

BILLIONAIRES



Don't
To Go
Camp

AMEY ZEIGLER

BILLIONAIRES DON'T GO TO CAMP

AMEY ZEIGLER



Copyright © 2023 by Amey Zeigler

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover art by Trish Howard

For Xander who always gets lost in my stories

“Well, the very rich can afford to give offense wherever they go. We need not care for his good opinion.”

~ Elizabeth Bennet, *Pride and Prejudice*

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[FREE ebook!](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Amey Zeigler](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER 1

Clara Easton hated driving the dilapidated white van around Austin with the words Happy Camp spray painted on the side. It felt like driving one of those kidnapper vans. Only hers had windows, four bench-rows of rowdy teenagers, and plenty of seatbelts.

“Buckle up in the Happy Bus,” she called from the driver’s seat waiting for the after-school car line to get out of the parking lot. “You know this van doesn’t go on the big roads until everyone is safe.” She glanced in the rearview mirror.

Kiva bent over the seat behind him, and his pants didn’t quite cover his boxers—purple ones, with pineapples.

Clara shook her head. “Kiva. Get buckled.”

Turning around, he opened his arms and brushed the hairnet covering his head, his bright white teeth gleaming. “What? I am.”

She squinted into the rearview mirror. “When I say buckled, I mean over you, not under you.” Inching the car forward, she was almost to the intersection out of the high school. “I mean it. I will turn this thing around.” She totally bluffed. Making any kind of turn in this beast was a pain in the tailgate.

“Oh man!” Kiva rolled his eyes and stood to retrieve his belt from underneath him. “You got me.” He flashed her a semi-smile.

Owen punched his shoulder. “I told you you wouldn’t get away with it. Captain Clara has eyes in the back of her head.”

“That’s right.” She inched the car forward, smiling at her nickname. Counting the cars, she felt a throbbing start at the base of her neck from the music blasting from the back seat. Finally, it was their turn at the intersection. Clara glanced up and down the street to make a left turn. Cars came from both sides in a constant stream. “Man, we have a lot of traffic today.”

Kiva shrugged. “It is the last day of school. What did you expect?”

The low school zone speed limit didn’t help the traffic—just stretched it out. Clara bit her lip. “We might be here a while, guys.”

“I reject the masculine term for us all.” Marian sat in the front seat.

“I’ll just use the Southern collective, y’all, then.” Clara sneaked a peek in the rearview mirror to make sure no more shenanigans happened behind her back. “Hey, do me a favor and look up the fastest way to get to camp.” With traffic this bad, she might need an alternate route. She tossed Marian her phone. Marian held the phone close to her face like a lifeline; her many rings on her fingers flashed as she scrolled.

The central Texas sun already beat down at the end of May. Clara squinted from the glare, wishing for sunglasses. “All right. Everybody ready? Here’s a break in the stream of cars.” She needed to stomp pretty hard on the gas to get the momentum for this crazy bus to cross four lanes of traffic.

At last, only one car remained on the road. After that, she could go. Could she make it? The car seemed to be coming awfully fast from her right.

“Holy cow! Do you see that car?” Dante lifted his phone.

An orange sports car headed toward them. The thing hugged the road, yet it hummed and moved with precision.

The sounds of seatbelts unbuckling and clanking echoed in the cabin, and a rush of teenagers flew to the right side where Dante pointed, all of them with their phones out and recording.

Clara feared the van would tip over. She wouldn't be driving anywhere soon. Shaking her head, she dropped open her mouth.

"Sick ride." Kiva whistled.

"He's going fast." Dante's phone followed the sports car.

The orange car blew past the intersection, rocking the van.

"Lawbreaker," Clara murmured under her breath. She despised seeing adults being disrespectful to and in front of school kids. "Take a picture of his license plate—2KOL4U." Clara snorted. "Oh, no you don't," she said under her breath, imagining speaking aloud to the driver. "You can't ignore a school zone just because you drive a fancy car."

Kiva shook his head. "Man, he blew through that twenty-mile-an-hour school zone like he was on a freeway."

Owen shook his head. "Did you see that? He was easily going sixty, if not more."

"I got it all on video." Marian blinked.

Clara turned. "On my phone?"

Marian nodded.

Owen pushed up his glasses. "Let's post it on social media. Bust this guy's a—"

"Don't say it." Shaking his head, Kiva elbowed Owen.

Owen rolled his eyes. "I forgot. Captain Clara doesn't like swear words."

Clara nodded. "Thanks, y'all. Now let's get back into our seatbelts. We've got a forty-five-minute drive ahead of us."

A chorus of groans followed.

Once they were all buckled, Clara edged out into the intersection and turned left.

A few blocks down, a police car sat, parked on the side of the road with its lights flashing. The orange hot rod sat motionless in front of it.

“He was caught!” With a giant grin, Clara wanted to get a good look at the careless driver. She slowed her van past the scene—slower than the required twenty-five miles an hour. She couldn’t contain her glee.

“I don’t know why you assumed it was a man.” Marian held the phone up.

The police officer got out of her car, a knot of blonde hair swirled in a bun on the back of her head. She bent over the small window, pointing back to the intersection.

“Well, the officer is a woman.” Clara took only short glances to keep her gaze on the road.

The driver stuck out his head from the window, motioning as if he was surprised the officer pulled him over. He was young, all right. And had a nice profile. Yes, he was quite good looking. They were all the same, these types. They always thought their good looks and money would get them out of all their trouble. Sighing, Clara shook her head.

Did the officer smile at him? *Oh, man!* He was going to get away with this infraction. Clara passed the sports car, glancing in the rearview mirror for confirmation.

Marian lowered the device. “These types of guys just pay their way out of any negative consequences.”

“Is that what you guys think?” Clara asked.

Owen nodded. “Happens all the time—rich guys never have to obey laws. They never have to pay the consequences of their actions.”

“Not this time.” Clara sped up. “What do you guys think about Owen’s idea of posting the video on my Insta-chat?”

Opening his eyes wide, Kiva covered his mouth with his hands. “Captain Clara, you wouldn’t do that, would you?”

Clara set her jaw. “He shouldn’t get away with speeding through a school zone. Students could’ve gotten hurt.”

Marian furrowed her brows and clicked on a few things on the screen. “I uploaded the video to your account. What should we say?”

“Maybe something like, anybody know who this is?” Clara tapped the steering wheel. “He sped through our school zone.”

Marian’s thumbs flew over the phone.

“All right. Done. And posted.” She sat back and smiled, tossing the phone into Clara’s bag. “Oh, and take the back way. It’s mostly clear.”

Clara nodded and headed toward the less crowded roads. “I don’t expect much to come of the post.” She drove the van on smaller Farm to Market roads that kept her off the I-35 running through town. She sure wished a furor would come of their social media post. Everyone with money seemed to assume they could do whatever they wanted. She shook her head. “All right settle in. We’ve got a long drive.”

Students slipped earbuds into their ears. She experienced a quiet rest of the trip. When she parked at Happy Camp in Bastrop, she got out to stretch her legs.

“Last call for any kind of Internet access. Send any last texts, watch that last video, and like that last post. Farther in, all your social media disappears until the end of summer. Well, at least until Thursday when I take you home.” She liked taking the kids out here in the scented loblolly for a break from their lives, a break from the Internet, and a chance to gain a set of new skills.

Dante held up his phone. “What the ice?”

“Ten points to Dante for the creative swear!”

He kept focused on his phone. “You have over sixty-five thousand views on your video, Captain Clara.”

“What?” Clara cocked her head to watch the video on his phone. “In forty-five minutes?”

Kiva showed her his phone. “They’ve identified the driver. Elliott Bracken, a tech billionaire in Austin. He’ll get off Scot-free.”

