

**MELODY LOOMIS**

**WHEN THE ICE**

*Melts*

**A STORM SERIES NOVEL**



# **WHEN THE ICE MELTS**

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STORM SERIES

BOOK 2

MELODY LOOMIS

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## **PRAISE FOR THRILL OF THE CHASE**

It gave me a 'if Jo and Jonas from Twister had a love story' vibe and I am so here for that.

— GOODREADS REVIEWER

With a relatable heroine and a charming hero, this story swept me away with its imagery and love story.

— ARC REVIEWER

I was torn between savoring this and blowing through it in a day...The amount of conflict pushing them apart was just perfect. It didn't leave me wanting to throw the book across the room. It's the perfect touch of angst without pushing too far.

— AMAZON CUSTOMER

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**M**elissa Martin stood on the porch and started her car. Remote start was a wonderful thing. She never used it much before, but now that she lived in Minnesota—and it was winter—it was a godsend. As cold as it was, it was a blessing to climb into a warm car. Plus, she hated scraping ice off her windshield. Of course, her little Honda Accord wasn't the best vehicle to traverse the snowy roads, but her brother, Jeff, made sure she had good snow tires.

She hurried back into her house, already shivering from the few seconds she was outside. Growing up in Kansas, she wasn't inexperienced with the cold, but Minnesota was cold on another level.

And she definitely wasn't in Kansas anymore.

She reached for her coat and began the process of bundling up. She didn't want to mess up her hair by putting on a hat, but with the freezing temperatures, going without was not an option. She supposed it didn't matter. The hair and makeup person would make sure she was ready for the camera. She tugged the beanie over her long, brown hair, pulling it down to make sure her ears were covered.

A glance at the clock told her she'd better get a move on, but when she finally made it out the door, her windshield was still frosted over.

"Damn it," she muttered as she dug the ice scraper out of her car. It was after one o'clock. Anywhere else, the sun would have melted it by now. Not in Minnesota. Melissa half-assed the job, scraping just enough off so that she could at least see while she was driving. She didn't want to be late for her first day.

On her way to the station, she called Kit. If anyone could calm her down, it would be her best friend.

“I’m so nervous.” The words tumbled out of Melissa’s mouth the second Kit answered.

“You’ll do fine,” Kit said. “You’ve already got the job.”

“I know, but what if I flub my lines or look at the wrong camera? And then, they’ll decide that maybe I’m not cut out to be the evening news anchor.” A break in the clouds appeared, and the sun came out. Melissa squinted through her crappy scrape job as the light hit the ice on her windshield and caused a glare.

“Stop worrying. They hired you because, out of all the candidates they interviewed, you were the one who did the best.”

Melissa smiled. “You’re right. No more busting my butt as a reporter. And hey, it’s only the third day of the new year, and I’ve already reached one of my goals. Now, if I could just find Mr. Right before my eggs shrivel up and die, I’ll be all set.”

She heard Kit sigh. “Not this again. You’re thirty-four. You have time.”

“And soon, I’ll be thirty-five. Sometimes it feels like I never get to have what everyone else has. You’re already happily married with a baby on the way. Jeff and Eileen have two kids. Even Geneva Langston from high school is getting married. Did you see that on Facebook? She never had any interest in dating, and all of a sudden, she’s having a wedding too. Why don’t guys like me? Am I high-maintenance? Am I too clingy? I’m not ugly, am I?”

“Melissa, stop. You’re gorgeous. Look, you’ve got the job, and eventually, everything else will fall into place. Think positive. Why don’t you get Eileen to set you up on that dating site she met your brother on?”

Melissa grimaced. She usually shied away from online dating, preferring to meet people in person, but maybe it was worth a shot. Finding love from the comfort of her own home might be more appealing than going to a bar on a cold night. “I’ll consider it.”

Up ahead, the WLMN News 12 sign came into view. “Well, I’m here now. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck. You’ll do great.”

Melissa ended the call and did one last face check in the mirror. Nothing like starting a new job with something embarrassing hanging from your nose. She smiled at her reflection and tried to pretend she was confident. “Well, here goes nothing.”



An icy wind hit her face as she opened the door. She covered her cheeks with her scarf as a shiver rolled over her. Her boot splashed into a mushy puddle of dirty snow. Definitely not white and pristine like the pictures Jeff sent. But she'd deal with snow if it meant she got to do the work she loved.

Inside, it was stifling. She'd gone from teeth chattering to nearly sweating. She shucked off her coat and draped it over her arm.

The receptionist from the day she interviewed waved her over. "Hi, Melissa. I'll let Cassie know you're here. Are you excited?"

"Yes, very much. I used to dream about sitting in the anchor chair." Melissa recalled how in high school, she'd been a part of the school's news segment. It had been her first inkling that this was what she was meant to do.

Melissa heard footsteps, and the perky blond she'd met at her interview appeared. "Hi, Melissa. Come on back." She gestured toward the hallway behind the desk.

As they walked, Cassie introduced her to every camera person, lighting tech, video editor, and reporter who was in the building. Melissa couldn't remember everyone's name, but she was sure in time, she'd get to know these people.

"And here's where it all happens." Cassie indicated the anchor desk, which sat under bright studio lights with a myriad of cameras posed around it. Melissa wanted to sit in the chair to try it out, but Cassie kept on walking. Well, she'd sit in it soon enough.

At the end of the hallway, Cassie stopped at an open door. "And this is your office."

Melissa peeked inside. It was a small room, but it had a nice view, and the cherry wood desk looked polished and organized. "I get to have an office?"

Cassie looked at her as if she had been asked a strange question. "Of course."

Melissa didn't care if Cassie thought it was strange. She'd never had an office before, and had never expected to be in a position to need one. She would enjoy it. "I just assumed I'd be in a cubicle."

"No, the anchors get an office."

Melissa hung her Michael Kors handbag—which she'd gotten for a steal at an outlet mall—and her annoying puffer coat on the wall hook. It was a relief to not have to carry that around. She never needed a heavy coat like that in Kansas.

“And Bob is right across the hall,” Cassie said. “You remember Bob.”

Bob was the veteran newscaster she’d be co-anchoring with every evening. Melissa did some dry runs with him during her interview.

“Is he here yet?” Melissa asked.

Cassie popped her head into Bob’s office, but he wasn’t in there. “He’s probably making his snack run. He walks to Dollar General every day.”

“He walked? But it’s freezing out there.” The dollar store was a good several blocks away, and the wind was biting cold. Melissa would have driven.

Cassie laughed. “This? Oh, this isn’t freezing. Wait until it gets below zero. Oh, speaking of weather, you haven’t met our new meteorologist yet. He came on board about a week before you, so you won’t be the only newbie around here.”

Melissa followed Cassie to another staff area. “I thought I would be working with Stan. He was the meteorologist I saw on your website.”

“Stan retired. The new guy is Tripp, and let me tell you, he *is* a trip!”

Cassie laughed at her joke, but Melissa stood frozen and felt a chill up her spine. *Shit*. This could *not* be happening. She’d been in love with a meteorologist named Tripp ten years ago, but he’d broken her heart when he said he didn’t want to marry her. But it couldn’t be the same Tripp, could it? There had to be other men with that name.

“He has the same name as his father and grandfather, so he goes by Tripp,” Cassie continued, unaware of Melissa’s inner turmoil. “I guess like, for triple digits because he’s the third?”

It had to be him. That was the reason for his nickname too. But why would he be here in Winter Lake? He lived in Iowa. Unless ... had he moved to be closer to family? She recalled he grew up in Minneapolis.

“Is Tripp from Minnesota?” Melissa asked, hoping and praying the answer would be no.

Cassie glanced over her shoulder and grinned. “Yep, he’s a Minnesota boy. Grew up in Minneapolis.”

Her heart sank. It was him. She used to dream they would work at the same news station. Now, it was the last thing she wanted.

Cassie stopped at the desk with weather models on the computer, but the chair was empty.

“Lance, have you seen Tripp?” Cassie asked, addressing the reporter Melissa had met a few minutes ago.

Lance looked up from his screen. “Try the break room. He said he needed his afternoon caffeine fix.”

Dread settled in the pit of Melissa’s stomach as they turned the corner toward the break room. What would it be like to see him after all these years? She had blocked him from social media—looking at his pictures was too painful. But seeing him in person? That would be a thousand times worse.

“There he is.” Cassie pointed to the man pouring himself a cup of coffee. From behind, he had the same brown hair as Melissa’s ex. Same medium build. When he extended his arm to replace the coffee pot, she noticed his hand. That was definitely Tripp’s, big and strong.

“Tripp, meet our new anchor.”

He turned around. Melissa’s heart skipped a beat. His hazel eyes lit up, and the corner of his mouth turned upward. He was clean-shaven, revealing the dimple in his chin.

It was Arthur “Tripp” Bartlett III in the flesh—the only man she’d ever truly loved.



TRIPP COULDN’T WIPE the smile off his face. If he ever doubted his ability to manifest something he wanted, he didn’t anymore. He wished for love in his life, and Melissa walked into the room. He’d never had a meaningful relationship since Melissa. He had a lot of regrets about how he’d hurt her, but he never thought he’d get a second chance.

After the initial shock wore off, he found his voice. “Melissa? What are you doing here?”

“New job. Jeff moved to Minnesota and I followed him. What are you doing here? I thought you were in Iowa.”

He thought he heard a nervousness in her voice. Seeing him was sure to be a shock to her. “I got a new job, too.”

Cassie moved to stand between them. “Wait, you two know each other?”

Tripp nodded. “We go way back.”

“We’re old—friends,” Melissa said.

Tripp heard the hesitation in her voice. They had been so much more than friends, and Tripp had blown it.

“Oh my god,” Cassie squealed. “What a small world!”

One of the production assistants poked his head into the room. “Cassie? We have an issue with a microphone and can’t find the spares. Can you help?”

Cassie nodded. “Sure, I’ll be right there.” She looked at Tripp and Melissa and smiled. “I’ll let you two get reacquainted. I’ve got to put out another fire.”

Once Cassie left, Melissa began to pace. Tripp remembered she did that a lot when she was nervous. “This is not happening,” she said softly.

“I’m probably the last person you want to see.”

She turned around, and Tripp could tell she was trying not to cry. “You’re damn right I don’t want to see you. You left me at that courthouse. We were supposed to get married. If you didn’t want to go through with it, you should have said so from the very beginning.”

“You’re right, and I’m sorry. Things happened so fast, and I didn’t know how to tell you I didn’t want the same thing.”

“Why are you here? I thought you wanted to live far away from your family.”

“My grandfather left me the lake house. When I heard a meteorologist position would be opening up here, I took it as a sign to move back to my home state.”

Her face softened. “What happened to your grandparents?”

A heaviness weighed in Tripp’s chest. He didn’t like to think of how he’d lost time with his grandparents while he was away. “Gram came down with pneumonia, and Gramps had a heart attack a year after that.”

“I’m sorry. I know you were close to them.”

“Yeah. They were the only family I could stand.” And he’d left them behind, just like he left Melissa.

Melissa returned to her pacing. “I cannot believe this is happening.”

“You said that already.”

She turned to face him. The eyes that moments ago shimmered with tears gave him a cold stare. “How am I supposed to go on camera and report the news with you sitting next to me? All I’m going to be able to think about is how you hurt me.”

He hated that she couldn’t stand to be in the same room with him, but he could only blame himself for that. “You have every right to be mad at me. But that was years ago, and I’ve changed. Letting you go was the biggest mistake of my life. But now, you’re here. Don’t you see? It’s fate.”

“More like bad luck. I need to get ready for tonight.”

She turned to leave, but Tripp blocked her path. “Have dinner with me. Let’s talk. We get a break before the ten o’clock airing.”

“I can’t deal with you right now, Tripp.”

Cassie breezed back into the break room. “Sorry about that. I swear, you want something done, you’ve got to do it yourself. Well, are you ready, Melissa? Let’s go find Bob and he can go over what you need to know before airtime.”

“That would be great.”

Melissa followed Cassie out of the room without a second glance back. Tripp couldn’t blame her for being upset. He shouldn’t have waited ten minutes before their courthouse wedding to tell her he was not ready to get married. But the fact that she was here changed everything. He was going to have a second chance at love, and this time, he wouldn’t blow it.

Lance eyed Tripp’s mug when he returned to his desk. “How do you drink it black? That’s disgusting.”

“You will not believe this,” Tripp said, ignoring Lance’s dig at his coffee. “The law of attraction is real and at work.”

“What are you babbling about?”

“You meet the new anchor?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s my ex-girlfriend. The one I almost married.”

Lance swiveled his chair around. “You’re kidding. Did she know you worked here?”

Tripp shook his head. “No, she was as surprised as I was. And not too happy. But don’t you realize what’s happening? I was tired of being alone, and in walks the only woman I’ve ever loved. If that’s not a sign from the universe, I don’t know what is.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “You and your signs from the universe.”

Tripp grinned. “I’m telling you, man. All you have to do is put that vibe out there, and it’s yours.”

“If that law of attraction bullshit was real, I’d have a million dollars by now.”

“You don’t have a million dollars because you don’t believe.”

“I believe I’m awesome enough to be a millionaire. Let’s just pull up my bank account and check.” Lance opened the app on his phone and held it up. “Nope, still not rich.”

“Well, think whatever you want. I never thought I’d get another chance with her. Now that she’s here, I’m not letting her get away again.”

“Don't blow it this time.”

A flash of brunette passed in his peripheral vision as Melissa followed Cassie to the hair and makeup room. Melissa made eye contact with him, then quickly shifted her focus away.

“Dude, I can feel her icy glare from here,” Lance said. “I think she’s still pissed at you.”

“She is, and I deserve it. But we’re meant to be together. Tell me this, what are the odds that my ex-girlfriend would end up working at the same news station as me?”

Lance shrugged. “It’s a coincidence, for sure.”

Tripp grinned. “No man, not a coincidence. It’s fate.” That, he was certain of.



MELISSA TOOK deep breaths as she sat at the anchor’s desk. For years, she wanted to sit here. There had been several times back at her old job when someone was sick and she had to fill in, but her boss Jan always passed her over for promotions. Now, the dream was real. Of course, she hadn’t pictured her ex at the same station.

She heard the sound of a chair rolling back as Tripp sat at the weather desk. She watched him unnoticed for a moment as he shuffled some papers around, apparently looking for something. That was Tripp—always disorganized. At that moment, Tripp looked up and winked at her. Melissa turned away. She couldn’t have Tripp distracting her like that—especially when she was about to go live in a few minutes. She was glad when Bob took the seat next to her. A welcomed distraction.

“Are you nervous?” Bob asked.

“A little, but I’m excited too. I hope I don’t mess up by looking at the wrong camera or reading the teleprompter wrong.”

“Don’t worry about that. They’ll tell you in your earpiece which camera to look at. Just look for the red light. And if you mess up the line—well, that happens to all of us sometimes. Just correct yourself and move on.”

One of the audio techs came over and assisted Melissa with her

microphone. After a quick sound check, they were ready. Melissa kept glancing at the digital clock. Almost air time. Her palms were sweaty, and her heart was pounding, but she knew that the moment the camera was on her, that feeling would go away. She could always perform for an audience—it was just the moments leading up to it that were nerve-wracking.

“So, where are you from again?” Bob asked, making friendly conversation.

“Kansas, and I’m definitely not in Kansas anymore. I mean, it does snow there, but not like here.”

Bob chuckled. “No, it’s certainly not Kansas. Do you miss it?”

“A little, but I don’t miss the tornadoes.”

“We get tornadoes,” Tripp butted in on their conversation. “But you’re right—we definitely get more snow. In this part of Minnesota, we probably get about fifty inches of it.”

Melissa wanted to tell Tripp to mind his own business, but she didn’t want to be a bitch with an audience. And it was best not to get worked up right before she was about to go live.

Finally, someone gave the cue, and the *On Air* sign lit up red.

Bob spoke first. “Good evening, I’m Bob Thomas. And with me tonight is the newest anchor for WLMN, Melissa Martin. Welcome, Melissa.”

Melissa remembered to smile. It was her turn now. “Thank you, Bob. It’s great to be here. And we’ll start off tonight with our top story—the frigid temperatures. Let’s check in with meteorologist Tripp Bartlett to get an update on the weather. Tripp?”

Of course, the weather had to be the top story. It couldn’t be a robbery. It couldn’t be a rowdy school board meeting. It couldn’t have been an accident on Main Street. No, it had to be the weather. The top story was always going to be the damn weather, because nothing else happened in this town.

At the weather desk, Tripp sat in front of a large monitor with a weather map behind him. Several counties were colored in pink. “That’s right, Melissa. We’ve got some cold temperatures to start off the first week of the new year, and our friends at the National Weather Service have issued a winter weather advisory for our viewing areas. Overnight, some wintry precipitation will be moving in, and we’re looking at about three to five inches of snow. With this, it’ll make driving a little dicey in the morning, so make sure you give yourself some extra time to get to school or work. Temperatures right now are hovering in the teens, but that’s going to quickly

drop as the evening goes on. I'll have all the details in your full forecast coming up in a few minutes."

He gave her another one of his smiles, but Melissa ignored it and turned her attention back to the camera. Bob took the next story, and Melissa had a moment to compose herself.

As long as she didn't let Tripp get to her on live television, she would be okay.



BY SEVEN O'CLOCK, the early evening news had wrapped up. Melissa detached her microphone, yanked out her earpiece, and hoped to make it to the safety of her office before Tripp caught up with her.

Instead, her new boss stepped in her path. Melissa didn't know her all too well yet, but from what she could tell, Sharon Woods was nothing like the station manager at Channel 4. Sharon had a big smile, a warm personality, and a soft-spoken voice.

"Hi, Melissa. You did great!"

As nervous as she had been, hearing that she had done well was a relief. "Thank you. I enjoyed it." Well, except for Tripp being there, but she left that part out.

She caught a whiff of aftershave and recognized it as Tripp's. "Channel 4's loss is Channel 12's gain," he said. "Isn't that right, Sharon?"

Sharon grinned. "Absolutely. We're glad to have you on board. Cassie mentioned you and Tripp were old friends."

Melissa smiled as if she were on camera. "Yeah. We met years ago through a mutual friend." That much was true. They certainly weren't friends now, but no need to tell her new boss that. She didn't want Sharon to think she didn't get along with her coworkers.

"And now we're working together," Tripp said. "Small world, huh?"

Melissa gave him a fake grin. *A little too small*, she thought.

"Well, you two were great on camera together," Sharon said. "Keep it up!"

Melissa nodded. "Thank you."

When Sharon was out of earshot, Melissa looked at Tripp. "If she only knew, huh?"



“Are you hungry?”

“No,” Melissa said, though her stomach growled, betraying her. Hopefully Tripp hadn’t heard.

“Betty’s Bistro is down the street. They have really good soup, and I know minestrone is your favorite. Please come. I want to talk to you.”

“I’d rather not. I’m having a stressful first day that’s not over yet and I have a headache. I’d like some quiet before the ten o’clock airing.”

Tripp nodded. “Understood. If you change your mind—”

“I won’t.”

“Some other time then.”

Melissa breathed a sigh of relief as Tripp walked away.

In the sanctuary of her office, Melissa closed the door and sank into her chair with a huff. She rolled her neck and shoulders, tight with tension. She could use a massage. And food. She was starving now, but she’d been in such a rush when she left the house that she hadn’t brought anything to eat. She rummaged around in her purse until she found a granola bar.

Outside her window, she heard a familiar laugh and a vehicle door slam. Tripp. She peeked out the blind. Tripp and Lance had climbed into a black truck with Tripp behind the wheel. Snow was falling lightly. There was no way Melissa was driving in that. No, she’d be fine with her granola bar.

Her stomach growled, and she looked down at her belly. “Shut up.”

With a sigh, she woke up her computer. She’d only been here for a few hours, and already, she had an inbox full of emails. Time to do a little work.

Her cell phone rang. She glanced at the screen and saw it was her brother.

*Shit.* She forgot Jeff promised to watch the news. That meant he saw who the meteorologist was.

“Hey, Jeff,” she answered, bracing for Jeff’s tirade.

“What the hell is he doing at Channel 12?” Jeff said, skipping the hello. “Did you know he was working there?”

“No, of course not. Do you think I would have taken this job if I had known I’d be working with my ex-boyfriend? You just *had* to convince me to move to Minnesota.”

“Did he find out you were going to work there and decide he wanted a job there too? Because Eileen said there was another weather guy a few weeks ago.”

“He started before me. I knew this job was too good to be true.”

“You want me to drive to Winter Lake and kick his ass? I can convince

him to take a hike and find another job. There's plenty of other news channels he can work for."

"He's not going to leave. His grandfather left him a lake house and that's where he lives. You remember he's from Minnesota, don't you?"

Jeff sighed. "I hate this for you. If he gives you any trouble, you'll tell me, right?"

"Of course. But stop being all big brother, okay? I'm a grown woman. I can take care of myself."

"I don't want to see him hurt you."

"I'll just have to deal with it. I'm not going to let Tripp ruin the best job I've ever had."

"Well, speaking of the job, you did great. It's nice to see you on television. You know I only watch the news because of you."

"You could see me in person, you know. We finally live in the same state again. When are you coming for a visit?"

"This weekend, I promise. Eileen and the kids too. I'm really sorry I couldn't help you move in."

"Please, don't be. The moving guys were really quick. And anyway, I wasn't about to ask you to come help when I knew you guys were all sick. Is everyone feeling better now?"

"We're on the mend. I got to run. Charlotte needs help with her math homework, and Eileen's trying to get the baby ready for bed. We're exhausted. I just wanted to congratulate you on a job well done."

"Thanks, Jeff."

"And I'm serious. If Tripp bothers you, just say the word. I'm only a forty-five-minute drive away."

"Thanks. I'll see you this weekend. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Melissa ended the call and reached for her bag. She'd planned to decorate her cubicle with pictures of her family. The office was a nice upgrade though, and she grabbed the framed photographs out of her tote. The first picture was from this past Christmas with her, Jeff, and his family. They had all worn Santa hats and posed in front of Jeff's fireplace.

The second picture was the last family vacation she and Jeff had taken with their parents. It had been a beach trip, and they'd all gotten sunburned, but they'd had a great time. If she'd known it would be the last vacation she'd ever have with her parents, she would have spent more time with them

and less time flirting with the lifeguard.

Melissa placed the two photographs at the corner of her desk. Her eyes lingered on the photo of her parents, and she felt a twinge in her chest. She knew if they could see her now, they'd be proud of her. They watched every one of her school news segments posted online, even though they were super corny and bad quality.

She blinked her eyes, then focused on the rest of her desk. It was sparse with only a pen cup, stapler, and a stack of sticky notes. She needed to do a little more office personalization, but the framed pictures would have to do for now.

Half an hour later, her stomach growled again. She searched for another granola bar in her purse and came up empty. Maybe she could eat some crackers from the vending machine.

There was a knock on the door, but when she called out, no one came in. She got up to open it, looked down the hall, and saw no one there. Tripp's aftershave lingered in the air though, and on the floor, there was a brown paper bag. She picked it up and closed the door again.

Inside was a small container of soup. There was a Post-it note stuck to it with Tripp's terrible handwriting.

*Thought you might be hungry. Try the minestrone from Betty's.  
Congrats on your new job. Hope your head feels better.*

*Tripp*

"Damn it," Melissa muttered. "Now how am I supposed to completely hate you?"

She opened the soup. It smelled good. Really good. It tasted even better. Tripp was right. This was the best soup around.

When she finished, she thought it might be a good idea to go find him. She should probably thank him at the very least. But just as she reached the door, she stopped.

Yes, he had done something nice for her, but there was still a lot of pain when it came to Tripp. She didn't want to talk to him right now. No way did soup make up for leaving her on their wedding day.



TRIPP DIDN'T SEE Melissa again until it was almost air time, and by then, he couldn't talk to her. He knew she had eaten the soup because he saw the empty container in the trash. She looked more alert, so he hoped it had helped.

After the newscast, Tripp decided not to bother her. Lance suggested he give her space. Maybe he was right. Tripp needed to let Melissa adjust to her new job—and seeing him again. Hell, he was trying to adjust too. It was hard to wipe the smile off his face.

When he was ready to leave, he found Melissa bundled up and standing in the lobby. For a moment, he thought she was waiting for him, but then she held up her car remote. “Just waiting for my car to warm up.”

“I know you hate being cold.” Tripp took out his own remote and started up his truck. “Auto start is pretty much a necessity here. And we'll have to knock the snow off our windshields too.” The snow was really coming down now.

Melissa leaned against the door, her breath fogging up the glass. “I hate snow.”

“Hate to break it to you, but you're in Minnesota. You'll be seeing a lot of it. How was your first day? I know being an anchor was always your goal.”

“It could have been better. I can't believe I have to work with you.”

Her voice cracked, and Tripp knew she was trying not to cry. His heart ached, and guilt washed over him. “I know, and I'm sorry. I want to make it up to you. Please, have dinner with me tomorrow.”

“My car should be warm by now. Thanks for the soup, but I don't want to have dinner with you.” She pushed the door open, and a blast of cold air rushed inside.

Tripp held the door open. “Hey, drive safe. The snow makes the roads slick.”

She nodded and turned toward her car. Tripp stayed inside and watched as she brushed the snow off her little silver Honda Accord.

Earning Melissa's forgiveness would not be easy, but he sure as hell was going to try.

**M**elissa tightened her robe as she walked into the kitchen the next morning. She had only lived in this house for a few days, and already, she hated it. It was always cold because the insufficient furnace couldn't keep up. To add to her misery, a peek out the window told her she'd need to shovel the driveway later.

She thought of Jeff, who had encouraged her to look for jobs here. He said that the snow wasn't all that bad once you got used to it.

Yeah, right.

She could probably handle her new living situation better if she didn't have the added complication of working with her ex. She needed to call Kit. She would have some advice for her.

The line rang several times. Kit was probably at work, and Melissa was worried it would go to voicemail.

"Hello, Ms. Evening News Anchor for WLMN Channel 12," Kit finally answered.

"Hey. I didn't catch you at a bad time, did I? Can you take a break?"

"It's not a bad time. I took the morning off. I'm feeling better now, but I already threw up twice. Thank god for saltine crackers."

"Oh, I'm sorry. That morning sickness has been hitting you hard."

"It's okay. I'm sure by the time tornado season starts, it'll be over. I heard the second trimester is much easier. Then by the time the season wraps up, I'll be almost ready to pop this baby out."

Melissa turned on her coffee pot and smiled. "Only you would plan your pregnancy around tornado season."

Kit laughed on the other end. “I told Ryder I wasn’t going to chase tornadoes if I was nine months pregnant or on maternity leave. Well, enough about me. How did it go last night? Do you love your new job?”

Melissa sat at her rickety kitchen table while she waited for her coffee to brew. “It was terrible.”

“Wait, what? *Terrible*? What happened?”

“I mean, the job itself is fine. I love it. Unfortunately, it’s a certain coworker of mine that’s the problem.”

“Oh no. Your new boss isn’t worse than Jan, is she?”

Melissa picked at her frayed placemat. “No, Sharon’s nice. Everyone’s great, except for the evening meteorologist. Guess who it is.”

“Is it someone I know?”

“Oh yeah, you know him. You introduced us. It’s *Tripp*.”

“What? *No!*”

“Yes!”

“You’re working with your ex-boyfriend? Are you joking?”

“God, I wish I was, and it’s a nightmare.”

“What happened to Iowa?”

“His grandfather left Tripp his lake house. I knew he was from Minnesota, but he grew up in Minneapolis. I didn’t think he’d be here in Winter Lake.”

“Okay, so tell me what happened.”

Melissa filled her in on the details of yesterday. “He was going on about how it was fate that I was working here and that he wanted to make it up to me. He wants me to have dinner with him so we can talk.”

“Are you going to go?”

“No. I’m going to bring my dinner and eat in my office.”

Kit sighed on the other end. “Maybe you should talk to him. See what he has to say.”

“I can’t right now. Every time I see him, I picture him walking down those court steps and leaving me, and it makes me want to cry.”

“Do you want me to talk to Ryder and see if he can get you a job at the station here? Do you want me to call Tripp and threaten to kick his ass if he bothers you? I read that pregnancy hormones can make women really bitchy sometimes, so I’m prepared to unleash my fury on him if needed.”

That got a laugh out of her. “Well, you’ll have to get in line. Jeff’s ready to get his hands on him too. But I’ll be fine.”

“Liar.”

Melissa eyed her coffee pot and got up to get her mug out of the cabinet. “I never imagined I’d see him again. It hurts just as bad as the day he left. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll tell you what you’re going to do. You’re going to go to work tonight, and you’re going to focus on your job. Don’t let Tripp ruin this for you. Then hopefully, a position will become available here, and then you can move to Oklahoma City. We average six to eight inches of snow a year here.”

Melissa laughed. “Thanks, Kit. I needed to hear that.” She glanced at the clock. “I better go. I slept late because I didn’t get much sleep last night. I have to be at work at two.”

“Okay. Call if you want to talk. Anytime. Except for maybe early morning. I’ll probably be barfing in the toilet.”

“Aww. Feel better, Kit.”

“You too. Bye.”

Melissa put down her phone and finally poured herself a cup of coffee. Kit was right. She couldn’t let Tripp bother her. She didn’t know exactly how she was going to do that, but she was going to try.



SNOW CRUNCHED under Tripp’s boots as he headed up the path to his house. He took his Labradors out for a walk here every day, and the girls enjoyed the fresh, brisk air as much as he did. Plus, it gave him a chance to catch up with his brother, who was often long-winded. The phone slipped out of his gloved hand and fell to the ground. Luckily, it didn’t fall into the yellow snow. The dogs had peed everywhere. Tripp picked up the phone, wiped the wetness off with his glove, then held it back to his ear. Daniel was still talking.

“...remember that time I worked with my ex-girlfriend at the country club?” Daniel said. “That was a painful summer. I feel for you, Tripp.”

“It’s not bad. I like having Melissa around.”

“But she doesn’t want you back.”

Tripp neared the house. Bella, the black six-month-old puppy, led the way. The older yellow Labrador, Rosie, hung back with him. “No, but I hurt her, and that’s my fault. This is my chance to make things right with her.”

“Yeah, but if you break up again and you’re working together, that’ll be a disaster.”

Tripp and the dogs reached the back porch, and Bella pressed her nose against the door as Tripp fumbled with the handle. “Who says we’ll break up? Melissa was the only woman I ever felt a connection to, and I’d be willing to bet she feels the same about me.”

“Still don’t know what she ever saw in your dorky ass.”

“Shut up, man.” Once he was inside, he yanked his gloves off. “Look, Daniel, I got to go.”

“Yeah, me too. Busy just got home, and she looks upset. I’m sure she’s about to complain about something. Good luck with Melissa.”

His brother ended the call. Tripp breathed a sigh of relief and unleashed the dogs. “We got off the phone just in time. Uncle Daniel complains about as much as his wife.”

Once free, Bella bolted to the living room. Rosie took a more leisurely pace and went back to her napping spot by the fire.

“Nice to be inside where it’s warm, huh girls?”

The dogs didn’t answer, which was the unfortunate thing about pets—they didn’t make for good conversation.

He and Melissa used to talk all night. Now, he could barely get in two words without her walking away.

“I know, I screwed up,” he said to the dogs. “But I’ll make it up to her. Got any ideas on how I could do that?”

Both dogs closed their eyes, and Tripp sighed.



MELISSA’S PLAN had been to avoid Tripp as much as possible. Unfortunately, they got to work at the same time. He pulled his truck into the parking space next to her car.

“Wonderful,” she muttered. “Already off to a great start.”

She didn’t get out of the car right away. Instead, she took her time disconnecting her charger cable and putting her phone back into her purse. She hoped by the time she got out, he’d be inside.

No such luck. He stood outside her vehicle, waiting for her. Melissa groaned and reached for the door handle.



“Be careful,” Tripp said. “There’s some slick spots on the pavement.”

Melissa said nothing, gathered her things, and locked her car. As she made her way across the parking lot, Tripp walked next to her.

“Did you sleep okay last night?” he asked.

She stopped in her tracks and stared at him. “No, what do you think? I had a lot on my mind.” She turned around and her foot slipped out from under her. Instead of falling onto the hard blacktop, she fell into Tripp’s arms. She felt a sudden flush of warmth as his arms wrapped around her.

“Careful there.” He helped her to an upright position. “I warned you it was slippery. Are you okay?”

Melissa yanked herself out of his arms. “I’m fine.” She looked down at her feet. “I guess I should have worn the boots.”

Tripp nodded. “Boots have more traction.”

“I know, but they don’t go with this outfit.”

“You’re in Minnesota now. Snow boots are a requirement every day in winter.”

“Fine, I’ll wear them tomorrow.”

They continued their walk to the door. This time, Melissa avoided the ice patches.

“Will you have dinner with me tonight?” Tripp asked.

Melissa held up her lunch bag. “Sorry, but I brought a frozen meal.”

When she reached the door, Tripp rushed ahead and held it open. “Okay then. I’ll see you later for the photo shoot.”

He walked away. Melissa wanted to smack herself. She’d forgotten about the photo shoot. Cassie had mentioned briefly yesterday that they needed new photos for the website. That meant standing in close proximity to Tripp.

So much for avoiding him.



TRIPP HATED PHOTO SHOOTS. His suit was hot under the bright studio lights, and no matter how he posed, the photographer was not pleased.

“Look less serious,” instructed the photographer.

“Less serious?”

From her chair behind the photographer, Cassie watched. “Pretend you’re excited about a snowstorm.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Melissa emerged from the hair and makeup room. Now here was something to be excited about. She looked gorgeous with her long brown hair and red lips. Tripp remembered a playful time when Melissa kissed him on the cheek and left a crimson mark. She had apologized and wiped it off with a tissue, but Tripp never complained. He liked her lips on him. Hell, he wanted those lips on him now.

“That’s better,” the photographer said, clicking away with her camera. “Stay that way.”

Melissa briefly met his eyes before looking away. She started to walk toward her office, but Cassie, bless her, hopped out of her chair and pulled her back.

“Melissa! Go stand next to Tripp.” Cassie gently pushed her toward the green screen.

“Oh, now?” Melissa asked. “Shouldn’t we wait for Bob?”

“We’ll get the three of you in a minute. I thought you might like some photographs of you and old friend Tripp. Just for fun! Here, stand next to him.”

There were times when Cassie got on Tripp’s nerves with her gossip or constant instructions, but there were times, like this, when he appreciated her bossiness. He knew Melissa was not looking forward to this, but she moved to stand next to him anyway.

Tripp put his arm around her, pulling her closer. “How’s this?”

Cassie beamed. “Perfect!” She then looked at the photographer. “Well don’t just stand there. Take the pictures!”

The photographer snapped away.

Tripp recalled the hundreds of other times they had their picture taken. Melissa would always wrap her arms around his neck, maybe give him a kiss on the cheek. He still had those pictures on a photo storage site, and some in an album Melissa had made for him. When he got home, he might just dig out that album from his memory box. He was pretty sure it had room for more pictures. He was certain Cassie would let him have some from this shoot.

“Get a little closer,” the photographer instructed. Tripp was happy to oblige and put his other arm around her. The photographer’s camera clicked.



MELISSA BREATHED a sigh of relief when Bob arrived. She didn't know how much longer she could stand next to Tripp with his arm around her. Being around him stirred up memories of happier times. Her heart raced, her body reacting to his touch, as if it were unaware that she should no longer feel that way toward him.

The photographer held up her camera. "Okay, let's get the three of you together now."

Melissa moved over so Bob could stand in the middle. Bob had the advantage of being a big guy. The further away from Tripp she was, the better.

The photographer put down her camera. "Why don't you stand in the middle, Melissa? I think we should have Bob on the left."

"Agreed," Cassie said. "Ladies in the middle," she said with a giggle.

Tripp had the gall to wink at her as Melissa moved into position. She wanted to wipe that smirk off his face, but they had an audience. She didn't want anyone to know that she couldn't stand to be near him.

So instead, Melissa put on a smile and hoped for the best.



TRIPP SHOVED his frozen burrito into the microwave and mashed the two-minute button. It was his break, and Melissa was still avoiding him. She went straight to her office after the newscast and had been in there with the door closed ever since.

At the table, Lance cracked open a soda can. "Melissa still won't have dinner with you?"

Tripp watched his burrito rotate in the microwave. "No."

"Give her time," Lance said. "When Stacy's upset with me, I stay out of her way. Eventually, things calm down enough so that we can talk."

The microwave beeped, and Tripp took his plate to the table. "I want to prove to her that I'm not the same guy who bailed on her."

Lance speared a piece of meat from his takeout container. "Have you really changed?"

"Well, yeah, I'd like to think so. I'm tired of flings. I want a relationship. With Melissa, I had a real connection. Now that she's back, I can't imagine being with anyone else other than her."

He turned at the sound of high heels clacking on the floor. Moments later, Melissa was standing in the doorway. She seemed to hesitate when she saw Tripp at the table, but then headed to the refrigerator.

“That was some photo shoot,” Tripp said, making conversation.

Melissa took out her lunch bag but didn’t say anything.

Tripp leaned forward to whisper to Lance. “She might not be talking to me.”

Lance cleared his throat. “So, Melissa, you’re from Kansas?”

“Yep, born and raised.” As she talked, Melissa unboxed a frozen meal and kept her back to them.

“Did you ever dress up like Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz* for Halloween?”

Tripp shook his head. “You don’t have to answer that. Lance likes to ask stupid questions.”

Lance looked offended. “What? I’m just trying to get to know your ex-girlfriend.”

Melissa turned around and shot daggers at Tripp. He saw her eyes narrow and knew that somehow, he had hit a nerve.

She marched to the table and leaned over it. “I would appreciate it if you would not blab our history to everyone. I fought hard to get this job, and I’m trying to make a good impression. The last thing I need is for Sharon or anyone else to think I don’t get along with my coworkers.”

Lance held his hands up. “Hey, you don’t have to worry about me. I won’t say anything.”

Tripp stood and walked around to Melissa. “Hey, I wasn’t blabbing anything. I promise. Lance just knows because we’ve been friends forever. I’ve known him since I was a kid.”

Melissa’s expression relaxed. “Fine. Just please don’t tell anyone else we were involved, okay?”

Tripp made a zipping lips gesture. “My lips are sealed.”

“Thank you.”

She turned her attention back to her food, and Tripp returned to his seat.

“So, did you?” Lance asked.

Melissa placed her dinner into the microwave and pushed a few buttons. “Did I what?”

“Dress up like Dorothy? I think of Kansas, and I think of that movie.”

“Actually, yes, I did. But it wasn’t for Halloween. It was for a school

performance.”

Tripp remembered Melissa showing him old pictures on her Facebook profile. “Oh, that’s right, because you were in the drama club. I remember that photo. You made a good Dorothy.”

“Did you ever want to be an actress?” Lance asked.

Melissa shrugged. “For a brief time. I always liked to be on camera. But being on the local news was a steady income, and acting was a little more unpredictable. Besides, it was nice to be close to home.”

Tripp thought he saw a sadness in her eyes, but she turned back to the microwave before he could be sure. She probably missed Kansas. He was sure it reminded her of her parents. They had died when she was in high school.

When the microwave beeped, Melissa took out the meal and slung her lunch bag over her shoulder.

“You can join us at the table.” Tripp pushed out the chair across from him with his foot.

Melissa glanced at him. “Thanks, but I’ll eat in my office.”

She left, and Tripp sighed.

“Sorry, man,” Lance said. “Looks like she hasn’t warmed up to you yet.”

Tripp decided to stop feeling sorry for himself. He didn’t want to put out that negative vibe into the universe. So instead, he smiled. “She won’t give me the cold shoulder forever. We’re meant to be. Out of all the places Melissa could’ve moved to, she ended up in Winter Lake. Now, if that’s not the universe at work trying to put us back together, I don’t know what is.”

Lance rolled his eyes. “You and your universe again.”



MELISSA WAS ready to get the hell out of there the second work was done. All throughout the newscast, Tripp kept winking and smiling at her. There was a time in her life when she enjoyed that kind of attention from him, but certainly not anymore.

She waited in her office while her car warmed up, hoping to avoid any run-ins with him. Once she was bundled up, she headed to the lobby and breathed a sigh of relief. No sign of Tripp. She knew it would be impossible to avoid him forever, but she wasn’t ready to deal with him just yet.

Her teeth chattered as she stepped out into the frigid temperatures. How could anyone enjoy this godforsaken weather? She hurried into the warmth of her Honda, buckled up, and peeled out of the parking lot.

She came to a stop sign. As she pumped the brakes, she realized she was going too fast for the road conditions. Her car slid off the side of the road. She yanked the wheel to steer it back to the road, but somehow, that made it worse. Moments later, her car came to rest in a bank of snow.

Her arms trembled as she continued to grip the steering wheel. Her car could have tipped over in the ditch. She waited a moment for her breathing to return to normal, then pressed her foot to the gas. Unfortunately, her wheels spun, stuck in the snow. Her little car was going nowhere.

She hit the steering wheel with her gloved hand. “Damn it!”

As she searched for the roadside assistance number in her phone, headlights appeared in her rear view mirror. She recognized the driver right away.

Tripp.

So much for having success at avoiding her ex. Why couldn’t it have been Bob or Lance?

He tapped on the window. Even though she saw him coming, she jumped at the intrusion. She rolled the window down and felt a cold blast of air rush in. Tripp exhaled, and she saw his breath in the air. Damn, it was cold.

“Looks like your car is stuck. That happens a lot on this road. It curves a little and there’s always a patch of ice when it gets cold. Hang tight and I’ll pull you out.”

“Thanks, but not necessary. I have a road service through my insurance that I can call.”

Tripp leaned into the window, and damn if she didn’t get a whiff of him and feel her pulse quicken. “If you call a tow service, they’ll charge you an arm and a leg. Plus, you could be waiting a long time. If you let me help you, I’ll do it for free. I have some recovery straps in my truck. Won’t take but a few minutes. And regardless of if you let me help or not, I’m not leaving you, so you might as well let me do it.”

“Fine,” she said through gritted teeth.

“I’ll get what I need out of my truck.”

True to his word, Tripp had her out of the ditch in no time at all. He acted as if it had been nothing, but to Melissa, it was everything. Her stress levels dropped—at least the stress concerned with her car. Tripp still stressed her

out, but he was being a nice guy. It was hard to call him an asshole when he was being generous.

He peered into the driver's window again. "You're all set."

"Thanks." The word seemed a bit inadequate, but then Melissa remembered how he'd hurt her in the past. Tripp owed her.

"Be more careful next time. These roads can get pretty slick."

"Yeah, no kidding. I was going faster than I should have."

"Next time, don't slam on your brakes, and turn into the slide."

"I think I knew that in the back of my mind, but I panicked. I hate driving when the roads are like this."

"Yeah, that wintry mix might make some of the back roads a little dicey. I'll follow you home."

Melissa's eyes widened. "No, you don't have to do that. Totally not necessary."

"Just to make sure you get home safely. Then I'll go and won't bother you. I promise."

"I guess I can't stop you from following me."

"Where are you staying?"

"This old house on Vance Street. It's at the end of the road."

Tripp looked surprised. "You're staying at the old Burnett house? No one has lived there in a while."

"It was the only thing I could get on short notice that wasn't too expensive. The rental market is crap. Every other house I looked at got snatched up before I could even get a viewing. I got it sight unseen." Probably a mistake, but at least it was a roof over her head.

Tripp winced. "You want me to take a look at the place?"

"Tripp, just go home. I don't need an escort. And anyway, Jeff is coming this weekend to help me out with a few things."

"I'm following you. The roads are icy tonight. I'll see you in a bit."

Tripp headed to his truck, and for a brief moment, Melissa considered taking off. But with her luck, she'd slide off the road again. Best to let him follow her.

And if she were completely honest with herself, it gave her some peace of mind. She wasn't entirely comfortable driving on these roads in the icy dark.

Once Tripp was settled behind the wheel, Melissa eased her car back on the road and went slower this time. The drive normally took about ten minutes, but with black ice on the roads, it took longer.

At her house, Tripp waited at the curb until Melissa unlocked her front door. He waved as she looked back one last time, and then he was gone.

Okay, so he made sure she got home safe. But that didn't mean she was ready to forgive him yet.



Tripp whistled as he sat down at his desk.

Lance narrowed his eyes. “You’re whistling. You must be in a good mood.”

Tripp grinned. “That’s because I am. Melissa ran her car into the snow bank last night, and guess who happened to be there to pull her out.”

Lance took a bite of his Snickers bar. “Nice. Playing hero to her damsel in distress. Bet she’s falling all over you now, huh?”

At that moment, Melissa walked past their work space. She glanced at Tripp, then hurried away.

“Yep, she’s falling all over you,” Lance said with a chuckle.

“I’m still working on her. I’ll be right back.”

He found Melissa in the break room getting coffee.

“Hey,” he said. “I’m going to ask you again. Come have dinner at Betty’s with me tonight.”

Melissa set the coffee pot back in place. “Look, just because you helped me with my car, it doesn’t mean I’m ready to forgive you.”

“You can’t avoid me forever, Melissa. We have to work together.”

She poured a generous amount of vanilla creamer into her coffee. Tripp smiled. She’d always loved her coffee sweet.

“I’m busy. I don’t just spend my time reading a teleprompter during the news. When we’re off the air, I’m actually working on news stories. You know, like you’re supposed to be monitoring the weather? I just came to get some caffeine.”

She put the creamer back in the refrigerator, shoved past him, then made

her way down the hall to her office.

Lance stood nearby shaking his head. "I told you. Give her space."

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough. I'll have dinner with you."

Tripp sighed and left the room.

Later at Betty's, he ate his chili while Lance went on about the latest hockey game. Tripp barely paid attention, distracted by the need to make things right with Melissa. But how was he supposed to do that when she was still avoiding him?

"You're not listening," Lance said.

Tripp looked up from his bowl. "Of course, I am."

Lance gave him an annoyed look. "Oh yeah? Then what did I just say?"

"Something about a hockey game?"

"Dude, you've got to get Melissa off your mind. Come watch the game Friday night. Winter Lake is up against Deerville."

"I'm working. You know that."

"Yeah, and so am I. The sports guy has to cover the games, you know? And since my parents own the rink, they'll feed you hot dogs for free. Maybe you could convince Rick and Sharon to let you do the weather on location. You know, change it up a bit. A lot of people want to know what the weather is like when they go out. And they're having some cancer fundraiser so it'll be a big crowd."

Tripp shrugged. "I guess I could ask. I do like free hot dogs."

Lance laughed. "I knew I could convince you with free food. And plus, getting out of the station will get you away from Melissa's eye daggers."

At the mention of Melissa, she walked through the door. She glanced around, as if she were looking for him, but it appeared she hadn't spotted him yet. Had she changed her mind about talking to him? Tripp felt his hopes buoy.

"How's my hair look?" he asked Lance.

"Same as always. Why?" Lance turned around, then nodded. "Oh, I see."

Tripp grinned. "I guess she changed her mind. I'll be right back."

He walked to the counter where Melissa waited and leaned against it. "Hey, you came."

She looked his way. "I'm just here to get takeout."

"You're here. Why don't you stay?"

The man behind the counter slid a bag over her way. "Here you go, miss."

“Thank you.” Melissa turned to Tripp. “I’m going to work during my dinner break.”

She headed for the door, but Tripp raced ahead of her. “Melissa, come on. Are you going to be like this forever?”

“Tripp, please don’t make this any harder for me.”

