to share me with his mates... it's killing the kindness in him. I can tell. I can see the sadness festering, morphing into something mean and ugly.

"This morning, I offered to make breakfast for them. Sully snatched the pan from my hands with such speed that I nearly fell backward. Matthew jumped in to catch me at just the right moment, but I could see them glowering at each other. I've got a bad feeling that the built-up tension is going to explode soon."

I shake my head, furious at what I'm reading. This can't be right. This can't be what's happening tonight, too. It's not fair. I'd only just found a small measure of peace in this place, this idea of love on another level, of a bond that could withstand the test of time and societal norms, somehow. Then again, living in isolation in a cabin in the mountains during the middle of winter could easily skew reality.

Maybe it was all just an illusion from the beginning. Maybe I've romanticized the entire dynamic solely for the purpose of falling in love after my disappointment with Kieran. Frickin' Cynthia, man.

"It finally happened," she writes in another diary entry. "Sully snapped. He and Matthew got into a fight outside. I was taking a bath when I heard the commotion. By the time I got downstairs, they were bloodied and bruised and hurling insults at each other while Jason struggled to keep them apart. I tried to get involved but it only made things worse. Matthew told me to go back to my room. I don't feel safe here anymore."

It doesn't make any sense. Even in this moment, as I read these words, I struggle to imagine this side of Sully that Cynthia has so vividly described. He may be the tall, dark and mysterious type, but Sully is a good man with a giant heart and the patience of a saint. He likes it rough in the bedroom, sure, but I love that part of him more than anything. The way he pushes me around, the way he grabs my hair, or the finger-necklace he puts on me while he fucks me senseless, I love all of it. I've never felt any danger or discomfort, only safety and trust.

Why would he blow up like that? Cynthia doesn't mention a reason, but I think I can guess at this point. It's her. It had to be her. I have a feeling the reason Jason came home drunk is also because of her. Cynthia's return has wreaked havoc on all of us. Our little corner of wintery heaven has been

turned upside down, and it's breaking my heart in ways I didn't expect.

"Jason's drinking every day," Cynthia notes on another page. *"He barely talks to me anymore, and when I try to talk to him about his issues, he just tells me to go suck Matthew's dick, since he's my favorite. Jealousy is a dangerous thing because it breeds hurtful words that cut deep. He's in a lot of pain, and much like Sully, he is having an increasingly hard time in this relationship. I love the three of them equally. I would never leave one for the other. It's either the four of us or nothing at all. And the prospect of nothing makes me want to curl up and cry through the night."*

I know what that feels like.

Looking back at the past couple of days, I realize the signs are already there. Jason is slowly pulling away from the group, and tonight's incident will certainly cause a deeper dent in their relationship, not to mention ours. He knows about my dad's history of heavy drinking after Maddie died. He knows how painful this is for me. So, why did he do it? Why did he choose to drown in alcohol instead of talking to me about what's bothering him?

We used to be so open with each other. We used to tell each other everything. Well, almost everything. I've been keeping this diary a secret from them, so it's not like I'm Saint Selina over here. But I would never hurt any of them intentionally. *I'm hurt.* I'm hurt and offended, and I'm sensing that I have little time left in this place before they discard me for old and nasty habits.

If I don't feel safe here anymore, I can't stay here. But I don't want to leave them, either. I don't want Cynthia's fate to become mine.

SULLY

Jason falling off the wagon is the first of many dark days to come. And it's not just an ominous thought I've been having. It's history repeating with enough accuracy to scare the hell out of me. After my years in the service, I never imagined I'd feel this way again, but it's real—the dread, the insecurity, the sensation that everything I've tried so hard to hold on to is ultimately going to slip through my fingers.

I heard him come in the other night. I recognized the all too familiar sounds.

Matthew and I spent days and nights helping him out, keeping him close and giving him the support he needed to get through those first months. I saw Jason at his worst, and I am ready to see him through it again if I have to, but if there is one thing I've learned from his last relapse is that he needs to come to the right conclusion himself. Something tells me Selina will be his turning point this time around. He doesn't want to lose her, and neither do I. Matthew would also be devastated.

We've gotten too close and we know it but there's no turning back. A love like this doesn't just pop out of nowhere. *Love*. As much as I loathe the word, I can no longer deny its reality. I'm scared, petrified. Selina saw Jason. She knows that something happened to him, something bad enough to make him drink again. I haven't spoken to him yet, he's been avoiding us.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to put two and two together. Things have consistently gone sideways since Cynthia slithered back into the picture. She should've just stayed gone. God, I wish she would have remained a memory, a bad dream that we would eventually forget ever happened. The worst part is that it is taking a toll on me, as well. As much as I try to control this rage

within me, Cynthia's presence is forcing my demons to resurface. There are moments when I can barely tolerate other human beings around me, and simply looking at Selina makes me feel inadequate and insufficient for a woman like her. I'd thought I'd get away with being part of a trio of men loving her, but if I can't stand on my own when I'm with her, I'm worthless. Soon enough, she will see it.

The best I can do for the time being is to spend an hour out in the cold, chopping up some firewood. Jason is upstairs, likely coming out of his binge and feeling miserable. Matthew is away, probably running errands. There are snowier days ahead, and we need to be ready. I did ask him to have more logs delivered to the cabin later in the week. Hopefully, they'll get here before the next blizzard.

My thoughts aren't good company right now. Selina is up on the slopes, likely skiing on her own or stressing the hell out of an instructor. With Jason currently unavailable and in his current situation, I reckon she wanted to put some distance between them. I'm embarrassed for him, for the three of us. We were supposed to be her knights in shining armor but it turns out we were the fools, obviously. With ghosts of our own, with wounds like ours so quick to reopen, how could we even imagine ourselves capable of rescuing a woman who isn't even a damsel in distress but rather a gorgeous warrior queen who's simply fallen on some hard times?

"Knock-knock!" a familiar voice has me gripping the axe a smidge tighter as I turn around and see Lance coming into the backyard, accompanied by Cynthia.

My stomach turns, but I manage to give them both a nod of acknowledgment. "Lance. Cynthia."

"Sorry for showing up unannounced but we were getting bored," she says.

Lance raises a six-pack for me to see. "I brought some Belgian brewskis, I figured you'd appreciate them."

"Thanks." I straighten my back and put the axe down, despite my itchy palms. I take the gloves off and receive a bottle from the six-pack, then nod at the thick wooden stumps we often use for stools out here. "Make yourselves comfortable." I look at Cynthia with a furrowed brow. "Why didn't you two just go into town while you still can? There's another blizzard coming."

"We figured we'd hang out here with more familiar faces," she says, smiling broadly. "You know how Aspen tends to get crowded during this

time of the year, blizzard or not. Way too many tourists for my taste.”

That’s a load of bull. I’d like nothing more than to call her out on it, but Lance will feel compelled to step in and defend his woman’s honor. And then I’ll have to beat the crap out of him. He’s innocent in this whole thing. He’s the stooge that Cynthia saw fit to bring around in order to make herself seem innocuous and benign. We know better, but Lance doesn’t. He’s just collateral damage.

“How is your stay here in Aspen so far?” I ask Lance, trying to keep the conversation civil and neutral, even though I can see how persistently Cynthia is staring at me. I deliberately avoid her gaze and focus on Mr. Square Jaw and Baby Blues over here. “I take it you’ve had your fun on the slopes already.”

“Oh, yeah, loving every second of it,” Lance replies. “Skiing, snowboarding, the whole shebang. I didn’t think I’d be so good at it, but my girl here says I’m a natural.”

“Well, you are. It’s rare for a man to have such poise and stability while battling the slippery snow slopes,” she says, laughing lightly. “You have no idea how many brave fellas have tried showing off and ended up getting airlifted from the middle of the southern woods.”

“Thanks, honey.” He shifts his focus back to me. “So, what did you say you do for a living, Sully? I don’t remember that part from our dinner chat.”

“That’s because I never said what I do for a living,” I reply dryly and take a long sip of my beer. Mulled wine would’ve been better in this cold, but anything works to take some of the edge off. “I’m not much of a talker, in general.”

“Sully is a pretty private person,” Cynthia tells him almost lovingly. It makes me sick to my stomach.

“Well, I’m curious,” Lance insists. “I mean, I get that Matthew is a big shot of sorts, taking over his father’s businesses and now running his own. And I understand Jason started his own business from scratch and that it’s booming right now. So, what is it you do?”

I give him a long look, wishing he’d caught the hint and let the subject rest. “I’m in the UFC circuit. And I train kids at the community center back in Providence.”

“Train kids?”

“Yeah. Kickboxing, MMA, Krav Maga. Mostly for self-defense and discipline.”

Lance nods slowly. “What’s a UFC?”

“It’s a mixed martial arts championship,” I tell him. “Big money, big celebrities, lots of media presence... a darling of the sports betting industry.”

“I see. Pretty cool. Why do you do that?”

“Why do I do what?” I ask, inwardly screaming. I think I know where he’s going with this, but my self-restraint is ironclad.

“Fight. I mean, you could’ve done anything with your life after you got out of the military. Do you like violence that much? Beating people up?” He makes it sound so crass, so pointless and tasteless. I’m almost disgusted with myself.

“Sports fighting is more than that. It’s not at all about the violence,” I tell him. “It’s about discipline and self-control. About technique and understanding your opponent. Of seizing an opportunity and knowing when to switch to defense. It’s an art in and of itself.”

And yes, it soothes my hunger for violence, too. But it also soothes my soul and keeps me on the right track. Where does this preppy-ass prick get off on judging me, looking at me with pity and disgust, like I’m some misdirected idiot he just wandered across? Cynthia’s brown eyes are on me, twinkling with amusement. She knows he’s pushing my buttons closer to the point of pressure where I’m either going to snap and kick Lance’s teeth in or I’m going to hurl insults at him for being a snob.

The joke’s on her, though.

“I don’t know, man, it seems pretty pointless to me,” Lance goes on, slowly shaking his head. “I mean, how much longer are you going to be able to keep it up? You’re getting older. Don’t you want to run a business of your own? And teaching at the community center... that just sounds like a waste of time. Those kids in the projects always end up either dead, in juvie, or ultimately jail, but never in the right place. Listen, if you want, I could introduce you to a friend of mine. He’s just started a business with a capital infusion from his dad. Solar panel roofing. He could show you the ropes and get you involved. It’s a pretty penny in this economy and with the most recent EPA regulations that came into effect this year—”

“Thanks, Lance, but I’m doing just fine.”

“Are you sure? You’ve got, what, maybe three or four years left before the younger fighters come up and start bashing your skull in?” he chuckles dryly.

There is only so much my ego can take. “I’m still good at bashing skulls

of my own,” I reply, eyeing him intently. Finally, he gets it and gives me a meek nod. “And I wouldn’t trade coaching kids for anything in the world. People like you think you have them all figured out. They still have a shot as long as someone like me has the patience and care to work with them, and if there’s anything I can do to keep at least one kid off the streets, I’ll do it.”

“Oh, Sully, always the brooding fighter but with a heart of gold,” Cynthia chimes in.

I don’t feel like finishing my beer. Frankly, I don’t feel like putting up with these two anymore, either. Carefully loading the chopped wood into a large metal basket, I toss the beer bottle into a nearby trashcan we keep in the backyard and bid my guests farewell.

“You two should head back to your cabin and tuck yourselves in. I’m pretty sure there’s some heavy snow coming today,” I say and look up at the graying sky. “Thanks for the beer.”

“Wait, where are you going?” Lance asks with an insolent smirk. “The conversation was just getting good.”

“For you, maybe. I’ve got work to do.”

“It’s okay, baby,” Cynthia tells him. “We’ll head home and put on a movie or something.”

“Alright,” he mumbles.

“You know your way out,” I say and go inside with my firewood, the blood boiling in my veins.

As soon as I shut the door behind me, I give myself a moment to breathe. But it’s as if a boa constrictor has coiled itself around my throat, tightening its grip until I almost choke. I drop the firewood basket and curse under my breath, tension gathering between my shoulder blades as I listen to their voices fading outside the cabin.

The nerve of him. The audacity of her. He may not know what she’s up to, but he’s a peach all on his own. An arrogant jerk who thinks he’s better than me. Just because I don’t make as much money as Matthew, or I’m not as successful as Jason doesn’t make me any less worthy of respect. What the hell is wrong with me? Why am I letting this buffoon’s words get to me like this? And why is Cynthia’s presence so toxic and suffocating?

Deep down, I know precisely why.

It’s my sense of self-worth that is fragile. It’s always been fragile. For as long as I can remember, people have doubted me and my ability to get ahead. Matthew and Jason were the only ones who consistently supported and

encouraged me, even when I felt like the road ahead was bleak and hopeless. Even when all seemed lost, they were there. They still are. Yet all it takes is someone like Lance to knock my ego down to bits and pieces.

“Hey, Sully,” Selina comes downstairs. She finds me standing in the kitchen, snow melting from my boots and onto the floor. Damn, she looks beautiful in a deep green velvet onesie that’s one size too big yet still able to suggest her full curves under my gaze. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah...”

I will be. I need her. Now, more than ever, I need her. Selina appreciates my strength. She likes me for who I am, who I’ve always been. I have no control over my body as I walk over to her and plant a kiss on her lips. She stills before me, holding her breath as our lips remain locked for a long moment. I wrap my arms around her, breathing her in as I deepen the kiss.

Selina is sweetly responsive, my safe haven in the eye of a storm I’ve been dreading for a long time. Yet the balance she gives me is fragile and easily shattered. The more I see of Cynthia prowling around, the clearer it becomes that no one is truly safe. She said that much to Jason not that long ago. The woman has returned to wreak havoc and make us miserable. In a way, we deserve it. But Selina... I can’t lose her.

“You’re squeezing a little too tight, baby,” Selina grunts softly as I realize how hard I’m holding on to her.

“I’m just getting started,” I reply and bite her lower lip.

She moans as I scoop her up in my arms and carry her upstairs. I don’t want to think about Cynthia right now. I don’t want to think about Lance, either. Not about Jason’s issues, not about Matthew’s reserved nature that has recently been more of a curse than a gift. No, right now I just want to lose myself inside this woman and forget about the rest of the world.

There is too much anger inside me, and it desperately needs release.

SELINA

I don't know what's gotten into him, but I welcome the affection with a sliver of doubt in my heart. Sully is more intense than usual, his grip on me firm as he carries me up to the master bedroom. I'm a little confused, though, because we use the master bedroom for our foursome lovemaking, not our one-on-one encounters. It's weird and unexpected, yet it's hard for me to pull away.

"I want you so badly, it hurts," Sully growls as he trails kisses down the side of my neck.

His hands roam up and down my body, my clothes and lingerie already on the floor. My breasts feel swollen and tender, so I can't help but whimper when he grabs handfuls of them to kiss and nibble and suckle. "Easy, baby," I manage, but the pain soon turns to pleasure as his teeth graze my skin.

"I need you."

"I'm right here, baby..."

It's been strange around the cabin lately. And it doesn't feel right for us to be doing this in here, without Jason and Matthew. The more I think about it, the more disconnected I become, despite the arousal causing liquid heat to pool between my legs. A scented candle has been burning on the nightstand for a few hours, so the room is loaded with a sweet and spicy mixture of apple and cinnamon—my favorite Christmas combination. The holidays are coming, and I'm overwhelmed by simultaneous waves of profound and confusing emotions. I long for the comforts of a stable home, the loving arms of a man, of three men, the warmth of a log fire and the safety of a healthy relationship... it's odd that I am so close to each of these things and yet feel so far away at the same time.

Sully kisses me, this time hungrily, viciously, as if he's about to devour me. His fingers dig into my flesh as he squeezes my ass cheeks, one hand sliding between my legs to find me wet and hot and ready for him. He finger-fucks me deep and fast, teasing my clit with the base of his palm, applying the perfect amount of pressure until I cry out in sudden agony and ecstasy. It almost hurts, but in a good way. I come undone, my juices flowing over his hand as he shoves three fingers in, constantly pumping and stroking me until I'm forced to hold on to him for dear life as I ride the wave of a shattering and unexpected climax.

"That's it, baby, come for me," he says, then pulls back and looks at me. "Now, get on your knees and take it like a big girl."

I do as I'm told, half-dizzy in a luscious afterglow and still hungry for him. Yet the room we're in keeps staring back at me, the walls giving off an accusatory silence as I'm on my knees. I open my mouth and welcome him in. He's rougher than usual, but it turns me on. The guilt should be eating away at me, but the taste of his magnificent cock and the precum drizzling on the tip of my tongue are enough to fool me. Sully holds my head as I deepthroat him, relaxing my muscles to take all of it, listening to the sound of his ragged breath as I feel him pulsating with a devastating inner fire.

"Sully, we're alone here," I manage as I take a deep breath. "We shouldn't—"

"I don't care," he replies and goes back in.

I suck him hard in between rushed sessions of licking and slurping his shaft. I've got one hand fondling his full balls, while the other hesitates on his thigh. There's something off-tune here. Something that doesn't quite fit. No matter how badly I want this, no matter how turned on I still am, the silence of the master bedroom returns with a vengeance.

"Sully..."

"Dammit, Selina, I don't fucking care!" Sully says and helps me up, then bends me over the edge of the bed. "Come here..."

He grabs me by the back of the head as he spreads my legs and spears me, filling me and stretching me in an instant. I gasp from the sheer size and girth of his monster cock, desperate for every glorious inch as I feel myself slick and tightening around him. He drills me hard, pumping fast and deep until I lose my breath. His hold on my nape strengthens, and I feel like a feral cat that's getting one hell of a pounding.

"Oh, God," I whimper as he goes deeper and harder. He slaps my ass.

I quiver, my insides turned to lava as I take him. Deeper, harder, faster.

He grunts with each thrust, while I try to keep up with the speed and the intensity of this possession. It's different. It's animalistic and wild. It's almost dangerous, but not in a way that scares me—it's merely unsettling—yet I can't stop him. I don't think I want to.

“Give it to me, baby, please,” I moan, feeling another orgasm gathering in my core, a ball of lightning that swells and swells as he slaps my ass again and again, then proceeds to slip that hand around my hip. His fingers find my clit, a swollen and overly sensitive nub which he flicks most viciously, making my knees buck. “Sully... oh, God... Sully!”

“Take it all!”

I have no other choice but to obey. The explosion is merciless and blows me apart as he pumps me full of his hot seed, one reckless thrust after another while my pussy ripples and trembles around him. My screams of ecstasy are muffled by the bedcover as I feel him deep in my body and my soul. But the pleasure is woefully short-lived. The afterglow fades quickly as the guilt returns to the center of my consciousness, and I realize what we've just done.

Sully realizes it, too. He's barely done and panting as he leaves me hanging on to the edge of the bed, my knees weak, my body covered in sweat, my ass reddened by his spanking and my back cold in his absence. “Dammit,” I hear him curse under his breath.

Tears rush to my eyes. “Matthew, Jason,” I whisper. “This wasn't right, not without them.”

“Don't you think I fucking know that?” he snaps.

For a moment, I just stare at him. Disbelief knocks me around as I pull myself up, feeling downright ashamed and vulnerable. I'm waiting for him to come over and comfort me, but Sully just settles by the window, his arms crossed and his muscular chest glistening with sweat in the noon's cool light. He can't even look me in the eyes. It only serves to amplify my growing anxiety and insecurity. It's bad enough we stripped our partners of the respect they deserved, but now he's not even giving me the small measure of reassurance that I so desperately need.

“Sully...”

“Maybe you should go.”

Anger bubbles through my veins. I feel used. Fucked out of my mind and cast aside solely for him to recover some sense of self-worth or self-control, maybe. This was supposed to be an intimate moment between us, not an

opportunity for him to fill a hole and loosen up. “Screw you,” I say and walk out, shaking like a leaf.

By the time I get in my room, I’m crying my heart out, naked, as I hold my clothes with both hands and lean against the door. I can hear him cussing in the master bedroom. A flurry of curse words and punches. He’s punching the wall. He hits too hard, and I hear the plaster burst open, the wood crackle. The sound of his pain reverberating through the cabin makes me fall to my knees, utterly distraught.

This was wrong on so many levels, and he couldn’t even own up to it, he couldn’t even be bothered to comfort me. I would’ve comforted him. I would’ve taken him in my arms and given him the love he needed. Why is he acting like this?

It all started when Cynthia came back but everything else that followed is on them, on each of them alone. Only they are in control of their own behavior. The writings in Cynthia’s diary are coming true, and it’s a painful thing to acknowledge. I’d hoped I was special, that I meant enough to them to stop the past from repeating itself. But Sully’s anger is getting out of control—I’m not scared of him, he’d never hurt me, but he is absolutely hurting himself, digging himself into a deeper hole. Jason is drinking again. And Matthew... what will he do to ruin everything?

Because it’s only a matter of time, now. Only a matter of time before it all falls apart.

I fear I’ll be alone, homeless and brokenhearted yet again. This was supposed to be a naughty winter getaway, an opportunity to just rest and relax for the holidays before I’d have to go back to Providence and face the mess of my life. How did this whole thing devolve into an even hotter and painful mess?

MATTHEW

Something happened the other day between Sully and Selina. Neither of them will talk about it, but I can tell there's a dark cloud lingering between them. Jason is still mostly huddled away in his room, nursing his shame and drinking binge. It took a serious toll on his psyche for him to need this level of isolation, though I won't even consider bothering him. He needs some space and time to think. And with Selina and Sully barely speaking to each other, I don't know where this leaves me.

We haven't been together in days. The master bedroom is out of the question with Jason being so withdrawn. The balance I was so happy to live through has crumbled like a shoddy brick wall. I'd hoped we'd get over this hurdle without incident, but Cynthia keeps butting in. Sully doesn't have to tell me anything for me to figure it out. The same goes for Jason. After my last conversation with her, I know she is determined to wreak havoc among our ranks. We never should've let her in, but we were all head over heels at the time, thrilled that we'd found a woman for all of us to be with, to share without a single hint of jealousy. It made sense.

Unfortunately, Cynthia was and will always be unstable and unsettled. Unwilling to compromise, let alone share us the way we lovingly shared her. I feel played, foolish. Even after a year, the sting of that affair's disastrous end still lingers. I can't shake the guilt that I've felt every day since. I should've cut her off long before things escalated the way they did. But I was stubborn. I kept hoping we'd settle down and get past the arising issues. It only got worse and I had to learn some things the hard way. The past is in the past. At least it was for me, for the guys. It's Cynthia who keeps bringing it up and throwing it in our faces, if only to hurt us and to get Selina to run

screaming for the hills.

I wouldn't blame her if she did. Without our side of the story, she only has hints about what happened, bits and pieces from Cynthia. But even if she did hear our version of what happened, there's a good chance she might still run screaming for the hills. But my feelings for her are too strong now and I can't let that happen. I can't lose her. We can't lose her. I have to sort things out with Cynthia, the more I let it fester, the worse it's going to get.

Speak of the devil. As soon as I head for the door to run some errands, there's a knock. My nightmare resurfaces yet again when I open it. Cynthia stands in the doorway with a satisfied grin, looking particularly tame in her ivory-white sky suit and snow boots. Her car is out by the driveway, loaded with her skis and snowboard. "Hey, honey," she says. "Mind if I come in?"

"You're no longer welcome here, I thought I made that clear," I reply bluntly, my blood already boiling.

"Yeah, well, I'm asking for your permission, for you to make an exception. The last time I came around, I stayed in the backyard. You should appreciate that," she says.

"The last time you came around?"

"A few days ago. Had a beer with Lance and Sully. They seemed to hit it off," she says casually, as if nothing is wrong and everyone is getting along just fine. "Although I had no idea Sully was so frustrated with his professional life."

"What are you talking about, Cynthia?"

Sully has never mentioned anything about being dissatisfied in his career. Then again, I've barely spoken to the guys over the past few days. Selina has been just as scarce, which is unmistakably ironic, considering that we're all sharing this cabin. As if smelling fresh blood, Cynthia leans into the doorway with the confidence of a lioness that is about to pounce on her prey while I cross my arms, making it clear that I am keeping an invisible wall between us. There is nothing left here for her. No longing, no desire, no emotional connection. Deep down, she probably knows it, but she isn't the type to just give up and go her own way.

"Lance was only trying to help Sully out with his career. Or lack thereof. And Sully got defensive and overly proud, which ultimately resulted in a rude ending to our otherwise constructive conversation," she replies. "All Lance wanted to do was give Sully a chance to stop wasting his time beating up people for money. It's demeaning and pathetic."

I can't help but scoff and chuckle, disgust raising the taste of bile up to the back of my throat. "You're still trying to stir things, huh?" I reply, shaking my head. "You don't get it, do you, Cynthia?"

"What do you mean?"

"The innocent look doesn't suit you. I know what you're trying to do here, and I'm telling you, it won't work. We have moved on. You no longer belong in our lives. And no matter how hard you try to pick us apart, we're never going to give you that satisfaction. You'll never win."

Cynthia exhales sharply. "We both know you're more superior than Jason and Sully put together. If you'd stop wasting your time hanging around with those two, you'd see how better off you'd be. One is an alcoholic and the other one is a bloodthirsty gorilla. They're eons beneath you."

"That's what this is about? You're still trying to drive a wedge between us?"

"No, I'm trying to make you see the truth. We belong together, Matthew. You and me. Not you, me, Sully, and Jason. That's just never going to work out, and not because you and I wouldn't be able to support the relationship but because those two have no intention of growing up or getting better. They'll keep pulling you down to their level, and I only want what's best for you."

I could laugh if I weren't so furious with the audacity coming from her. "You and I will never be a couple, Cynthia. I don't love you. I will never love you."

"Who said anything about love? It's okay, darling, I have enough love for the both of us. You need to realize that it's in your best interest for us to marry. Our families would proceed with one hell of a merger. The whole East Coast will worship us by the time you make an honest woman out of me."

"Cynthia, have you lost your mind? Does Lance know you're here, what you're proposing?"

She giggles, rolling her eyes like a schoolgirl. "Oh, he'll get over it. I'm sure he'll understand."

"This isn't going to happen. Nothing is going to happen between us. Are you really this delusional?"

Her smile fades. Her mask is cracking. "What do you mean?"

"You and I are not a thing. We never were. We never will be," I say, half-amused. "Please don't tell me you're actually serious."

"Matthew, we belong together. We're a match made in Rhode Island

heaven, and we will have the world at our feet once you put a ring on my finger,” she says. “I don’t care what you tell yourself to sleep better at night, but there will never be a better woman for you than me. You deserve a full and healthy one-on-one relationship with a real woman. How much longer are you going to let those two hang on to you and hold you back from your destiny?”

“My friendship with Sully and Jason is not something you would understand. Clearly. You never did,” I reply bluntly. “Cynthia, I have no intention nor desire to ever be with you. Regardless of the reasons why you think we would make a great match, I’m not interested. You need to move on.”

“And you need to understand that this isn’t how life works,” she hisses. “If you think dipping your wick in that little skank you brought home for the holidays will replace the experience of being with a woman like me, you’ve got another thing coming.”

I’m beyond baffled. I’m starting to feel like this is just a bad dream where my subconscious has gone completely haywire, determined to render me shocked and speechless. Has Cynthia been stewing and having these thoughts ever since our breakup? Surely, she must’ve told these things to somebody, perhaps a healthcare professional. The red flags are screaming.

“Can you not hear the narcissism oozing from your own words?” I manage.

“A narcissist? Puh-lease. I simply know my worth and what I want.”

“What you think you’re worth and what you want is yours and yours alone. I’m not interested.”

Cynthia gives me a wicked smirk. “I suggest you think about it some more. And I also suggest you find a way to get Selina back home sooner rather than later. Things are already starting to unhinge between the four of you, that much is obvious by the sour look on your face.”

“I’m certain you had a part to play in that.”

“Get rid of her, Matthew, and start focusing on us. Get rid of her, or I will.”

It’s not a threat. It’s not a promise, either. It’s a factual statement, and it sends chills running down my spine as I watch Cynthia turn around and walk back to her car. I stare in utter disbelief, trying to wrap my head around everything she just said. This isn’t just a delusion she’s dealing with, it’s a dark fantasy she really believes will happen.

I'd even venture to say it's something much more toxic and dangerous, bordering on psychosis. The guys and I need to sit down and talk about this, whether they want to or not. I'm starting to worry for Selina's safety. And I'm not seeing any decent options ahead on how to protect her. Cynthia has been playing a long game here. I doubt I'll be able to best her before the Christmas holidays are completely ruined—because that is precisely what she's angling for.

Maximum damage. Sully, Jason, and Selina out of the way.

On second thought, I don't think I have to confer with anybody on this. As I shut and lock the cabin door, I realize that the only one who can do something here is me. And it's about damn time I did. I've been sitting on my hands for too long. Some hours later, Selina comes back from another ski session with a new instructor. I love this look on her—smiling and giggling with bright pink cheeks, telling me about her day, as she peels the dark green ski suit off, one piece at a time. All I can do is sit in the armchair, glass of whiskey in my hand, and admire her gorgeous body, her thick thighs and full breasts as they bounce while she wriggles herself free from the suit.

“Man, I was dying,” Selina says, waving her hands to cool down. “Heatstroke in this gear is a real possibility. Granted, I did have a mulled wine before I got back. That might've played a role.”

“I'm glad you had fun,” I manage, my eyes never leaving hers.