“Why was he driving through our ’hood?” Searching the Internet for Elliott Bracken, Clara scrolled the accompanying pictures of the law-breaking billionaire. One with a hot

woman, wearing little more than a bathing suit—and they were not on the beach or at the pool—curled around his arm. He looked like the type of guy who never paid for anything, especially not for the consequences of his actions. In another picture, he was with a different woman, both wearing evening wear. The lawbreaker certainly looked good in a tux. Clearing her throat, she returned the phone, raising her eyebrows. “Let’s hope the officer won’t let him off so easily.” She would make sure of it!



ELLIOTT BRACKEN PACED the boardroom of his spacious high rise above the quaint Austin skyline. He loved Austin for its eclectic vibe and its great food trucks. Austin turned into a tech hub overnight with Elliott Bracken at the forefront with the advent of GPS-enabled pet collars.

“Did you see your stock prices this morning?” Quinton bustled in through a wooden door with his tablet clutched between his hands. His eyes bugged out, and lines were visible between his eyebrows. He looked worried, but Quinton always looked worried.

“No, but I bet it’s all good news.” Elliott snagged a stress ball from a care package someone sent—was it Susanna or Marquess?—and tossed it toward the ceiling. His motto was never to stress about anything. “Our new product launches in ten days.”

Pushing up his glasses, Quinton palmed his comb-over. “Actually, a bit of fervor disrupted the nice, upward trend.”

Squinting, Elliott dropped the ball back into its packaging. “What do you mean?” He leaned his head back into his hands with the squeak of his leather chair.

Quinton sniffed. “Seems someone caught you driving over the speed limit in a school zone—including an entertaining video, pictures of your license plate, and your stop by a cop—and posted it all to Insta-chat.”

“What?” He sprang out of his chair. Who saw his little indiscretion? “Let me see.” He took the tablet from Quinton as he eschewed devices of all types except his phone—and hated social media even more. He hired a social media manager to curate his account and trusted her completely. To be this successful, he couldn’t waste his time on frivolity like social media.

He watched the video first. The video must’ve been sped up. He didn’t blow through that school zone so fast, did he? He was tracking a dog who had run away. Being so occupied, he wasn’t watching his speedometer.

The Insta-chat post had thousands of views and tons of comments. He replayed it, watching in horror. A woman posted the whole thing to her feed. Who was this woman? He clicked on her profile. Clara Easton. Single. Not bad looking if her profile picture was up to date and unaltered—how many of his ex-girlfriends looked nothing like their profile pics? But she was a terrible person to post his carelessness. Heat smoldered in his chest. What an annoyance! *Oh, well.* He’d faced worse opposition. He couldn’t pay for this kind of coverage. She was actually doing him a favor. “You know what they say—no press is bad press.” Shrugging, he handed the device to his assistant.

Quinton shook his head. “Not this time. This incident may taint two things: our product launch and your court appearance.”

“Impossible.” The pretty cop barely gave him a little more than a warning. So he had an appearance in court. So what? Ignoring the rising anxiety in his chest, Elliott returned to his view of Lady Bird Lake. A group of women practiced yoga on the SUP boards in the middle of the lake. *Hmm.* Could he create a workout system that replicated the feeling of being on the water? He loved summer and missed the carefree days of being outside and feeling the sun on his face. He might own a controlling share in this company, but really, it owned him.

“Court appearances are public record. Anyone can go to them and ensure justice is served. This is your seventeenth moving violation in two years. The judge can suspend your

license. It will be a little harder for you to—shall I put it nicely?—bribe your way out of this one.”

He kept his eyes on the smooth movements of the yogis. His mind worked the physics. If the board tilted slightly under one’s weight... “I’m not worried about it. And bribe? I resent the word bribe. I prefer the phrase ‘come to a mutual understanding.’”

“Whatever you say. However, what about the dip in stock prices?” Quinton’s voiced sounded strained.

The idea for the SUP board vanished. Elliott turned and faced Quinton. He shrugged. “Just a coincidence.” He stepped toward his desk. “Listen, I’m sure things will smooth over. I’m not worried about it—”

Quinton opened his mouth.

“—And you shouldn’t be either.” He placed his hands on Quinton’s thin shoulders. “Go ahead and contact Jenkins. Tell him to connect with this woman. Invite her here. I’m sure we can come to a mutual understanding.” He smirked.

“I will warn you that this may not go over easy.” Quinton frowned and notated on his tablet. “This woman may need more than a bribe.”

Elliott held up his hand. “I only take legal advice from Jenkins. Your job is to keep me on track.” He placed his hands behind his back and paced in front of the large glass windows. “What is on the schedule for today?”

“Press release due at nine-thirty. Meeting with designers at ten. Lunch with Vivian at eleven. Meeting with the board—”

Elliott ran a finger over the scruff on his chin. “Vivian? Who is that again?”

Quinton swiped his screen. “You met her at the art gala downtown. Remember the one near the tableaux.”

“Ah, yes!” She liked a painting of an interesting scene depicting people rushing through razor wire to get to the mall—*Bleeding to Buy*. An interesting commentary on

consumerism. “The blonde.” Her face was a little fuzzy, but she wore a red dress. He remembered the dress.

Quinton nodded. “Yes, sir. The blonde. Will you ask her to be your plus one at the company anniversary party?”

He balked, shaking his head. “Vivian? I doubt it.”

“You’re running out of time. It is in one month.”

“I am aware.” Elliott cleared his throat. “Where are we eating today?”

“I made reservations at the Town Lake Grille. At least, that’s what you asked me to do.”

Elliott frowned. The Town Lake Grille was an outdoor affair overlooking the lake and one of the pricier venues in town. Was that too nice for a first date?



ELLIOTT PULLED out the chair for Vivian. From the deck overlooking the water, the sun rose high and sparkled off the lake like fireworks. The canopy above them shielded them from the harsh summer rays already beating down from the sky. Misters blew cool, moist air around them. Violins sounded in the distance.

Vivian wore a backless shirt and ankle-crop white pants. Her blonde hair cascaded down her back and blew in the breeze, and with it came the musky scent of perfume.

The waiter brought the menus. But Elliott wasn’t interested in the words. The lake spoke to him. The water, glistening in the sun, cleared his head. He did his best thinking in nature—his best inventing. Sadly, he rarely got out of his office anymore. The lake inspired him. Light filled his mind as he relaxed into the chair. What if he invented a—

Vivian slapped her arm.

The sound shook Elliott from his thoughts. He raised his chin. “You all right?”

She nodded, furrowing her brows. “Just a mosquito.”

Elliott returned to the trees rustling in the wind on the far side of the lake. Their movement reminded him of—

Vivian slapped her ankle.

He refocused on her.

She smiled tightly through painted lips. “Instead of a pocket-sized perfume bottle, I should’ve brought mosquito repellent,” she said through gritted teeth. “Grrr. I hate mosquitos.” She slapped her shoulder.

“They kind of come with the outdoors.” A buzz sounded in Elliott’s ear. Waving his hand to shoo the pest, he looked over the menu, exhaling. This would be a long lunch.

Vivian leaned over her menu, pouting her lips. “Does the maître d’ have any tables inside?”

“Good idea. Let’s ask.” Elliott nodded and motioned to the waiter. “Do you have any indoor seating?”

The waiter bowed and pulled back Vivian’s chair. “Yes. I’m sure we can find somewhere for you to sit.”

“Thank you.” Still in his chair, Elliott motioned to his date. “Will you take Miss Vivian inside?”

The waiter widened his eyes. “And you? Will you accompany her, too?”

“No, thank you.” He smiled sweetly at Vivian. “I’d prefer to sit out here. With the mosquitos.”

Vivian dropped her jaw and furrowed her brows. “And I’d prefer to go home.” Thrusting her nose into the air, she picked up her handbag and trotted toward the door.

The waiter glanced around, opening his mouth like a fish. “But, of course.”

Elliott shrugged. He picked up the menu. “Before you order the car for Miss Vivian, can I get the lobster salad with grapefruit vinaigrette, please?”