“I’m not trying to make things difficult. Look, you know we’re both in our probationary period, right?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“You know what that means, don’t you? It means that the station can fire us for any reason if they decide we’re not working out. And if they think that we’re not getting along, Sharon will start to worry that it’ll affect ratings. And then, you and I could be out of a job. You don’t want that, do you?”

“No, of course not. That’s why I’ve asked you to not bother me. You push all my buttons. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” She pushed past him and went out the door. It slammed behind her, blowing a rush of cold air inside. Tripp walked back to the table, defeated. He collapsed onto the chair with a heavy sigh.

“Ouch,” Lance said. “She’s still ice queen toward you.”

“It’s just going to take a little more time than I expected.”

“You know what you need to do? Forget your ex. She’s not interested, which means you need to move on. You should try online dating.”

“I don’t want to be on some dating site. I already know who I want to be with.”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t want you. And you want a girlfriend, right? That’s what you said a few weeks ago.”

Tripp kept his head down and picked at the corner of his napkin. “I want Melissa.”

Lance reached across the table and grabbed Tripp’s phone. “Let me put the dating app on your phone.” He tapped on his phone and unlocked it.

“How do you know my passcode?”

“1-2-3-4? Come on, man, you need to have better security than that.”

“Okay, my passcode is weak. I don’t want a dating app.”

“You get the first week free. After that, you can cancel. But give it a shot.”

Tripp knew the only way to stop Lance from nagging him was to just go along with it. “Fine. Sign me up.”

“You need a profile picture. Say cheese.” Lance snapped a picture.

Tripp reached for his phone. "Let me see it."

Lance flashed the picture to him, but wouldn't relinquish his phone. "It's good."

"You are not putting that picture on the site."

"You can change it later. Now, let's get you a user name and set up your profile. Oh, and there's a short questionnaire you have to answer too. Don't worry. I'll help you out with that."

"A questionnaire?"

"Yeah. It helps the site match you with people who are compatible."

After filling out the profile section and uploading his picture, Lance asked him the questions. They ranged from how he liked to spend his free time to what he felt was important in a relationship.

"Okay, last question. On a scale from one to five, how important is marriage to you?"

"Three," Tripp answered.

Lance shook his head. "No, you got to say five. Women want a man who's ready to make a commitment."

"I am ready to make a commitment, but why does commitment mean marriage? Why can't two people just be together because they want to be together?"

Lance tapped on the app. "I'm putting down a five. Women aren't going to contact you if they think marriage isn't important to you. They'll think you're just looking to get laid. This way, you'll have more potential matches. You can get to know her, and if she doesn't work out, let her go."

"Are you done with my phone now?"

Lance handed Tripp back his cell. "It'll alert you when you have new matches. Looks like you've already got some. Want to take a look?"

Tripp didn't. There was only one woman he was interested in, and these women weren't her.



"ARE Rick and Sharon cool with you going to the hockey game tomorrow?" Lance asked the next day.

Tripp sat in his chair. "Yeah. Sharon loved the idea, and Rick almost wanted to trade places with me. But since I'm the new guy, he doesn't mind

sending me out in the cold.”

Lance laughed. “Being the new guy has its perks sometimes. By the way, your phone was blowing up while you were away from your desk. I think you have some love matches.” Lance wiggled his eyebrows.

Tripp glanced at his phone, lit up with dating app notifications. He swiped them away. “Not interested.”

Lance grabbed Tripp’s phone and opened the app. “Oh come on. She’s cute. What’s wrong with her?”

There wasn’t anything wrong with the smiling blond on his phone—except she wasn’t Melissa.

Tripp took his phone back. “Isn’t there some basketball game you’re supposed to be at? Maybe you should get back to work and stop obsessing over my love life.”

Lance signed out of his computer. “I always have time to help you get laid, bro.”

Tripp rose from his seat. “I can handle that on my own, thank you very much.”

They had a thirty minute break when the national news aired, and Melissa was usually in her office then. She couldn’t avoid him forever. They worked together, after all.

She wasn’t there, but the door was open. Tripp let himself in and looked around. Already, Melissa had put some personal touches in the space. There was a potted plant near the window. The wall had a painting of a dog. On the desk, she had some framed family portraits. Tripp picked up one to get a closer look. It appeared to be a recent picture. He recognized Melissa’s brother. He assumed the blond must be his wife.

“What are you doing in my office?” Melissa stood in the doorway with a stack of papers in her hand. She didn’t look pleased to find him looking through her things.

“Sorry. I was looking for you.” He held up the Christmas picture. “Is this Jeff’s wife?”

“Yeah, don’t sound so surprised. Some people like to get married.”

Tripp winced. He deserved that. He turned back to the photograph. “So the kids in this picture must be his.”

“Yes. The girl is Charlotte. She’s eight. And the baby is little Eli.”

Tripp placed the picture back in its spot. “I have a niece and nephew too.”

“What do you want?” Melissa looked annoyed.

“Look, you’ll get a little time away from me tomorrow. I’m taking my weather report on the road. First high school hockey game of the new year. Hockey’s kind of big deal around here.”

“Great.”

“How’s your first week going?” He was genuinely interested, because despite her displeasure at his presence, Melissa was doing a fantastic job.

“Tripp, there’s a breaking news story we’re working on. Can you leave and let me work? I’d like to prove to Sharon that hiring me was the right decision.”

He nodded and closed the door. When he returned to his desk, Lance had already left. At least he wasn’t around to rub the rejection in his face again.



MELISSA HADN’T BEEN at work for more than five minutes the next day when Sharon knocked on her office door.

“Hi, Melissa. How’s your first week going?”

Melissa made sure to smile, not wanting her boss to think her new job was anything less than ideal. “It’s been going great.”

“Wonderful. So listen, I’ve got a news story I want you to cover. Would you be interested in going on location today?”

“Location?”

Sharon sat in the chair on the other side of Melissa’s desk. “The high school hockey team is playing tonight, and there’s a player I’d like you to interview. His name is Jonathan Smith, and this will be his first time out on the ice since he recovered from cancer. In addition to this, the team will be taking donations for cancer research, so we’d like to get the word out. How does that sound?”

“I’m in, definitely. Human interest stories are my favorite, and I’m all for cancer research. Should I leave soon? I imagine the high school is being dismissed right about now.”

“Oh no, that won’t be necessary. You can interview him at the Ice House before the game.”

Melissa’s stomach roiled. “Is Tripp coming too? He said something about going to a hockey game.”

“Yes, we’ll have our whole news crew there! Won’t that be fun? Tripp

told me there would be a cancer fundraiser that we might want to tell our viewers about, and I think you'd be the perfect person to cover that story. You two can catch a ride in the news van together."

Melissa put on a fake smile. "Great!"

Sharon rose from her seat. "Have fun tonight! This will be a great way to end your first week!"

The smile dropped from Melissa's face the moment Sharon left. Spending an evening with her ex in a cold skating rink was not her idea of a great time.



TRIPP WAS CHECKING the weather on his phone when the van door slid open. Melissa's cold eyes stared at him between the scarf covering the lower half of her face and the knitted hat covering her hair. If he had to bet, he'd guess that Melissa wasn't thrilled about having to ride with him. He hadn't intended for Sharon to assign Melissa the cancer story, but he wasn't complaining about it either.

"Saved you a seat," he said with a smile.

"I'll ride shotgun."

"Holly already called it. Her bag is in the seat. Why the hair and makeup girl is coming, I don't know. It's not like you need her. You're beautiful already."

"Then I'll take the seat in the back."

"Ray likes to sit in the back with all the camera equipment."

Melissa groaned, then closed the van door and took the seat next to him. "This is all your fault. I could be inside a warm studio reading a teleprompter, but no, I have to spend the evening in a freezing ice house."

"I thought you loved going to the rink."

"I do, but I keep warm by skating. And with a hockey game going on, all I can do is sit on the sidelines and be cold."

Tripp inched as close to her as his seatbelt would allow. "Just stick close to me. I'll keep you warm."

Melissa glared at him and gave his arm a shove. "Move. I'm trying to buckle my seatbelt."

Tripp slid back to his side as Melissa struggled with her belt. "It might be easier if you take your gloves off."

“That’s not the problem. It’s this giant puffy coat I have to wear because it’s zero *fucking* degrees outside.” Melissa finally snapped the seatbelt in place.

Tripp held up his phone which displayed the current temperature. “It’s actually five degrees right now.”

Melissa didn’t look amused that he had corrected her.

“Just so you know, it wasn’t my idea to have you come along. That was Sharon’s idea.”

The van door opened and Ray climbed in. He grinned at them both. “I guess we’re all going to the game tonight.”

“Hurry up and close the door, man,” Tripp said. “She’s cold.”

Ray complied and gave Melissa a pat on the shoulder. “You’ll get used to it, Kansas! This isn’t all that bad. Wait until it gets to thirty below.”

“Joy,” Melissa muttered.

“At least Lance started the engine,” Tripp said. “He made it nice and warm inside for us.”

“He started it because he had to melt the ice off the windshield,” Melissa said.

Tripp laughed. “Well, that too.”



AT SEVEN, the game started, and Melissa had a break. Though she had been nervous, the pre-game interview with the hockey player had gone well. She was pleased that for once, she was able to do the kind of work she enjoyed. She would have preferred to head back to the station after the interview, but Sharon wanted her to stay and report on the fundraising, so she was stuck.

Melissa put her coat back on. Her coworkers teased her about her giant puffy coat, making her feel self-conscious, but damn it, she was shivering. How anyone could “get used to this” was beyond her. Perhaps tomorrow, she’d do some online shopping for some long underwear. She needed more layers.

The concession stand sold hot chocolate. Maybe that would warm her up. The last thing she wanted was a hot dog, even though they were being offered for free to the news crew, courtesy of Lance’s parents. Between hoping the interview would go well and avoiding Tripp, her stomach was in knots.



Melissa gave the girl behind the counter a smile. “Hi, can I get a medium hot chocolate? And can you put a little whipped cream on top?”

Someone came up behind her. She knew who it was without looking. She recognized the smell of his aftershave.

“I’ll have the same,” Tripp said. “And I’ll pay for hers.” He leaned over the counter and handed the teenage girl at the register a twenty.

“You don’t need to pay for my hot chocolate.”

“I want to. And besides, you deserve it. That was an amazing interview. You handled that really well. Not that Bob couldn’t have done a good job too, but I’m glad Sharon assigned you to it.” He took his change back from the girl and put it in his wallet.

In spite of her annoyance, the compliment made her smile. “You really think so? I was nervous.”

The corner of Tripp’s mouth lifted. “You didn’t look nervous. You looked great.”

“Well, thanks. It’s all I ever wanted to do. Report the news and tell people’s stories.”

The girl made their drinks and placed two paper cups on the counter. Tripp picked them up and handed one to her. She took a sip. The warm, chocolatey goodness warmed her from the inside out. “This is really good.”

Tripp nodded. “I prefer coffee, but this is a nice change. And chocolate has caffeine, right?”

She preferred not to make small talk with Tripp, but her coworkers were around. Ray was in line at the concession stand, and Holly was at a nearby table on her phone. It would look weird if she kept her distance from her *old friend*. She made her way to an empty booth, resigning herself to suffer for the next couple of hours. “How long does this game last?”

Tripp joined her on the opposite side. “It could go on for a while. It’ll probably wrap up by ten. Are you getting warmed up?”

“Slowly. I used to love going to the skating rink in the summer, but going in January is just brutal. It’s like perpetual winter here.”

“Remember that time it snowed in Oklahoma, and you and Kit were stuck at my apartment?”

Melissa cracked a smile at the memory. “Yeah, and we ate ramen noodles for two days because you didn’t go grocery shopping.”

“I didn’t think it was going to be that bad. In Minnesota, those roads would have been plowed by then. Do you still talk to Kit?”

“We FaceTime or call at least once a week.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Happily married and just found out she’s pregnant.” Every time Melissa thought of her best friend, she couldn’t help but feel envious. Melissa wanted to be a wife and mother. Maybe it would never happen for her.

“Is she still chasing tornadoes?”

“Yeah. She’s working at the Storm Prediction Center.”

“That does not surprise me. I knew she’d go all the way to the top.”

Melissa finished her hot chocolate and pretended to be interested in her phone. Anything to avoid talking to Tripp. She could feel his gaze on her though. Underneath the table, his knee kept bumping into hers. She couldn’t tell if he was doing it on purpose or not.

“Can we talk about us now?” Tripp asked.

Lance walked over at that moment. Melissa let out a sigh of relief, grateful for the interruption.

“Winter Lake is already killing it out there,” Lance said. “They just scored another point.”

“I heard the crowd roar a minute ago,” Tripp said.

Lance and Tripp started talking about the game, and Melissa took the opportunity to escape. “I’m going to freshen up.”

She left the boys and headed to the ladies’ room. After checking underneath the stalls to make sure she was alone, she stood under the fluorescent lights and stared at herself in the mirror. “Get it together, Melissa. Three more hours of this game, one quick news segment, and then you can go home.”

All she wanted to do was to get away from Tripp, but instead, he was a constant presence. At least here, she had a few moments of peace.

She pulled her phone back out and called the one person who knew her almost better than herself.

“Hello, Ms. Evening News Anchor,” Kit answered.

“I’m stuck at a hockey game covering a news story with Tripp.”

“Why is Tripp there? Is covering the weather outside not enough? Does he need to report the conditions from inside the rink too?”

“He somehow convinced Sharon that people would want to know what the weather would be like for the Friday night game. And spoiler alert, it’s been the same forecast every day this week—cold.”

“And why are you there?”

Melissa leaned against the wall next to the hand dryer. “There’s a cancer fundraiser thing. We had to drive in the news van together. Most uncomfortable drive ever. And now, he’s out there wanting to talk to me and buying me hot chocolate. I can’t get away from him.”

“I hate to say it, but you’re going to have to learn how to work with him eventually.”

Melissa sighed. “I know, but not tonight. Every time I look at him, I picture him leaving me before our wedding.”

The bathroom door opened and a woman with two rowdy children entered. Kit said something, but Melissa missed it over the commotion. “What did you say?”

“Ryder said if you need him to go up there and teach Tripp a lesson, just say the word.”

“Tell him thanks, but not necessary. I’m sure my brother will be first in line. I should probably get back to work. We need to film some of the fundraising footage for the ten o’clock news.”

“Okay, hang in there, and don’t let your ex ruin the best job you’ve ever had. You earned this position.”

“Thanks, Kit. I’ll chat with you this weekend. Bye, girl.”

Melissa ended the call and stared at her reflection again. Thank god she didn’t cry, otherwise Holly would have to redo her makeup all over again.

**M**elissa was glad when Saturday arrived. She had managed her first week with as minimal interaction with Tripp as possible. And now, she had a whole weekend where she didn't have to see him at all.

Unfortunately, she couldn't relax. There was more snow to be shoveled from the driveway. How people endured this, she couldn't understand. The only good thing about it was that it could count as exercise.

A half hour later, she heard a car horn outside. A blast of cold air hit her as she opened the front door. An SUV was parked in her driveway. Moments later, a blond-haired girl hopped out of the back and ran toward her.

"Auntie!"

Melissa held her arms out and hugged the girl. "Oh my gosh! Look at you, Charlotte! You're so tall!"

Charlotte laughed. "You say that *every* time you see me. And you just saw me over Christmas."

"Well, it's true every time." Melissa hugged her niece again. If there was one benefit to living in Minnesota, it was that she lived close to family again. Charlotte was growing up way too fast, and she didn't want to miss it.

The car door closed, and Jeff and Eileen walked to the house. Jeff held the baby carrier. The newest member of their family, baby Eli, was wrapped in a cozy-looking crocheted blanket.

"Hey, sis," Jeff said.

"Hey. Come in. It's freezing." Melissa held the door open for them.

Jeff placed the sleeping baby on the couch, and Melissa couldn't help but lean forward to get a look at the little guy. His cheeks were rosy, and his

pouty lips twitched in his sleep. “Oh, he’s so precious. I want one.”

“You can babysit all you want,” Eileen said, and then laughed. “Good to see you, Melissa.”

“Hey, sweetie.” Melissa hugged her sister-in-law. “He’s adorable.”

“Except when he’s crying,” Charlotte said. “Or pooping.”

“I don’t know,” Eileen said. “I think he’s kind of cute when he’s making his poop face.”

Melissa leaned forward and squeezed his little socked-foot. “I think he’ll always be cute. Well, make yourself at home. Sorry I don’t have a lot of places to sit, but I can bring some more chairs out from the kitchen. You can hang your coats on the stand in the corner.”

Jeff walked around her living room. “So, this is your place, huh?”

“Yeah, this is it. Ignore the boxes in the corner. I haven’t had time to unpack everything yet.”

Jeff turned to her. “Again, I’m really sorry we couldn’t help you move in.”

“I already told you not to apologize. I handled it. It took the moving guys like an hour. Of course, I don’t have that much.” Melissa gestured to her sparsely decorated living room. She had a couch and a rug, but not much else. Not even a coffee table.

Eileen made herself comfortable on the sofa next to the baby. “We have some furniture in storage we could loan you.”

“Really? You don’t mind?”

“Not at all.”

Charlotte opened one of the boxes in the corner. “Auntie, I could help you unpack. I’m good at putting stuff away.”

Eileen smiled proudly. “She really is. She picks up all of Eli’s toys every night.”

“I would love the help. But first, how about you help me make some hot chocolate?”

“Yes!” Charlotte cheered.

They headed to the kitchen, and Jeff followed. As she grabbed the milk from the refrigerator, he leaned forward to whisper, “Is Tripp giving you any problems?”

“It’s an adjustment working with him, but I’m fine.” As fine as she could be working with her ex, anyway.

“If he bothers you, call me. Okay? I can take care of him.”

“I can’t reach the mugs,” Charlotte said, stretching up on her tiptoes to reach the open cabinet.

“I’m going to take a look around your house,” Jeff said.

Melissa grabbed the mugs and placed them on the counter. “There’s not much to see. It’s a small house. Pick any mug you want, Charlotte.”

Eileen stepped into the kitchen. She eyed the stove where Melissa placed a saucepan. “This looks pretty old.”

Melissa poured the milk into the pot and turned the burner on. “Yeah, everything in this house is old. But it works. For how long remains to be seen.”

Charlotte peeked into the pantry and grabbed a blue box from the shelf. “Found your hot chocolate.”

Melissa took the Swiss Miss. “Perfect.”

By the time the milk was heated, the baby had woken. Eileen tended to him while Charlotte helped in the kitchen.

The back door opened, and Jeff walked in. “Those back porch steps are rotted out and falling apart.”

“I know. The girl at the office said the owner plans to fix it.”

“From the looks of it, they’ve been like that for a long time. If they were going to fix it, why haven’t they already?”

Melissa poured the cocoa powder into a mug. “Well, I don’t think anyone has lived here in a while.”

“That’s no excuse. Someone could get hurt.”

“I’ll just avoid the back porch for now.”

“No, I’ll take care of it. I’ll run to the home improvement store. It’ll be fixed by this afternoon.” Jeff went to the living room and grabbed his keys from the counter.

Melissa followed him. “Jeff, that’s nice of you, but you don’t have to do that. I would hate for you to spend money and time fixing it when it’s not your responsibility. The leasing office will make sure it’s repaired.”

“When?” he asked.

Melissa shrugged. “I don’t know. They didn’t say exactly. I noted it on the property inspection checklist.”

Jeff shook his head. “Not good enough. I’ll fix it for you. Be back soon.” Without another word, he headed out the door.

Eileen looked up from the couch. “You might as well let him fix it. He will anyway.”

“Yeah.” In a way, Jeff reminded Melissa a lot of Tripp. Sometimes she would tell him not to do something, but he would do it anyway. Like the other night when he insisted on following her home.

A few minutes later, Eileen and Melissa were seated on the couch with hot chocolate and a dozing baby in Eileen’s arms. All he needed was a quick nurse and he was back to napping again.

On the floor, Charlotte had opened more boxes. “Want me to put your books on the shelf?”

“That would be great.”

“I’ll even put them in alphabetical order.” With more strength than her small frame appeared to have, Charlotte pushed the heavy box of books down the hallway.

“So, how’s the new job going?” Eileen asked. “I don’t have time to watch the news every night. Between getting dinner ready and taking care of this little guy, I sometimes forget to turn the television on. But from what I’ve seen, you’re doing a great job.”

“Thanks. I’m finally doing what I’ve always wanted to do. And since it’s the evening news, I don’t have to get up at an ungodly hour in the morning to do it.”

Eileen smiled. “That’s great. I long for the day I can sleep in.” She looked down at the baby. “Eli’s a morning riser, just like his dad.”

“When I was at Channel 4, my schedule always changed. Sometimes they needed me in the morning, and other times they needed me at night. It just depended on when the news was happening. It’s nice to finally have a set schedule. Of course, the job’s not all sunshine and rainbows.”

Eileen’s smile fell. “Jeff told me the meteorologist is your ex-boyfriend.”

Melissa nodded. “Of all the news stations in Minnesota, I had to work at the same one as him. What are the odds?”

“Jeff was about to blow a gasket. I couldn’t figure out what he was so bent out of shape over until he calmed down and told me who he was. You want to talk about it? I’ve had some unfortunate encounters with ex-boyfriends before. Maybe I can offer some advice, or at least an ear.”

“Did Jeff tell you what he did to me?”

Eileen nodded. “He left you at the altar.”

“Well, courthouse, but yeah. Kit was the one who introduced us. They had classes together at OU, and she thought Tripp and I would hit it off. And she was right. Next thing I knew, I was driving to Oklahoma every weekend

to see him. I just assumed that when he got that job in Iowa, he wanted me to join him.”

“But he didn’t feel the same way.”

“No, and he waited until we were minutes away from tying the knot to let me know.”

Eileen shook her head. “What an ass.”

“Jeff said it was a good thing he was moving eight hours away, otherwise he would have beaten him up.”

Charlotte returned to the living room holding a stack of paperback books. “Who did Daddy want to beat up?”

“Just someone who made me sad,” Melissa answered, choosing not to give all the details to her niece. “What do you have there?”

“Can I read these books?”

Melissa looked at the titles she was holding. If they had been her *Little House on the Prairie* collection, she wouldn’t have hesitated. These books, however, were romance novels. “I think those are a bit too advanced for you.”

“I’m the best reader in my class. And I read the books Mom writes.”

Eileen took one of the paperbacks. “Let me read them first, and then I’ll decide if they’re appropriate for you.”

Charlotte placed the books on the couch. “Fine,” she said with a little sass before marching back down the hallway.

Melissa couldn’t help but smile. “It’s like you already have a teenager. She has an attitude and all.”

“She’s only eight. And apparently, the teen years are worse.”

“Does she really read your books?”

Eileen shrugged. “Sometimes, but I write sweet romance, and somehow, I don’t think this is the same judging from the buff guy on the cover.”

Melissa laughed. “No, it’s definitely not.”

“So, back to our discussion about Tripp. How are you handling working with him?”

“I’m not. I hide out in my office most of the time and try to avoid him. But I know I can’t do that forever. He wants me to have dinner with him, but it’s hard to be in the same room with him. He hurt me so badly.”

The baby whimpered, and Eileen rocked and made shushing noises. “Is there any hope for reconciliation?”

Melissa shook her head. “No, I don’t think so.”



“Really? Because it’s obvious you’re still in love with him. If you felt nothing, then he wouldn’t be getting to you like this.”

“It doesn’t matter how I feel. He made it clear that he didn’t want to get married, and I can’t trust him again.”

“So what are you going to do?”

An idea popped into her mind, and Melissa grinned. “I’m going to put Tripp behind me and move on. Kit said I should ask you to help me with online dating, since it’s how you met Jeff. Will you?”

A slow smile spread across Eileen’s face. “Of course. Who better to help you find love than a romance writer?”



BY THE TIME the family left, it was dark. Melissa’s back porch had brand new steps, her book collection was neatly put away, and she had a few less boxes to unpack.

She made a simple dinner of spaghetti and sat at her rickety kitchen table. She’d had it since she moved into her first apartment, and it hadn’t wobbled until the day she and Tripp had sex on it.

“I’m getting rid of this table,” she said to herself. Jeff said he could bring the furniture from their storage unit next weekend. Melissa would be sure to ask if there was a table.

After dinner, Melissa poured herself a glass of wine and went to the couch with her phone. She and Eileen, with the input of Charlotte, had created her dating profile. This particular dating site made you fill out a questionnaire, as it only matched people who were potentially compatible. Eileen swore by the site. It was how she met Jeff.

There hadn’t been time to browse through her matches earlier. Once Jeff returned and got to hammering, the baby woke up, and Melissa couldn’t concentrate. Now, she finally had a chance to look.

“Here goes nothing.” Melissa hit search and waited for her matches to load. You could sort them from the most compatible to the least, depending on their answers from the survey. Melissa didn’t have time for guys who played games or those who were only looking for a hookup. Best to go ahead and find out who was best suited for her.

She took a sip from her glass. When her matches loaded, she nearly

choked. Her top match was none other than *MakeItSnow1227*. Tripp Bartlett was in the picture. Even when she was trying to move on, she couldn't avoid him.

"I don't believe this," she said, clicking onto his profile, more out of curiosity than anything else.

Tripp's picture was recent, and the job description stated he was the Channel 12 meteorologist. It didn't make sense. How could she be matched with someone who wasn't serious about marriage?

She read his profile for clues, but Tripp had never been good at expressing himself. The whole profile was riddled with cliches. He was looking for a "partner in crime" and he "loved to laugh and have a good time." Him and every other guy on this site. No one put down that they loved to cry.

She backed out of his profile, clicked the "x" to remove him from the list, and moved on to Bachelor #2.

This guy had a great smile and looked handsome in a sports jacket. His occupation was listed as a comedian, which made her pause. She liked funny guys, so on the one hand, it was a plus. On the other hand, he struck her as the type who might be between gigs. The last line of his profile stated he still lived with his mother.

"Next," Melissa said. She moved on and found a handsome man dressed for success. "Well hello, Mr. Business Suit."

His name was Brett, and he was a lawyer. She read through his profile and saw that he enjoyed cozy evenings by the fire and wine tastings.

Melissa raised her wine glass. "Me too, Mr. Business Suit. Or should I say, Mr. Attorney at Law?" She giggled.

Her phone made a sound, indicating she had a message. She squealed when she saw it was Brett. After a few pleasant exchanges, they agreed to go out tomorrow.

Just as she was about to call it a night, her phone dinged again. Another message. Maybe she'd have two dates tomorrow. But her smile fell when she saw who the sender was.

*Looks like we're a perfect match. Can't argue with fate. -Tripp*

She didn't bother to respond. Instead, she deleted the message, then smashed the block button on his profile. There would be no more messages from Tripp.

"Take that, Tripp," Melissa said as she took a final sip of her wine.

**M**elissa planned to meet Brett for coffee, which seemed like a safe bet. If the date went sour, she wouldn't feel obligated to stay longer. On the other hand, if the date went well, they had all afternoon to talk.

All the close parking spaces at Starbucks were occupied when she arrived. Of course. Everyone wanted to park near the entrance. She settled for a space near the drive-thru and braced herself for the slushy snow puddles in the lot.

No one matching Brett's description was inside, and Melissa relaxed. At least she'd have a few minutes to compose herself. It had been a while since she'd been on a date, and she felt a bit rusty.

She put in her order with the barista and took off her hat, gloves, and scarf. She didn't want Brett to tease her about being bundled up. He'd already made a similar comment in their chat about one of her photos.

"Melissa?"

She turned and saw a man standing behind her. It was Brett, but he looked older than his picture. Eileen had warned her that guys didn't always look like their photographs, but she decided not to hold it against him. She'd put up a few older pictures herself.

"Hi, Brett. Nice to finally see you in person."

The corner of his mouth turned upward, and he looked her up and down, lingering on her chest for a few seconds longer than Melissa liked. "And it's nice to finally see you. The pictures on your profile don't do you justice."

The compliment would have been flattering, but already, Melissa was getting creepy vibes. For one, his smile was more leering, not friendly. And

two, his eyes kept wandering. She wanted to tell him that her face wasn't at her chest.

Shortly after, they were seated at one of the tables near the front. Brett had wanted to sit in the back corner, but Melissa said she preferred the window. What she didn't say was that she wanted to be where people could see them.

"So, where are you a lawyer?" Melissa figured she'd make idle chit chat until she finished her coffee and could get the hell out of here.

"At Dewey, Cheatem, and Howe." He laughed at his joke. "Just kidding. I work with my father at his law firm. Peterson & Associates, Attorney at Law."

More like Skeezy and Associates, Melissa thought.

"What did you say you did again? News reporter or something?"

Melissa put on a smile. At least they could talk about something she enjoyed. "I'm the evening anchor at WLMN. It's been my dream for a long time."

"Well, you're not going to be able to do that forever, you know."

Melissa frowned, unsure where he was going with this. "What do you mean?"

"You said you wanted kids, right?"

Melissa nodded. "Yeah."

"A news anchor is a terrible job for a mother. If you take the night shift, you won't be home to cook dinner or tuck the children into bed. If you take the morning shift, you won't be there to wake them up and get them ready for school."

She wanted to point out that a lawyer spent a lot of time in court, but held her tongue. "Well, any job a parent has takes time away from their family. But hopefully, I'll have a supportive partner who'll help me with the children and mealtimes."

Brett shook his head. "No, cooking is women's work."

Melissa was momentarily speechless. This guy was definitely not the man she thought he was from the profile. And how dare he assume that women belonged in the kitchen. This wasn't 1950.

"I think it's sexy when a man cooks," she said, the perfect comeback.

Brett didn't so much as blink. "Male professional chefs are fine, but I don't cook. That's the wife's job. You can cook, right?"

"What if I said no?" Personally, she enjoyed cooking, but she didn't want

to make a meal for his pompous ass.

“Well, a house cook is always an option. Look, if you were with me, you wouldn’t have to work. I make a lot of money. You could be a stay-at-home mom. Wouldn’t you like that?”

Melissa couldn’t believe this guy. “There’s nothing wrong with being a stay-at-home mom, but that’s not what I want.”

Brett gave her a smile. “I suppose we could hire a nanny then.”

She didn’t like the assumption that they somehow had a future together, because Melissa had already made up her mind that he was a no. And she was eager for this date to be over.



TRIPP LOADED his groceries into the backseat of his truck. The nice thing about Minnesota winters was that he didn’t need to rush home to put them away. The milk would stay cold, and he could run other errands.

As he got back into his truck, a notification came up on his phone. His coffee order was ready. Perfect timing. He needed a caffeine fix, and Starbucks was just across the street,

On the way to get his coffee, Daniel called.

“Busy’s mad again,” Daniel said when Tripp answered. “We had a charity event last night, and she thinks I was flirting with the waitress.”

“Were you?” It hadn’t been the first time Daniel cheated on his wife, and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

“Nice, Tripp. I call my brother to vent, and you want to get on my case too.”

“Sorry, but you haven’t always been faithful to her.”

Daniel sighed. “I know. I’m trying to make it up to her. I’m thinking we need a vacation. You know, to rekindle our relationship. Maybe Turks and Caicos. You think you could watch the kids while we’re gone?”

Tripp caught the green light at the intersection and turned into the parking lot. “For the weekend, sure, but no longer than that. I’ve got work. Can’t you get your nanny to watch them?”

“Busy fired the nanny. Said she was too pretty and that I might be attracted to her.”

Tripp shook his head in annoyance. Leave it to his sister-in-law to fire a

nanny because she was too attractive. “Well, get another nanny, preferably one that’s a grandmother. Look, you know I love Aidan and Riley, but you’re going to have to get someone else.”

“You’re so lucky, Tripp. You don’t have to think about anyone else except your dogs. You’re smart for not getting married. Don’t ever get married.”

It was true that Tripp didn’t want the life his brother had. No one in his family, save for his grandparents, had had a successful marriage. His father was twice divorced. His mother was currently on husband number five and living in Malibu. He and Daniel had a bet on how long it would last.

But there were times when Tripp felt lonely. His dogs were about the only female companionship he had these days. He missed the lazy weekends in bed with Melissa, and wondered what it would be like to have her in bed with him every weekend.

“I guess I’ll see if Busy’s parents can watch them,” Daniel said.

As Tripp waited behind a Subaru in the drive-thru, he spotted a familiar silver Honda with Kansas plates. He couldn’t believe his luck.

“Daniel, I’ve got to go. Good luck with Busy.” He hung up and got out of line. If Melissa was here, he was going inside.

A wall of heat hit him as he walked through the door. He took off his hat and scanned the room for Melissa. He found her, but to his surprise, she was with another guy. Damn. Of course, that dating site.

The gentleman thing to do would be to leave Melissa alone and let her have her date in peace. But Tripp knew this guy. He was Brett Peterson, and he was an asshole. He used to live down the street from his grandparents, and all summer long, he’d bullied Tripp and Daniel. When they were older, he had a reputation for harassing women. It was even rumored he drugged a girl at a lake party, but it was never proven.

And there was no way Tripp was letting him hurt Melissa.

He grabbed his coffee and settled for a table in the back. Melissa’s back was to him, and she hadn’t noticed he was there. He wasn’t going to leave until he was sure she was okay.



TWENTY MINUTES WAS about all Melissa could take of Brett Peterson. The

conversation had been mostly one-sided, with Brett informing her of what *he* wanted in a relationship. He did want marriage and kids, but Melissa wasn't about to fulfill his fantasy of a 1950s housewife barefoot and pregnant. Too bad she wasted money on a coffee and drove out in the cold for nothing.

Hoping Brett would get the hint, Melissa reached for her hat. "Well, I'm afraid I have to go. I'm having dinner at my brother's house." It was a lie, but she needed some sort of excuse.

"Blow your family off," Brett said. "There's a wine tasting tonight. You said you love those. Why don't you join me?"

"I don't think so."

He reached across the table for her hand. "Come on, it'll be fun. And afterwards, we can go back to my place. I have a stunning view of the lake." Brett's thumb rubbed the back of her hand.

Melissa slowly moved her hand away, reeling from his unwelcomed touch. "Brett, I don't think we're a good match."

"That's where you're wrong. The site paired us up. We want the same things, and I think you're incredibly sexy."

Melissa stood and reached for her purse. "I really have to go."

Brett moved to block her. "Melissa, please. I know I come on a little strong, but can you give me a chance? I think we could have a lot of fun."

He extended his arm and touched her hand again. Melissa wiggled away.

"She said she wasn't interested."

Melissa turned to see Tripp standing there. For the first time this week, she was actually glad to see him.

"Well, if it isn't the geeky weather nerd, Tripp Bartlett," Brett said.

Tripp wasn't as muscular as Brett, but he was taller. He moved closer until he was in Brett's face. "Leave her alone. She said no."

"I'm not leaving unless Melissa wants me to go." Brett gave her a look that almost dared her to say no.

"I'd like for you to leave."

Brett reached for his coat. "All right. I'll go. By the way, I lied about your pictures. You looked hotter online."

He turned and headed for the door. Melissa breathed a sigh of relief, thankful that he was gone.

"He's wrong. You're way hotter in person." Tripp gave her a smile, and for once, Melissa didn't feel like clawing his eyes out.

"Thanks for the save." She hated having to thank Tripp for coming to her

aide, but she was glad he'd been there.

"No problem. Look, I'm not trying to be the jealous ex-boyfriend, but I know that guy, and you don't want to get involved with him. He's a real ass."

"Don't worry, I got that message loud and clear. What are you doing here? You haven't been following me, have you?"

Tripp held his hand up. "I swear, I wasn't following you. I came here for a coffee, saw you were with Brett, and decided to hang back. I'm glad I did. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She thought of the time that a guy hit on her at a bar, and how Tripp came to her rescue then too. He'd always been the protective type, something that seemed to be a rarity in the guys she dated lately. "I'm just a little annoyed that I wasted my time on him." Even the conversation had been lame.

"Well, I won't keep you," Tripp said. "I know you need to get to your brother's house."

"That was a lie. I just wanted an excuse to end the date."

Tripp nodded. "Gotcha. Well, I guess I'll see you at work tomorrow. Have a good night."

He headed for the door, and Melissa felt a pang of guilt. He'd come to her rescue, been nothing but a gentleman, and here she was still treating him like crap. Maybe it was time she quit avoiding him. "Tripp, wait."

He turned around. "Yeah?"

"Want to have another coffee?"

The corner of his mouth lifted. "I would love another one. And I'll pay for yours. What do you want? You still drink those vanilla lattes with whipped cream?"

Melissa laughed softly. "Yes. Me and my sweet tooth."

A few minutes later, he came back to the table with two cups of coffee. Her heart raced. Maybe it was the caffeine, or maybe it was just being near Tripp. A part of her almost hoped that they could get back what they used to have. If only she could trust him again.

"One vanilla latte with whip." Tripp pushed the cup toward her.

"Thanks. I'm probably not going to be able to sleep tonight."

"Good thing we don't have to be at work so early in the morning, huh?"

Melissa took a sip and felt the warm liquid go down her throat. A blast of cold air blew over them when a customer walked in, and the coffee helped ward off the chill. "Okay, you finally have my undivided attention. What do



you want to say to me?”

“I want to apologize. Again. It feels so inadequate to simply say ‘I’m sorry,’ but I know I screwed things up with us. I’m trying to make it up to you.”

“It really hurt when you left me. Why did you do that?”

“It wasn’t that I didn’t love you. It was because I was a coward. The thing is, I never actually proposed. When I got that job in Iowa, you said getting married was the next logical step, and I wasn’t mentally there yet. I thought we could continue our long-distance thing. But you surprised me when you said you wanted to come with me.”

Melissa realized that what Tripp said was right. She never asked Tripp what he wanted, and there had never been a proposal. But it hadn’t occurred to her that he didn’t want the same thing. “I guess I did sort of steamroll you. But you should have told me you didn’t want to go through with it. You shouldn’t have waited until the last minute.”

“I know, and that was shitty of me. Things happened so fast, and I didn’t want to upset you. I almost said something, but by then, you’d already applied for the marriage license and gotten a dress. For a while, I thought I could go through with it. But that day, I woke up and felt dread. And that’s no way to start a marriage. Everything was rushed, and getting married would have been a mistake.”

Melissa sighed. “I have to admit, it wasn’t my dream to have a courthouse wedding. I just loved you, Tripp. I wanted to be with you. Back then, Jeff had started talking to Eileen online, and I was worried he’d fall in love and move to Minnesota. And I didn’t know then if Kit was moving back to Kansas. I didn’t want to be alone. So that’s why I rushed things. I’m sorry.”

Tripp reached across the table and touched her hand. It wasn’t skeezy like when Brett had done the same thing earlier. “Melissa, you have absolutely nothing to apologize for. This is all me, and I’m sorry. I want to tell you something.”

“I’m listening.”

“After our breakup, I was miserable. I missed how we’d spend the weekends watching television and sleeping in bed.”

Melissa grinned. “We didn’t do much sleeping.”

Tripp laughed. “No, I guess not. The point is, I never really felt a connection with anyone like I did with you. I missed that, but I knew I had blown it. I didn’t think I’d ever get a second chance with you. And now,

you're here. It's fate, Melissa. We're meant to be together."

Melissa wanted to believe him, but the pain of him walking out on their wedding was still a sore spot for her. She'd never thought Tripp could hurt her that way, but he did. How could she be sure he wouldn't hurt her like that again?

"Say something," Tripp said. "Please tell me you feel the same way."

"You told me when we broke up that you didn't want to get married, and that you never wanted to get married. I can't be with you if you're not willing to make a commitment to me."

Tripp squeezed her hand. "I do want to make a commitment. But I'm going to be honest—I don't want to get married. At least not right now. But I do want us to be together. What do you say? Will you give me a second chance?"

Melissa thought about it. It was what she wanted, but what if Tripp never wanted to get married? Melissa wanted a big wedding and to start a family. She didn't want to be waiting for Tripp to put a ring on her finger. "The thing is, I don't trust you to not break my heart again. And I can't go through that a second time."

Tripp was quiet for a moment. He took a sip of his coffee, as if he was mulling over what Melissa had said. Finally, he put his cup down and nodded. "Fair enough. I need to earn your trust back. I need to prove to you that I've changed. Give me until Valentine's Day."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a little over a month away, right? Give me until February 14th to prove to you that we're still good together."

"And how do you plan to do that?"

"By us spending time together. Look, we might as well get used to being around each other again. We're coworkers now. If nothing else, we need to at least be friends. So you give me a month, and when it's Valentine's Day, you can decide if you want to give us a second chance."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll leave you alone."

Melissa thought the plan was a good one. It would give her some time to see if Tripp had truly changed. But there was only one problem. It'd be so easy to fall back in love with him, and there was no way Melissa was letting her guard down. Tripp had to prove his commitment to her first. "I have a condition."

“Name it.”

“I’ll spend time with you, but there will be no hand holding, no cuddling, no kissing, and definitely no sex. That’ll just muddy the waters, you know? I’d rather make this decision with a clear head.”

“We can take things slow if you want, but I would definitely not be opposed to any of that, just so you know.” He winked at her.

Melissa took a sip of her latte, but didn’t feel like finishing it. A nervous feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Was she making a mistake? She wanted to believe Tripp was being sincere, but she had believed the same when he agreed to marry her. What if he was just saying what she wanted to hear?

“I have an idea,” Tripp said, interrupting her thoughts. “I know you hate winter, so I’m going to spend the month showing you that Minnesota isn’t a bad place to live, even with it being cold for most of the year. Who knows? After this, you might like the snow after all.”

“If you think you’re going to get me on skis, you’re crazy.”

Tripp laughed. “Minnesota isn’t the best state for skiing, and I’m not great at that myself, but we can do other things.”

“Like what? Building a snowman?”

“Even better than that. And we can start tomorrow.” He looked at his watch and frowned. “I actually should go. I’ve got a few more errands to run.” He grabbed his coffee cup and reached for Melissa’s. “Done with this? I’ll toss it.”

Melissa nodded and stood to put her coat on. “What are we doing tomorrow?”

Tripp smiled as he tugged on his hat. “I don’t know yet, but dress warmly. I’ll pick you up at ten.”

She zipped up her coat, bracing herself for the frigid temperatures outside. She wished she could say she was looking forward to it, though it wasn’t just the cold she was dreading. That nagging feeling came back.

She thought of the pictures of her and Tripp she kept in a box, the ones she never looked at. She’d been unable to get rid of them, her heart not quite ready to let go.

And now, she’d be spending time with Tripp. She was putting her heart out on the line. She just hoped it wouldn’t be broken again.



“HOW WAS YOUR DATE?” Kit asked Melissa on the phone that night.

Melissa walked into the kitchen dressed in her yoga pants and oversized house sweater. “My date was an ass, and then Tripp showed up. He told him to take a hike, which I was actually grateful for. And then, I might have made a stupid mistake.”

“You slept with Tripp,” Kit guessed.

“*What?* No! Not that stupid.”

“You forgave him?”

On the stove, Melissa had some soup simmering. She grabbed a ladle and gave it a stir. “Not quite. Tripp wants to prove to me that he’s changed, but I don’t know if I can trust him yet. So, we made an agreement of sorts.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m giving him until Valentine’s Day. We’ll spend time together, and when the day comes, if I want to give him a second chance, we’ll get back together. And if I don’t, he promises to leave me alone. But no sex or kissing or anything like that. Not until I’ve made my decision.”

“What’s stupid about that? I think it’s a great idea.”

Melissa took out a bowl from the cabinet. “Because I still don’t know if Tripp will ever want to get married.”

“Does marriage really matter if he still wants to be with you?”

“Of course, it matters. If he isn’t willing to vow that he’ll love me forever before everyone, then I have a problem with that.” Melissa sighed. “What if I fall back in love with him, and he leaves me at the altar again?”

“I don’t think you ever fell out of love with him to be honest.”

Melissa pondered that statement. Kit was right. She had been angry at Tripp, sure. Depressed after their breakup, yeah. But even when she was mad at him, a part of her heart was unwilling to let him go. Just like the photographs of Tripp she kept in a box. She couldn’t throw them away. “I suppose you’re right. I just don’t want to get my heart stomped on again.”

“Ryder gave me a second chance after I hurt him. I was so stupid. But we worked things out, and we grew stronger in the end. And Tripp isn’t all bad. I mean, yeah, he’s got your classic male fear of commitment, but he was a nice guy. I think you owe it to yourself to see if you’re still good together.”

The soup was ready, and Melissa’s stomach growled. She ladled some into her bowl. “I suppose. It’s just scary.”

“Maybe it’s like what Tripp said. Fate.”

Melissa cracked a smile. “I don’t know where this fate talk has come

from. Tripp used to be so cynical and felt like the world was against him.”

“Then I guess you should spend some time with him and see how he’s changed in the last ten years.”

“I hope it’s for the better,” Melissa said.

**M**elissa looked at the clock and groaned. It was 9:50, and Tripp said he'd be here at ten. She peeked out the window and looked for his truck. All she saw was a driveway full of snow with her poor little Accord covered.

Muttering a curse, she pulled on her winter gear and headed outside to grab the shovel. As she got to work, the cold air made her nose run. There was no tissue in her pocket, so she had to ignore it as she cleared the driveway. She hoped to finish before Tripp arrived, but she hadn't even made a dent in it before he pulled up to the curb.

Tripp got out of his truck. "You're doing that wrong."

Melissa narrowed her eyes. "I'm shoveling snow. How many different ways can you do it?"

He held his hand out. "Let me show you." He took the shovel and stood in the middle of the driveway. "What you want to do is bend your knees and gently push. You don't want to twist your body when you lift the shovel. That's how you'll injure your back." As he talked, he demonstrated his technique. He made it look easy. "Then when you're ready to shovel, just get a little at a time. Snow is heavy, and there's no need to strain your back while lifting a heavy load. Now, you try."

He handed her back the shovel, and Melissa tried to copy how Tripp had done it. She had to admit that it was easier Tripp's way.

"See the difference?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"You need a snow blower. Especially for those days when you have like a

foot of it.”

“They’re expensive.”

“Yeah, but they get the job done in half the time. Why don’t you go inside? I’ll finish clearing this, and then we can go.”

She hated needing help, especially from her ex. But he offered, and damn, it was cold. A chilly wind made her teeth chatter. “Okay, thanks. I’m already tired of winter.”

Tripp took the snow shovel. “Welcome to Minnesota. You know what they say about our state, right?”

“No, what’s that?”

“We have four seasons. Almost winter, winter, still winter, and road construction. That last one is technically summer, but that’s also when the ice melts enough for the DOT to repair the roads.”

“Joy,” Melissa said sarcastically.

Not long after, Melissa heard footsteps on the porch, and Tripp let himself in. “Driveway is clear, and I knocked the snow off your car too.”

“Thanks again.”

“Really, it was no problem. So, are you ready? We should go before it gets too crowded.”

She was still bundled up. It took too damn long to take off all the layers just to put them back on minutes later. “Yep, I’m ready.” She followed Tripp outside and locked her door. “Are you going to tell me what we’re doing now?”

They reached his truck, and Tripp pulled out something from the bed. It was a giant blue sled. “We’re going sledding.”

“Sledding? What are we, eight?”

“Sledding is a fun activity for all ages. And there’s a great spot in the park for it. Don’t you like sledding?”

“I’ve never been sledding.”

Tripp looked at her as if he couldn’t believe it. “Never been sledding? How is that possible?”

“Because I grew up in Kansas. It’s a flat prairie.”

Tripp nodded. “Ahh. Right. Well here at least, we have hills. And you’re in for a treat.”

“I’m not sure about that. Careening down a snow-covered hill with the cold wind in my face doesn’t sound like my idea of a good time.”

“You’ll be fine. Come on, get in.” He opened the passenger door of the

truck, and Melissa climbed into the cab.