I miss her so much. I'll miss her even more when she's gone, but there is no other way for me to keep her safe. Not with Cynthia on the loose and clearly missing a few marbles. Selina gives me a curious look as she pulls her hair back and gathers it on the top of her head with a scrunchie. Loose, ruby curls fall and frame her round face, amplifying the green in her gaze.

“What's wrong?” she asks.

“I'd say there's been a lot wrong around here lately,” I sigh deeply. “And I'm sorry you got caught in the middle of it all.”

“I'm trying not to let it get to me,” Selina says. “We each have our issues, don't we? Living together like this, occasionally trapped by a blizzard... it was bound to bring some stressors into the situation.”

“This isn't about that, and I think we both know it,” I tell her. “Selina, I've been thinking...”

She stills, her eyes widening slowly. I'm guessing she can already see the wrecking ball coming even though I'm trying my best to let her down easy. My heart is breaking as my lips part, as I struggle to say the words that I have

repeating to myself throughout the day. In Sully and Jason's absence, I've been left with only my frayed mind to keep me company. And I'm not my best advisor, no matter what others might say. I've always had my friends to offer input and different angles on every problem. If anything, I'm pretty sure I owe most of my success to Jason and Sully.

Cynthia crippled them both before I could even anticipate such dangerous moves on her part.

"What's wrong?" Selina asks again. I can hear the subtle fade in her voice.

"We, as a group, are not doing alright anymore. Things from our past have resurfaced, and I thought we had a good handle on it all but—"

"By things from the past you mean Cynthia."

"Yes."

"That much is obvious. She rattled you. Jason and Sully, too. Rattled is probably not strong enough of a word," she sighs deeply.

I nod slowly. "It's only going to get worse unless we hit the brakes on this for a while."

Selina clearly wasn't expecting this. I can tell from the drop of her shoulders, the tremor in her voice, the sadness slowly settling in her hazel green gaze. "I see..."

"Maybe it's best if you go back to Providence for a little while. I've got a great studio apartment for you to live in until you get back on your feet. I won't charge you any rent, not until you're back in financial balance. But I can't, we can't, have you here anymore, not until we resolve our Cynthia problem."

"I don't need your pity," Selina replies harshly. I can see her hands balling into tight fists, the knuckles white with anger.

"It's not pity, Selina. I just want you to be comfortable and safe. Let's be honest, you going back to live at the store in the middle of the winter holidays isn't the best idea."

"I'm starting to feel like I'm the problem that you need to resolve. And I'm nobody's charity case, Matthew. I've got enough to pay a month's rent, if anything."

"I don't want your money right now. You need it more than I do," I say.

She scoffs and crosses her arms, the fury rising and swelling into the air. It's almost difficult to breathe as I try to navigate her understandably volatile emotions. Not only is she feeling rejected, but she is also being made to feel

helpless. It's not what I wanted, and certainly not my intention, yet my choice of words hasn't helped.

"What happened with Cynthia, exactly?" she asks, narrowing her eyes at me. "What is it about her, about your relationship with her, specifically, that you haven't shared with me? Why won't any of you talk about her?"

"What did Cynthia tell you? I know she has accosted you more than once."

"You're answering my question with another question. Do you see why I'm starting to get suspicious here?" she replies.

I nod. "We had a difficult relationship, Selina. Cynthia isn't, well, let's just say she isn't who she pretends to be. She may come across as friendly and kind, but there's a side to her that's dark and dangerous."

"I don't know why I have such a hard time believing that, considering that the only ones acting up around here these days are you guys. Jason fell off the wagon. Sully is rage incarnate. And you're trying to ship me back to Providence mere days before Christmas," Selina snaps. "You know what, Matthew? As much as I've enjoyed our time together, maybe it's time we put an end to it. Not a break, not a pause, because life and relationships don't work like that. You clearly don't want me around anymore, and I'm not about to insist on knocking on doors that obviously don't want to open for me."

"Selina, let's not—"

"Screw you!" she shoots back. "Thank you for having me here, I had a wonderful time. But then your unresolved issues came back to haunt you, and instead of opening up to me, instead of talking to me about them so that I might be able to help you, you chose to shut me out and then ship me out the door. Therefore, out the door I'll go. Don't worry about me, I know my way back."

She's already going up the stairs. I can almost hear her heart breaking, echoing the insurmountable turmoil in mine. "Selina, please..."

"No need to further explain anything. I got the message loud and clear," she says. "Don't worry. I'll pack my bags and be out of your hair by morning."

I'm about to go after her, but I know that in doing so, I will only make it worse. She's hurt and angry, and I deserve a hell of a lot more than what she has just dished. "Can we talk about it some more? Please? Later?" I ask.

"No. I won't be coming down for dinner, either. Leave me alone," I hear her say just before the door to her bedroom shuts loudly behind her.

Dammit. This entire situation is only getting worse. She will never accept my offer to stay in my studio. A proud woman like her, having just been rejected after things were getting so warm and intimate between us, will stand her ground. We had talked about spending more time together once we got back to Providence. Maybe even a spring break holiday in Tahiti. Life was looking bigger and brighter, but now it seems small and dark. Empty and senseless. We should've been more careful with Cynthia. We should have nipped it in the bud a long time ago. The price we're paying now is far too steep, and our own egos and shame won't allow us to tell Selina the whole truth.

What would be the point, anyway? Cynthia is determined to deliver the maximum damage regardless. Unbeknownst to her, the damage has already begun. Selina's reaction says that much. But at least she'll be safer once she leaves. I'll be able to better handle Cynthia with Selina out of Aspen.

SELINA

I didn't even say goodbye to any of them.

Before the break of dawn, I ordered myself a cab from Aspen, loaded my bags into the trunk, and instructed the driver to take me to the airport, leaving the guys and what was supposed to be a romantic and playful holiday behind. It's been a few days, now, and I'm back at The Sartorialist. Etienne was surprised to see me back so early, and even more surprised when I asked if I could pick up some extra holiday shifts. With Christmas just days away and my desperate need to find myself a new place, I could use the extra cash. Part of me regrets that I didn't take Matthew up on his offer, but dammit—I already received enough heartache out of the whole deal. The last thing I need is to live in his place as a tenant.

Whatever they had with Cynthia was serious enough to leave unmendable deep scars, and because of that, with them was not a good place for me to be. My heart tells me that I'm being foolish and proud, but I've got enough trauma in my backpack to keep me away from them. I'm done putting myself last, and I'm done being a victim of circumstances that are out of my control. They need to deal with their issues without dragging me into their mess. And I need some peace of mind.

Spending my nights at the store again isn't what I had in mind, but at the end of the day, it beats the silence and the tension that had engulfed the cabin. Not a day goes by that I don't miss them. My whole body aches. My heart bleeds, and my soul cries out for them. I've fallen deeply for all three. They each occupied an important space in my life and my heart, and now I need to clean everything up. I need to get them out of my system. It was a bad idea—getting emotionally involved. I should've stuck to the physical part and

guarded myself from anything else.

But who am I kidding? They're incredible guys. Strong, resilient, charming and kind, though their dark sides worry me. They don't scare me, but those ghosts of theirs were starting to haunt me, too. Their lack of transparency where Cynthia was concerned ultimately bled into other aspects of our relationship. Perhaps it's best that we separated now and not later. As much as it hurts, perhaps it will be easier on me going forward.

"Dinner for one," I mutter to myself as I come back to the store with a bag of microwaved sandwiches from the 7-11 down the block and a pregnancy test in my purse. I have enough anxiety to power the entire Empire State Building.

My period is a few days late. It may be nothing, but considering how I spent the last month and a half it's something I should consider. Actually, it's something I should've considered much sooner, but the moments spent in Aspen clouded my judgment. I didn't care. Everything about those guys is so hot and intense, so exhilarating and exciting, that I lost my rational thinking altogether—one more reason as to why I'm better off staying away from them.

I lock the store shutters and sit down at the counter to eat my food in silence. Unfortunately, I can barely stomach this pastrami sandwich. The smell alone is revolting, even though there is absolutely nothing wrong with it. I take a bite, and then another, but washing it down with sparkling water isn't helping.

If this is morning sickness, then the universe is absolutely teaching me the foulest of lessons at the worst possible time. Better to know now than later, however, so I leave the food and head to the bathroom. The last thing I need is a positive result, with my life back in shambles.

Yet it's a positive sign that I'm staring at twenty minutes later.

The nausea subsides into something far worse. A knot so tight in the pit of my stomach that I can barely breathe as I try to figure out what it is that I'm going to do. I'm still homeless and I've just walked away from three men who have touched my heart in ways I didn't even think were possible. My job isn't enough to keep me and a baby fed. The rent alone will cripple me because I'll need a two-bedroom, now, instead of a studio.

"What the hell am I going to do?" I ask myself out loud.

Only silence and numbness answer as I curl up on the floor and cry my heart out. I didn't need any of this, but I brought it on myself. I was so

desperate to get away from Kieran and my financial situation, so eager to be around three men who excited me in all the right ways. I was so happy to be able to spend some time in a winter wonderland, in the company of three souls that made mine sing new songs, songs I didn't even know it could sing. My body, my heart, and my spirit were in perfect sync, day after day, causing potential consequences to fade into the background, much like the rest of my life.

Now that I'm back to square minus one and unable to take my eyes off this wretched plus sign, every single unpleasant aspect of my life has returned to make me feel lonely, insignificant, and worthless. How the hell am I going to be a mother when I'm so thrown apart, so stretched all over the place and unable to pull myself back together?

My mom hasn't returned any of my calls. She can spend the rest of her life in Florida and keep forgetting that I exist. I'm done trying to fix something unfixable, and I'm done feeling guilty for getting Maddie out of the house that night. I was a kid, and I shouldn't be made to pay for a mistake until my very last breath. I've been living with Maddie's ghost in my head for too long, and it's the kind of weight that I can no longer carry. Not anymore. Not with this little thing growing in my womb and needing my full attention. Accidents happen. Maybe someday I will find a way to forgive myself for Maddie. I was the root cause, but ultimately the driver that T-boned us caused my sister to die.

As for my dad, he's just as lost. But at least he's trying to stay in touch. I can't tell him about this. It'll throw him for a loop, and the last thing he needs is chaos in the middle of yet another cleanup process. Thinking about his drinking problem throws me back to thoughts of Jason and his issues. Gosh, he must be tormented and restless, riddled with guilt and self-loathing. If only he'd let me in, if only he hadn't gone downhill and made things worse between us. I could've helped him. I helped my father enough times to know how to pull a man back onto the proverbial wagon. I could've been Jason's strength.

"It doesn't matter anymore," I whisper, the tears burning hot as they roll down my cheeks.

It really doesn't matter anymore. I've made my choices, and now I have another mistake to work on. I have a baby to take care of. Sure, I'm homeless and lonely, miserable and heartbroken. I turned away from Matthew, Jason, and Sully, aggrieved by the fact that they haven't resolved their issues with

their pasts. My own ghosts are very much present, bearing down on my shoulders and making it harder for me to breathe.

Christmas is coming, and I have no decent option, no place to call home, no man to call my own. I had three, and I miss them terribly. But Matthew said I should leave so I left. I keep telling myself these things, over and over, hoping that they might make more sense if I think about them enough. They don't, though, and I know they never will.

SULLY

“**Y**ou should’ve talked to us about it,” Jason says, sulking in one of the armchairs.

The cabin seems so empty and dull without Selina. I didn’t realize how much light and color she brought to this place. It’s only in her absence that the truth has emerged, that the impact she made becomes undeniable. The living room feels drab and cold, despite the fire crackling in the fireplace, the flames consuming each log with great hunger. We’ve been sitting here for the better part of an hour, finally reunited after days’ worth of solitude and isolation from one another—probably not the best idea after Matthew saw it fit to send Selina away. Jason and I have been trying to work on our issues in her absence but all we can do is miss her.

“I agree with Jason on that one,” I tell Matthew.

He sighs deeply, his shoulders dropping with the exhale as his gaze lingers on the fire. There’s a half-drunk glass of whiskey held loosely in one hand, the ice cubes melting and thinning the amber liquid with each absent-minded swirl. Jason licks his lips but manages to look away, determined not to hurt himself again like he did the other night. Instead, he takes a swig from his soda bottle and gives it a few seconds as it rolls down his throat before licking his lips again, this time with a glimmer of relief in his blue eyes. Things are getting better, I can see it on him. The tension, the guilt. They’re starting to fade away.

“Have you heard from her?” Jason asks. “She didn’t even say goodbye.”

“She left early, before any of us woke up. I wanted to give her a ride to the airport, but I guess she called herself a cab,” Matthew says.

“Dammit, man.”

“And she didn’t want to stay at your place in Providence, either” I scoff. “Proud woman, that one.”

“Can you blame her?” Jason replies, giving me a pained look. “Given the way we behaved...”

I give Matthew another glance. “We should’ve been firmer with Cynthia. You know this is all on her, right?”

“Yeah.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “I thought she was alright. I really thought she was better, but when I realized she was anything but, I pulled withdrew instead of pushing her away and setting firmer boundaries. This one is on me.”

“It’s on the three of us,” Jason says. “I let Cynthia get to me too. She came here prepared, fellas. She had a plan, and she executed it flawlessly.”

I nod in agreement. “She picked us apart, just like the last time. Except she had Lance as a good distraction. God, had I known that she planned on using him against me the way she did, I would’ve held back on myself, I would’ve controlled my temper better.”

“Selina was on the receiving end of everything,” Jason says. “I failed her. We failed her.”

Matthew sets the glass of whiskey on the table and clears his throat. “None of us expected to feel the way we do about Selina. I honestly figured we could have a nice holiday with a woman we all liked. When feelings began to emerge, I should’ve recalibrated the whole thing.”

“We were being careful,” I tell him. “And for good reason. Look at how it ended with Cynthia. How it’s still ending, for that matter, because the woman clearly isn’t done with us yet.”

“She’s not done with me,” Matthew says, concern etched in the shadows drawn under his eyes. “This is about me, Sully. It was always about me. Cynthia agreed to the three of us but she always had her sights set on me. It’s why she came between us, why she did the things she did, and when she saw us starting over with Selina, I guess she was hoping for a do-over this Christmas.”

“I understand. But my question is what are we going to do, now?” I ask. “We can’t let Selina think we’re done with her, that we’ve given up.”

Jason exhales sharply. “As long as Cynthia is around, Selina will never be safe. Remember what she told Matthew the last time she came here.”

“Fine. Then let’s do something about it. The three of us. What the hell, fellas? We’re Marines. We’re fucking men. How did we let a trust-fund baby

like Cynthia get between us like this? Not once, but twice already!” I demand.

It gets the desired result. Matthew gets up and takes a deep breath. “You’re right. You’re right, Sully, and I am sorry that I didn’t step up sooner. Assuming it’s not too late yet, I suggest we go straighten things out with Cynthia, once and for all. United we stand, right?”

“United we stand,” I reply, feeling a smile testing the corner of my mouth.

I don’t know how this will work out, but we can’t sit on our hands anymore. We let the ghost of a troubled past ruin a perfectly wonderful present and an extraordinary possible future. We froze, and we allowed our demons to take over. I should’ve been stronger, calmer. I should’ve stayed closer to Selina so Cynthia wouldn’t be able to get to her. I should’ve... it doesn’t matter anymore. What matters is that I miss Selina more than I’ve ever missed anyone in my life. I miss the feel of her skin on mine, the softness of her flesh, the smell of her, the taste of her. The sound of her voice and waking up next to her. I miss it all, and I intend to get it back.

* * *

MATTHEW, Jason and I make our way over to Cynthia’s cabin. The drive is relatively simple since the snow has settled in a thick layer on the country road. Matthew’s four-by-four truck handles the winter weather well. It has seen infinitely worse than this, and it’s more than capable to handle the slopes and bumps. I love driving this thing, it helps clear my head, so I’ve commandeered the wheel since Matthew has already had a couple of drinks. This whole thing with Cynthia has gotten to all of us, and it’s about time we did something about it.

It’s annoyingly quiet out here. Cynthia’s cabin sits between two others, with only a log fence separating the properties. It doesn’t appear as if anyone is around. As soon as we get out of the truck, I notice the shuttered windows and the quiet in the air. It snowed a little last night, and the old boot tracks leading to and from the house are mostly covered. Cynthia must’ve left within the past 24 hours or even earlier.

“Cynthia!” Matthew shouts as he bangs on the front door.

I watch the softening ice crumble and fall off the wooden frame with each

pounding of his fist. Jason goes around the cabin, checking the back for signs of life. By the time he returns, the three of us have come to the same conclusion.

“She’s gone,” I say.

“That can’t be right,” Matthew mutters, his brow furrowed. “She was determined to spend the whole winter here, like a thorn in our side.”

“There’s no car, either” Jason points out, nodding back at the narrow road. “And I only see our tracks coming in. The snow must’ve covered hers last night.”

“Yeah, it looks like she’s been gone a while,” I add.

The sound of snow crunching under boots has us turning around to find Mary Swanson as she comes down from the opposite direction, carrying a large bag loaded with maintenance tools and a shovel on her shoulder. She’s remarkably spry for her age. Frankly, I aspire to be just as sturdy and relentless when I retire. Mary is a force of nature, and right now, she’s wearing the smuggest smile I’ve seen in a while.

“Hey, Mary,” I call out. “What’s up?”

“Oh, just going about my usual rounds,” she beams at me, then makes her way past Cynthia’s front gate. “If you’re looking for the psycho bitch, she left last night. I’m just here to clear some stuff out of the cabin and make sure everything has been turned off. Rest assured, I’m doing it because her parents pay me, not because I give a single hoot about this place.”

“Your resentment is duly noted,” Matthew chuckles. “Did Cynthia say anything before she left? Like where she’s going?”

Mary shakes her head. “Nope. I was coming out of Albert’s cabin yesterday evening when I heard her and Lance arguing. He came out first, red-faced and furious. He got in his car and drove off. Cynthia was in the doorway, grinning. She seemed to be in a good mood despite the argument they had.”

“So, she didn’t say anything,” I mumble, hoping for some sort of idea as to where she’s gone.

“Nah, just that she’s headed out soon enough, too,” Mary says. “Which is why I’m here, now. Listen, fellas, I think you’ve had enough trouble with that hussy last year, enough to keep you traumatized for a lifetime. Why are you back here, looking for her again?”

Jason laughs awkwardly. “I keep forgetting how ridiculously observant and aware you are of everything that goes on around here.”

“Boy, I was born and raised up on this mountain. I know everything that moves. Hell, I know when a tree falls out in these woods before it even hits the ground,” Mary declares proudly. “And I’ve known the three of you long enough to tell when you’re positively smitten. Where’d your angel girl Selina go?”

The guys and I exchange quick glances. Matthew clears his throat. “She went back to Providence.”

“Already? I thought you were spending Christmas and New Year’s together,” Mary replies, understandably confused. But then it hits her. “No. Don’t tell me Cynthia stuck her claws in that pie...”

“Yeah,” I sigh deeply. “But we’re partly to blame as well. We weren’t entirely forthcoming with Selina, either, at least where Cynthia was concerned.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Mary asks. “To put the bitch back in the bottle?”

“I don’t know if we can do that,” Matthew says. “But yeah, we were looking to talk to Cynthia and remind her that there is nothing left between us. Hasn’t been since last year.”

Mary shakes her head in dismay. “Don’t remind me of last year. That’s something I never want to live through again. Cynthia made her own bed—you don’t have to share it with her. Mind your own lives and your own business.”

“We were trying to do just that,” I tell Mary. “But she wouldn’t let us.”

“Come on, you boys should have known better,” she shoots back. “Come on, just be glad she’s gone.” She takes out a spare key and lets herself into the cabin. “God knows this mountain is better off without Cynthia on it.”

Jason can’t help but chuckle dryly. “I think we’re all better off without Cynthia, not just the mountain.”

“You can say that again, kiddo!” Mary says. “I’m gonna go get things done around this place. The three of you had better not still be here when I’m done.”

“Roger that, ma’am,” Matthew replies.

She closes the door, leaving us on the porch as we glance at each other with wondering eyes. Concern and fear work their way through us as we begin to fathom the many ways in which this entire situation could get even worse. It’s cold out here, despite the sun peeking through the scattering clouds. Each deep breath is accompanied by a subtle sting in my lungs. My

nose burns a little, and generous curls of steam roll off my tongue with every word that comes out. It's only noon. It'll get warmer before the night sets down again and freezes the mountain once more.

"I don't like this." The words roll off my tongue with too much ease.

"Neither do I," Jason says.

We both look to Matthew. It's obvious that he feels the same way.

"Then that makes three of us," he replies.

This doesn't sit right. Not knowing where Cynthia is after dealing with her covert campaigning against us is infinitely worse than when she was around, lurking and scheming and dripping poison into Selina's ears. Last year, Cynthia's downfall nearly destroyed us—not just our friendship but us, individually, on an emotional and psychological level. This time, the threat feels larger and darker than ever before because of Selina.

I cannot allow this to continue. I cannot let the past obliterate the future I've been building in my head with Selina. She's the woman of my dreams, of our dreams. She's the real deal, a wholesome creature whose body and heart is attuned to mine in ways I didn't think were possible. We've done enough damage to this relationship all on our own. We can't let Cynthia deliver the final blow. I'm done paying for that mistake.

SELINA

Christmas is tomorrow.

I'm still living at the store, feeling like the ultimate hobo, pregnant with a broken heart and wounded pride. The situation is not sustainable and I can't live like this much longer, not with a baby on the way. I was exhausted and worn out before, but now I've got one hell of a reason to rise up and push through. Granted, the Christmas bonus I received in my bank account this morning along with this month's salary has certainly managed to shift my outlook a bit.

It's not enough for a downpayment on a new apartment yet—I will need a bigger one now since I'm currently hosting a tiny guest in my womb—but it's enough to have me staying at a decent motel until next month's salary, when I will definitely have enough to put down the necessary funds. Almost there, Selina. Almost there. Spending November and most of December in Aspen helped me tremendously, and I will never stop being grateful for that opportunity. It just pains me so much to even think about them. Especially today, Christmas Eve. We were supposed to spend Christmas together.

I wipe my tears for the umpteenth time and get busy dusting the shelves around the store. It's closed for the holidays, so I've got the place to myself until after New Year's Eve. I figured since I'm squatting here, I might as well make sure it's nice and clean by the time everybody else gets back from their winter break. We've got new designs coming in from the manufacturer in January, and I'm pretty excited about it. I would've loved to have authored some of them, but maybe someday Etienne will do more than just thank me for the sketches I give him every other month in the hopes that he'll pass them on to his team of Sartorialist designers.

Truth be told, I don't intend on sticking around much longer unless I'm considered for a Junior Designer position next year. It's what I originally applied for and although I'm thankful for the job, I'm not really a salesgirl. I'm a fashion designer who graduated at the top of her class, and life has hurled enough curveballs my way to make me painfully aware of what damage one's wasted potential can do.

My phone rings again. It's Matthew.

"Dang it," I curse under my breath as I feel another round of tears coming. I miss him so much, I miss the three of them so much, I can barely sleep. My body aches for his touch, my soul cries out for all of them. I felt safe there. I felt safe until I read through Cynthia's diary, until she showed up and ravaged the precious and fragile balance I'd thought we'd built for ourselves.

I reject the call and put the phone in the front pocket of my jeans before going back to wiping the empty shelves clean and setting the folded sweaters into neat stacks. I'm so deep in my thoughts, memories of my getaway replaying in front of my eyes, my heart skipping beats as I remember Matthew's hands roaming up and down my body, the strength of his arms as he held me, I don't even hear the store shutters rolling up until the final clang of the lock mechanism.

The sound has me spinning on my heels to find Etienne Lacroix coming into the store. Panic strikes with lightning speed, and I freeze at the sight of him. He, too, stills when he sees me in my house slacks and old Nirvana tee, fluffy slippers and my messy hair tied up in a loose, scraggly bun on the top of my head.

"Oh, shit," I hear myself whisper.

Etienne rarely comes around during the winter holidays, so my brain is struggling to connect his physical presence in this moment. I'm getting an error message in the back of my head, staring at him as I try to find a reason for why I'm here. But the damage is already done, I realize, as I notice the sleeping bag next to the shop counter. Assuming nobody would be around, I didn't bother to put it away, along with any other trace of my squatting in the store indefinitely.

My blood runs cold, stiffening my veins as I look into his eyes.

"Selina," he finally says. "What are you doing here?"

"What... um, what are you doing here?" I manage, horrified by the tremor in my voice.

“I’m in town for a couple of days, and I needed to stop by and pick up a few things from the back office,” he replies, raising a curious eyebrow. “What about you? You’re supposed to be taking time off with the rest of the team. We’re closed for the holidays. You know that.”

“I... I do know that.” I stare at the floor.

My eyes are stinging. My throat closes up, and I fail to find the words needed to properly explain my situation. The catastrophe unfolds in my head, the repercussions swiftly rumbling through in the form of the worst-case scenario now coming true. The damage is done, and I’m pretty sure there’s no coming back from this. One of the store employees has been sleeping here. And the boss just caught her. How the hell do I fix this?

“Selina, is that a sleeping bag?” Etienne asks, staring at my makeshift bed.

“Um...”

“You’re not in uniform, either. What is going on here?”

“I... I’m... I have nothing to say in my defense.” My shoulders droop, the hole in my stomach getting bigger and deeper, the pain shooting through my torso as I struggle to keep my chin up.

What I wouldn’t give for lightning to just strike me down in this very moment and put me out of my misery. Things weren’t supposed to get to this point. I was supposed to be stronger, smarter, better adapted to the hurdles that life was bound to cast along my path. I should’ve known since the night I asked Maddie to come pick me up from that stupid house party. I should’ve known from the moment the doctors told us that she didn’t make it. I should’ve known that fate would find a way to make me pay for my selfishness.

The bill is still running—adding and subtracting and further breaking me down.

While I was in Aspen, I had moments where I believed things would somehow work out. I had peace of mind and three men who I thought were ready to hold me forever. I had a smile on my face, warmth in my bed, and the promise of a better tomorrow. I had a song in my heart, a sweet soreness between my legs, and fingers running through my hair. I had lips on my skin, three pairs of beautiful eyes constantly beholding me, and good food on my plate. I had three men that I would’ve liked nothing more than to devote the rest of my life to, if only they had been willing to do the same, but none of that matters anymore.

It's all gone. It's just me and my boss awkwardly standing in the middle of the store on Christmas Eve. And I haven't got one decent reason for why I'm here. At least not one that won't get me fired.

"Selina, I'm a bit confused," Etienne says. He doesn't sound angry, but he's not the type to blow up, either so I don't have a pattern to recognize or follow. "I understand you came back earlier from your extended holiday, which isn't a problem as long as everything was sorted with your shift manager. But the store is closed today. Why aren't you at home?"

I take a deep breath and brace myself for the fallout. "I don't have a home anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... I'm so sorry, Etienne," I burst into tears as I scramble to get my bag from behind the counter, along with my wallet and phone charger. "I didn't mean for things to... I'm so sorry."

"Selina, if you're in trouble—"

"I'm just an idiot," I blurt out and head straight for the door. "And I'm obviously fired too. It's so inappropriate but I came to stay here because I had nowhere else to go. I'm so sorry."

"Wait!"

But I move like a shadow, light on my feet despite the chunks of lead currently crushing my stomach. I slip past the door, leaving the rest of my luggage and my sleeping bag behind. Hell, I can't even look Etienne in the eyes let alone hang around to collect my things while he tells me about how I'm never going to work in this industry ever again. As if the whole situation wasn't already terrible enough, leave it to the universe to further screw me over when I needed a reprieve the most.

"Selina!" I hear Etienne calling out.

I can't stand the shame, the impotence of where I've landed. All I can do is run down the stairs and sneak through the service exit of the building, utterly embarrassed and hopeless. I doubt I have a job anymore. But what I do have is a sliver of dignity left, and I don't intend to spend this Christmas out in the streets.

With my wallet and overnight bag hanging on one shoulder, I rush downtown to find a decent hotel that still has a vacancy this time of year. I can at least sleep in a bed for a couple of nights until I figure out my next move. Come January, I'll be applying for a new job, anyway. I need a plan to keep my head above water.

Yet the child growing in my womb needs me to keep fighting. I'll figure something out. I always do. Even when the horizon is dark, when the night is cold and my heart is bleeding, I always find a way. What other choice have I got?

SELINA

At least I was able to find a nice hotel downtown for the holidays. I'm checked in for ten days—it was all I could afford, assuming I no longer have a job to go back to after New Year's Eve. My phone is off. I can't bear the sound of it ringing and buzzing. Not today. Not on Christmas Eve.

The few friends I have in Providence are out of town. And going back to Kieran's is completely out of the question.

All I've got is myself, for now.

With newfound determination and hoping it'll last long enough to get me through the holidays, I grab my wallet and head out to the local diner. There's a handful of customers left at this hour. It'll be midnight soon enough, so I am thankful for whatever they have left in the cake and pie display to serve as my dinner and tomorrow's breakfast. There's also a shawarma place further down the street, and since they don't celebrate Christmas, they'll be open for business. Gotta love America sometimes; it's a melting pot that accommodates a variety of needs.

"Hey, honey, what can I get you?" the waitress asks from behind the counter.