CHAPTER 2

After taking the kids home Friday night, Clara settled into her office, looking over her accounts. Red numbers marred her computer screen. She shook her head. Mosquitos buzzed in her ears. She found a bottle of her spray and drenched herself in it with huge squirts. The citrus scent of the repellent wafted to her nose and brought back so many memories of camping. Sighing, she set down the bottle. She'd already let so many employees go from Happy Camp.

Wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead, she sighed. Since the AC was turned up to nearly eighty-five degrees, she sweltered in her office. And it didn't help that there was no insulation on the walls. She'd never had money to finish drywalling the office. Exposed studs made convenient shelves and housed all sorts of things from staplers to figurines to mugs.

"You okay?" Lotus leaned against the office door frame.

With a sigh, Clara rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Yes. I'm okay. Just a little tired. Long week."

"The first week is always the longest." Lotus shook her full head of tight curls. "Looks like you're going over the financials."

Sitting up in her chair, Clara quickly clicked out of her screen. "What financials?"

"Is it as bad as your expression?"

Clara relaxed her face. She hadn't realized she was scowling. "Worse." She flashed Lotus a wan smile. "The

utilities went up this year. As well as cost of food. Those teenage boys just eat us out of hearth and home. We'll have to do another fund raiser. What can we do this time? Garage sale? Maybe we should start our own garden to offset the cost of food."

With a lengthy nail set, Lotus scratched her neck. "Yeah, let's see. I grew tomatoes once. After buying the soil, the plants, the soaker hoses, and the cages, I figured those tomatoes cost me about ten bucks a pound with the three or so I actually ate after what the squirrels devoured."

Clara rubbed her temples, combatting the tensions there. "Okay, so maybe bake sale or car wash? We could put all those boys to work. They can work on their entrepreneur and car detailing skills."

Arching her brow, Lotus let out a puff of air. "Honestly, I'd rather have them clean my car than eat something they made. But who would want to get their car detailed clear out here? We'd have to take them into the city, and you know what kind of permission we'd need to transport them all around."

Clara played with a pencil on her desk, keeping her focus there. "True. Other than taking them back to the school and bringing them here, I don't have permission."

"We could get it."

She dropped the pencil. "But it's a lot of work to get the papers signed and track it all." Half the kids rarely saw their legal guardians on good days.

As Lotus crossed her arms, her bracelets jangled. "If they could make a bunch of treats here in our kitchen then we could take a few of the kids to sell outside a grocery store."

Clara bit her lip. "I wish the kitchen was updated." She shook her head. The oven burned one side and barely warmed the other. "I'll have to think about it."

"And if we don't do some sort of fund raising?"

Leaning forward, Clara clicked on the computer screen again. "We can only stay open until the end of summer." A

sinking feeling settled in her gut. “It would be the last year of Happy Camp.”

“How much money do we need?”

“Just a couple thousand dollars increase every year. We really don’t need much to keep going. The grant pays for most of it. And the difference is usually paid by the endowment. But when Mr. Hitcher created the recurring gift, he forgot about cost-of-living increases and inflation. It’s been twenty years, and we still receive the same amount.”

Lotus narrowed her gaze, shaking her head. “How long has it been since you’ve paid yourself?”

Clara clamped her lips shut. How did Lotus guess she’d been living on the cheap? She even quit her lease and moved in with her mother. She focused on the keyboard. “I don’t know.”

“Liar.” Lotus wagged her finger, placing a hand on her hip. “Listen honey, you’ve got to find a way to make this sustainable. I believe in what you’re doing. You’re giving these forgotten kids a place to go and something to do. They’re learning great skills. It just can’t come from your pocket.”

Clara’s body tensed. “But if I don’t help them, who will? A lot of them will end up on the streets, dealing drugs or worse, selling themselves. I can’t have that. These kids are good kids. Most of them are almost too old for the foster system. Nobody else wants them over the summer. They should get jobs, but they need training before anyone will hire them.”

“You can try going to your father.”

Clara clamped her lips shut. “No. I refuse to ask him for money.”

“Okay. I hope you enjoy living with your mom.” Lotus shook her head. She was only looking out for Clara.

Clara’s phone buzzed. Startled, she reached for it. She barely got reception out here. The number was blocked. Should she answer it? Usually automated solicitors called, wanting to know if she renewed her car warranty or if she was

interested in upgrading to solar. Ha! She couldn't afford the four hundred a month electric bill, how did they expect her to pay fifty thousand dollars? She'd never make back her money.

“Are you gonna answer, hun?”

“Oh.” She hadn't made up her mind. She clicked on the button sending it to voicemail. Who had time for junk calls?

Lotus hitched her purse up on her shoulder. “Go home and think about your next move. I support you one-hundred-and-ten percent on how you want to stay in business.” Her voice rose to a silly pitch. “We can try grant writing again...”

Clara shook her head, rubbing her throbbing temples. “I tried that. I suck at writing grants. Why does owning a non-profit have to be so hard? I'd rather just find the money on my own.”

“Okay.” Lotus checked her watch. “I've got to jet.”

A chime sounded on Clara's phone. She flipped it over. “Voicemail.”

“Hm, probably not someone selling pest control, then.” Lotus nodded and left the office.

Clara clicked on the button for the recording.

“This is Ferrell Jenkins's secretary from the firm Jenkins, Caine, and Fresco. We are calling on behalf of Elliott Bracken. He wanted to schedule an appointment to discuss a recent posting on social media.”

Terror raked through Clara. She dropped her phone as if it were a lizard-like skink. “Aaaack!”

With her hand over her heart, Lotus stuck her head in the office. “What's wrong?”

“Elliott Bracken wants to meet with me.” Clara's hands trembled.

“Who?”

“You know,” she hissed. “The guy who sped through the school zone.”

“Ohhhhh.” Lotus lifted her chin, a half-smile resting on her lips. “Interesting. What are you going to wear?”

Clara pointed to the phone. “This is not a date. His *lawyer* called.”

Lotus winked. “But he is an extremely handsome bachelor. And has all those stock options. Maybe he’s so rich, he has his lawyer set up dates instead of Lovematch dot com.”

Swallowing hard, Clara tapped the side of her phone. “I’m sure he’s upset about the video we posted.”

“Is he going to sue you for defamation of character?” Lotus dropped open her mouth.

“He can’t do that, can he?” A sickening feeling opened in Clara’s gut. What if he sued her? “What more can he take from me? Does he want a dilapidated camp and an old van?” Clara huffed. “Sure, he can take over the payments on those.” What else could he want?

Lotus pointed at her with a lacquered nail. “He’s going to offer you take-down money.”

“No, he’s not.” She shook his head, but secretly she wondered how much he would be willing to pay. “I’m more worried about getting sued.”

“Guys like that worry about their image.”

“If he cared about his image, he wouldn’t be hanging out with floozies all the time. Look at all these images of him.” She typed up his name on the search bar of her phone’s browser. His name came too quickly to her fingers. The images took forever to load—either because of her out of date phone or because of the slow Wi-Fi.

“Man, that boy looks fine in a tux.” Lotus hummed, appraising him.

“I’m sure these are all doctored to make him look more attractive.” Clara scrolled through dozens of images.

“Still, it would be hard to resist the charms of that one. I mean, look, his bio says he started his company while he was in undergrad at UT-Austin. Looks like his company is worth

billions in just five short years. At the tender age of twenty-six, he's bought out or eliminated all his competition." Lotus raised her eyebrows and patted her hand. "Don't you give in to this powerful and attractive man."

"Don't worry." Clara held up her fist. "I have an iron will and want to see justice done—not for the community—for my kids. They need to see that spoiled, rich lawbreaker get his just desserts."

Lotus tilted back her head and laughed. "You may not have much, Clara, but you have gumption."