Tripp had left the truck running. The inside was warm and toasty with the heat blasting. She reached for her seatbelt, which was never easy to do with gloved hands.

The truck shook as Tripp got in and heaved the door closed. “Is it warm enough for you? I put the heater on high.”

Melissa nodded. “It’s perfect. Can’t we do something that doesn’t involve snow?”

“Don’t worry, if you absolutely hate it, we don’t have to do it again. But how can you know you don’t like it if you don’t at least try it? Remember that time we tried whitewater rafting?”

Melissa did remember. They’d gone for a weekend trip to Colorado because Tripp wanted to experience it. Melissa hadn’t been keen on the idea, but she enjoyed it anyway. “Okay, good point. Let’s go sledding.”



THE HILL LOOKED INTIMIDATING to Melissa. She wasn’t one to shy away from doing new things, but sliding down a snowy hill on a piece of plastic seemed like a very bad idea.

Tripp reached for a sled. “It’s fun. Trust me.”

“If you say so.” Her teeth chattered as her skin broke out into gooseflesh. She needed to invest in more layers.

Tripp set the blue sled down and handed her the red one. “Now, let’s go over how to sled.” He went over the basics of sledding—steering, braking, and bailing if she was about to hit something. It didn’t seem too difficult, but Melissa was still nervous.

“You ready?” Tripp asked.

“Will you go with me? I don’t want to go by myself.”

“I’ll be right next to you. Come on.”

Melissa followed him to the top of the hill. He got into position, and Melissa did the same.

“Now, we just push off and go,” Tripp said. “Want to do it on the count of three?”

*No*, Melissa thought. But instead, she nodded. “Count of three.”

Tripp smiled. “Okay, here we go. One. Two. Three!”



Melissa pushed off seconds after Tripp. She flew down the hill so fast that it felt as if she were on a ride at the county fair. She did in fact scream, but she wasn't scared. The ride was exhilarating, and seconds later, it was over.

Tripp sled into a pile of snow, while Melissa stopped just short of it. Tripp rolled off his sled and laughed. "Haven't done that in years! That was awesome!"

Melissa laughed with him. "I can't believe how fast we were going. How are we going to get back up?"

He pointed beyond the swings. "There are some stairs we can use. Want to go again?"

"Yes!"

Tripp laughed. "I knew you would." He offered his hand and pulled her up. She felt a rush of blood to her core at his touch and told her body to stop reacting. That was the problem—hanging out with Tripp reminded her of old times. They had never gone sledding, but they had done similar activities, like riding jet skis and water skiing. That had been just as exhilarating, and usually ended with them making love in the back of his truck.

Thank god it was too cold to get naked.

She grabbed her sled and followed Tripp back to the top.

"I'm still trying to catch my breath. It was scary, but at the same time, it was fun."

"And you can't go sledding in the summer. Only in the winter."

Melissa loosened her scarf. All the activity was actually warming her, which was an odd sensation when it was below thirty-two degrees. "Well, if you're determined to make me enjoy winter activities, I do have a request."

Tripp grinned. "Oh yeah? What are you up for? Ice fishing? Snowmobiling? You don't want to try snowboarding, do you?"

"Snowboarding? God, no. I was thinking we could go ice skating. As much as I hate winter, I do enjoy that. And when we were dating, you would never go with me to the skating rink."

"That's because I..." Tripp muttered something unintelligible.

Melissa cupped her hand around her ear. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"I can't skate, okay? There, I said it."

"Are you kidding me? How can you grow up in Minnesota and not know how to ice skate? Don't you Minnesotans love to play hockey?"

"Daniel was the hockey player in the family."

“Well, I’m not experienced in all things winter, but I’m willing to give things a try. And if I’m going to do all of these winter time activities that you enjoy, then it’s only fair that you do something I enjoy too.”

Tripp sighed. “Fine. You’re right. We’ll go ice skating. How about tomorrow?”

Melissa smiled. “That works. I can’t wait to see you out on the ice.”

“Don’t get too excited. It’s pretty sad watching me out there.”

They reached the top of the hill, and Tripp held up his sled. “Ready to go again?”

Melissa was already getting her sled into position. “Ready when you are.”



AFTER THE FIVE O’CLOCK NEWSCAST, Tripp found Lance in the break room. Tripp shoved his phone in his face.

“Look at this. I’m canceling my free trial of this dating app.” Tripp looked at his phone. “Are you sure you want to cancel? Oh yes, I’m sure.” He pushed the cancel button. “Oh, look at that, they’re sorry to see me go, but they hope this means I’ve found a match.”

Lance put a quarter into the vending machine. “You’re in a good mood. Did Melissa forgive you over the weekend?”

“In a way. We’re going to take some time to feel things out. I’ve asked her to give me until Valentine’s Day to prove to her that we’re still good together.”

“Aww, look at you being all romantic.” Lance made his snack selection and his barbecue chips fell. “Back together by Valentine’s Day.”

“That’s the plan.”

Lance opened the bag and offered Tripp a chip. “And if she decides she doesn’t want to be with you?”

Tripp took a chip. “Not going to happen. We’re meant to be together. It’s fate, bro. Fate.” He popped the chip into his mouth.

“You and your fate talk again. So, what are you going to do? Date again? See if there’s still a spark?”

The smell of Lance’s barbecue chips made him crave his own. He dug out his wallet. “I’m going to show Melissa that winter in Minnesota can be fun. We went sledding this morning. She loved it.”

“And tomorrow, we’re going ice skating.”

Tripp turned his head at Melissa’s voice. How long had she been standing there?

Lance grinned. “Wait a second. You mean to tell me you actually convinced this guy to get out on the ice? He can’t skate.”

“I’m trying out his favorite winter activities, so it’s only fair that he tries out one of mine.” Melissa gave Tripp a look as if she dared him to back out of it.

“What time are you going?” Lance asked. “Because I think I’d pay money to see Tripp fall on his ass.”

Lance and Melissa laughed at his expense, but Tripp didn’t let it bother him. “Fine, you go ahead and laugh, but we’re going to have a good time.” He smiled at Melissa. “Just you wait and see.”



TRIPP USUALLY STOOD at the anchor desk while they wrapped up the newscast. This was the part Tripp enjoyed the best. He got to be next to Melissa.

The camera wasn’t on him at the moment, so Tripp watched her report on the last story of the evening. A local man in the area had come up with a creative activity to do with his kids—building an igloo.

“That looks way too cold for me,” Melissa said to Bob with a laugh.

“I think it’s perfect,” Bob said. “I love the cold.”

Melissa glanced at Tripp. “Speaking of chilly temperatures, let’s get one last check on your weather. What’s it looking like for tonight, Tripp?”

“You’re going to want to bundle up with that Alberta Clipper making its way through our area. Fortunately, it’s a fast moving system, so snowfall accumulations will be minimal. But regardless, temperatures are going to plummet to below zero tonight. So stay warm. Especially you, Melissa. I know you’re not a fan of cold weather.”

“No, definitely not. I’ll be sleeping under my electric blanket tonight.”

Tripp wanted to say he wished he could join her under that blanket, but he wasn’t about to lose his job over a comment like that. On live television, no less. And with his boss watching.

Melissa smiled at the camera. “All right, that’s going to do it for us. From

all of us at WLMN 12, have a good night.”

“Good night,” Bob said.

Tripp gave a nod at the camera. “So long.”

“And we’re clear,” someone called out.

Tripp relaxed when the camera was no longer on him. He waited for Bob to walk away before saying something to Melissa.

“Going to be cold tonight.”

Melissa gathered her papers. “I know. You just did a whole news segment on it.”

“Remember that time you came to see me, and the temperature dropped forty degrees?”

“Oh my god, I was so cold. I wished you had told me to bring a sweater.”

“I just assumed everyone paid attention to the weather report like I did. But you weren’t cold—not for long, anyway. Remember you started calling me *The Human Furnace*? You said I was way better than an electric blanket. Just thought I’d remind you of that.”

Melissa’s face turned red, which had been his goal. If he reminded her of the good times they used to have, perhaps he could convince her that they could still have fun.

“I’ll pick you up at nine-thirty,” he said, then left before Melissa had time to respond.



ONLY ONE OTHER person was at the skating rink the next morning. Melissa was grateful for the quiet. Tripp said he was grateful he didn’t have much of an audience. It was freezing, of course, but Melissa did her best to ignore it and move her body. Soon enough, she felt herself warm up, and slid across the rink on one skate in a spiral.

From the sidelines, Tripp clapped. “Nice! Do one of those spinning jumps next.”

“How about you stop watching and come join me?”

“Actually, I’m good on this bench. I’ll just observe you for a bit. Got to learn how you do it first.”

“Chicken. Can’t believe you’re passing up an opportunity to be in close proximity to me.”

“I’m up!” Tripp said, and he hobbled over. “But I’m warning you—I’m terrible.” He eased himself onto the ice, then promptly fell on his ass.

Melissa winced. “Are you okay?”

Tripp raised his hand. “I’m good.” When he attempted to stand, he fell again.

He didn’t appear to be hurt, so Melissa laughed. “You really are bad at this.”

“A little help?”

She skated over and extended her arm. When their gloved hands met, Melissa felt a rush of warmth underneath her coat, which was weird when it was freezing cold. He grabbed her hand tight and pulled himself up. Tripp always had strong hands, and for a moment, Melissa remembered those hands pulling her close to him.

She shook off the feeling and let go. “I guess you could hold on to the wall.”

A slow smile spread across his face. “I’d rather hold on to you.” He seized her hand again. “Let’s skate.”

It hadn’t been the easiest skating session. Tripp was unsteady, and every time he wobbled, he threatened to pull her down. Eventually, he would right himself, and they could go for a little while before Tripp stumbled again.

“Bend your knees and hold out your arms to keep yourself steady,” Melissa said.

“Like this?” Tripp lowered himself, lost his balance, and fell to the ice. He brought Melissa down with him.

For a moment, Melissa couldn’t move. The fall hadn’t hurt much, but she was more stunned than anything. Here she was, lying on top of him, and Tripp was so close that she could feel his hot breath on her cheek. The stupid part of her brain wanted him to kiss her. The logical part of her brain told her to get off him.

“I promise I didn’t do that on purpose,” Tripp said, but he had a sly grin on his face like maybe he had. “I like when you’re on top of me.”

Melissa wiggled out of his grasp and stood up. “Teaching you how to skate might be a lost cause.”

Tripp managed to stand up—on his own this time—and skated toward the stands. “I’m going to take a break.”

Melissa followed him. “How is it that you’re so bad at ice skating? You grew up in *freaking* Minnesota.”

Tripp fell into the seat. “Just never had the balance for it. See, I can’t even land gracefully.”

Melissa joined him on the bench. “If you practiced it enough, you’d be able to do it. I’ve seen you on water skis before, so I know you have good balance.”

Tripp took his knitted cap off and bunched it into his hands. “You want to know the real reason I never bothered with ice skating?”

There was a time when she thought she knew everything about Tripp, but he still had some secrets. “Tell me.”

He turned to look at her. “When I was a kid, Gramps cleared the snow on the lake and decided to teach me and Daniel how to ice skate. Our parents were there too, but they had to leave to catch a flight. They were going on vacation. I forget where. Europe, probably. Anyway, I hadn’t been on the ice for long when I slipped and fell back. Fractured my wrist. Dad had to take me to the emergency room, and we were there for hours. He didn’t say much, but I knew he was upset that his plans were ruined. I made him miss his flight.”

“What about your mother? How did she react?”

Tripp snorted. “My mother left for the airport. She wasn’t about to miss out on any of her vacation.”

“You don’t really talk about your mother much. You talk about her less than you do your father.”

“Because she was never around. My parents would argue all the time, and she’d get pissed about something and be gone for weeks. She wasn’t really the mothering type, you know?”

She didn’t know. Her mother had been kind and nurturing. And her father had been doting. She’d always been a daddy’s girl. “I’m sorry you had such a sucky childhood.”

Tripp shrugged. “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. But to answer your question, that’s why I never learned how to ice skate. It brings back a lot of bad memories.”

“I guess I’m fortunate. I have good memories of my parents. And it was my dad who taught me how to skate. My mom worked a lot of weekends since she was a nurse, so on Saturdays, Daddy would take me somewhere. We’d go bowling or out for ice cream. Sometimes he’d take me out on the lake. And one day, he took me to the ice rink that had just opened in town. He grew up in Wisconsin, so he knew a thing or two about ice skating.”

“I’m glad you have good memories of your parents. I know you miss

them.”

“Your life can change in an instant. One night, your parents leave for dinner and tell you not to stay up too late. Then at midnight, you have a cop knocking on your door telling you there’s been a tragic accident.” A tear rolled down her cheek, but she quickly wiped it away.

“I know it’s not the same, but my parents weren’t around a lot,” Tripp said. “Dad was always working. Mom was gone. A lot of times, it was just me and Daniel on our own.”

“I don’t know what I would have done if Jeff hadn’t been there. Can you imagine being twenty-three years old and having to take custody of your sixteen-year-old sister?”

Tripp shook his head. “No, but Jeff was way more mature in his twenties than I was.”

“Speaking of Jeff, he’s not thrilled that we’re working together.”

“Jeff and I never got along. No one was good enough for his little sister. But I’m going to try hard, Melissa. I’m going to work hard at gaining your trust back.”

He gazed at her with his hazel eyes. Melissa missed the way he would stare at her so intently. She almost wanted to kiss him, but stopped herself. “We don’t have to skate anymore if you don’t want to.” She stood and hobbled over to get her shoes on the nearby chair.

Tripp walked over to her. “No, I promised you a morning of ice skating. You’ll just have to help me. Think you can handle that?”

He held out his hand, and for the first time in forever, she willingly took it.



SHARON CALLED Melissa into her office that afternoon.

“Have a seat, Melissa,” Sharon said, indicating the seat across from her desk.

Meetings like this with her former boss never went well. Dread settled in her stomach. “Is everything okay?” She hoped Sharon hadn’t discovered Tripp was her ex-boyfriend. Maybe she was worried about them not getting along.

Sharon wheeled away from her computer and looked at Melissa. “Bob

won't be in today. He had a family emergency."

"Oh no. What kind of emergency? Or can you tell me?"

"His mother had a fall and is in the hospital. He drove down to Minneapolis to be with her."

"I hope she'll be okay."

"He says she'll be fine, but he needs to be there to help her until his brother gets back into town."

"That's a relief." It was also a relief this meeting had nothing to do with Tripp.

"Yes, it is, but with Bob away, it'll mean you're on your own tonight. And probably for the rest of the week. I can get Lance and Ashley to give you a break, but otherwise, it'll be a solocast. Do you think you can handle that?"

The idea made her anxious, but she smiled brightly. "Absolutely. I used to fill in at my old station when we were short-handed."

"Good, I'm happy to hear that. Well, I'll let you get to work. I know you have a busy night ahead."

Sharon turned her attention back to her computer, and Melissa took that as her cue to leave.

Out in the hall, Tripp was waiting for her. "What was all that about?"

"Bob's going to be out for a few days. His mom had a fall, but she'll be okay."

"That's good that she'll be all right. So, I guess it means it's all you tonight. Nervous?"

Melissa nodded as she made her way to her office. "A little, but I can handle it. She said Lance and Ashley could help."

Tripp stood in her office doorway as she sat at her desk. "Well, it's unfortunate that Bob is out, but I'm excited for you. What do they say? Break a leg?"

"That's for show business. I don't think the same applies to the news."

Tripp shrugged. "Well then, whatever they say, you'll do great. If you lose your train of thought or something messes up with the teleprompter, you can always have them go to me. I've got tons of weather updates to give."

Melissa smiled. "Thanks, Tripp. And thanks again for earlier. I had fun."

"Just wait until you see what I have planned for tomorrow."

"Do I need to dress in layers again?"

"Actually, I was thinking we could do something indoors. I want to take you somewhere for breakfast. Can I pick you up around eight? Or is that too



early?”

“Eight is fine.”

Tripp grinned. “Great. I’m looking forward to it. It’s been a while since you and I had breakfast.” He winked, and walked away.

Melissa was pretty sure that wink was to imply all the times they did have breakfast together, usually in bed. She was glad Tripp wasn’t around to see her blush.



IT WAS the last two minutes of the ten o’clock newscast, and things had been going well. Not once had Melissa looked at the wrong camera, flubbed a line, or otherwise made a fool of herself on live television.

But she was tired. She was so tired that all she could think about was going home and going to bed. Even though Lance and Ashley had done some of the weightlifting, she had worked hard. She really appreciated Bob and would be sure to tell him so when he returned.

“Wrap it up and go to the weather,” Mike said in her earpiece.

Melissa smiled at the camera and read the teleprompter. “Let’s get one last check of the weather with Tripp. Looks like we’ve got boned-chilling—I mean bone-chilling temperatures for overnight.”

A perfect solo newscast, and she had to mess up her line in the last two minutes. Her face grew hot, and the damn studio lights didn’t help.

She half-expected Tripp to laugh, but he just smiled and nodded. “That’s right, Melissa. We’ve got some bone-chilling temperatures on tap for tonight...”

She zoned out as Tripp gave the evening’s forecast, then missed her cue to sign off.

“Sign off,” Mike hissed in her ear.

“Thanks, Tripp. From all of us at WLMN, have a good night.”

”And stay warm,” Tripp added.

When it was over, she yanked off her earpiece and microphone.

“You did great,” Tripp said.

“What are you talking about? Those last two minutes were terrible. Did you see how I messed up my line? Boned-chilling temperatures? And then I got distracted and missed my cue. I hope Sharon doesn’t hold it against me.”

Tripp smiled. “Stop worrying. It happens to all of us. Back at my job in Iowa, I one time said temperatures were above frigid instead of freezing. No one cares to be honest. You’ll probably agonize over it, but the audience has already forgotten. They’ve either just turned the television off to go to bed or they’re watching the late show now.”

Melissa sighed. “I guess you’re right. Well, I’m going to go start my car, and then by the time I’m ready to leave, I hope it’s warm.”

“And not boned-chilling?” Tripp teased.

“You’re never going to let me live that one down, are you?”

Tripp laughed. “Not a chance. I’ll see you for breakfast tomorrow. Come hungry.” He smiled, then walked away.

Once again, she was reminded of the time they were together, and how breakfast had been their favorite meal of the day.

At least they would be fully clothed this time around.

Melissa awoke and stared at the clock. It was just after two, and she'd been having a sexy dream about her and Tripp. For some reason, they were making love outside in the snow, which Melissa would never do. Too damn cold. But Tripp felt warm, and somehow, it was okay. *The Human Furnace*. It was annoying that her subconscious hadn't gotten the message that Tripp was her ex-boyfriend. Sure, they were getting along better, but she still had until mid-February to decide if she wanted to give them a second chance.

Feeling parched, Melissa reached for her cup on the nightstand. Empty. Any other time, she'd let herself stay thirsty, but with the furnace working overtime, her skin was dry and she felt dehydrated. She needed some water.

She left the comfort of her bed, putting on her robe and shuffling to the cold kitchen, still half asleep. As she refilled her cup, she heard a squeaking noise.

This old house made all sorts of strange noises. She'd gotten used to the creaks and groans of the wood settling. This sound, however, was distinctly different, setting off alarm bells in her head.

She heard the squeak again, and her heart raced as she reached for the light switch. She had a suspicion of what was making the noise, but prayed she was wrong.

Light flooded the room as she flipped the switch. In the center of the tile floor, there was a beady-eyed rat.

Melissa let out a blood-curdling scream and fled the room. She locked herself in her bedroom, trying to calm her racing heart. There would be no

more sleep tonight—that was for certain.

“What the hell am I going to do?”

Just the thought of dealing with a rat made her squirm. Never had she wished for a cat as much as she did at this moment. She was going to have to call someone. An exterminator, for sure.

Unfortunately, it was two in the morning, and no exterminator would come right now. But she had to get the rat out of her house. She wouldn't be able to sleep until she did. Hell, she wouldn't be able to do *anything* until it was gone.

She grabbed her phone off the nightstand. She could call her brother, but he lived forty-five minutes away and had a two-month old infant.

Or, she could call Tripp.

Realizing the rat could be anywhere by now, Melissa crept her way back to the kitchen. The rat had moved, but not far. Melissa scurried to stand on top of the table and pulled up Tripp's contact. “Well, Tripp, if you want to be my boyfriend again, this would be a very boyfriend thing to help me with.”

She smashed the call button and prayed he would answer.



TRIPP BLINKED his eyes at the sound of the alarm. It seemed too dark for seven o'clock. He then noticed his phone was lit up. Not his alarm. Someone was calling him.

Probably his brother—drunk. Wouldn't be the first time Daniel had done that. He grabbed the phone and squinted at the screen.

It was Melissa.

Tripp's heart raced. He couldn't imagine Melissa calling him for any reason in the middle of the night—unless something was wrong. He immediately answered. “Melissa? Are you okay?”

“Oh, thank god you answered! I was worried I'd have to leave a voicemail.”

“What's the matter?”

“There's a rat in my house!”

Tripp let out the breath he'd been holding. Not a major crisis, thankfully. “A rat?”

“A rat! A giant, beady-eyed, long-tailed, filthy and disgusting, bubonic

plague-carrying rat!”

Tripp rubbed his eyes. “Are you sure about that last one?”

“Oh my god, he’s on the move! Can rats climb? I’m on the table. What should I do? Can you come over?”

Any other time, Tripp would jump at the chance to go over to Melissa’s. But it was two in the morning, and he’d been yanked out of a deep and blessedly quiet sleep. “Don’t you have some traps you can set?” He yawned.

“Tripp, please come get this rodent! I need you.”

Tripp snapped awake. Melissa needed him. This was his chance to prove he’d do anything for her. And he wasn’t going to let her down.

“I’ll be right over.”



TRIPP CARRIED a plastic bag full of rodent traps from his cabinets and headed to the porch. He could see the light was on, but when he knocked, no one came to the door. “Melissa? It’s me.”

His phone rang. He dug it out of his pocket and saw it was Melissa.

“The key’s under the doormat,” she said.

“Why can’t you come to the door?”

“Because I’m on the table, and I’m not coming down.”

Tripp stifled a laugh. He found the key and unlocked the door. “You really shouldn’t leave your house key under the mat. You know that’s the first place a thief is going to look.”

“Oh please, like a thief would think anything in this house is worth stealing.”

She had a point.

Stepping into the kitchen, he found her dressed in an oversized pink robe with flannel pajama pants. He wondered if she was wearing some sexy night shirt underneath. Back when they had been dating, she’d had a collection of those.

Relief washed over her face. “Thank god you’re here!”

“Where’s the rat?”

“He went behind the refrigerator and I haven’t seen him since.”

There was a large space between the wall and refrigerator. Tripp took a peek, but it was too dark to see anything. “Do you have a flashlight?”

“In the drawer next to the stove.”

Tripp looked again with the flashlight, but still didn't see the rodent. He banged on the side of the refrigerator, and when that didn't work, he reached for the broom and slid the handle under the appliance.

The rat ran out and made a beeline to the edge of the cabinet. Tripp followed it with the flashlight and smiled. “That's not a rat. It's just a big mouse.”

“Whatever it is, please get it out of my house!”

“Don't lose sight of it. I'll get these traps set. Do you have anything you can use for bait?”

“I have bread.” She pointed to the counter where a loaf of bread sat next to the toaster.

Tripp untwisted the bag tie. “You shouldn't keep this out in the open if you have a mouse problem. They'll chew through this bag in a heartbeat.”

“I've never lived in a place where I had to worry about mice eating my bread. Wait, are you saying that mice can climb?”

Tripp smiled. “Oh yeah, they can climb.”

Melissa moaned.

“Don't worry, we'll get rid of him.”

Melissa looked at the bag he brought. “What did you bring? Those little snap traps?”

“Yes, from my stash at home. Hopefully it'll kill it instantly. A little more humane than the glue traps. Luckily, I have different sizes. We'll just use the small ones since it's just a mouse.”

Melissa shuddered. “Oh god, I'm going to throw up.” She did indeed look pale.

“Why don't you go lie down or sit on the couch? I got this.”

“I'm not moving from this spot. I'm not about to have a rat run across my bare foot on my way to the living room.”

“It's a mouse.”

“Whatever!”

Tripp held back his laughter. “The chances of that happening are slim. You're much bigger than he is. He'd probably run away from you.”

“Oh, he's going behind the stove now! We'll never get him!”

“Relax, we'll coax him out. He's after food, and that's what we're giving him. It'll be his last meal, but he doesn't know that. Do you have anything sticky like peanut butter or Nutella? That would actually work better than

bread. That way, he can't be sneaky by snatching it without setting the trap off."

"I have peanut butter in the pantry. You really think that will attract him?"

Tripp found the container of Jif. "Oh yeah, mice love peanut butter. Put a little of this on the trap, and you'll catch that sucker and his friends in no time."

"*Friends?*"

Tripp grimaced. "Sorry, maybe I shouldn't have said that, but if you have one, you could have more."

Melissa looked like she was going to faint.

"Hey, don't worry. I know a good exterminator." He found a butter knife in Melissa's drawer and went to work at preparing the traps.

"I don't know how he got in. I'm so careful about keeping the door closed."

Tripp looked around the kitchen. "This is an old house, so there's bound to be some holes and spaces he can squeeze through."

"Like where?"

"Under the sink usually." He took a look. "Yeah, there's a big gap you've got here around the pipe. Places like that make it very easy for a mouse, or a rat, to enter your house. Do you have any steel wool to seal it?"

"Steel wool? What's that?"

"It seals up the cracks and crevices that rodents can crawl through. They can't chew through it. I'll pick you up some."

"He's still behind the stove, or at least, I haven't seen him come out."

"He will. These traps are ready."

He placed one trap between the refrigerator and wall and the other under the sink.

"Do you think it'll work?" Melissa asked.

"Oh yeah. But it might be best if we leave the room. If we're gone, he'll probably come out of his hiding place."

Melissa looked at the floor, and Tripp knew what she was thinking.

"Do you want me to carry you?"

She shot him a look. "No! I'm perfectly capable of walking myself. But could you make sure he doesn't run out and chase me?"

"He's not going to run after you, but if it'll make you feel better, I'll walk beside you."

He offered his hand and helped her off the table. He didn't have the chance to escort her, however, because Melissa sprinted to the living room.

She turned on the lamp as he walked into the room. She was on the couch with her legs tucked underneath her. Obviously, she had no intention of letting her feet touch the floor.

"What now?" she asked.

Tripp took the other end of the couch. "Now, we wait."

Melissa yawned and moved the couch cushion underneath her head. "God, I'm exhausted now. After that adrenaline burst, I'm drained."

"Go back to sleep. Here, wrap up." He took the blanket over the edge of the couch and handed it to her. She huddled underneath it.

"But what about the mouse? What if he comes into the living room and climbs onto the couch?"

"I'll keep guard."

"Really?"

He nodded. "Really. Close your eyes. You have to be on camera more than I do. Get some sleep so you don't wake up with puffy eyes."

Melissa smiled. "What do you know about puffy eyes?"

"Isn't that what you used to always say? If I kept you up all night, you'd have puffy eyes in the morning? You'd say that you needed your beauty rest to look good for the camera."

She nodded. "Thank god for the hair and makeup people."

"I don't think you have to worry about getting rest to make you beautiful, but it might make you feel better."

"Okay." She pulled the blanket up to her chin. "Tripp? Thanks for coming over. I'm sorry I had to call you over at this hour."

Tripp smiled. "It's no problem." It was the truth. He may have groaned and cursed on the drive over, but now he was glad to be here. He was spending time with Melissa, and he'd take any chance he could to be near her.

She closed her eyes, and he wished he could hold her in his arms like he used to. But that would go against Melissa's 'no cuddling' rule, so Tripp behaved and stayed on his end of the couch.

Sometime after four, Melissa was asleep, and Tripp felt himself nodding off. He'd promised to keep watch, but his eyelids were heavy.

A loud snap came from the kitchen, and Tripp smiled. The mouse had been caught. He should probably get up and take care of it, but he was tired.



And if he couldn't sleep with Melissa in his arms, this was the next best thing.

He grabbed the other end of the blanket, adjusted the cushion under head, and closed his eyes.



WHEN MELISSA OPENED HER EYES, it was morning. Or at least, later that morning. Sunlight filled the living room, but its warmth was deceptive. She pulled the blanket around her tighter.

A memory of last night rushed back to her, and Melissa sat up. The mouse! Had it been caught? And where was Tripp? Had he left?

She threw the blanket back and stepped on the hardwood, making it creak. As quietly as she could, Melissa peeked into the kitchen.

"He's gone," Tripp said.

Melissa put her hand over her heart. "You scared me. I didn't think you were still here."

"Sorry. You've probably had enough adrenaline this morning. It got caught in the trap and died instantly."

Melissa breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank god."

"I'm going to pick you up a few more of these traps, and I'll get some steel wool for you too."

At hearing those words, her relief was short-lived. "You really think I might have more than one mouse?"

"Hate to say it, but it's possible. But don't worry. I'll take care of it. Oh, and I've called Larry. He can come around noon. Is that okay?"

"Who's Larry?"

"My exterminator. Is that a good time?"

Melissa nodded. "The sooner, the better."

She noticed Tripp's gaze drifting to her chest and saw her robe was hanging open. All she had underneath was a thin shirt. Her nipples were probably poking out. "Great," she muttered and quickly covered herself.

Tripp grinned. "You know, I've seen you in your pajamas before."

"I should get dressed." She moved past him and headed into the bathroom.



TRIPP TOOK her to a restaurant she had driven past many times but had never ventured in. The place was cozy looking, and not busy at all. Melissa did enjoy slow-paced restaurants.

“What’s this, like a Mom and Pop joint?” she asked.

“Yeah. Alice owns the place. She was my grandmother’s friend. I try to pop in every now and then, but I haven’t been in a while.”

Inside, a big woman with a warm smile and a face creased with laugh lines walked over to them. “Tripp! This is a nice surprise!”

The woman pulled Tripp in for a hug. From the expression on Tripp’s face, Melissa wondered if she was hugging him a bit too hard. “Hi, Alice,” Tripp said in a strained voice.

The woman finally released him and stood back to look at him. “Look at you. Why haven’t you been to visit me lately?”

“Sorry, Alice. Been busy with the new job.”

Her eyes widened. “You started on the news channel already? What’s the latest weather report? Are we getting some snow?”

“We always get snow, Alice.”

Alice giggled. “Oh, I do love the snow! Makes it feel like Christmas for longer!”

Melissa could do without it, but she thought it would be rude to say so.

“And who is this lovely young woman?” Alice asked, looking at her.

Melissa blushed. *Young?* She didn’t feel that way, but she’d take the compliment. “I’m Melissa.”

“So lovely to meet you, dear,” Alice said, then turned back to Tripp. “I didn’t know you had a girlfriend, Tripp.”

*Girlfriend?* Melissa glanced at Tripp, waiting for him to correct her. They weren’t exactly back together yet.

“We met when I was in Oklahoma, and Melissa just moved to the area. We’re actually working together at the station. She’s the evening anchor.”

Alice’s face lit up. “Oh, how wonderful! Did you plan that?” She looked at Melissa.

Melissa shook her head. “No, just a coincidence.”

Tripp placed his hand on the small of her back, momentarily surprising her. “No, it was fate. We were meant to be together.”

Alice put a hand over her heart. “Oh, I love that! Well come, sit! Have a

look at the menu.”

For all the discomfort Melissa felt in the moment, a look at the menu made her smile. Everything looked good, and she had a hard time deciding what to get.

“You can’t go wrong,” Tripp said. “It’s all good. Best breakfast house in Winter Lake.”

They placed their orders, and Alice took their menus. “I’ll have that ready for you shortly. And it’s good to see you finally settled down, Tripp.”

Once Alice was gone, Melissa looked Tripp in the eyes. He was grinning. “You didn’t correct her. She thinks we’re together.”

“I know, but is it really so bad that she thinks we’re happy and in love? Alice is like family, and she just wants the best for me.”

Melissa sighed. “I guess it’s not a huge deal.”

“And hey, by Valentine’s Day, I think we really will be back together. Come to think of it, that’s a special day for us. Wouldn’t it be nice to be reunited on the anniversary of the first time we were together?”

Her cheeks blushed, remembering the day she and Tripp had finally given in to how they felt. She had no idea back then how things would turn out. She thought they would be married with two kids by now.

She hoped that was still in their future, but trusting him not to break her heart again weighed heavily on her mind.

**B**ella curled up in her crate as Tripp locked her in. He hated crating the pup, but she was still in her destructive phase. Already most of his shoes had been casualties.

Rosie bumped his hand, and Tripp gave her a pat. "I'll be back before I go to work, girls. And Molly will come play with you later." Molly was his dog walker. He never saw her, but she was a dependable girl who took good care of the dogs when he was at work.

As he headed out the door, his phone lit up with a call. He smiled when he saw Melissa's picture. "Hey, I was just about to pick you up. Ready for the park?"

"I'm sorry, but can we do it tomorrow? I have a little plumbing issue, and I'm waiting for the rental agency to call me back."

"What kind of plumbing problem?"

"The stupid toilet. The water level in the tank keeps dropping, and then it makes that ball or whatever lower and it fills up again."

"Is it leaking into the bowl?"

"Yes."

"It's probably the flush valve seal. I'll come take a look at it."

"You know how to fix a toilet? Didn't you grow up with a butler and servants?"

Tripp grinned. "We didn't have a butler. And yes, I know how to fix a toilet. You learn a thing or two when you live on your own and watch home improvement shows. I'll be there shortly."

Tripp climbed into his truck and peeled out of his driveway. He wanted to

prove to Melissa that she could count on him when she needed help, and fixing her plumbing issue would be a good opportunity to do that. Never had he been more excited about a toilet problem.



MELISSA STOOD in the bathroom doorway as Tripp removed the tank lid. It was too small of a room for them to be in there together, and anyway, best not to be too close to him. He smelled good, like a forest after a rain mixed with clean laundry. Melissa wanted to bury her face into his neck like she used to, but restrained herself.

“Do you think it’s an easy fix?” Melissa asked.

“Yeah, I’d say it’s definitely the seal. Those things go bad and need to be replaced. You’ll probably need to replace this fill valve soon too.”

“Why do you say that?”

Tripp lifted the floating ball. “Because modern toilets don’t have the ballcock.”

Melissa couldn’t tell if Tripp was joking. “I’m sorry, the *what?*”

Tripp laughed. “I swear, that’s what it’s called.”

“I’m sure a man came up with that,” Melissa muttered.

Tripp unscrewed the assembly. “I’m going to take this seal and run up to the hardware store. Can you get a paper and pen so I can write down this toilet’s model number? I want to make sure I get the right one.”

Thankful to have a reason to not be so close to him, Melissa hunted down a scrap piece of paper and a pen. Tripp scribbled down the information.

“You still write like a chicken.”

Tripp smiled at her. “Maybe in a past life, I was a doctor.” He folded the paper and tucked it into his pocket. “All right, I’ll be back soon.”

Forty-five minutes later, Tripp had replaced the seal. He’d even replaced the fill valve as well.

They waited as the toilet flushed to see if it filled properly. It did.

“Looks like it’s fixed,” Tripp said. “Now, if anything else goes wrong with it, you’ll have to call an actual plumber. I’m afraid this is about the extent of my plumbing expertise.”

She laughed. Sometimes, just the tone of his voice when he said something struck her as funny.

“Got a laugh out of you,” Tripp said. “You must be warming up to my company.”

It was like he could read her mind. “Thank you for fixing my toilet. And you really didn’t have to get rid of that cock ball, but I appreciate the upgrade.”

Tripp roared with laughter. “It’s called a ballcock.”

Melissa laughed with him. “Right. Well, ‘ballcock’ isn’t much better.”

Her stomach growled, and she caught a whiff of the soup she had simmering on the stove. “Are you hungry? I made soup.”

Tripp grinned. “I’d like that. I’ll get cleaned up first.”

While she waited for Tripp, she poured soup into two bowls and set the table. The bread she baked was still warm. She sliced it and put it on a plate.

Tripp walked into the kitchen. “It smells good.”

“Chicken soup. Not the canned version. My version.”

Tripp peered into the pot. “That’s the best version. You always made good soup.”

When Tripp took his seat, he leaned on the table and made it rock. Some water sloshed out of his glass, and he hurried to wipe up the spill with his napkin. “You still have this old wobbly table, huh?”

“Wobbly because of you.” Melissa blew on her soup, which was still steaming.

Tripp tilted his head and furrowed his brows. “Me?”

She gave him a pointed look. “You know why it’s unsteady.”

His expression was blank for a moment, and then a slow grin spread across his face. “Oh yeah. That was a good time.”

Tripp dipped his bread into the soup and took a bite. He moaned, which Melissa took as a good sign.

“You like it?”

Tripp nodded. “You outdo Esmeralda.”

Melissa shook her head in disbelief. “Please, like I could be as good as your cook. Does she still work for your family?”

“Oh no, she’s like ninety now. But she made good soup like this.”

“It’s the perfect meal to eat when it’s cold. I’m so tired of winter.” She spooned some of the broth and blew on it before putting it in her mouth.

Tripp grimaced. “Well, you’re not going to like this, but there’s a fifty percent chance of snow showers tonight, and lows will be in the single digits.”

Just thinking of the white stuff made her shiver. “Great. More cold and snow. Both are four-letter-words, you know. I don’t know how you stand it.”

Tripp shrugged. “When you grow up here, you get used to it. And you can do so many things in the winter that you can’t do any other time of the year. Didn’t you build snowmen and have snowball fights with your friends when you were a kid?”

“Sure, but my favorite part was always coming inside. I’d warm up next to the fireplace with a mug of hot chocolate. Or soup.”

"I should cook for you next time."

“You cook?”

“Yeah. Believe it or not. I lived on my own for so long that I had to learn. And Esmeralda taught me a thing or two. Why don't you come over to my place Saturday night? You can see my lake house, and you could say hello to the dogs, too. Bella loves everyone, and I’m sure Rosie misses you.”

A memory of a little yellow puppy flashed through her mind. “You still have Rosie?”

“Yeah. She’s getting on in her years, but she’s still around. So, what do you say? Dinner at my place this weekend? I could pick you up if you want.”

Melissa considered it and smiled. “It would be nice to not cook for one night. Okay, you make dinner Saturday. And just text me your address. I can drive myself.” No way was she letting Tripp pick her up. She needed her car so that she could leave at a moment’s notice. Tripp could easily convince her to stay over, and damn it, she was not breaking her own rules.



TRIPP PULLED up to Melissa’s house the next morning. Her bundled up figure was already waiting for him on the porch. As she walked to his truck, he wondered how many layers she had on today. He wanted to peel off every one of them and warm her with his body heat instead.

Melissa climbed into the passenger seat. “Oh, it feels good inside here.”

Tripp was sweating, but it was worth it. “I cranked up the heat just for you.”

Melissa took her gloves off and held her hands up to the vents. “What are we doing today?”

“We’re going to do your favorite winter activity.”

He glanced at Melissa and saw her give him a look of disbelief. “You must be mistaken. I don’t have a favorite winter activity.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“Ice skating?” she guessed. “We already did that.”

“Okay, I meant your second favorite winter activity.”

“Not following.”

Tripp gave her a smile. “Remember you said you liked to drink hot chocolate by the fire?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s this coffee house by the park, but they’re more famous for their hot chocolate. And they have a fireplace. What do you say?”

“Sitting inside where it’s warm, and I get hot chocolate? Now, you’re speaking my language.”

Tripp laughed.



MELISSA MOANED as the aroma of coffee beans hit her nose. “Oh my god. That smells delicious.” The coffee house looked cozy with a large brick fireplace and several plush couches and chairs. A few small tables sat along the windows.

It wasn’t too crowded at this time of day, so she had her pick of seats. While Tripp placed their orders, Melissa settled on the orange sofa and imagined she was on an episode of *Friends*. The warmth from the nearby fire made her sweat, and she took off her winter gear. No need to bundle up. She was feeling warm and toasty.

Tripp joined her a few minutes later and handed her a paper cup. “I told them to put whipped cream on it. I know you and your sweet tooth like that.”

“I do, but I better stop. The camera adds ten pounds, and I don’t need to pack on more. I need to find a gym soon.”

“I could take you to mine. Try the cocoa.”

She took a sip and let the chocolatey liquid settle on her tongue. The whipped cream made it sweeter, and Melissa moaned.

“Good, right?” Tripp asked.

“That’s the best hot chocolate I’ve ever had.” She took another sip, then reached for a napkin from the side table. “I’ll have to bring Charlotte here.”



“You like being an aunt, huh?”

“I love it. Makes me think about how fun it would be to have my own kid someday. Do you ever think about that?” She stared at Tripp while waiting for his answer. The question of children had never come up when they had been dating. At the time, they were too focused on their careers and education to think about a family. If the idea of children appalled him, she would know for certain that they would have no future together. Which quite honestly, would make everything about this decision easier. Except, what if he said no? She wanted him to want kids.

“Oh, I love kids,” Tripp said. “If I ever had a child, I’d be the best damn father ever. Way better than my old man was.”

Melissa let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. He passed the test.

A figure moved into Melissa’s line of sight. When she looked up, she saw a tall blond woman standing over them. She was dressed in tight leggings and a shirt that revealed way too much cleavage, her eyes on Tripp. Maybe she recognized him from television.

“Well, if it isn’t Tripp Bartlett,” she said in a surprised tone.

Tripp seemed taken aback. “Sandy?”

The woman broke out in a big, toothy grin. Her teeth were perfectly aligned and pearly white. “Hey, stranger. It’s been a minute, huh?”

She held open her arms, and to Melissa’s annoyance, Tripp stood to embrace her. Melissa thought the hug went on for a little longer than necessary. When they finally separated, Tripp had a smile plastered across his face. Melissa was horrified to realize she was jealous.

“How’ve you been?” Tripp asked.

“Good. I saw you on the news. I always knew you were a weather nerd. When did you move back to Winter Lake?”

“Last month. I’m living in my grandparents’ lake house.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

Melissa felt like she was invisible, and she didn’t for one minute like the way he was looking at this woman.

“I’ve been meaning to reach out to you, but I’ve been so busy,” Sandy said.

“I thought you were in Chicago.”

“I was, but I’m back. I just opened my own bakery. *Sinful Delights*. I have some business cards.” Sandy dug through her purse and pulled out

some. “You should come check it out.”

Melissa purposely cleared her throat to alert the two that she was still there.

“Oh, Sandy, this is Melissa. Melissa, this is Sandy.”

Sandy thrust a business card into Melissa’s hand. “Oh yeah, you’re the new reporter.”

“Anchor, actually.” She couldn’t even get her job title right.

“Tripp and I go way back.” She then turned to Tripp and gave him a sly look. “Remember, Tripp? We must have spent every day on that boat.”

Tripp laughed softly. “We were definitely tan by the end of the summer.”

“Tan all over,” Sandy added with a giggle.

Melissa’s eyebrow twitched. She had a vision of Tripp rolling around naked with this woman, and the image didn’t sit well with her at all. Why the hell was she jealous? She knew Tripp hadn’t been seeing this woman when they were together, but still, the thought was distracting. Melissa tapped her foot, ready for this Sandy woman to leave.

“Well, it was good seeing you, Sandy, but Melissa and I were kind of in the middle of something.”

At least Tripp finally remembered they were supposed to be hanging out.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Sandy said. “I’ll let you two get back to your ... whatever. But we should catch up some time. Stop by my bakery when you get a chance.” She leaned in closer to Tripp and placed the business card in his front coat pocket. “I’ll give you some free samples.” She said the last part in a low voice, but Melissa heard every word. And she was sure the free samples weren’t anything in her bakery.

Sandy gave Tripp one more flirty grin, then walked back to her table. She put on her coat, then sashayed her way out the door. Her pants were so tight that you could see the outline of her ass. It wasn’t appropriate clothing for the cold weather, but that apparently didn’t faze Sandy. Tripp, of course, had his eyes on her as she left.

“Ex-girlfriend?” Melissa asked, though she had a feeling that was pretty obvious.

Tripp rubbed his neck. “Yeah. I’m sorry about that. If I had known she was here, I would have suggested we go somewhere else. I haven’t heard from her in years.”

“Well, she was excited to see *you*.”

A slow grin spread across Tripp’s face. “Are you jealous?”

“What? No, of course not. Why would I be jealous?” Tripp didn’t need to know how she was really feeling.

“Sandy can be a little ... forward. But what we had was a long time ago.”

“Did you sleep with her?” As soon as the words left her mouth, Melissa wondered what possessed her to ask. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Tripp didn’t respond, which answered her question.

“You slept with her.”

“It was a long time ago. Way before us. I was a horny teenager eager to lose my virginity, and Sandy was willing. By the end of the summer, she was sleeping with someone else, and that was the end of it. I don't feel anything for her.”

Melissa thought back to the look on Tripp’s face when he hugged her. “Really? Because you seemed a little friendly toward her.”

Tripp grinned wider. “You *are* jealous!”

“Am not.”

“You’re *jealous*,” he teased.

Melissa sighed. “Well, she’s beautiful.”

“You’re more beautiful, and anyway, brunettes are more my type. I was just being nice to her.”

“Are you going to check out her bakery?”

“Absolutely not.”

Melissa looked at the business card. “*Sinful Delights*. Oh, look. It’s ‘Winter Lake’s only bakery specializing in custom and adult cakes.’ She owns a freaking erotic bakery.”

Tripp laughed. “That does not surprise me. Lance used to call her Sex-crazed Sandy.”

“Is that what you were too? Sex-crazed?” Melissa didn’t know why she continued to pick this scab.

“So that’s what’s bothering you. You don’t like that I had sex with another woman.”

Tripp had her there. The image of Tripp and Sandy out on the boat together was still on her mind.

His grin grew wider. “Wonder why that bothers you.”

“I know you had a past. It’s just awkward, okay? We used to have good times at the lake too.”

“And I had way more fun with you than I ever did with Sandy. With her, it was all hormones. With you, we had a connection, mentally and physically.

I mean, you've been with other guys, right? But you don't have any lingering feelings for them, do you?"

Melissa thought back to the years after she and Tripp broke up. There had been several men she had slept with. She'd been desperate to find someone she felt a connection with, but no one compared to Tripp. "No, I don't have any feelings for them." In fact, there was only one man she had lingering feelings for, and she was looking at him.



TRIPP WHISTLED as he strolled into work later that afternoon. Lance looked up from his desk and gave him an annoyed look.

"I hate when people whistle."

Tripp sat at his computer. "Can't help it. I'm in a good mood."

Lance swiveled around in his chair. "Oh? Making headway with Melissa?"

Tripp shrugged. "Maybe. I took her to that coffee shop by the park, and you'll never guess who we ran into."

Lance pulled a chocolate bar from his desk drawer. "I don't know. Who?"

"Sandy."

"Sandy? Sex-crazed Sandy Nelson?"

"That's the one." Tripp pulled out Sandy's business card. "She's back in town and just opened up an erotic bakery. Check this out." He held the card up for Lance to see.

Lance roared with laughter. "Classic Sandy! Who knew her skills in the bedroom would aid in her baking business? So, what happened?"

"She flirted with me, and Melissa was clearly jealous. You know what that means, right? Melissa still has feelings for me." Tripp tossed Sandy's card into the recycling bin.

"You should keep that. If Melissa sees it, maybe she'll think Sandy is on your mind. Might push Melissa into staking her claim on you."

"Nah, don't need it. I've got fate on my site."

"If you say fate one more time, I'm going to smack you."

"Fate, bro. It's fate." He chuckled when Lance glared at him.