I take a seat on one of the barstools and give her a warm, tired smile, noticing the way she braided her black, curly hair to frame her pretty, round face. Her skin is the color of milk chocolate, creating a lovely contrast with the pale pink of her uniform. "Hey, Lacy," I say, reading the nametag. "Can I get one of those pies to eat here, and two more to go?"

"Sure thing. We've got one slice of cherry left, and two apple. Which one do you want to have here?" she says, already fetching a plate from behind the

shelves below.

“Let’s go with cherry,” I tell her. “I’ll take the apple to go.”

“Cherry it is.”

I watch quietly as she slips the cherry pie onto the plate and puts it in the microwave oven for about a minute while she packs the apple slices into a brown box. She looks up and smiles.

“Anything to drink?” she asks.

“Just a…” I pause, realizing I was about to go for a Diet Coke. “Orange juice?”

“We’ve got orange juice.”

With a baby on the way, I might as well start looking after myself. This body is going to bring another human into the world, and I owe it to this little person to make sure he or she gets the best seat when they arrive. I wonder who the father is. Matthew, Jason, and Sully were equally generous in that sense, but I never thought to keep track. We spent so many nights together—the four of us and one-on-one. It would be impossible to assume anything without a DNA test. How am I going to tell them? I’m not sure if I even want to or if I should.

Matthew sent me away. I can only assume that he, along with Jason and Sully, simply didn’t want me around anymore.

Once the orange juice and pie are set in front of me, I take my sweet time with this so-called dinner while I try to put some order to my thoughts. My options are limited, but they do exist. It’s the only silver lining I’ve got to hold on to right now. As soon as I get back to the hotel, I’ll get on my laptop and start looking for a new job. January might be a dry month, but there are plenty of gigs I can go with in the meantime. My car still works, so I can use it for Uber or deliveries. I know the city well enough to navigate my way around.

“You know, we still have the kitchen open,” Lacy says.

I look up, and the smell hits me. Fried eggs, bacon, French fries… all the greasy goodness that my heart so desperately desires. “Anything I can get to go, then?”

“Have a look at the menu,” she replies and gives me a laminated sheet with a handful of dishes to choose from. “The Midnight Breakfast is my favorite. I’ll have Bobby throw in a couple of pancakes on the house, if you want. Maple syrup and everything on top.”

“You’re too kind.”

“It’ll be my pleasure, darlin’. You wouldn’t be here at this hour on Christmas Eve if things were easy,” Lacy says.

It’s not pity I’m getting from her voice. It’s pure empathy. She’s been down this road, or at least one similar, at some point in her life. I suppose wounded souls tend to recognize one another, even in a crowd. I can’t help but smile.

“You know what, I think I’ll go for that Midnight Breakfast, then. The pancakes, too.”

“Excellent choice.” She writes it down and takes the order into the kitchen, then comes back to refill my drink. “How’s the pie?”

“Honestly, it’s fantastic. It might be the best pie I’ve ever had,” I tell her, and I mean every word. I can literally taste every ingredient, every granule of sugar, the sweetness of the cherries, and the soft flakiness of the crust. The custard fills me with pure joy, and the slightly sour end note amplifies the whole experience. “Then again, I’m eating for two, and I hear pregnancy can really mess with your taste buds.”

Lacy lights up, a huge grin beaming across her face. “Oh, honey, congratulations! You’re going to be a mom!”

“Yeah. Worst possible timing,” I chuckle dryly.

Her brightness fades as she understands my predicament. “Oh. I’m so sorry...”

“It’s okay. I’m gonna be okay, somehow. Jobless, homeless, broken-hearted on Christmas Eve. Just found out I’m pregnant, too. Do you think it can get any worse?”

She leans over the counter, her brown eyes slightly narrowed. “I’d say don’t tempt fate on this one and just roll with the punches.”

“Figured that much. But damn, this pie really is amazing.”

“Bobby makes it from scratch. The crust, the custard, the fruits... all natural and organic.”

“Ah, so it’s not just my preggo taste buds going haywire.”

Lacy giggles and shakes her head. “Girl, we’re pretty popular in the neighborhood on account of these pies. You should come around more often. We’ve got peaches and apricots in the summertime. The pecan pies are to die for in autumn.”

“Good to know. I’m definitely dropping by again,” I reply as I take my last bite.

The hole in my stomach has settled. At least there’s food in there to keep

the hunger away for a while. The baby will need every single morsel I can manage. Even if I don't feel hungry I still need to eat to keep him or her sated. I feel Lacy's gaze lingering on me, so I look up from my plate to meet her eyes.

"Thank you," I mumble and gently push the empty plate toward her.

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah. I will be, anyway. I think I just need Christmas and New Year's to go by so I can clear my head and properly analyze my options."

"You know, I'm a firm believer that life doesn't throw anything your way that you can't handle," she says. "And you seem to be a real fighter. The kind of girl with enough grit to take on an army."

I took on three Marines at once. They filled me every which way and made me the happiest I've ever been. Does that count for something? All I can do is give Lacy a smile as she packs my updated order into a large paper bag with the diner's logo printed on the side. It smells like cinnamon and baked apples in here, along with freshly brewed coffee and deep-fried decadence wafting in from the kitchen. For a minute or so, I find solace and peace in this old diner where lost souls gather, drawn by the delicious fragrances and the tastes of simple comforts.

"Thank you, Lacy," I say, getting up from my seat. "I hope you have a wonderful Christmas."

"You, too."

I give her one last smile, then grab my food bag and head out. It's a white Christmas Eve outside, the cold air hitting me in the face like a frosted kiss. It's snowing, generous clumps of snowflakes falling softly over the city. Soon enough, the whole of Providence will be covered with a glimmering layer of white as the world comes to a halt, as the windows light up in different colors, and as children go to bed early, eagerly awaiting Santa's arrival.

I walk down the street, faceless and nameless among strangers, thinking about Christmases past, filled with equal parts of good and bad memories. My Christmas memories with Maddie are wonderful—loud and fun moments as we used to bicker over who got what from under the tree, since Dad always forgot to tag them. Christmas moments after Maddie were mostly quiet and dark, with Dad nearly drinking himself to death and Mom silently plotting her escape to Florida. My Christmases with Kieran were nice but always felt incomplete. Something was always missing in that relationship,

and I can see that clearly now.

I can't help but mourn the Christmas memories I would've created with Matthew, Sully, and Jason, I know they would've been beautiful. Tranquil and sweet, gathered in front of the fireplace, the orange flames licking at the logs, consuming them bit by bit, until only a mass of smoldering embers remained, while the lights twinkled on the tree. We would've sipped on my delicious signature eggnog, listening to Christmas carols while watching the snow fall quietly outside.

We would have exchanged gifts, the guys most likely spoiling me. Sully would've gotten me something spicy and naughty, like him. Maybe those black lace and pearl panties we saw at the lingerie store in Aspen. Crotchless and Brazilian cut. He would've loved to see me in those. Hell, I would've loved me in those. Jason probably would've gotten me a perfume he knew I liked. We smelled plenty at the fragrance store in between blizzards when we ventured into town. And Matthew... he probably would've sprung for jewelry. It's not the would-be gifts that I'm missing, though. It's the gesture itself. Their kindness and generosity. Their attention to detail. I miss what I know would have been an amazing time making great memories, gifts or not. The bond we would have continued to strengthen.

None of that matters anymore. My would-be Christmas ain't happening. I'm staying at a hotel and having diner food for dinner. At least there's apple pie and extra pancakes with maple syrup. Just the thought of it has my taste buds activated. The baby is craving everything at once, and I'm sure it'll only get more intense as the weeks roll by. I need to find my balance, first and foremost. I'm going to be a mother, and I'll be damned if I will ever fail my child the way my parents failed me after Maddie died.

Once I get to the hotel, I soak under the hot shower for the better part of an hour. Despite the earlier bout of hunger and wholesome cravings, I'm no longer in the mood for anything other than steam and heat. Like a gator in the heart of Florida, I welcome both as I feel my muscles relax under the steady stream. My thoughts continue to keep me company, but I no longer pay attention to any of them. I'm too tired and worn out. I need some downtime, a few nights and days to nurse my emotional wounds and to feel what I feel before I can look to the horizon once more.

One step at a time, right?

I get out of the shower and wrap myself up with a towel, taking my seat at the table by the window overlooking the hotel's parking lot so I can have my

dinner. The cravings are back. I'm guessing it might be like this until my due date. Hungry, not hungry, heavy, not heavy, gotta pee, can't stand the taste of water, give me all the water on the planet, sleepy, sleepless, agitated, exhausted, and so on and so forth. My hormones are doing the splits down the learning curve of an already complicated situation. All I can do is try to keep up.

As soon as I turn my phone on, a string of texts and missed calls pour through. A couple are from Etienne, asking me to call him as soon as possible. It sounds urgent and judging by how he found me at the store, the last thing I want is to further ruin an already devastated Christmas. Matthew has been calling, as well. Sully left a couple of messages. Jason, too. Kieran sent me a Christmas-themed meme, but he can screw off. I'm never going back there. The trash took itself out, and I've learned my fair share of lessons with him.

Then the universe decided to send me three more potential lessons, neatly packaged in three gorgeous men. I, the fool, jumped at the opportunity, never anticipating the speed and depth with which I would end up falling in love. The last thing I needed is the very thing that happened, and I need to dwell on that for a bit. The hopelessness will fade, the despair will fizzle away. The heartache will subside, and the love I was ready to give Matthew, Jason, and Sully will be redirected toward the tiny creature currently growing inside me. I'm going to give this world a brand-new human, and I intend on raising him right. Or her.

"Boy or girl?" I wonder aloud, placing my hand on my belly and looking down, as if it will answer.

It doesn't really matter. It's not like I can choose. I will love them either way, and I will give them everything I've got. Maybe more. With a mouthful of egg and bacon, I take my laptop out and flip it open, determined to peruse the job adverts before I hit the sack. I'll be sleeping in a decent bed for the first time in days, though I have to admit, I sorely miss my cabin bedroom in Aspen.

Shaking the thoughts away, I distract myself online. There isn't much for me to pick from, but there are a couple of interesting gigs that are worth making a call for. It's a starting point at least, and it's better than nothing.

MATTHEW

Back at my cabin, we start to execute the plan while packing our overnight bags. There's a chance we'll come back for the remainder of the season, so we don't take everything we brought from Providence. This place feels so empty without Selina, anyway. I'm no longer drawn to it, no longer looking forward to returning if she's not here to greet me with that gorgeous smile and long, red hair flowing over her shoulder.

Sully is on the phone with a former commander of ours, currently running a private security firm that actively works with law enforcement across state lines. "Your traffic cam system is the best I've ever seen," he tells the guy. "Which is why I need you to comb through it. I'll send you the search terms to narrow the process down as much as possible, but the sooner you can tell me where she's been spotted, the better."

"I never thought she'd fall off the grid like that," Jason mutters as he comes into the living room, having just finished a conversation in the kitchen with yet another of our former Marine units. "Funny thing is that rich folks seem to be way better at disappearing than any of your run-of-the-mill street crooks."

"Until we figure out her game plan, it's going to be hard to figure out where she's gone to," I say, glancing back at Sully. "Hopefully the traffic cams will spot her. Cynthia may be rich and capable, but she is also easily recognizable. She'll pop up somewhere, eventually."

"I still can't get a hold of Selina, either" Jason says, his brow furrowed deeply. "I called the store but there was no answer."

"It's the holidays, man, Christmas Eve. What did you expect?"

"Dammit, man, it's killing me," he says, shaking his head. "We did her

wrong on so many levels. How the hell are we going to make it up to her? I want her back. I need her.”

“We all need her. But she needs a little bit of time to gather her thoughts and process everything that has happened,” I tell him. “In the meantime, we need to get rid of Cynthia, once and for all. So, whatever Selina is up to right now, leave it be, and give her the space to work through it. As long as she’s as far away from Cynthia as possible, I think she’ll be alright.”

Sully comes closer, putting his phone away. “I’m waiting for some footage,” he says. “He’s got the full name, the license plate, the DMV photos and social media profiles. That’s enough to get a search program running across the board. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Good. Thank you, Sully,” I say.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he replies.

I have an idea of where she might be, but it doesn’t entirely make sense, nor does it feel plausible. Cynthia didn’t want Selina around. With Selina gone, I would’ve expected Cynthia to be pleased and right back at my door, fawning over me while pushing my closest friends away. It seemed like a natural outcome based on her behavior and reactions. But now Cynthia is also gone. And until I know what she’s up to, I’m rather uneasy.

“I don’t like it, either” I say. I zip up my bag and carry it over to the door while Jason goes upstairs, muttering under his breath.

“Listen, I’ll have a look through the rooms upstairs, just in case we forgot anything,” Sully says. “I need to keep busy.”

“I get it, Sully. Do what you gotta do, man. I’m wrapping up down here in the meantime,” I tell him. “We’re flying back tonight.”

Listening to their footsteps upstairs, I wonder if Jason and Sully are actually doing better or they’re just amped up by Cynthia’s unexpected and awfully suspicious absence. Jason hasn’t had a single drop of alcohol since that night. Sully appears to be calmer, too, and better focused. Perhaps it’s the idea of Christmas coming around and Selina being gone on top of Cynthia’s scheming. Or maybe he’s just tired of replaying the same emotional turmoil.

We’ve all grown plenty since last year, but we should’ve done a better job of implementing those lessons with Selina. We’re the ultimate reason she’s gone, not Cynthia. All Cynthia did was facilitate Selina’s departure, but she didn’t cause it. Perhaps it’s this particular reasoning that has the three of us sharper than ever, reaching out to our Corps contacts and friends within the DOJ to get a line on Cynthia before she does more damage to an already

fragile relationship.

All I wanted was to have a tranquil and beautiful Christmas together. Me, Sully, Jason, and Selina. The four of us, naked and basking in a lazy afterglow on Christmas Day. Our hearts and souls interconnected, our bodies intertwined. It would've been perfect, sweet, and peaceful—a precious moment in time for me to someday look back on.

It all fell apart so quickly, I barely registered the collapse. I heard the noises, though, smelled the danger as soon as Cynthia first showed up at my door. I should've done something then. She played her part, and she played it well. I almost believed her to be a changed woman.

Sully comes downstairs, white as a sheet of paper as he holds up a notebook. “Cynthia left a diary in Selina’s room.”

“Wait, what?” I manage, torn away from my thoughts. “What diary?”

“That’s the thing... it’s not real. It’s fiction. These pages are filled with lies,” he says.

“Hold on,” I mumble as he hands me the journal. I start flipping through it, briefly checking the dates of each entry, along with the first few paragraphs. The more I read, the tighter my stomach gets as I realize that Sully is right. “It is all lies,” I say. “None of this happened, at least, most of it didn’t happen.”

“She got the sex bits right,” Sully crosses his arms.

I shake my head slowly. “Jason never badgered her on a drinking binge, and I never said any of these things.”

“And I certainly never hurt her in any way,” he replies.

“Where did you find this again?”

“Selina’s room.”

My blood runs cold as the implication becomes painfully clear. Cynthia left this behind on purpose. She hasn’t set foot inside the cabin since last year, so the diary must’ve been here ever since. Selina never mentioned it, but it’s clear she’s read at least some, if not all of it. Garbage. Every frickin’ page is loaded with garbage. Disingenuous bullshit meant to skew the reader’s opinion about the three of us.

At first, Cynthia paints us as the men of her dreams. But as the diary progresses, she starts to paint a much different picture, adding the shades and nuances that more than likely caused doubt and pushed Selina away. But this was only stage one of a much larger plan. All of a sudden it hits me, the big picture in its clearest form. The diary was the first step of her devious plot

and with each chapter, Cynthia played us like a fiddle.

“Matthew, she left this in the bedroom on purpose,” Sully says. “Selina had to have read it. And based on what I’ve read about myself, it’s no wonder she chose to leave without saying goodbye.”

“Cynthia has been playing us since last year,” I manage, the air practically knocked out of my lungs as the realization sets in. “This thing was probably here since before she... before she did the unthinkable.”

Sully nods once. “What if what she did was also part of the plan?”

“How twisted can this woman be?”

“I think we already have our answer,” he replies, glowering at the journal in my hands.

“If she has been planning this,” I say, “then there’s a purpose to it. Planted evidence?”

“Probably, yes.”

Which means Cynthia expects this diary to be found by the local authorities. She probably wanted Selina to find it first, though. It doesn’t matter. Any woman that stayed in that bedroom this winter would be treated to the same work of disturbing fiction. Cynthia wanted to make sure that nobody else would find peace in our arms, ever. Her showing up when she did was planned. It was timed to match our arrival, with Selina’s presence.

Shaking my head slowly, I look to Sully again. “Cynthia is playing a dangerous game, Sully. And something tells me she’s going after Selina.”

“Ah, guess we’re gonna find out,” he replies as his phone rings once. “Video files and snapshots, hold on,” he mutters as he flips through the media files. I watch his expression grow darker as he scrolls. His lips move, curled around whispered curse words as the glimmer of sinister recognition lingers in his dark eyes. “Oh, shit.”

“What is it?”

He turns the phone around and shows me footage of Cynthia behind the wheel of a dark blue SUV. “She’s in Providence,” he says. “Three different traffic cams caught her.”

“Jason!” I call out. He rushes downstairs, his blond hair frazzled and bouncing with each step. “We’re heading out. Now.”

“Our flight doesn’t leave for hours,” Jason reminds me with a confused frown.

I give him a slight nod. “True, but Cynthia is already in Providence.”

Nothing more needs to be said at this point. Jason understands precisely

what's going on, and as soon as Sully shows him the diary, he starts putting two and two together. It's impossible not to notice Cynthia's carefully timed visits, the jabs and the subliminal prods used to chip away at each of us. She intentionally left behind false words for Selina to read through. She had our traumatic past together to feed off of, to poison and use against us. She had everything she needed to destroy our relationship with Selina, and she wasted no time in doing so.

We served ourselves up like prized chunks of beef over the fire. Cynthia barely moved a finger as we played ourselves right into her long con. But the stakes have climbed much higher, now. There's a target on Selina's back, and I know she won't be safe unless we step in and pull Cynthia away from her. She's got Selina right where she wanted her—out of Aspen and out of our reach, where we are unable to protect her.

I hate what is about to happen. As much as I told myself that Cynthia would stay in the past, she has clearly expressed her determination to haunt us deep into the present and well into the future. I can't allow that. I want Selina back more than anything, and I will do whatever it takes to make that happen. Whatever it takes.

SELINA

It's early Christmas morning. My eyes peel open to a sea of white outside, visible through the half-shuttered window. My body feels heavy as I roll out of bed and head to the bathroom. It takes a while to pull myself together, but I manage to brush my teeth, then wash and moisturize my face before changing into a pair of jeans and a dark gray sweater. There's a slice of apple pie left on the kitchenette table, along with the extra pancakes I got from the diner last night. I'm hungry, starving. Starving and nauseated at the same time, two sensations that are equally overwhelming but difficult to reconcile. This baby is already doing quite the number on me, and it's only a few weeks in. I dread the day my ankles swell and I start waddling. It's only a matter of time.

I barely slept. Maybe it was the stark loneliness or the exaggerated silence of my hotel room, but either way, keeping my eyes shut and my mind turned off was a veritable challenge. Judging by the dark shadows under my eyes I failed miserably. My phone screen shows a number of notifications for messages and calls, but I have yet to check any of them. I guess I'm afraid of what I'll find. More heartache and misery. More empty apologies and excuses.

"Christmas breakfast, here I come," I mutter as I sit at the kitchenette table and flip open the pie box.

It still smells fantastic, and it looks wonderful even a day after it was removed from its display. The crust is perfectly soft and flaky, the filling gooey and sweet, the tartness of apples mingling beautifully with the heftiness of cane sugar and a plethora of spices. The cinnamon hints are the best, smoothly balanced with the faint whiff of vanilla beans. Each bite feels

like a Christmas party unraveling in my mouth, and I welcome every morsel while trying not to cry again.

I know I need to move on. I try to keep my chin up and my eyes to the sky, but the solitude and the longing are too much to bear. I'm crushed by the weight of my own choices, emptied by their absence, and depressed by the idea of a future that doesn't have Matthew, Jason, or Sully in it. That's not a life I'm interested in, yet it's pretty much the only one that's left. At least I'll have their baby. It doesn't even matter who the father is—what matters is that I have a chance to be a better parent than my own.

My child, my living situation, my career. I will do better, I will be better, aiming high and preparing myself to be strong and brave. I will do whatever it takes to be successful and raise this baby in the best way possible.

A knock on the door startles me. I freeze in my seat, absently humming to the Christmas carols playing on TV. I can't even remember turning it on. The volume is low enough to create a nice background noise. Sighing deeply, I get up and turn the TV off, then head for the door. The second knock has me sucking in a sharp breath.

Who could it be? Nobody knows I'm here. Maybe it's the hotel manager. Or somebody who got their room wrong. My heart is beating faster than usual. My instincts are heightened. It's a rather unusual sensation, but it quickly makes sense as I open the door and see Cynthia standing before me with a smug smile and a bottle of white wine.

"Darling, it took me forever to find you," she says.

I stare at her with a mixture of dismay and disbelief. I have absolutely no desire to see her or to be around her, least of all on Christmas. "What are you doing here, Cynthia?"

"That's no way to greet a friend," she quips and lets herself in, walking past me with swaying hips and an extra bounce in her perfect brown curls. "I bring a gift, it is Christmas after all. A lovely Italian vino to sip on later tonight."

"I'm sorry, I just... why are you here?" I ask her.

Cynthia sets the bottle down on the TV console, then whirls around and puts on a plastic smile. "Did you really think you could hide from me, Selina?"

"What? Cynthia, what are you talking about?"

The sweetness in her voice has turned sour. The light in her eyes has darkened. "Did you really think I wouldn't find you, Selina? You're nothing

more than a bug on my windshield, and I will get you out of the way.”

“Cynthia, what is going on here?”

To say that I’m confused would be an understatement, but I’m starting to think there might be something wrong with her. That, in turn, puts the whole diary under a murky light. Doubt creeps in with long and gnarly fingers, working its way up the ladder of my consciousness until a clearer picture finally emerges.

I see her for what she really is. Tall and slender underneath her white mink coat and matching Russian-style hat. Her makeup flawlessly applied and a heavy note of expensive fragrance lingering in the air around her. Nails perfectly painted red and glossy, not one hair out of place. Yet everything is wrong about Cynthia.

I see her, the real her, for the first time. And she is ugly.

“I decided it was time for the two of us to have a real conversation, like grown women should,” she says. “It has come to my attention that Matthew wants you back. I just want you to know that should you consider that possibility, I will make your life miserable. A living hell.”

“Excuse me?”

“Matthew is mine, Selina. He’s always been mine, and no matter how many of you prance around in that master bedroom of his, he will always be mine.”

“Cynthia, are you off your meds or something? I’m at a hotel in Providence, not at the cabin. How did you even find me here?”

“I will find you anywhere,” she hisses, pointing an angry finger at me. “And I will do whatever it takes to keep you away from my man!”

I’m getting a better understanding of the concept of “unhinged” at this point. Cynthia is anything but stable, and I worry that it will only get worse from here. This version of her sends shivers down my spine. I don’t know what her endgame is, but I do know she’s got it out for me. I didn’t expect her to come here, and the fact that she was able to track me down is deeply unsettling and concerning.

“I don’t understand, Cynthia. I have no interest in Lance whatsoever,” I tell her.

She laughs, a dry cackle that further creeps me out. “Who gives a crap about Lance? I’m not talking about Lance. Matthew. He’s the one you need to stay away from.”

“Well, you can have him,” I manage, trying to figure out a way to get her

to leave me alone. “I left the cabin, obviously. It’s over.”

“Something tells me you’ll crawl back to him, soon enough. Matthew can be... addictive. And he’s mine, Selina. We were meant to be together. I’m not letting you ruin it for me. It’s bad enough I had Sully and Jason to deal with. I don’t have any energy left to spend on you too.”

“Didn’t you guys break up, like a year ago?”

Her lips curl into a bitter smirk. “I like to think of it as a much-needed break. Matthew knows he’ll never find anyone better than me. With my last name, with my father’s connections, with my, well, let’s just call it pedigree, I’m Matthew’s perfect mate. You, honey... you were just something for him to fill his time with. He’d never marry a salesgirl. You’re a nobody.”

“Well, Cynthia, I don’t think you fully understand the depth of Matthew, Sully, and Jason’s relationship,” I reply, shaking my head. “The deal was the three of them or none of them. You can’t rip Matthew away from his closest friends.”

“I almost succeeded last year. This time, I just need to get you out of the way.”

My hands shoot out in front of me, a defensive gesture my body deemed necessary before Cynthia even takes one step toward me. “You need to rethink your options here. Listen, I got out, okay? We broke up. You should just go back to Aspen and do whatever it is you have to do. I wish you the best of luck.”

“It’s not about luck,” she says. “It’s about removing obstacles from my path, and you’re a huge thorn in my side right now. I could tell from the moment I met you that they thought you were special. I’d hoped the diary would send any woman running away from them. I was surprised things got as far as they did with the four of you—”

“Hold on, you planted that?”

She offers me an evil grin. “I knew I’d have my work cut out long before we split up last Christmas. I knew I’d need a way back in once I was done with my therapy and rehab dance.”

“Rehab,” I mumble. “What happened last Christmas, Cynthia?”

She scoffs and crosses her arms. “I tried to rush things, and the situation got out of control. It doesn’t really matter, not to you, anyway. What does matter is that you’ve had your little fun, you’ve had your fill, and now you need to step out of the picture. I’m done waiting.”

“Again, I ask, why do you feel like I’m a threat in any way? I’m here,

they're not. Just leave me alone."

"I'm not buying that. Surely, you're aware of how much money Matthew makes. You're aware of his reputation and his prestige. A poor little thing like you must've caught his scent. And judging by your current living conditions, I'm inclined to believe you'll run back to him and his friends as soon as you can no longer afford even this place. So, I'm here to make you an offer. How much will it take?"

Holy crap, she's serious. Dead serious, apparently, as she takes out a checkbook and a pen, watching me and waiting for my answer.

"You've got to be kidding me," I blurt out. "Cynthia, I don't want your money. Just go away."

"No, you need my money. Let me put you out of your misery. How much will it take? Fifty grand? A hundred? How much, Selina? I've got it. You can cash it in as soon as the banks reopen. All you need to do is fall off the face of the earth."

"I said no!" I snap, the anger now bubbling through me, the fury searing my veins as I struggle to remain levelheaded in front of a woman who is not only unhinged but determined to humiliate me and remove every sense of value that I've got left. "Take your money, take your crazy ideas, take yourself out of this room and out of my life. I don't want any of it. As for Matthew, you can keep him if he'll have you, though honestly, I think I now understand why they gave you the boot in the first place. And I can't believe you planted that diary... who does that?"

She grins coldly. "You read it. Who's worse?"

"I'm not proud of myself, but seriously what you're doing is embarrassing, it's unbecoming and desperate. I actually feel sorry for you."

"That's rich," Cynthia snorts a chuckle and shows me the checkbook again. "How much?"

"I don't want your money, I just want you out of here!"

She puts it away and curses under her breath. "I was hoping we'd be able to reach a reasonable conclusion, but you had to go and play the proud bitch, instead." She suddenly takes a knife out—a long blade, something akin to a rather sharp letter opener—and points it at me. Fear sets in, freezing my body on the spot. "I suppose I'll have to do things the hard way, then."

"What... what are you doing?" I take a step back.

I've got a baby growing inside me. My survival instinct kicks in, and my gaze darts across the hotel room as I try to figure out a way to resolve this

without violence. My blood rushes down my legs and arms, my heart racing wildly as I take a deep breath.

“You need to get out of Matthew’s life,” Cynthia says, her eyes glassy with furious determination.

“And you need to take another look around you,” I tell her. “You’re the one who came to Providence. Matthew isn’t here, is he? Whatever it is you two have going on, it doesn’t concern me anymore.” And while the words hurt my very soul, I hold on to them for dear life, hoping it’ll make enough sense for her to finally back off and leave me alone. “Just go get your man, Cynthia. I won’t get in the way.”

She shakes her head. “No, no... I’ve seen the way he looks at you. The way Sully and Jason look at you. You mean something to them, Selina. And if you won’t take my money, I’ll have to take you out of the picture completely, by any means necessary.”

“How is that going to get Matthew back, huh? Do you think he’ll want you after you murder me?”

“Who said he needs to know?” she grins again, and I’m about ready to start screaming for my life, hoping someone will hear and come over. The door is still open behind Cynthia. I could try to get through it without meeting the knife.

There are a couple of blunt objects along the way for me to work with. An old vase in faded shades of green, and an alarm clock that looks sturdy enough to cause damage. I never thought I’d have to think about such things, but it’s not as though Cynthia has left me another choice. I’m not a fan of conflict and I have always steered clear of physical violence, yet the sight of the knife has my senses flaring, the dread washing over me in ice cold waves as I understand my situation with crystal clarity.

Cynthia doesn’t know that I’m pregnant. She can’t know, either. If she’s unhinged now, I can’t even imagine what it’ll be like if she learns that I may be carrying Matthew’s child.

SELINA

“Cynthia, you really need to think things through here,” I say, the tension thickening the air between us. Winter blows through the open door, the temperature dropping across the room, yet it is nothing compared to the icy fear that’s gripping me firmly by the throat. “You don’t want to do this. You said it yourself, I’m a nobody, and right now I’m scared... I wouldn’t even think about doing anything to get in your way. I promise.”