"After this summer, that may be all I have." Would he really pay her off? She dreaded meeting with him.



ELLIOTT WAITED for the social media image-wrecking woman in his office. She was five minutes late. Had she no respect for other people's time?

A buzz sounded on his desk. Quinton messaged him.

She's here. You should see what she was driving!

Elliott raised an eyebrow. What did Quinton mean?

The door opened to his office.

Quinton, with his tablet, and a woman entered.

Elliott stood behind his desk and buttoned his suit. He wore a suit as a power move. Normally, he wore dress shirts and slacks.

She brushed back her dark hair. "Sorry I'm late. I had a hard time parking in the tiny spaces in your garage."

He narrowed his gaze and swept his eyes over the woman in front of him. So this was Clara Easton. She was even prettier than her profile picture—despite her ill-fitting slacks, peeling handbag, and pilling sweater. Why a sweater in this heat? "I'm sorry to hear that. Please, have a seat." He dismissed Quinton with a wave of his hand and sat,

unbuttoning his coat. Now he felt overdressed and strangely self-conscious.

“Thank you.” Clara seated herself across from him. Her gaze wandered to the lake behind him. “Nice view.”

She spoke with confidence. He wasn’t used to that. Most girls were in awe when meeting him unless they had money of their own, and Clara didn’t look like she had a lot of money. In fact, she looked quite the opposite. He nodded. “I assume you know why I asked to meet with you.”

“I have no idea, Mr. Bracken.”

Her expression remained passive. He couldn’t tell what she was thinking. “Please. Call me Elliott.” He lifted his phone. Quinton sent him a screenshot of the incident and the thousands of comments and replays. “Your post on Insta-chat?”

“Oh, that.” She smiled for the first time.

Her grin made her looks go from a mousy seven to a full ten. What would she look like in an evening gown? Slightly shaking his head to remove the image, Elliott shifted in his seat. “Yes, well, I wanted to ask how much you’d like to remove this post. I’m sure we can come to a mutual understanding.”

“Oh, I’m not taking it down.”

She had a wicked imp-like grin. Elliott was used to being rejected on the first offer. “I’d be happy to pay you whatever you want.”

“I don’t want anything.”

“Surely, you must have something you need. Say, fifty thousand?” He folded his hands and remained calm. He lost more than fifty thousand dollar’s worth of stock with the posting.

Clara lifted her chin. “Oh, no. I updated the post with the time and date of your hearing. I hope people show up in droves and demand the justice you deserve.”

“Ah, my adoring fans will show up. I’m not afraid of that.”
As if publicity would harm him.

“You set a bad example for my teenagers. Justice will be served—not matter the cost.”

Setting his jaw, he shook his head. What teenagers was she talking about? She couldn’t be a day over twenty-six. “I’m offering to pay you handsomely to remove the post. Final offer: one-hundred-thousand dollars.” He was used to working with hard negotiators, but she was the worst.

She lowered her brows. “If that’s what this meeting was about, then you’ll have to excuse me.” She picked up her purse. “I’ll be following your hearing closely. I might even show up for your day in court. And now, Mr. Bracken, if you have nothing more to say to me, I’ll be going.”

Elliott dropped his jaw. Resolve hardened in his chest. “I always get my way, Miss Easton.”

She turned, passion flashing her eyes. “That’s your problem. You always think you can get whatever you want. I hope the judge suspends your license,”

He scoffed. Where did her venom come from? He wanted nothing more than to offer the olive branch. “Suspend my license?” He scoffed. “I can hire a driver. Not having a license won’t hinder me in the slightest.” Or make him look less cool.

Narrowing her eyes, Clara folded her arms. “You won’t get away with this.”

“I already have.” He gave her a smug grin.

She lifted her chin and stood.

Crossing the room, he opened the door.

Quinton sat at his desk.

“Show Miss Easton out.” He flashed a fake smile and swept his hand outward. He clenched his teeth so hard his jaw hurt. Why wouldn’t she take the money?

He slammed the door behind her, nearly hitting her on her behind. If she wasn’t so charming, he wouldn’t be so annoyed.

Why didn't his dashing good looks work on her? And when that failed, why didn't she take the money? What kind of woman was she?

Usually when he had an adversary he would research and study them. Maybe he should do the same with this woman.

He had a few minutes until his next meeting. What if he followed her? He peeked out his office door. The elevator doors closed across from him with Quinton and his adversary inside.

He went to his private express elevators and hit Lobby.

At the ground floor, he hid behind a fiddle-leaf fig plant in the foyer.

She exited the elevator and headed toward the parking garage door.

He waited a few breaths until after she'd walked into the cement parking garage then followed her through the door.

Her steps echoed in the cavernous garage. He smelled warm cement. He never came in here. His valet delivered his car up front. Keeping out of sight, he ducked between cars and followed her until she reached...

He raised his eyebrows and blinked at the huge, rusting, white van. Did she really drive that old beater? He held in a laugh.

No wonder she had a hard time parking the thing. It was a beast!

She opened the door. Rust fell from around the wheel wells, and it desperately needed a new paint job. After a few false starts of the engine, it finally roared into life.

When the headlights came on, he jumped into the shadows, heart beating. He hadn't had this much excitement outside the office in a while.

The van finally pulled out. The words Happy Camp were spray-painted on the side in graffiti. What was Happy Camp? He'd have to look it up.

Choking engine sounds finally faded as she descended to the exit.

Elliott ran back inside for his ten o'clock meeting. While in the express elevator, he searched the Internet for Happy Camp.

Pictures and directions to a dilapidated old camp came up. He clicked on Mission. "To help at-risk teens learn skills, have fun, and be outdoors."

The she-devil ran a non-profit camp? Clara Easton would actually be likable if she wasn't so stubborn. He wouldn't have to fight against a woman who helped at-risk teens. She had no resources, no money. Victory would be his!



CLARA COULDN'T BELIEVE the offer he made! She drove away from the busy city center. One hundred thousand dollars. That money could've done so much for the camp! How easily she could've been swept up by his dashing good looks and devastating charm and taken the money. But her integrity was worth more than that. Her father taught her that people needed to be held accountable for their actions. But what could she do? Tension had been building at the base of her neck ever since she called to schedule her appointment. At least he wasn't suing her—yet!

The light turned red in front of her. She tensed as the cars crossed in front of her. Clara had no money, no resources. She couldn't ask her dad to intervene. Powerlessness overwhelmed her. Elliott Bracken must have a consequence for breaking the law.

Her cell phone rang.

Lotus.

She put it on the hands-free.

"How did it go? Did you think he was hot?"

The light turned green. Clara stomped on the gas, deciding how to answer. “He looks like his pictures.”

“That’s not what I asked. I asked what you thought.”

Clara switched on her blinker, checked her blind spots, and switched lanes, avoiding the question. How could she tell Lotus that if he weren’t a complete jerk, he’d be mighty fine. “His total lack of respect is not attractive.”

“Ha! Did he offer you money?”

“A hundred thousand dollars.”

Lotus whistled into the speaker. “Let me guess. You refused.”

“He has to pay the consequences of his actions. Someone must hold him accountable.”

“And that person is you?”

“No. The system, the judge.” As long as it wouldn’t be a female judge who succumbed to his charms. Clara sighed. “He shouldn’t get away with it.”

“By all means make an enemy out of one of the richest and powerful men in Austin. I’m sure that will help.”

“There has to be something I can do. I feel so powerless.”

“Don’t they allow people who are connected to the case to write a letter to the court and explain your side of the story?”

“*Amicus curiae*?”

“Could you write one of those?”

“Maybe.” She merged onto the freeway. “I could tell the judge, as long as it was a man, that he needed to execute the full weight of the law. I could tell them about the kids.”

“People always love to hear about what you’re doing, Clara. You can build lots of sympathy for your case. These teens are impressionable.”