MELISSA YAWNED. Four days of doing the newscast without Bob had been exhausting, but she wasn't complaining about the work. She was finally doing what she loved. And Bob would be back Monday, so all was good.

She took her coat from the hook. Work was over, and it was finally the weekend. At least for the next two days, she could relax a little.

Tripp poked his head in her doorway. "Hey, are you ready to go? I can walk you to your car."

Melissa put on her hat. "Just about. Got to put on all this damn winter gear first. What's the temp? Like, twenty degrees or something?"

Tripp smiled. "More like ten."

She reached for her gloves and tugged them on. "Oh, the joys of winter. Okay, I'm ready." She grabbed her purse, turned off the light, and closed her office door.

"You did good doing the news on your own," Tripp said as they walked down the hallway. "I heard Sharon giving you praise."

"Thanks. It was tough, but I loved it. It's nice to work for someone who actually believes in me."

Tripp reached the door first and held it open. The night air was crisp, and when Melissa exhaled, she saw her breath. Good thing her car was already warm and toasty. Thank god for remote start.

Tripp walked alongside her. "I always knew you'd make it to the anchor desk. Remember you used to say how cool it would be if we were working at the same station? And now, it's actually happening. Funny how that worked out, isn't it?"

She knew if she answered that question, he'd go on again about how it was fate. She decided to change the subject. "So, what are you cooking tomorrow?"

Tripp smiled. "I'll surprise you."

If they were still a couple, they would have kissed. And there were times when Melissa missed that, especially when Tripp was close enough to smell him. God, he always smelled so good.

But instead, she just smiled and opened her car door. "See you tomorrow."

**M**elissa cursed when she missed her turn. Nothing like a GPS that waited until the last minute to give you directions. She made a three-point-turn, thankful there was no traffic in the other direction, and drove back to the street she missed.

After a short drive, the trees thinned out a bit. Up ahead, a big house came into view.

*“Turn left, and the destination is on your left,”* her GPS squawked. *“101 Lakeview Road.”*

When Tripp said he lived in a house by the lake, she pictured a small, rustic log cabin in the woods. This house was much bigger. As she pulled into the driveway, Tripp stepped out onto the porch and waved to her. She got out of the car, and a black lab puppy barreled down the steps toward her.

“Bella, no!” Tripp called out, but the dog ignored him and jumped on Melissa anyway. “Sorry. She gets excited when we have company.”

Melissa gave the puppy a scratch behind her ears and let the dog lick her cheek. “Hi, puppy. It’s okay. You know I love dogs.”

“This is Bella. She’s six months old and already a handful.”

Melissa laughed as the dog continued to lick her cheek. “I can see that.”

“I thought when I got Bella, she would keep Rosie company, but instead, she just tends to annoy her.”

“Well, that makes sense. Rosie’s an older dog. Speaking of, where is she?”

“Napping. She sleeps a lot these days.”

Once Bella was satisfied she’d given Melissa a proper hello, she bounded

back up the steps and happily wagged her tail.

“Well, want to come inside and take a look?” Tripp asked as she made her way to the porch.

She shivered from the biting wind. “Out of the cold? Yes, please.”

She followed Tripp inside and into the grand living room. She first noticed the fireplace with its decorative brick border. A large television was mounted above. To complete the room, a pair of black leather recliners sat in front. The only thing out of place was an ugly couch with a floral print, worn from years of use.

“I know, it’s awful,” Tripp said. “It’ll get replaced soon. Something to match these babies.” He indicated the leather recliners.

Melissa thought they were tacky as hell, but Tripp seemed proud of his purchase, so she kept quiet.

“Oh, and check this out.” He pointed to the corners of each room where there was a speaker. “I have surround sound.”

“Must be nice for movie night.” At least there was something about his place that she liked.

“It is, and I can crank up the music as loud as I want and not disturb anyone.”

In the back corner of the room, which Melissa assumed was a dining area, there was a pool table.

“You have a pool table in your dining room.”

“Yeah, isn’t it great? There used to be a regular table there, but Daniel needed it for his cabin.”

The whole setup screamed bachelor pad—a reminder to Melissa that Tripp was unattached, and most likely preferred to stay that way. “It’s definitely you. You have your own man cave, only it’s the size of a house. Where do you eat?”

“At the bar.” Tripp led her to the kitchen area. “And I have these great new barstools. They can go as high or low as you want.” He pulled a lever on one and made it go up.

Melissa was more impressed with his kitchen. She ran her hand along the granite countertop and admired his stainless steel appliances. It made her kitchen back at home look like a dump with its beat up stove and humming refrigerator. “This room is beautiful, like straight out of an HGTV show.”

Tripp smiled. “You still watch HGTV?”

“Not lately, but I miss it. Remember we used to binge those house

flipping shows?”

“Oh, I still do. Sometimes they give me ideas for remodeling. I’m going to make some changes to this house soon.”

“But it’s perfect already.”

“It’s not bad, but it could be better. If I tear down this wall right here, it’ll really open up this space. Then I could get a dining room that’s not cut off from the kitchen. I guess by then, I’ll have to get a real table.”

“Then where would your pool table go?”

“In the basement. I’m going to finish it and make it my own personal man cave. You know, complete with the works. Pool table. Maybe foosball too. And a bar. And of course, a giant flat screen television to watch the game.”

Melissa gave him a smile. “You really have big plans for this house, huh?”

“When Daniel and I inherited the lake house a year ago, he didn’t want any part of it. But I figured I could make it mine and turn it into the place it was always meant to be. I thought it would just be a vacation house, but now that I live here, I can make it my dream house.”

“Well, it looks amazing.” Melissa gazed at the artwork hanging and the gorgeous wooden beams that lined the high ceiling. Everything was perfect. Except, of course, for the massive buck head on the wall. Nothing like a dead animal to liven up a room. Melissa thought if she ever moved in with him, that ugly thing would be the first thing to go. Then she wondered why she had that thought. Was she actually thinking about getting back together?

“Oh, that’s Ed.” Tripp must have seen her looking at it. “Gramps liked to hunt.”

“It’s tacky as hell.”

“What are you talking about? I think it’s cool.”

“You should get rid of Ed. He ruins the whole decor.”

Tripp grinned. “Why do you care that I have a buck head on the wall? Are you saying you’d spend more time here if you didn’t have to look at that thing?”

“It looks creepy.”

“All right. I’ll get rid of it.”

“Really? Just like that?”

“Yeah. In fact, maybe you could help me do a little interior decorating. I’ve been doing a little here and there, but it needs a feminine touch. That was always your favorite part of those home makeover shows—the decorating.”



Melissa thought it over. Tripp was right—that had been her favorite part. “Okay, I’ll help. You definitely need to change some things. And the first thing to go is Ed.”

Tripp shrugged. “Eh, we weren’t that close anyway. Oh, you haven’t even seen the most amazing thing. Come on.”

Melissa followed him to the back door. “Check out this view.”

Bella scooted ahead, jumping and wagging her tail. Melissa almost tripped over her. When she got to the back deck, the view was breathtaking. The frozen lake was covered with snow, and it spread out as far as Melissa could see. Around the water, the trees were bare, and the ground was covered with clean, pristine snow. It was quiet and still, and Melissa thought it was the most peaceful place she’d been to since moving here. Cold, but peaceful nonetheless.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“Isn’t it? And that lake is frozen.” He nudged her. “Perfect for ice skating. Oh, and check out the new addition. Had a hot tub installed.”

Tripp led her to the edge of the deck. He’d taken the railing down, and there was a huge gap between the deck and hot tub sitting in front of it. “I know it looks like a mess, but I’m going to extend the deck and build around it. I’ll get that done soon.”

“Too bad you won’t be able to enjoy it until it warms up.”

Tripp looked at her funny. “Au contraire. Winter is the best time to enjoy a hot tub. Just think, on a cold night when the stars are out, you could be looking at this view and staying warm at the same time.”

“But what about when you get out? You’ll be soaking wet and freezing.”

Tripp shrugged. “I’ve got a long robe, and the cold doesn’t bother me that much. I prefer it to those muggy summers in Oklahoma.”

Melissa rolled her eyes. “Right, you’re immune to sub-zero temperatures. You’re that guy who walks the dogs wearing shorts on a snowy day.”

Tripp laughed. “Guilty as charged. Want to come take a dip in this thing tomorrow? I know you enjoy wearing a bikini.” He grinned.

“I only wear a bathing suit in the summertime. When it’s *hot*.”

“It gets hot in Minnesota. You know, for six weeks in the summer, twelve if we’re lucky.” He winked at her. “You could put on a bikini and we could take the boat out.”

The thought of so little clothing made her teeth chatter. “Can we go inside now? It’s freezing.”

Back inside, a big yellow dog moseyed up to them. Melissa couldn't believe this was the same dog she once knew as a puppy. She knelt down to pet her. "Rosie! Hey, sweet girl. Look at you all grown up. Do you remember me?"

Tripp gave Rosie a pat on the back. "How could she not remember you?"

Melissa scratched Rosie behind her ears, and she responded by licking her cheek. Bella then joined in, jumping on Melissa's knee.

"You're cute, too." She turned to give some love to Bella. "Yes, you are." Bella barked and licked Melissa's cheek.

"I forgot how the dogs respond to your baby talk. It's cute."

Melissa stood and wiped the dog hair off her pants. "I can't help it. I see a baby or a dog, and it just comes out. Well, are we eating soon? I smell something cooking."

At that moment, a timer from somewhere in the kitchen dinged.

Tripp grinned. "As a matter of fact, it's time to take it out of the oven right now."



THEY ATE AT THE BAR, where Tripp served up baked chicken along with zucchini stir fry and a salad. And wine, of course, because he knew Melissa would want some.

"Is it good?" Tripp asked, nodding toward her plate.

"It's delicious."

Tripp was pleased. He had never cooked anything when they dated, other than ramen noodles. Maybe Melissa would realize he was capable of change.

Melissa took another bite and moaned. "I can't believe you cook. You used to be the take-out master. And now, they have food delivery for everything."

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm still the take-out master. But it's nice to use this kitchen every once in a while. Plus, I thought I'd impress you with my newfound culinary skills."

"This is a really nice place. Not many people are lucky enough to have lakeside property."

"Yeah, I love how peaceful and quiet it is out here. And isolated. My nearest neighbor is across the lake."

Melissa cut a piece of chicken on her plate. “You still like living far away from your family?”

“God, yes. Even though I’m living back in my home state, they’re at least two hours away. Well, except for my mother. She’s in California with husband number five. But two hours away is a nice enough buffer from the rest of them. I see Daniel when he wants a break from his wife, but Dad is usually too busy to visit.”

Melissa took a bite of chicken. “Have you seen him since you moved back?”

Tripp speared a piece of meat on his plate. “Nope, and don’t care.”

“Not even at Christmas?”

“He went on a trip to Paris with potential wife number three, some woman half his age.”

Melissa gave him a look. “Tripp, you should visit your father.”

“Why? And have him remind me of how I’m a disappointment? Hear him complain that I should stop being a ‘weather guy’ and get a real job at Bartlett Enterprises? I have always been different from his golden boy Daniel, and my father never lets me forget it.”

Melissa turned her attention back to her meal.

“I’m sorry. You know how I get worked up when we talk about my parents. Can we change the subject?”

“Yeah, that would be good. I’m finished actually.” She pushed her plate back. “That was delicious.”

Tripp’s smile returned. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. You want more wine though, right?”

Melissa smiled and slid her glass over. “Absolutely.”

He refilled her glass, then stood. “You want to go upstairs?”

“What?”

Melissa gave him a funny look, like she wasn’t sure about it. He couldn’t figure out what he’d said to make her look at him that way. It must have been the word *upstairs*. “Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. I just thought you’d like a tour of the rest of the house. You know, see my childhood room and stuff.”

Melissa visibly relaxed. “I thought you were inviting me to see your bedroom.”

“Well now, you’re certainly welcome to take a peek.”

“Tripp,” she said in a warning tone.

He held his hands up. “Kidding. Come on.”

As they headed up the stairs, Tripp realized he didn't actually want to show Melissa his bedroom. He remembered that he'd forgotten to make the bed, and he'd left a pair of dirty boxers on the floor. Not that Melissa hadn't seen his underwear before, but it was the pair with a hole in them, courtesy of Bella.

They came to the first room at the top, and Tripp opened the door. "This is the room where Daniel and I slept. There used to be a bunk bed, but Daniel took it for his kids. We still have the old beat up dresser though, and the wallpaper from the seventies."

Melissa walked in and examined a spot on the wall. "Someone wrote, 'Daniel is a doofus.'"

Tripp laughed out loud. "Oh yeah, I forgot about that. I wrote it when I was mad at him. He always got his way because he was younger, and I resented him for that."

"So, what are you going to do with this room?"

"Turn it into a proper guest room. Then my brother will have a place to stay when he has a fight with his wife."

"That's nice. Not that your brother argues with his wife, but that you want to make it into a guest room."

Melissa headed back into the hallway and pointed across the hall. "Is this another bedroom?"

"Yeah. That's the room my parents would use, if they stayed at all. It's a bit messy."

Tripp attempted to open the door, but furniture blocked the entrance.

"A bit messy? You can't open the door all the way."

He turned on the light and squeezed through the opening. "It's not quite a hoarding nightmare, but it's a mess all the same."

Melissa stood at the front of the room and stared at the piles of junk and clutter everywhere. "What is all this stuff?"

"My grandparents' belongings. They weren't hoarders—I promise. I moved stuff in here to get it out of the way. When I have time, I'll look through these boxes. Most of it's probably junk that can be tossed, but I don't want to throw away everything."

By the door was a cherry wood armoire. Melissa ran her finger along the edge and left a line in the dust. "Your brother and father should help you sort through this stuff."

"Dad already got everything he wanted, and Daniel doesn't have the

patience for that. He suggested hiring someone to clean it out for us, but I wouldn't let him. I didn't want any family mementos thrown away."

Melissa moved toward the closet. "What's in all these boxes over here?"

"I don't know. Could be anything."

Melissa lifted the lid and pulled out several DVD cases. "Look at all of these '80s movies!"

Tripp laughed. "Oh, that. Yeah. Gram and Gramps had a big movie collection. Gram hated to go out. Come to think of it, she hated winter, a lot like you. She'd spend hours inside and have movie marathons. Gramps enjoyed it too."

She pulled out movie after movie. "Wow, they had all the classics."

Tripp took out a handful and examined the titles. "*Back to the Future.*"

Melissa pulled out more. "*Pretty in Pink. Sixteen Candles.* That's a great one."

"If you say so," Tripp said.

"*Say Anything!* That's my favorite. You like this one, right?"

Tripp shrugged. "I don't remember it."

"Yes, you do! Remember that scene with John Cusack? Where he's holding the boombox over his head and playing that Peter Gabriel song?"

"I have no idea."

Melissa gathered the DVDs. "You will soon enough. We're watching these."

"What?"

"I want to check out your surround system downstairs. Don't you want to show it to me?"

"Okay, we'll watch some movies. But let's watch something with a little more action." He pulled out the perfect movie. "How about *Die Hard?*"

Melissa shook her head. "No, I don't think so. If you want me to spend time with you, then we're watching the movies that I want to watch. I never got to choose the movie when we were dating. So now, the tables have turned. And we're starting with *Say Anything.*"

She left the room holding the stack of movies, and that, apparently, was the end of the discussion.

Tripp turned off the light and followed her down the hallway. "I'll get the popcorn started."



AS THE CREDITS ROLLED, Melissa looked at Tripp to gauge his reaction. She was certain he hated the movie, but decided to ask him anyway. “So, what did you think?”

Tripp shrugged. “It was okay.”

“Tripp, if you didn’t like the movie, just say so. I’ve hated plenty of the movies you enjoyed and forced me to watch.”

“I wouldn’t want to watch it again, if that’s what you’re asking, but it wasn’t a bad movie. I mean, some parts of it were kind of cheesy. You know, in an eighties rom-com kind of way. But I liked Lloyd’s persistence.” Tripp grinned at her. “He was determined to win Diane’s heart.”

That would be, of course, the part he would latch on to.

“Maybe I can take a few pointers from Lloyd,” Tripp continued. “Win the girl I’m after.”

She stood and gathered the stray pieces of popcorn in her chair. “I should go.”

He took the popcorn bowl from her, brushing her hand as he did. They locked eyes, and the corner of his lip lifted into that sly grin of his. When he looked at her like that, her insides melted. She shook the feeling off. It wouldn’t take much to convince her to go upstairs, but she wasn’t about to give in to her feelings because of a look.

“How about I start up your car for you?” Tripp offered.

Melissa smiled. “That would be great. I’ll just go run to the bathroom before I leave.”

Once in the bathroom, she leaned against the sink and stared at her reflection. Tripp had to prove he had changed before she gave into her feelings. Did he want the same thing as she did? It would be so easy to forgive him and go back to the way things were before, but she couldn’t forget the look in his eyes when he proclaimed he never wanted to get married.

When Melissa came out, Tripp was tossing the loose popcorn kernels in the trash. “I’m glad you came. We should do this again.”

“You should cook more often. Dinner was actually good.”

“You say that like you’re surprised I knew my way around the kitchen.”

“Well, you did grow up with a cook.”

Bella jumped on Melissa’s leg as she bundled up. After zipping her coat, she knelt down to give the dog a goodbye pet. “Bye, Bella. I enjoyed meeting you.”

Bella, in turn, licked her face and made her laugh.

Next to her, Rosie bumped Melissa's hand, and Melissa gave the old dog a head rub. "And I'm glad I got to see you too, Ro."

"You can visit the dogs anytime," Tripp said.

Melissa rose to her feet. "Well, goodnight, Tripp."

If they were still together, this would be the point where Tripp would press her against the wall and kiss her senseless until she changed her mind about leaving. She felt her cheeks warm just thinking of the memory, and for once, was glad for the cold blast of air from outside.

But Tripp did not kiss her. For that, she was grateful. The last thing she needed was for things to get complicated. Instead, he just smiled, and Melissa noticed a laugh line appear on his face. He was older, but still just as handsome.

"Goodnight," Tripp said.

The wind blew in her face and she wrapped her scarf tighter. She needed to get into her car. Hopefully the heat had kicked in by now.

"Melissa?" Tripp said when she was halfway to her Honda. "It'll be Valentine's Day in a month. I will prove to you by then that I've changed."

Melissa didn't say anything. It was as if he'd been reading her mind. She really hoped he had.

**M**elissa awoke to the sound of the chirping smoke detector. The battery in the bedroom unit decided to die in the middle of the night. She slept in the living room to get away from the noise, and now, had a crick in her neck from the couch cushion.

The smoke detector chirped again, making Melissa curse.

Her phone beeped with a text message. Probably Jeff. He said he'd text when he was on the way. But it was Tripp.

Good morning. Want me to bring you Starbucks?

That was an offer Melissa couldn't refuse. She texted back a reply.

That would be great. Slept awful. Smoke detector battery is dying and I had to listen to it chirp all night. I'm all out of 9-volt batteries.

Tripp texted back.

I'll bring a battery. Want the usual order?

Melissa replied yes, then thought of something else to text him.

You shouldn't stay long. Jeff is coming to deliver furniture. You're not his favorite person in case you didn't know.

She waited a couple of minutes for Tripp's response. He was typing something, because she could see the blinking dots. He was an awfully slow texter.



Good, I want to talk to Jeff. And I can help move some furniture.

Melissa texted back.

Okay, your funeral.



TRIPP HAD FINALLY MADE it to Melissa's bedroom. Of course, changing a battery in a smoke detector wasn't exactly what he imagined himself doing. Her bed was neatly made with about ten pillows at the head. Tripp wanted to toss them on the floor, pull the covers back, and drag Melissa on top of her 800-thread count Egyptian cotton sheets, which he was certain she still had. Melissa always enjoyed a little luxury. Hell, he'd better make sure his own sheets were up to snuff. He couldn't have Melissa spending the night with old sheets still on his bed.

"Can you get it?" Melissa asked, looking up at him.

"Yeah, no problem." Tripp snapped the 9-volt battery into place. "No more chirping."

"My ears thank you. I'm so exhausted."

In the kitchen, Tripp held up her cup. "Maybe this will help?"

Melissa took her coffee. "It's a start."

She headed to the living room and made herself comfortable on the couch. Tripp held back a smile as Melissa placed a blanket over her lap.

"Cold?"

"It's three degrees. What do you think?"

Tripp heard a vehicle outside and peeked out the blind. A pickup truck loaded down with furniture was pulling into the driveway, and Tripp was glad he had the forethought to park along the curb.

"Your brother's here."

Melissa rose from the couch. "You sure you don't want to make an escape out the back door?"

"I'm good. What kind of furniture are you getting?"

"A coffee table, a chair for the living room, some end tables, and definitely a new kitchen table."

Tripp followed her to the front door. "You're getting rid of the table? You can't get rid of the table."

“Why? Do you want it?”

Tripp grinned. “Yeah, I’ll take it. I guess you pointed out that I needed one. And plus, I have some good memories of that kitchen table.”

She said something under her breath that Tripp didn’t catch.

While Melissa put on her coat, Tripp stepped out onto the porch. Jeff, along with an older man and a blond-haired girl, stepped out of the truck.

The storm door behind Tripp opened, and Melissa came outside.

“Hi, Auntie!” Charlotte said. “We brought furniture for your house!”

“Great! I’m so excited!”

Charlotte went up the steps and looked at Tripp. “Hey, you’re the weather guy.”

Tripp smiled. “That’s right. And you must be Charlotte.”

“I always watch the weather so I’ll know how cold it is. I know if it’s above thirty-two degrees, the ice will melt and I can’t go skating on the pond.”

Tripp nodded. “That’s right. You’re pretty smart.”

Charlotte turned to Melissa. “I really have to pee! Daddy wouldn’t stop anywhere.”

Melissa laughed. “Bathroom is all yours.”

Charlotte ran inside and slammed the storm door behind her.

“Hi, Jeff.” Melissa waved. “Hi, Arnold!”

“Hello,” Arnold said. “Jeff needed a hand with the furniture, so I tagged along.”

“That’s Eileen’s dad,” she told Tripp.

Tripp, however, wasn’t looking at Arnold. He was looking at Jeff, and Jeff seemed none-too-happy to see him.

“Jeff, good to see you,” Tripp said. “It’s been a while.”

“What the hell is he doing here?” Jeff asked Melissa, loud enough for Tripp to hear.

“Jeff, will you relax?” Melissa said. “We’re trying to be friends.”

Jeff glared at Tripp. “Can I see you for a moment?” Jeff nodded toward the other side of his truck, away from the group.

“Sure. I’d like to have a word with you too.”

When they were out of view, Jeff shoved Tripp against the side of the truck and grabbed hold of his coat collar. “What the hell do you think you’re doing with my sister?”

Tripp held his hands up. “I’m not doing anything to hurt her.”

Jeff gave him one more shove, then released his hold. “That better be true. Because if I find out you’re trying to lure my sister back into your bed, we’re going to have a problem.”

Tripp did want Melissa back, but Jeff had it all wrong. He didn’t want to simply get laid. His need for Melissa was way more than physical. “Look, I love your sister, and I’m trying to make up for the mistakes I made. I’m not perfect, and I know what I did was wrong.”

Jeff leaned in close and pointed a finger at him. “If you ever, and I mean *ever*, hurt my sister again, I will personally drive over to the news station and beat your ass to a pulp. Is that clear?”

Tripp looked him dead in the eye. “Crystal.”

“Jeff, leave him alone.” Melissa stood a few feet away.

“You want him to leave?” Jeff asked, then looked Tripp in the eyes. “Because I’ll make him leave. I’ll even get him to pack up and leave Winter Lake if that’s what you want.”

Melissa moved to stand between them and placed a hand on both their chests. “Jeff, calm down. If I didn’t want Tripp to be here, I would tell him to go. But we work together, so I’m trying to get along with him.”

Jeff pointed his finger at Tripp again. “I meant every word of what I said. If you hurt my sister, I’ll come after you.”

“I won’t hurt her.” He glanced at Melissa, but she averted her eyes and turned away. “I mean that, Melissa.”

“I’ll clear some space so we can move the furniture in,” she said and walked away.

Jeff gave Tripp one more warning glare before following Melissa to the house.

Tripp inhaled deeply and then exhaled, seeing his breath in the air. Winning Melissa back wouldn’t be easy. Convincing Jeff he wasn’t out to hurt his sister would be even harder.



THE TENSION between Jeff and Tripp was palpable, but with Charlotte around, her brother managed to keep things cordial.

“Do you like the chair, Auntie?” Charlotte asked.

Melissa sat in the cozy wingback chair and sighed. “Yes, it’s so comfy! I

can already see myself curling up in it and reading a book.”

Tripp walked into the room and leaned against the wall. “Your aunt likes to read. I see she still has her collection of *Little House on the Prairie* books.”

“It’s a childhood favorite,” Melissa said.

Footsteps approached from down the hall, and moments later, Jeff and Arnold appeared with the kitchen table. “Oh, Tripp said he’ll take that. He needs it for his place.”

Jeff placed his end of the table back on the floor and stared at Tripp. “Then I’ll leave it for you to take.” His tone suggested he wasn’t going to lift a finger to help Tripp.

“Jeff, be nice,” Melissa said. “Just carry it to his truck.”

Tripp moved to pick up the table. “It’s fine. I’ll take it.”

Arnold, who was always in a good mood, lifted his end of the table again. “I’ll help you carry it out.”

“Thanks, Arnold. Appreciate that.”

Charlotte held the door open. Meanwhile, Jeff shot daggers at Tripp’s back.

When Charlotte left to get a snack in the kitchen, Jeff unleashed his anger. “I really think it’s a bad idea for him to be hanging out with you.”

“Jeff, I know you’re very protective of me, but I can take care of myself. Tripp and I are just feeling things out, okay?”

“Feeling things out? He left you on your wedding day. Have you forgotten that?”

“No. Look, I’m not going to let him back into my life so easily. He has to prove to me that I can trust him again.”

Jeff shook his head. “He’s not going to leave you alone until he gets what he wants from you. And I don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

“I don’t want that either. That’s why we’re taking things slow. I won’t get back together with him unless I’m certain he’s ready to make a commitment.”

“I don’t care if he is ready to make a commitment. I don’t trust him, and I’ll never like him.”

“You don’t like who?” Charlotte asked, walking back into the living room with a banana in hand.

Jeff gave Melissa an exasperated look.

“He doesn’t like Tripp,” Melissa said. “We used to be boyfriend and girlfriend before you were born, but we broke up.”

“How come?” Charlotte asked, banana in her mouth.

Melissa racked her brain for a way to explain her past relationship to an eight-year-old. “We wanted different things.”

Charlotte shook her head. “That’s too bad. Mom would call that the third act breakup.”

Melissa frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“In her books, the characters break up in the third act. But they always get back together.” She took another bite of her banana.

Jeff ruffled his daughter’s hair. “Those books are too advanced for you. I’m going to go outside for a smoke.”

“What? I thought you quit smoking!”

Tripp and Arnold came back into the house at that moment, and Jeff glared at Tripp. “I felt like starting again for some reason.” He bumped into Tripp and didn’t apologize as he went out the door.

Tripp grimaced. “I take it he’s still mad at me.”

It was quiet for a moment, then Arnold patted Tripp on the arm. “How about we get that new table set up? It’s the last piece of furniture in the truck.”

Melissa rose from the chair. “Yes. It’ll be so nice to not have a table that wobbles.”

As they walked out onto the porch, Tripp leaned in to whisper in her ear. “I like that it wobbles. We can eat dinner again at my place if you want. You know, like old times. A lot of good memories of that kitchen table.”

Melissa shushed him, hoping her brother hadn’t overheard. Tripp just laughed.



TRIPP SAT his beer on the edge of the deck as he relaxed in the hot tub. Across from him, Lance had the jets beating against his neck. “Feels good, huh?”

“You’re a nice date, Tripp. You’re the only guy I get half-naked for.”

Tripp roared with laughter and pointed to him. “And you better keep those swim trunks on.”

“So why am I here and not Melissa? Are things not going so well?”

Tripp positioned himself in front of a jet and let the water massage his back. He’d pulled a muscle from moving the table. “No, things are going well. We had a nice dinner last night, but we’ll have to work up to the hot

tub.”

“Good luck with that.”

Tripp reached for his beer and took another sip. “I’ll get her out here. I already bought her a robe and some crocs. Now I just need to get this deck finished so it’ll be easier to get in and out of this thing.”

Lance shook his head. “Don’t ask me. I’m busy.”

When they got out, Tripp was freezing, but he preferred being cold over hot. You could dress in layers when the temperature was low, but you couldn’t take everything off when you were hot.

While Lance dressed, Tripp fed the dogs and noticed he had a missed call. It had been his father, but he hadn’t left a voicemail.

Tripp swiped the notification away and put the phone on the charger. He saw no reason to call him back.



WITH HER IPAD and a glass of wine, Melissa sank down into the cushy wingback chair. The living room looked more like a home with the additional furniture. Once she was settled with a blanket over her lap, she made a Facetime call.

Kit’s face appeared on her screen. “Hey, what’s up?”

“I’m in trouble.”

“You slept with Tripp.”

“No, why do you keep saying that?”

“Because I know you, and clearly, you’re fighting how you feel.”

“Fine, but it’s not that simple. I want to be with him, but I want to know we have a future together.”

“And maybe you do. It’s been ten years, and Tripp’s had some time to grow up. Catch me up on what’s been happening.”

Melissa told her about her week with Tripp. “I’ve actually had fun. It’s felt like old times.”

“Why don’t you ditch this Valentine’s Day deadline and just make a decision now? I think you should go for it.”

On the screen, Ryder appeared in front of the camera. “Give the poor guy a second chance if you still love him.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. You two are ganging up on me.”

Kit smiled. "I just hate to see you miserable, and you were happy with Tripp."

"And I was very unhappy when he said he didn't want to marry me."

"He was twenty-five years old. What twenty-five-year-old man is ready for marriage?" Kit turned to look at Ryder offscreen. "Ryder, were you ready for marriage at twenty-five?"

"Not even close," he said.

Kit gave Melissa a pointed look. "See? Even Ryder wasn't ready."

"I just wish he was ready now, but I know he's not."

"Give him some time to realize how good it would be to make it official."

Melissa yawned and looked at the clock. "I'm exhausted. I should go to bed."

"I'm sure everything will work out how it's supposed to," Kit said. "Just have fun."

But having fun was the problem. It made her heart want to give in to how she felt and get back together. Her head, however, kept warning her not to rush into it.

**T**ripp waited outside the women's locker room. What was taking Melissa so long? He had changed into his gym clothes in less than five minutes, but Melissa was taking closer to ten.

A group of women exited the room, and one of them glanced at him and whispered to her friends. Moments later, they were all looking his way. Fortunately, they continued on. He was getting more attention lately since he'd taken the evening meteorologist position, and a lot of that attention had been from women.

Of course, none of them had a chance if they were looking for company. He had his sights set on the brunette in the locker room. He checked his watch.

"Sorry I took so long," Melissa said, appearing in front of him.

"You're worth the wait." She was wearing black spandex leggings and a tight fitting sports tank. He felt a certain part of his anatomy react, so he thought of his grandmother. He could never get aroused when he thought of Gram.

Melissa appeared not to notice his gawking. Instead, she seemed annoyed at something else. "I had to fight a woman in there for a locker. I thought Minnesotans were supposed to be friendly."

"Most of them are. A few rude ones here and there. So, where do you want to go first? We could do weights or we could do the machines."

Melissa pointed ahead and started walking. "Let's start with the ellipticals."

"Ellipticals it is," Tripp said and followed her. In the past, he would have



made a comment about how great her ass looked in those pants, but he figured that would be inappropriate now. He'd only piss her off, and he was finally making some headway with her.

There was an array of exercise equipment in the large room—treadmills, ellipticals, and a few exercise bikes. Usually he'd hit the weights first, but he wasn't complaining. Melissa was hanging out with him, which would definitely make this workout session more enjoyable.

Melissa examined the handles of the elliptical. "Staff clean these things, right?"

"Sure."

She yanked a wipe from a nearby wall dispenser. "I'm not taking any chances on getting some nasty flu bug." She began to wipe everything down. "You should get one too."

Tripp was halfway on his machine, but he reluctantly grabbed a wipe. He'd forgotten how much of a germaphobe Melissa was because her mother had been a nurse, but she was probably right. No telling who had used this machine before him.

As he wiped down his equipment, he caught a whiff of perfume and immediately recognized it as Sandy's. He turned around and saw her standing in front of them.

"Hey there," Sandy said. "Looks like we had the same idea."

Sandy's workout attire was similar to Melissa's, albeit with a bit more cleavage. Tripp tried not to stare. It was a habit more than anything to stare at a woman's chest, but the last thing he needed was Melissa to think he was interested in her. "Sandy, you're here at the gym too."

"Got to keep up my figure with all the sweets I eat," Sandy said with a little giggle.

Tripp looked at Melissa and tried to read her expression. Was she annoyed? Jealous? "I didn't know you were a member."

"I just joined last week, but I love it already. How do you like it, Melissa?"

Melissa seemed surprised to have Sandy address her. "Oh, this is my first time. Tripp said this was the best gym in town."

Sandy turned her attention back to Tripp and gave him a flirty smile. "He's right. I'll have to make sure I come more often. I didn't see you at my bakery this weekend."

"Sorry, I was busy." And he didn't need an erotic cake—or anything else

from her for that matter.

“It’s okay. Best not to overindulge in sugar anyway. And I can tell you eat healthy, Tripp.” She inched closer to him, then right in front of Melissa, pinched his bicep. “Look how strong and fit he is. He definitely works out.”

Tripp backed away and cleared his throat. “I’m not *that* in shape.”

“Of course you are! The girls at the bakery were excited when I told them I knew the TV weather guy. You make meteorology look sexy.”

Tripp glanced at Melissa, but she seemed more interested in the settings on the machine.

Sandy’s watch beeped, and Tripp was grateful that something other than him had her attention. “Oh shoot, I’m meeting a friend for spin class. I don’t want to be late. I’ll catch you two later.” Sandy leaned closer and once again, pinched his bicep. “Enjoy your workout, sailor.”

Once Sandy was gone, Tripp turned to Melissa. “I am so sorry. If I had known we were going to run into her again, I would have suggested we do something else.”

“She sure is flirty with you, isn’t she?”

Tripp smiled. “There’s that jealousy again.”

“I’m not jealous. I just get annoyed with overly-flirty women. Why did she call you sailor?”

“We spent a lot of time on my grandfather’s boat.”

“Forget I asked,” she said. “Come on, let’s do what we came here to do, and then go before we run into her again.”



A GOOD WORKOUT usually had Melissa feeling great, but the whole experience had been marred by Sandy’s presence. Even though Tripp claimed he wasn’t interested in her, she noticed the way he stared at her chest. Though she supposed it was kind of hard not to with Sandy shoving her boobs in his face.

Melissa hoped to avoid her for the rest of their workout, but in the locker room, there she was again. Sandy reminded Melissa of that popular girl in eighth grade gym class, the one confident in her looks and who already had breasts. She walked around in nothing but a towel with her blond hair in a perfect bun. Melissa looked at her own reflection and sighed. She was a

sweaty mess with flushed skin and damp hair falling out of her ponytail.

As she reached for a towel, she felt a tap on her shoulder. Sandy.

“Hi, Melissa. I was hoping I would run into you again.”

Sandy stood there with a bubbly smile and her perky tits peeking out from her towel. The woman had no shame.

Melissa pointed to Sandy’s chest. “Your towel is slipping.”

Sandy looked down and pulled her towel up. “Whoops. Well, we’re all women. Nothing we haven’t seen before.”

But it wasn’t anything Melissa *wanted* to see.

“So, are you and Tripp together?” Sandy smiled at her, as if Melissa was her friend and they were chatting about hot guys.

“Well, it’s complicated.”

Sandy’s eyebrows knitted. “Are you dating?”

“Not exactly? I mean, we used to be together, but we broke up. But I don’t know, we might try again?” Her voice had a question at the end. She hoped, but there was always that possibility that it wouldn’t happen.

Sandy smiled. “He’s such a sweet guy, isn’t he? Adventurous with a hint of nerdiness.” Sandy laughed. “I don’t know why that turns me on.”

Melissa gave Sandy a fake smile and took her body wash out of her bag. “He’s something, that’s for sure.”

A shower freed up, and Sandy walked toward it. “Nice seeing you, Melissa. Come stop by my bakery!”

Melissa couldn’t think of an occasion where she would ever need a phallic-shaped cake, but gave Sandy a polite wave.

When another shower opened up, Melissa ducked in and quickly rinsed off. She hoped Sandy would be gone by the time she finished, but no such luck. From somewhere in the locker room, she heard Sandy’s annoying little giggle.

Hoping to sneak past her, Melissa headed to her locker. On the other side of the wall, she overheard Sandy and another woman. Melissa hurried to get dressed.

“I always had fun with Tripp,” Sandy said.

Melissa raised her head.

“I was the one to deflower him,” Sandy continued with a giggle. “God, I had so much fun teaching him. He was a fast learner.”

“You should go for it,” Sandy’s friend said.

“Did you see that mousy brunette he was with?”

“*Mousy?*” Melissa mouthed. She wasn’t mousy. Was she?

“Yeah, I saw her.”

“She looks like she has a stick up her ass,” Sandy said. “She said they used to date and might get back together, but I don’t see what Tripp could possibly see in her.”

Melissa looked at the mirror. Sometimes, she wondered that herself.

“Well, you better lay your claim on him before she does,” the friend said.

“Oh, please,” Sandy said. “All I have to do is remind Tripp of the good times we used to have, and the choice will be easy. I bet the makeup person at the news station has a hard time covering up all those frown lines on her face.”

Sandy and her friend laughed, their voices growing faint. The door squeaked open, and Melissa breathed a sigh of relief when they were gone. She knew she didn’t like Sandy, but she hadn’t expected to be insulted.

Out in the lobby, Tripp was waiting. “I’ve got the truck warming up. Ready to go?”

Oh, was she ever. “Yeah. I ran into Sandy in the locker room. She has no modesty whatsoever.” She decided not to mention the conversation she heard.

Tripp nodded. “Yeah, that sounds about right. I mean, she runs an erotic bakery.”

Melissa followed Tripp out into the cold. An icy wind hit her cheek, and she rushed to the warmth of Tripp’s truck.

“Whew!” he said as he got inside and closed the door. “That’s a cold wind, isn’t it?”

“I thought you liked this weather.”

He smiled. “I do.”

“Do I look mousy?”

His smile fell. “Mousy? Why would you say that?”

“Do I have wrinkles? You can be honest.”

Tripp shook his head. “Where is this coming from?”

“I just feel like Sandy is so ... beautiful. And I’m ... not.”

Tripp looked her directly in the eyes. “I don’t know where you got a crazy idea like that. You’re beautiful.”

“Yeah, when you met me. I was young and in my twenties and would have won some beauty pageants had I bothered to enter them. Now, the best years are behind me, and I’m on television. Holly’s going to have to work

extra hard to hide all my frown lines. Meanwhile, Sandy's been blessed with great genes. And she's the same age as me, I assume."

Tripp stared at her for a moment, mouth agape. "Okay, I don't know where this negative talk is coming from, but you stop it. I have always thought you were beautiful. And even more so now. Don't compare yourself to Sandy. She's attractive, sure, but she's not so pretty on the inside. She's a spiteful and vindictive person. She only cares about what she wants. You, on the other hand, are kind and caring, and I would choose you over Sandy in an instant. Why do you think I broke up with her?"

"I thought you said you broke up when she slept with someone else."

"She did, but I didn't like her as a person and was thinking of ending things anyway. She just beat me to it."

"Do you really mean all you said, or are you just telling me what I want to hear?" Because she knew Tripp, and he had done that before when he lied about wanting to get married.

Tripp reached out and touched her cheek. "I meant every word."

He let his hand linger, and for a moment, she thought Tripp might kiss her. But then, he moved his hand and placed it on the gear shift. Melissa focused on fastening her seat belt, slightly disappointed.

If he had kissed her, she would have let him.



TRIPP WHISTLED as he ran up his porch steps, pleased with how his morning was going. There had been a moment when he'd almost kissed her, but he was proud of himself for holding back. Not that he wanted to hold back, but he wanted it to be Melissa's decision.

Inside, he found both dogs waiting for him, which gave him pause. Why were both dogs waiting for him?

He knelt down and gave Bella a pat. "What are you doing out of your crate, girl?" He distinctly remembered her going inside it, but then the dryer had buzzed and distracted him. Shit. He forgot to latch it.

Tripp hung his coat on the hook and saw a piece of cotton on the hardwood. He picked it up. "What's this?"

Bella turned away and trotted off toward the living room.

"What's that dog gotten into?" Tripp muttered as he shucked his shoes

off. As he entered the living room, he found the answer.

Stuffing littered the rug, and a saggy and ripped throw pillow was strewn in the midst of it. The couch hadn't fared much better. It sported a giant rip in the arm and a dog-sized bite out of the cushion. The leather recliners, thankfully, had been spared.

"Ahh, fuck," Tripp said, mentally kicking himself. It was his own damn fault. He should have made sure the crate was secure before left. He shook his head at the dog. "You really made a mess, didn't you?"

Bella wagged her tail. It was almost as if she were proud of the destruction she had caused.

From her bed, Rosie rested her head on her paws, eyes open.

"I know you didn't do this, Rosie. Bella, you've been a very bad girl."

Bella curled up on her bed, and Tripp sighed. Having a puppy was like having a toddler some days.

On his way to retrieve the vacuum, he kicked a soda can on the floor. And there was more garbage, a trail of it. In the kitchen, the trash can lay on its side with its contents spilling out.

Not only had his living room been destroyed, but the kitchen had too. Tripp turned the trash bin right side up and replaced the lid.

He picked up as much as he could, but he'd need the broom to get the rest. Tripp had tossed out a bag of stale cereal yesterday, and Bella had gotten into that. Cheerios were scattered everywhere.

On his way to the hallway closet to retrieve the vacuum and broom, he saw a sock on the floor. He picked it up, spotted another one, and followed the trail until it led into the laundry room. His basket of clean clothes had been toppled over. Tripp found his swim trunks on the floor and saw Bella had chewed a hole clean through them.

He was going to have to buy more socks and swim trunks.

His cell rang, momentarily distracting him from the carnage. When he dug the phone from his pocket, he sighed. His father.

He considered letting it go to voicemail, but it was the second time he'd called. He couldn't avoid him forever. Best to get this over with now.

He pressed the answer button. "Hey, Dad."

"So, he is alive. Thought you weren't going to pick up."

Oh, he had been thinking about it. "I just walked into the house."

"You're home? That's good. I had some business up your way. Thought I'd drop by."

Tripp took in the sight of his messy house with trash and laundry and couch stuffing everywhere. “You’re here? You’re coming now?”

“I tried to call you last night to let you know, but you didn’t answer.”

“You could have left a message.”

“I hate leaving messages. Figured I’d try you again. Remember I said I wanted to check on the lake house some time?”

He’d said that weeks ago.

“You’ll be home, right?” his father asked.

“I’ll be here for a couple more hours.”

“Great, see you in about twenty minutes.”

The call abruptly disconnected, and Tripp cursed under his breath. He wasn’t in the mood for his father to come over and criticize him, and he definitely didn’t want his father seeing his house like this. Tripp ran a hand through his hair and surveyed the destruction. Bella stood up and wagged her tail.

“You had to pick the day my father decides to visit to destroy my house.”

Bella cocked her head. Normally, Tripp would find that amusing, but his day had just taken a turn for the worse.

For the next fifteen minutes, Tripp scrambled to clean the house. He picked up the laundry and put it in the washer. He vacuumed the stuffing. He disposed of the trash and swept the floor. He even had to bring out the spray cleaner and scrub the hardwood because food from a takeout container had left a wet and sticky mess.

As he was putting away his cleaning supplies, he heard a car door. Tripp hadn’t had a chance to clean up his normal mess. He’d left a pile of junk mail on the coffee table, and last night’s dirty dishes were still in the sink. The doorbell rang, and both dogs began barking.

Rosie was well-behaved, but he didn’t trust Bella to not jump on his father’s expensive business suit. And his father—not a dog person—wouldn’t appreciate that.

The doorbell rang again.

“Hold on!” He led Bella to her crate and made sure it was latched this time. Bella barked and paced, eager to see who had arrived.

Tripp finally opened the door. His father stood outside with a scowl on his face.

“Took you long enough,” Arthur Bartlett Jr. said as he walked inside.

“Sorry. I had to crate the puppy.”

From her cage, Bella continued to bark excitedly.

“Sorry for the noise.”

“How are you, son?” Arthur asked, giving him a quick one-armed hug before moving into the living room.

“Fine. The new job is going great by the way. In case you were wondering.”

“You know the door is always open if you want to work at Bartlett Enterprises. You could get an office next to your brother. Certainly pays more than the news station, I’m sure.”

Tripp nodded. His dad never stopped trying to get him to work for the family company. “I know, but I’m happy being a meteorologist. That’s what I went to school for.”

“At least you’re back in Minnesota. I’m surprised Daniel didn’t want the lake house, but I’m glad you did.”

Arthur walked around the living room. He stopped in front of the couch and stared at the ripped fabric. “What the hell happened here?”

“The dog. It just happened.”

“Is that what happened over here, too?” His father pointed to some furniture where Bella had scratched and bitten the wood. He examined everything with a critical eye.

“Yeah, but I’m not going to keep all this furniture. It’s old. I’ll just hold on to it until Bella is out of her biting phase.”

Arthur looked at him. “These dogs are ruining this place. I could smell them when I walked in. And look, dog hair is everywhere. Even this floor looks scratched up. I’m sure that was caused by the dogs too, huh?”

“The hardwood is scuffed from years of people walking on it. I’m going to eventually change the floors.”

In the kitchen, his father looked at the sink. “Do you need a housekeeper?”

“I have one. She comes once a week.”

“Perhaps she needs to come more often.”

“What the hell, Dad? Did you just come over here to criticize me?”

Arthur’s expression softened. “No, but I would like to think that you’re taking care of this house. I’d hate for your grandfather to see the condition it’s in.” He opened the cabinet under the sink and peeked inside.

“If it’s in bad condition, it’s because of Daniel. He was supposed to be taking care of it before I got here. But I’m making improvements.”



Arthur moved on to the dining room and peered out the window to the backyard. “What the hell is that? A hot tub?”

“Yeah. I’ve always wanted one.”

His father turned his attention away from the window. “Why would you waste your money on something like that? It’s an eyesore.”

Tripp clenched his fists. “Says the man who has his own hot tub. Indoor, I might add, next to the heated pool.”

Arthur went back to the living room and began to inspect the fireplace. “That was all your mother’s doing. She was always buying something extravagant that we didn’t need.”

From her crate, Bella let out a whimper. She hated to be caged when there was company.

“Can’t you shut that dog up?”

“Sure, but then I’d have to let her out, and you probably don’t want her jumping on you and getting that expensive suit ruined. Speaking of which, you probably have to head back to the office, right?”

Arthur headed for the front of the house. “I thought I could stop by and we could have a pleasant lunch, but clearly, I was mistaken. I do have to get back.”

Relief flooded Tripp as he walked his father to the door.

“I’ll be in touch,” Arthur said as he made his way down the porch to his car.

“Goodbye.” Tripp closed the door.



MELISSA STEPPED out of the hair and makeup room, feeling a little bit better about herself. She apologized to Holly for giving her so much work when it came to applying makeup.

Holly looked at her like she didn’t understand. “What are you talking about? I barely have to put makeup on you at all. Your skin is gorgeous.”