“Oh, if only it were that easy.”

I need to buy myself a couple more minutes while I analyze my options carefully. With that knife, I’m limited and in mortal danger. There’s no room for error. “Hold on, I’m a little confused,” I say, playing dumb. “So, you planted that diary, right?”

“Yes. I knew all too well that they would get themselves another woman to share,” she replies. “It was too easy to plant that diary, knowing that she’d find it and get curious, unable to resist reading what I had to say about Matthew, Sully, and Jason.”

“How much of what was in the diary was true, then?”

“Oh, the sex was fantastic,” Cynthia laughs. “They really gave themselves to me wholly. I welcomed every experience, too, I’m not gonna lie. But I always had my heart set on Matthew. I had to tolerate Sully and Jason in order to get closer to him, though it was never something I wanted long-term.”

“And Jason’s drinking?”

Her eyes widen with amusement. “He almost fell off the wagon, but he soldiered on. Most of my work was psychological, to be honest. Planting a

suggestion here, fanning the flames there... by the time Christmas came around, they were already at each other's throat. It almost worked."

"Sully's violent outbursts?"

She shakes her head. "The man has more self-control than I expected. But the diary wasn't meant to tell the truth. It was meant to get you out of there."

"It worked. See? I'm here, nowhere close to Aspen or Matthew."

"I can't risk it. I've come so far with this, Selina, you don't understand. Every month that I spent at the clinic, pretending I was getting better, that I was healing and getting cleaned up... all that other New Age bullshit these life coaches try to sell you. I worked hard to build this new version of myself and you almost ruined it. So if you won't take money, you'll take this, for sure," she says, raising the blade between us.

"Wait!" I almost scream at her as I glance behind her, praying for someone to walk by and see what was about to unfold, an insane woman currently wielding a knife. "If you and Matthew were meant to be together, why weren't you just honest from the beginning? Do you really think deceit will get him back?"

"I tried the honesty part," she sighs, shoulders dropping in faint disappointment. "Before I started the diary, before I knew I'd be pushed out and would need to find another way in, I spoke to Matthew about us being a couple, and he said he couldn't, he wouldn't, leave Sully and Jason out. He droned on and on about how their friendship and camaraderie are more important, about how it's crucial for them to be able to share a woman, body and soul. I think it's a complete load of crap, really. And I believe you feel the same."

"Not really. I mean, it worked for us," I mutter.

"Yeah, because you're a starving mutt who'll spread her legs for an entire platoon if that's what'll get you out of the gutter," Cynthia replies. "I'm a high-class woman, and a member of high society. A queen, not a whore!"

"And you're also really full of yourself," I shoot back, downright irritated by the venom dripping from her every word. "Yet you also spread your legs for the three of them, didn't you?"

"Means to an end," she says, as she takes a step toward me.

"Cynthia, stop!" Matthew's voice booms in the doorway, rendering me speechless. He's not alone, either. Sully and Jason are with him and I've never been more relieved to see them. Dusted by the snow, cheeks red from the cold, they immediately assess the situation. "Dammit, Cynthia, this has

gone too far!” I hear Sully say.

I exhale sharply, the adrenaline coursing through my veins while I struggle to keep my senses in check. She could still jump me, still cause critical damage. Instinctively, I cradle my belly and move farther back while Matthew and Sully come around with great caution as they measure Cynthia from head to toe.

“What are you doing?” Matthew demands. “Did you really think this would work out in the long run?”

“Christ, Cynthia, what the hell?” Sully snaps and slaps the knife from her hand. She yelps as the blade hits the floor with a dull clang. “This isn’t what I wanted!” she screams, slipping into a hysterical fit. “I never wanted this! You were supposed to take me back, not fill your bed with this whore!”

“It’s over, Cynthia,” Matthew says firmly. “Back off, now. Go home. It’s over. I don’t ever want to see you again. We’re never getting back together, and if you don’t stay away from the three of us as well as Selina, I will seek a restraining order. Do you understand?”

“We’re not done! We belong together! Baby don’t let this—” she tries to hug him but he pushes her away. The move shocks her. I see it clearly on her pretty painted face. The dismay, the disbelief, the horror of rejection as it sets in.

“Your father cut you off, didn’t he?” Jason asks.

Cynthia sneers at him. “Why do you think I wasted eight months of my life in rehab?”

“Good. Waste another eight and forget we exist,” Matthew says. “We’re done.”

She storms out of the hotel room, and as soon as she’s gone I feel like I can breathe again. As the fear begins to subside and the adrenaline simmers down, my whole body starts to shake with the ghastliness of what could have happened, had they not intervened when they did.

Jason steps into the hall, glancing out the big window that overlooks the parking lot. A few moments later, we hear the sound of an engine roaring to life, of tires screeching and splashing, slipping on the snow-covered pavement, and then the heavenly sound of silence that follows. Every second that has passed in Cynthia’s absence feels like a gentle hug for my heart. I don’t know if this is what peace is supposed to feel like, but the relief smacks into me like a tidal wave, washing over my frayed senses and pulling me back into the present.

I turn to look at the guys, my heroes. Matthew with his salt-and-pepper hair and deeply concerned expression, a charcoal-gray winter coat draped over his broad shoulders. Jason with his sandy-colored mess framing his tanned face, a mixture of fear and longing swirling in his blue eyes. And Sully, my darling Sully with his almost-black eyes and a camouflage-style jacket making him seem bigger and bulkier as he walks toward me.

“Are you okay, baby?” Sully asks.

All I can do is nod, my lips quivering as he takes me in his arms. I melt in his embrace, much like a snowflake against a heated windshield, tears streaming down my cheeks as I find comfort and safety in his firm but loving hold. He cups my face and beckons me to look up at him.

“How did you find me?” I ask between sobs.

“We had intel on Cynthia’s whereabouts which led us to you. We knew we needed to find her quickly before she could harm you,” Matthew says, coming closer.

Jason moves in to flank my side, one arm slipping around my waist. “We had no idea what we were walking into. Selina, what happened here?”

“I don’t really know,” I reply, leaning into him. “She came knocking, offering me money to leave Matthew alone, and when I told her off, she took out... oh, God, she took out that dreadful a knife. I can’t believe she did that.”

I’m suddenly shattered, now that the realization of what just happened sets in. I’m bawling my eyes out as Matthew closes the distance between us and plants sweet kisses on my temple. They hold me close and tight, unwilling to let me go. I feel their hearts beating with mine, echoing through the vast halls of my being and reminding me of how good they are, of how kind they are, of what a fool I was to buy into that diary and the lies that filled its pages.

“You’re okay,” Matthew says, his lips brushing my ear. “You’re going to be okay, Selina. I promise you.”

“I am so sorry, Matthew,” I tell him. “I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you about the diary, I should’ve told you. She left it behind in my bedroom, back at the cabin. I believed what she wrote in there, that’s why I left the way I did. I didn’t give any of you a chance to prove her wrong, I didn’t give you the support you needed. I shouldn’t have believed anything she wrote.”

Sully frowns, but his eyes never leave mine. “We know about the diary. We found it last night, and once we got word that Cynthia was back in

Providence, we immediately headed here. We had a hunch she was coming after you.”

“Selina, for the love of everything, please, do not apologize. We’re the ones who weren’t exactly forthcoming about her. I underestimated her, terribly. I had no idea she was that frickin’ unstable and off her rocker. Had I known, I would’ve told you everything earlier.”

They sit me down on the edge of the bed. Matthew sits to my right, Jason to my left, and Sully kneels in front of me, his hands resting on my thighs. We are closed in together in my cozy hotel room as winter remains outside with its icy gusts and tomblike silence. A Christmas Day to remember for sure, one for the books.

“What really happened with Cynthia?” I ask, wiping some of my tears with the sleeve of my sweater. “Was she always like this? So manipulative and evil, a two-faced bitch?”

Jason chuckles softly. “Loving the use of descriptions there. But yes, she is. We thought we’d found someone who was willing and happy to be with the three of us. As you know, Matthew, Sully, and I made a pact shortly after we left the Marine Corps that we’d figure out a way to be able to have one woman for the three of us. We’ve been through thick and thin together, and few people understand the level of trust and intimacy that we’re capable of. It worked with a few women in the past, but nothing that lasted.”

“We definitely lacked the emotional intimacy of what an actual relationship needs,” Matthew continues, one arm resting around my shoulders. “I’d known Cynthia from previous winters in Aspen—I knew her family—so we were somewhat connected both in Aspen as well as here, in Providence. We hooked up, and she seemed open to being with the three of us. We hit it off and decided to spend the winter holidays at my cabin. We really thought it would work, at least in the beginning. She was so warm and excited, willing and eager to receive everything that we had to give. However, it was all a ruse. Cynthia never had any intention of staying with all three of us.”

“She only wanted you,” I tell him, remembering her rambling from earlier.

Sully nods slowly. “She started playing us, planting issues where technically there weren’t any. She figured out our weaknesses and used them against us. And, as it turns out, the closer we got to the edge the better prepared she was, knowing she’d have to exit before trying again. That’s

where the diary came in. She had to make sure that whoever came after her would have enough concerns and doubts to never fully commit to us.”

“As much I hate to say this, she’s pretty smart, if you think about it,” I mumble, lowering my gaze.

“Not smart enough. She didn’t bank on us falling for you as hard as we did,” Matthew says. Surprised, I look up to find a sea of warmth in his eyes. “I’m in love with you, Selina, and I know Sully and Jason feel the same way. We didn’t plan for it, I swear. We just wanted a fun winter holiday to wash away the sorrow of last year, and you needed a break from your own chaos. It seemed like a good idea.”

“Oh, Matthew...”

“Cynthia got feral at one point,” Jason says, his brow furrowed as he recounts the events of last year. “We were at each other’s throats, arguing and almost fighting each other. It wasn’t in our nature, it didn’t make sense. There was tension there that wasn’t supposed to be, that had never been there before. When you’ve been through hell and back like we were while in the service, there isn’t a single woman who could ever come between us. It dawned on Matthew that it had to be something to do with Cynthia. We confronted her.”

I give him a curious glance. “What happened?”

“She got emotional and irrational. She started screaming nonsense, begging Matthew to leave the two of us behind so they could be together. Naturally, Matthew told her no. Cynthia had a day to pack her things and leave. Except she didn’t. She did, however, sneak into Sully’s room and found his pain meds—stuff he hadn’t taken in a long time—and she overdosed. She almost died that night, had I not found her puking and pale and purple. It was horrible.”

“Oh my gosh.”

Sully takes a deep breath. “We blamed ourselves. Cynthia was taken to the hospital and left in her parents’ care. The last time we heard from them, she’d been committed to a private rehab clinic. Therapy, yoga, a proper psych specialist... we thought, we hoped, she’d be okay.”

“And you didn’t see her again until she showed up in Aspen this year,” I fill in the blanks.

Matthew nods. “Yeah. I thought she’d gotten over it. We had no clue about what she’d been planning the whole time. I’m deeply sorry for this, Selina. I’m sorry for the way she treated you, for threatening you. We failed

you when you needed us the most.”

“No, you guys saved me. Besides, I have ownership in this too. At the first sign of trouble, I ran off instead of sitting down to work things out with the three of you,” I concede.

Jason kisses me sweetly on the lips. “We’re not leaving you again, baby.”

“I don’t want you to.”

“And Matthew said it right,” Sully adds, giving me one of his smoldering looks. I feel the emotion in his voice, and it’s making my heart sing. “I’m in love with you. I wanna be with you, I want the four of us to pick up where we left off. I want us to do whatever it takes to make it work in the long run.”

I exhale sharply. “I am crazy about you, as well. I’m in love with all three of you, and I hated that I had to leave. I never expected this.”

“I know, baby, neither did we,” Matthew replies, a warm smile stretching his lips as he brings a hand up to my face, lovingly caressing my cheek. “I was an idiot. I was scared, and I didn’t want Cynthia getting close enough to hurt you. It’s why I sent you away, and I deeply regret it. Especially since she ended up coming after you anyway. It was a mistake.”

“It’s okay. I understand now. You just wanted me safe and out of harm’s way. Judging by her behavior today, I completely get it, Matthew. Had I not seen it for myself, I’m not sure I would’ve believed you,” I say, an ache persisting in my chest. “She’s a good actress. It’s over, though. Right?”

“It is,” he says.

“She’ll never come near you again,” Sully adds.

Jason shakes his head vehemently. “We’ll need to inform her parents. She definitely needs help. Obviously that clinic she was at didn’t provide the type of help that she needs. Whatever works, as long as she stays away from us.”

“I think we seriously need to consider a restraining order,” Matthew says. “That means reporting what happened today to the local authorities.”

I give him a startled look. “Are you sure? It could cause quite the scandal. ...”

“Your safety and well-being are paramount, Selina. I think it’s necessary,” he replies.

I have to admit, that makes me feel good. Precious. Cherished. Genuinely loved and protected. It’s such a dramatic shift of feelings from what I’ve been experiencing since I came back to Providence. I had expected and prepared myself for a lonely and uneventful Christmas. After the horrifying events with Cynthia, Santa brought me the best gift, actually, *gifts*, possible.

But I still need to tell them about the baby.

Later. Right now, I need to feel their arms around me, their soft kisses on my cheeks and lips, their musky cologne filling my lungs and their strength imbuing my soul with much-needed energy. Whatever comes next, we'll handle it together. The certainty and promise of a better future ahead has my eyes twinkling and my soul warming as I feel myself coming back to life. Winter may be cold and sleepy outside, but there is the sweetest spring blooming in my heart.

SELINA

I had almost forgotten how good it felt to be in the company of people that I could actually rely on. Having lived my whole life experiencing disappointment from the very ones who were supposed to love and nurture me, I'm genuinely not used to getting this kind of support. Matthew, Sully, and Jason are determined to show up for me in every single aspect of my existence. The mere concept fills me with wonder and awe, but I refuse to let that scare me anymore. It is beautiful, and something I now believe I truly deserve.

The first thing I need to do, according to Matthew, is return to The Sartorialist and talk to Etienne about what happened. I assumed I was fired when I left, so I definitely need to speak to him about my job, to apologize for running off the way I did, and for ignoring the calls that followed. I panicked. I was terrified and embarrassed. My ego couldn't take another blow after I left the cabin in Aspen, and my heart wasn't ready for yet another failure. I hope Etienne will understand.

"Worst case scenario, he will at least give you a good recommendation for your next job," Matthew says. We're in the back seat of his truck. Sully is driving, while Jason rides shotgun. We're on our way to The Sartorialist, and my heart is pounding. "I'm sure Etienne will understand, though. I know him well enough to say that with a certain degree of confidence."

"I hope so," I reply, my head resting on his shoulder. "I feel like such a lost little lamb right now. I barely recognize myself."

"And it's perfectly okay," Jason says, giving me a smile over the shoulder. "You've been through a lot, Selina, and you barely had a moment to sit down and process everything before another storm hit. You're only

human. We're all only human. Once we learn to accept that, we can forgive and elevate ourselves."

"Spoken like a guy who's been through the twelve-step program," Sully chuckles dryly.

"Whatever it takes," Jason replies. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that, Selina. And I'm sorry I didn't have the nerve to leave my room for days afterwards. You needed me, you needed us. I'm doing better now, though. I promise."

"I believe you," I tell him. "And I do understand. Remember, I grew up with a dad who's still on and off the wagon. I get it. I may have been on the receiving end of a lot of hurt and sorrow from that man, but I do understand the addiction and the struggle against it. It's a disease, and it needs to be treated as such. The fact that you have the presence and the state of mind to do something about it tells me you're more than strong enough to handle it, and to get your life back on track."

"I haven't had a drink since that night," he says. "It was easier this time around because I had you constantly in the back of my mind. The guys have been nothing but supportive, but that's no surprise."

"We're only human," I remind him of his own words.

"Okay, here we are," Sully says as he pulls into the parking lot. "Ready?"

"No," I mumble, staring at the megastore building as I climb out of the truck, snow crunching beneath my boots. "I don't think I'll ever be ready for a conversation quite like this."

Yet ready or not, it must be done. I owe it to myself and I owe it to the man who gave me a job when he didn't really have one for me and my talents at the time. It took me a while to understand that simply having talent and a college degree wouldn't be enough to make me worthy of a designer position at a company like Etienne's. I get it. I've had room and time to grow, to further hone my skills and better learn, particularly where The Sartorialist's style guide is concerned.

In hindsight, I doubt I would've been a good fit even as a junior designer for this brand. I didn't understand the ethos as well as I do today.

"Come on, let's grab life by the horns and kick it in the ass," Matthew says, offering me his arm.

I slip my hand through and let him guide me into the building, closely followed by Jason and Sully. I seem tiny and insignificant in the company of these three men, but I am definitely proud and blossoming in their presence

again. This whole place seems as if I'm revisiting it from a past dream, a corner lost somewhere in the past that I have only just found again. Why did I run? Why was the fear of failure stronger than my desire to grow and face my demons? Loneliness, as bitter and as badly as it hurt before, felt more familiar than having to look Etienne in the eyes and tell him the truth.

"I can't thank you guys enough for being here with me," I say. "But the store should be closed today. I can't believe I didn't think of that earlier—"

"No need," Matthew replies. "I called Etienne. He's expecting us."

That makes my heart skip a beat and my stomach shrink with anxiety. For a brief moment, I'd thought I'd be off the hook, able to postpone an extremely uncomfortable conversation. Alas, fate has other plans. Fate has Matthew, Sully, and Jason leading the way as I brace for the inevitable. They're right, though. I owe Etienne that much.

Up ahead, the store rises with its sleek front displays and chrome-plated frames, its white marble shelves and equally pristine floors. Light pendants hang from above, but only half of them are lit since it's not actually open. The front grates are pulled up, and I can see Etienne inside, carelessly scrolling through his phone as he leans against the counter. He's wearing jeans and a plush navy-blue sweater—not from his collection. It looks like it's from last year's GAP autumn/winter line, which is all the more endearing when I see it on a man who would normally scrunch his nose at anything "casual-American," as he describes it.

"How did he sound?" I ask. "It's Christmas Day, for Pete's sake. He must've been spending time with his family," I mutter when Matthew doesn't tell me about Etienne's tone over the phone. I'm getting nervous. Downright skittish.

But Sully places his hand on the small of my back and leans in. "Would you relax?" he whispers. "You're gonna give yourself a heart attack."

"I'll try."

I take a deep breath, and we go inside. As soon as he looks up from his phone, Etienne's expression lightens up. It fills me with sudden relief because he seems genuinely happy to see me again.

"Selina! Merry Christmas, first of all," he says, his French accent adding thickness to the words.

"Merry Christmas to you, too," I reply. "I'm so sorry..."

"Come, let's talk," he says, motioning for me to follow him into his back office. He sounds calm and gentle, which further serves to soothe my nerve

endings at a time when I need all the encouragement and comfort that I can get. “Now tell me, Selina, ma cherie, what happened?”

He sits behind his massive mahogany desk. It’s older than me—I think he’s had it since he first got started in the fashion industry. Etienne once told the store staff about his desk and how it saw him grow through the decades. Hours and days, nights and minutes, spent hunched over, drawing and designing until his eyes couldn’t take it anymore. There are objects of fine art displayed on the wall shelves, serving mostly as bookends but also telling stories of their own. I recognize some from when he first brought them over, following one trip abroad or another. Others have come with him since his earliest days in Paris.

Sculptures made of brushed bronze or neatly polished pink marble, unique photograph frames with real gemstones and precious metals serving as Art Nouveau-style embellishments, decorative boxes with mother of pearl inlays, and custom-designed cigar boxes. Minimalist crystal cuts from Latin America, hand-crafted globes with glossy, painted maps of the world dating back to the early 1800s, and rare Chinese vases made of porcelain and donning the classic blue motifs of one ancient dynasty or another. Etienne is one of the few people I know who has likely seen more than half of the planet with his own eyes. I believe he’s doing even more traveling now in his retirement age—though he has yet to fully withdraw from the design scene.

Something tells me he will be launching new lines well into his nineties.

“I have to apologize, first and foremost,” I say as I settle into one of his guest seats. “I acted completely out of character yesterday, and I couldn’t even explain myself.”

“You are clearly going through something, Selina, but I am here, and I am more than willing to listen. Please, spare no details,” he says. “I want to help.”

“I broke up with my boyfriend a while back,” I start from the very beginning, swallowing my pride as I look him in the eyes and keep my chin up. There is no turning back now, and enough damage has been done already. Maybe I can mend some of it. “I used to live at his place, and I left without really considering my options. The store doesn’t pay me enough for a quick deposit on another apartment, so I spent a couple of weeks sleeping here... I’m sorry for that, too. Squatting in my late twenties was not something I had on my bingo card, Mr. Lacroix, but I had nowhere else to go.”

“Well, Selina, I need to tell you something. I know you’ve been staying

here.”

“Wait, what?” I can barely breathe. “What do you mean you know?”

Etienne smiles broadly, leaning back into his chair. “Did you really think I wouldn’t know what’s going on in my store? I check the camera feeds, I read the shift manager’s notes and reports. I specifically instructed the staff that you be left to your own devices while you figured something out. Nobody wants to live in their workplace, Selina, so I understood that you had something serious going on in your life.”

“Oh... my... God.”

“There is nothing to be ashamed of. Life happens to all of us. Did I ever tell you about the nights I spent sleeping in Grand Central Station?” he asks, slightly amused, as I shake my head slowly. The shock is too powerful for me to say another word. “I was an up-and-coming designer at the time. I was about to launch my first collection, and I had put all of my money, every cent I’d saved up, into the fabrics I needed for the show. I had nothing left for rent, and you know as well as I do that New York can be pretty expensive. So I slept in Grand Central Station for about a week. I would shower at the YMCA, I’d grab a croissant from the bakery down the road from the workshop I shared with five other designers, and then I’d go to work, determined to make it in the business.

“Mind you, I couldn’t sleep at the workshop because the other five designers were squatting there,” he adds, laughing lightly. “It was a difficult and humbling experience, but I understood the sacrifices required of me to make it. When it dawned on me that you had fallen on hard times, I couldn’t let you fail entirely. I had to let you muddle through until you found your own way. And then you left. Matthew said you stayed at his winter cabin in Aspen, right?”

“Yes...”

“A good man, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is,” I sigh deeply.

“I can tell he loves you,” Etienne replies, making my cheeks blush pink. “But I can also tell that you are a proud woman. Once you were back at the store, I understood that you had yet to find your way out. It is why I came over yesterday. I wanted to suggest something. A solution that would benefit you without putting my company in any danger or discomfort. The Sartorialist cannot be a home for you, Selina, not in that sense.”

I nod once. “Yes, I agree. Again, I am so sorry.”

“Please, do not apologize. Hear me out. Firstly, I would like to give you a raise.”

“Huh?” I stare at him, utterly confused.

“You’ve been a true asset to the company, and it’s about time you were rewarded for your hard work. So, let us start with a generous raise for your sales specialist position. I have a two-bedroom apartment not far from here that you can rent, and I can deduct the monthly fee from the raise, without it affecting your current salary, basically. You don’t need a deposit, you only need to live there and live well, Selina.”

“Etienne. You are way too generous and far too kind—”

He raises a hand to silence me. “I’m not done. Second, I don’t intend to keep you as a sales specialist for much longer.”

“You’re still gonna fire me,” I gasp, the rollercoaster of emotions way too jiggly for me to handle.

“No, I would like to start mentoring you in the new year, once you get back on your feet and have a sense of balance back in your life. A frazzled designer is of no use to me.”

Again, I stare in sheer disbelief.

He watches me closely for the better part of a minute. Truth be told, I had a longer speech in mind about how I screwed up, about how I never intended for things to get as far as they did. But with a simple tale from his own past, Etienne Lacroix has made himself come across as infinitely more human than I ever thought he could be—one more lesson for me to add to this year’s roster of newfound wisdom. He didn’t need the actual details he asked me not to spare. He didn’t need the full story. He already knew and understood everything precisely as it was laid out before him.

I can’t believe I’ve been walking on eggshells around this man, when I could’ve simply opened up and explained my situation. Pride be damned. Tears fill my eyes, and I struggle to blink them back as I try to give him a proper response.

“Etienne, I don’t know how to thank you,” I manage.

“Let’s start by being more honest with one another, what do you say?” he replies.

“Yes, absolutely.”

“You’re not just an employee, Selina. You are a human being. And while I cherish and protect my company fiercely, I feel the need to do the same for the people who help keep me in business. You are one of our most treasured

sales specialists, and I am more than aware of your talents as a designer. I believe you've spent enough time on the bench to understand how my brand works now, and I think you will soon be ready to take the next step. Would you like that?"

"God, yes. Having you as my mentor would be a dream come true!" I blurt out. "Frankly, I was positive that I was fired, that I would never work in this industry again."

"Had you not come over today, I might've considered blacklisting you, to be honest. But I am glad you did show up, and I am glad we are having this conversation. You will need that backbone for later, Selina. The fashion industry is harsh and heartless."

"I understand."

"But let us get past Christmas first, okay?"

I giggle softly, and he slides a key across the desk, along with a small envelope. "This is for you. The details of your new address are in the envelope, along with everything else you'll need to settle in. The maintenance numbers, the Wi-Fi password, you know, the important details one gets when they move into a new home."

"I cannot thank you enough."

"You will thank me plenty when you become one of my best designers, Selina. In the meantime, I suggest you and Matthew and your friends try to enjoy what's left of these peculiar holidays. What do you say?"

Laughing, I take the key and envelope and shove them in my coat pocket. "I say that sounds wonderful." Etienne doesn't need to know about my foursome situation. I'll rather let him think it's just me and Matthew. It's weird enough as it is, and we still have so much more to figure out in the days to come. There's no point in spilling the beans everywhere. "I look forward to coming back to work in the New Year, then."

"With the appropriate amount of hangover, I presume."

I can't laugh at that one. I'm pregnant. I give a weak smile instead. I really need to let the guys know they are about to be fathers.

After our meeting, Etienne and I return to the front of the store, where Matthew, Sully, and Jason patiently await. I'm feeling nervous because I know I have to tell them about the baby. Today has been such a whirlwind of emotions and events already, yet my life appears to be resetting, one stone at a time. Part of me wants to wait, but they have the right to know and deserve the truth.

I'm terrified of how they might react even though they've been so kind and understanding thus far.

"How did it go?" Matthew asks.

"Better than I thought," I reply, holding back a smile as I give Etienne a long, affectionate look. "Not only do I get to keep my job, but I'm in line for a new junior designer position sometime next year, and I also have a place to stay."

Sully lets a delighted grin split his face from ear to ear. "That sounds phenomenal. Who'd have thought?"

"Then again, you are ridiculously ambitious and talented," Jason quips. "Well deserved, Selina, congratulations."

"Thank you, Etienne, for everything," Matthew says to my boss, then turns his focus back on me. "You know, I still have a studio apartment for you to stay in, rent free."

I would like nothing more than to accept the offer, but my current situation won't allow it. "And I can never thank you enough for being so kind and generous in offering that," I tell him. "But I prefer Etienne's two-bedroom for two major reasons."

"And what would those be?" he asks, raising a curious eyebrow.

"Well, first, it's my financial independence. Etienne's place keeps me out of your debt, and the rent gets taken out of my augmented salary. In the long term, it's a sound and safe decision. Besides, I will need the extra space, a studio won't do anymore," I say.

Jason chuckles. "On account of you moving up in the fashion world and needing more room for your workspace, a little workshop of your own?"

"That, too. But it's mostly on account of the fact that I'm pregnant," I say.

The bomb has been dropped, and the three of them are staring at me, speechless and probably mindless. Etienne takes a deep breath, equally surprised but also thrilled as he turns around and hugs me. "Oh, Selina, you didn't mention that. Good grief, ma chérie, congratulations! I think. I think? Are congratulations in order?" He sounds worried, and understandably so, because he's probably thinking my ex is the father.

"I guess," I tell him, struggling to put on a weak smile as I keep stealing glances at my men. "The ex is not the daddy, if that's what you're wondering," I tell him. "Kieran and I stopped being intimate a long time ago."

“My, my,” Etienne exclaims as he looks to Matthew. “Sounds like you’re going to be a papa.”

“Am I?” he manages, his gaze darting between Etienne and me.

It’s supposed to be a scary moment since I don’t know how to understand and interpret Matthew, Jason, and Sully’s reaction, but all I can do is laugh as I realize that the three of them are wondering the same thing while also trying to keep it cool in front of Etienne. The only accurate answer will put me in a bad light in front of my boss, so I choose to shrug, instead.

I give a subtle nod and a look to him that silently says, “I guess?”

Matthew wraps his arms around me and holds me close. I know Sully and Jason are dying to do the same, but Etienne’s presence has them holding back, pained and exhilarated at the same time. “It’s gonna be okay,” Matthew whispers in my ear.

“I am terrified,” I whisper back, shuddering in his embrace.

“I’m here. Jason is here. Sully is here. Baby, we’re not letting you go ever again,” he says, careful not to be overheard. “No matter what, we’re going to get through this together. Come on, let’s head out. The guys are about to explode,” he adds with a short laugh.

We say goodbye to Etienne and wish him the best for the remainder of his winter holiday. I follow Matthew, Sully, and Jason outside and quietly, we cross the parking lot to the truck, now under an extra inch of snow. The sky is pure white and loaded, determined to give Providence the postcard Christmas it’s been longing for since Black Friday.