“Lotus, you’re brilliant. As soon as I get back to camp, I’m writing the letter.” For the first time since her meeting with Elliott, she finally felt like she had some sort of power.

CHAPTER 3

Driving downtown terrified Clara. With a sigh of relief, she eased her huge white van between a small four-door and a motorcycle in the courthouse parking lot. Her beast of a van wasn't made for tiny parking spaces. The lot looked pretty full. She wondered how many people showed up for Elliott's hearing. Turning off the shuddering engine, she snatched up her bag and ducked out the door. She couldn't believe he tried to buy her out. Although she was tempted to take the money—for the kids—she also wanted to make sure he got his due. Her kids couldn't grow up thinking the rich were exempt from the law.

She found his name on the docket outside the courtroom. Praying she wasn't late, she opened the door.

Cool air blasted her. She swung her sweater around her shoulders. After working with little or no air conditioning, any place blasting air froze her near to death.

She slid into a hard, wooden bench and waited. Lifting her chin, she searched the room for Elliott.

There he was, sitting next to a man with a tuft of gray hair on the back of his head. Was that Jenkins, his lawyer?

The judge called Elliott's name—a man judge, thankfully. No using his charm to get out of his punishment.

Elliott stood with his counsel at one table in front of the judge. The pretty officer was at the other.

Unlike courtroom dramas, no one paced in front of a jury or showed slides. The whole thing was actually kind of boring.

If she hadn't been so personally invested, she might've skipped the whole thing. Thankfully, she sat enough to the side where she could catch a glimpse of Elliott's profile.

Adjusting the glasses on his nose, the judge studied a paper in his hands. "This is your seventeenth moving violation in less than two years. I should put you in jail."

Elliott didn't appear too contrite. He still had a cocky smile for the pretty cop. Clara guessed he'd had plenty more than seventeen in the last two years. Those were just the ones he couldn't talk his way out of.

"Yes, sir."

The judge looked over his metal-rimmed glasses. "You realize I can suspend your license."

"Yes, sir."

"And ask you to pay a fine."

"I understand, sir. Just tell me how much, and I'll gladly pay it."

Still no panic in his voice. Clara rolled her eyes. He looked so hot in his suit. She shook away her ridiculous thought.

"Or sentence you to jail time."

Finally, Elliott's smile faltered.

The judge squinted. "But I don't think those actions will get through to you."

"I'll try my best to be a better driver."

Huffing, the judge arched his brow. He returned to the paper. "I have here a letter from a Miss Clara Easton. She petitioned the court for the fullest weight of the law to be settled upon you. She witnessed your reckless driving through a school zone. Your behavior was witnessed by a handful of teenagers in her care. In her letter, she states her teens are impressionable. Your blatant disregard for the law makes it difficult to teach proper respect and behavior. She signed the letter, noting she is the owner of Happy Camp, a non-profit in Bastrop that teaches life-skills to at-risk teenagers. She said

she would be attending today.” The judge dropped his paper. “Is Miss Clara Easton in the courtroom?”

Hearing her name called by the bailiff, Clara jumped in her seat. She raised her hand. Her cheeks flamed. Heat poured from her sweater. She was no longer cold.

“Miss Clara, would you step forward?”

Trembling, she stepped down the aisle toward the judge’s bench. She took a few cleansing breaths to still her racing heart. She caught a glimpse of Elliott with his mouth open, staring at her.

The bailiff opened the gate. He motioned for her to stand by the lady cop.

The judge nodded. “Thank you for your letter. It touched my heart. Thank you for the work you do for those teenagers.” The judge turned toward Elliott. “It seems to me you owe a debt to society—not one of money but of time and putting forth a good example. You owe these young teens. You need to repay what you’ve taken from them—a certain respect. What I’m about to do here is unprecedented, maybe, but in this case, needful. I am suspending your license, but instead of a fine, I am ordering you to serve forty hours of community service for Happy Camp.”

A murmur arose from the people in the courtroom.

Elliott lifted his chin. “Forty hours? Your Honor, I beg a recant. I am working on a product launch that will—”

The judge arched his brow. “Eighty hours.”

“Your Honor—”

“One hundred and twenty hours. You should stop speaking now.”

Clara sneaked a peek at Elliott across the room.

His jaw flexed. Intensity burned in his eyes.

Jenkins placed a hand on his arm. He whispered something to Elliott.

The judge pointed his finger. “One hundred and twenty hours to be completed in four weeks time.”

Elliott dropped open his mouth.

“If it is not completed in the next four weeks, I will throw you in jail for contempt of court. Miss Clara will be your supervisor and will sign for each hour you complete.”

Jenkins stood. “Permission to approach the bench.”

“Not granted. I have spoken what I have spoken. Judgment is reserved for me in my courtroom. I will not hear a protest.” The judge narrowed his eyes. “I hope this will teach you not to play around with the law. Hearing closed.” After tapping his gavel, he swept up his robes and retreated into a doorway behind his bench.

Clara stood, still shaking. She was afraid to leave at the same time as Elliott. She risked a glance up as she passed him. He glared, keeping his gaze forward to where the judge disappeared behind wood paneling.

Clara couldn’t believe the judgment. She wanted the judge to throw the book at him, not force her to spend more time with him. Although the judge was doing her a huge favor. Having an extra set of hands would really be useful, as long as he was truly that—useful.

They needed to schedule a time to meet. Inhaling, she steeled herself against his reaction. “When shall we get started?”

His eyes narrowed. Keeping his gaze forward, he grasped his cufflinks. “I have a lot going on during this next month. I’m afraid we’ll have to postpone.”

“I believe the judge said the required hours must be fulfilled by the end of four weeks.”

Finally facing her, Elliott growled through gritted teeth. “My personal assistant will be in contact.” He brushed by her and into a crowd of waiting...fans? Women flung themselves at his elbows. Two of his men stood and cleared the way before him.

Clara reeled when the reality settled on her. What would she have him do for one-hundred and twenty hours? That was a full-time position for four weeks. She'd have to figure out what he could do. She almost laughed at the image of him out in the woods. All the tasks she'd been too busy to do, he could do in that short time. She grinned. She couldn't wait to get him started.



THE PRODUCT LAUNCH consumed all of Elliott's thoughts. How could he even have time to think about his punishing sentence?

While he was in his office, his phone rang.

"Clara Easton is on the phone." Quinton nodded toward him, reading the caller ID. He'd called her earlier, but only got the voicemail.

"Who?" He pretended he didn't remember the she-devil.

Quinton wasn't buying his act. He pushed his phone toward him. "You better answer it."

Answering the call, Elliott rolled his eyes. "Hello?"

"Yes." Her connection sounded garbled. Likely a cheap or old phone. "Sorry it's taken me a while to get back to you. I would like to schedule your first visit to Happy Camp."

"I don't have a way to get out to Bastrop. I don't have a license, remember?"

She laughed a musical laugh. It almost melted his heart. But not quite.

"Oh, that's funny because you said you could easily hire a driver without too much trouble."

Gah, she used his own words against him. He inhaled. "I have something really big going on, and I can't leave the office. Is there anything I can do that you can bring here? Even for one night?"

Clara was silent on the other end for a few seconds. “Sure. I have a few things we can do. When shall I come by tonight?”

“Tonight?” He wouldn’t be done until late. He tugged at his collar.

“I have the kids here until eight.”

“Fine. I’ll still be here at my office.” He rarely left work before midnight away.

“I’ll drop by then with—”

“Thank you. Bye.” He clicked off the phone.

Quinton arched his brow.

Elliott felt a bead of emotion in his gut. “She’ll be here after eight. Let’s at least try to get some progress done by then.” He rubbed a hand over his face and dug into this work.

Dusk clouded the windows. A buzz sounded. He raised his head from his computer. What time was it? When he worked, he often didn’t realize the hours ticking by. Likely he’d be here another four hours. Neither food nor rest tempted him. He had to make sure this newest project was ready to go.