*Take that, Sandy.*

Over at the weather desk, Tripp dropped his papers, and one of them flew her way. She reached for it and handed it back. “You got it?”

He gave her a weak smile. “Yeah. Thanks.”

Since they arrived at work, Tripp kept to himself, which was unusual for

him. She thought they'd had a good time at the gym. There had been that awkward moment when she thought he might kiss her. She didn't think that could be bothering him, but something was clearly on his mind.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, not making eye contact.

"No, you're not. Because I know you, Tripp. I know when something's bothering you. What is it?"

He sighed. "When I got home, I realized I forgot to crate Bella, and she destroyed my house. And then, my father dropped by."

Of course, that explained Tripp's mood. "You saw your dad? How did that go?"

"About as well as to be expected. He said the dogs are ruining the lake house, and he thinks the hot tub is an eyesore. He didn't stay long."

"I'm sorry."

Cassie breezed past. "On the air in five!"

"It's okay," Tripp said, returning to their conversation. "Hey, at least I finally got a chance to see him. So, what do you want to do tomorrow? Want to go to the park and build a snowman?"

She noticed that Tripp changed the subject, and decided not to press the matter. "Actually, Eileen called. Her mother is sick, and she asked if I could take Charlotte to her dentist appointment tomorrow. And I'm going to hang out with her and the baby before that, so raincheck on playing in the snow?"

"You just want to get out of doing something cold."

His smile had returned, which Melissa took as a good sign. "Eileen did call me, but yes, I'd prefer not to do anything winter-related. Wait, you said snowman. Does that mean we're going to get more S-N-O-W tomorrow?"

Tripp just grinned.

"Damn," Melissa said. "That four letter word again."

**M**elissa poked her head into the house. No one came when she knocked, and the door was unlocked. “Hello? Eileen?”

“In the nursery,” Eileen called out.

Melissa headed to Eli’s room. There, she found Eileen fastening a fresh diaper on the baby. “The door was open, so I let myself in.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get away. We had a poopy situation.”

Melissa looked down at the happy baby on the changing table. “Hi, sweet boy. Auntie’s here!” She couldn’t resist giving his chubby cheek a squeeze, and Eli cooed. “Oh, he’s so adorable.”

“You want to take him to the living room while I clean this mess up?”

“Don’t have to ask me twice.” She scooped the baby up.

Eileen offered a burp cloth. “Take this. He has the tendency to spit up.”

Melissa placed the cloth over her shoulder like she’d seen Eileen do, then went to the living room with her nephew. It was such a nice feeling to hold a baby, and Eli was an easy baby to handle. He didn’t get fussy often.

She sat on the couch and inhaled the spot between his neck and shoulders. It smelled like pure bliss. If only they could bottle that scent up.

Eileen came into the living room. “Thank you. It’s so nice to have another set of hands.”

“I don’t mind at all.” Melissa looked at the baby and smiled. “I think Eli loves it when Auntie comes for a visit. Don’t you, sweet baby?”

Eli cooed in response.

Eileen joined them on the couch. “He does love his auntie. I’m glad you could come. Usually my mom helps, but with her cold, she didn’t want to get

the baby sick.”

“I’m happy to come for a visit. I needed some baby time anyway.” Melissa gave the top of his fuzzy head a light kiss. His tiny fingers reached out when she held him in his arms, and Melissa imagined what it would be like to hold her own baby.

She sighed. Someday. She hoped.

“So, how’s work? How’s dating? Are you making Tripp jealous? Jeff said he was at your house trying to win you back.”

Melissa didn’t talk to Eileen often. It wasn’t that they weren’t close, but with a newborn and a precocious third-grader, Eileen was always busy. Melissa hadn’t had a chance to tell her anything yet, so she caught Eileen up on what had been going on.

Eileen hugged her knees to her chest. “So let me get this straight. You went from saying that there was no chance of reconciliation to you thinking you’ll get back together by Valentine’s Day. What changed?”

“You were right when you said I was still in love with him.”

Eileen grinned. “Then get back together with him already.”

Melissa cradled the baby closer to her chest, feeling his warmth and smelling a whiff of baby shampoo. “I wish it was that simple. It’s not that I don’t want to get back together, but he hurt me so badly. I want to be sure he means it this time.”

Eileen nodded. “I get it. You want to make Tripp work for your forgiveness. And he broke up with you on your wedding day. I’d be cautious too.”

“He said he still doesn’t want to get married. But then he said, ‘at least not right now,’ so when will he be ready? I don’t want to wait another ten years.”

“Why is he reluctant? Classic male fear of commitment?”

Eli started to fuss, so Melissa popped the pacifier in his mouth. The baby began to suckle, and Melissa relaxed. “I don’t know. His parents didn’t have a great marriage, so maybe he’s messed up from that. He acts like he wants a commitment, but when we broke up, he said he never wanted to get married. He acted as if getting married was like jumping off a cliff.”

Eileen reached for the blanket on the back of the couch and tossed it over her legs. “In a way, it is. When you decide you want to be with someone for the rest of your life, you sort of have to take a leap of faith. And married life isn’t without challenges, but it has its benefits too.”

“You and Jeff make it seem pretty easy.”

“We’ve had our share of difficult times, but we work through our problems. Right now, I’m trying to convince your brother to stop smoking. I told him I won’t kiss or sleep with him until he does.”

Melissa laughed. “If you gave him an ultimatum like that, then I’m sure he’ll stop soon!”

Eileen placed her hand on Melissa’s. “Give Tripp a chance to know what a life with you could be like. He’ll come around. It takes some men a little longer to get there.”

“That’s the same thing Kit said.”

“I think Kit’s right.”

Eli spit out the pacifier and let out a cry, providing a welcome distraction from the discussion.

“He’s hungry,” Eileen said, and Melissa handed him over.

“How do you know he’s hungry?”

Eileen cuddled the baby close and settled him in for a nursing session. “I just do. You get a feel for these things once you’ve been a mother for a while.”

Once he latched on, Eli stopped crying.

“See, that was it,” Eileen said.

Melissa extended her arm to touch his fuzzy little head. “Oh, I want one of these. Ever since I was little, I just wanted to get married and have a family, and I feel like I’m running out of time. I mean, I know I could adopt, but I just want someone to share that with me, you know?”

Eileen smiled at her. “You’re not running out of time. I know plenty of women who don’t marry and have babies until their forties. Forty is the new thirty.” Eileen laughed. “So, back to Tripp. I understand you’re taking things slow, but it sounds like you’ve been enjoying your time with him.”

Melissa’s smile returned. “Yeah, I have been. It sort of feels like old times, except with snow.”

Eileen laughed.

Melissa glanced at the clock. “I should probably leave now to pick up Charlotte from school.”

“I really appreciate you doing this. I don’t want to drag the baby out in the cold.”

Melissa reached for her purse. “It’s no problem at all.”

Eileen walked her to the door, and Melissa gave the baby, now sleeping, a

kiss on his forehead. “I’ll be back soon. And thanks for the advice about Tripp.”

Eileen gave her a one-armed hug, as she had the baby in her other arm. “If it’s meant to be, you’ll work things out.”

Melissa hoped.



CHARLOTTE’S DENTIST was in Winter Lake, which was perfect, because Melissa needed to find a new dentist for herself. They were in and out in an hour, and afterwards, Melissa took them to Betty’s for lunch. Charlotte’s teeth still hurt, but soup was easy enough to eat.

Charlotte picked up the menu. “Let’s get dessert. Ice cream is soft.”

“You want ice cream? It’s five degrees.”

Charlotte smiled, showing off her pearly whites. “It won’t melt.”

“Okay, you can have ice cream. I’ll have coffee. I need something warm.”

“You really hate being cold, don’t you, Auntie?”

“Let’s just say that I’ll be glad when it’s summer.”

It was snowing when they left, which wasn’t unexpected. Thanks to Tripp, she always knew when there was a chance of snow. She had to listen to his forecast multiple times a day. Unfortunately, she still had to drive in it. She had to get Charlotte home, then head to work.

The road to her brother’s house was a long stretch of highway lined with trees. Melissa didn’t mind the drive, but during adverse weather, the roads were slippery. She lowered her speed.

“It’s pretty,” Charlotte said.

It wasn’t so pretty when she was driving through it, but Melissa stayed calm. People drove in snow all the time up here. She would have to get used to it.

“Turn on the radio, Auntie.”

Melissa switched it on and turned the dial. “Tell me when it’s playing something you like.”

Suddenly, a blur of brown fur jumped in front of her car. The crash was jolting, and both Melissa and Charlotte screamed. The deer bounced off her hood and fell to the side of the road.

After the impact, her first thought was Charlotte. She turned around to see

if she was all right. “Are you okay?”

The girl nodded, but her eyes were wide. “That was a deer.”

“She jumped in front of the car. I couldn’t avoid her. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I think so. That was scary.”

“Yeah, for me too.” Her foot was shaking on the pedal, and her heart was still in her throat. She eased off the brake and slowly pulled over to the shoulder. The snow was really coming down now, and visibility was limited. The last thing she needed was for an unsuspecting car to rear-end them. As an afterthought, she turned on the hazard lights. She turned off the radio so she could concentrate.

“I think the deer is dead,” Charlotte said.

Melissa squinted through the falling snow, and sure enough, it was lying on the side of the road. “Yeah, looks like it.”

“Are you hurt, Auntie?”

Her heart was racing, and Melissa was pretty sure the adrenaline coursing through her veins was keeping any pain she would feel later at bay, but she put on a smile. “I’m fine. I’m going to see how bad the damage is. You stay inside.”

A cold blast of wind hit her face as she stepped outside. Snow flew into the car, and she slammed the door to keep the warm in.

After inspecting the damage, Melissa had her doubts about the car’s drivability. The hood was crumpled, and a headlight was busted. And with the storm, it was already difficult to see.

“Damn deer,” she muttered.

Back inside, Charlotte looked concerned. “Is your car really bad?”

“Afraid so. I don’t think I should drive. We better call your dad.” She looked for her phone and found it moments later on the floor. The impact had knocked it down, but the phone was okay. She called Jeff. It rang several times, then went to voicemail. Melissa hung up and dialed again. “Come on, Jeff, pick up.”

Charlotte pulled out her own phone. “I’ll try Mom.”

Jeff still didn’t answer. She turned to look at Charlotte. “No luck with your mom?”

Charlotte shook her head no. “She’s probably busy with Eli.”

“I’ll text them.” Melissa tapped out a quick message to them both, telling them to call asap. “We’ll wait for them to call back. We can give them a few

minutes.”

“Why don’t you call Tripp?” Charlotte suggested.

With neither Jeff or Eileen answering, he was her next call, and maybe the best option. They weren’t too far away from Winter Lake yet, and Tripp would get to them faster than Jeff or Eileen. And from the looks of the snow covering her windshield, the weather was only going to get worse.

“Okay, Tripp it is.” Melissa pulled up his number. The call connected to her Bluetooth, and she and Charlotte waited as it rang. “Come on, pick up.”

“Hey,” Tripp answered. “This is nice—you calling me for a change.”

“Hey. I need help. I just hit a deer, and I have Charlotte with me.”

“Are you two okay?”

“We’re fine, but I’m not sure about my car. Jeff and Eileen aren’t answering their phones, and the snow is coming down pretty hard. I need someone to pick us up.”

“I’ll be right there. Where are you?”

Melissa gave him the location, and Tripp promised he would be there soon.

“Thanks, Tripp. I’m going to call my roadside assistance. They’ll have to tow my car.”

“Okay, do that. I’m on the way.” He disconnected, and Melissa sighed in relief. Tripp was coming. She looked at Charlotte. “I guess all we can do now is wait.”

Several minutes passed. The tow service had been notified, and Eileen finally called back. She said Jeff would pick up Charlotte from the station since Melissa had to go to work soon.

Melissa checked her watch and wondered how long it would take Tripp to come. Right on cue, she heard a vehicle pull up behind her. She couldn’t see out of her windshield on account of the snow, but she could just make out a black truck in her side mirror. Tripp.

He appeared at the door, and Melissa rolled her window down. “I’m so glad to see you. Thanks for coming.”

“No problem. I’m going to look at your damage.”

She rolled the window back up and watched as Tripp examined the front of her car. Moments later, he climbed into the passenger side.

“Whew, that’s an icy wind!” Tripp said, closing the door behind him. He turned around and looked at Charlotte. “You hanging in there?”

Charlotte nodded. “Yeah, but the deer is dead.”



“The more important thing is that you two are all right.” He turned to Melissa. “Are you in any pain?”

Melissa shook her head. “No.”

“You might feel some in the morning. Sometimes it hits after the adrenaline rush is over.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. What do you think about my car?”

“You have some bad front end damage.”

“Yeah, no kidding. The tow truck should be here soon.”

“When it does, have them take it to Winter Lake Body Shop. Ronnie’s the owner, and he’s done work for me before. I hit a deer too on this road.”

“I never hit a deer in Kansas. Came close to hitting a cow once.”

“Yeah, they’re all over here.”

“Great, another wonderful thing about Minnesota. Lots of deer.”

Tripp glanced at Charlotte. “We’ve got to find something about Minnesota your aunt likes.”

Charlotte laughed.

“I like hot summers,” Melissa said. “And lakes.”

“We’ve got lakes,” Tripp said. “We’ve got 10,000 of them.”

“I like lakes when they’re not frozen.”

Charlotte leaned forward in her seat. “But then you can’t ice skate.”

Tripp grinned at Melissa. “She’s got you there. And I know you love ice skating.”

“Fine, the one thing I like about Minnesota. Now can you turn off this snow shower already?”

Tripp laughed. “No turning off a Saskatchewan Screamer. She’ll stop when she’s good and ready.”

Thirty minutes later, the tow truck arrived, and Melissa watched as her battered Honda was hauled away. She had a sinking feeling it was beyond repair. And just when it had finally been paid off.

“Look on the bright side,” Tripp said. “Maybe now you can get a vehicle that can handle Minnesota winters a little better. And this has been a mild one so far.”

“A mild winter? You’re joking, right?”

Tripp grinned. “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”



AT THE STATION, Melissa introduced Charlotte to a few colleagues and gave her a tour. Charlotte, however, was more interested in the break room.

“You have a vending machine! Can I have some quarters?”

Melissa took a handful of coins out of her pocket. “Get the peanut M&M’s. At least they have protein. And don’t tell your mom I gave you sugar before dinner.”

Charlotte put the money into the machine. “Are you and Tripp boyfriend and girlfriend again?”

That was complicated to explain. “Not exactly, but we might get back together. I don’t know.”

The M&M’s dropped, and Charlotte dug the yellow bag from the drop slot. “If you do, are you going to get married?”

Melissa smiled. “That’s the million dollar question.”

Charlotte gave her a confused look.

“Never mind,” Melissa said.

When they left the break room, they found Tripp in front of several computer monitors with weather maps on each of them.

Charlotte ran toward him. “Are you tracking the snowstorm?”

Tripp swiveled around in his chair. “I am. Are you enjoying your tour so far?”

“Auntie showed me the break room. I can’t believe you have a vending machine.”

“It is pretty great, but not as great as the coffee maker.” Tripp held up his mug. “Need a lot of caffeine to get me through the afternoon.”

Melissa put her hand on Charlotte’s shoulder. “You want to sit in the anchor chair and pretend like you’re reporting the news?”

“Or I could show you how the green screen works,” Tripp said.

“Yes!” Charlotte was already halfway to the screen.

Tripp grinned and followed her. “Kids can’t resist that,” he said to Melissa.

Melissa couldn’t help but feel a pang of jealousy, which was stupid. Any kid would be more fascinated with the green screen.

Charlotte ran her hand across it. “How do you know what you’re pointing to on the map?”

“From the monitors.” Tripp pointed to where they were.

Charlotte moved in front of the screen. “This is weird. How does it not show the green on TV?”

“The computer looks for anything green and projects the weather map onto that color. And that’s why I can’t wear green when I’m on camera.”

Charlotte smiled. “What would happen if you wore green?”

“I’ll show you. Let me go grab something.”

He left and came back moments later holding a green shirt. “I keep this on hand because the school groups love it.”

Tripp stood in front of the screen and held the shirt up to his chest. “Look on that monitor right there and tell me what you see.”

Charlotte laughed. “The weather map is on your shirt, and you’re a floating head.”

“And that’s why I can’t wear green. I get pinched on St. Patrick’s Day a lot.”

“That’s so cool!”

“Maybe you’d like to be a meteorologist when you grow up.”

Charlotte shook her head. “No. I’m going to be an Olympic figure skater. Is it going to be cold enough to skate outside on the lake?”

Melissa snorted. “It’s always cold enough to skate on the lake.”

Tripp held up his finger. “Actually, there are some winters that are unseasonably warm, and the lake ice isn’t safe.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Melissa said.

“Will it be cold enough?” Charlotte asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Charlotte.”

Her brother’s voice surprised her. Jeff was standing behind the camera watching them.

Charlotte ran toward her father. “Daddy, Tripp was showing me how they do the weather map on the news!”

“I see that.” Jeff gave her shoulder a pat. “Go get your things and we’ll go. The weather’s bad, and we want to leave before it gets too dark.”

When Charlotte left, Jeff looked at Tripp, and Melissa thought she saw her brother’s eye twitch. “You okay, sis?” he asked, though he kept his eyes on Tripp.

“I’m fine, but I don’t think my car’s going to make it.”

“You need a better vehicle anyway.”

“That’s what I told her,” Tripp said. “Jeff, how’s it going?”

Melissa remembered how their last interaction had gone and hoped there wouldn’t be a repeat.

“I guess I owe you one for picking up Melissa and Charlotte.”

“It was no problem. The deer are pretty bad on that road.”

“I know. I hit one too a few months ago.”

Melissa let out the breath she'd been holding. At least her brother was cordial.

Charlotte came back with her backpack over her shoulder. “I'm ready.”

“I'll walk you guys out,” Melissa said.

In the lobby, a frigid wind and a flurry of snow blew in as Jeff opened the door. “I've got the truck parked at the curb. Let's go.”

Melissa pulled Charlotte in for a goodbye hug. “I'm sorry our day was spoiled.”

“It was great! Except for the deer, but it was fun seeing the station. Auntie?”

“Yeah?”

“I like Tripp. I think you should be his girlfriend again. Bye!”

Charlotte ran out the door, bringing more chill inside. Melissa rubbed her arms as she watched Charlotte climb into the backseat of the truck.

To Charlotte, life was simple. Tripp was a nice guy, and Melissa should be his girlfriend.

But in the adult world, it wasn't that simple.



TRIPP EYED THE CLOCK. There were a few minutes left of the final broadcast, and he couldn't wait to leave. It wasn't that he was happy Melissa hit a deer and wrecked her car, but he was glad the universe had thrown him a bone. Giving Melissa a ride home meant more time with her. On top of that, the weather was bad. Tripp would be sure to drive slowly.

“Let's get a final check of the weather,” Bob said. “Going to be cold, right Tripp?”

“Yeah, Bob, it's going to be freezing. Overnight, expect temperatures about twenty below zero as the remnants of this Saskatchewan Screamer make their way out of here.”

Melissa turned to Tripp, and he could tell she was about to say something off-script. “So last week, we had an Alberta Clipper. And this week, we're having a Saskatchewan Screamer. I'm almost afraid to ask what's next.”

“Well, there’s always a chance for a Manitoba Mauler,” Tripp said with a laugh.

“Which one is worse?” Bob asked.

“And which has the most snowfall?” Melissa added. “That’s all I’m concerned about.”

“Actually, they’re the same kind of storm with the same amount of snowfall. The only difference is the name. Just depends on where that low pressure system originates in Canada.”

In his earpiece, the producer hissed at him to wrap it up.

“Fortunately, it’ll be out of here by morning, so we’re looking at maybe three to four inches of snow. The bigger issue is going to be the cold temperatures. In that case, I’m going to go ahead and issue a snuggle alert for tonight. Bundle up under those covers and stay warm.”

Melissa laughed, and Tripp knew it was genuine laughter. He loved making her laugh. “I’ll crank the heat up for sure. Well, that’s going to do it for us. From all of us at WLMN Channel 12, have a good night.”

“Goodnight,” Bob said.

“And stay warm,” Tripp added.

“We’re clear,” someone yelled, and Tripp took off his microphone and earpiece.

Bob pushed his chair back. “All right, that’s a wrap. You two enjoy your evening.”

“Goodnight, Bob,” Melissa said.

Tripp nodded. “Goodnight.”

Sharon made her way over. “Hey, great job, you two. I just want to tell you that since you both came on board, our ratings are up. I think people enjoy the banter between you two. Keep at it.”

Tripp smiled. “I did have someone tell me the other day that I make meteorology look sexy.”

Sharon laughed. “Great! Have a good night.”

Once Sharon was out of earshot, Tripp leaned in to whisper to Melissa. “Hear that? They enjoy our banter. We’re good together, Melissa. Everyone can see that.”

He wanted her to smile and say she agreed, but Melissa was quiet. Maybe she was tired. She’d had, after all, a long and stressful day.

“I’m exhausted,” she finally said.

“Give me ten minutes to wrap up things here, and I’ll take you home.”

Melissa nodded. “Thanks, Tripp. I appreciate that.”

He watched as she got up and headed to her office. He wanted to take her home and stay there overnight. Maybe soon. He still had some time before Valentine’s Day to convince her.

**M**elissa's car was totaled, though that hadn't been a surprise with the mileage on her Honda. And because she didn't have rental coverage, Tripp offered to be her ride.

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Driving you around Winter Lake? Of course, I don't mind. Put off buying a new vehicle as long as possible." Tripp gave her a sly grin.

But Melissa couldn't put it off. She needed something to drive. "Take me to that used car lot by the DMV. I'll start looking there."

Tripp shook his head. "No, that place is shady and they probably sell lemons. I'll take you to the Subaru dealership. They have used vehicles there too."

Melissa bucked her seatbelt. "Fine. I'm not picky. I just want something affordable."

"And something that drives in the snow," Tripp added. "And one that has a block heater. You'll want that when the temp is minus forty."

Melissa's jaw dropped. "Minus forty? You're joking, right?"

Tripp just grinned.

At the dealership, a salesman approached them before they'd even gotten out of the truck.

"It's like he could smell us," Melissa whispered.

"Don't worry. I won't let him rip you off."

"Morning, folks," the salesman greeted. "Are you looking for a new vehicle?"

"She is," Tripp said.

“A deer totaled my car last night.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. Well, I’m Alan, and I’d be happy to help you find something new by the end of the day. What did you drive before?”

“A Honda Accord.”

“I got a brand new Subaru Legacy that came in yesterday. That’s comparable to your Accord. It’s right over here.”

The salesman led them to the shiny new vehicle and immediately launched into his pitch.

“Would you like to test drive her?” Alan asked.

“It’s nice, but she’s looking for something used,” Tripp said.

Alan showed Melissa several other vehicles, but all of them had one thing in common—too small.

“Any of these seem like something you’re interested in?” Alan asked.

“Actually, I was thinking of something more family friendly. You know, a vehicle with room for a car seat or two? Got to think about the future.” She glanced at Tripp. It was good to remind him of what she envisioned her life would someday be like.

Tripp, however, seemed unfazed by her comment. “And she needs one that can handle Minnesota winters. She hates driving in the snow. And definitely something with remote-start.” Tripp looked at her and winked.

Alan smiled. “I know just the vehicle.” He led them to the front of the lot where a red Subaru Forester was parked. “Got this last week. Only a few years old and not a lot of miles. Perfect for driving the kids around in all kinds of weather.”

Melissa ran her hand along the exterior. It was certainly big enough, and it looked like it could handle winter weather. “Red is my favorite color.”

“Would you like to test drive it?”

Melissa nodded. “Absolutely.”

A few minutes later, Melissa was settled behind the wheel with Tripp in the passenger seat and the salesman in the back. The interior was clean as if it were brand new, and even though it was a few years old, there was still a faint new car smell.

“It’s a good car,” Tripp said. “I ought to get one of these. Good for toting the niece and nephew around.”

“Oh yes,” Alan said. “Plenty of room back here. My wife and I have a Forester. We haul all the kids and their hockey gear,” he said with a laugh. “You two planning a big family, huh?”



Melissa stayed quiet. Tripp had done most of the talking to the salesman. Let him answer that question.

“Kids are great,” Tripp said. When Melissa glanced at him, he winked at her again. He was always doing that. She never knew anyone who actually winked except Tripp. She kind of missed that.

Back at the dealership, she handed the keys back to Alan.

“Well, how do you like the way she drives?” Alan asked.

“I love it, but I’m not sure if I can afford it.” Even though it was a used car, it was still pricey.

“We can work out something. Come on to my office. Let’s talk about it.”

Alan led them to a small room inside and promptly left to go grab the paperwork.

“He’s determined to make a sale,” Melissa said, a little put off by Alan’s assumption. She’d let herself have fun with the test drive, but when they’d gotten back, reality hit her. It was out of her price range unless she could negotiate a lower price.

“I thought you liked the Subaru,” Tripp said.

“I do, but it’s expensive. I’m going to tell Alan I’d like to keep shopping.”

She stood, but Tripp reached for her arm. “Hey, why don’t you let me help you with the down payment?”

“Tripp, no, I can’t ask you to do that.”

“A few thousand is nothing to me. And I’m not asking you to pay me back. Please, let me help you. I’ve got to do something to make up for being a shitty boyfriend to you.”

Melissa cracked a smile and returned to her seat. “You do owe me. Do you know how much I paid for that wedding dress?”

“You were gorgeous in it. Do you still have it?”

She shook her head. “No. Gave it away to a consignment shop.”

“Oh. Too bad.”

*Too bad?* Why would Tripp care that she got rid of her wedding dress? She wanted to ask him, but then, Alan breezed into the office.

“All right, Ms. Martin, let’s get you a new car.”

Melissa smiled at Tripp. “Yes, let’s get me a new car.”



LATER AT WORK, Tripp was preparing the forecast when the receptionist informed him he had a visitor.

“A visitor? I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“I think she’s a fan. She brought you muffins.”

“Muffins?” *Shit*. Only one person would bring him baked goods.

“Do you want me to tell her you’re busy?”

Tripp pushed his chair back. “No, that’s okay. I know her.”

In the lobby, he found Sandy pacing with a basket. When she saw him, her face brightened.

“Hi, Tripp!”

“Sandy. What are you doing here?”

“Since you’ve been too busy to visit my bakery, I thought I would bring the bakery to you. Fresh mini muffins!”

She handed him the basket. Though he didn’t want anything from Sandy, he remembered she could make a damn good muffin. “Thanks. That’s really nice of you.”

“There’s blueberry, banana nut, and I even made a few with chocolate chips. I know you like those.”

Tripp could smell them, and they did look good. “I do love chocolate chip. I’ll share them with my coworkers.”

“I put my business card in there. I could make all your workplace cakes. You’ll tell them, won’t you?”

“Sure.” Of course, he didn’t think it would be appropriate to bring a penis cake to work. He thought of the absurdity of it, and almost laughed.

“It’s so good to see you again, Tripp,” Sandy said in a low voice. She inched closer, and Tripp caught a whiff of her perfume. “I watched your forecast last night. That whole ‘snuggle alert’ bit was cute.”

Tripp felt a hand on his ass and backed away. “Look, Sandy, I appreciate the muffins, but I have to get back to work.”

“Oh, sure, I understand. You probably have to track that next snowstorm, huh? What did you call it? A Manitoba Mauler?” Sandy laughed.

“Yeah, but I was just joking. We’ll probably have a regular ole snow shower.”

“I should get back to work too. Already I have a ton of orders for the weekend.”

“Birthday parties?”

The corner of Sandy’s lip turned upward. “Among other things. Bye,

Tripp.” She gave him a quick peck on the cheek, then turned toward the door. “Enjoy those muffins!”

When Tripp turned around, he saw Melissa. He wondered how long she had been standing there. She turned to walk away, which answered his question.

“Melissa? Melissa, wait.”

He followed her all the way to her office. Once there, he shut the door behind them. He didn’t want any of their coworkers to overhear.

“She just showed up.”

Melissa shrugged. “Okay.”

“You had a look on your face like you were upset.”

Melissa sat in her chair. “I’m sorry, I just don’t like that woman.”

“I hope you didn’t get the wrong idea. She kissed me on the cheek.”

“Yeah, because she likes you.” Melissa reached for a tissue and handed it to him. “Here.”

“What’s this for?”

“Look in the mirror.” She pointed behind the door. “On the wall over there.”

Tripp took a look, then groaned when he saw the red lipstick stain. “Damn. I’ve got to be on air in an hour. Thank god you saw that before Lance. I’d never hear the end of it. Sandy strikes again.”

“And with a basket of baked goods, apparently.”

Tripp placed them on her desk. “You want one?”

Melissa stared at the muffins for a long moment, then finally took one. “There goes my diet.” She popped the muffin in her mouth, then nodded. “These are actually pretty good.”

Tripp took one with chocolate chips and tasted it. “Or sinful.”

Melissa cracked a smile. “I’m surprised they aren’t dirty muffins.”

Tripp chuckled. “I know, right.” He sat down, relieved that Melissa wasn’t upset about Sandy. “So, I guess now that you have a new car, you don’t need me to pick you up tomorrow. Which is a bummer, because I was sort of hoping I could give you a ride to work again.”

“Thanks again for helping me at the dealership. I promise I’ll pay you back.”

“I told you that you don’t have to. But if you really want to, you could hang out with me and we’ll call it even.”

Melissa smiled. “Can we do something I want to do?”

“Not ice skating again. Please.”

“No, I’m still kind of sore from the car accident. But I didn’t get much time to visit with Rosie this weekend. I’d like to see her again.”

Tripp smiled. “I think that can be arranged.”

Melissa took two more muffins and pushed the basket away. “Put these in the break room before I eat them all. Damn Sandy.”

Tripp took the muffins and smiled. “Can’t wait for tomorrow.”



BELLA BARKED and scratched at the door, while Rosie sat patiently. Tripp attempted to get to the door, but the dogs kept blocking his path.

“Girls, if you move, I could let her in.”

Finally, the dogs moved a few inches, and Tripp opened the door. A bundled up Melissa rushed in and rubbed her gloved hands together.

“It’s freezing out there!”

“I got the fire going just for you. Take off your coat and come warm up.”

Melissa took off her layers, then knelt down to greet the dogs. “Hi, puppies.”

Bella licked her cheek, and Rosie pressed her nose against her knee.

“I told them you were coming, and they’ve been excited all morning.”

Melissa cradled Rosie’s face in her hands and kissed her head. “I’m excited to see you, too. Oh, I want a dog. I miss having one.”

“If you want to take Bella for a few days, feel free. I’m still mad at her for destroying my house. Come look at this.” He led her to the living room and showed her the torn up couch.

“Oh my god. She did this?”

“It’s my fault. I’ve been spending so much time with you. I guess she’s a little jealous.” Tripp reached down and gave Bella a head rub. “Aren’t you, girl? Well look, now I’m spending the morning with all my favorite girls.” Not wanting to leave Rosie out, he scratched the old lab behind her ears.

Melissa sat on the ripped couch with Bella. “Well, labs can be destructive if they’re not getting enough attention. Remember that time Rosie got mad we kept her out of the bedroom?”

“And she ate your red thong,” Tripp finished for her.

She laughed. “That was fun explaining to the veterinarian.”

“Yeah, your face was about the same shade as the underwear.” He joined them on the couch with Bella sandwiched between them. “This one gets into that kind of trouble too. Not only did she tear up the couch, but she got into the trash and the laundry. It was such a mess.”

“Good thing you’re so cute,” she said to Bella in a baby voice. “Hard to be mad at that cute face for long.”

Rosie extended a paw as if she wanted to jump on the couch too, but backed off.

Melissa patted the ripped cushion. “Oh, sweet girl. You can come up here too.”

“Jumping is hard for her these days. She has arthritis.”

“Oh, poor Rosie. Well, I’ll just have to come down to you. I want to be closer to the fire anyway.”

Melissa settled herself on the rug. Rosie rested her head on her lap. Bella, not wanting to feel left out, joined them.

Tripp was left alone. “Well, guess I know who’s their favorite.”

She gave Bella a head scratch. “You’re going to need to do something about that couch.”

“Yeah. I’ve been meaning to go furniture shopping anyway. I need a new mattress for my room, and one for the guest room too.”

Melissa stood and wiped the dog hair off her pants. “Then let’s do it.”

“Furniture shopping?”

“Yeah. Remember I said I would help you decorate your place? Might as well start with the living room. Bella destroying your couch was a blessing in disguise.”

Tripp smiled. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

“Too bad Bella didn’t destroy those tacky recliners.”

Tripp retrieved his key from the wall hook, stepped outside to the porch, and remote started his truck. “What’s wrong with them?”

“They scream man cave. Are you trying to be like Joey and Chandler from *Friends*?”

Tripp shrugged. “Maybe I am. It’s a good chair. You sat in it when we had our movie night. Wasn’t it comfortable?”

Melissa sighed. “Yes.”

“That’s because I paid good money for them. And they’re new. I’m not giving them up.”

“I guess we’ll have to find a couch that’ll go with them.”

Tripp reached for his coat. "I was thinking of something leather to match."

"Bella's going to destroy it."

Bella walked over to them at the sound of her name. Tripp gave her a pet. "No, you won't, right, Bella? You learned your lesson, didn't you?"

Bella barked.

"See? Bella won't do it again."

"She won't if you crate her." Melissa nodded her head toward the crate against the wall.

"Oh yeah. Don't want to forget that."



AT THE FURNITURE STORE, Melissa followed Tripp through the maze of couches and coffee tables. Her gaze inadvertently went straight to his ass. His butt could always fill out a pair of jeans nicely. She made an involuntary sound, and then cleared her throat to cover it.

Tripp turned around. "You okay?"

Melissa nodded. "This cold weather irritates my sinuses." No need to let on that she was admiring his butt.

"I don't like any of these." Tripp stopped in front of a plush beige couch.

Melissa sat on the sofa and rubbed her hand across the velvet material. It was the kind of couch you sank into, and Melissa thought it felt like a pillow. "It's comfy. Try it."

Tripp had his eyes toward the back of the store. "Wait a minute. I think I see what I want."

He walked away, and Melissa reluctantly stood. She would love to have a couch like this for her living room. Her old couch was ratty and stained. This one would be perfect. For a brief moment, she considered buying it for herself, then looked at the price tag.

"Never mind that," Melissa said to herself. With a new car payment, furniture would have to wait.

In the back, she found Tripp relaxing on a black leather sofa. He pushed a button to activate the recliner, then leaned back with his eyes closed.

He opened them when he noticed Melissa standing over him. "I like this one."

“You don’t need a couch that reclines. That’s what your recliners are for.”

“Yeah, but when company comes over, they’ll want to relax too.”

“What about this one?” She walked over to a similar black leather couch. “It’s the same as that one, only it doesn’t recline.”

Tripp ran his hand along the armrest. “No, I want this one.”

“But the one you’re sitting in is like a thousand dollars more.”

“Don’t care. It’s worth every penny.” He patted the space next to him. “Sit down. Tell me what you think.”

Melissa took the opposite end rather than the middle seat next to him. She sank into the leather cushion, and without meaning to, exhaled loudly.

“Comfy, huh?” Tripp grinned at her.

He had her there. It *was* comfy. “Yes. But I still think it’s a waste of money. I’m sure the other couch is just as comfortable.”

“Not a chance. It doesn’t have any of the bells and whistles like this one. You really need to get the full effect. Check out the recliner.”

She touched the side of the couch and felt around for the controls. There were four buttons. Why in the world did there need to be four buttons? What kind of fancy sofa was this?

She pressed one of them, but nothing happened. She pressed a second one, and still, nothing happened. “What’s wrong with this thing?” She leaned over the arm in an effort to get a better look at the buttons.

“You’re probably pressing the wrong one.” Tripp slid over to her side. So much for not sitting next to him.

Melissa sat with her back to the chair as Tripp leaned over into her personal space. He was close enough to smell his aftershave, and damn, it always smelled so good. She closed her eyes and tried not to react, willing her mind to think of something, *anything* else.

Suddenly, he reached for her hand, and she felt a jolt at the touch. “It’s this one.”

Tripp finally moved off her lap, and she pressed the button. The chair reclined as her legs lifted.

“So? What’s the verdict?” Tripp asked.

Melissa closed her eyes. “Okay, I will admit that this feels nice. And oddly ... warm.”

“Yeah, those are the heated seats. You must have turned it on when you were fiddling around with the controls.”

She stared at him wide-eyed. “They make couches with heated seats? Are

you kidding me?”

Tripp grinned. “You like that, huh?”

Melissa sighed as the heat warmed her. “I might actually be able to take off my coat.”

“And just so you know, that leather couch you want me to buy over there doesn’t have this feature.”

“What do the other buttons do?” Melissa leaned over the arm to look at the controls again. She pressed them all to figure them out. The first one she knew reclined. The second one moved it out of the reclined position. The third one turned on the heated function. What did the last button do? She pressed it, and the chair started to vibrate.

“It massages too,” Tripp said.

Melissa felt her tension ease. “Okay, buy it. It’ll match your recliners, and the heated seats and massage features are worth it.”

“I knew you’d agree. Now, I need a bed.”

Melissa glanced around the store. “I see three mattresses.”

“Yeah, not much selection here. We’ll go to the Mattress Emporium.”

Twenty minutes later, Tripp pulled into a parking space outside the mattress store. Melissa had already unbuckled her seatbelt when Tripp cursed.

“What’s wrong?”

Tripp nodded toward the strip mall. “I forgot that Sandy’s bakery was next door.”

Melissa clipped her seatbelt back on. “Then we’re just going to have to go somewhere else.”

“Yeah, but this place has the best selection of mattresses. Come on, maybe she’s not working. We probably won’t even see her.”

Melissa unbuckled her seat belt again. “Fine.” She opened the door slowly as the pink van in the next space over had parked too close to the line. Melissa had to squeeze between the vehicles to get out. Once she stepped onto the curb, she looked at the van. It was backed into the space with a full view of the doors, covered in pastel-colored decals of cupcakes and flowers. The *Sinful Delights* logo was front and center.

“I think Sandy’s here.” Melissa pointed to the vehicle.

Tripp was already at the door to the mattress store. “It’s the bakery’s van. That doesn’t mean she’s here. Come on, let’s get inside.”

A cold wind hit her face, and Melissa hurried to the door Tripp held open.



She'd left her hat and gloves in the car because Tripp always made sure the heat was on high in the cab, and she hadn't needed to wear them.

Inside, the smell of new mattresses hit her. There were about twenty-five of them out on the floor. "Now I know why this is called the Mattress Emporium."

"Yeah, they've got a big selection."

Right away, the lone employee on staff approached them. They were the only customers in the store, so they had his full attention. "Hi there, folks. I'm Mike. What can I help you two find today?"

There was the implication that they were shopping for a bed together, so she separated herself from the men. She pretended to be interested in the Serta mattress up front.

Mike walked Tripp to the back to show him the new arrivals—probably the most expensive mattresses in the store. A few moments later, Tripp motioned for Melissa to join them.

"Now these are the queen size," Mike said, indicating the two mattresses side by side. "But we do have a king available. They're the same brand with different levels of firmness. Try them out and see how you like them."

Tripp sat on one of the beds and bounced a little. "It's firm, but I like it."

"Do you ever wake up with back pain?" Mike asked. "Sleeping on a firm mattress can help that."

"Sometimes, but anyone sleeping on my sagging mattress would get back pain." Tripp lay down to get the full experience. He glanced at Melissa and smiled. "Come try it."

Already this morning, she had tried to avoid looking at his ass and being close enough to smell him. And now, he wanted her to lie next to him. Her hormones needed to calm the hell down.

"Come on," Tripp urged again.

She sat on the edge facing away from Tripp. The mattress was hard as a rock.

Mike grinned. "What do you think?"

"Feels like Papa Bear's bed to me."

Mike laughed. "It is firm."

She felt a poking at her back. "Lie down," Tripp said. "I want to see how you like it."

"What I think doesn't matter. It's your bed."

"But I need your help deciding."

Melissa sighed. “Fine.” So much for avoiding being near him. She spread out on the mattress and stared at the tiled ceiling. Tripp was tall and took up a lot of space, and the queen size mattress felt very small.

“Well?” Tripp asked.

“I hate this one. It’s too hard.”

“It’ll be less firm once you break it in,” Mike said. “But I can show you some softer mattresses.”

The store phone rang, and Mike frowned. “Excuse me for a moment.”

While Mike answered the call, Tripp inched closer to her, his lips near her ear. “I have some ideas on how we can break it in,” he whispered.

“You would.” Melissa gave him a playful shove back to the other side of the bed.

Tripp got off. “Remember when I had that horrible futon?”

“Well if you want to recreate that experience, buy this mattress.” Melissa glanced at the price tag and scoffed. “That much money for that uncomfortable thing?”

Tripp moved to the next mattress. “Let’s try out another one.” He eased himself onto the bed. “Oh. That’s very different.”

“Good different?” she asked.

“You tell me.” He gave the space beside him a pat. “Plenty of room.”

“Hardly,” she said, but she lay down next to him. Unlike the hard mattress, this one felt like a pillow.

“Well?” Tripp asked.

“Definitely Mama Bear’s bed.”

“But do you like it?”

“Well ... yes and no.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s comfy, yes. But I don’t think I’ll be able to get off it.” Even now, Melissa felt as if she were sinking, and right into Tripp, of course.

“I think I like this one,” Tripp said, wiggling his eyebrows.

She rolled off the bed. Damn, did he smell good. “It’s too soft.”

“Yeah, agreed. But cozy.” He grinned.

Mike returned. “Sorry about that, folks. Well, have you found one you like?”

“We’re still looking.” Tripp looked at Melissa and smiled. “I think we’re going to have to lay down on every one of these until we find Baby Bear’s bed. You know, one that’s just right.”

When she suggested furniture shopping, she didn't anticipate she'd be lying next to him on a mattress. The sooner she helped Tripp find a bed, the better.



TWENTY MINUTES and several beds later, Tripp made his decision. Melissa was partial to the softer mattresses while he liked a little firmness, so he settled on one that was somewhere in the middle. He didn't say it, but he was glad Melissa was there to give her input. He definitely wanted to make sure he had a mattress she liked too, for obvious reasons. He chose the same mattress, albeit a smaller size, for the guest bedroom. And even better, both were in stock and could be delivered by the weekend.

Outside, the temperature had dropped, and Tripp exhaled to see his breath. "Going to be a frigid one tonight."

"It's frigid every night," Melissa said flatly.

The bakery van parked next to his truck had its back doors open. A bundled up figure was loading some cake boxes inside. Tripp took one look at the knitted pink cap and knew exactly who it was. *Shit.*

The figure turned around, and Sandy's eyes locked on him. Her rosy face lit up. "Tripp! You came!" Sandy closed the van doors and made her way over to him.

He pointed to the doors he had just exited. "I was doing a little mattress shopping."

Sandy leaned in and tilted her head. "New bed, huh? Did you get a good one?"

"Top of the line," Tripp replied.

Melissa cleared her throat. "It's freezing out here." She blew on her hands—he knew she was cold because she'd left her hat and gloves in the truck.

"Come inside!" Sandy reached for Tripp's hand and pulled him toward her shop.

Tripp reluctantly let Sandy drag him. "We can't stay long. We've got to grab lunch and get to work soon."

"You have time for a pre-lunch cupcake!" Sandy held the door open for them, and Tripp smelled her perfume as he walked past. She always wore too much, and she never smelled as nice as Melissa.

Sandy rushed inside and skipped ahead of them. "Lola, look who it is!"

A young redhead with freckles looked up from the register. Her jaw dropped. "Oh my god. Tripp Bartlett from WLMN News in the flesh."

Sandy positioned herself between Tripp and Melissa, then grabbed hold of his arm. "Told you I knew the hottie weather guy."

Lola locked her green eyes on Tripp. "You're my favorite. Can I have your autograph?" The girl hastily grabbed a pen and a *Sinful Delights* napkin.

Tripp grinned and took the items. "Sure. I guess I am sort of a local celebrity."

Sandy gave his bicep a gentle squeeze. "You're definitely a celebrity."

Tripp scribbled "To Lola" along with his name across the napkin. He slid it back to her, and Lola held it against her heart.

"I'll treasure this forever."

Tripp felt Sandy's hot breath in his ear. "Lola has a little crush on you."

He thought the attention was fun, but when he glanced at Melissa, she didn't look amused. Lola wasn't the only one who had the hots for him, especially the way Sandy was clinging to his arm. Slowly, he extracted himself from her grip. "So, you said something about cupcakes?"

"Right!" Sandy left his side and stepped behind the counter. "Do you have a flavor preference?"

He looked at Melissa, who at the moment, was flipping through a binder on the counter. He spotted a boob cake on the page and lost his train of thought. He looked up at Sandy. "I'm sorry, what?"

Sandy grinned. "Never mind. I know exactly what you want. I'll be right back."

Sandy left, and Tripp felt awkward with Lola staring at him and Melissa looking at boob cakes. He turned his attention to the display case and saw a cake shaped like a penis smiling at him. A white filling drizzled out of the tip with the words "The Best is Yet to Cum!" written in icing. There was no safe place to look.

Sandy came back with a pink *Sinful Delights* box in hand. "I personally baked and decorated these myself." She slid the small container across the counter.

Tripp lifted the lid and saw two cream-colored cupcakes with a pink nub in the center. "These cupcakes look like nipples."

"I know! Aren't they cute? They were leftovers from a bachelor party." Sandy leaned over the counter and gave him a suggestive look. "I know

you're a breast guy."

Tripp's eyebrow twitched. "Well, they smell good." He didn't want to keep staring at them, so he closed the box. What the hell was he supposed to do with nipple cupcakes? Sandy couldn't have given him nice, normal cupcakes. No, she had to give him cupcakes shaped like little boobs, and a pair to boot. Well, it was an erotic bakery. What did he expect? "I'll try them later." Definitely not at work though, unless he wanted his coworkers to think he was a pervert. "How much do I owe you?"

"No charge. Just free samples for a very sexy weather guy."

Out of his peripheral vision, he caught Melissa's eye daggers. At least he was making her jealous. "Well, thanks for the cupcakes."

Sandy leaned over the counter. Her open coat revealed the cleavage spilling out of her shirt. She gave him a flirty grin. "My pleasure. Well, I need to run now. I've got to make some deliveries. I'll walk you out."

Outside, Tripp hadn't even unlocked his truck when Sandy threw her arms around him. Her perfume cloud hit him as she smacked a kiss on his cheek. "Come see me again," she whispered.

Melissa stood on the sidewalk, shivering, and Tripp hurriedly unlocked his truck so she could get in.

Once inside, he cranked the engine and turned the heat on full blast. Sandy's van in the next space fired up, and moments later, she was gone.

"I am so sorry about that," Tripp said. "You were right. We should have gone somewhere else for a mattress."

"At least it's over now." She reached for a tissue in her purse and handed it to him. "She got you again."

Tripp pulled down the visor mirror and saw the lipstick stain. "I wish she'd quit doing that."

Melissa tugged on her hat and gloves. "Did you notice she didn't say one word to me? That whole time. It was like I was invisible. Neither did Lola. I guess she didn't want my autograph."

"I'll take your autograph anytime. You're still my favorite local celebrity. Want a nipple cupcake?" He held out the box.

Melissa pushed it away. "No thanks. I'm not eating a cupcake that looks like that."

Tripp peeked in the box again. "At least they smell like regular cupcakes." Tripp was a little tempted to have one, though he felt weird about it. He closed the box and placed it on the center console. "Speaking of

cupcakes, I'm starving. Lunch at Betty's?"