“Guys, I know I should’ve kept my mouth shut back there, but I couldn’t hold it in anymore,” I say as I open the passenger door.

“Get over here,” Sully growls and hugs me tightly, showering me with kisses and filling my heart with his affection, while Jason and Matthew huddle around and hold me close. I’m warm and tightly snuggled between my men, their lips caressing my cheeks, my temples, and every other inch of skin that they can find. I can’t help but giggle, surprised by their candor. “It doesn’t even matter which of us is the father, Selina,” Sully says, catching his breath. “I’m going to be a father.”

“I’m going to be a father, too,” Matthew adds.

“This kid is the luckiest already. He’s gonna have three dads,” Jason says, equally thrilled.

“I’m so happy to hear you say that! I was so afraid you’d be upset.” I manage, tears stinging my eyes once again.

Matthew caresses my cheek. “Don’t be ridiculous. Sure, it’s a surprise, one we certainly didn’t see coming but judging by how today went from this morning up until now, it seems to be the promise of a much brighter future ahead. I meant every word I said, Selina. You’ll never be alone again.”

“Good,” I whisper, shuddering slightly against his body. “Because I can’t bear the thought of being away from you, guys, ever. This time apart almost killed me.”

“I know. It was hard on us, too,” Jason says. “But you’re not on your own anymore. And as weird as it may get, as unorthodox as our relationship may be, we’re gonna have a baby. We’re gonna be a family.”

“A pretty feisty family,” Sully laughs.

I lean into them, surrendering unto their strength and comfort as I welcome their support and unconditional love. No one could have imagined a road veering so far off the better-known path. I definitely didn’t think I’d be pregnant by Christmas when I agreed to join them at the winter cabin. It was supposed to be spicy fun, a way to disconnect and satisfy my darkest, naughtiest desires.

Not once did I imagine I’d be giving them such news on Christmas Day, mere hours after their crazy ex-girlfriend practically tried to kill me. Damn, somebody should write a book about my life, there’s clearly enough in just the span of a few months to produce a riveting read. At least mine would be the truth and not the lies that Cynthia spoon fed me through her diary.

I am going to be a mother. And yes, I’m also going to have three men to rely on. Three fathers for my child. Three soulmates to keep my heart singing and my body humming from pure pleasure and wholesome joy. Life may throw plenty of curveballs at my head, but I am pretty sure I’ve figured out which ones to dodge and which ones to strike and ultimately win the game.

As bad as the past few days have been, the future has found its way back on the horizon, and I see it bright and clear. I see the promises in the sunlight through a snowy sky, I see my peace and happiness rising with the morning of a better tomorrow. I’m leaving a gloomy and tempestuous past behind. I’m leaving behind all of the grief, loneliness, stubbornness and irrational pride. The fear and the insecurity.

I deserve better and I deserve more. Fortunately, fate seems to have agreed with me.

SELINA

The day after Christmas finds me back in Aspen.

With a fire burning, the flames crackling as the scented candles dominate the mantel, I keep myself busy around the living room—wiping the dust from the bookshelves, arranging the coffee table platters and bringing glasses in from the kitchen. I've made my favorite eggnog recipe, one of the few things I've developed over the years. Kieran never appreciated the nutmeg and grated orange peel, but Matthew tasted it earlier and declared it to be the best eggnog he's ever had.

I made a non-alcoholic version for Jason and myself. The guys are out doing some last-minute grocery shopping for our dinner. Aspen is a tourist destination, so plenty of the supermarkets in town are open over the holidays. I'm expecting some turkey breast, rosemary, and plenty of potatoes for tonight, and I look forward to every moment that will go into preparing this meal. It's our first Christmas together, albeit a slightly delayed one, and I am excited to make it as close to perfect as possible.

A cool selection of 50s and 60s Christmas-themed songs plays in the background, and I hum to the melodies as I glide around the living room with a dry cloth and furniture spray. My heart is at ease, dancing to the rhythm as I let the minutes pass in harmony. It's been a long time since I've felt this happy, and I'll be damned if I will let anything or anybody get in the way of that again.

My job is safe. The store will open after New Year's Day, and I'll fly back then to settle into my new apartment before going to work. The sales specialist position will end by spring, during which time Etienne will begin mentoring me as a Junior Designer. To my delight, plenty of my most recent

sketches have made it onto his drawing board, and he wants us to work together on each piece in order to have it ready for a future collection. I'm due to see an OB-GYN when I return to Providence as well since I need to make sure the baby is healthy and that the Cynthia scare didn't cause any long-term damage.

Thankfully we haven't heard anything from her since the hotel incident.

We filed a report with the police, and Sully has asked his law enforcement friends to keep their ears to the ground for any news about the situation. Cynthia has been described as armed, dangerous, and potentially unstable, and I'm pretty sure daddy's money won't get her out of this one. She went too far, and she needs to pay for it. She put my life in danger. Hell, she almost killed me and my unborn child. I never want to live through something like that ever again.

I admit, I'm feeling uneasy not knowing where she is. But her face is plastered all over Aspen—if she comes back into the area someone will surely recognize her and call the police. Besides, there's another blizzard warning in effect that will probably cause us to be snowed in for a few days, at least, and I will be safe in the arms of my men. My three handsome, intelligent, brave and loving men. Damn, I got so lucky.

A noise outside captures my attention. It must be the guys, though I didn't expect them home so soon. I figured there'd be long lines at the register, particularly with another snowstorm coming. I take off my apron and leave it on one of the armchairs, then straighten the creases of my emerald-green velvet dress that Sully got for me from a Christmas-themed store. It's supposed to be a sexy elf kind of style, but I think I'm sporting it way better as a red-haired Mrs. Claus. I even paired it with black lace stockings and one of the lingerie sets that Matthew got me for Christmas. We opened presents this morning, and needless to say, I am now the proud owner of an entire lingerie store.

Another clang and crack startles me, this time from the back of the house.

I peek through the living room window first, but I don't see the truck. "Must be a deer or... please, don't let it be a bear. I'm gonna scream if it's a bear."

They're a rare occurrence during this time of the year, but certainly not impossible. The heavy snows should have kept them hibernating, though. Cautiously, I tiptoe over to the kitchen and look through the window by the door. I only see the snowy yard, the sky above already darkening with the

coming blizzard. It'll be impossible to see anything past the back fence in less than an hour.

"You fellas had better be back by then," I mutter.

There's movement at the corner of the porch, but I can't tell what it is. It doesn't look big enough to be a bear, so I'm emboldened enough to step outside to get a better look.

Careful not to slip, I move toward the edge but there's nothing there. Not a rabbit, not a deer, certainly not a bear. I can't help but breathe a sigh of relief over that last possibility, then laugh lightly to myself. I've been so on edge since the incident in Providence that basically any noise makes me jittery.

I hear the rushed footsteps and turn around just as Cynthia charges at me.

I scream and duck when I see the log swinging for my head. She misses by only a few inches, but I slip on the snowy porch and land on my ass. "OW!" I cry out upon hitting the hardwood, but I need to get up. She's coming at me again. "Cynthia, what the fu—?"

"You're gonna pay for this!" she snarls.

Looking crazed and disheveled, I barely recognize her. She's wearing jeans and a black parka, her hair a mess and her eyes bulging with rage, hysteria, and hatred. Cynthia hates me so much that she wants to seriously hurt me, if not kill me.

"Stop, Cynthia, please!" I shout, raising my hand to try and protect myself.

The log hits me across the forearm and searing pain shoots all the way up to my shoulder. Tears sting my eyes as I scramble backwards only to find myself cornered by the porch railing.

"You'll pay for this, you bitch!" she keeps coming. "I had him! He was mine! You took him away from me, you stupid, filthy bitch!"

"Cynthia, stop it! I'm pregnant!" I scream, my mind blank and my survival instincts flaring every which way as I try to buy myself another second or two—long enough to figure out how I'm going to survive, because this woman is ready to bludgeon me to death.

To my surprise, the words do stop her, if only for a moment.

But the moment turns out to be a crucial one. She stares at me with a mixture of horror and disbelief. Her beauty is long gone, smothered by her hatred and toxicity. Cynthia has been drinking her own poison, and it's all downhill for her from here, there is no coming back from this.

Suddenly, Mary Swanson is behind Cynthia. All I can do is hold my breath. I didn't even see her coming let alone hear her.

Before Cynthia can raise the log to try and hit me again, Mary whacks her over the back of the head with a snow shovel. I hear myself yelping but I cover my mouth when Cynthia's eyes roll up, and she falls flat on her face with a shameful thud. The silence that follows is downright frightening, the hairs on the back of my neck rising stiffly as I try to take in the multitude of events that just unfolded before I could even realize what was happening.

My breathing is ragged, bursts of steam dancing past my lips into the cold winter air. The gray skies above thicken, darker clouds swelling ominously with the promise of heavy snow. My arm hurts, but I can still move it. The wrist seems fine as I twist my hand around. Flashes of pain shoot upward, and the fabric of my dress is torn to reveal several scratches and cuts, blood dripping and seeping into the green velvet.

"Honey, are you okay?" Mary asks, panting but unable to let go of the snow shovel yet. Her gaze keeps darting back and forth between me and Cynthia.

All I can do is look at her with paralyzing fear. I glance at Mary's feet and notice she's wearing her heavy duty snow boots. Thank God those things don't make a sound, especially on the wooden porch. I'm baffled and horrified as I manage to shift my weight from my likely-bruised ass to my knees, the stockings also shredded in the skirmish.

"I... I think so," I manage, finally able to breathe, as I bend forward to check on Cynthia.

She's out cold but definitely still alive, blood trickling down from the back of her neck. Her lips are parted, and her breathing seems even. The last thing I need is a dead body to add to all the trauma I've been through. She's done enough damage, and the rage pooling in the pit of my stomach signals the dissipation of that earlier adrenaline rush.

"I knew she'd be coming around again," Mary says. She helps me up, my legs shaking terribly as I lean against the railing to catch my breath. "From the moment Matthew told me about what happened in Providence, I knew it was only a matter of time before she'd slither back up this mountain and try to finish what she started."

"Was she always like this?" I ask.

Mary shakes her head slowly, her graying hair curling around the temples. She looks bulkier under her winter coat, but I welcome her strength

tenfold after what she just did—she basically saved my life. “Honestly, Cynthia was a good kid growing up. Happy, smiling, playful. Always friendly. She used to stick to me like glue whenever she came around, especially in the winter. Her parents would often leave her on her own, causing her to believe they never really loved her. The older she got the worse she became; it was as if their absence ate away at her, swallowing her soul. They threw all their money at Cynthia, giving her whatever she wanted, hoping that would make up for the absence of their attention and affection.”

“So, they spoiled her.”

Mary nods. “Rotten. Ski instructors. Snowboarding instructors. Nannies. Personal assistants. Trips all over the world. Jewelry, cars, expensive clothes. Anything that Cynthia’s heart desired, she got. By the time she turned twenty, she became insufferable.” She pauses for a moment, shaking her head in dismay. “And the sad thing is, I mentioned how bad things were getting to her father more than once. I told him, ‘Henry, this girl needs her parents, not a winter chalet in Aspen.’”

I nod slowly. “What did he say?”

“He said—and I kid you not—he said, ‘Cynthia doesn’t need us. She already has everything she needs.’ Imagine that. Her own parents. It got worse after college. I couldn’t stand her, to be honest. She’d often come around and try to spend time with me, but she gave off this terrible energy, Selina... for every smile she offered, Cynthia would eat away at your soul. She’d make you feel small and miserable because she couldn’t stand people being happy around her. She felt everyone was beneath her.”

“She had all the money in the world, and she still wasn’t happy.”

Damn, I almost feel sorry for her.

“But that’s certainly no excuse for treating people like crap. Last year, she became fixated on Matthew. Cynthia has been eyeing him since he started coming to Aspen, shortly after he and the boys retired from the Marines,” Mary says. “I was glad to have him up here. He and Jason and Sully are absolutely delightful. They are no comparison to the other stiffs who usually spend their winters on the mountain. I started to notice Cynthia finding reasons to come over more often. I didn’t pay much attention until last Christmas, when they got together. The four of them, I mean.”

The look that Mary gives me is blatantly obvious—she totally knows about our situation and what goes on in this cabin. That brings blood up to my cheeks, making me blush as I can barely sustain her gaze. It makes her

laugh.

“Don’t worry, honey. Love is love, no matter the shape or size or number it involves,” she adds, then glances down at Cynthia again. “That was her problem. She could never accept that Matthew would never be with just her. She could never accept that she wasn’t the apple of his eye, much like she was never the apple of her father’s eye. Whatever therapy and rehab she did over the summer obviously didn’t help. This has been festering inside her for a very long time.”

“Yeah, I can tell.”

“I’m sorry you got caught in the middle, Selina. You’re a good girl. The boys are so enamored with you. They’re happier than I’ve ever seen them,” she smiles lovingly, then proceeds to tie Cynthia’s hands behind her back at the first sign of consciousness. “Good thing I always keep a couple of cable ties in my pockets, just in case. You never know when the wiring gets loose up here, and with a blizzard coming, it would take a while for an electrician to arrive before some squirrel or deer chews on the wrong thing.”

I have to chuckle internally at how casually Mary talks about why she carries the cable ties as she’s binding Cynthia’s wrists with them. “Do you think she’ll be okay?” I ask Mary.

She nods once, and I help turn Cynthia over on her side. “She is as resilient as a cockroach. Chances are, she’ll survive an apocalypse. That’s the trouble with people who are inwardly miserable and thoroughly self-hateful—the universe won’t let them go out easily and quickly. The more they hurt others, unintentionally and deliberately, the longer they seem to be around. Karma is real, Selina, and something tells me that the rest of Cynthia’s life will be payback for all the wrong she’s inflicted on others.”

“Yeah, well, attempted murder will definitely keep her on lockdown for a while,” I mutter. My arm is throbbing now, stinging heat enveloping the injured area as the jitters wear off. “I just... I honestly can’t believe this happened. I thought she was gone. I had hoped she’d gotten arrested by now.”

“Matthew would’ve heard something.”

“It’s a good thing you followed your gut, then, Mary. I wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for you. I can’t thank you enough,” I manage, choking up on a fresh round of tears.

She hugs me tightly and holds me close for the better part of a minute. “Honey, you don’t have to worry about a thing. You don’t owe me anything.

I only did what any decent human being would do. What matters now is that you're safe. Are you feeling alright otherwise? I heard you're expecting." Her concern shifts into a warm and amused smile. "A little bundle of joy to three daddies."

"Yes, I think so. I certainly hope I'm okay and that the baby is too."

I give myself a few moments to pay attention to my own body, to every sliver of physical discomfort. But all I'm getting is a sore ass, bruised knees and calves, and my forearm. That log did a number on me, though I don't feel like anything is broken. My belly feels fine. I have zero pain or discomfort in that area. I will definitely need to keep an eye on the little one in the coming days, though. Sudden stress does have a way of slapping me later down the road rather than on the spot.

"We should call the police now," Mary says. "Before the blizzard comes through tonight. Let her spend a few days in the local jail, snowed in and stuck in a cell. Can't wait to see the look on her father's face when he flies in. That heartless bastard deserves all the shame for this."

I can't fathom how a woman's soul could degrade to such a low point. The absence of love, of a nurturing home is like poison. The slow-killing kind that takes forever to set and actually do the maximum damage. At least I had a family. I had loving parents until my sister died, and then I was more or less left to my own devices. I had my own share of trauma and irrational guilt to work through, but I never took it out on anybody else. I never sought to hurt others in order to make myself feel better.

I can't pity Cynthia enough to ever forgive what she's done to me, what she would've done if Mary hadn't been around this time and if Matthew, Sully, and Jason hadn't arrived at the hotel the other day when they did. Life can throw you a horrifying and dangerous curve even when you think you're safe and finally at peace. I can't wait for my men to get back, to allow myself to be nurtured and protected once again.

About half-an-hour later, red and blue lights dance across the cabin as the sheriff's car pulls up. Mary sits with me on the front porch as the deputy brings Cynthia out from the back in handcuffs, while the sheriff takes my statement with a voice recorder. I tell him everything that happened—from the moment I heard the noises outside all the way through to when Mary tied Cynthia up with the cable ties.

Daylight fades slowly as the snowstorm approaches from the north. Large clumps of snowflakes are already falling, lazily gliding through the crisp air

before landing on the white blanket that is already dressing the mountain. I called Matthew and told him what happened, asking him to please drive careful even though I know he wants to hurry and get back to me.

“Do you need an ambulance?” the sheriff asks once he’s done with my statement.

“I don’t think so,” I reply, glancing down at my bandaged arm. “Mary did a great job of patching me up, and the bleeding has already stopped, so I think I should be fine.”

“What about the baby?” he insists, his white brow furrowing under his dark green hat. “I understand you’re pregnant.”

“I am, yes. But I feel fine, I promise.”

Mary gives me a concerned look. “Are you sure, honey? You could ride with the sheriff at least to the hospital down in Aspen and get yourself checked out by a professional.”

“And spend the next two to three days stuck in the hospital on account of a blizzard? No, thank you. I promise, Mary, I’m good.”

It may not be enough to ease her worries, but it will have to do. I really do feel fine, much to my surprise. Perhaps it’s because it’s still early in the pregnancy, and the shock of Cynthia’s attacks didn’t have the impact one might expect if I was further along. Or perhaps it’s because I’m stronger than I ever give myself credit for. Either way, I know in my heart that everything is okay. I’m ready to put this nightmare behind me once and for all. I’d hoped the hotel incident was the last we’d hear from Cynthia, but she obviously had more sinister plans in mind.

“What will happen to her?” I ask the sheriff as I watch Cynthia get placed in the back of his car.

The deputy isn’t too rough with her and avoids putting his hand on her head injury. She’s lucky she didn’t get worse from Mary’s shovel. I was paralyzed with fear and desperate to survive, and I certainly wish I had Mary’s presence of mind in that moment, because I would’ve kicked her ass six ways from Sunday. Fortunately for Cynthia, I’m not the violent type. I abhor physical altercations of any kind, and thankfully I’ve never had to deal with physical violence in my life, which is why this whole episode has shocked me down to the very core of my being.

“I presume you will be filing charges,” the deputy says.

“Absolutely,” I reply.

Cynthia is dazed but she can still see me from the backseat, hands cuffed

behind her back and a sour look on her face. The hatred in her brown eyes burns brightly, and I know that as long as she is a free woman, she will never stop coming after me. I'm not the one who took Matthew away from her, but it will probably take many years of prison and mandatory therapy for her to finally accept and get the help that she desperately needs. Her once glowing, silky brown hair is a clumpy mess that falls around her face, deep shadows sharpening her cheeks and making her eye sockets look hollow.

"This woman can't see the light of day again, at least not anytime soon," Mary grumbles as she puts an arm around my shoulders and holds me close.

"She won't," the sheriff assures us. "I'm taking her into custody. She'll be in jail throughout the blizzard, and I will speak to the District Attorney to make sure she doesn't get released during her arraignment. The D.A. will most likely also request that she surrenders her passport as she is certainly a flight risk and has the financial means to disappear. I assume they will expect you both to be present at that hearing."

"I reckon you can count on Matthew, Jason, and Sully to be there, as well," Mary says with a firm nod.

"Will she be able to get medical assistance?" I wonder aloud.

The sheriff shrugs. "We've got a doctor who can have a look at her as soon as we get to the jail. He's usually on call at the community clinic down the road, but he always makes himself available whenever a blizzard hits. She looks well enough to me, though she could have a minor concussion. I expect Mary didn't swing that shovel to behead the woman."

"It would've been an unintended bonus for sure," Mary quips.

I can't help but chuckle softly. It might be morbid humor but given the entire situation, it's a welcome change of mood. I've had enough heartache and disasters to last me a lifetime. It's time to enjoy life again and make light of any situation. I can only hope this was the worst of it and the last.

Finally, the deputy shuts the car door, and the sheriff gets back behind the wheel with a promise to give us a follow-up call later. Mary and I watch them go, lights still flashing red and blue down the road just as Matthew's truck emerges from the thickening snowfall. The headlights illuminate the snowflakes as he pulls up outside the cabin.

My heart skips several beats as I pull myself up, my knees still a bit weak and my head feeling rather light, but it's relief that I feel more than anything else. Although I was looking forward to the guys seeing me in the green velvet holiday dress, I changed into dark blue cotton loungewear, and I'm

wearing thick, furry, Ugg-style boots on my feet. I stayed outside on the porch while the sheriff took my statement; I needed the cold air to keep me awake and upright. Only now do I realize how exhausted I am after everything that's happened.

"The cavalry is here," Mary says with a warm smile.

Matthew jumps out of the truck first and rushes up to us, quick to measure me from head to toe, frowning at the sight of my bandaged forearm before hugging me tightly, hiding his face in my hair. I listen to his agitated breathing as he inhales me, as he revels in the feeling of having me close. "Are you okay, baby?" he asks, unable to let me go.

"I'm fine. Better, now that you're here," I tell him.

Sully joins us, his brow furrowed and his dark eyes travelling up and down my body before they also stop at my arm. "Dammit," he curses under his breath.

"I'm okay," I say it again so Jason can hear it, too, just as he reaches the front porch.

"We just passed the sheriff's car," Jason says. "Please, tell me she was in the backseat and headed to jail."

"Oh, yeah," I reply.

Matthew kisses me deeply and then Sully's lips find mine next. Jason takes Matthew's place to hold me and cover my face with short and sweet loving pecks. I welcome all the love and care that they wish to give me, all the comfort of their warmth and protective nature, the relief that their presence offers. Traumatic events in general tend to bring people closer, and I'm sure after what happened today will only serve as more glue to hold us together, stronger and safer in each other's arms.

"For a moment, I thought I'd lost you," Sully whispers in my ear as the three men wrap their arms around me, barely registering Mary's presence.

She doesn't mind it, though. I steal a glance at her and notice the huge grin dancing across her face, happiness glowing in her tired eyes. It must've been awful for Mary, as well. Having to hurt Cynthia the way she did. She didn't have any other choice, though, and I know she's fully aware of that. But even so, there has to be a certain amount of stress and a flurry of feelings going on inside her. A woman like Mary Swanson may be tough, hardened by life and the many winters spent on this mountain, yet nothing can truly prepare someone for the moment where they have to pick up a heavy object and hurt someone else in order to stop them from killing an innocent,

expecting mother.

Mary and I never asked for any of this.

Tears stream down my cheeks, hot and endless as I shudder in the embrace of my three men, my three soulmates. They feel me shaking, and they tighten their hold on me as I rest my head on Sully's shoulder. Jason kisses the side of my neck, while Matthew tucks a rebellious lock of red hair behind my ear, lovingly gazing upon me.

"I'm gonna be okay, I promise." It's all I can manage as I finally let go of the tension that I've been holding on to since Cynthia first lunged at me.

"Oh, honey, you need time and peace and plenty of rest before you can say that" Mary mumbles from the side. "Don't struggle with unnecessary bravery at this point. You've suffered enough."

"We've got you," Matthew says, then looks to Mary. "And you... Momma Mary, I can't thank you enough for being here."

She chuckles and makes her way down the porch steps. "Don't worry about a thing, sweet boy. Just remember that my instincts are never wrong. I warned you about Cynthia, didn't I?"

"You did. And I should've listened to you the first time," Matthew replies with a heavy sigh.

"Hey. The past is in the past now. What matters is that you four can still enjoy the peace and beauty of this winter holiday," Mary quips, leaving us behind with a friendly wave of her hand. "Y'all stay put and let the blizzard pass before you venture outside again, though. I hear this one's gonna be a doozie."

"Yeah, up to four feet of snow is expected," Jason mutters as he's the first to pull away from me. "Which reminds me, we need to get all the groceries and supplies inside. It's getting nasty out here."

"You're right, I didn't even notice being safe and warm embraced by the three of you," I say, looking up.

The snowflakes have gotten bigger, the angle of their descent sharpening as a freezing wind blows over the mountain. I take a deep breath and welcome the cold air in my lungs, but Matthew doesn't let me stay outside for another minute. Instead, he gingerly ushers me through the door and has me settled on the sofa while he and the guys bring everything inside.

Once they're finished, the truck snugly covered with its snow tarp, the windows and doors tightly closed and securely locked, they unpack the groceries and supplies, careful to put everything away before they start

getting ready to prepare dinner. I planned on handling that, but I certainly don't mind kicking back for a couple of hours as I watch my three men roll their sleeves up and do it instead.

Mary was right—I need to rest and I know that the little one safely tucked inside my womb needs it, too.

SELINA

By the time we take our seats at the dinner table, the platters appeal to our senses with an abundance of rosemary and butter roasted potatoes accompanying the tender turkey breast drizzled with a delicious maple syrup and chili sauce, a lovely selection of freshly baked buns and garlic bread, a fresh salad bowl with out-of-season vegetables, feta cheese and olives, and one hell of a chicken cream soup on the side. Needless to say, it all looks fantastic, and I pray to all the gods that there's enough room in my stomach for everything.

Matthew makes sure the glasses are never empty. Mine and Jason's are graced with cranberry juice, while he and Sully work on a bottle of chardonnay. "This pairs beautifully with the turkey," Sully says as he takes a long sip from his glass.

"I'm going to need a second stomach," I mutter as I barely manage to finish a small serving of creamy chicken soup. "This is so filling and comforting and everything else smells amazing, especially the turkey."

"Let me guess, you want to leave room for the turkey," Jason chuckles, leaning in to drop a kiss on my temple. I smile softly, well aware that there's also a strawberry cheesecake in need of my attention and currently waiting in the fridge. "And the cheesecake," he adds.

"Boy, you read my mind like a psychic," I shoot back.

We laugh and carefully work our way through each course, while my loving men make sure that I get the chance to taste a little bit of everything that they created in the kitchen over the course of several hours. The turkey is as tasty as it looks, and I am determined to recreate the maple syrup and chili sauce for another dish the first chance I get. It's an absolute game changer.

“This is amazing,” Sully remarks as he leans back in his chair. “Sitting around the table like this. Enjoying this good food.”

“Soul food,” Jason chimes in.

“Like a family, huh?” Matthew replies, smiling broadly as his hand covers mine on the table.

No one has said a word about Cynthia yet. We haven’t discussed the incident and I really don’t want to, truth be told. They already know what happened, and clearly nobody wants to revisit anything having to do with her ever again. Maybe tomorrow, or any other day, we might sit down and recount what happened. Maybe someday we will address the issue and how we’re going to proceed moving forward. There is still the chance that her father could bail her out or get her a reduced prison sentence. Money in America can still move pieces across the board, silently ensuring justice doesn’t get served.

Therefore, we will have to take precautions. We will ensure restraining orders here and in Providence are still in place. Additional security measures will be added around the cabin, not to mention my apartment in Providence. Maybe even a security detail, a bodyguard or two. Sully has plenty of Marine buddies who’d jump at the opportunity for a full-time gig, and I know Matthew would gladly approve and pay for it. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there, but in the meantime, I wrestle the last of my rosemary and butter potatoes, enjoying the taste and the melty texture currently conquering my taste buds.

“We are a family, aren’t we?” I ask as the four of us exchange warm, soft glances. “A weird one, but a family, nonetheless.”

“Absolutely,” Matthew replies. “And we wouldn’t be a family without you, Selina.”

“How are you feeling?” Sully asks me for the umpteenth time.

I roll my eyes at him, but in a playful manner. “Perfectly fine. Even better, in fact, with so much food currently wrestling for the pole position in my tummy.”

“And the kid?” he insists, his dark gaze constantly scanning me.

On any other day, I might’ve found his persistence somewhat irritating, but not today. It’s endearing and soul-filling to have such concern wrapped around my shoulders like an invincibility cape. To have so much love pouring down on me, glazing me in the warmest and most sincere kind of sunshine. To feel so safe and cherished.

“The kid is starting to think about that cheesecake again,” I reply with a playful grin.

“Just the kid?” Matthew laughs.

Time stands still as I gaze across the table. The food, the drinks, the company. There is no place I’d rather be in this moment, and it fills my heart with joy. Strange, how life throws these curveballs my way, and how they’re so subtly followed by bliss and happiness, as if the trauma barely happened. I think of myself as a tree, ever growing and reaching for the skies.

Sure, someone or something will come along and break some of my branches. The traumatic events leave me with scars, but I grow around them, much like a tree. The knots that form in the wake of such violence only serve to strengthen the trunk. The tree keeps growing, ever taller and stronger. I suppose that’s what life is all about—not allowing the trauma to define you but rather learning to live with it, to grow in spite of it, and to rise far above it.

“I’m just... I’m so grateful to be here with you,” I tell my darlings. I peer into Jason’s blue eyes, a glowing reminder of the summers to come. “You make me smile even when I fear I will never have something to smile about ever again.” I look at Sully, losing myself in the black pools of his eyes. “You make me feel safe, even in the heart of a snowstorm.” When my gaze finds Matthew’s, I feel the strength of a thousand suns burning through me. “And you, my love... you give me power and patience, you make me want to do better, to be better. Thank you, thank all of you.”