Quinton opened the door. “Your eight o’clock is here.”

His eight o’clock? He rubbed the bridge of his nose. Who was that?

Clara Easton strode into the office. This time, she wore shorts and a sweatshirt.

Oh, yes. *Her*. He narrowed his eyes. He’d forgotten all about her.

“Where would you like me to put these?” A squeaking sound followed her.

He glanced at the wagon near her shapely legs.

“What are those?” It looked like a heap of different-colored canvas.

“Backpacks.” She dropped the handle. “I have another wagon with supplies.” Stepping out of the office, she returned

with another squeaky wagon piled with pencils, papers, notebooks, glue sticks, and all sorts of art supplies.

He stood, pointing. “And what is this for?”

“Your first hour of service for the camp. At the end of the summer we give each camper a backpack filled with school supplies for the fall. Many of them can’t afford to buy their own, so this small offering gives them a leg up for fall.”

“It’s June. Why are we doing it now?”

“You said you couldn’t come to the camp. I struggled to think of a service we could do in your office, and I came up with stuffing backpacks. Usually, we do it in the autumn when the school supplies are all on sale, but to accommodate your schedule, we’re filling them tonight.”

“I can’t stuff backpacks tonight.” He sat down again and stared at his screen. Maybe she would give up and go away.

She marched toward his desk. “I spent all day gathering supplies for this activity. To get this ready for tonight, I spent nearly twice as much as I usually do because nothing was on sale. You will not brush me off. We had an agreement: tonight we do service.” She placed her hands on her hips.

Elliott half-expected her to start tapping her foot. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll pay you the difference of the school supplies, and maybe Quinton can help you.” He cast his gaze on Quinton.

Quinton pursed his lips. “It was your court order, not mine.”

“Listen, Clara.” He ran a hand over his chin scruff. It had grown a long-after-five o’clock shadow. “I don’t have time to stuff backpacks. We have a major launch coming up.”

Clara stood with her chin high. “Shall I call the judge?”

She probably would do something like that. He was defeated—for now. “We can fill them over there on the table.” Sighing, he pointed to a table across the room. He’d just double-task, and Quinton could work his keyboard. “Quinton, type.” He slumped in his chair.

As she led the wagons, the wheels squeaked giving her the air of a child. Elliott smiled as he rose from his chair, grasping his tie so it wouldn't fall into Quinton's coffee mug.

She unloaded backpacks onto the table.

Quinton situated himself in front of the keyboard.

Elliott pointed to the spot where he left off. "Here." The muscles ached in his neck. He made a mental note to call for an appointment with the masseuse, Kyara, tomorrow.

Clara organized the school supplies into piles—markers over there, highlighters there, and stacks of folders at the end. She picked up a canvas bag and went around the table, dropping items into the bag. Clara raised her eyebrows and handed him a backpack. "They need two of everything except the markers. They only need one box."

Her shoulders sagged under her shabby sweatshirt. Grubby trainers swallowed her feet.

Elliott inhaled and faced Quinton. "All right. Position one." Snatching the backpack, he picked up a pack of markers and slipped them into the bag. Working from memory would make his task more difficult but not impossible. "Move to the second row. When we had tests that complicated the picture, I know we discussed where to put this one." He checked Quinton.

Shifting up his glasses, Quinton nodded and typed something on the keyboard.

Satisfied, Elliott returned to grab two packs of paper and two packages of folders. He slipped them into the bag. "Now, when we discussed position four, we needed to move that to the..." He did this for a while, concentrating on his project.

"What are you doing?" Clara jarred him from this thoughts.

"Filling backpacks." He opened his hand.

"But you're still talking to him. For the last ten minutes you've just talked to him about your project."

“I’m double-tasking.” He’d tried multi-tasking but discovered his limitation was doing two things at once, not more.

She scowled. “But you’re not focusing on what you’re doing.”

“I can do both. How hard can filling backpacks be?” He curved his lips into a forced smile and placed another pack of paper into a bag.

Clara huffed. “You can just recall all that stuff from your head?”

“I live, breathe, and eat this project. I know it like the back of my hand.” With a grin, he filled the bag and started a new one, watching her. “I believe I’m working faster than you are.” Then he turned toward Quinton. “Position five, we discussed moving that to the rear. I know because of previous problems we didn’t move forward with the preliminary basis.” He dropped more items.

“Did you want the ID to notify the changes?” Quinton worked the keyboard.

“Ahem.” Clara tapped her foot again, holding up a bag he just finished.

He faced her. “Yes?”

“How hard can it be?” She held up a bag he just finished filling. “Each bag needs one pack of markers, not two. If I have to re-do your work, it doesn’t count.”

“So I put an extra set of markers in one.” Rolling his eyes, he shrugged.

“I have exactly enough for each bag. No mistakes.” She flattened her lips to a straight line.

Staring at her, he dug into the bag and retrieved the extra set of markers. “There. Happy?” He placed them back in the pile.

In reply, her stomach growled.

He'd been ignoring his own weakness, but he couldn't ignore hers. She was obviously hungry, too. While his concentration was interrupted, he might as well order food. He leaned closer. "Have you eaten yet?"

She recoiled. "You mean dinner? No. I haven't had time yet today." She threw a pack of highlighters into a bag.

"What do you want? I'll pull up the menu." He hovered a thumb over his phone and searched for his favorite restaurant. "Quinton will order us dinner from Hoakies." He showed her the menu on his phone and continued stuffing. "Tell Quinton what you want. Don't worry. I'm buying."

Casting him a glare, Clara studied the menu. "A hamburger is fine. With fries. No ketchup. Extra salt. And a salted caramel shake."

Quinton took her order. "And for you?"

"My usual." He ordered Hoakies at least once a week. Their Everything burger was the best.

Quinton nodded and lowered his head toward the computer again.

"Why do you have to buy the school supplies?" A heady scent of paper reminded him of his school days. "Can't people donate materials?" He slipped more folders into a bag.

"Oh, at first we had donors. Some years we do. Other years are a little more lean. I just cover the cost myself. It's not a big deal."

But if he read between the lines, he guessed it was a big deal to her. He made a mental note to donate school supplies to her cause—anonymously. "Can I ask you a question?"

She worked her way around the table. "Sure." She arched a brow.

"Why do you wear a sweater or a sweatshirt in the summer? Aren't you hot?"

She laughed a little. "I am not used to the air conditioning."

“You don’t have AC in that big, white van of yours?”

“No, I do in the van.” She slipped another notebook into a backpack. She shrugged.

“Oh.”

When the food arrived, he stopped only to hand her the meal. He talked, stuffed, and ate.

In the remainder of the hour, he finished all the bags and helped load them onto the wagons. He even managed to make progress on the product. “Want me to wake Quinton to take these down for you?”

Five minutes ago, Quinton put his head down on the desk for a quick power nap, his glasses off to the side, and was snoring an uneven tune. He still had a long night ahead of him.

“No need.” With her wagons in tow, Clara gave a quick nod. “Thank you for dinner. Next time, you’ll have to come to the camp.”

Her expression was so sweet in the dim light of his office, he wondered if she was a good kisser. “Will you take down the Insta-chat post if I come?”

“No.” Arching a brow, she shook her head. “I can’t keep coming here. This time, you have to come or I will tell the judge you skipped out, and you’ll be in contempt of court. He’d throw you in jail for sure.”

Elliott frowned. He wasn’t sure if the Wi-Fi was fast enough to complete his work from a county cell. She was still a she-devil. He crossed his arms. If only he could hire someone to take his place at work. But no one else could make his decisions. He’d better get his hundred and twenty hours over with. “All right. When shall I come out?” He clapped his hands together. Oh, he would make this experience just as painful for her as it was for him.