"Sure."

He put the truck in reverse and backed out of the parking space. "That was my first and last experience with an erotic bakery."

"I was looking at her cake samples in that binder. She charges fifty dollars for one of her boob cakes. Or twenty-five for a single boob."

Tripp laughed out loud. "Does she charge that much for a butt? Twenty-five dollars per cheek?"

"I don't know. I didn't get to the ass cakes. But she's got over twenty types of penis confectioneries."

Tripp laughed again. "She's living up to her nickname. Sex-crazed Sandy."

“**W**hat are you and Tripp doing today?” Kit asked on the phone as Melissa walked to the living room. It was Saturday, which meant she didn’t have work, but it also meant that Tripp had plans for the whole day.

“Snowmobiling. He promises it’s just as fun as riding a jet ski, but given that it’s an outdoor winter activity, I have my doubts.” Melissa peeked out the window, saw the snow covering the driveway, and groaned.

“Everything okay?”

“Sorry. I just noticed I have to shovel the driveway again.”

Kit laughed. “You really don’t like winter, do you?”

“I could tolerate fifty degrees and rain, but these daily snow showers are pissing me off.”

“Well listen, I’m about to tell you something that’ll put you in a good mood.”

Melissa headed to the kitchen and opened her pantry. She needed to go grocery shopping, but didn’t want to leave the warmth of her house. “Minnesota is about to have an unexplained heat wave in January?”

“Sorry, just because I’m a meteorologist doesn’t mean I can change the weather. Clear your calendar for next weekend. I’m coming to see you.”

“What? Really?”

“Of course! We have to celebrate your birthday!”

“But you’re pregnant, and you have morning sickness. And it’s winter in Minnesota. Are you sure you don’t want to come for a visit in the summer?”

“Come summer, I’ll be as big as an elephant. So yes, I’m coming now. I

want to celebrate you turning thirty-five. And I want to see where you work. I miss you, bestie.”

“Aww, I miss you too. You’re not driving, are you?”

“No, I’ll take off Friday and catch a flight to Minneapolis. And don’t worry about picking me up from the airport. I can get a rental car.”

“I’m picking you up. I wouldn’t have it any other way. And plus, I’ve been loving my new car. It’s been so much easier to drive in the snow.”

“See, you’re getting used to it,” Kit said. “Before long, driving in snowy weather will be nothing.”

Melissa peeked out her window again. “I just wish there wasn’t so much of it.”

A few hours later, Melissa stood in Tripp’s driveway. It was sixteen degrees, and despite the multiple layers of clothing, the cold still penetrated her bones and made her shiver.

“Can’t we do this when it’s warmer?” she complained.

Tripp, who evidently didn’t know what being cold felt like, looked up at her from behind the snowmobile. “If we wait until it’s warmer, the snow will melt.”

“Well can we do this when it’s not as windy? The temperature may be in the teens, but with the wind chill, it feels colder.”

Tripp grinned. “You’ve been paying attention to my weather reports.”

“Then you should know the wind will be in our face.”

Tripp stood and handed Melissa a helmet with a face shield. “That’s what this is for.”

He turned his attention back to the snowmobile and pulled the cord several times. Nothing happened.

“Is it broken?”

“Sometimes it takes a while.” He pulled the cord a few more times. Still nothing.

“Does it need gas? New battery?”

“It shouldn’t.” Tripp pulled the cord one more time. When it still didn’t fire up, he kicked it. “Damn it. Daniel never takes care of this thing. I’m sorry. I guess I should have checked it beforehand.”

“I guess that means no snowmobiling today, huh?” she said with a grin. She wouldn’t be heartbroken if she had to spend the day inside hanging out with the dogs.

Tripp moved over to the second snowmobile. “No, we can still do it.



Mine should be working.” He gave the second snowmobile a pull on the cord, and the engine roared to life. “See, look at that?”

“So, what, we’ll take turns?”

Tripp grinned at her. “No, we’ll just ride together. It’s probably for the best since you’ve never been on one. You can hold on to me like you did that time we rode that motorcycle.”

The last thing Melissa wanted to do was to *hold on* to him. She’d been doing her damndest to keep her distance, but it was too late to back out now. Tripp was already putting on his helmet.

“Ready to go?” Tripp asked.

Melissa sighed and put on her own helmet. “I guess so.” She climbed onto the seat behind Tripp and wrapped her arms around his waist. She shuddered, not from the cold, and her brain scolded her body to quit enjoying this. She wasn’t going to give in already. Hell, it wasn’t even February yet. Tripp still had twenty-three days to show her he had changed.

“All set?” Tripp said over the roar of the engine.

“Yep.”

“You’ll love this. I promise.” Tripp hit the throttle, and they were off.

To her surprise, Melissa enjoyed every moment of it. He took her around the frozen lake and through the trails in the woods. The hills were gentle and not too scary. It was just the right amount of exhilaration without worrying about falling off. Though when they made any turn, Melissa held on to Tripp for dear life.

Soon enough, Tripp’s lake house came into view. He headed for the garage and came to stop in the driveway. The snowmobile’s engine cut off, and Melissa realized belatedly that she could let go of him.

Tripp hopped off and removed his helmet. “Well? What did you think? Did you like it?”

“Liked it? I loved it.”

“I knew you would. Told you it was similar to jet-skiing, and I know you love that.”

Melissa took off her helmet. “Jet-skiing is better, but this was the next best thing. Too bad it has to be so damn cold.” She wouldn’t admit this to Tripp, but she had warmed up. Probably from Tripp’s body heat. *The Human Furnace*. An image of them in bed flashed through her mind. She shoved that thought back down again. She was *not* going there.

“And what did you think about the landscape? Minnesota is beautiful,

isn't it?"

"I prefer a tropical scene over a winter one, but it wasn't awful."

Tripp grinned. "I'm wearing you down. You'll eventually love it here."

"Sure," she scoffed.

But a small part of her thought it wasn't too bad.



INSIDE THE HOUSE, Tripp cranked up the heat and started a fire. He was sweating, but he knew Melissa appreciated the warmth. Hell, he'd tolerate a little sweat if it meant Melissa would stay longer.

Just as he expected, Melissa sat next to the fire and held her hands out to it.

"Got to thaw out," she said. "Some coffee would be great, if you've got any."

Tripp grinned. "If I've got any?" He laughed. "Hell yeah, I have coffee. And I was just thinking of getting a cup myself. I'll get a pot ready. I even bought vanilla creamer because I know you like it."

Melissa flashed him a smile. "Appreciate that."

Tripp headed to the kitchen. "You know, I hadn't taken the snowmobile out in a while. That was fun."

"Yeah, more fun than I thought it would be," Melissa said. "For a winter activity, anyway," she added.

Tripp scooped coffee into the machine and turned it on. "I could take you on some trails in the area. There's one about an hour away. We could do that next Saturday."

"Oh, can't. Forgot to tell you. Kit's coming for a visit."

He poked his head around the wall. "Oh yeah? That's nice."

"She's coming for my birthday."

Tripp's hand paused midway as he reached for a mug. Her birthday? *Shit*. How had that date slipped his mind?

"You got quiet all of a sudden," Melissa called out. "You didn't forget, did you?"

"No, of course not," he said, maybe a little too quickly.

"Oh yeah? When is it?"

"January twenty-seventh." He remembered the date, but only because his

birthday was the same date in December.

“Okay, just checking. Hope you got something special planned.”

“I do, but not going to give you any hints.” His heart raced as he hurried to look at his refrigerator calendar. The twenty-seventh was Thursday, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Thank god, he had time to think of something. Maybe Lance could give him some ideas.

A few minutes later, he carried two steaming mugs of coffee into the living room. Melissa was on the floor with both dogs resting their heads on her lap. “You must be the dog whisperer. I swear they like you more than me.” He set her coffee on the table.

“Maybe they’d like you a little more if you took better care of them.”

Tripp was taken aback. “What are you talking about? I take good care of my girls.”

“Oh yeah? When’s the last time you gave this one a bath?” She held Bella’s face in her hands, then gave Tripp a grimace. “She stinks.”

“Okay, so I haven’t given Bella her weekly bath yet. She hates bath time.”

Melissa turned her attention to the other dog. “Well, Rosie never minded bath time, and she smells a little rank, too.”

Tripp settled into his chair with his coffee. “Okay, you’re right. I could be a better dog dad. I’ve gone nose blind to their stench. I’ll give them a bath tomorrow.”

“No, we’re doing it after we finish our coffee, because I’m not smelling dog funk all afternoon.”

“Are you sure you want to help me wash the dogs? Because I’ll warn you ... Bella can be feisty.”

Melissa picked up her mug, and with her other hand, gave Bella a pat on the head. “I’m the dog whisperer. I’m sure I can handle her.”



MELISSA ROLLED her sleeves up as the tub filled with water. Ideally, she’d prefer to give the dogs a bath outside with a hose, but since there was snow on the ground and it was nearly ten degrees, that wasn’t an option. Tripp’s guest bathroom would have to do.

There were several fluffy towels on the shelf, and Tripp said they would

need all of them. She placed two on the floor to minimize wet paw prints on the tile. She grabbed another and placed it on the back of the toilet. Best to have one easy to reach.

As she turned off the faucet, Tripp walked in with Rosie. "I know Bella stinks more, but we'll let Rosie go first. Bella tends to splash."

Melissa knelt down and motioned for Rosie to come closer. "Come on, girl. Time for your bath." She tapped the edge of the tub, but Rosie didn't move.

"She has a hard time getting in and out," Tripp said.

"Oh, right. Her arthritis." She gave Rosie a loving pat. "Poor girl."

"All right, Rosie, it's bath time." Tripp picked up the dog with what looked like minimal effort, then gently placed her in the warm water.

Melissa reached for the handheld shower head, turned the water on, and gently sprayed the dog's back. "Good girl, Ro."

Tripp opened the bottle of shampoo and lathered the places where the fur was wet. "This is nice having help. Giving the girls their bath is always such a chore. It'll go a lot faster with two people."

"Especially with this girl." She rinsed away the soap and was careful not to get suds in Rosie's ears. "Yeah, you like the water."

"Not Bella. Just wait and see."

"Dogs are like children. They don't like bath time. Rosie is the exception. You're such a good girl. Yes, you are."

She heard Tripp laughing and snapped her head up. "What?"

He was still grinning. "There's that baby talk again."

"Are you making fun of me?"

His expression turned serious. "No, I wasn't. I just miss it, that's all. I miss a lot of things about you. I miss us being together."

"Oh."

His smile returned, and for a moment, things felt awkward. She missed him too, but she wasn't about to say it aloud. Melissa turned her attention back to Rosie. "She needs more suds."

When Rosie was clean and towel-dried, Tripp lifted her out of the tub. "All right, I'll be back with the monster."

Melissa pulled the drain plug. "Tripp, be nice."

"She's wild. You'll see."

A few minutes later, Tripp came in with a whining and wiggling Bella. It was as if the dog sensed what was about to happen, and she had already

decided she was having no part of it.

Tripp struggled to hold the dog as Bella let out a bark. “Bella, stop! You need a bath, and this is not up for debate.” He gave Melissa a desperate look. “I’ll hold her down while you get her wet.”

“Tripp, stop fighting her. Put her down. There’s a better way to do this.”

“She’ll run off.”

“Just trust me.”

Tripp placed the dog on her feet. She didn’t run. Instead, she wagged her tail and peered into the toilet bowl. Seconds later, she took a drink.

Tripp pulled Bella back. “Hey! No drinking out of the toilet!” Bella moved toward the bowl again, and Tripp closed the lid.

Melissa couldn’t help but laugh. “You’ve got your work cut out with this one.”

“I forgot how hard it is to train puppies. Rosie was so easy.”

Rosie had been easy to train because Melissa had been there to help, but she kept that thought to herself.

“So, how do you want to do this?” he asked.

“We’re going to have to do this a little differently. We need two things. Doggy treats and peanut butter.”

“Why do we need peanut butter?”

“Do you have some?”

“Yes.”

“Then go get it!”

Tripp gave her a salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

When he left, Melissa made eye contact with Bella and shook her head. “Men. Am I right?”

Bella barked.

Tripp returned with a bag of treats and a container of Jif. “All right. I’ve got treats and peanut butter.”

“Good.” Melissa reached for treats. “First, you have to lure her into the tub. You don’t want to force her.”

“But she’ll run off.”

“No, she won’t.” Melissa gave the bag a shake, and Bella looked up expectantly. “Bella, you’re going to be a good girl, okay? I have something for you.” Reaching into the bag, she pulled out a single treat and held it over the tub. “Come on. Jump in to get it.”

Just as she expected, Bella jumped into the tub and scarfed up the treat.

“Good girl,” Melissa praised. “Look at you in the tub. Look, here’s another treat for being so patient.” Bella licked her lips and snapped it up.

“Okay, so far, so good,” Tripp said. “But what about when we turn on the water?”

“That’s where the peanut butter comes in. Take that Jif and smear some on the wall.”

“Okay.” He began to spread the peanut butter on the wall. Right away, Bella licked it up.

“When she licks it all, spread a little more. You want to keep her occupied so she won’t jump out. I’m going to turn on the water now.”

Melissa put her hand under the faucet to check the water temperature. It was warm, and she splashed just enough to let Bella’s paws get wet.

Bella backed up, and Melissa sensed her unease. “You’re a good girl. Have another treat.”

Bella apparently knew the word treat. The second Melissa took it out of the bag, Bella gobbled it up.

Tripp tapped the other edge of the tub. “Bella, look here. I’ve got some more Jif for you.”

While Bella licked the walls, Melissa started the shower. Bella was too interested in the peanut butter to notice she was getting wet.

“This is amazing,” Tripp said. “She never tolerated a bath like this.”

Melissa shrugged. “You have to make it fun for her.”

“You don’t even have a dog. Where did you learn all this?”

She reached for the shampoo and squirted a dollop into her palm. “All those years I volunteered at the animal shelter. We had to wash a lot of reluctant dogs.”

“Right. I forgot you used to do that. You really are the dog whisperer.”

Melissa soaped up Bella’s back while the dog licked the tub’s edge. “More peanut butter.”

Tripp hurriedly smeared more on the tub. “I’m surprised you don’t have a dog as much as you love them.”

“I figured I’d get one as soon as I was settled in a house. I didn’t want to have one when I lived in an apartment. They bark, and neighbors complain, you know?”

“Out here, they can bark as loud as they want. My neighbors are too far away to hear.”

“Wish my neighbors were far away.” She hadn’t met the people who

lived near her, but she already didn't like them. Her neighbor next door always had a mound of trash by the curb, which probably attracted the disgusting mouse. The one across the street looked like they ran a used car lot. It would be nice to live out here by a lake where it was quiet and peaceful. Maybe if Tripp ever proposed, she would.

"Melissa?"

She looked up, realizing Tripp had asked her something. "I'm sorry, what?"

He grinned. "I was just saying that I think Bella is ready to be rinsed."

"Oh, sorry. Got distracted."

"Where were you just now?"

She shook her head. "Not important. Let's finish her up so she can get out. I know she's ready to be through with this."

Bella had licked all the peanut butter smears and searched for more. When the dog turned around, she bumped Melissa's hand and made her drop the sprayer.

"Bella, did you do that on purpose?" Melissa asked her in a high-pitched voice.

Bella sniffed Melissa's hand.

"I think she wants another treat," Tripp said.

Melissa grabbed the treat bag. "You finish rinsing her off, and I'll give her one. She deserves one for being such a good girl."

As Melissa fed Bella the treat, a sudden spray of water hit her in the chest and she shrieked. When she looked down at her shirt, it was soaking wet. So were her jeans.

Tripp stared at her, mouth agape. "I'm so sorry!"

With no more treats or peanut butter to distract her, Bella jumped out of the tub. She gave a doggy shake, sprayed more water on Melissa, and ran out of the bathroom.

"Well, I'm already wet," Melissa said.

Tripp handed her a towel. "Again, I'm so sorry. I picked up the sprayer and didn't realize where I was aiming."

Melissa attempted to dry herself, but her shirt was so wet that it clung to her.

"I can put your clothes in the dryer for you. It won't take long."

"But what would I wear while I wait?"

Tripp smiled. "Actually, maybe we could do something that won't require

clothes.”

Melissa’s jaw dropped. Was he seriously suggesting sex?

Tripp held up his hands. “Relax. I wasn’t talking about that. I was going to suggest that we get in the hot tub. I was planning on a dip tonight anyway, and the water should be heated up by now.”

Melissa gave him a pointed look. “Okay, first of all, I told you, I’m not getting into the hot tub. It’s freezing outside.”

“But it’s not cold in the hot tub. You’ll only be uncomfortable for a second, I promise.”

“Second of all, I’m not getting naked in front of you.”

“You know, I’ve seen you without clothes before.” He leaned in close enough so that Melissa could feel his hot breath on her face. “Remember that time I licked whipped cream off of every inch of your body?”

Melissa backed into the towel rack, her cheeks growing hot. She remembered that time very well. It had been sticky as hell, but oh boy, they had a fun time washing it all off. “Tripp ... it’s different this time.”

“Why?”

“You know why. We’re not together like that anymore.”

“How about I promise not to look? I’ve got a robe you can wear.”

Melissa sighed. “You’re going to keep bugging me about getting in your hot tub until I finally cave and say yes, aren’t you?”

Tripp grinned and nodded. “Come on, Melissa. I know how you love a hot tub. And you’ll only be cold for a minute.”

She thought about it. “You promise you won’t look?”

He held up his fingers. “Scout’s honor. Come on, say you’ll get in the hot tub with me? I bet you’re feeling pretty cold in that wet shirt, aren’t you?”

She was feeling pretty miserable at the moment, and a sudden chill made her shiver. “Okay, I’ll get in your hot tub.”

“Yes!” Tripp cheered. “I’ll go get that robe.” He left the room in a hurry. When he came back, he handed her a long and fluffy pink robe. “Okay, one robe for the lady.”

Melissa thought she might drown in the fabric, but at least it would cover her. “You bought this for me?”

Tripp grinned. “I had to get you in the hot tub somehow. Oh, and I got these for you too.” In his other hand, he held a pair of crocs. “You’ll need something to put on your feet outside, and these can get wet.”

Melissa looked at the bottom of the shoe. “Wow, you even got the size



right.”

“I remember you had a million pairs of shoes. I eventually learned your size.”

Melissa smiled. “Okay. Leave so I can change.”

“All right. I’ll run upstairs and get ready myself.”

She closed the door and hurried to get out of her wet clothes. The robe felt warm and soft against her skin. Melissa made sure the sash was tied tight. The last thing she needed was for it to be hanging open and exposing everything.

In the laundry room, it took her a moment to figure out the dryer’s controls. Tripp had a fancy model with enough dials to make a simple task complicated. She eventually settled on a low heat setting, then turned it on.

Tripp returned dressed in a long blue robe and identical crocs to hers. “You ready?”

Melissa shrugged. “I guess.”

“Oh, forgot something.” Tripp ducked into the kitchen and came back with two wine glasses and a bottle of pinot noir. “Okay, now we can go.”

She followed Tripp outside to the deck and waited as Tripp switched on some deck lights. The hot tub was steaming, but she shivered.

“Cold?”

“Aren’t you?”

He set the wine on the edge of the deck, then gave her a smile. “It’s a bit nippy, sure. You want to get in first?”

Melissa shook her head. “You go.” Underneath the robe, she had already broken out into goose flesh. She wasn’t keen on the idea of losing the robe and being completely naked in below freezing temperatures.

Tripp kicked off his crocs. “The sooner you get in, the sooner you’ll warm up.”

Melissa’s teeth chattered. “Just give me a minute.”

“Oh, and just so you know, I don’t care if you see the goods.”

Before Melissa could register what he was talking about, Tripp slipped off his robe and stood naked in front of her.

She covered her eyes. “Oh my god! Tripp!”

He had the nerve to laugh. “Thank god you’ve seen me without clothes before. Wouldn’t want you to get the wrong idea about ... you know. Cold weather gives me a little shrinkage.”

“You weren’t supposed to be naked!”

“Why not?”

Melissa peeked to see if he was still out in full view. He was. She quickly turned around. “I thought you were going to put on a pair of swim trunks. I don’t have a bathing suit with me, but *you* do!”

“Wrong. Bella chewed up the only pair I had left. And try finding swimwear in the middle of winter. You can look, you know. I don’t care.”

“Just get in the hot tub already!”

Tripp laughed, and shortly after, she heard him groan as he eased himself into the water.

“You can turn around now,” he said.

Even though she knew he was in the water, she didn’t want to look. She knew she was going to turn around and like what she saw. Sure enough, his muscular chest was exposed, and that devilish grin was still plastered to his face.

“Come on in,” he said. “The water's fine.”

“Ahem,” she said.

“Oh, right. I’ll close my eyes.”

“Not good enough. I want you to turn around too.”

While keeping one eye on Tripp to make sure he wasn’t peeking, she hastily shed her robe and placed it on the hook next to his. Her plan had been to ease herself slowly into the hot tub, but the shock of the frigid air made her reconsider. She kicked off her crocs and went down the small steps into the tub.

“Don’t look!” she warned.

“I won’t. But tell me when it’s safe to turn around.”

She carefully lowered herself into the hot water and let her body adjust to the temperature. When her breasts were adequately covered, she figured it was safe for Tripp to turn around.

“All right. You can look now.”

He turned around with a smile. “So, how is it?”

Now that Melissa wasn't worried about Tripp seeing her naked, she could actually relax a bit. She sank back and moaned as the jets massaged her neck and shoulders. All week, she’d had a painful knot forming, and she was still a bit sore from the deer collision. “Oh my god.”

“I know, right?”

Melissa could barely think a coherent thought. “This feels like heaven. All of those hours on the computer are a killer on my neck.”

“And how are you temperature-wise? Feeling cold?”

Melissa smiled at him. “Not at all.”

“See? I promised you wouldn’t be cold. Now, this is the way to enjoy winter.” He moved across the tub until he was sitting next to her, close enough to where Melissa could feel his warm, wet skin bumping against her arm. But she didn’t complain. “Look at that frozen lake and all that snow. See how the moon reflects off it? This is my view all winter long.”

Despite the fact that she hated the cold, Melissa had to admit that Tripp had a picturesque view. She looked up at the sky dotted with thousands of stars. Here at the lake, the light pollution was minimal, and Melissa liked to think she could see every star in the sky.

She closed her eyes and relaxed for a while. She could hear the sound of the water bubbling, and Tripp’s occasional groan next to her.

“I’ve always wanted a hot tub,” Tripp said. “I don’t care that my dad hates it. It’s the best thing that’s happened to this lake house.”

Melissa grinned. “It is pretty wonderful.” She opened her eyes to see Tripp leaning his head against the edge of the tub, eyes closed, with the jet beating on his back. “Feel good?”

“Oh yeah.” He sat up and opened his eyes. “How about some wine?” He reached behind him and grabbed the bottle of pinot.

Melissa took one of the glasses Tripp offered and let him fill it up. “Definitely won’t turn this down.” She was naked in a hot tub with her ex. She was going to need something to get her through this evening. Her resolve to not give in was slipping.

Or maybe alcohol would lower her inhibitions, and drinking was a bad idea. “On second thought, maybe alcohol and a hot tub is a bad combination.”

“Come on, one drink won’t hurt.”

The wine did smell good, and Melissa took a sip, not being able to resist.

Tripp filled his own wine glass. “Remember that hotel we’d meet at all the time? The one with the hot tub by the pool?”

“We always had the place to ourselves,” Melissa said. “I couldn’t believe it.”

“We had some good times there. I’m surprised the staff didn’t kick us out.”

Melissa took another sip, wishing she could go back to those times. “If I hadn’t pushed us to get married, do you think we would still be together?”

Tripp sipped his wine, and for a moment, Melissa wasn't sure if he would answer her question. After a silence, he said, "I don't know. I was willing to keep up our relationship, but you seemed to think that Iowa was too far away."

"Well, it was. We were only four hours away with you in Oklahoma and me in Kansas. But Iowa? That was like an eight hour drive."

"I just assumed we'd fly to see each other."

Melissa imagined what it would have been like to pick up Tripp every weekend from the airport. It would have been better than not being together, but Melissa had wanted more. She wanted Tripp all the time, not just on the weekends. Melissa looked into Tripp's eyes. "Tell me something. Why didn't you want to marry me? Was I not good enough? Did you not want to be tied down? Was our relationship moving too fast? All you said is that you didn't want to get married, and I want to know exactly why."

A strand of wet hair had fallen across her forehead, and Tripp moved it away from her face. She felt a tenderness when his hand brushed against her. She thought for a moment he might kiss her, but she didn't want him to avoid the question. She needed an answer.

"First of all, you are good enough. It was not you. It was all me. And I know, that's what everyone says, but it's the truth. Our breakup had nothing to do with you."

"So why?"

He shrugged. "I think I was scared. By that point, my father had already been divorced for a second time, and my mother was on her third marriage. I didn't have many good examples of what a healthy marriage looked like. I guess I was afraid that if we got married, I'd lose you."

"You lost me anyway. You were the one who ended our relationship."

"No, I told you I didn't want to get married. You never gave me a chance to say I still wanted to be with you. Instead, you told me to go to Iowa, and that you never wanted to see me again. So I respected your wishes, and I stayed away."

Was he blaming this on her? "So our breakup is my fault?" she asked, her voice rising an octave.

"No, that's not what I meant. I was the one who screwed things up. I should have been honest with you in the first place."

Melissa took a sip of wine. This was a lot to take in. "And what are your feelings about marriage now?"

“I don’t think it’s something to rush into.”

“But are you still afraid of it?”

Tripp didn’t answer, and at that moment, Bella began barking. The pup stared at them through the open glass door.

“Shit,” Tripp said. “I forgot to feed the girls dinner. It’s probably time for us to get out anyway.” He moved to the ladder. Tripp hadn’t answered her question, and Melissa wasn’t about to press him on it again. She had a feeling she already knew the answer.

**M**elissa left after dinner, and Tripp, surprisingly, was relieved to see her go. As he loaded the dishwasher, the dogs stared at him.

“Why are you staring at me? You think I’m a coward?”

Rosie blinked her eyes. Bella just wagged her tail.

“Well, I know what you would say if you could talk. You’d say I was chicken.”

All throughout dinner, Tripp waited for Melissa to bring up the subject again, but she didn’t, so neither did he. To be honest, he hadn’t been sure how to answer her question about marriage, because he knew Melissa wouldn’t be satisfied with what he had to say.

He was terrified of getting married.

Why, he couldn’t say for sure. Probably all the times his father would mutter ‘don’t ever get married’ to him and Daniel when he and their mother had an argument. Or how miserable Daniel was now that he had tied the knot. And now, Daniel warned Tripp of the same thing. He and Busy once couldn’t keep their hands off each other, but everything had changed once they became husband and wife. He didn’t want Melissa to turn bitter and resentful toward him.

He looked at the dogs again, who were still staring at him. “What should I do, girls? How can I convince Melissa to give me a second chance but not to be so obsessed about being hitched?”

Bella pawed the cabinet where the doggy treats were kept, and Tripp sighed. He probably should talk to an actual person.



HER BIRTHDAY WASN'T until Thursday, but when Charlotte insisted on Melissa coming over for a little pre-birthday celebration, she couldn't refuse. It was nice to be able to celebrate birthdays in person again now that they lived in the same state.

"Do you like your birthday cake, Auntie?"

Melissa looked down at the tropical beach themed cake, complete with a blue ocean and a palm tree cake topper. "I absolutely love it."

"I told the cake lady how to design it," Charlotte said proudly.

Eileen walked into the kitchen with the baby over her shoulder. "When we told her we wanted something beachy, she took one look at us and said, 'Someone must be tired of the snow.'"

Melissa laughed. "I sure am."

"Just think of snow like sand!" Charlotte said.

"Oh, if only it were that easy. Sand is warm. Snow is cold and ... wet."

"Sand can be wet too," Charlotte said, then sneezed.

"Bless you. And true, but wet sand feels good between the toes. Snow on my bare feet would give me frostbite."

Charlotte laughed.

Eileen stood behind Charlotte and placed a hand on her daughter's forehead. "That is the third time you've sneezed today. I hope you're not coming down with something."

"It's probably just this cold weather," Melissa said. "I feel like my sinuses have been blocked ever since I got here. What I wouldn't give to breathe in some salty air right now."

Eileen nudged her. "We'll plan a Caribbean vacation next winter."

"I'd settle for temperatures above freezing," Melissa said.

They all indulged in too much cake. Charlotte went to her room to lie down, feeling sick to her stomach. Jeff was half-asleep in his recliner. Melissa was tired, but happy as she cuddled with the baby in the rocking chair.

Eileen came into the nursery. "Is he asleep?"

"Out like a light."

"Thank you for helping out with him while I cleaned up."

"Believe me, this is the best birthday present right here. I wish I could take this little guy home."

“When I’m done breastfeeding, I might take you up on that offer,” Eileen said with a laugh. “I don’t know what a full night’s sleep feels like anymore.”

Melissa slowly eased herself to a standing position, being careful not to jostle the sleeping baby, and placed him in the crib. “I’m sure he’ll sleep through the night soon.”

“So, now that we have a few minutes to talk when your brother can’t hear, how are things going with Tripp?”

“I don’t know,” Melissa said with a sigh.

Eileen frowned. “Uh oh, that doesn’t sound good. What happened?”

“I asked Tripp if he thought we’d still be together if I hadn’t insisted we get married.”

“And?”

“He said he didn’t want to end our relationship. He thought we could have still done the long-distance thing.”

“That’s a good sign. Isn’t it? That he wanted to keep seeing you?”

“Maybe.” Melissa leaned against the crib and watched her nephew sleep. “He said he was scared of marriage back then, and I have the feeling that’s how he still feels.”

“Hmm,” Eileen said.

“What?”

“I was just thinking that you can’t fault him for that. I mean, getting married is pretty scary, even if it is something you want. It’s a life-changing event. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I guess.”

“Have you decided if you want to get back together with him?”

“I want to.”

Eileen grinned. “So, get back together with him already. Why are you waiting?”

“I want Tripp to say the words. I want him to say he wants to spend forever with me. Hell, I’d even settle for an ‘I love you’, which he hasn’t said to me yet.”

“Has he ever said it?”

Melissa smiled as a memory came to mind. “He has, but it was a long time ago. The first time we made love. It was actually Valentine’s Day come to think of it. We missed our reservation at this fancy restaurant, but we ended up getting a hotel suite with room service instead.”

“Sounds romantic.”



“Yeah, he was like that. He brought me flowers. Red roses. Because they’re my favorite.”

“Can’t go wrong with roses. They’re beautiful. Just get back together with him, Melissa. You love him.”

Eileen was right. She did love him. But she still didn’t know if she could trust him with her heart.



TRIPP HANDED Lance a beer and settled into his recliner. “They still losing?”

Lance cracked the can open. “Vikings always lose. This game is pretty much over. So, where’s Melissa today? Couldn’t convince her to come watch the game?”

“She had a family thing.” Tripp opened the can. “Her birthday is coming up, and I’m screwed.” Tripp took a sip of his beer.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It is when you forget it.”

Lance reached into the bowl of chips between them. “Dude, how could you forget her birthday? Weren’t you together for a couple of years?”

“I didn’t forget the date. It just snuck up on me. Now I have until Thursday to plan something. What should I do? Take her out to dinner? And I need a gift. Maybe a new winter coat? She’s always cold.”

Lance shook his head. “No, you need to do much better than that.”

“You don’t think she’d like a new coat? And what’s wrong with dinner?”

“Tripp, you’re missing the point. You’re trying to win her back, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you need to step up your game. You need to go all out. Grand gesture and all that shit.”

“What do you mean?”

Lance shrugged. “I don’t know. You know her better than I do. Like, if she loved to ski, you’d fly her to some fancy ski resort.”

“She doesn’t want to try skiing.”

“Then find something she does like. You got to think of something much better than a coat. Or, of course, there is another option.”

“I’m listening.”

“A diamond ring.”

“Not you too.” Tripp rose from his seat and headed to the kitchen.

“I’m just saying,” Lance called out.

Tripp didn’t reply and grabbed another bag of chips. When he returned, the television showed cheering crowds.

“Oh look, the Vikings finally scored,” Lance said. “Now, if only my poor buddy Tripp could score too.”

Tripp reached into the chip bag, grabbed a handful, and tossed it at him. “Shut up, man,” he said, though he had to laugh.



AT WORK ON TUESDAY, Tripp pulled up a blank Google page. Ever since yesterday, an idea had been brewing in his mind. He’d been watching television with Melissa when a *Little House on the Prairie* rerun came on. He knew Laura Ingalls Wilder had lived in Minnesota at one time, and there was a museum Melissa would love. He’d just have to convince her to take some time off. He’d already gotten the okay from Rick.

Behind him, Lance shuffled in. Tripp felt him look over his shoulder. “*Little House on the Prairie*? Why are you googling that?”

Tripp swiveled around in his chair. “I’m working on Melissa’s birthday surprise. I thought about what you said. She loves everything about *Little House on the Prairie*. The books, the television show, everything. So, I thought I’d take her to the museum in Walnut Grove. You think it’s corny?”

“No, man, I don’t think it’s corny. I think you’ll be bored out of your mind, but she’ll probably have a good time.”

As if thinking about her made her appear, Tripp looked up to see Melissa heading to her office. She was bundled up head to toe. “There she is. Don’t say anything about this. I’m going to surprise her.”

Lance nodded. “Good luck, man.”

Tripp followed her to her office and found her taking off her winter gear. “Hey, I want to talk to you about something.”

She finally unshed her layers and sat down at her desk. “Okay, what?”

“I already talked to Rick, and he’s cool with filling in for me. I was wondering if you could ask Sharon for your birthday off.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Tripp, I just started this job. I think it’s a little too soon for me to already be requesting vacation time.”

“I want to take you somewhere for your birthday, but it’s a few hours away. And it’ll be perfect weather.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why? You’ve been working hard. Don’t you deserve a break? It’s only one day.”

Melissa was quiet as if she were considering it. “Where do you want to take me?”

“That’s a surprise, but you’ll love it.”

“Tripp, I really don’t feel comfortable asking for time off. Bob would be on his own.”

“I’m sure Bob wouldn’t mind.”

Bob popped his head into Melissa’s office. In his hand, he had a package of Little Debbie cakes. “I wouldn’t mind what?”

Tripp turned to the older man and smiled. “I’m trying to convince her to ask Sharon for Thursday off, but she’s hesitant because she hasn’t worked here for long. It’s her birthday, and I’d like to take her somewhere, but it’s a few hours away. We wouldn’t be back in time for the evening broadcast.”

“Say no more,” Bob said. “I’ll cover it.”

“Bob, I couldn’t ask you to do that,” Melissa said.

“It’s no bother. And I appreciate you holding down the fort when I took time off to be with my mother. You should take off your birthday.”

Tripp turned back to Melissa. “So? What do you say? Bob’s okay with it.”

Melissa sighed. “Let me clear it with Sharon, and if she’s okay with it, then yes, I’ll take some time off. Thank you, Bob.”

“Sure, anytime. You kids have fun, whatever you’re doing.” He gave them both a smile before heading back into his office across the hall.

“You won’t give me a hint at least?” Melissa asked.

“Nope. But I promise you’ll love it.”

“You better be right.”

Tripp pulled into her driveway at seven-thirty Thursday morning. It was way too early for her, and she hadn't even had her caffeine yet.

Tripp, meanwhile, seemed raring to go.

"Happy birthday," he said as she climbed into his truck.

Melissa yawned. "We're going to Starbucks first, right?"

"Of course."

She shivered as she waited for the heat to warm her body. "I thought you said it was going to be perfect weather."

"It will be."

She gave him a look. "Will it be warm?"

He gave her a smile. "It's winter. It's going to be cold."

"Then it's not perfect weather."

He backed out of her driveway. "Well, it won't snow."

"I guess that makes it a little better. Are you going to tell me where you're taking me?"

"Not yet. You'll figure it out when we get closer."

Melissa racked her brain for places in Minnesota Tripp thought she would enjoy. She thought of one place that was a few hours away, and she smiled.

"Are you taking me to the Mall of America?" She'd gone there with Eileen over Christmas, and she did love to shop.

"No. Why? Do you want to go there?"

"Duh. It's a mall."

"We're not going to the Mall of America, at least not today. We'll put it on the Minnesota to-do list."

After a quick stop for some coffee, they got on the interstate. Tripp turned on some music, and Melissa closed her eyes. Even though she'd had a grande-sized latte, the caffeine hadn't kicked in yet. She dozed after a while, then awoke hours later when Tripp stopped at a gas station.

"I'm going to run inside and get directions," Tripp said. "We're almost there."

"Directions? Why not just use your phone's GPS?"

Tripp smiled. "Because if I use the GPS, you're going to figure out where we're going. It'll ruin the surprise."

"It was worth a shot," she said.

They drove for a little while longer, and Melissa felt refreshed now that she had napped and had an empty bladder. She peered out the window, and up ahead, she spotted a sign.

*Welcome to Walnut Grove. Est. 1879. Childhood Home of Laura Ingalls Wilder.*

Melissa sat up straighter. "Oh my god. Walnut Grove! You're taking me to Walnut Grove?" She looked at Tripp in astonishment.

Tripp grinned widely. "That's where I'm taking you."

"I forgot she lived in Minnesota. How did you know this would be somewhere I'd love to go?"

"I know how obsessed you are with those *Little House* books, then I remembered this place was here."

Melissa couldn't believe it. Was this really Tripp? When they had been together, they'd always gone to the places he wanted to go and done the things he wanted to do. Melissa knew this was probably the last place Tripp wanted to visit, and yet, he was taking her because he knew she would love it. Maybe he had done some growing up. Maybe he had changed.

"You're kind of quiet."

"Just thinking. I can't believe you thought to bring me here. How do you even know about this place? You never read the books and you hated the show."

"My nephew had a field trip here. And I didn't hate the show exactly. As a teenager, I thought Mary was hot."

"You had a crush on Melissa Sue Anderson?" Melissa smiled.

Tripp smiled back at her. "She's pretty, but the Melissa in front of me is

way more beautiful.”

His gaze flickered to her for a brief moment before he turned his attention back to the road. “Now, let’s see if we can find this museum. Shouldn’t be too difficult. I hear this place is small.”

Melissa pointed up ahead. “There it is!”

They pulled into the parking lot, but already, Melissa had a feeling that something wasn’t right. “This place looks kind of ... empty. Is the museum not open yet?”

Tripp looked at his phone. “There’s one car over there, so someone’s here. Let me look them up.” He stared at his phone for a few moments. “Oh, fuck.”

“What? Are they closed?”

“Yeah, until April. We came at the wrong time of the year. Fuck!”

“Let me see.” Melissa took his phone and browsed through the website. “It looks like the gift shop might be open.”

“But I wanted to take you to the museum. That’s the part you would have loved. You must be furious at me. I make you take off work. We drive all this way. And the place is closed.”

Melissa reached out to touch his arm. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m not angry.”

Tripp looked at her with a surprised look. “You’re not?”

“Of course not. I never would have imagined this was where you were taking me. I definitely want to come back in April, but it means a lot that you knew this would be a special place to me.”

“I should have looked up their hours first.”

“I’m sure we could still have a good time. Why don’t we go into the gift shop and see what we can find?”

Tripp’s smile returned. “That sounds great.”



“I’M sorry your birthday surprise was a disappointment,” he said as Melissa put her shopping bags in the truck. Tripp had bought her everything she wanted at the gift shop, and he was relieved the trip wasn’t a complete bust.

“I told you—it’s not a disappointment. I’m having a great time.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Really. Though of course, I think I would enjoy it more if

the temperature was in the seventies.”

Tripp laughed. “What are you talking about? It feels good out here.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “If you say so. Let’s walk around and explore. A little movement might warm me up.”

Even though they couldn’t explore any of the museum buildings, he was glad to see Melissa appeared to be having a good time. When he felt his stomach growl, he realized the time. “We should get some lunch soon.”

Melissa grabbed his arm. “I know the perfect place! We’ll eat at Nellie’s Cafe! I saw a sign for it.”

“That was the mean girl on the show, right?”

Melissa just smiled at him.

At the restaurant, they each ordered a Nellie Burger, and Melissa seemed to enjoy the pictures on the wall.

“Did you know that Nellie Oleson was actually based on three girls Laura knew from her childhood?”

Tripp took a bite of his burger. He had learned more *Little House* trivia than he ever cared to know, but he was thrilled to see Melissa so happy. He’d have to thank Lance for pushing him to think big.

“Is it good?” Melissa asked, indicating his burger.

Tripp nodded, unable to speak with his mouth full.

“At least the food is better than Nellie’s restaurant on the show,” she said with a laugh.

After lunch, Tripp suggested they take a walk at nearby Plum Creek Park, which Melissa got really excited about. He supposed it had some sort of significance to the book. When Melissa told him moments later that the Ingalls family lived on the banks of Plum Creek, his suspicion was confirmed.

There was a footbridge over the creek, and Melissa reached for his hand and practically dragged him to it. Tripp wondered if she realized she was holding his hand. A gloved-hand, of course, but it still counted. Once they reached the center of the bridge, she let his hand go to hold the railing. He wanted to pull her back to him, but restrained himself.

Melissa nodded toward mounds of snow on the sides of the frozen creek. “You know, I hate winter, but this is actually kind of beautiful.”

“So you do like snow a little.” Tripp held his thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

“No, I hate snow. I don’t like driving in it and shoveling it from my

driveway. But just out in the open like this, it's not so bad. It's like rain. I love it when I'm inside and dry, but it's not so enjoyable when I'm out in it."

"Then you'll love a blizzard. During one of those things, you can't leave the house at all."

"Yeah, but what happens when the blizzard is over? You're buried in it."

"Not for long. Minnesota takes its snow plowing very seriously. The DOT even holds a snow plow naming contest."

Melissa laughed. "Too funny. I guess I should be grateful we don't live in the 1800s. At least we're a little more prepared for bad weather. In one of the *Little House* books, Pa was coming home when he got caught in an unexpected blizzard. He had to take shelter in a snowbank and ended up eating the Christmas candy because he was starving."

"Blizzards can be deadly. I imagine in the 1800s, meteorology wasn't what it is today."

"No, definitely not. They were always having some blizzard come take them off guard. In one of the other books, they had seven months of blizzards—one right after another. The trains stopped delivering supplies, and everyone was starving and had to burn hay to keep warm. So you see, I'm not exactly a fan of snow, seeing as how it could kill you."

"Well I can promise you this. I won't let a blizzard catch you off guard."

His gaze turned to her lips, and she actually smiled at him. Tripp wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless. It even looked like she was leaning toward him, but then she turned away. Maybe he imagined it.

"We should probably head back," Melissa said.

"You sure? We can stay as long as you like."

Melissa shook her head. "No, I'm ready to go. I know we have a long drive back. But I'm glad I got to come here."

"We'll come back when it's warmer."

It was dark by the time Tripp pulled into Melissa's driveway. She'd forgotten to turn the porch light on, so Tripp offered to keep his headlights on so that she'd have a little light.

Melissa gathered her purse and shopping bags from the floorboard. "Well, thanks for the birthday surprise."

"Did you really have a good time?"

"Are you kidding me? It was the best. I got to explore the childhood home of my favorite author. I can't believe you planned all this for my



birthday.”

Tripp felt a stab of guilt. He hadn't been planning this. Not for long, anyway. He was going to buy her a coat if Lance hadn't talked him out of it. “I should be honest with you about something.”

Melissa narrowed her eyes. “About what?”

“When you asked me if I had forgotten your birthday, I lied. I mean, I remembered it was January twenty-seventh, but the date snuck up on me. I kind of threw this trip together at the last minute.”

Melissa smiled. “I don't care that the trip was a last minute thing. The fact that you knew this was something I would enjoy meant a lot to me.”

“I just feel bad that we came at the wrong time of year. Maybe if I had looked at the website closer, I would have realized the museum was—”

She kissed him, and Tripp forgot what he was saying. *Holy shit, Melissa was kissing him!* When she pulled away, he was too stunned to speak.

“It was perfect,” she said.

A slow grin spread across his face. “You just kissed me.”

“Goodnight, Tripp.” She opened the truck door.

“Wait, aren't we going to talk about this? You kissed me, and all you say is goodnight?”

She didn't answer and closed the door.

Tripp rolled down his window as Melissa headed to her porch. “You know, we don't have to wait until Valentine's Day to get back together.”

Melissa ignored him and unlocked her front door.

“We'll hang out tomorrow before work?”

“I'm picking Kit up from the airport, and we'll be busy all weekend.”

“Then let's have dinner tomorrow. You, me, and Kit.”

“Fine. See you at work.” She slipped inside and closed the door behind her.

Tripp couldn't stop grinning as he backed out of the driveway.

The Minneapolis traffic was heavy as Melissa took the exit for the interstate. When the cars on her left finally passed, she merged into the lane. She glanced at Kit in the passenger seat. “At least it’s not snowing. You chose a good weekend to come.”

“You really didn’t have to pick me up,” Kit said. “I had planned on getting a rental.”

“And miss this time catching up with my bestie? No way. We’re going to have an awesome weekend, and it starts now.”

“So, now that we finally have a chance to talk, how’s Triiiiiipp?” She drew out Tripp’s name in a long drawl. “Where did he end up taking you for your birthday?”

“I kissed him last night,” she blurted.

“You *kissed* him?”

“I had a moment of weakness.”

“Okay, you’re going to have to back up and tell this from the beginning.”

Melissa recapped their Walnut Grove visit.

“Can you believe he remembered my favorite author? He actually remembered and took me to her childhood home. What guy does that?”

“Apparently Tripp. So what about the kiss?”

“When he pulled up to my driveway, he apologized again for the museum not being open, like his birthday surprise had been an epic fail. But I was so touched that he did that for me. And I don’t know what came over me, but suddenly I kissed him.”

“What happened after that?”

“Nothing. I said goodnight and went inside. I chickened out. I wasn’t about to let it get any further than that.”

“Why not? The Melissa I know would say to live in the moment and have fun.”

“We are having fun.”

“But not naked fun.” Kit laughed.

Melissa tapped her hand on the steering wheel as a slow car drifted into her lane. “Well, I’m not going to sleep with him. The agreement was that I give him until Valentine’s Day to make a decision. I still have seventeen days.”

“Who said you have to wait? You obviously want him back. Just go for it.”

She checked her rearview mirror, saw she had the lane clear, and moved to pass the slow vehicle. “Well I’m not going to sleep with him this weekend because you’re here. And I’ve got so much planned. Are you up for shopping tomorrow? We could buy baby stuff.”

“I know what you’re doing, Melissa. You’re trying to change the subject.”

“Fine. Look, I’ll think about it. But I know that if I sleep with Tripp, that’s it. We’ll be back together. And I don’t want to rush things.”

“Okay, if you want to hold off on being happy, that’s your choice.”

Melissa didn’t want to tell her best friend that she was being annoying right now, and she certainly wasn’t going to argue with her when she’d flown all this way to visit. So instead, she turned the music on and hoped the discussion about Tripp would end.



TRIPP EXAMINED the weather models on his computer. All signs were indicating heavy snow next Saturday—something to keep an eye on. Of course, a lot in the forecast could change in a week, but knowing Minnesota, there would definitely be some snow.

“Looking at the model runs for next weekend?” said a female voice behind him.

Tripp recognized the voice, swiveled his chair around, and saw an old friend standing over him. “Well, if it isn’t Kit Lanier.”

“It’s Lanier Jackson now.”

“Right. Good to see you.” He stood and hugged his old pal. “When did you get in?”