“Selina, it’s been a weird couple of months, I know,” Matthew says, inching closer. “But I also know that I wouldn’t have had it any other way. It took some stumbling, some teeth kicked in, some poking and prodding and plenty of misery, yet all that did was peel away at the rough layers of who we truly are. We’re here because of you, baby. We’re together because we belong here. You, me, Jason, Sully. And soon enough, our first child.”

“Had you told me that I’d be doing this a few months ago, I probably would’ve laughed my ass off,” Jason confesses, mildly amused as he squeezes my shoulder. “I would’ve said you’re crazy. Sure, we’d find ourselves another woman to share, eventually, but I never imagined we’d find one we’re equally thrilled about and willing to love. Matthew is right, Selina. We’re here because of you.”

Sully leans in, dropping a kiss on my cheek. “And we’re never leaving you again,” he says. “You’re stuck with us, baby, so you’d better get used to

it.”

“I can’t imagine anything else I’d rather do,” I giggle, feeling my skin heating under their gaze.

Jason claps his hands together, brightening up. “Alright, so! I heard there’s a cheesecake we need to deal with. The last thing I want to do is deprive our child of their wants and needs.”

“Let’s not forget the mother of said child,” Matthew replies.

Laughter rings through the dining room as Jason and Sully clear the table, leaving only the dessert plates and the drinks, while Matthew brings in the cheesecake on a porcelain platter, and I add the eggnog bowls to the center. It smells fantastic, the nutmeg and orange zest filling the room with a playful and exhilarating dance of scents.

After all the trials and tribulations, I find myself bathing in love, in emotional safety, in the purest form of happiness. I’m scared of what’s to come, becoming a mother, bringing a new human into this world. I know I want to raise them and make sure they get everything I never had without overloading or spoiling them. I want to build a home and a family with three men who have made it crystal clear that they want to make this work.

Once we’re done with dessert, we settle in front of the fireplace for a few more cups of eggnog and Christmas carols. Sully adds more logs to the fire, and we spend the evening talking and sharing stories from our pasts. My history is vastly different from theirs, but as the flames crackle and I listen to their words, as I look into their eyes, I feel as though I’m right there on the battlefield with each of them, sharing their experiences.

I’m scared when an IED explodes right behind Jason, while Sully and Matthew help get the rest of the group to cover and out of the enemy’s line of fire. I’m horrified when Sully falls from the second floor of an abandoned hotel in Mogadishu, yet he manages to pull himself up and limp out of there as Jason and the rest of the crew provide the cover with a hail of bullets. I’m speechless when Matthew wakes up in the middle of the night, deep within the desert, to find the camp attacked by insurgents.

But I am delighted when Sully returns from the service and starts his first kickboxing classes at the community center in Providence. I feel his joy and tranquility as he rests easier, knowing he’s managed to take a couple of kids off the streets, in the hopes that they find their way into the halls of a community college and beyond or possibly even the military. I am thrilled when Jason bids his family in California farewell and decides to start his

charter boat business off the coast in Rhode Island. I'd miss my folks, too, if I were him, but the excitement of a new life and a bountiful opportunity were far too appealing to ignore. I am filled with pride when Matthew tells me about how he worked on his frayed relationship with his father, how they were able to make amends and the old man gradually pulled him back into the family business.

It takes time to heal deep wounds, but when both parties are willing, it can be a natural process. It can happen without us even realizing it. I've forgiven my parents. We may be apart and barely see or hear from one another. But I forgave them.

It's my turn to share. "When I was sixteen," I begin then take a deep breath, "my sister Maddie and I got into an accident. I'd run off from home to go to a party. All the cool kids were there, and I'd just been told that I would never become a professional tennis player because of my knee injury. My dreams had just been shattered along with my kneecap. I was young and angry... at myself, at life, at everything."

Matthew nods slowly. "I think we've all been there in one form or another."

"Maddie had just gotten her learner's permit. She wasn't supposed to be driving without Mom or Dad in the car with her. But I called her and begged her to come and pick me up without our parents knowing. I was drunk, I wasn't even supposed to be out of the house at that hour. I was selfish and I didn't want to suffer the consequences of my own actions," I continue.

"You were a teenager," Jason kindly reminds me.

My eyes fill with tears. "I guess. But I was selfish. I didn't think of the consequences. I didn't care that Maddie didn't have the experience to drive on her own. What's worse, we got into an argument in the car. She was upset with me for turning to alcohol as the answer in dealing with my heartache from losing my tennis career. She'd done me one hell of a favor coming to pick me up, and all I could do was berate her for reprimanding me. All it took was one moment... she looked at me instead of watching the road and..." I lose my voice as I relive that night once more, the pain too much to bear.

In an instant, Matthew has his arms around me, holding me close, while Jason scooches closer on the sofa and Sully kneels before me, hands resting on my knees. I cry my heart out as they each comfort me with physical touches that mend my soul in ways I didn't think were possible. Part of me knows that it's time to let go of this old wound. It's time to stop punishing

myself for something that was never meant to hurt anyone. It was an accident.

“I was so mad that I’d lost my future—the only future I knew at the time, the only future I wanted. I didn’t see the pick-up truck coming. It happened so fast,” I manage between sobs.

“Selina, you were both kids,” Jason says. “You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, but you are not responsible for that accident.”

“I lost my sister that night. Had I not called her, she would’ve been safe, at home...”

“The past cannot be undone,” Sully says. “And you can’t keep revisiting it to punish yourself for something that was out of your control. Maddie made the decision to get into the car. You didn’t force her, she chose to do that because she was your sister. She loved you and wanted to help.

“She could’ve told your parents, but she was protecting you,” he says, and I nod once. “Now, I’m not saying Maddie was responsible, I’m not saying that at all. That’s the thing with accidents, they happen and we can’t control them. One split-second, one micron of lost focus, one wrong move, and things can be changed forever. That’s life, Selina. You either survive it, or you don’t. We don’t get to decide when it’s over. We don’t get to choose. Life decides for us, and we never have a say in it.”

“I could’ve—”

“No, Selina. It’s done,” Sully insists. “Once you accept that, once you honestly accept that you can’t change what happened, that’s when you can finally move on. There’s nothing you could have done. It can never be taken back, and it wasn’t your fault. No matter how your parents felt, no matter what they said, or how they behaved afterwards, it still wasn’t your fault.”

“Honestly, baby, your parents failed you horribly after the accident,” Matthew adds, his brow pulled into a shadowy frown. “You were scared and hurt, you were grieving and you were riddled with the kind of guilt that no kid your age should ever have to deal with. They were supposed to be there for you, to help you forgive yourself, to love and protect you. Instead, they allowed their own grief and guilt to eat away at them until there was nothing left for you. Yes, you made a mistake. But so did Maddie. And your parents made the worst mistake when they left you to shoulder the weight of her passing on your own. There is no easy fix for how you feel, I know and understand that. But you can’t torment yourself for a lifetime. It won’t bring Maddie back.”

“It won’t bring your parents back, either” Sully sighs deeply, gazing into my eyes.

There it is. The cold, hard truth that I’ve been denying for so long. I suppose my inner child thought that if I’d spend every living moment feeling sorry, feeling guilty, it might make my mother and father love me enough to come back to me. It obviously didn’t work. And Sully is right. It’s not on me.

“They were the adults,” Jason says. “They should’ve known better. You and Maddie were just kids. Your decision-making abilities were ridiculously underdeveloped at the time. But they were the grownups, Selina. And when they had to bury one daughter, they were supposed to remember that they still had another, and that she needed them. Desperately.”

“Honestly, this makes me angry,” Matthew replies, the grief thickening his voice. “They should’ve been there for you. No wonder you’re hyper-independent. No wonder you are so strong and resilient, so alone in this world. You couldn’t rely on your primary caregivers for the much-needed comfort and love you sought.”

I give him a long look, a smile tugging the corner of my mouth. “I’m not alone anymore, though. Am I?”

“No, not anymore,” he says.

After an emotional but much needed discussion, we find ourselves in the master bedroom.

My tears have dried, and my heart is filled with anticipation as I stand naked before the bed. My skin is pearly white against the red and black backdrop of the walls and silken sheets. Candles burn on the nightstand, releasing delicate fragrances of jasmine and lily of the valley as the snowstorm intensifies outside. I gaze past the window and can only see an endless white fluff that makes the cabin feel like the only place left in the world.

I’m precisely where I need to be.

Matthew, Jason, and Sully approach stripped bare and muscles rippling with every movement, like panthers eager to pounce on their prey. I cannot wait to be devoured. A bell chimes on the dresser, signifying the stroke of midnight. The vintage clock strikes the magical hour as I take a deep breath and brace myself for the wonderful things to come.

After everything that has happened, this is our first time being physically intimate again. Yesterday was so heavy and we were all exhausted. There is nothing in the world that will keep me from making love to my men tonight.

Christmas Day has come and gone, yet we are going to make sure we still celebrate it.

“Gosh, you look stunning,” Matthew declares as he looks at me, his hazy gaze traveling up and down, memorizing every curve of my body.

“I’m fortunate to be in the company of three dapper gentlemen, myself,” I reply, hungrily eyeing each of them, my brain quick to register the six-pack of Sully’s toned abdomen, the broad shoulders of Matthew’s athletic frame, the square pecks of Jason’s tanned chest.

I see faint scars of ancient battles on all of them, badges earned from fighting for their lives, their country, fighting for valor and honor. I see such strength in my warrior kings, my heroes, my soulmates. My heart opens up as my hands tremble at my sides.

“I will never get enough of you,” Sully whispers in my ear. He’s hard and ready for me, his cock twitching anxiously as I wrap my fingers around the shaft.

“Let me taste you,” I say, thirsting for the glimmering pearl of precum that blooms on the engorged tip. Breathlessly, I kneel before them, three gifts eager to please my lips and tongue.

The guttural sounds of their desire rumble louder in the silence of our bedroom as I wrap my lips around Sully’s cock, first. I take him in, slowly at first, relaxing the back of my throat as he gradually eases himself deeper. I stroke Matthew and Jason gently, matching the rhythm of my head movement as I suck and lick Sully with a ravenous appetite.

“Your lips are heaven,” I hear Jason say when I take him on.

Matthew runs a hand through my hair while I hold him and Sully tightly, feeling the veins twitch and the pressure gathering in their hardened, swollen balls. I revel in the moment, suckling them like the most delicious lollipops I’ve ever had the pleasure of tasting. I lick and deep throat each of them until my jaw hurts, until my lips are tender and flushed, until I feel a subtle ache in the back of my neck from the physical effort.

But I’m loving every second, I’m loving the music of their aching passion as they get harder and thicker in my mouth, one marvelous man, one marvelous cock at a time. Minutes linger past midnight as I feel liquid heat pooling between my legs, knees melting into the plush carpet as I service my lovers with great hunger and dedication.

“My turn,” Matthew grunts softly.

They help me up and turn me around to face the bed. They sandwich me

between them, their naked bodies perfectly matching mine. Skin on skin, their lips, their tongues, their fingers wander... exploring and rediscovering how every inch of me is hopelessly reactive to each of theirs.

“Ah, this feels like home,” I whisper, tilting my head back to let it rest against Sully’s shoulder.

Jason takes his sweet time trailing wet kisses down my arm before he shifts his focus onto my breasts. They’re getting fuller and infinitely more sensitive, the nipples instantly reacting as his mouth closes around each for the better part of a minute. He suckles them lovingly, his tongue flicking incessantly and his teeth grazing, nipping and teasing until moans escape from my throat. Matthew is on his knees. He spreads my legs, one hand gripping my thigh while the other goes on to explore my slick folds, one long and talented finger at a time.

I look down to meet his smoldering gaze just as he dips into my pussy, sliding his tongue through to find the clit firmly engorged and aching for release. He finger-fucks me frenetically and suckles on the swollen nub as my hips sway against the intensifying rhythm. Sully holds me closely from behind, his cock teasing my senses as it slips between my buttocks. Jason massages my breasts as I feel myself closer to the edge.

Time dilates and expands rapidly as I feel the bolts of lightning unfurling deep in my core.

Matthew’s fingers curl inside me, his whole hand jerking up and down and sideways while his lips and tongue hold on to my clit until I finally explode with a throated cry of ecstasy. I ride the wave as he sticks a third finger in, stretching and priming me for what’s to come. I ripple outward like a supernova, the cosmos unraveling around me, the pleasure washing over my body and soul like an endless ocean.

He doesn’t let me off that easily, though. We’re barely getting started.

Moments later, Matthew has me bent over the bed. My breasts are tender as Jason climbs in front of me so I can suck him once more. Sully quickly joins me, and I giggle delightedly as I take their cocks in, one at a time. Matthew takes me from behind, thrusting himself hard and fast and knocking the air out of my lungs for a second or two.

My lips are stretched around Sully’s engorged member as I look up to find him watching. My left hand is working Jason over to the point where I’m sure he’ll fill my mouth with cum if I take him again. But Matthew... damn. He’s so big and thick and so deep inside me, pounding me with pleasure.

“Harder, baby, harder,” I manage in between licks as I feel my pussy working overtime and happily receiving every inch of this man. This is exactly where I need to be, exactly where I belong. Right here, right now. “Oh, God!”

Another orgasm rocks through me as Matthew fucks me into oblivion, holding me tightly by the back of the neck with one hand and slapping my ass with the other. The sweet pain only serves to amplify the shattering climax as I feel myself wrapped tightly around him, as he fills me to the brim, as he possesses my body and soul with unsurmountable pleasure.

Sully is inside me, staring into my eyes as I ride him, while Jason climbs behind me and joins him inside me, stretching my pussy wider and giving me everything they’ve got. I lick my lips as I take Matthew in my mouth, and for the sweetest string of what feels like endless minutes, I allow myself the ultimate surrender.

My heart sings as my three men make love to my mouth and pussy like it’s our last night on earth. Wonderfully enough, we’re only just getting started.

“I love you so much, it fucking hurts,” Sully breathes, his gaze locked on mine and his fingers digging into my hips as he thrusts himself upward.

“I love you... God, I love all of you... oh, don’t stop... oh, fuck, don’t stop!” I scream and throw my head back as Jason pounds into me in a rhythm matching Sully’s.

Two massive cocks have me close to fainting as I welcome Matthew back in my mouth. I feel the twitching of his thundering orgasm and the heat of his seed spurting and tumbling down my throat. I drink him, every single drop. I suck him dry and lick him clean, holding on to his thighs as he gives me all of him.

Sully curses harshly, and I know he’s close. Jason comes at the same time, both of them throbbing and pulsating as they release deep inside me. I gasp and moan, welcoming every thrust and ripple as I come apart at the seams.

Outside, the blizzard rages on.

I’ve got two perfect cocks inside me and one filling my mouth, and I can’t let go of any of them. I clench myself around each, determined to hold on for dear life, not wanting to let this moment pass. I’m theirs, and they are mine. I know it is the first of many beautiful nights yet to come, and I feel so lucky.

“I don’t want this to end,” I whisper.

Matthew lifts my chin so he can look me in the eyes, shadows hooded over his face. “It won’t. Not until I give my last breath, baby. And that ain’t happening anytime soon.”

“Good. Because I can’t get enough of you.”

“Then give me a couple of minutes,” Sully growls as he rolls me over on the bed. “I’ve got a lot of work for you tonight.”

“I think the three of us have an entire task list for you tonight, Selina,” Jason chuckles gruffly.

I can feel warmth dripping down my thighs and onto the silken sheets. My body is as soft as pudding, my hair’s a mess, and my heart’s a constant wildfire, but this is as close to heaven on earth as it’s ever going to get.

I put on a Cheshire cat grin and arch my back, letting my breasts rise with each deep breath as my men admire me, as the shimmer of an unforgettable afterglow settles over our sweaty bodies. The clock may have jumped well past midnight, but the night itself is still young. The morning will find us here, still sucking and licking, pinching and slapping, biting and caressing, devoting ourselves to the act of making love until exhaustion leaves us splayed across the bed wrapped on one another’s arms.

We will sleep soundly for a while, only to wake up and start all over again.

I’m safe and loved and protected. Most importantly, I’m home. Wherever Matthew, Sully, and Jason are will always be home.

EPILOGUE

SELINA

The following months are a superb combination of weird and wonderful, of new and scary, of perfect simplicity and unexpected balance. I'm just a few weeks shy of my due date now, and my belly is huge. I'm taking up more space than usual, my back hurts like a motherfucker, and my men take turns rubbing my feet and ankles whenever we're together. But I wouldn't change a single thing about any of it.

I'm still not talking to my parents, not that it's a problem. I've accepted that this is how they chose to live. With plenty of emotional support from Matthew, Jason, and Sully, I've learned to let go of the ghosts of a past I can never change, anyway. I have plenty of marvelous things on my plate. A baby on the way. A blossoming career as a junior designer for The Sartorialist, as Etienne has finally taken me under his wing. A nice and comfortable place to stay, also thanks to Etienne who has become my good friend, my unexpected father figure and design mentor, in addition to being my boss. And a wonderful and fulfilling relationship with three men who always go above and beyond for me, for us.

I even got myself a new car, something I am able to afford with the raise that came with my new position within the company. Summer is bright and hot in the heart of Providence, the sun forever shining and smiling down upon me as I drive myself to work. There's plenty of traffic, and the temperatures are getting downright nasty, but this new ride has an awesome A/C system that keeps me comfortable behind the wheel. The radio is playing some of my favorite songs, a smooth mix of 80s music that has me smiling and bobbing my head to the rhythm.

It's as if the universe itself has realigned to match the song in my heart.

Not a day goes by that I don't miss my sister Maddie, but I understand that she would've wanted me to let go, to forgive myself and move on. Once that concept was fully internalized, I was able to look forward with fresh enthusiasm, with joy and determination. I'm living for her, too. Every day counts as two. One for me, and one for Maddie. I like to imagine she's watching me from somewhere beautiful and peaceful, smiling proudly as I move through life with sparkling energy and love oozing from every single pore.

I arrive to work with a decaf latte in one hand and my purse in the other, the sliding doors opening as I make my way through the megamall building and take the escalator up to the first floor. A different kind of music plays here during opening hour—bubblegum dance, as I like to call it. I don't mind it. It's supposed to appeal to everyone. The summer look of this place is colorful and happy, an abundance of pastels and neon signs, mobile tiki bars and balloons cluttered at the center of the domed roof. It adds an extra kick to an otherwise tired step as I walk into The Sartorialist.

“Good morning, sunshine!” Etienne greets me with a broad smile.

“And a good morning to you, kind sir!” I gleefully reply.

“Good morning, Selina,” the trainee sales specialist says from behind the counter. The rest of the crew has yet to arrive since we don't open for another hour, but I do appreciate Lara for her spunk and dedication.

“Mornin'!” I say with a wink.

She will be taking over Matthew, Sully, and Jason's store accounts soon enough. I still make sure they get the best out of our designs, of course, but they're my only sales customers at this point. I spend most of my working hours in the back office with Etienne, as I follow in his footsteps and further hone my design skills.

I've already got six products currently awaiting their turn on the manufacturer's desk, which will be released with our autumn/winter collection. Naturally, I'm stoked and eager to do more, already proud to have managed six different items under Etienne's personal approval. He's an excellent teacher, and I have to admit, I've learned more from him in the past three months than I learned in all my years of design school. Granted, most of my experience in the store has also been a tremendous help to me, as I'm able to easily discern what makes The Sartorialist's brand really tick with our desired clientele.

On top of that, I'm dating three of its most prized customers. Of course,

I've got some insider knowledge that certainly helps. Matthew often tells me about what he likes and what he'd like to see more of on the shelves.

"How are you coming along, Lara?" I ask, setting my coffee and purse on the counter.

"I'd say I'm doing well, but Mr. Lacroix can confirm or deny," she says, half-smiling. I like her. She's in her early twenties, a strawberry blonde with sharp green eyes and impeccable style. The Sartorialist uniform suits her perfectly, and she has already flawlessly adopted the demeanor of an expert sales specialist. I'm comforted by the idea that my men will be in good hands. "I'm definitely loving the job and its challenges."

"I can confirm that Lara is doing a wonderful job," Etienne says. "Though she hasn't met Mr. Hamstring yet."

I burst into laughter, painfully aware of the customer he's referring to. Lara gives me a curious look. "Who's that?" she innocently asks.

"Mr. Hamstring, otherwise known by his legal name, Franklin Mandela," I say, "is a pain in the ass and then some. He's very wealthy, and he will spend thousands of dollars in a single afternoon when he's in town. But he will also consistently ask you to make sure that our tailor customizes his pants in his preferred bespoke style which he claims makes his butt look fantastic. His hamstrings need to feel 'pretty,' he'll tell you, and he will expect you to blush and laugh a little."

"Frank is condescending and pretentious," Etienne adds, still chuckling. "And he likes the young ladies, probably a little too much considering that he has a wife and three children at home. I often advise my staff to be careful with... what did you call them, Selina?"

"Spicy customers," I giggle.

"Yes, spicy customers. Well, Frank is spicy but harmless. He just loves droning on about his derriere and his hamstrings, and he loves any ounce of feminine attention that he can get."

Lara takes a deep breath, putting on a slightly awkward smile. "I will make a mental note of the gentleman in question, then." She nods my way, glancing at my baby bump—or undercover watermelon, as I like to call it. "How is the baby?"

"Kicking. I'm sure we've got a future soccer player on our hands," I reply.

"Do you know if you're having a girl or a boy yet?"

I shake my head. "No, and I specifically asked the doctor to keep us in the

dark. We want it to be a surprise. It's how we like living life these days, fast and loose."

"Oh, ma cherie, whatever it is, this child is the luckiest. How is Matthew, by the way?" Etienne replies.

I take a moment to admire his dapper style—the black suit with subtle gray lines, the pearly gray vest, the white shirt and burgundy tie look great on a man his age. Then again, Mr. Lacroix only wears the finest fabrics and personally tailors each piece, making sure to follow the current trends without abandoning the classic men's fashion values upon which he built his own brand. It's admirable. I hope I'll be just as iconic when I'm his age.

"Matthew is good. He's back from a conference in Toronto. I believe he, Jason, and Sully are coming by the store later," I say, then look to Lara. "I sent you an email yesterday about setting some shirts aside for the guys. Did you get a chance to read it?"

"Yes. And I've already prepared them for Matthew and his friends when they arrive."

"This one's a keeper," I quip to Etienne.

He smiles broadly, genuine affection glowing in his eyes. "I must say, Selina, I love this look on you. Who'd have thought you would get this far with the right man beside you? Had I known Matthew would be such a good influence, I would have personally catapulted that other fellow, what's his name?"

"Kieran."

"I would have personally catapulted Kieran straight into the sun ages ago."

I snort a dry chuckle, realizing that Kieran hasn't crossed my mind in eons. My head is clear, my heart is as light as a feather. I'm pregnant and happy, thriving and content, for the first time in... I can't even remember how long. Why would I even give the past a second thought? There's no need for that, not anymore. Only the present and the future matter. "Etienne, I am definitely blessed with Matthew by my side. He looks after me and takes care of me. He meets me halfway on everything that we might not immediately agree on. He knows what I like and don't like, and I swear he can sometimes read my mind."

"He just loves you truly and deeply," Etienne says. "Only a man who loves truly and deeply is able to see so deep into a woman's mind that he can read her with such startling accuracy."

I'd tell him more about my relationship, but then I'd have to explain how I'm physically and emotionally involved with three men, not just Matthew. That Matthew, Sully, and Jason take turns on the weeknights, and that we do our favorite foursome fun on the weekends. We madly make sweet love into the night, and again in the morning, and they make sure I have everything I need, always. It's a hard thing to explain to anyone, so I keep my complicated family to myself—which is better, anyway. It's better to keep the most precious things in our lives as close to our chests as possible.

Good people are hard to find and sometimes they turn out to be even harder to keep. But I am happy. We complete each other in so many ways. Sully's fighting career is reaching its peak, so Jason and Matthew have already begun lobbying around Providence to help him open his own gym downtown. He still trains kids at the community center, and he will keep doing it for as long as he breathes, yet he also needs a lucrative business model—a gym of his own seems like the reasonable option. Sully gets to do what he loves for a living without destroying himself in the cage. I love him, and I need him whole and healthy. I love him even more for understanding that and for making the necessary steps in that direction. We estimate another year of prize fights before he retires at the top of the pyramid and goes on to start his own unique project.

Jason's charter boat business is booming, too. So much so that he had to buy a few more vessels in the spring, and Matthew has even offered to bring in additional funds as a business partner, seeing how well the whole endeavor is going. The pier is extra busy during the summer, and since Jason is more of a hands-on kind of guy, I only see him late in the evenings, but I have him on the weekends, along with Matthew and Sully.

I do like our schedule and how we fit each other's careers and personal projects to match one another. We get to grow in this relationship, we support and encourage one another. Matthew is also making incredible progress with his father's company. They made it onto the latest Forbes list, and that has had a positive impact on their stocks. To celebrate these accomplishments, Matthew will be taking the four of us to Belize after the baby is born and I am comfortable leaving them with the nanny. I'm looking forward to it and then some, I've traveled more in the past six months than I ever could have imagined.

The world is a big place and there is plenty to see. Plenty of places and cultures to explore. Different sunsets across the globe. Different waters. I

always come back feeling refreshed and ready to grab the bull by the horns yet again.

“Alright, so what’s on today’s project board?” I ask Etienne, eager to delve right into work.

No wonder I’m constantly buzzed and capable of taking the whole world on. I’m finally doing what I love. I’m in a healthy—albeit complex—relationship, I’m safe and satisfied on every level. And I’m going to be a mother soon. I’d gotten so used to getting punched in the gut over and over again, survival mode was the only way of life I knew and understood. That was a terrible sort of comfort zone to exist in.

“I would like for us to go over the jacket section of our autumn/winter collection,” Etienne says. “You had a couple of suggestions for the tweed patterns, and I’ve given them some thought.”

“Don’t tell me you’re willing to gamble on my patterns,” I gasp.

“I am, actually.”

“Be still, my beating heart!”

The first part of the day flows smoothly. I spend it behind the drawing board, trying out different shades of green, red, and blue for tweed patterns. I’ve done my fair share of Scottish textile studies, but I have really dug deep into this particular field since Etienne first mentioned that he wanted to bring it back into the new collection.

By the time I’m done with my renewed proposals, my boss is smiling, definitely pleased with what he’s seeing. I got some good colors in, I’ll give myself credit for that, but it’s his particular eye that makes the final decision. To my delight, it’s a nod of agreement as he takes the swatches off the board and adds them into the collection’s hardcopy folder, where we keep all the approved designs and fabric swatches.

It fills my heart with joy as I admire the thick book, aware that some of my work and creativity has gone into its pages. Soon enough, I’ll be watching handsome young men strutting down the New York catwalk, wearing my designs.

I bid Etienne a good afternoon and make my way back to the front of the store, where I’m greeted by my three men. Matthew, Sully, and Jason have decided to buy a couple of the shirts Lara had set aside for them, so they each have shopping bags waiting by the counter. I feel a smile bloom on my face as I waddle over to my boyfriends and hug each of them. Unfortunately, I can only kiss Matthew in public—we agreed it would be safer, as uncomfortable

as it can sometimes be. Perhaps the world will be a little more open-minded someday. For the time being, however, I'm good with the absolute privacy of my home and theirs.

"Hey, baby," Matthew says, wrapping his arms around me. There's more of me for him to hug these days, but he loves it. "How was your day?"

"I got a few more things into the upcoming collection," I reply with sparkling eyes.

"Congratulations, then. Although it's no longer a surprise at this point. We all know you're a brilliant designer," Jason says.

Sully waves Lara goodbye as he grabs the shopping bags and leads the way out of the store. "Come on, beautiful. We've got somewhere we need to get to."

"Oh? I thought we were having dinner at home," I say, confused. "At my place, I mean. I bought the steaks and everything."

"Don't you worry about it," Jason quips, as Matthew rests his hand on the small of my back and escorts me toward the descending escalator. "You'll love where we're taking you."

"Or so we're hoping," Matthew mutters.

Only now do I realize how nervous the three of them really are. I'm not sure what's going on, but they always get jittery when they're planning a surprise for me. My birthday party had them really on edge as they went out of their way to make sure I didn't know anything about it. I specifically remember Sully saying that Matthew nearly had a heart attack when the wrong cake came in from his favorite bakery, Tres Jolie. They're so adorable when they try so hard—granted, they always succeed when it comes to making me happy, so whatever it is they're up to this time, I'm sure I'm gonna love it.

I, however, need to start getting used to this good life. There are still moments when I'm filled with self-doubt, when I fear that something might happen and I'll lose everything again, that I'll be left on my own with a child to raise. Trauma has a way of taking longer to heal than it did to set in.

Sully takes my car, while Jason, Matthew and I ride in the truck. The conversations are always light-hearted and funny, especially when we hit traffic in midtown. But the closer we get to our destination, I can see that my men are getting anxious again. I can't help myself from smiling when we reach a familiar part of Providence—though I'm not yet sure what we're doing here.

“I thought we were eating out,” I mumble as we get out of the truck.

We’re parked outside a residential building in one of Providence’s nicer neighborhoods. Sully pulls my car up behind Matthew’s and quickly joins us with a broad smile. “Ready?” he asks.

“For what?” I reply.

Matthew nods at the building. “There’s something you need to see.”

“You guys...” I mumble, downright confused. “What are we doing here?”

“Relax. You’re gonna love it,” Jason insists, trying to hold back a grin.