CHAPTER 4

Standing out in the heat of the mid-morning sun, Clara checked her watch. *Ten minutes late.* She dropped her arm. He was ten minutes late. He was all talk and no show. She would believe Elliott when she saw him at the camp. Friday, he promised he'd be here Monday morning. She bit her lip and glanced down the dirt road. Today, they'd worked on the kids' cooking skills. Some kids finished and went repelling on the fifty-foot tower.

Fifteen minutes late. He wasn't coming. Dropping her arm again, she turned and faced the camp's office and lounge area, walking along the dirt road, avoiding rocks that twisted her ankle.

A rumble sounded behind her.

She spun. In a cloud of dust, a black...*limousine* barreled toward her. Waving her hand in front of her face to clear the dust, she stepped back as it nearly hit her.

The sleek black limo with dark tinted windows parked in front of the shabby office.

Footfalls of the kids running from their classes sounded behind Clara. She turned to see their open mouths and wide eyes. She crossed her arms over her chest and faced the ostentatious car, tapping her foot. *What a distraction he was!* Could he be any more obnoxious? Having him here might be worse for her bottom line and for her students.

The front door popped open. A man in a suit jumped out and ran along the sleek exterior to the back door and opened it.

Elliott's foot landed on the gravel. He wore expensive-looking leather shoes that looked like they'd never seen dirt. He swung a hand to the top of the door and stepped out.

In a suit?

Clara dropped her jaw. A flicker of annoyance passed through her. Why was he wearing a suit at a summer camp? Although, the jacket fit his broad shoulders nicely. Judging by the cut, he paid big bucks for this. Wasn't he hot out here in the sun?

After slipping on a pair of sunglasses, he buttoned the top button.

His man returned to the front seat, motor running.

"You can't leave that here." She pointed to the limo.

"What?" A half-smile graced his lips.

"Your car. It's distracting. Why did you bring that thing?" Already the kids ran their fingers across the glossy paint job. "Don't touch it," she said to the kids, keeping her gaze fixed on his.

He stood close, towering over her. Clara swallowed hard. He was just making an entrance to stir her up. Well, his passive-aggressive move worked. Her heart raced.

A tight smile pressed on his lips. "I can't drive—thanks to you—so I had to take alternate transportation." He raised his eyebrows. "Should I have brought the sports car?"

Gosh, no! The sports car would've been ten thousand times more of a distraction. She pointed to the black car. "Tell your driver to leave. You can call him at the end of the day to come pick you up."

He gave a quick nod. "All right." He lifted his phone and texted.

Like he couldn't walk ten feet and talk to the dude? Clara rolled her eyes. "Stand back, y'all. The limo is leaving."

The teenagers stood back.

The limo slowly moved around the circular drive and retreated the way it came, disappearing in a cloud of dust.

“Okay, back to your activities.” She waved to the kids to return to some semblance of normalcy.

The kids finally went back to their classes.

Clara was aware of the man standing near her. She gulped. What could she have him do? He certainly didn’t come prepared to paint or fix fences. She narrowed her eyes. He probably dressed like that on purpose. “Well, in a suit or not, you have to work. Come with me.” She nodded toward the office. “I’m afraid you’re a little overdressed for our chores today. I have a bin of donated clothes in the closet inside. You’ll want to change.”

He paused just under the covered porch. “Uh, sorry?”

Clara opened the front door. A slight breeze from inside carried the scent of mildew and corn chips. “I doubt you’ll want to work in a Merino wool suit. Luckily, the community donates a few outfits and the box also acts as the lost and found, so you might find something in there.”

“Listen.” He removed his sunglasses, setting his jaw, raising his hand above her over the door, keeping his eyes on hers. “I said I would come out here”—he grimaced at a plank of rotted wood over the doorway—“and I’m here to do your bidding. But this is how I dress for work.”

She swallowed hard at his nearness. “You need to complete a hundred and twenty hours of service for this camp.”

He held up a finger. “A hundred and nineteen. We did one hour already.”

Clara inhaled. If he wasn’t so attractive, arguing with him would be a lot easier. A throb started behind her ears. Did Lotus have any pain killers in the nurse’s office? She stepped away, letting a hot breeze come between them. “I’m not exactly sure what you thought community service meant, but to me, that means real work. Hard work.” She pinched her lips

and emphasized the last two words. “We’re a little short-handed as it is, so any help would be greatly appreciated.”

“I said I’ll be happy to do anything, but I’m not wearing any cast-off clothes.” He kept his voice even, yet persistent.

“But you might ruin your nice clothes.”

“I only wear them once anyway.”

“Fine.” Rolling her eyes, she turned and went inside, slamming the door behind her, which might not have been a good idea since it was barely on its hinges. Her heart thundered in her chest. She breathed as if she’d run a marathon instead of stepping a few paces. *That man!*

The door opened behind her. Elliott stuck in his head. He stepped inside, glancing up to the stained ceiling.

His gaze swept the poorly furnished room and finally settled on Clara. She was suddenly self-conscious of the thrift store couches and mismatched lamps.

He tucked his sunglasses into his inside breast pocket. “What do you need me to do?”

With a lifted chin, she pointed to the gallon of paint. Earlier, the older boys moved the frayed and sagging couches to the middle of the room.

He raised his eyebrows. “Painting?”

“Afraid of getting your suit mussed?” She pried off the lid. “I bet you hire a contractor to paint your place, don’t you?”

He unbuttoned his jacket. “Of course. When I have a task that needs to be done, I contract professionals. My time is better spent elsewhere. It’s not worth my time to paint anything myself.”

She smirked. “Oh? What is worth your time?”

“I employ thousands of people and make sure they have jobs. That endeavor is worth my time.” With a tight grin, he removed his jacket and tie and tossed them over the worn back of an upholstered chair. He removed his cufflinks and

pocketed them. He rolled up his sleeves to just below his elbows.

“I bet you’ve never painted before.” Clara had to look away. The three-quarters sleeve was a good look for him. Heat flashed her face. She focused on pouring paint into the tray and rolling her roller across it. She stood and handed him the handle.

Without breaking eye contact, he swiped the tool. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know you’re wealthy. You assume you’ll get your way by paying off people.” And he had an attractive jawline, and the shirt he wore fit him snugly across the hips. “What else would I want to know?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’d be surprised, I think.” With that, he turned and rolled beside the window on the opposite side of the room.

Whatever. She didn’t have time to train him how to paint. He’d just have to figure it out. Clara inhaled the sharp scent of latex and poured a cup of paint, dipped in her paintbrush, and cut-in around the windows on her side of the room. She accidentally painted over the wood casing and fetched a washcloth from the kitchen. On her way back, she checked on her protégé. He was already on the second wall?

Without the help of a step-ladder, Elliott stretched to the top of the wall with the roller, then knelt, dipped it in the tray for more paint, and went again. He was a machine. And he was doing a great job of it. Maybe he had painted before. He certainly didn’t look like a beginner.

Clara brushed back her hair and started again.

Elliott finished the second wall and now rolled on her wall.

She painted near him, nearly shoulder to shoulder. His cologne smelled amazing even over the paint. Then he moved around her with grace and precision.

Clara had barely cut in around the baseboards, the ceiling and the window, before he was done with the third wall. To be

fair, she had to use the ladder to get close to the ceiling. The task was extremely time consuming.

“Finished.” He dropped his roller into the tray.

She dropped her jaw and turned.

“Want help cutting in?” He nodded toward the cup.

Clamping her lips, she shook her head. “If you’re finished, you can watch the kids at the climbing tower until lunch.” She paused, holding up her brush in the air, and inspected him.

Not a speck of paint landed anywhere on him. He could’ve come from a luncheon with the head of another multi-billion-dollar company.

She glanced down at her outfit. Paint splatters were everywhere. Drips marred her shorts. Blobs dotted her arms.

“Oh, here. You have a little spot of paint in your hair.” Stepping closer, Elliott pinched a lock of hair and ran his fingers through it.