Kit pulled up a chair and sat next to him. “Just now. I don’t miss working at a news station, but I thought it would be fun to hang out here and watch you and Melissa.” She pointed to his screen. “I was looking at those same models this morning. If it pans out, it’s going to be wild. Tornadoes in the south and blizzards in the Midwest.”

Tripp smiled. “Are you going to be out there chasing them?”

Kit sighed. “I wish, but not this time. I have to work. But Ryder might take the T-Rex to Mississippi or Arkansas, depending where the storms fire up.”

“Melissa showed me pictures of your husband’s tornado chasing vehicle. You must love that.”

“Yeah, it’s great. We chased an EF2 last month just south of Oklahoma City. I’m not going to say increasing December tornadoes are a good thing, but it’s nice to have a few more opportunities to study them.”

“Climate change. Minnesota had a December twister too.”

“So, enough talk about the weather. What are your intentions with Melissa?”

Tripp turned his attention back to his computer. “Sheesh, you sound like her brother.”

“I’m serious, Tripp. As Melissa’s best friend, it’s my job to look out for her. And if you’re planning on breaking her heart again, we’re going to have a problem.”

“I don’t want to hurt Melissa.”

“So, you’re telling me that you’re ready for a commitment? That if you got back together, you wouldn’t get cold feet and leave her?”

“That’s what I’m telling you. Melissa’s it for me. I don’t want anyone else. She was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I blew it. I want us to have a second chance. I can make her happy.”

Kit gave him a stern look. “You better.”

He saw a flash of red in his peripheral vision. Melissa walked over to them, wearing her long-sleeved crimson dress, the one that accentuated every curve of her figure. The high heels made her legs look longer. No way Melissa wore that coming in. She’d be too cold. He learned that she often brought a change of clothes in her bag. He looked her up and down with a

grin on his face. “You look stunning. Did you decide to dress up just for me?”

Melissa didn’t answer his question, but he saw the corner of her lip turn upward. “I see Kit found you.”

“Tripp and I were discussing the possibility of snow next weekend,” Kit said.

“Ugh, not again. When does winter end? And I’m not asking when spring officially starts. I mean when does winter end in Minnesota?”

Tripp and Kit laughed. Melissa didn’t look pleased.

“Why do you guys always tease me about being cold?”

“Because you’re cute,” Tripp said.

“Come on, Melissa, we love you,” Kit said.

Melissa visibly relaxed. “Well, I have some work to do. We’ll have dinner tonight and we can catch up, like old times.” She looked at Kit. “Will you be okay just hanging out?”

Kit stood. “I’m fine. In fact, I think I’ll put on my coat and take a walk out in the cold. Get some fresh air.” She gave her a teasing smile before leaving.

Melissa shook her head. “I don’t understand it.”

“It’s a requirement to be a meteorologist,” Tripp said. “You have to love all kinds of weather.”

“Whatever. I’ve got work to do.”

She started to walk away, but Tripp stood in front of her. “Wait. Can we talk about what happened last night? When we said goodnight?”

Melissa looked around, as if checking if anyone was in hearing distance. “Shh, not at work,” she whispered. “We’ll talk at dinner.” Melissa walked to her office.

Tripp followed her and closed the door behind him. “I can’t wait. You kissed me last night. Does that mean you’ve made a decision about us?”

“It was just a kiss.”

Tripp sat on the edge of her desk. “No, it wasn’t just a kiss. You’re still in love with me. Please, Melissa, give in and give us another chance. We’re good together.”

Melissa was quiet for a moment, as if she was considering her response. “I kissed you because I wanted to, but I’m not ready for us to get back together. Let’s just see where this goes, okay?”

Tripp grinned. “I know exactly where this is going. But if you need more

time to make your decision, I can respect that.” He stood and put his hand on the door knob. “See you for dinner.” He walked out with a smile still on his face. Melissa was holding back, but she couldn’t resist him for too much longer.



ON SATURDAY, Melissa and Kit ate lunch at Betty’s, then spent the rest of the day shopping.

“I’ve missed us shopping together,” Melissa said as she headed into the house laden with several bags. “Now I have enough winter clothes to get me through at least March.”

“And I have a decent selection of maternity clothes,” Kit said. “I’m so excited about the jeans.”

Melissa put down her bags and shucked off her gloves. “I was almost convinced to buy a pair for myself. I think all pants should have a stretch pouch for the tummy.” And of course, she dreamed of one day actually needing those kinds of pants, but she kept that thought to herself.

Kit wiped the snow from her boots. “Stretchy pants are good. I feel like my other pants are already getting tight.”

“Even though we spent the day clothes shopping, my favorite new piece of clothing is this.” She removed her coat to reveal the sweatshirt underneath. It was decorated with snowflakes and said, *LET IT SNOW ... somewhere else*. “This might be the only piece of clothing I’ll ever wear with a snowflake on it.”

Kit laughed. “Ryder always picks out the best weather-themed clothing. I’ll be sure to tell him you love it.”

“Speaking of the cold weather, I could go for some hot soup. Want to help me get dinner started?”

In the kitchen, Melissa raided her refrigerator. “Do you have a taste for anything in particular? I could make some vegetable beef soup.”

Kit made herself comfortable at the table. “Oh, yes, please. I’ve been craving everything beef lately. This is definitely Ryder’s baby. I raided his beef jerky stash yesterday and made him go out and buy me more for this trip.”

Melissa laughed. “That’s hilarious. And here I thought pregnant women

craved pickles with ice cream.” Behind the milk, she spotted the bottle of pinot noir she’d bought the other day and grabbed it. “I’ve got some wine chilling. Want some?”

Kit stared at her. “Are you trying to torment me?”

Melissa wanted to smack herself. “Right, sorry! I just offered out of habit. I won’t have any.”

“It’s okay. Go ahead and have a glass. You should celebrate your birthday weekend.”

“You sure?”

“Please, I insist.”

Melissa squealed and reached for a wine glass. “Girl, I have been dying for a glass all week.” She poured herself a drink, took a sip, and felt that for a moment, all was right with the world.

“So, what’s Tripp doing tonight?” Kit asked.

Right. Tripp. Back to reality. She set her glass down and retrieved a pot from the cabinet. “He didn’t say. Probably hanging out with Lance.”

“You know what I think you should do?”

“What?” Melissa spun her spice rack around, looking for the oregano and thyme.

“It might just be a little wild and crazy, but the Melissa I know would do it. You should put on your sexy underwear and go over to Tripp’s lake house. Tonight.”

Melissa turned around, eyes wide. “What? No, I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because. I haven’t seen my best friend in months. I’m not going to leave you to go get naked with my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Kit grinned.

Melissa hadn’t realized she’d said that. Was Tripp her boyfriend? She turned back to her spices. “Actually, I’m not ready to call him that yet. He’s still my ex at the moment.”

“Oh my god, Melissa! You’re being so stubborn. You’re being like me. Remember how you pushed me to go for it with Ryder? I was so glad I did.”

“My situation is different. Look, I’m not going over there tonight. And anyway, I’m drinking.” She held up her wine glass, gave it a little shake, then took a sip.

“So? Take a ride share.”

Melissa shook her head. “No. This night is about me hanging out with my

bestie. And I'm starving." She reached into the refrigerator and pulled out some veggies. "I'm not having sex with anyone."

Kit sighed. "Fine. I just want you to be happy. You're still in love with him. And you're denying it. What if you just gave in to how you feel?"

Melissa turned her attention back to the vegetables. She didn't answer Kit's question, but the thought weighed heavily on her mind. What if she did?



TRIPP SETTLED into his recliner for a quiet Saturday evening in front of the television. He missed Melissa, but understood she wanted to spend time with her best friend. He'd almost invited them over for a movie, but at the last minute, changed his mind. He didn't want to ruin their girls' night.

He'd just turned on a house hunting show when the doorbell rang. The dogs barked excitedly. He couldn't imagine who would be coming over at just after nine o'clock on Saturday. His brother often showed up unannounced. He wouldn't be surprised if he had a fight with Busy and drove straight over. He muted the television and headed to the door, expecting to see his brother. But when he opened the door, it wasn't Daniel.

Sandy stood on his doorstep with a cookie tin in her hands. "Hi, Tripp."

"Sandy, what are you doing here?"

"I had to make a delivery nearby and thought I would surprise you. Can I come in?"

The last thing he wanted was Sandy in his house, but Tripp didn't want to be impolite. He held the door open. "Sure, come in."

Bella pounced, and Sandy held the tin container up high and out of the dog's reach.

"Bella, stop!" He grabbed hold of her collar and held the pup back. "Sorry about Bella. She gets excited over company. I'm trying to train her not to do that."

Sandy brushed the leg of her pants. "She poked a hole in my legging."

Tripp looked down, and sure enough, Bella's claw had left a tear in the thin fabric. "I'm so sorry. I'll pay for it."

Sandy smiled. "It's fine. These are an old pair anyway."

"Aren't you cold in those?" He knew Melissa would be. She'd be wearing pants much thicker than leggings.



Sandy giggled. “Oh, Tripp, you know I’ve always been hot-natured. In fact, it’s feeling rather warm in here.” She took off her coat and handed it to him. She wore only a tank top with her breasts nearly spilling out. “You must have it set to eighty degrees,” she said with a laugh.

Lately, he’d been keeping the thermostat to Melissa’s comfort level, and evidently, he’d gotten used to it. “Yeah, it is a little hot. I’ll turn it down.”

He hung Sandy’s perfumed-scented coat on the hook by the door, then adjusted the thermostat.

In the living room, Sandy ran her fingers along the back of the couch. “I love the leather sofa and recliners. It’s so you.” She walked around to the front of the couch and sat down. “Comfy too.”

Tripp sat next to her in the recliner. “Yeah, it’s all new. Bella destroyed that awful couch my grandparents had.”

“The one with the floral print?”

“Actually, it was a different one, but it was just as ugly.”

“That thing was so tacky.” A sly grin appeared on her face. “Remember that time we had sex on it and your grandmother almost caught us?”

Tripp didn’t want to take a stroll down memory lane. Sandy was his past, and it made him uncomfortable to think of her when he was in love with Melissa. “So uh, did you bring me something?” He pointed to the cookie tin in her hand, hoping to change the subject.

“Oh yeah, it’s just a little something. Open it.”

Tripp was almost afraid to look. She’d already given him nipple cupcakes. There was no telling what Sandy was giving him now. When he saw regular oatmeal cookies inside, he relaxed. They smelled delicious. “I love these.” He took one of the smaller cookies and bit into its sugary goodness.

“Good?”

Tripp nodded as he chewed. “Mmm, oh yeah.”

“I remembered oatmeal cookies were your favorite.”

Tripp wiped a crumb away from his mouth and placed the cookie tin on the table. “I thought you were about to give me another one of your naughty desserts.”

“I was planning on doing that now.” Sandy stood and yanked off her tank top. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and her perky tits bounced as she threw herself onto his lap.

There was nowhere Tripp could go. Sandy had him trapped with her arms

around his neck and her legs straddling his thighs. “Whoa, what are you doing?”

Sandy pushed her breasts against his chest. He felt her manicured nails scratch the back of his neck and caught a whiff of her perfume. “It’s been so long, Tripp. And we were so good together. Don’t you remember? Let’s go upstairs and break in that new bed of yours.”

Before he could say anything, Sandy kissed him.

**I**t was the first time a woman had thrown herself at him, and Tripp felt no desire to act on it.

“Sandy,” Tripp said against her lips. He tried to free himself, but Sandy was aggressive. She now had her hands around his face, and he couldn’t turn his head.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she said in a husky voice.

“Sandy, stop.”

Sandy pulled back, her lips pouty and swollen. “What’s the matter?”

“We can’t do this.”

“I have condoms in my purse if that’s what you’re concerned about.”

She wasn’t getting it. “No, that’s not what I meant. We can’t have sex.” He gently pushed Sandy off his lap and stood up. He left her in the recliner, her nipples hard and erect. Tripp tried not to stare at them.

“Are you like, performance shy or something? I know it’s been a long time, but believe me—you have nothing to worry about.” Sandy rose from the chair, and her breasts bounced as she walked closer to him. “We were always good together, and I bet it would be even more amazing now. Don’t you want to sleep with me?”

What he wanted was for her to put her damn shirt on. “Sandy, you’re a beautiful woman, and we had some good times that summer, but I’m not in love with you.”

Sandy smiled. “I’m not asking for your undying devotion. I just thought we could have a little fun. You know, like we used to.” She inched closer. Tripp backed up, but the couch prevented him from moving further. Sandy

took the opportunity to wrap her arms around him. Her lips hovered over his ear. “Remember how I’d let you fuck me?”

She leaned forward to kiss him again, but Tripp held his hands up to block her.

“Sandy, I’m in love with Melissa.”

“In love? Tripp, you and I both know that I’m a way better time than Melissa.” She blew into his ear, then bit his lobe.

Tripp slipped out of her grip. “Melissa and I have a history, and I’m trying to get back together with her. So no, Sandy, I’m not going to sleep with you.”

With a huff, Sandy snatched her top from the floor and pulled it over her head. “You’re an idiot, Tripp. I’m offering you sex, and you’re turning me down because you think you have a chance with your ex?”

Tripp followed Sandy to the door. “I’m sorry. I just don’t feel the same way about you.”

Sandy yanked her coat from the wall hook and put it on. “We could have had a really good time, Tripp.” She hastily zipped her coat and grabbed her purse. “And I hope you’ll be happy fucking Melissa in that brand new bed of yours. I can guarantee she won’t be as fun as me.”

Sex with Melissa had been anything but boring. But he didn’t feel like sharing the intimate details of his relationship. “I’m sorry I hurt you. That wasn’t my intention. I’m not that horny teenager you once knew. I want a relationship now, not a hookup.”

Sandy tilted her head. “It’s odd. I never thought you were the commitment type. You used to say you’d never get married. Call me when things don’t work out with Melissa.” Sandy turned on her heel and walked out the door.

Back in the living room, the scent of Sandy’s perfume lingered. Bella was sniffing the cookie tin, and Rosie sat on her haunches and stared at him.

“Isn’t that something? She thinks I want to get married.”

Tripp sat in his recliner, and Rosie placed her head on his knee. He gave her a head scratch. “Do you think Sandy’s right? Do you think I’m the marrying type after all?”

Rosie closed her eyes in response, and Bella began to lick the tin.

“Thanks for the help.”

He sighed and unmuted the television, but found himself unable to concentrate on the show. Was he actually considering marriage now? If he

wanted to spend his life with Melissa, he would eventually have to jump off the cliff.

That night, he tossed and turned. He wished he could blame it on the mattress, but the new one was comfortable. It was his thoughts that kept him awake. He never remembered telling Sandy he didn't want to get married, but after his parents wedded and divorced multiple times, he supposed he had some strong opinions about it.

Would it be so bad? Scary, yes, but he didn't hate the idea of growing old with Melissa. On the contrary. He wanted to be with her forever. But marriage was a big step. He didn't know if he was ready for that. Living together, sure, but marriage?

And yet ... he was considering it.

If he did propose to Melissa, he would need a ring, but just the thought of walking into a jewelry store almost gave him a panic attack. He imagined peering into a glass case of rings with an eager salesman hovering. To him, all diamonds looked the same, but he knew Melissa would see the difference. He wouldn't know how to choose one. Hell, he didn't even know her ring size. Probably something small. She had tiny fingers, like his grandmother.

Tripp rolled over to his side and looked at the clock. It was 1:11 in the morning. He loved repeating numbers, often taking them as more signs from the universe. And right now, an idea was forming.

He sprang out of bed and hurried across the cold hardwood in his bare feet. Across the hall, he flicked on the light in the spare room, squinting at the brightness. He was almost certain his father had it, but he had to look just to be sure.

A layer of dust coated the old dresser in the corner. On top of that dresser was his grandmother's antique jewelry box. He lifted the lid and searched for the diamond and garnet ring. It had been her favorite gemstone, and thus, Gramps gave it to her as an engagement ring. Tripp found old necklaces and costume jewelry, but no ring. If it had been here in this house, it would be in this box. But no, his father had it. Anything of value, he would have taken for safekeeping.

He closed the box and sighed. His father would probably give it to him if he asked, unless he'd given it to Daniel. But Daniel wouldn't have cared about a ring, and Busy had never gotten along with Gram. She wouldn't have wanted it either. But getting the ring would mean paying his dad a visit.

He trudged back to his bedroom and climbed under the covers. Hopefully,

he could get some sleep, because he was making a trip to Minneapolis in the morning.



TRIPP HIT THE ROAD EARLY. Best to go before he talked himself out of it. He didn't call ahead, but he knew his father would be home. No one in his family went to church, and his father always enjoyed reading the news over a late breakfast.

Two hours later, he pulled up to the large brick house. The ground was covered with pristine snow, not a footprint in sight. If it had been summer, the lawn would be neatly manicured with grass so green you'd think you were on a golf course. His father took great pride in the appearance of his property.

Tripp rang the bell and waved to the security camera. He expected his dad to come to the door, but when it opened, he saw a disheveled Daniel.

"And the oldest son returns," Daniel said as he held the door open. "What are you doing here?"

Tripp walked inside. "Came to see Dad. What are you doing here?"

"Busy and I are fighting, but what else is new? The kids are here."

On cue, a little girl with a mop of blond hair bounded down the stairs. "Uncle Tripp!" Riley squealed.

Behind Riley was his nephew, Aidan, who looked like a younger version of Daniel.

"Hey, Uncle Tripp!" Aidan said. "What are you doing here?"

He scooped up Riley and gave Aidan a hug. "Hey, kids. Just thought I'd come for a quick visit. Are you still playing with the Christmas gifts I gave you?"

"I'm already on level 10!" Aidan said, speaking of the video game Tripp bought him.

"I gave all my Barbie dolls a haircut," Riley said proudly.

Tripp laughed and ruffled her hair. "I'm sure they all look as beautiful as you."

A throat cleared, and Tripp turned to see his father walk into the foyer.

"Dad," Tripp said.

"Tripp. This is a surprise."

“I know.” He set Riley on her feet. “I felt bad the way our last visit went, and I wanted to talk to you.”

“Have you eaten yet?”

Tripp shook his head. “No, I skipped breakfast.”

Arthur indicated the dining room. “We were just about to sit down. Marian made pancakes. Come join us.”

“Sounds good.”

Riley took his hand and led him to the table. “Uncle Tripp, it’s the *best!* Marian puts chocolate chips in them.”

“Then I know they’ll be delicious.”



BREAKFAST HAD BEEN pleasant for the most part, save toward the end when Busy arrived to take the kids. Tripp watched silently as Daniel and Busy bickered.

“Why can’t you relax, Busy?” Daniel said. “It’s Sunday for crying out loud.”

Busy grabbed a cloth napkin and proceeded to wipe the syrup off Riley’s face. “I told you they had a birthday party at noon. The children were supposed to be dressed and ready by now.”

“Relax, we have plenty of time,” Daniel argued. “You know, if you hadn’t fired the nanny, she’d be able to take them instead of you having to drive across town.”

Riley crossed her arms. “I don’t want to go. Uncle Tripp is here.” Riley leaned into Tripp and grabbed hold of his arm.

“Yeah, why do we have to go to some stupid birthday party?” Aidan said.

Busy gave Aidan a stern look. “Because, they were nice enough to come to your birthday party, and it would be rude not to go to theirs. Now go upstairs and get dressed. Now.”

Right away, the children followed her orders. Busy exhaled loudly and left the room.

Daniel stood and hurried after her. “Busy, just let them stay...”

Tripp glanced at his father, who at the moment, was calmly sipping his cup of coffee and reading the news on his tablet. He supposed his father wasn’t fazed by it.

“Are they like that all the time?” Tripp asked.

“Every Sunday,” his father replied.

The kids and Busy left shortly after, and Daniel announced he was going to do some laps in the pool. At the mention of this, Arthur rolled his eyes. “I’d get rid of that damn indoor pool if your brother and the kids weren’t always using it.”

“Rich people problems,” Tripp said, grinning.

His father wasn’t amused with the comment, so Tripp turned serious. “Is now a good time to talk?”

“Let’s go to the parlor. It’s quiet there.”

Arthur had Marian make them each a second cup of coffee, and they settled into the expensive wingback chairs an interior designer had picked out for this space.

“So, how’s the new job?” Arthur asked, and Tripp figured that was as good of a place as any to start a conversation.

“Work is good.”

“Still haven’t changed your mind about coming to work for me, have you?”

“Sorry, but no. As a matter of fact, I have a very good reason to stay. Do you remember my girlfriend Melissa? The one I almost married?”

Arthur nodded. “I remember her. Very nice girl. Daniel mentioned she was the anchor at your station now. You both have a good camera presence, and you’re a good meteorologist.”

Tripp was stunned. “You watch me on the news?”

“Well, we don’t get your news channel in Minneapolis, but I watch WLMN’s broadcast online occasionally.”

“I always thought you were disappointed in me.”

“I was disappointed you didn’t want to follow in my footsteps, but only because I thought if you joined the business, we could be closer. But instead, you wanted to go your own way. But I never was disappointed in you. I paid for your college education, didn’t I? I wanted you to succeed.”

Tripp had never considered that, so wrapped up in his anger over how his father preferred Daniel over him.

“So, what about this girl? Are you back together?”

“Not exactly. I’m trying to convince her to give me a second chance, but I’m afraid I’ll screw it up. Can I ask about your relationship with Mom?”

“What about us?”



“You didn’t have a good marriage, and I want to know what happened. Why did you get divorced?”

“Well, I suppose the simplest explanation is that we were never in love with each other.” Arthur took a sip of his coffee.

Tripp frowned. “If you were never in love, then why did you get together?”

“She was attracted to my wealth. I was attracted to her looks. And we enjoyed each other’s company, at least for a while. To be honest, I never would have married her, but she got pregnant with you, and that changed things.”

Tripp’s eyes widened. “I’m the reason for your failed marriage?”

Arthur shook his head. “No, our failed marriage had nothing to do with you. I wanted children. Your mother didn’t. She didn’t have a maternal bone in her body. But she stayed with me because she had nothing, and she wanted to make me happy so that she could get what she really wanted, which was my money. I thought for a while, we could make it work. When your brother came along two years later, she had mellowed out a little.”

“Mellowed out?”

“There was a brief period of time when your mother and I got along. I’d go to work. She’d leave you and Daniel with the nanny. And then, she’d spend hours on end at the country club or spa. And if she wasn’t doing that, she’d be shopping. Your mother was happy when she had money to spend and no responsibilities.”

Tripp nodded. “I remember those years. I felt closer to the house staff.”

“I’m partly to blame for that too. I threw myself into work. I know I was absent a lot in your childhood, but the reason I worked so hard was so that I could provide for you. Your mother never cared about making sure your basic needs were met. She never even changed a diaper. She would say that I was one who wanted kids. I should be the one to get up at night. I had to hire an in-house nanny. Your mother never helped me at all with you boys.”

“If you had such a bad marriage, why did you stay with her for so long?”

His father shrugged. “I don’t know. I suppose I was used to our life by then. And your mother stayed with me because she knew if we divorced, she wouldn’t have access to the bank accounts anymore.”

“So why did you finally separate?”

“Caught her having an affair with one of our friends. There was an infidelity clause in our prenup.”

Tripp nodded. It made sense. He often saw his mother flirting with other men, but it hadn't been until he was an adult that he understood. "What happened with your second marriage?"

"I thought Cynthia would be a good stepmother to you and your brother."

"She used to come with us to hockey games and lake outings."

Arthur nodded. "Yeah. She acted the part of a doting mother. But when we got married, her true colors showed. She was only after my money too."

Tripp remembered how Cynthia had changed after she and his father got married. She had gone from wanting to spend time with him and Daniel to suggesting they be sent to boarding school.

"Why all of these questions about marriage?"

"I guess I'm thinking about getting married, but it freaks me out."

Arthur lowered his gaze. "That's my fault. I never gave you or your brother a good example of what a healthy relationship should be. Look at Daniel and his wife. That's a train wreck waiting to happen."

Tripp nodded. "Yeah. I'm surprised that they're still together. It seems like the only people who had a successful marriage in this family were Gram and Gramps. Which is kind of why I wanted to talk to you. I think you have Gram's diamond and garnet ring, and I was wondering if you'd let me give it to Melissa."

His father looked him in the eyes and was quiet for a moment. "Do you love this girl?"

Tripp smiled. "Yes, of course."

Arthur smiled back. "I had to ask. The last thing you want to be in is a loveless marriage."

"So, is that a yes to the ring?" His father still hadn't answered his question.

"Stay here. I'll be right back." Arthur stood and headed up the stairs, leaving Tripp with a racing heart. Was this actually happening? Was he seriously going to take this ring and propose to Melissa?

His father returned minutes later with a black ring box in his hand, which he placed into Tripp's palm. Inside, Tripp found the silver ring with the large garnet stone between two small diamonds. It had been a while since he'd seen the ring, but seeing it now brought back memories of his grandmother wearing it.

"It's perfect," Tripp said.

"Garnets were your grandmother's favorite. Not rubies or sapphires or

emeralds or even diamonds. Garnets. She used to say that she loved them because they were a symbol of love. Isn't that funny? You'd think diamonds would be it, but no, not to your grandmother."

The ring was old, but still just as beautiful. Tripp examined the intricate design on the band. He could see Melissa wearing it. "You really don't mind if I have this?"

"You should have it. I want to keep it in the family, and I don't trust Daniel with it."

"Seeing as how Busy spends all his money, I'd say that's a good call."

"This girl is really special to you, isn't she?"

A smile spread across Tripp's face. "Yeah, and I was a fool to let her go before. But I think we can work it out this time. I'm just nervous."

"You're older now. Wiser. Probably for the best you didn't get married back then. Your mother and I got married young. And I'm not saying a young couple can't make it work. Look at your grandparents. They were even younger when they got together. But as for your mother and me, we weren't ready for it."

Tripp didn't know if he was "ready" for it either, but one thing was for certain—he loved Melissa and wanted her in his life forever.

Arthur stood up. "Well, you're probably anxious to get back to Winter Lake. I imagine you have someone to see."

Tripp closed the ring box and nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"I've got a client I need to touch base with, and he's expecting my call. Good luck, son. I'm glad you came."

For the first time in a long time, Tripp felt the same. He stood and embraced his father. "Thanks for the talk. And the ring."

Arthur patted him on the back. "Come visit more often."

They parted, and his father started to walk off.

"Wait, Dad?"

Arthur paused at the doorway.

"Do you remember that day I tried ice skating and broke my wrist?"

"I remember."

"Were you angry that I had ruined your vacation plans with Mom?" In light of what Tripp learned, it didn't make sense. His father never loved her, so why would he be disappointed in a ruined trip to Europe?

Arthur frowned. "Is that what you thought?"

"Well, yeah. You were upset when you took me to the hospital and

missed your flight.”

“Tripp, I was never mad with you. I was furious with your mother for leaving. You needed us, and she didn’t dare cancel her vacation plans. That’s what happened. What made you think of that?”

Tripp shrugged. “Just something that had always bothered me. But I’m glad I know the truth now.”

Arthur nodded. “Come see me again, Tripp.” He pointed to the ring box in Tripp’s hand. “Let me know how it turns out.”

His father smiled, then left the room.

**A**t work Monday, Tripp logged onto his computer and examined the latest forecast models. Things were looking more promising for snow this weekend. He hoped it would be a weekend blizzard, then Melissa would have to stay with him. He couldn't imagine her riding out a storm like that in her run-down house.

Cassie came over to his desk. "Tripp, there's someone here to see you."

The last time someone came to the station to see him, it had been Sandy. "It's not a blond woman, is it?" And if it was, he'd most definitely refuse the visit.

"No, it's a guy. Says he's your brother. And he brought your niece and nephew. They're so cute. I think they want a station tour."

Tripp reached into his drawer and pulled out several green shirts. "Time to have fun with the green screen."

Cassie laughed.

Riley, in her blue princess dress over pants and a long sleeved shirt, was the first to see him. She shouted his name and ran across the lobby with open arms. Tripp scooped her up and gave Aidan a side hug. "What are you all doing here?"

"The kids missed you," Daniel said. "They didn't get enough time with you yesterday, and Aidan asked if we could see where you work. Since Busy's out of town and the kids had a half day at school, we thought we'd surprise you."

Riley wrapped her arms around his neck. "We missed you, Uncle Tripp."

"Yeah, we never get to see you," Aidan said.

“I miss you guys, too. I’m sorry my new job keeps me so busy.”

“No, you’re busy with Melissa,” Daniel said, teasing. “Where is she?”

Tripp spotted a leggy brunette in a black dress coming out of hair and makeup. “As a matter of fact, she’s right over there.”

Daniel turned to look, and when Melissa noticed she had an audience, she headed over.

“Looks like you have some visitors,” Melissa said.

“Melissa, you remember my brother, Daniel.”

Melissa turned to Daniel. “I remember. You look exactly the same as you did ten years ago.”

Daniel smiled and extended his hand. “And you look even more amazing. My brother is way out of his league dating you.”

Tripp shook his head. “That’s what you think. Melissa likes what she sees.” He winked at Melissa.

Melissa cleared her throat and looked at the kids. “And this must be your niece and nephew.”

“I’m Riley!” Riley said. “And I’m a princess!”

Melissa smiled at the girl. “I can see that. You have such a beautiful dress. And this must be your brother Aidan.”

“I’m going to be a meteorologist just like Uncle Tripp,” Aidan said.

At that, Tripp smiled big. “He wants to be cool like me.”

Daniel rolled his eyes.

Aidan tugged on his arm. “Can you show us the green screen now? You said you would if we came to visit you at work.”

Tripp put Riley down and held up the green sweatshirt in his hand. “Who’s ready to see me as a floating head?”



RILEY’S SHRILL little girl laughter filled the studio as Tripp goofed off in front of the green screen. Melissa couldn’t help but laugh as she watched. *He was good with kids.* This, she already knew from his interactions with Charlotte, but seeing him with his niece and nephew was like seeing a whole new side of Tripp. A long time ago, she imagined having children with Tripp. It had been a while, but the thought crossed her mind again. *He would make a good dad.*

Every time Tripp danced in front of the weather map with the green shirt, Riley would laugh at his head floating over the Minnesota map. Aidan then joined in on the fun, dancing right along with his uncle. Riley laughed at the two floating heads on the computer monitor.

Daniel moved to stand next to her. “My brother’s a nut,” he said, popping a peanut M&M into his mouth. Apparently, he’d found the vending machine.

Melissa turned back to Tripp and the kids. “I’ve never seen the fun-loving uncle side of him before.” And it was turning her on. She told her biological clock to calm down. Yes, he was good with kids, and Tripp said he wouldn’t be opposed to being a father. But she really shouldn’t put the cart before the horse. If she was having kids with Tripp, she wanted a ring first.

“Oh yeah, Tripp is their favorite uncle. Busy’s brother is a CPA who gets pissed when they play with his calculator. Tripp dances with them in front of a weather map.”

The trio now all donned green shirts, and Melissa laughed at the three floating heads.

“Hey, Melissa!” Tripp hollered. “You know you want to get in on this action! I got another green shirt!”

“I don’t want to mess up my hair and makeup.”

“They’ll retouch it! Come on!”

Melissa shook her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

She walked over to the screen where Tripp handed her a green shirt.

“Put it on!” Riley said, jumping up and down with her blue dress peeking out of her own green tee.

Being careful not to touch her face or get her hair tangled, Melissa slipped the shirt over her head. Tripp took her hand, and Cassie pulled out her phone and started recording.

“Isn’t this fun?” Tripp said.

Oh yes, it was.



THE NEXT DAY, Lance walked to his desk and sank into his chair. “Man, this week is boring, and it’s only Tuesday.”

Tripp looked at him and grinned. “I wouldn’t say that. In fact, I’d say this week is about to get very interesting.” All afternoon, Tripp had been

monitoring the latest model runs. That weekend snowstorm was looking more promising. And not just any storm—a blizzard. He pointed to his monitor. “See that?”

Lance shrugged. “I don’t know what I’m looking at.”

“You’re looking at blizzard potential this weekend. I got to tell Melissa the good news.”

“Good news? She hates snow.”

Tripp leaned in to whisper. “That’s the point. Do you think she’s going to want to ride out a blizzard in that run-down house of hers?”

Lance smiled. “Ahh, I see. You’re going to invite her to stay at your place. You dirty dog.”

“Hey, I’m not saying anything is going to happen between us. I’ve got a nice guest room set up now. Of course, if she wants to try out my new bed, I wouldn’t be opposed to that.” He winked. “I’ve got to go find her.”

“Good luck,” Lance said.

Tripp found Melissa in her office. She’d said she had some things to do that morning, so he missed hanging out with her. She looked up from her computer when she saw him there. “Hey.”

“Hey. Missed you this morning. Did you get all your errands done?”

“Yeah. We can do one of your snow-related activities tomorrow.”

“Actually, that’s just what I had in mind. How about you and me take a trip to the grocery and hardware stores.”

Melissa laughed. “What? That’s not related to snow.”

“It is when you have to prepare for a blizzard.”

The color drained from Melissa’s face. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“No joke. Weather models point to Saturday as being pretty snowy. It’s not clear yet how much snow we’ll get here in Winter Lake, but best to be prepared. But don’t you worry. I promised I wouldn’t let a blizzard catch you off guard. You’ll be fine.”

“What do I need to do? Buy batteries? Canned goods?”

“You let me handle all of that. You can stay with me at the lake house. I’ve got the guest bedroom set up, so you can’t say no.”

Melissa seemed to consider it for a moment. “Are you sure it’s going to be a blizzard? Maybe we should wait and see how bad it’ll get.”

Tripp shook his head. “No, you don’t want to take a chance. Someone is definitely getting a blizzard this weekend, and it might be us. And you don’t want to ride out that thing in your rental. Do you even have a generator?”



“No.”

“That electric blanket of yours won’t work if the power’s out. And I know you hate being cold.”

He saw the dread in Melissa’s face. He knew he had her.

“Okay, we’ll make plans for the weekend—if the weather is bad. Can we talk about it later? I’ve got a breaking news story I’m working on.”

Tripp smiled. “Oh sure, we’ll talk later. And it’s definitely going to be bad weather.” He closed the door and whistled as he walked down the hall.

Lance caught up with him. “You’re whistling, so I’m guessing she said yes?”

“Of course. Once again, the universe works its magic. It’s always throwing me and Melissa together. Want to take bets on me and Melissa reuniting this weekend?”

Lance shook his head. “No way, not taking that bet. How can I go against the universe?”

Tripp smiled. “I knew I’d convince you eventually.”



BY THE END of the week, it was clear—a blizzard was forecasted to hit Winter Lake and the surrounding areas. It was the top news story, and Tripp was ready for it.

There were fifteen seconds until air time. He cleared his throat, took a quick sip of water, and watched as the producer gave the countdown cue.

The broadcast started, and Bob over at the anchor desk gave the camera a serious look. “Good evening. I’m Bob Thomas.”

Next to him, Melissa took her cue. “And I’m Melissa Martin. Our top story is the expected blizzard this weekend, so let’s check in with meteorologist Tripp Bartlett on the latest. Tripp?”

“Yeah, Melissa, it’s calm now, but things are going to change by tomorrow. Our friends at the National Weather Service have gone ahead and issued a blizzard warning ahead of this weekend’s storm. That means that blizzard conditions are expected 12–18 hours out. In our area, we’re most likely to see conditions deteriorate around three or four Saturday afternoon, but don’t wait until the last minute to make your preparations.”

On the monitor in front of him, Tripp could see what the viewers were

seeing at home. A graphic of blizzard conditions displayed. “Now, what are blizzard conditions? Number one, you’ll have snow reducing visibility ¼ mile or less for three hours or longer. So that’s why you don’t want to be out on the roads. I cannot stress enough that it’s very dangerous to be driving and that you should prepare to stay inside.

“And number two, sustained winds or gusts of 35 mph or greater. That could lead to some sporadic power outages across the area, so get ready early and hunker down. I’ll have more coming up in just a few minutes. Back to you, Melissa.”

Melissa nodded at him. “Thanks for the update, Tripp. And speaking of the dangerous driving conditions, the Minnesota DOT is already preparing for this weekend’s blizzard...”



AFTER THE NEWSCAST WAS OVER, Tripp walked over to the anchor desk where Melissa was gathering her notes. He was excited for the blizzard, and not just because he loved snow. Melissa was definitely spending the weekend with him. For a while, he worried she would back out and stay with her brother instead, but the whole family had come down with strep throat. Unlucky for them, but it worked out in Tripp’s favor. Since Melissa didn’t want to get sick, Tripp’s lake house it was.

“Are you ready for your first blizzard?”

“Yeah, I feel more prepared for this blizzard than ever now. I just reported on it. See?” She held up her cheat sheet of what to do before a blizzard. “I’ll come over in the morning. Do you have the guest room set up for me?”

“Oh yeah, it’s ready. I even bought an electric blanket for the bed, just for you.” He leaned in to whisper into her ear. “But if you’re in my bed, you won’t need it. I’m *The Human Furnace*. Remember?” He gave her a wink, then walked away before she could respond.

On Saturday, Melissa carried her small shoulder bag into Tripp's house while he wheeled her large suitcase. It was weird to be spending the weekend at Tripp's. For a moment, it felt like old times when they were together.

"I see you're still an over-packer," Tripp said with a laugh.

"Yeah, I know." Melissa figured it was best to be prepared for anything. She honestly didn't know if she would be wearing sweatpants or sexy underwear tonight.

Tripp put her suitcase in the guest room, and Melissa was pleased to see the room was coming together. "The bed looks nice."

Tripp pulled back the comforter. "Electric blanket, as promised." He waved the control in the air. "Look, this one goes up to nine."

Melissa laughed.

By afternoon, a dark cloud blocked out the sun, and Melissa had to turn the lamp on just to read her book. While she'd been engrossed in her novel, Tripp sat on the window seat watching the snow. Ever since the blizzard started, Tripp had been like a little kid, pointing out large snowflakes and commenting on the howling winds.

She closed her book and watched him. Bella sat next to him, her little nose pressed against the glass. Melissa wasn't sure who was more excited about the show, Tripp or Bella, and laughed at the thought.

Tripp turned her way. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just cute that you still love a snowstorm. You see it all the time."

“Yeah, but this is a blizzard. That’s not just any snowstorm.”

Melissa threw the blanket off her lap and joined Tripp and Bella at the window. Bella gave her cheek a lick, then turned her attention back to the front yard.

She had to admit that this storm was different. The winds were so fierce that the snow blew horizontally, blocking out everything behind it. “Now I know what whiteout conditions look like.”

“Did I ever tell you about the time Daniel and I almost got lost in a blizzard?”

Melissa shook her head. “No.”

“We were kids. I was about ten. Daniel left a toy in the shed and thought he’d run outside to get it. I told him not to, but when I wasn’t looking, he slipped out the back door. I guess I was supposed to be watching him, but I was a kid too, you know?”

“Where were your parents?”

“Dad was away on business and stuck at the airport. Mom was sleeping off a hangover. By then, we didn’t have a full-time nanny anymore, and none of the other house staff could get there because of the weather. So anyway, I realized Daniel had gone outside because the door was open and his shoes and coat were gone. I thought I heard him yelling for me, but I couldn’t be sure. The wind was so loud.”

Melissa imagined ten-year-old Tripp worried about his little brother. “What did you do?”

“Tied a kite string to the door and went outside to find him. Luckily, he hadn’t gone far, but without that string, we would have never made it back to the house.”

“You must have been so scared.”

“I was. Had Daniel gone a little further, or if the string had come untied or broken, who knows what would have happened to us?”

“I’m glad you were both okay.”

Tripp nodded. “Yeah, blizzards are nothing to play around with. Best to hunker down and stay inside. Speaking of which, we have a few hours to kill while we ride it out. What would you like to do? Watch a little HGTV? See if there’s a movie on? There’s always strip poker if we get too bored.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“I’m not playing strip poker. Do you really think I would enjoy getting naked when it’s cold enough for a blizzard outside?”

“I could bump the heat up.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

Tripp laughed.

“Actually, I have an idea,” Melissa said. “Why don’t you teach me how to play pool?” She nodded to the pool table in the dining area. Tripp hadn’t moved it to the basement yet, and it sat next to the wobbly kitchen table. Melissa never played pool before, but it looked fun. It was better than finding other ways to occupy themselves.

“You really want to learn how?”

Melissa walked over to the table. “Sure, why not?”

Tripp reached for the triangle and placed it on the table. “First, we rack them.”

“I know that part.” Melissa gathered the scattered balls and placed them in the triangle.

“Except the 8 ball goes in the center.” He moved the black ball to the correct place. “And you want to put one solid and one striped at the bottom corners.”

“Just teach me how to shoot.”

Tripp walked over to the wall where several cue sticks hung. “You’ll need one of these.”

He handed her the stick and went over the rules of the game, which seemed fairly simple. But when it came time to play, she struggled. First, she sent the cue ball flying off the table. Then, she didn’t use enough force to break the triangle.

She put her cue stick down. “You do it. Apparently, I suck at this.”

“Cut yourself some slack. It’s your first time.”

Tripp broke them, sending a solid red ball into the corner pocket. He made it look easy.

“Okay, so I’m solids and your stripes.”

When it was Melissa’s turn, she had her eye on the orange striped ball near the side pocket. “Okay, I’m going for that one.” She hit the white ball with her stick, missed, and the ball bounced off the wall. She stomped her foot. “Damn.”

“There’s an easier way to hold the cue. Can I show you?”

“Okay.”

Before she realized what he was doing, Tripp moved behind her. His chest pressed against her back, and his arms wrapped around her. She could

feel his heat through her sweater. *The Human Furnace*. Though ironically, Melissa shivered.

“First of all, relax your grip.”

Easier said than done. She could barely concentrate with his hands on her. He had sexy hands, big and strong. But at the moment, his touch was light.

“Melissa?”

“Sorry, what?” Those damn hands were distracting.

“Take this hand and hold the stick back here.” He moved her right hand to the back of the cue stick where a grip was. “Next, line your body up with the cue ball. And lower yourself over the table.”

Melissa leaned over the table, and Tripp pressed his body against her. The position felt naughty, and a memory of herself leaning over her wobbly table with Tripp behind her came to mind.

“You feel tense. Keep your legs relaxed and slightly bent.”

She slowly bent her legs, but she still felt him pressing against her. Was that a bulge in his jeans? She shook the thought away. “What now?”

“With your left hand, you’ll make a bridge.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I’m going to show you. So, you’ll let your hand lie flat on the table, and you’ll rest the stick in the V between your thumb and index finger.” He guided the stick into her hand and held it there. “There, like that. Now, with your right hand, you’re going to make a stroking motion, like this.” He moved the cue stick back and forth several times.

The repeated stroking motion brought another sexy thought to Melissa’s mind. Playing pool had been a mistake. “You can stop now, Tripp. I got it.”

“All right. Now, we’ll slide the cue forward and take the shot. Remember to relax. We’ll do it together.”

With his hand guiding hers and the stick, Melissa hit the ball and landed the striped one into the pocket.

“There you go,” Tripp said. “Now, let’s practice another one. See that purple striped ball?”

“Yeah, but it’s all the way across the table. And the green ball is in front of it.”

“What you’re going to do is hit that green ball with the cue ball and make it sink your striped ball into the pocket. Let’s try it.”

Once again, he pressed his body against hers. As he moved his head over her shoulder, his cheek rubbed against her face, soft and smooth. He had

recently shaved, and damn, he smelled good.

“Melissa?”

“Huh?”

“I said, are you ready?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

As they did before, Tripp guided her hand to move the stick forward. Just as Tripp predicted, the white ball struck the solid green ball, which in turn, sank Melissa’s striped ball into the pocket.

“Look at you getting your first combo shot.” Tripp finally moved away, and damn if she didn’t miss his arms around her. “Are you ready to do one by yourself?”

Melissa turned around and leaned against the table. If she didn’t make a move now, she would talk herself out of it later. “I don’t want to play this game anymore.”

Tripp frowned. “Oh. Well, we don’t have to actually play. You can just practice shooting if you want.”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about. I mean, I’m tired of playing this game between us. I’m tired of pretending that I don’t love you anymore, because I do. I miss you, Tripp.”

His smile returned. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

Melissa wrapped her arms around his neck, feeling the warmth of his body against hers. “I want to be with you. I want us to get back together.”

She felt his hands rubbing her back, holding her closer. “I have been waiting for you to say those words.”

“I never stopped loving you. Even when I was mad at you.”

“And I never stopped loving you, even when I was stupid enough to let you slip away.”

She pressed her lips against his and kissed him tenderly at first, then with more passion as Tripp deepened the kiss. And yes, there was most definitely a bulge in his jeans.

Suddenly, she felt herself being lifted on top of the table. His mouth was on her seconds later, and gently, he lowered her onto her back. The thought made Melissa think of them on her kitchen table, and she let out a giggle.

Tripp stopped his kissing and looked at her. “What?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking that this wouldn’t be our first time on a table.”

Tripp smiled. “But it’s our first time on a pool table. And here I thought

you said you didn't want to get naked.”

“Are you trying to change my mind?”

“Hell no,” Tripp said, yanking his shirt off. His mouth was on hers seconds later, and Melissa wrapped her arms around his neck and held on.

“You feeling warmed up?” he whispered against her lips.

“Burning hot,” she said, and it was true. She reached for the edge of her sweater and pulled it over her head. She was wearing her lacy black bra, the one she'd gotten from Victoria's Secret. From the grin on Tripp's face, he liked what he saw.

He moved to kiss her again, and Melissa felt his hands move to the hem of her jeans. But then, he pulled away. “Actually, we can't do this here.”

“Really? The old Tripp I knew would make love anywhere. In a hot tub, the back of a truck, on top of a table...”

Tripp laughed. “True. But my condoms are upstairs.”

“Don't need them. I'm on the pill.”

Tripp smiled back at her. “Okay, so you want to do this here?”

Melissa considered it. “You know what? I'm going to say that our adventurous twenties are behind us. The pool table is hard on my back, and I'll be warmer in bed.”

“Oh, did you know I have a new bed?”

Melissa smiled. “Really? You don't say.”

Tripp nodded. “Yeah. Maybe you could help me break it in?”

“As long as you keep me warm.”

“Don't worry, you'll be burning up,” Tripp whispered.

Tripp's room was dim, but when Melissa reached for the lamp, he stopped her. “Wait, I have candles. Want me to light them?”

“You have candles?”

Tripp reached into his bedside drawer and pulled out a lighter. “I remembered you like them.”

As he went about lighting the room, Melissa sank into Tripp's king-sized bed. Tripp had already turned down the covers, and the sheets felt soft like the ones she had at home. And it was definitely more comfortable than the pool table. “Oh, this is nice.”

“The mattress? Or the sheets?”

“Both.”

Tripp climbed into bed and moved on top of her. Melissa could feel the heat coming from his body. She must have made a sound, because Tripp



smiled at her. "I haven't even started yet," he said.

"Your skin feels so hot."

Tripp chuckled. "Oh, I'm hot all right. I'm *The Human Furnace*." He kissed her neck, and Melissa raked her fingernails across his back. He'd told her once that when she did that, it drove him crazy. Sure enough, Tripp groaned moments later.

His hands moved underneath her, and she felt him reaching for the hook of her bra. "I want to see you. All of you." He unclasped it, tossed the garment to the floor, and stared at her for a moment. "You're so beautiful." He buried his head between her breasts and left a trail of kisses from her chest to her navel. When he reached the top of her jeans, he placed his hand on her zipper. "How about I take these off?"