Realizing that they won’t tell me more until we get to our destination, I nod quietly and follow them into the building. Judging by the masonry adorning the façade and the wrought iron railing of the interior staircase—both remnants of an Art Nouveau style that has only been preserved in several historical locations across the city—this is definitely one of the poshest places left.

The lobby area is cool and dimly lit.

We reach the first floor and stop in front of a beautiful, lacquered red door with an old-fashioned bronze-brushed knob and a knocker shaped like a lion’s head. Matthew takes out several sets of keys, handing one to each of us. It hits me, now, what I’m about to walk into. I’ve thought about it for weeks but I never expected it to become a reality. I never even said anything in conversation. Hell, I never expected them to actually do this.

“Oh, my God,” I murmur as Matthew opens the door to let us in.

“I figured it was time for us to move in together as a real family,” he says, his voice slightly trembling as he stands in the doorway. “I know we haven’t talked about this with you directly, Selina, but it feels like the right thing to do. It’s also something the three of us want. It will make me happy, it will make us happy, and I only hope it will make you happy, as well.”

“Oh... my... God...” It’s all I can manage at this point, the key ring hanging from my index finger, my hand frozen in midair.

My heart is beating a million miles a minute as I stare at Matthew, then at Sully, then Jason. My soul is about to explode, and I’m sure the baby is just as stoked judging by the restless kicking. It’ll make my bladder explode, eventually. But this is true happiness I’m feeling. Yet another layer of bliss that I’ve dreamed of for as long as I can remember.

“Come on, let me show you around,” Matthew adds.

I follow him inside, marveling at the sleek and minimalistic design. The

decor matches the antique Art Nouveau style of the building itself, and the walls, flooring, and furniture all fall under the Scandinavian simplicity palette. I can barely breathe as I behold this beauty. Our home.

“I know you’re an independent kind of girl who’s happy to pay rent and whatnot,” Sully says as we pass through the hallway, my gaze wandering across the framed posters depicting fine prints of Alphonse Mucha’s most popular works. “But you’ve got three men here who want to build a life, a future, and a home with you,” he adds. “And while I do see the appeal of a two-bedroom pad for you and the baby, the four of us will need a bit more space.”

“Here’s the kitchen,” Jason says.

I’m speechless as I try to take everything in. The elegant light fixtures. The seamless finish. The impeccable attention to detail. While the foyer is a simple blend of ash hardwood flooring and off-white walls with a couple of slim-legged side tables, the kitchen sprawls generously with black and gold marble and lacquered-red counters. The counter tops are a Carrara-style marble with delicate gray veins, and all the appliances sparkle in the abundance of daylight flowing through the gigantic windows.

“It’s stocked and fully equipped, ready to move in as soon as today,” Matthew says. “Six ensuite bedrooms, including the nursery. Three half baths. A dining room and an entertainment room that doubles as a home design studio.”

“Matthew,” I manage as they show me around. “This is... it’s a lot!”

“One bedroom for each of us, one master bedroom for the four of us,” he reminds me with a playful wink. “Plus, the nursery for our baby. It’s perfect.”

“It’s huge,” I reply, with a nervous laugh.

Sully gives me a worried look. “Don’t you like it?”

“Oh, God, I absolutely love it,” I turn to look at him. “I’m just... I’m stunned that you actually thought of this. How long have you been working on it? It must’ve taken some time to have the place done up like this. Holy smokes, the game room is amazing...”

I am positively stunned as I behold a spacious lounge area with a huge wall-mounted TV and cream-colored sectional seating. On the other side of the room, they actually brought in a desk and chair, a massive wooden drawing board and plenty of shelving for all my design books and art supplies. They’ve thought of everything, and the enormity of this gesture is enough to bring tears to my eyes. A knot tightens in my throat.

“She loves it,” Jason chuckles softly.

“I... I do... it’s amazing,” I whisper, the tears now freely streaming down my cheeks. “I cannot believe you did this...”

“To answer your question, it took us about three months,” Sully says, proudly crossing his arms as he gazes around. “Granted, it wouldn’t have been possible without Matthew’s financial input. The handiwork alone was quite the monetary challenge, getting this place ready at this level in such a short time. But it was worth it.”

Jason, Matthew, and Sully move to stand in front of me, the three of them smiling as I try to register every detail so that I can remember this moment with crystal clarity later down the line. I can’t stop myself from crying, though these are happy tears. They’re tears of relief, of love, of unending gratitude toward the universe for having gifted me such days to live through.

“We love you, Selina,” Matthew says. “We love you and our child. We love each other and we want to cherish every single day that we get to spend together on this earth. Most importantly, it’s time for us to stop moving around and live under the same roof.”

“Fair enough.” I can’t help but laugh as I open my arms and welcome the three of them into a tight embrace.

They hold me close. We kiss each other deeply and lovingly, and I am overwhelmed with excitement as I look around once more. This is going to be our home. My home. My safe space, in the company of my men and my baby. This is my future spilling into the present and further drowning out the past.

EPILOGUE II

SELINA

This is insane.

I'm walking onto a fashion catwalk, showered by clicking camera lights and applause as I join an army of male models sporting an entire collection signed by yours truly. My first full collection for The Sartorialist. Three years in the making. Three years since my life was forever changed when I first sought shelter in that store and slept there like the ultimate hobo before Matthew, Sully, and Jason walked in and turned everything upside down.

My life is the complete opposite of where I thought I would end up, truth be told. I wanted this. The glory. The professional and creative accomplishments. My name on my own fashion line. I just never expected it to actually happen. After I lost my shot early on at a professional tennis career; after I lost my sister and then the rest of my family; after I lost my direction and entered into a defective and unhealthy relationship with a man who only dragged me down instead of lifting me up; after I lost my home and my heart and almost lost my frickin' life on account of a crazy woman—I have finally arrived.

Smiling and waving at throngs of fashion reporters and fellow designers, discerning clients from New York's upper echelon, fashion bloggers and magazine editors, fancy fashion critics and famous models and actors as they all applaud and cheer my collection. *My* collection. Holy smokes.

"You're killing it," Matthew whispers as I stop at the front of the catwalk.

I actually got him, Sully and Jason to join the other models in wearing my designs. My men inspired these pieces, and it only seemed fitting for them to show it all off to the world. They look fantastic, I'll give them that. The

jackets are perfectly tailored to fit their muscular frame and broad shoulders. The colors and patterns work beautiful with their handsome features.

Matthew's salt-and-pepper hair is sleekly combed back as he dons navy blue silk with silver embroidery on the lapels and black lacquer loafers. God, I wish I could rip everything off him in this very moment and have my way with him right here, in front of everybody. Sully looks stunning in white and deerskin beige. The makeup artist even added a hint of charcoal eyeshadow, making him appear like a desert prince, and I am more than happy to let him take me away on his black stallion. And Jason, my darling Jason, always sunny and smiling in blue denim and white linen.

They inspire me. They are my muses.

"Congratulations, Selina," Sully says, clapping along with everybody else.

I'm overwhelmed, smiling, as my brain is working overtime to keep me upright as I glance across the room once more. There are plenty of familiar faces—people I've worked with, people I've met and networked with over the past couple of years. It's amazing how much I've managed to accomplish with the right men by my side. I am stupid lucky, even I can't believe it, sometimes. Matthew likes to say that it isn't luck but rather the universe's way of rewarding me along with me working my ass off.

To say that I'm humbled would be a severe understatement. I don't want this moment to end. I feed on the applause and the words of encouragement constantly pouring in from all sides. Secretly, I'm glad I've got my guys up here so I can discreetly lean on them while I smile and wave at the rest of the world. I'm glad I get to breathe them in, to feel their hearts thudding against mine as I embrace this new stage of my life.

"It came out infinitely better than I expected," I mumble mostly to myself.

"Baby, you deserve this and more," Matthew replies. "Look at this place. It's a full house, and they came here for you. Etienne was right to bet on you, Selina. This is your hard work and your brilliant mind paying off."

"I doubt I would've gotten this far without your support," I say, amazed by the sheer size of this unexpected success.

I feel Sully's arm snaking around my waist as we pose for the front row photographers. This is crazy. It really is crazy, and I'm beyond honored to be at the center of this picture. I see Lara and everybody else from the store in the guest rows, standing and whistling, cheering and clapping frenetically.

Etienne chose to take a bit of a backseat for this one, much to my astonishment. He wanted me to get all the accolades while he holds my son, my beautiful little Ashton, who looks dapper in his custom tuxedo that Etienne made especially for him.

My three-year-old prince claps his cute, chubby hands delightedly along with everyone else, black curls framing his round face and dark eyes. God, I melt over this boy whenever I look at him. He is the spitting image of Sully, but in our family, Ashton has three daddies who love him to the moon and back. He's growing up so fast. Soon enough, he'll be off to school. The days go by in the blink of an eye. Moments I barely register, sometimes. Yet I live each of them fully, intensely, with the kind of *joie de vivre* that would make poets and writers insanely jealous.

"Give it up for Selina Fuller," Etienne shouts from the audience. "The real star of *The Sartorialist*!"

I mouth a "Thank you" and send dozens of kisses his way as the crowd's cheers roar louder across the room. This man has been a positive influence on me since day one. I've learned so much from him, ever since I first started working at his store. It's funny, how miffed I was that I didn't get that junior designer position from the very beginning. How irritated I was that I had to make do as a sales specialist and sell the kind of clothes I wanted to be designing. How sad I was when two years passed, and I still wasn't any closer to that drawing room in the back office.

Yet it was Etienne's hesitance to add me to his design team that completely reframed my existence. Were it not for that, for his willingness to employ me regardless of the role, I never would've met Matthew, Jason, and Sully. I never would've grown so much on a personal level. Funny, how life tends to work out.

"You're a star," one of the male models says from behind me. "Congratulations, Selina!"

Some of the models have been making passes at me all night, but my men have been equally relentless in delivering as many death glares as they can in order to let them know that I'm taken and exclusive. I find the attention flattering, but I only have eyes for three certain people. The dress Etienne designed for me to wear this evening is fantastic, I must admit. I can understand why I'm getting so many compliments. Etienne thought I'd look gorgeous in champagne-colored sequin for tonight's show, and apparently he was right.

The dress is hugging me in all the right places, though I'm no longer used to the high heels anymore. My back hurts—I haven't had this kind of physical discomfort since I was pregnant with Ashton. Despite the aches, however, I still feel invincible.

"I'm honestly in awe. I can't believe they're still clapping," I say, constantly smiling and waving at folks. "We've been doing this for what, three minutes straight now?"

"Yeah, get used to it, my love," Matthew laughs. "This is what success looks like."

"I can't wait to go home. Don't we have some leftover pizza from yesterday?" I mutter.

Some of the front row reporters are starting to ask questions, but this isn't the right time to answer any of them, so I choose to thank them as I bow out and head back behind the stage, followed closely by my guys and the other male models. I'm starting to get really hungry. After all the excitement, and the stress of getting everything ready and perfect for the show, the adrenalin is wearing off, and my stomach is growling.

The afterparty is light and breezy. I steer clear of the alcohol and stick to raiding the hors d'oeuvres, instead. Matthew, Sully, and Jason stay by my side throughout the rest of the evening, while Etienne refuses to let go of Ashton. I don't mind at all. He's the closest my son will have to a grandfather from his mother's side, and Etienne is wonderful with him. Who knows, Ashton could end up being the next in a fantastic line of fashion designers. Or a successful businessman like Matthew or Jason. Or he could be one hell of an athlete, like Sully. Either way, whatever my son decides to do with his life, he will have my full support as well as his fathers and an unlimited supply of love.

I can't help but think of Maddie tonight. She would be so proud, so happy that I've been able to find not only success but also love, with three wonderful men.

The bitterness of her memory lingers, but I don't have time throughout the evening to dwell on it for long. So many questions are being thrown at me and everybody wants to be seen and photographed next to me. I'm rubbing elbows with people I don't even know but can only benefit my career, and all I want to do is go home and read a bedtime story to my little boy. Our boy. His dad's love story time as much as Ashton.

That leftover pizza keeps scratching my brain, so I scarf down another

pastry roll instead, following it up with a champagne glass filled with sparkling water.

“Selina, I think we’re ready to discuss the new spring/summer collection sometime next week,” Etienne says as Ashton gets busy running his fingers through his gray beard. While it may have been trimmed to perfection by an uptown barber earlier this morning, it will look like an unkempt bush by the time my son is done with him. “I have some ideas adjacent to yours, and I think we can share credits on this one. Perhaps Etienne Lacroix and Selina Fuller for The Sartorialist?”

“Wow Etienne that sounds incredible,” I reply. “I can’t thank you enough for giving me such a huge opportunity. You really have made my dreams come true.”

“Ma cherie, you’ve more than earned it. If anything, there are moments when I’m sorry I didn’t take you on board sooner.”

“Oh, no, everything happened precisely the way it was supposed to,” I tell him. “I have no regrets, even if I was sleeping at the store at one point.”

“Crazy times, eh?” Jason laughs.

Crazy times, indeed. Speaking of crazy, Cynthia is in prison, currently serving a twenty-year sentence for a string of charges—attempted murder being at the top of the list. Her father couldn’t bail her out this time. There wasn’t enough money in the world to save her from the wrath of our justice system, and I am certainly grateful for that. My family and I are safe, and hopefully the time in prison will help Cynthia to heal properly and live a different life once she’s free again.

Until then, I get to sleep at night.

“Crazy but wonderful,” I tell Jason. “Like I said, absolutely no regrets.”

“Excuse me, but this little man needs to go to the bathroom,” Etienne says, his eyes round and sparkly after Ashton whispered the magic word in his ear, the magic word being “potty.”

“We’ve trained him well,” Matthew chuckles as we watch Etienne make his way through the thinning crowd.

Soon enough, it’ll be just the models and a couple of influencers left to drink the massive cocktail bar dry. In previous years, I would’ve joined them, but motherhood has done quite the number on me. It does come with endless perks and so much joy, though, so I prefer today to yesterday. It’s a permanent mindset, now, and I’m the healthiest I’ve ever been, both inside and out.

“Guys, we should get going soon,” I tell my darlings. “While I’d love nothing more than to stand around and graciously accept wave after wave of compliments, I’m getting tired, and that pizza is still on my mind.”

Sully gives me a broad smile. “You are really fixated on that day-old pizza, babe. What’s the deal?”

“Yeah, I thought the entrees here were pretty good,” Jason adds, equally amused. “And I’m pretty sure you raided at least one platter on your own.” His humor fades as he realizes that he might be digging himself into an accidental hole. “Not that I’ve been keeping track, baby, you know I love you.”

I can’t stop a laugh from rolling out of my chest. “It’s okay, honey. It’s just that I’m still hungry. Leftover pizza sounds easy, and you know what would work great with it? I remember we had an opened jar of pickles in the fridge, too. I’d ravage that. I’d totally ravage that.”

“You haven’t had cravings like this since you were pregnant with Ashton,” Matthew jokes, but then it hits him as he stares at my glass. “Hold on...”

Sully is quick to catch on. “You haven’t had a single drop of alcohol tonight, Selina.”

“Yeah, I guess that comes with the territory of being pregnant. Again,” I reply with a cool grin.

I have to admit, the utter shock, the total blank expressions on their faces was worth waiting until this evening to break the news. The tests came back positive this morning, though I’d suspected something over the past few weeks. Sore breasts, the late period, and now the cravings returning with a vengeance. I’m happy to be able to give them such news. We did talk about having a bigger family. Another kid or two. The ideal would’ve been for each of my men to father a child of their own, though given the way we operate, the way we love each other so intensely, the odds would always be uncertain.

It doesn’t matter. We’re having another child.

And the happiness spreading across their faces as they grasp this unexpected reality has my heart singing yet another song of joy. I keep telling myself that it doesn’t get any better than this, but the universe seems intent on proving me wrong.

The End

Read another sexy military reverse harem romance, an Amazon Top 25 book - Single Mom's Glow Up, [HERE](#). Available on Kindle Unlimited and I've included a sneak peek into that story on the next page.

SINGLE MOM'S GLOW UP (PREVIEW)



**"You shouldn't be here in the middle of a storm."
"I had no choice, Officer. My husband is a dangerous man."
His jaw clenches in anger. "Did he hurt you?"**

In the middle of a winter storm - I'm stranded and desperate.
I have no food or money to feed my two little girls.
If I've ever needed a miracle it's NOW.

A Sheriff's car pulls up.
This man is a giant *by no exaggeration*.
Sheriff Kellan makes a phone call to his twin brother, Fallon.

The two of them waste no time getting my girls and I out of the harsh cold
and into their car to meet their best friend, Luke.
Just like the brothers, Luke is a war veteran and as mesmerizing to look at as
a Greek statue.
I'm shocked when Luke says we can stay 'for as long as desired' in this
breathtaking lodge - where he runs his million dollar business.

I should be grateful but my husband is a dangerous man with connections.
Could this all be a ticking time bomb?
Or do decent men *actually* exist in this harsh world??

**Considering the rush of emotions I feel when these three ex-military
alphas melt like puppies for my little girls...
And the way they look at me with such admiration and a yearning...
I can't help but wonder: Do happily ever after's exist outside of cheesy
romance novels?**

*This is a sexy, stand-alone reverse harem romance filled with humor, danger,
and generous amounts of love. It also contains blistering hot MFMMM,
ménage fun times, in single and multiple partner scenes so HOT they're
bound to melt your kindle! HEA guaranteed.*

PROLOGUE

“Undress for us,” Kellan whispers, then takes a step back.

We lose our layers at the same time, watching one another as our clothes hit the floor. The shoes and boots go first. Then the pants and shirts. My lingerie is the last to fall as I stand naked and ready before them. Their eyes darken with desire as they move closer, lips parted as shadows dance across their faces.

Their dominant presence overwhelms me in a way I can’t even describe.

Kellan stands tall and strong, muscular and gorgeously fit. I admire the tattoos and the narrow dip of his hips while my hands gradually work their way up my own body. I feel the need to touch and squeeze my breasts as I shift my focus onto Fallon, this mountain of a man with a gargantuan cock and a hungry look in his eyes. He could crush me in the palm of his hand if he wanted to, yet his touch is so soft and delicate, I practically melt when his fingers find my nipple and pinch it, ever so lightly.

My breath hitches as I gaze up at Luke, my whole body quivering as he smiles and trails kisses down the side of my neck. He’s a beautiful soul, a handsome man, a provider through and through. His prosthetic and his scars only serve to amplify him in the best possible way. If anything, I want him even more because of it, not less.

I touch his chest, letting my palm splay across the blonde curls covering his rippling pecs, trailing my nails back and forth.

Fallon takes my other hand and guides it down to his cock. I grab hold and welcome the firmness, the enormous girth. I lick my lips, dying to feel him inside me once again. Kellan cups my pussy gently, getting a feel for

what awaits him.

“I love how you’re always ready for us,” he says, his fingers sliding between my wet folds.

My swollen nub instantly reacts to his touch, my core tightening as he teases me.

“Your skin is so soft,” Luke adds, then kisses my shoulder. He bites into it, gently at first, until my nipples perk up under Fallon’s hungry eyes.

“Are you a good girl, Avery?” Kellan asks me.

I nod once. “I’m a very good girl.”

“Then get on your knees,” he commands me.

Without hesitation, I kneel as they close ranks in front of me, cocks twitching with anticipation. I know what they want, and I do it gladly, willingly, hungrily. I take each of them in my mouth, never breaking eye contact as I relax the back of my throat and loosen my jaw to get as much in as possible. Slowly but surely, Kellan fills my mouth and I feel the veins swelling along his shaft.

I taste the precum on his tip, licking it off, eager for more.

“Fucking hell,” Luke curses under his breath as he shoves both hands in my hair to hold my head in place. “Take it, baby, all of it.”

And I do. He fucks my mouth with decisive thrusts, and I take him in, deeper and deeper until I can barely breathe. Tears trickle down my cheeks, but they’re nothing compared to what drips down the insides of my thighs as Fallon takes his turn. He’s the biggest and the thickest. My lips stretch as I feed on him, as I suck and lick him into a frenzy, holding the base of his cock with one hand while I massage his hardened balls with the other.

“You’re a fucking natural,” Kellan whispers when he retakes control.

Deep-throating me, he smiles like the devil as he claims my mouth, deeper and faster and harder. I’m so wet, I’m dripping, hoping that they don’t intend to let me suffer for much longer. Before I can register the shift in our positions, I find myself back on my feet and bent over the bed.

Luke’s hands run up and down my back as he fucks me from behind, with Fallon and Kellan kneeling on the bed in front of me. With their engorged cocks in each of my hands, I moan and whimper as I blow them, ravenous in my exploits and licking every glorious inch. Luke thrusts himself deeper and harder inside me, stretching and filling me to the brim.

“Oh, God, don’t stop!” I cry out when his hand slips around my hip and finds my clit screaming for attention. The orgasm rocks me to the very core

of my existence as he pounds into me, harder and harder until I unravel, feeling as if I just broke apart into a billion little pieces.

“That’s it, baby, that’s it,” he growls as he fucks me senseless. I melt against him while Kellan and Fallon keep my mouth busy.

They take turns, giving me everything they’ve got. When Fallon spears me with his full length, I come again, arching my spine as he grabs a handful of my hair and gently pulls my head back. He gives it to me with perfection, each thrust intensifying my orgasm, my pussy overflowing with sweet juices.

Kellan gets on his back and I climb on, riding him, as Fallon massages my breasts, pinching my nipples until a third climax washes over me. My flesh is like melted butter, my skin hypersensitive, my core unraveling as I fill myself with Kellan. It’s delicious and mindless madness as I surrender to them.

“I want you in my mouth,” I tell Luke at one point, dazed and hungry for more.

I’m standing now, bent over as I suck him hard and fast. Fallon takes me from behind again, while Kellan is beside us with one hand between my legs, stroking himself and my tender clit at the same time. Fallon grunts harshly as I feel him come, feel him spilling his seed with deep thrusts. My knees are weak, but I don’t want this to end.

“Take me, Kellan,” I whimper, then look up at Luke. “I want you, too. Inside me. Fill me up.”

Luke smiles and bites his lower lip, one hand caressing my face as Kellan claims me yet again. I’m shivering and crying tears of joy as I suck Luke while Kellan comes with a hefty burst. I revel in the slapping sound of skin on skin, my heart singing as I clench myself tightly around him, squeezing him dry. By the time Luke finishes inside me, I’m somewhere up in the heavens, held firmly by Fallon and Kellan.

I need them to keep me upright while Luke takes what I gladly and gleefully offer.

I need them to consume me, to turn me over, to squeeze my ass and fondle my breasts, to run their fingers through my hair, to kiss me relentlessly as Luke explodes into a fucking frenzy and pounds me into oblivion.

I don’t ever want this night to end.

It was only just beginning.

Two Weeks Earlier

“**M**omma?” my daughter calls out from the backseat of my car, now deceased Citroën, to be specific. “We’re cold!”

“I know, honey,” I reply, trying to make myself heard over the howling of a raging winter storm. “Keep your sister close and stay under the blanket!”

Miley is only five years old but smart enough to know when to listen to me. Annie is three and doesn’t understand what’s going on. Hell, I’m even baffled as to how we got to this point, but I had no other choice. This is what I get for trying to work things out with a narcissistic psychopath. I never should’ve married Daniel. I never should’ve stuck around for as long as I did. That’s all part of the past, though and that’s where it will stay. Besides, there is nothing I can do to change it. All I can do now is look forward and make a better life for my kids.

We’re a few feet away from Johnson Lake, stuck on the side of the road with too many miles between us and the next town. My car died, and I am nowhere near capable or equipped to fix it myself. To top it all, this snowstorm has me stranded and unable to walk all the way to Lexington with my daughters to an overnight shelter. The snow is too heavy, the wind is biting cold, and I can barely see ten feet ahead of me.

It’s the middle of winter in Nebraska. What did I expect?

“Mommy is trying to find a way to get us somewhere nice and warm,” I tell my daughters, hoping they can hold on for at least a couple more hours.

We only have what little heat the engine delivered before the car died, so I told Miley to keep the windows up so we can preserve that for as long as

possible. I keep looking around, praying for a pair of headlights to appear from either direction but even that could end up being a double-edged sword. What if it's Daniel?

I smacked him over the head pretty good with that lamp. I would've bashed it all the way in, but Miley and Annie were screaming, terrified of their own father. He wasn't supposed to be able to find us and I don't understand how he did. The restraining order didn't faze him in the least. He just wanted to hurt me, to make me suffer for having had the audacity to divorce him.

Shuddering, I check my phone again. The battery is drained, and the screen is black. We're stuck out here on the side of the road in a Nebraska snowstorm, and I don't know whether I can rely on the kindness of strangers. With this low visibility, it could be Daniel who finds us. And then it'll be over. I've no doubt he will kill me. I hit him with the lamp, I grabbed my daughters, and then I drove off as fast as I could, not caring about the thickening snowstorm at that point. I had to survive. I had to put some distance between us and him.

My girls are huddled together, shivering under the blanket. I reckon most of the warmth has faded by now and they are relying on one another's body heat. We've been out here for maybe half an hour, and I haven't seen a single car or truck drive by. Who would be nuts enough to drive in this weather? Well, me, obviously. I would've tolerated Daniel hitting me. I would've tried to talk some sense into him, at least until I could call the cops, but when he laid his hands on Miley, I just snapped.

"I didn't have a choice," I mutter through gritted teeth, my jaw clenched as my whole body involuntarily bucks against the freezing cold.

All I have to keep me relatively warm is this hooded winter parka of mine and the boots I managed to slip into before I ran out the door. The three of us were in our jammies when the bastard broke in. Everything happened so fast. My arm still hurts from where he grabbed me and my cheek stings from where he slapped me so hard I saw stars. I'll take the cold of winter over being anywhere near Daniel ever again. But my babies... we won't last much longer if we aren't rescued soon.

Eventually, I'll have to get in the back with Miley and Annie so I can give them what's left of my own dwindling body heat. It'll drop dramatically below zero later in the night, and I doubt we'll survive until morning if the weather reports turn out to be accurate. But I will do whatever I can to give

my daughters a chance to make it, even if I don't.

Less than four hours ago, we were eating mac and cheese and watching a Tom & Jerry marathon on TV. We'd only just moved to Campbell. I liked that town. It was small, quiet, and far enough away from Daniel to allow me to sit comfortably in the evenings while planning for the weeks ahead of my already frazzled life. Damn Daniel for ruining things again.

My breath gets stuck in my throat as I see a pair of headlights approaching. For a moment, my heart stops beating altogether. Terror grips me until I realize the car is coming from Hershey, not Campbell. Daniel would be coming from Campbell, where I left him bleeding on the floor.

I start honking my horn, my muscles heating up with every frantic motion. I hope the driver can see me through this dense snowfall and hear the horn blaring over the wind. The lights get brighter, and the car starts coming to a slow halt. A heavy sigh leaves my body as I recognize the Sheriff's red and blue lights glowing overhead. I can hear the tires sliding on the snow as the car gets closer. "Thank God," I mumble as I cautiously open my door.

I freeze again when I see this mountain of a man getting out from the driver's seat. Holy hell, he's massive. Tall and broad-shouldered, made even bigger by a thick winter jacket with a brown fur collar. I see the badge on his leather belt. The woolen cap with the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department logo just above his forehead. Then the piercing green eyes that seem to be able to look right into my soul.

"Are you alright, ma'am?" the man asks as I open my door a little more to talk to him.

"No, I am anything but alright," I reply with a trembling voice. "My car died."

He looks inside the car and spots my girls in the backseat. "Are they your children?"

"Yes. We've been stuck here for a while. Not a car in sight," I say.

"Where were you coming from?"

I have the sudden fear that Daniel has woken up and called the police to say I've kidnapped my own children.

"Ma'am where were you coming from?" he asks me again, this time more sternly.

"Does it matter?" I shoot back, my shoulders squared. I have no idea what I'm trying to do here other than protect my children. "Officer, we just need some help, please. Maybe a jump start."

The man looks at me with the kind of intensity that has my skin tingling all over. He's handsome and then some. Olive skin, soft lips, just enough stubble to make my fingertips feel ticklish. I can imagine layers of rippling muscles underneath that uniform. *Snap out of it, Avery.* "Where were you coming from?" he insists, speaking more slowly this time, enunciating each word.

"Does it matter?" Two can play this game.

"Momma, we're cold!" Miley cries out from the backseat.

"Dammit," I curse under my breath. "Campbell. We were coming from Campbell."

"Alright," the man replies. "And where are you headed?"

My shoulders drop. I'm exhausted from constantly being afraid all the time, so wary of danger because of Daniel. This truly could be just an officer of the law doing his job. He's supposed to ask questions. He's supposed to get as many details out of me as possible in order to make an informed decision. I'm seeing Daniel's flying monkeys everywhere these days, and it's hindering my efforts to keep my own daughters safe. My eyes sting as tears threaten to make everything worse.

"As far away from my ex-husband as possible," I say, a knot tightening in the back of my throat.

The man stills and narrows his eyes at me. "Did he hurt you?"

"My daughter, too," I nod slowly. "Listen, if you can't help me out with the car, could you at least give us a ride into the next town? My phone's dead, but I've got some cash, just enough to keep us in a motel or something until the morning."

"There are no motels anywhere nearby. The closest one would be in North Platte," the man says.

"Could you take us there?"

"I need to know your name, first."