Melissa nodded, and Tripp pulled the zipper down. He helped her out of her jeans, then slipped a finger under her panties. "Is this a thong?"

"Yes."

Tripp made a low growling noise. "You could always rock a pair of those."

"How come I'm down to my underwear and you're not?"

Tripp reached for his belt. "Good point. I better catch up." He undid his jeans and shoved them down, revealing his black boxer briefs. He tossed them to the floor, then turned his attention back to her. "Now, where were we?"

"You were about to take off those boxers." Melissa grinned at him.

"Oh, I was?"

"Yes."

Tripp shook his head and gave her one of his lopsided grins. "Nope, not yet." He held her face in his hands and moved to kiss her once more.

Though it was Melissa's hope that Tripp had changed in the ten years they had been apart, she was glad he hadn't changed when it came to this. He'd always been slow and attentive when they were together, never rushing things. Sometimes, Melissa wished Tripp would speed it up, eager to get to the main event. But just as always, he took his time with her.

Outside, the wind howled, reminding Melissa of the frigid conditions outside. If she weren't in bed with *The Human Furnace* right now, she'd be freezing.

A sudden sound, only to be described as jarring, pulled her attention away from Tripp. She snapped her head up. "What was that?"

“That was the power going out,” Tripp said.

Sure enough, the house was quiet without the background humming of the furnace, and Tripp’s bedside clock was black. “I thought you had a generator.”

“I do.” He smiled at her, and his eyes shone in the candlelight. “Give it a moment.”

Not thirty seconds later, the furnace clicked back on, and the clock came back to life, displaying the time as 12:00.

“If you’d been at that shack of yours, you’d be freezing right about now.”

“Not if you were with me,” Melissa said. “Even if I didn’t have a generator, I’m pretty sure you’d do a good job of keeping me warm.”

“Damn straight,” Tripp said, then resumed his kissing.

His fingers slipped back under the hem of her underwear, tugging at them gently. His other hand slipped behind her, cupping her ass.

“As much as I love your sexy underwear, I want them off,” he said with almost a growl.

“I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours,” she said in a teasing manner, her lips brushing against his cheek. The smell of his aftershave still lingered on his face.

“Fair enough,” Tripp whispered. “I don’t know if I can wait much longer.”

They finished undressing in the light of the candle, the wind continuing its relentless howling as the blizzard raged on.

Tripp held her face in her palms, gazing down at her with a hunger in his eyes. “I love you, Melissa.”

It had been the first time in ten years she had heard him say those words to her. She knew he was sincere when he said them. “I love you, too.”

They didn’t talk anymore, but as they moved together, so many thoughts raced through Melissa’s mind. Why did she avoid him for so long? She could have unblocked him and sent him a message. She should have called him, asked him how he was doing. And at the very least, she could have given him a second chance sooner. But they were together now, and that was all that mattered. She had never stopped loving him, even when she’d been angry at him. It had always been Tripp who had her heart. Always.

Afterwards, Tripp gently rolled over to his side and took Melissa with him, his muscular arms around her, holding her close. A hand brushed the small of her back, and Melissa burned at the touch.

“I told you we’re still good together,” he said.

She placed her palm against his chest, feeling the racing thump underneath. It was beating as fast as hers. Never had Melissa felt more intimately connected to another person. “Yes, we sure are. I love you, Tripp Bartlett.”

“And I love you, Melissa Martin,” he whispered, pressing his lips against hers.



TRIPP STRETCHED and let out a contented sigh. He listened to the winds howl outside as he waited for Melissa to come back to the bed. It seemed like he’d been chasing Melissa for so long that it was unreal they were finally back together. All was right with the world now.

The bathroom door opened, and Tripp admired the view as Melissa sprinted naked across the room. Now that view, he would never get tired of.

She dove under the covers. “It’s freezing!”

Tripp wrapped her arms around her. “I’ll keep you warm.”

She pressed her body against his and nuzzled closer to him. “Mmm, *The Human Furnace*. So hot.”

“You’ll never be cold again. Who needs an electric blanket when you’ve got me?”

Melissa laughed softly.

“So how do you like the bed? Comfy?”

“I like it better than your old one.”

“The futon?”

“Well, yeah, definitely. But the other one too.”

“The squeaky mattress?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

He grinned at her. “Don’t you worry. We’ll break this one in and wear it out soon enough.”

They were quiet for a moment, and Melissa turned to look at Tripp. He was staring back at her.

“I missed this,” she said.

He placed his hand over her head and smoothed her sweaty hair back. “I missed this, too.”

Outside, a tree branch banged against the side of the house. Melissa nuzzled closer to him, like she was happy to be warm and safe inside with him.

“It’s really coming down out there,” Tripp said. It was too dark to see anything, but Tripp could hear the wind. He imagined the heavy snowflakes flying through the air.

“Not that I’m complaining, but how come you’re not at the station covering the ‘big blizzard?’ Shouldn’t it be an ‘all hands on deck’ situation in this kind of weather?”

“Rick’s there to cover it, and Colin, because he was scheduled to be on shift anyway. I’ll get a turn eventually. But it’s nice to be off to enjoy it. Like on those days when the snow was so bad and the schools had no choice but to cancel for the day?”

“Minnesota actually closed down schools for snow? Shocker.”

Tripp laughed. “Only if it buried us.”

“Why did you want to be a meteorologist? I don’t think I’ve ever thought to ask you.”

“I always looked forward to snow days, and my parents got tired of me asking what the weather would be. So, I decided to find out for myself. And thus, my fascination with weather began.”

“If you love snow, why did you go to college in Oklahoma?”

“The only meteorology program in Minnesota is in St. Cloud, and that was a little too close to home. I wanted to be as far away from my family as possible.”

Melissa propped herself up on her elbow and stared at him. “Okay, but why not go to school in the Midwest or New England? You know, some place that actually gets a lot of snow?”

“I considered it. I even applied to a few other places. In the end, you know what was the deciding factor?”

“What’s that?”

“All I had to do was get on Interstate 35 and drive south. Oklahoma was far away, and it involved the least amount of road directions.”

Melissa laughed out loud. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious,” Tripp said with a laugh. “I also thought it would be good for me to experience other kinds of weather other than just winter. And OU has one of the best meteorology programs.”

“I guess I should be glad you went to OU. We would have never met if

you hadn't had classes with my best friend."

Tripp stretched out beside her. "See, it's like I've been trying to tell you. It's fate that we're together. Are you going to tell me you still don't believe it?"

Melissa gave him a smile. "I guess I'm warming up to the idea."

"Speaking of warming up, it's a good evening for hot soup. Are you hungry?"

"Starving."

Tripp grinned at her. "Then we better fix that problem. You're going to need your energy tonight."

"Oh yeah. And what are we doing tonight?"

He moved over her and kissed her on the lips. "Round two. And maybe three and four."

Melissa laughed and kissed him again.

**I**t was light, but still early, when Melissa woke up. Outside, she heard the snow plows already at work, which meant that the blizzard was over—thank god.

Someone was texting her, but Melissa was too comfortable to check her phone. She was lying on Tripp's chest, and his body heat was unbelievably warm. Her phone dinged again.

Reluctantly, she extricated herself from his arms and reached for her phone. It could be her brother, and if she didn't reply to him, he'd be worried. But it wasn't Jeff. She smiled at Kit's messages.

Did you survive your first blizzard?

And did you and Tripp finally bang?

Melissa smiled. She had a lot to talk to her best friend about.

Quietly, she slipped out of bed and put on her robe and slippers. Tripp was still asleep, snoring even. He'd probably sleep for a while.

Downstairs, Melissa got a fire going, which coaxed Rosie away from her bed near the wall. The old lab made herself comfortable on the rug, and Melissa gave her a pat as she closed her eyes.

Bella, full of energy, hopped up onto the couch. Underneath her black fur, Melissa spotted the beige heated throw blanket. "Hey you, I need that." She gave the blanket a tug, and Bella moved. Even though the couch had a heating function, she still preferred a blanket. She was glad she had the forethought to bring hers from home.

Once settled on the couch with Bella curled up next to her, she finally

called Kit.

“Are you freezing?” Kit answered. “Or is *The Human Furnace* keeping you warm right now?”

“*The Human Furnace* is in bed conked out. I think I wore him out last night.”

“YES! I *knew* you wouldn’t make it until Valentine’s Day. Ryder owes me twenty bucks.”

“You took bets on when Tripp and I would sleep together?”

“Ryder said if you were as stubborn as me, you’d hold out until Valentine’s Day for sure. But I knew you wouldn’t be able to wait much longer.”

“Hey, wait a second. Is that why you were pushing me to sleep with him? So you could win a twenty-dollar bet against your husband?”

Kit laughed. “Oh, come on, you wouldn’t have slept with him if you didn’t want to in the first place. I know you.”

“Yeah, and you were right. I wanted to. I can’t believe I waited for so long.” Melissa yawned, a little louder than she had intended.

“Are you tired?”

“I didn’t get much sleep.”

“Must have been those howling winds, huh?”

A memory from last night flashed through her mind. “There was noise all right, but it wasn’t just the wind.”

Kit laughed.

“I guess we’re back together.” Bella’s cold nose brushed her hand, and Melissa gave the dog a head scratch.

“But?”

Melissa yanked the blanket off, suddenly feeling flushed with where this conversation was going. “But I know eventually, the question of marriage is going to come up. And I don’t know what Tripp’s answer will be.”

“Stop thinking about the future. Just live in the moment. That’s the advice you always gave me. And if you weren’t with him, you’d be missing out on the feel of Tripp’s hands on your body.”

Melissa laughed out loud. “What?”

“Oh, come on, don’t you remember you said something like that about me and Ryder? And I know you have this thing for a man’s hands.”

Melissa smiled. “Yeah, I do. I’m weird.”

“Are you happy right now?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s all that matters. And hey, maybe Tripp will come around. Why don’t you two come for a visit when the baby’s born? I bet that’ll make Tripp think about the future. You said he likes kids, right?”

“Yeah, he’s a good uncle and Charlotte adores him.”

“Give it time. Things will work out.”

The floorboards creaked above, and Melissa heard footsteps on the stairs. “Tripp just woke up. I should go. Talk to you later?”

“Sure. Enjoy those hands,” Kit said with a laugh before disconnecting.

Tripp wore sweatpants but no shirt, and damn if Melissa didn’t want to go back upstairs with him. Bella leapt off the couch to greet him, obviously preferring his company. She couldn’t blame the pup.

Tripp gave Bella a head pat. “There you are,” he said, but he was looking at Melissa when he said it.

“I thought you’d sleep for hours.”

Tripp joined her on the couch. “The bed felt cold without you. Imagine that, me actually feeling cold.” He kissed her lips, and when his hands cradled her face, she smiled. He really did have great hands. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.” Melissa kissed him again.

“Was that Kit?” Tripp asked when he pulled away.

“Yeah, just girl talk.”

“Told her all about last night, huh?” Tripp grinned.

“Yes.”

“Want to go back to bed?”

“What do you think?” she said and kissed him.



BY MONDAY, the roads were open, and Melissa realized she needed clothes for work. “I’m going to make a quick trip over there.” Melissa reached for her keys.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

He was smiling at her, but Melissa couldn’t figure out why. “What?”

“Your driveway.”

Realization dawned on her. “Shit, it’s probably covered in snow.”



Tripp moved to where she stood and took her in his arms. “How about I give you a ride and I’ll clear it for you?”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Of course. Isn’t that what boyfriends do?” He leaned forward and kissed her.

At her place, he shoveled a path so that she could at least make it to her porch. While Tripp worked, she went inside. The house’s usual musty smell greeted her, and Melissa groaned when she saw the microwave clock showing the wrong time. The power had definitely gone out at some point. Thank god she’d been at Tripp’s where it was warm.

She’d forgotten to bring her suitcase, so she grabbed a tote bag and filled it up with clothes. She needed enough for the week, because of course, she was staying at Tripp’s. A weekend at his lake house had spoiled her. He had things like an efficient furnace and a hot water heater that wasn’t pushing twenty years.

The door opened, and Tripp’s footsteps sounded down the hallway. “Ready?”

“No.” She took out a sweater from her closet, but the tote bag was full. “I need another bag.”

Tripp chuckled. “You and your overpacking.”

Melissa tossed the sweater onto the bed and turned back to her closet. She rifled through her garments. “I can’t find my favorite red shirt. Everything is packed in here. And no, I don’t have too many clothes. It’s just that this closet is too small. I hate this house.”

“How long is your lease?”

“Six months. I’m glad I didn’t sign on for a year.” Between two oversized sweaters, Melissa saw a red sleeve poking out. “Ahh, here it is.”

“You know, there’s a simple solution to your closet problem.”

“Oh yeah?” She gave the shirt a tug, but it was caught on the hanger.

“My lake house. Move in with me.”

Melissa let go of the sleeve and slowly turned around, wondering if she heard him right. “What did you say?”

He sat on her frilly comforter and smiled at her. “I said you could move in with me. I have plenty of closet space.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, why not? We’re back together, right?”

She put the bag of clothes down and sat next to him. “Tripp, moving in

together is a big step. Are you sure you're ready for that?"

He shrugged. "We practically lived together in college, or at least on the weekends when we could see each other. And during summer break, I stayed with you at your apartment. I thought we tolerated each other well. Except for my dirty socks on the floor." He chuckled.

It wasn't a marriage proposal, but it was the next best thing. If she moved in with Tripp, it would be a trial-run of sorts for married life. And maybe Tripp would finally see that it could be wonderful.

"So, what do you say?" Tripp gave her a nudge. "You wouldn't have to deal with shoveling snow anymore. And, you'd definitely be warm at night." Tripp wiggled his eyebrows.

Melissa grinned. "I say yes, I'll move in with you." She grabbed hold of his coat collar and pulled him in for a kiss.

"Only one problem."

Melissa's smile fell. "What's that?"

Tripp looked at her frilly bed pillows. "I was kind of hoping I'd get to sleep in your bed at least once." He turned back to her and grinned. "You up for a nooner?"

Melissa slapped him playfully on the arm. "Tripp, we don't have time. We've got work soon."

"I can be quick."

"Tripp."

He sighed. "I suppose you're right. We do have to go. Some other time?"

Melissa thought about it. "I don't know. I really like your new mattress. It's much better than mine." She leaned forward and kissed him.



TRIPP WHISTLED as he walked to his desk.

Lance glanced up from his computer and shot him an annoyed look. "You know I hate when you whistle."

Tripp sank in his chair and stretched out his legs. "Guess who got laid this weekend."

Lance spun around in his chair with a grin on his face. "You dog!"

"Told you it would happen. It's fate."

"You and your fate talk," Lance said with an eye roll.

“I also convinced her to move in with me.”

“Well, that’s a new development. Are you getting engaged next?”

“One thing at a time. We just got back together.” He thought of his grandmother’s ring in his drawer. The idea of proposing made his stomach flip and his heart race. He wasn’t quite ready to give it to her, but he had some time to mentally prepare himself.

“Well, I think moving in will be a good thing for you. You’ve been on your own for way too long, and your lake house could use a woman’s touch.”

“I know. She already had me ditch the buck head. I had to move him down to the basement.”

“Ed? No way.”

“Why, you want him?”

Lance shook his head. “Nah, Stacy would never allow that.” Lance stood and patted Tripp on the shoulder. “Let me give you a word of advice now that you’re living with a woman. Let her decide all the decor, and leave the toilet seat down.”

Tripp laughed.



THE BIG NEWS of the evening was the cleanup efforts after the blizzard, but Melissa could barely concentrate on it. Every time she’d glance at Tripp across the room, he’d do something like wink or flash her a sexy smile, and Melissa would remember his face when they made love. She felt her cheeks grow warm.

Cassie walked past her. “You okay, Melissa?”

Melissa nodded. “Yeah, why do you ask?”

“You looked a little flushed.”

“Oh, just the studio lights. They’re always so hot.” She needed to stop thinking about being with Tripp. But hey, at least it kept her from feeling cold.

During the broadcast, Tripp reported on the record low temperatures during the blizzard. “Hope you were able to stay warm, Melissa. I know you hate cold nights.”

The comment was unscripted, and when the camera was off him, he winked.

She remembered his naked body pressed against hers and the way the heat radiated off him. She did *not* want to be thinking about that when she was live on the air. “I managed.” She smiled for the audience, and when the camera was off her, she reached for her water and took a swig. The icy liquid slipped down her throat, but she didn't feel any cooler.

After the newscast was over, she ducked into her office and called Kit. With the recent developments of this afternoon, she'd been dying to talk to her best friend.

“He asked me to move in with him,” she said once she finally got Kit on the line.

“Are you serious? That's like, a big step for Tripp.”

“It may not be a marriage proposal, but it's a step in the right direction.”

“Think of it as a baby step for Tripp. Once you live together for a while, it'll be like you're married anyway.”

Melissa paced her small office. “I just have to be patient. Maybe one day, he'll get over his hang-ups and just ask me.”

There was a brief knock on her door before it opened. Tripp poked his head into her office.

“I have to go. I'll call you back later.” She hung up and put her phone away.

“Didn't mean to interrupt.” Tripp closed the door behind him. “I just had to see you.”

He moved to hold her, but Melissa pushed him back. “Tripp, we're at work,” she whispered.

He wrapped his arms around her anyway. “I know, but you have an office, and everyone is going to dinner.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “I thought we could fool around.”

Melissa moved out of his arms. “Tripp, no. When we're at your place tonight, we will, but not at work.”

“You mean our place.”

Melissa smiled. “Right, our place. But we're not doing this now.”

Tripp sighed. “Can't blame a guy for trying. Do you know how sexy you are when you report the news? Did you like it when I asked if you'd stayed warm this weekend?”

“I'd appreciate it if you'd not make me think about us together when we're on air.”

Tripp chuckled.

“Open that door. I don’t want our coworkers to start talking.”

Tripp opened it. “They’re going to know eventually. I don’t think we can keep it a secret for long. Lance already knows, and I think Bob suspects. And once Cassie learns about us, all of WLMN will find out.”

Melissa’s eyes grew wide. “You don’t think we could get in trouble, do you? I mean, are coworkers allowed to date? When they hired me and gave me the policy manual, I didn’t exactly read all of it.”

“I read it, and it’s fine.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You read the policy manual?”

“When you started working here, I sure as hell did. It’s not forbidden, but we do have to disclose our relationship to our supervisors and our HR rep. And you know who the HR rep is, don’t you?”

As if she had been summoned, Cassie knocked on the door. “Hey, a group of us are going to Betty’s for dinner. You want to come?”

Melissa looked at Tripp, and he looked at her, then at Cassie. “Cassie, can we talk to you for a moment?” he asked.

“Sure, what’s up?”

Tripp glanced at her, then back at Cassie. “If two coworkers get into a relationship, what do they have to do?”

“Well, they would let me and their supervisors know, and there’s a form to sign, and—” Cassie looked at them both, and a wide grin spread across her face. “Oh my god, you two are dating, aren’t you?”

Tripp put his arm around Melissa. “We’re not just dating. We’re in love.”

Cassie held her hands together in a swooning position. “Aww, you guys! I *knew* there was something going on between you two!”

Melissa was shocked. She had thought she’d hidden her feelings for Tripp so well. “Really?”

“Of course! You two are always hanging out. And you look so cute together.”

“We actually used to date a long time ago,” Melissa said.

“But since we found ourselves working at the same station, we realized fate was trying to get us back together,” Tripp said.

“You and your fate talk,” Melissa said with a laugh. But in all honesty, she now believed it was true.

Every morning this week, Tripp woke up with Melissa in his arms. It was a nice way to start the day. Saturdays, he knew, were going to be his favorite. No work meant he and Melissa could have a lazy day in bed. Tripp could stand to wake up like this every morning.

He pulled her close and kissed her on the forehead. “Remember our *Naked Saturdays*? That would be fun to bring back.”

Melissa gave him a look. “When it’s eighty degrees and summer, we’ll talk about it. Didn’t you say it was going to snow later?”

“Yeah, but I can keep you warm. I’m *The Human Furnace*.”

Melissa laughed as Tripp threw the covers over them.

When they finally dragged themselves downstairs, stomachs rumbling, Tripp let out the dogs and made her breakfast.

“I still can’t believe you cook,” Melissa said, digging into her scrambled eggs. “And it’s actually good.”

“Couldn’t live on take-out forever.” He joined her at the wobbly table and apologized for shaking her juice glass. “I wonder if I can fix the wobble. Probably a screw needs to be tightened.”

“It’s been tightened, then it gets loose and wobbles again. We should get rid of it. I can bring the table from my place.”

“No way. I love this table. Every time I sit at it, I see you sprawled out naked on it. Or leaning over it naked. Or that time you did a little striptease while standing on top of it.”

Melissa held up her hand. “Enough with memory lane. We’re replacing it.”

Tripp grinned. “I guess I’ll move it down to my basement man cave. Me and Lance can play poker on it. Jeff could join us—if he’ll tolerate me.”

“Best not to tell my brother why the table is wobbly,” she warned.

They finished breakfast, and Tripp glanced at the pool table with the balls still scattered from last week. “You know, we never did finish our pool game.”

Melissa smiled. “Wonder why.”

Tripp gathered the colored balls into the triangle. “Want to start over?”

Melissa grabbed a cue stick. “I might be up for a quick game.”

“Wonder if we’ll finish this one,” Tripp said, winking.

They had only been playing for a little while when he heard a car pull up outside. Tripp peeked out the window and saw a familiar blue SUV. “Great.”

Melissa looked up. “Who is it?”

“Daniel. I guess *Naked Saturday* is definitely not happening now.”

Tripp shielded his eyes against the morning sun as he opened the door. Both dogs went berserk barking as Daniel got out of the vehicle. Tripp saw him holding a duffel bag and groaned.

“He’s got an overnight bag.”

Bella pressed her nose against the glass door, tail wagging. Tripp held her by the collar as he opened the door.

“This is a surprise,” Tripp said.

Daniel tossed his bag on the floor and petted the dogs. “I know, I didn’t call. Sorry.” He spotted Melissa. “Hey, Melissa.”

“Hey.”

“Tripp, I need a place to stay. Busy kicked me out and asked me for a divorce.”

“Wow. I’m sorry, but I can’t say I didn’t see that coming.”

Daniel sighed. “Yeah, me too. I guess we’re over for good. Can I crash here? I’ll leave tomorrow night. Dad’s getting tired of me at the house. I can sleep on the couch.”

Tripp glanced at Melissa, hating that their weekend time alone was gone now. “You can sleep in the guest room. I have it set up now.”

“Thanks, Tripp. Don’t know what I would do without you.” He gave Tripp a pat on the shoulder and shucked off his coat. Moments later, he made himself comfortable on Tripp’s recliner. “You got any beer? I could really use a drink.”

Tripp glanced at the wall clock. “It’s not even noon.”

“Just get one for me. Please? I’ve had that kind of day already.”

Melissa grabbed her coat by the door. “How about I take the dogs for a walk and let you two talk?”

Tripp tossed her a grateful look. “That would be great. Thanks.”

She gave him a quick peck on the lips. “We’ll finish our game later,” she whispered. “Come on, girls! Let’s go for a walk.”

Both dogs followed Melissa to the mudroom.

In the kitchen, Tripp opened the refrigerator and grabbed a beer. He considered getting one for himself too, but thought better of it. He really didn’t want to drink before noon.

Daniel’s shoes sat on the living room rug and the remote was in his hand, the TV tuned to ESPN. Tripp handed the can to Daniel and took a seat in the other recliner. “So, what happened?”

He cracked the can open. “She’s fucking her yoga instructor. Some douchebag Australian guy with a fake tan and a love for all things kale. I guess she decided to get back at me. Tit for tat.”

“I’m sorry.”

“She wants to bitch about me looking at other women, and this whole time, she’s screwing another man behind my back.” Daniel took a sip of his beer.

“You know, I hate to say it, but I think it’s probably for the best that you separate. You two haven’t liked each other for a long time. Think about your kids. Remember us growing up with Mom and Dad fighting all the time?”

Daniel leaned back in the recliner and put his feet up. “I’m not sorry we had kids, but if I could do it all over again, I would have never married her.” He looked at Tripp and held up his beer. “You’re so smart to stay single. Don’t get married.”

Tripp was quiet. He thought of the diamond and garnet ring in his drawer upstairs, the one that had belonged to their grandmother.

The one he was planning to give to Melissa.

“Shit,” Daniel said. “Don’t tell me.”

“What?”

“You get that look when I say something you disagree with. You’re not thinking about it, are you?”

“What if I am?”

“You didn’t want to marry her before. Why would you go down that road again?”



Tripp shrugged. “Things change. You know what I’m figuring out? We never had a good example of what a healthy relationship looks like, except for Gram and Gramps. For a long time, I loathed the idea of marriage. What was the point if it ended up in divorce anyway? But they made it work, so why can’t I?”

“If you think Gram and Gramps didn’t have problems, you’re mistaken. He was messed up for a long time after the war, and they only stayed together because of Dad. Which is exactly what Busy and I have been doing. So, you’re right. Busy and I should split up. It isn’t good for the kids. And if you want my two cents, look how messed up Dad is. You think he’d be that messed up if Gram and Gramps had separated?”

Tripp hadn’t considered that, and it made him pause. “I’m not saying they didn’t have problems, but they worked through them. They came out stronger in the end.” Much like, he hoped, he and Melissa would.

Daniel shook his head. “You’re missing the point, big brother. Dad grew up to be a terrible husband because Gramps was a terrible one too. If I learned anything about having a wife, it’s that it’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

Did Gram and Gramps really just stay together for the sake of their child? Was their relationship not as strong as he thought? Tripp feared that his brother was right. “You don’t think they had a happy marriage?”

Daniel leaned in closer. “Not a chance.”



MELISSA HAD MADE it halfway across the yard when she realized she’d forgotten the poop bags. They’d probably just tinkle, if anything. They’d already been outside once. But if she took them for a walk without poop bags, they’d definitely do a number two. Best not to be unprepared, especially with the way Bella ate.

“Come on girls. Let’s go get them. Then we can continue our walk. Unless, of course, you’re too cold and want to go back inside?”

Bella and Rosie wagged their tails in response. They seemed content to be out in the fresh air, and Melissa sighed. “Does cold weather not bother anyone else but me?”

Inside, she pulled out two bags and slipped them in her coat pocket. She’d

been about to walk out the door when she heard Daniel's voice.

"Don't do it, Tripp. Don't ask Melissa to marry you. You may think it's fun at first, but trust me, the honeymoon period only lasts for so long. After a while, she'll nag you about your dirty clothes and the toilet seat. You don't want a life like me and Dad."

Melissa stood behind the wall to listen, curious at Tripp's response to that. Did he agree with his brother?

"No, I don't want to be miserable like you and Dad. That's the thing about marriage that always scared me—repeating Dad's mistakes."

It wasn't the response she wanted to hear, and she didn't want to listen to any more of it. She crept out the door, hoping not to be heard. Once outside, she knelt down to pet the dogs and felt the tears in her eyes. Tripp didn't want to get married. He wanted to live together, but he didn't want to make it official. Her heart had known that all along, and she had led herself to believe she could change him.

She'd been so stupid.



TRIPP LEANED back in his recliner and considered all his brother had said. "But you know what? Even though I'm scared of it, I think I still want to do it. I don't think I'd be miserable with Melissa. Dad and Mom never loved each other, and you and Busy, well, you fell out of love. But I love Melissa. I have Gram's ring upstairs, and at some point, I'm going to give it to her." Whenever he had the courage to, anyway.

Daniel took a sip of beer. "Don't say I didn't warn you. The only good thing that came from my marriage was the kids, and that's it." He stood, leaving the empty beer can on the table. "I'm going to go upstairs and take a nap."

"Sure." Tripp didn't want to say it, but he was relieved Daniel was leaving the room. Sometimes, listening to his brother complain was exhausting.

He watched television while he waited for Melissa to return, but after a while, she still hadn't come back. When he looked out the back door, he was surprised to see both dogs resting on the floor, but no sign of Melissa. She probably wanted to give him time with Daniel.

Upstairs, Tripp heard the sound of something being zipped open. He peered inside his bathroom and saw Melissa tossing her makeup into her tiny cosmetic bag. “Hey, there you are. I saw the dogs but didn’t see you.”

“I was quiet.” She zipped the bag back up, then placed it in the side pocket of her suitcase.

“What are you doing? Are you packing?”

She closed the suitcase and looked at him. “I think I’m going to spend the night at my place.”

“You don’t have to go. Daniel won’t bother us. He’ll probably sleep most of the time he’s here.”

“This isn’t about your brother. This is about us. Maybe we shouldn’t live together.”

Panic set in. What the hell was Melissa talking about? “I don’t understand. You seemed excited about it.”

She put her phone charger in her purse and didn’t answer him.

“Okay, did I do something wrong? Did I leave the toilet seat up too many times?” He laughed at his joke, but Melissa wasn’t smiling.

She slung her purse over her shoulder and reached for the suitcase handle. “Tripp, I know how you feel about our future. I overheard you talking to your brother. You don’t want to get married. So maybe us getting back together was a mistake. Just like before, we want different things from this relationship, so why the hell are we together?”

Tripp racked his brain as he thought of his conversation with this brother. Had he said that? “I think you misunderstood.”

“You said you didn’t want to be miserable like your dad and brother. The thought of marriage scares you. I got the message, Tripp.”

So that’s what she heard. He took a deep breath. “Yeah, Melissa, the thought is a little scary sometimes. But don’t think I don’t want to be with you. You didn’t hear the whole conversation.”

“I know you want to be with me, Tripp. I have no doubt about that. You just don’t love me enough to make it official.” She threw her bags over her shoulder and wheeled the suitcase out the bedroom door.

He followed her out into the hall. “Melissa, don’t go. Let’s sit down and talk.”

She ignored him and headed down the staircase. Her suitcase made a thump-thump-thump as the wheels hit the wood.

“Melissa.”

She stopped at the foot of the stairs and reached for her coat. “I don’t want to talk right now, Tripp. I just want some space. Can you give me that?”

“If that’s what you want. Can I come over tonight?”

She zipped up her coat and threw on the hood. “I don’t know. I just want to be alone.”

The dogs were at her heels, almost as if they too were pleading for Melissa not to go. She gave each one a goodbye pat, then opened the door. “Bye, Tripp.”

And then, she was gone.

“What happened?”

Tripp looked behind him and saw Daniel in his dirty socks and disheveled hair. “Just a little misunderstanding with Melissa.”

But shit, Melissa had it all wrong. How the hell was he going to fix this?

Lance held his door open and Tripp marched in. “I fucked up, Lance. I fucked it up.”

“Uh-oh. What did you do?”

Tripp paced the living room and ran his hands through his hair. “Melissa’s under the impression that I don’t want to get married, but that’s not true.” Tripp stopped his pacing and thought about what he just said. “Holy fuck. I want to get married.”

“Okay, just calm down and tell me everything that happened.”

Tripp told him about Daniel showing up and what Melissa had heard them talking about.

“How do I fix this, Lance?”

“Sounds like an easy fix to me. You’re going to have to put a ring on it.”

“I know.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the ring box. “I’ve been holding on to this for two weeks.”

Lance took the box and examined the ring inside. “Wow, you really are serious. This looks antique.”

Tripp took the ring back. “It was my grandmother’s. I got it from my father when I went to visit him. I want to give it to her, but I’m nervous as hell.”

“Tripp, that’s completely normal. You don’t think I was nervous when I asked Stacy to marry me?”

Tripp nodded. “Okay, I’ll go over there, give her this ring, and then everything will be good again.”

He stood, but Lance pulled him back. “Whoa, no. You can’t just go over

there and propose.”

“Why not?”

“She won’t think you’re being sincere. She’ll think you’re just proposing because that’s what she wants to hear.”

“But I am being sincere.”

“Okay, so you’re going to have to make a grand gesture. You know, something romantic.”

“Romantic. Right. Give me ideas.”

Lance shrugged. “Well, it’s Valentine’s Day Monday.”

Tripp grinned. “That’s right. And that was our deadline to get back together. But no, Monday is too far away. I need to do this tonight.”

“Well, there’s the lovers’ skate this evening.”

Tripp shook his head. “No, too public, and I’m terrible at skating.”

“You’re going to have to think of something big.”

Tripp considered his options. What would Melissa like? What could he do to get her to listen to him? And then, he had the perfect idea.

“I got it.” He jumped from the couch. “Thanks, man.”

“What are you going to do?” Lance asked.

“I’ll tell you later!” Tripp said, then hurried out the door.



AT THE HOUSE, Daniel was in his recliner and stuffing his face in front of the television. “Did you make up with Melissa?”

At the door, Bella jumped on Tripp, but he didn’t have time for a walk now. “No. I haven’t seen her yet.” He started for the stairs, then stopped halfway. “Remember that old boombox Gramps had? You didn’t take it, did you?”

Daniel gave him a confused look. “Why would I want some stupid old boombox?”

“Never mind.” Tripp ran up the stairs.

He squeezed his way into the spare room and turned on the light. It had to be here somewhere. After a frantic minute of searching, he found the boombox on top of the bookshelf. It was coated in a layer of dust, but nothing that a washcloth wouldn’t fix.

He doubted it still worked, and even if it did, he was sure he didn’t have

the song from the movie. He couldn't even remember what it was. His phone would help with both of those problems.

As he headed out, he spotted the DVD on top of a side table near the door. He'd placed it there after his movie night with Melissa. Right on the back cover was John Cusack with the boombox. He studied the picture for a moment and knew Gramps had a trench coat just like Lloyd's in the closet. Well, hell. If he was going to recreate the scene from the movie, he might as well go all out.

Heading back into the dusty, junk-filled room, Tripp made his way to the closet. When his grandparents had been alive, Gram had the whole master bedroom closet to herself. Gramps had used this one. And right in the front, there was the trench coat. A little big, but it was perfect.

Back downstairs, Tripp grabbed his keys and phone from the table.

Daniel muted the game. "Leaving again?"

"Yeah. If all goes well, I won't be coming home tonight. Do me a favor? If I don't come back, keep my dogs alive. Feed them dinner and let them out to use the bathroom before you go to bed."

"No problem."

Tripp stopped to look at his reflection in the mirror. He'd been running around all day. Maybe he should take time to shower and shave, but making things right with Melissa took precedence.

"All right, I'm gone." He gave Rosie and Bella a goodbye head scratch. "Remember, take care of the girls."

"Stop worrying about your dogs. They'll be fine. And good luck."

"Thanks." He sure as hell was going to need all the luck he could get.



MELISSA TOOK a sip of wine and peeked out the window. The sun was gone and clouds were gathering, matching her depressed mood. The snow was coming again.

She pulled on her *Let it Snow ... Somewhere Else* sweatshirt and curled up on the sofa with her blanket. She missed Tripp's heated couch, and she missed Tripp. Even with her electric blanket, she felt cold without the arms of *The Human Furnace* around her.

At the other end of the couch, her iPad lit up with a Facetime call. She

texted Kit earlier, but Kit couldn't talk and promised to call her back.

"Tell me what happened," Kit said.

Melissa reached for a tissue, knowing she'd need it, and told her friend everything.

"And the day had started off so perfect," Melissa finished.

On the screen, Kit looked concerned. "Is it possible you're overreacting? I mean, you've known that Tripp is a little gun shy when it comes to marriage. I thought you were going to try moving in and letting him get used to domestic life."

Melissa thought about it, and she knew Kit was probably right. "Yes, it's possible I'm overreacting."

"You should talk to him. Give him a chance to explain what he meant. It may just be that he's nervous about marriage right now, but that doesn't mean he won't be ready for it in the future."

"Yeah, I guess."

Somewhere offscreen, Melissa heard Ryder's voice in the background.

"Okay, just give me a few more minutes, honey," Kit said.

"Do you need to go?"

Kit shook her head. "I'm not in a hurry. I always have time for you."

"Where are you going?"

"Ryder and I are going to do a little shopping for the nursery."

"Aww, that's fun."

"Yeah. And then we're—" Kit trailed off. "Never mind. Not important."

"What? Tell me."

Kit had a pained look on her face. "Since Valentine's Day is Monday, Ryder and I were going to celebrate tonight. You know, dinner, romance, the works. Except for wine, of course."

"Right. It's the weekend before Valentine's Day. I was supposed to make a decision about Tripp by now."

"I was trying not to remind you of that."

"It's okay."

"Don't completely shut him out, Melissa. Is he afraid of marriage? Yes. But he wants to be with you. He keeps saying it's fate, right?"

Melissa sighed. "Yeah. Okay, I'll let you go. Enjoy your evening."

"Talk to Tripp. I'll call you tomorrow."

She ended the video chat with Kit and picked up her phone. Just as she pulled up Tripp's contact, she heard music playing outside. It was the Peter



Gabriel song from her favorite movie.

Melissa peeked out the window. There was Tripp, standing in the middle of her snowy yard. He was wearing a trench coat and holding a boombox over his head. The music continued to play. He looked ridiculous dressed that way with that enormous boombox, but in that moment, her heart melted.

She tugged on her boots and pulled on her puffy coat. In her rush to get outside, she forwent the hat and gloves and opened the door.

It was snowing now, and Tripp flashed her a smile. "I love you, Melissa. And I want to be with you. Don't you ever doubt that."

She made her way down the porch steps and over to Tripp. She looked him up and down. "Boombox. Trench coat. I can't believe you're doing this. That's really ... sweet."

He set the boombox on his truck seat and reached for his phone. He turned the music down, but let it play in the background. "The boombox is just for show. The music is coming through my Bluetooth speaker."

"I figured."

He reached for her hands. They felt slightly cold, which was a first for *The Human Furnace*, but Melissa didn't care. The snow fell harder, and big, fluffy snowflakes covered his hair, but Tripp didn't seem to notice. "I need to say something to you."

"And I have something to say to you," Melissa said. "I thought about it, and we don't have to get married. I don't know why I'm so obsessed about it. I guess I just want what everyone else has, and I feel like I'm past due for it to happen to me. But I love you, Tripp. And if you just want to spend your life with me without it being anything formal, then that'll be enough."

Tripp shook his head. "No, it won't be enough. Look, I'm not going to lie that the thought of marriage makes me anxious, but that doesn't mean that I don't ever want to. And actually, whether you believe me or not, I've been thinking about it."

Her heart raced. "You have?"

He nodded. "Monday is Valentine's Day. Our deadline, remember? But I don't want to wait. I know it was about you making your decision about me, but I think it's the other way around. I need to make a decision about our relationship. Am I scared about marriage? Yes. But you know what? My grandparents were together for sixty years. And no, they didn't have a perfect relationship, but they fought for it and stayed together. If they can do it, then we sure as hell can too."

It felt like a proposal was coming, but Melissa didn't want to get her hopes up. "Tripp, what are you saying?"

He got down on his knee and held up something.

A ring.

"I've had this for two weeks. Every time I thought about how this moment would play out, I'd get nervous. I was sure I would screw it up or say the wrong thing. But I want to marry you. So, I'm asking you now. Melissa Ann Martin, will you marry me?"

So many thoughts were racing through her mind, and she was too stunned to speak.

"Are you going to leave a guy hanging?" Tripp said, smiling. "My knee is soaking wet from the snow."

"Oh my god. Do you mean it?"

"Yes. I'm unhappy without you, and I think you're miserable without me too. Why are we doing this to ourselves? Let's get married and be together. So, are you going to say yes?"

Melissa laughed, giddy with excitement. "Yes. Yes, I'll marry you, Tripp!"

He moved to a standing position and slipped the ring on her finger. It was a perfect fit. Seconds later, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

"You have made me so happy, Melissa. When you left today, I was scared I'd ruined my second chance with you."

"I overreacted. I have a tendency to do that sometimes."

"No, you had every right to be mad. You said from the get-go that you wanted a commitment. I'm ready to give that to you. I want us to spend the rest of our lives together."

"Me too." She admired the ring again. It wasn't a typical engagement ring. There were diamonds, sure, but the red garnet was the biggest stone. "This ring. It's beautiful."

"It was my grandmother's. When I went to see my father, he gave it to me so that I could give it to you."

"You went to see your father?"

Tripp nodded. "Yeah, the weekend Kit was here. You were right to tell me to talk to him. I think we're in a good place now."

"That's good, Tripp. I'm glad you went to see him." She looked at her hand again. Though the light was fading fast, she could still see its sparkle. "Garnets are my birthstone."

Tripp grinned. “No kidding. Really?”

“Really.”

Tripp pumped his fist in the air. “The universe works its magic again!” He pressed his lips against hers. His breath was warm, and Melissa felt herself shiver as a cold wind whipped her face. The snow was falling down harder.

Tripp looked up at the sky. “I know you hate the snow. I’m sorry I couldn’t propose to you under better conditions.”

“It was a perfect proposal, and actually, maybe snow isn’t so bad.”

Tripp cupped his hand around his ear. “What did you say? I don’t think I heard you. Did you say you liked snow?”

Melissa hit him playfully. “I said it’s not that bad, but I never said I liked it. But…”

“But what?”

“It will always remind me of how happy I am to be with you.”

The wind picked up, and Melissa shivered without her hat and gloves.

Tripp rubbed her upper arms. “You must be freezing.”

“I am. You want to come inside and warm me up? You said you wanted to sleep in my bed, didn’t you?”

Tripp laughed softly. “I definitely want to be in your bed, but sleep is the last thing I plan to do.”

## EPILOGUE

**I**t was summer, and the weather was perfect with temperatures in the lower eighties. No rain—or snow—was in the forecast. The ice had long since melted on the lake, to Melissa’s relief. She turned her face to the sky and felt the sun warm her cheeks. “Oh, it feels so good.”

“To you. I don’t know how I’m going to survive a week in Aruba.”

Melissa turned to look at her husband. He was wearing a tuxedo, which had to be hard for him. At least she could wear a dress.

“We’re almost done with pictures, and then you can take off your jacket.”

He dabbed a bead of sweat from his forehead with a fancy white handkerchief. “See, I told you Minnesota would have some weather you’d like.”

“You were right. Road construction season has some pleasant weather conditions.”

Tripp laughed.

“All right, let me get just a few more,” the photographer said, her camera ready again. It was the same photographer who had taken their WLMN pictures, and she was thrilled to hear Melissa and Tripp were getting married.

It felt so weird to think that. She was married. *Married*. So many times in the past, she had dreamed of this moment with Tripp. When he had spoken his vows in front of their friends and family, Melissa knew in her heart that he meant every single word.

“Let’s get one more of you kissing,” the photographer said.

Melissa was happy to indulge the photographer, and she and Tripp kissed with the lake as the backdrop. After the picture had been taken, he was still

kissing her, even slipping her a little tongue.

“Get a room,” Lance shouted.

Tripp finally pulled away. “To be continued tonight,” he said with a wink.

Melissa patted him on the arm. “Okay, now go sit in the shade.”

He grinned at her, then headed toward the catering tent.

Pictures with her bridal party were next. Eileen and a very pregnant Kit headed to the front.

Kit leaned into Melissa. “You look amazing.”

“So do you.”

Kit rolled her eyes. “Please, I’m huge. I’m so ready to pop this baby out.”

“I think pregnant women are beautiful,” Melissa said, wrapping her arm around her best friend. “And who knows? Maybe this time next year, it’ll be me looking like you.”

Eileen gasped. “Are you guys trying?”

“Please say yes,” Kit said. “I would love for our kids to be close in age.”

“Tripp and I decided that after the honeymoon, I’ll stop the birth control. Then if it happens, it happens.”

Kit squealed and gave her a hug. “I’m so excited for you!”

“You’ll be a great mom,” Eileen said. “Eli won’t be much older if you have one soon, and Charlotte’s already so good with her baby brother. I bet when she’s a teenager, she’ll be an excellent babysitter.”

“Speaking of my niece, where’s my junior bridesmaid? And my flower girl?”

“Coming!” Charlotte said, holding Riley’s hand as they made their way to the photographer’s set up.

Once everyone was in the shot, Riley shouted “*Cheese,*” and the photographer clicked her camera.



DESPITE THE HEAT, Tripp was having a good time. And though he had only been married for a couple of hours, it wasn’t so bad. He’d never seen Melissa so happy, and it was contagious. He had a feeling he would enjoy married life.

Everyone seemed to be having a good time. His mother, freshly divorced and back from Malibu, complained about the reception not being at the

country club. The open bar was keeping her happy at least, and fortunately, his parents hadn't caused a scene. Tripp was on edge for some drama, as his father brought along his new wife. She was young and pretty, but had a pleasant demeanor. Tripp's mother hated her. Meanwhile, Daniel was flirting with the photographer. Well, at least he wasn't cheating on Busy since they had separated.

After some cheek pinching from Alice, who told Tripp that his grandmother would have been so happy for him, and ribbing from Lance about the wedding night, he finally made it to the dessert table. He snagged a cookie and felt someone's eyes on him.

"I was wrong about you," Jeff said.

Tripp hastily swallowed his mouthful of cookie. "I do love your sister."

"I know. Did Melissa ever tell you that Eileen and I broke up for a while? And it was me who had initiated the separation."

"Perfect Jeff? No."

Jeff nodded. "Yeah. We met online and we lived in different states. I found it impossible for us to maintain that sort of long-distance relationship. So, I broke up with her, broke her heart, and started dating other women."

This was refreshing to hear. "You're telling me all this time when you were pissed at me for breaking Melissa's heart, you had done the same to Eileen?"

Jeff nodded. "I'm not proud of it."

"But obviously you got back together."

Jeff took a sip of his champagne. "We did, but it wasn't easy. I was miserable without her, and those other girls on the site weren't for me. Conversation didn't come as easy with them as it did with Eileen. That's when I knew that I had to get her back."

"What did you do?"

"I flew to Minnesota and proposed to her in front of her parents. Probably not the best idea. Her father was ready to kill me."

"You and Arnold seem to get along now."

"Yeah, but only because Eileen forgave me. She'd been miserable without me too. I was prepared to quit my job and move to Minnesota, but Eileen knew I didn't want to leave Melissa behind, so she followed me to Kansas. So, if Melissa can forgive you, then I can forgive you too."

"Thanks, man. That means a lot."

"So, brothers?"

Tripp smiled. “I guess we are brothers now.”

“Welcome to the family.” Jeff extended his hand, but Tripp skipped the handshake and went straight for a hug.

“Maybe you’ll want to come play poker with me and the guys sometime,” Tripp suggested. “I’ve got a sweet man cave set up in the basement.” Complete with the wobbly table, but Tripp didn’t tell Jeff that detail.

Jeff nodded. “Sure, that sounds fun.”

“Aww, I’m so glad to see my brother and husband getting along.”

Tripp turned to see his wife—that was going to take some getting used to—smiling at them both.

“Tripp and I have come to an understanding.” Jeff looked Tripp square in the eye. “But what I said before still stands. If you hurt my sister again, I *will* kick your ass.”

Tripp nodded. “Duly noted. And if I do, I’ll deserve the ass-kicking.”

“Good. Just as long as we understand that.” He held up his champagne flute, then walked away.

Once Jeff was out of sight, Tripp placed his arm around Melissa’s waist and pulled her close. “Have I told you how happy I am to have you as my wife?”

“Not for at least an hour, but you can say it again. I’ll never get tired of hearing it.”

He looked her in the eyes and cradled her face in his hands. “Mrs. Bartlett, I’m so thrilled to have you as my wife.”

He kissed her.

## **DID YOU ENJOY THIS BOOK?**

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## ALSO BY MELODY LOOMIS

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But Kit knows it won't last. She needs to get the hell out of Dodge and get her career back on track. Her dream job is in Oklahoma, but Kit doesn't do long-distance relationships. And if she gets the job, it'll mean saying goodbye to Ryder.

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