I scoff. "Do I have to get arrested in order to put a roof over my daughters' heads tonight?"

"That's not necessary," he says. "I just need a name."

"I could try and punch you. That'll get us an overnight stay in jail, right?" I'm willing to do whatever it takes at this point. Either the snowstorm caused my brain to short-circuit, or I really am that desperate.

"A name."

"What's yours?" I reply instead. "How do I know Daniel didn't send you?"

He's probably looking for me right now."

"Ma'am, I'm Kellan Cassidy, Sheriff of Lincoln County. No one sent me," he says firmly, sounding somewhat offended. Not that I can blame him. "I knew there might be trouble on the roads tonight on account of this weather, so I decided to do a slow and steady tour of the main roads before I head back home for the night. It seems as though my instincts served me well since I found you. Chances are you won't get another car driving by at least until the morning. Entire sections of this road have already been closed, blocked off by snow."

I look around, and all I see is a sea of white underneath a gray sky. Somewhere beyond, I know there's Lake Johnson. It's close enough, but the constant snowfall makes me feel cut off from anything and everything. I'm alone out here, alone with two babies who depend on me for their safety.

"Can I see your badge, Sheriff?" I ask politely. "I just need to be sure."

The sheriff nods and takes the badge off his belt, then brings it forward with cautious steps. I notice his other hand is resting on his weapon. I inspect it quickly and allow myself a sigh of pure relief. "I would like to help you," he says. "The temperatures are set to drop well below zero before dawn."

"Thank you, Sheriff. Can you take us to the police station at least? Or a motel in North Platte?"

He comes closer as he replaces his badge, his gaze softening as it settles on my face. I must look like crap.

"Is Daniel your husband?" the sheriff asks.

"Ex-husband. I have a restraining order against him. But he came after us anyway."

"Did that happen tonight?"

"Yes, sir."

Miley pipes up from behind me. "Momma! Are we going home?"

"Oh, God, I need to get them out of this cold," I burst into tears. This is it. My breaking point coming at the worst possible time. I can't control my body from shuddering as I drop my head on the steering wheel and start crying my heart out. "I had to get away from him but the car... I knew I'd need to get a mechanic to check it before I took it out on the road again but Daniel... my girls... we need help." And then it hits me. "Oh, no, no. NO!" I cry out as I frantically pat my coat's pockets.

"Ma'am, you need to calm down," the sheriff says, crouching down beside my car door.

“I left my wallet in Campbell. Daniel has my wallet! My ID, my driver’s license... oh, no, no, this can’t be happening. My bank cards. Whatever cash I had left. Oh, God, I think I’m gonna be sick.”

The sheriff opens the door a bit wider and takes me by the shoulders. “What’s your name?”

“Avery, Avery Madison,” I manage between sobs.

“Okay, Avery. Can I call you Avery?”

“Yes.”

“Avery, I need you to listen to me very carefully now,” the sheriff says. “You need help, you need a place to stay, and it is more than an overnight stay at the police station could provide.” I look up, barely able to see him through the rivers of tears constantly flowing from my eyes. “I’d like to help you, if you’ll let me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you don’t have any cash or cards. You said it yourself. You left your wallet behind when you were understandably fleeing for your safety,” he says. “You need a warm place to stay, at least for a few nights until you sort out a new driver’s license, new bank card, and anything else you’ll need. Shelter and food for yourself and for your daughters is first and foremost. Do you agree?”

I nod slowly. “Yes, sir.”

“Please, call me Kellan,” he replies, a warm smile sketched across his lips. “I can help you. There’s a place I know where you would be the safest. Will you let me take you and the girls there?”

Blinking the tears away, I try to process every word coming out of his mouth. “Where is that, exactly?”

“It’s just outside North Platte,” Kellan says. “It’s a big house, top notch security. It’s the HQ of a security firm, but one whole wing doubles as a private residence. There’s a room available for you and your girls. And once we get you settled in, we can work on getting your life back, one step at a time.”

All I can do is stare at him in sheer disbelief. My mind draws a repetitive blank as I try to think of something to say but nothing comes. What’s the angle? Maybe there isn’t one. Maybe the sheriff of Lincoln County is honestly offering me much needed help. I can hear Miley weeping behind me, Annie crying next to her. I can’t falter. I can’t hesitate.

My babies depend on me.

“Okay,” I finally say. “But I’ll pay you back for everything.”
“You don’t have to worry about that right now,” Kellan replies as he lets go of my shoulders and stands back up.

“You’re too kind.”

“Come on, let’s get your girls in the backseat of my car where it’s warm, the heat is on.”

Shaking like a leaf, I get out of my car and open the back door, bending down to help the girls out. Miley is the first to move, quickly wrapping her arms around my neck. She’s shivering, poor thing, mumbling something about it being so cold that her teeth keep clattering. Kellan joins us with a pair of blankets he fished out from the trunk of his vehicle, wrapping one over Miley.

“Go with the sheriff, honey,” I tell her. “He’ll get us warm in no time. I have to get your sister.”

“Okay, Momma,” she replies, her head already resting on his shoulder as I hand her to him.

For a split-second I watch my daughter as she so eagerly relaxes in his arms, and a peculiar kind of warmth fills my heart. We might actually be okay. Maybe it’s just fickle and treacherous hope toying with my senses, but at least my girls will be warm tonight.

“I’ll call my brother to come and tow your car,” Kellan says as he carries Miley over to his vehicle.

I get Annie from the backseat. She’s awake and cranky, but as soon as I wrap her in the second blanket and shower her cold, pink face with kisses, she calms down long enough for me to move her safely and smoothly to the

warmth of the sheriff's vehicle. Miley holds her close, constantly whispering words of comfort like the wonderful big sister that she is, and it's all I can do to stop myself from breaking down again. They both deserve better than this.

I walk back toward my car where Kellan is just ending a call. "Thank you so much," I tell him as he puts his phone away.

The wind is blowing harder now, each flake smacking my face like a tiny blade. I pull the hood of my parka over my head, having completely forgotten about how cold I am. My toes hurt. Kellan frowns as he sees me wrap my arms around myself in a tight hug.

"Don't worry about it," he says. "My brother will be here in twenty minutes. He was on his way back to North Platte after an emergency job with his pickup truck. Lucky for us."

"I'm not sure what qualifies as luck anymore," I reply.

The intensity of his gaze makes my body light up from the inside. How am I even able to register these reactions when I've been in fight-or-flight mode for so long? Kellan comes closer, his green eyes searching my face, while I can't help but admire the soft line of his lower lip.

"I have an extra blanket in the trunk," he says. "That is, if you want to stay out here. The passenger seat is heated. Up to you, Avery."

"A blanket would be great," I tell him. "If I get in the warm car now, I'm pretty sure I'll pass out."

He nods, smiles subtly, then goes back to his car. I watch him tread carefully across the snow, each step echoing determination and strength. Kellan returns with a third blanket which he gingerly drapes over my shoulders pulling me closer as he brings the corners together for me to hold.

"Thank you."

He makes sure I'm sufficiently bundled, then takes his phone out again. "Give me your ex-husband's name and description. I can put a BOLO out on him and make sure he's apprehended sooner rather than later."

"Daniel Madison," I say, wondering if a BOLO would be enough to stop that bastard from coming after us again. "Once I get my phone charged, I can send you more details," I add. "Like social security number, pictures, that kind of stuff."

"License plate number, last known address, any official court documents will all be helpful," Kellan says. "We'll sort the rest out tomorrow at the station. But the name and a description should do for the time being."

"Six feet tall. Medium brown hair. Brown eyes. Medium build. Works for

a finance firm. Or did. I don't know anymore. I don't keep up."

"I suppose the divorce was messy," he says.

I nod once. "It was, but I didn't have enough evidence to keep him away from the girls. So, the court granted him visitation rights once every two weeks. Until he hit me. That's when I got the restraining order."

"When was the divorce finalized?"

"Five months ago."

"And when did you get the restraining order?"

I need a moment to remember the exact date. "December first. Last week. We moved to Campbell as soon as I got it."

"Does he still have visitation rights for the girls?"

"No. Temporarily suspended, pending a court hearing. I'll need to file some papers for that. Damn, I need a lawyer. I need a lot of things." And I'm about to hyperventilate as the prospect of going through the court system again fills me with anxiety. "I thought I'd put him behind us."

Kellan looks at me with kindness, not pity. "Listen, forget about him for now. At least for tonight. Give yourself some peace. You and your daughters have been through enough."

I look again at my surroundings. We're still in the middle of nowhere during a terrible snowstorm, yet there is a sense of safety wrapping itself around me, and I can feel my whole body gradually relaxing. Granted, this blanket is definitely helping, but so is Kellan's overwhelmingly masculine presence. I wonder if the universe saw me in desperation and decided to give me a break this time.

"How old are the girls?" he asks as we wait for his brother to reach us.

"Miley is five. Annie is three. Although Miley is way more mature for a kid her age. Or mellower. Whatever it is, I'm thankful, because I doubt I would've been able to handle two wound up girls in these circumstances."

"And what do you do? For a living, I mean."

"I'm an interior designer, though I didn't start my career until after I got divorced," I say with a heavy exhale. "I've been taking on clients here and there, mostly remodeling projects. I handle everything from top to bottom—carpentry, plastering, painting. I do it all."

Kellan gives me a long and curious look, a glimmer of fascination in his eyes. "You do the hard labor too?"

"I can't afford to pay additional contractors. But I'm really good at it. I used to help my dad out a lot on his remodeling jobs when I was a kid so I'm

familiar with the work.

“What about you?” I ask Kellan. “Did you always plan on becoming the sheriff of Lincoln County?”

“Not really. My parents figured I’d take over the family business, but I decided to join the Navy instead.”

“Oh. Quite the twist,” I chuckle softly.

He smiles, but there is a tinge of sadness shadowing his expression. “Yeah. It was an intense and eye-opening experience, to say the least. But then I got my honorable discharge and came back here. I joined the Police Academy and saw how poorly the whole county was doing in terms of law and order. I wanted to do something; it was almost like a calling.” He pauses upon seeing a pickup truck approaching us from the north end of the snowy road. “There he is.”

“Your brother?” I ask, immediately aware of the tension in my voice.

“You’re safe with us, I promise,” Kellan replies gently. I reckon he can tell I’m still on edge.

It’s only when his brother pulls over and gets out of the car that I realize this could very well be the spiciest visual Christmas present I never imagined I’d get. Kellan’s brother is almost identical, albeit significantly larger, taller. An even greater mountain of a man with equally striking green eyes and dark hair. He’s dressed in charcoal gray overalls and a thick black turtleneck.

“This is Fallon,” Kellan says.

Fallon definitely lives at the gym or deadlifts a dozen tractor tires every morning just for kicks. I feel so tiny by comparison. Then again, at five-foot-five I’m practically minuscule compared to these two. I can’t help but lick my lips as I gaze at them, unable to look away.

“Hi, Fallon,” I mumble.

He grunts something that sounds like ‘Hi’ before he glances over at my old Citroën. “That it?”

“Yeah. We’re not sure what’s wrong with it,” Kellan tells him.

Fallon walks over to my car and opens the driver’s door. The keys are still in the ignition, so he tries to get the engine started, checking the dashboard with each turn. “I think it’s the electrical system,” I blurt out when Fallon gets out of the car and decides to look under the hood next. “There’s no power whatsoever. It’s done this before.”

“Possibly,” he replies, giving me a steady, dark look.

I imagine this is what a deer caught in the headlights feels just before the

inevitable impact.

“You’ll have plenty of time tomorrow to look at it,” Kellan tells him. “I’m gonna take the girls back to the house for the night.”

“That’s sensible,” Fallon replies, then glances my way again. “I’ll give you a diagnostic tomorrow after I check everything.”

“Thank you so much,” I reply.

Kellan gently nudges me with his shoulder. “Come on, time to go. Your girls need warm food and a decent bed to sleep in.”

All I can do is follow him back to his car as the snowfall thickens and the winds howl even harsher against the white night. Once I’m in the passenger seat, seatbelt fastened, I find myself depleted and sinking into an unexpected dream state. I catch one last glimpse of Fallon pulling his pickup truck closer to my car so he can anchor it to his pulley before my eyes surrender and darkness beckons me.

I’m not sure how long I was out, but I awaken just as we are pulling up outside a ginormous mansion—a magnificent colonial-style construction set within a sprawling beautiful garden. The hedges are all covered in snow, much like the rest of the property, but I can imagine this place on a hot summer’s day, greenery everywhere beneath a clear, blue sky. The building itself is U-shaped, with a dark-red brick façade and French windows, wrought iron terraces on the first and second floors, and white stone columns adorning the porte-cochere.

“Are you doing okay?” Kellan asks as he takes the keys out of the ignition.

“Yeah. I must’ve dozed off.”

“You did and that’s a good thing. It means you felt safe enough.”

I lose myself in his eyes for the better part of a minute until I remember my girls are in the backseat. One quick glance as I catch my breath and smile, seeing both of them fast asleep and wrapped up in their blankets, their plump cheeks pink with warmth. “I think I can put them straight to bed,” I whisper. “We did manage to eat something earlier before...” My voice trails off as the horror of what happened returns to haunt me.

Kellan takes my hand in his and gives it a reassuring squeeze. “That’s alright,” he says. “Their room is ready, and so is yours.”

“Hold on, two rooms? That’s too much, Kellan. We can just use a single room for the night.”

“Nonsense. There’s plenty of space for the three of you. Just relax tonight

and tomorrow we will deal with your ID, bank cards, and your car, along with whatever else you need.”

I don't like this feeling of helplessness. “I... I don't know.”

“Accept the kindness of strangers,” he says. “It won't cost you anything, Avery. It's literally the least I can do.”

“What about your brother?” I ask. “I don't expect him to fix my car for free.”

“He owes me a favor.”

I scoff and nod toward the mansion. “And what about this other guy who lives here? Does he owe you a favor, too?”

“As a matter of fact, he does,” Kellan shoots back with a confident smirk that has me hot and slick between my legs.

“Oh, great. So, what, you're just going to cash in on all your favors for me, a total stranger? That's too much.”

“It's my decision,” he says. “All you have to do is let others take care of you and your girls for once. What have you got to lose?”

Not much at this point. He's right, I need help. I need to keep my babies safe and fed while I rebuild my life. And if Kellan is willing to help me, why the hell not? I will need to find out what the conditions are, the details. I'm hoping there isn't a catch, but even if there is, it can't possibly be worse than freezing to death on the side of the road or having to deal with Daniel ever again. I shudder at the mere thought. And to think I was ready to give that man my whole life. For better and for... gah. Lies. All lies. I married a monster, and this is the price I have to pay.

Kellan takes Annie while I handle Miley as we make our way across the driveway and up the stairs leading to the front door of the mansion. We're greeted by a tall man with dazzling blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail.

“Avery, this is Luke,” Kellan says.

Luke gives me a polite nod, his gaze softening at the sight of my daughters sleeping soundly in our arms. “Welcome, Avery. Consider this your home for as long as you need it,” he says.

He's in his mid-thirties, I'm guessing, much like Kellan and Fallon, and he is just as well-built. His jeans hug his muscular thighs, while his sweater is taut across his chest and shoulders. The term eye-candy comes to mind.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” I reply humbly. “We'll be out of your hair in no time, I promise.”

“There’s absolutely no rush,” Luke says, a smile testing his lips. “Come on, let’s get the little ones to bed first, and then we can talk about what you need.”

Kellan gives me a quick wink. “I know where he keeps the good scotch.”

I smile as I follow the two men inside, although I struggle to breathe once I take in the enormity of this place. The foyer is huge, with an elegant marble floor and modern wood planks on the walls. There’s plenty of nineteenth century art hanging everywhere, the gilded frames carrying subtle marks of the passage of time. Every side table features mother-of-pearl inlays, and there are Chinese-style vases everywhere, each loaded with an assortment of surprisingly beautiful and finely crafted faux flowers. As an interior decorator, I can’t help but register all these marvelous details.

We go up the stairs and down a dimly lit corridor in the west wing of the mansion. The girls’ room is decorated in a classic western style, with oak and walnut furniture, plaid patterns in shades of brown and green, and soft linen curtains hung over tall windows. There’s a bed big enough for both girls to comfortably sleep in, and as we settle them in together, I kiss each of my daughters on the forehead, breathing a sigh of relief.

“I have friends who come to visit occasionally,” Luke says as I carefully close the door behind me and join him and Kellan in the hallway. “Some of them have small children, so I’ve made sure I could provide them with all the comforts of home. As soon as Kellan called, I knew I’d be able to accommodate the three of you.”

“Again, I cannot thank you enough for this,” I reply.

“And again, please, don’t worry about it. We’ve got service staff coming in on a daily basis to clean and cook, so your girls will be well-looked after,” he says.

My heart is growing to the point where it feels as if it might explode. This really is too much, but I am too overwhelmed and exhausted to argue. Besides, I shouldn’t. I need to accept the kindness of strangers, just like Kellan said. So I offer a nod of appreciation and a soft smile. “They’ll be hungry when they wake up.” “We should call Helen,” Kellan tells Luke.

“Who’s Helen?” I ask as we make our way back down the stairs and into a lounge area on the ground floor.

“My aunt,” Kellan says. “She’d be happy to help and she’s an excellent babysitter.”

“Oh, I can’t afford a babysitter. I can look after my girls.”

The sheriff takes a seat in one of the massive leather armchairs by the window, pointing at the other one next to him. "Make yourself comfortable."

"I'll cover the babysitting expenses," Luke says, walking over to a beautiful ebony cabinet with hand-painted doors. I notice a subtle limp as he moves, but he doesn't seem to be in any kind of pain. It must be an old injury.

"Why on earth would you do that?" I ask, my breath faltering.

Luke gives me a sideways glance as he takes out three tumblers and a bottle of Laphroaig whiskey, bringing everything over to the coffee table in front of us. "Because you need some time for yourself," he says. "Come on, Avery. I know enough about what you've been through to understand that you could use the respite. It doesn't cost me much, and Kellan's aunt could also use some paid work."

"I'll pay you back," I insist.

"I'm not worried about that," he says and pours a generous amount of whiskey in each glass. I'm immediately enthralled by the smokey fragrance that accompanies the dark amber liquid as it settles.

I shake my head. "I insist. I pay my own way," I say stubbornly.

He nods and gives me a soft smile. "Alright, but until then, rest assured that all of your needs will be taken care of."

I can't help but question their generosity, though. I look over at Kellan. "Why are you all doing this?" I ask. "I mean, your brother is fixing my car. Your friend here is giving me a place to stay and food, not to mention a stiff and delicious glass of whiskey which, by the way, I'm probably gonna finish that bottle tonight. And you made all these calls on our behalf... why? I understand kindness and generosity, but it still feels like it's over the top."

"Avery, let me tell you a little story about us," Kellan says, his gaze bouncing between Luke and me. His friend takes a seat on the couch, quietly sipping his whiskey as he watches us with curiosity. "Luke, Fallon, and I were Navy SEALs. Far from home, always in combat mode, always fighting and watching each other's backs in the most hostile places on Earth. The three of us have been through unimaginable moments together and have come close to death more than once. Hell, we damn near lost Luke during our last mission." He pauses and finishes his whiskey in one gulp, then pours himself another. "We've seen what violence does to innocent people. And we've seen what happens when those innocent people don't get the help they need. So we made an oath upon returning to the states."

“We swore to help those in need, no matter what,” Luke continues. “It costs us little to nothing to do it. It’s pennies, Avery, I promise. Barely a blip in the bank account.”

“Judging by the size of this manor, I believe you,” I mutter, then give Kellan a frown. “You don’t have to go out in this blizzard again, do you?”

“I live here,” Kellan says.

That has me stumbling for a reply. “What?”

“We all live here. Luke, me, Fallon. The west wing is ours. The rest of the place is dedicated to our security business.”

“Hold on, I thought you were the sheriff of Lincoln County.”

“I am. But I’m also a partner in Wolfhound Security, which is Luke’s company.”

“*Our* company,” Luke corrects him with a half-smile before he looks at me again. “When we came back from the service, I had enough money saved to invest in this property. It was being auctioned after the bank repossessed it from a defaulting former owner. Kellan and Fallon pitched in with money of their own, and we decided to invest in a private security business. The Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office pays for our services once in a while, but the bulk of our clients are corporate giants from both the states and overseas. I’ll give you a tour of the place tomorrow, though my point is you’re safe here, Avery. You’re safe and taken care of until you’re able to get back on your feet.”

“Our honor demands it,” Kellan says, never taking his eyes off me.

I feel tiny, sinking into this chair, unable to say anything. They’re being genuine, and I have to accept that there are still good people in this world. Decent people who are willing to help me without wanting anything in return. It just so happens that these guys are also hot as a midday in August, and my body is responding in ways I’d forgotten it could to the presence of a man.

A couple of hours go by as we talk about my situation and how I got to this point. I figured that if I’m to be protected, they need to know more about Daniel and our relationship. Both Luke and Kellan listen quietly as I tell them about my troubled adolescence, both making sure my glass is never empty. I’ll give the whiskey credit—it has loosened up plenty inside of me, and not just my tongue.

“After Dad died, my mom remarried soon after. I’m sure they already knew each other, ” I pause to take another sip. “Point is, after that, things went downhill quickly. My mother stopped listening to me, paying attention

to me. It was all about Greg and his big plans, his feelings. That we should be thankful for Greg, that we'd be poor and miserable without him. It didn't matter that he had a drinking habit or that he liked coming into my room without being invited."

"Did Greg ever touch you?" Kellan asks, his voice low and his eyes as dark as the night outside.

It has stopped snowing, but there is no moon in sight. Only a black sky over a sea of sparkling white. It's eerily beautiful and comforting to admire from the warmth of this armchair. "No. He never had a chance. I was about seventeen when he first tried anything," I reply. "But whenever he came into my room, I made sure to ask him loudly what he wanted so my mom could hear. She was crazy jealous, even of her own daughter. Like I would actually try and steal her new husband away. I have no idea what made her change so drastically, but I reckon Dad's death sort of broke her beyond repair."

"And you said you moved out of the house as soon as you turned eighteen?" Luke confirms.

"Yes. I met Daniel through a friend. He was an instant charmer. He was quick to woo me, to make plans, to plant ideas of a future together." I sigh deeply. "I was scared and desperate to get away from Greg. Mom wasn't really there anymore, physically or mentally, and she'd started drinking as well. I had to get out of there, and Daniel made me believe that I would be safer with him."

"What happened after you moved in with Daniel?" Kellan asks.

"Oh, it was good for a while. He love bombed me in all the right ways. Made sure I was hooked. He even helped pay for design school. Once I got my degree, I was eager to get my career going, to pay him back for what I'd thought was kindness, love, and much needed support. But then I got pregnant with Miley, and Daniel insisted that I become a stay-at-home mom, that I could do interior design once Miley got bigger."

"I'm guessing you became pregnant the second time around just as you were preparing to focus on your design career again," Kellan concludes, slowly shaking his head.

"Bingo."

"Was he abusive the whole time?" Luke asks.

"No, not right away. Well, not physically anyway. I know now that abuse comes in many forms. Whenever I resisted him, whenever I went against his word, he'd find ways to punish or to sabotage me. I was raising Miley and

Annie on my own. We couldn't get a babysitter because Daniel wouldn't pay for one. I didn't have any friends because he wouldn't let me."

"Why would you need friends when you had Daniel?" Kellan exhales sharply.

"Precisely. But like you said earlier tonight, none of that matters anymore. I managed to get away from him. And I found myself in the company of good people tonight. So, here's to you, Kellan. Here's to you, Luke. And here's to Fallon, too. I just hope he can do something about that old car of mine." The three of us clink our glasses together before taking another sip of whiskey.

Luke checks his watch, a frown tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Well, I'm off to get some shuteye. Early start in the morning. Avery, please, we mean it when we say stay as long as you'd like. There's no rush. You've got the time and space and resources here to do anything. Just make sure you allow yourself to rest."

"Thank you, Luke."

He gives Kellan one last nod, then slowly gets up and walks out. I listen to the sound of his receding footsteps, registering the slight difference in his rhythm. There's definitely something off with his right leg, though I dare not ask what. Given that they were in the Navy together and based on the few details that Kellan let slip during our earlier conversation, I can only assume that Luke is living with a service-related injury that left him with that subtle limp.

Silence falls over the room for a short while as my gaze wanders around.

An entire wall is covered with bookshelves—all precious or first editions, judging solely by the intricate engravings on the spines and the high-quality leather binding. There are plenty of sculptural bookends sprinkled in between, likely collected from their overseas travels. I see East Asian motifs, African totems, and Polynesian patterns here and there, along with various vintage weapons mounted in glass cases.

"It's been a long day," Kellan says, pulling me out of my brief reverie. "You must be exhausted."

"I am, but that catnap I had on the way here pulled the dial back a bit," I giggle, noticing that my glass is empty. "You're right, though. I should get some sleep. I'll get out of your hair."

"Oh, I wasn't implying that at all," Kellan replies. "I'm just surprised you're still able to walk and talk after what you've been through tonight and

being out in the freezing cold for so long. The Nebraskan winters aren't known for being gentle on the human body."

I get up and find myself wobbling. "I guess I'm not that good at the walking part anymore."

In the blink of an eye, Kellan bolts from his seat and catches me before I fall. I remain soft and gooey in his arms as he holds me, my body burning hot against his. Our lips are dangerously close. Our eyes shadowed and hooded. The alcohol must be working some kind of voodoo on the both of us, because neither can pull away.

I can feel his heart thudding against mine.

"I think I'm still stiff from the cold earlier," I whisper.

"I won't let you fall," he says softly. His rock-hard body has me anchored safely, each muscle twitching nervously beneath his sheriff's uniform.

"Thank you," I reply.

"You're welcome," he says, his gaze dropping to my lips.

I should go upstairs. My room is next to my girls' room and I know I should sleep. But I cannot pull myself away from this sizzling man, and I don't think he's ready to let go of me yet, either. Time slows down as we look into each other's eyes, flames burning within. The fire consumes me from the inside to the point where I can no longer take it. Whatever is about to happen, I'm going with it. I deserve to allow myself this moment, to feel good and forget, even if just for a moment.

"I might kiss you," Kellan says.

"I'm hoping you will." *Where did that come from?* Never mind. Can't take it back.

He captures my mouth in a kiss. It's sweet and tender at first, breathing one another in. Eyes close as our tongues slip through, tasting, discovering. But then a ravenous hunger strikes, and we're devouring one another. My God, he is delicious. His tongue swirls and wrestles mine. My pulse starts racing as his hands move up and down my back, fingers digging into my hips. He pulls me closer, and I feel him hard against my core, ready to consume me.

"Oh, wow..." I manage as he trails wet kisses down the side of my neck.

I'm still wearing my velvety pink jammies from our Campbell place, which is actually a good thing, because all Kellan has to do is tug and... there goes his hand, right under my panties. He lets out a hiss of a sigh as he peers deep into my eyes while his fingers slide between my slick folds. "Fucking

hell, Avery. You're so wet."

I gasp as his fingers explore me while his other arm wraps tightly around my waist, holding me firmly in place. "Oh... Oh, right there."

It's been so long since I've felt a man's touch. The last man to touch me turned out to be a despicable monster. Every intimate moment I've ever had with Daniel has been soiled by the ugly truth of his nature, and so I am compelled to create a new and sweeter memory with this man standing in front of me. Kellan kisses me once more, deeper this time. It's intoxicating.

My hands rest on his shoulders, my mind ablaze as I try to get them to move. I'd love to get under his shirt, to feel his skin against mine, but I'm grounded where I stand. He's got me paralyzed, my legs parting gradually as his fingers continue working me closer to the edge. I'm panting, my breasts pressing against his rippling muscles as one finger slips inside.

"Ah," I whimper against his lips, my eyes wide open as I look at him.

He's loving every second of this. A devilish smile slits his handsome face as a second finger goes in. I'm gushing like a river as he licks his lips, his breath ragged as I feel his cock twitching against my belly.

"I think you need this," Kellan says. "I want to see you come."

"Oh, Kellan."

He's got the base of his palm pressing my clit while a third finger penetrates me. I hold on to him tight as the pressure builds up inside my core, every nerve ending alight while I try to remain standing. He is right about one thing—I desperately need this release, and he's determined to make that happen. "Deeper," I whisper. "Harder, please..."

"Gladly," he grunts and starts finger-fucking me mercilessly.

I hear the wet sounds of my pussy as he works me into a blinding frenzy. The orgasm rocks me to the core and I cry out in agony and ecstasy, the waves rippling through me until my knees give out. And just like that, all the turmoil I've endured up to this point dissipates in a colorful cloud of blinding sparkles, my heart exploding as he teases my pussy and squeezes every last drop of pleasure out of me before pulling his hand back and licking his glistening fingers. He stares into my eyes as he does so and it's so hot, I nearly come again.

He gives me a moment to recover but he never lets go. He simply holds me close, watching, analyzing every feature of my face as I try to take all of him in. I didn't expect tonight to end this way, but I knew from the moment I met Kellan that I wanted him. Badly. All of him. To my shame, I'm craving

his brother, too. And Luke is a morsel on his own. *Good grief, Avery, the snowstorm must've burned your brain circuits.*

“I think it’s time you get some sleep.,” he says gently.

I nod, suddenly exhausted beyond reason. I’m confident that I’ll be having sweet dreams.

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