He was only a breath away. His gaze danced around her face. Clara’s face burned. What was he staring at? Her heartbeat pounded in her chest.

“And you’ll need to wash your face. You’re completely splattered in paint.” With a smug grin, he used her rag to wipe his fingers, picked up his jacket and tie, and went out the door.

Clara groused at her reflection in the window. Smears of paint decorated her face like a kindergartener’s work of art. Would she be able to stand one hundred and eighteen more hours with this guy?



ELLIOTT LOUNGED on a rickety bench across from the climbing/repelling tower. Thankfully, it was in the shade, so he was only mildly baking instead of intensely broiling.

The devil-woman asked him sit here and watch the kids, but he could double-task right? He’d tried to log on to his

email for the last ten minutes.

He glanced up to where a teenage boy stuck his legs into a harness. “Hey, how do I get Wi-Fi out here?”

The boy shook his head. “We don’t have Wi-Fi out here. The closest connection is at the office, but even that’s pretty spotty.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Elliott squeezed his phone between his hands, dropping his head. *Great!* He added stronger Internet receivers to his list of inventions. No one should be without Internet, ever!

At least he could use his ridiculously slow data. He sent a series of rapid texts to Quinton asking him about the update and how things were going. He sat back with his arms on the bench. A bit of a breeze swept his hair. Actually, being outside wasn’t too bad. He’d never tell the devil-woman he actually enjoyed his time out in nature, or she’d think of a different activity for him. She thought he’d never painted before. Ho, ho, ho! One of his first jobs at fourteen was a painter for guy who lived down the street. He’d painted more houses than he cared to count. The she-devil was so judgmental.

Why didn’t she just hire painters? He shook his head. *That woman!* If only he didn’t find her so appealing. She wasn’t like the women he normally dated, but then, did he really like those types of women?

Closing his eyes, he breathed in this scent of pine trees or whatever those thick, red-barked trees that grew in Bastrop were. Brilliant ideas came to him. Being out here was actually productive. The fresh air enlightened his mind.

“Hey, mister.”

He popped one eye open.

A pre-teen boy held his harness around his legs, but one of the straps was undone.

“Hey, mister. Can you help me?”

Elliott pointed to himself. “I don’t know anything about...” He inhaled. He probably knew more than this

eleven-year-old. And—he glanced around—he was the only adult supervising the climbs.

An older boy, who could've been eighteen, belayed for the younger kids, but that was all. Clara needed to hire more people. "I'll come look." He lifted himself off the bench and knelt by the boy. He figured out how to slip the strap into the adjuster and then pulled it tight around his legs. "There. That looks right."

"Thanks. Are you going up?" The kid strapped on a helmet. "This is my favorite thing out here."

"Not really dressed for it." He looked down at his slacks. As comfy as they were, he wasn't up to climbing. Part of him wished he could. He imagined the view up there was spectacular. But he had to keep wearing the suit, just to aggravate his adversary. "Next time."

The kid nodded and waddled over to where an older teen hooked him up to the rope.

Elliott inhaled and went back to his bench and closed his eyes, letting the sound of nature enter into his psyche.

A group of boys passed.

"I bought a splitter. Does anyone want to listen to this song with me?"

Elliott cracked open an eye.

A slightly pudgy kid, probably about ten or eleven, held out a splitter to the older boys.

The older boys shook their heads and went right on listening to their own songs with their own headphones.

The younger kid hung his head and walked away.

Elliott's chest squeezed. He remembered being that age and wanting attention from older people in his life. "Hey, kid."

The boy kept walking, kicking his shoes against the rocks.

Elliott got up off the bench. He quickened his pace to keep up. He tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey. I couldn't help but overhear your conversation." Elliott hoped he didn't sound

like a creeper. “I’ll listen to your song with you. You got another pair of headphones?”

The kid’s eyes lit up. “I sure do!” He dug into his pocket. “Here.” He plugged a set of earphones into his splitter and handed them to Elliott.

Elliott couldn’t remember the last time he used wired headphones. The twisted and bent wires coiled in one mass. The earbuds looked rather dubious—all the cords twisted around each other. He took them and hoped he didn’t catch something from inserting them into his ear. “Let’s sit on the bench, shall we?”

The kid nodded and followed him over.

“What’s your name?” Elliott sat on the bench.

“Conner.” Conner sat next to him and kicked dirt with his feet.

“I’m Elliott.” He’d definitely have to get this suit cleaned. The song came through the buds with distorted sound. Elliott wrinkled his nose. “What is this?”

“It’s a new band I found. They use this cool new instrument, and I really like it. Don’t you?”

Elliott smiled. He wished he could take out the earbuds without insulting his new friend. A burble came from his stomach. He checked his watch. A little past noon. “You hungry?”

“Yup. Always.” He rubbed a little paunch underneath his shirt. “But they don’t always serve great food here. Mostly just corn dogs, and sometimes we get chips. My favorite is nacho day because then I can add as much cheese as I want.”

“The orange goopy stuff?”

Licking his lips, Conner nodded. “I love that stuff, don’t you?”

Elliott’s stomach turned at the thought of it. “Sure. Do you think everyone else has eaten?”

Conner glanced around. “Not yet. Lunch is at twelve thirty. Today was supposed to be taco day. But it’s mostly just the same as nachos—chips and cheese. A lot of people just skip it.”

“Does, uh, Miss Clara ever eat the same food?”

“Nah.”

Aha! Miss Devil saves the better stuff for herself.

“Captain Clara never has time to eat lunch. She’s too busy. She usually works right through lunch. But when she does, she eats the same as us.”

With a prick of guilt, Elliott pulled out his phone. “What do you think about me ordering lunch? For everybody?”

Conner’s eyes lit up.

“What would you like?”

Conner licked his lips and rubbed his tummy. “Everything.”

Rubbing his chin, Elliott made a few texts. “Might take a while for it all to get here. Do you think Miss Clara would mind?” If he could sweeten her up, maybe she’d sign off on the hours early, and he could get back to his product launch. If only he knew her favorite food...

CHAPTER 5

Sweat dripped down Clara's face, and her muscles shook when she finished painting the lobby. With the help of two older boys and Marian, she returned all the furniture. She hadn't bothered with placing plastic over the top of the upholstery. Most of the couches and chairs were decades old, harvested from thrift stores over the years. After a crazy morning of painting, she was starving.

She cleaned her brush and roller and put the lid on the paint can. In the bathroom, she washed her hands free of the white latex paint. And her face. *Egad!* Paint was everywhere on her face. Even inside her ears. How did that get there? She wiped it out with a towel. What did Elliott think of her?

Her stomach rumbled. What were they serving for lunch today? *Tacos*. Normally she loved tacos—Austin was known for their tacos—breakfast tacos, and gourmet tacos. But without the money to buy fresh veggie toppings, they were more like chips and fake cheese. Even ground beef got too expensive. What she wouldn't give for a local taco right about now.

She entered the lobby to inspect their work. Not bad coverage. He didn't miss any spots, did he? The scent of paint nipped at her nose, almost making her sick. Man, she was hungry.

A rumbling sound and a cloud of dust drew her attention outside.

Opening the front door, Clara squinted into the one o'clock sun. She wasn't expecting anyone, and yet, a large van-like

vehicle lumbered down the drive. And behind it, another. Shielding her eyes from the sun, she stepped off the porch.

A line of food trucks settled in the driveway and parked one right after another—Baja Grill, Paco’s Tacos, Fresh Catch Seafood, Pizza Pi, Nikki’s Gyros and more.

“What is going on?” Her brain couldn’t make sense of it. The row of food trucks was just so bizarre.

Lotus was in the back of the office. Did she order food for a special occasion? This many food trucks was over the top, even for her—not to mention outside the budget.

They parked on the circular drive.

Footsteps sounded in the gravel behind her. She turned.

Elliott and a few boys, still in climbing gear, came into view.

“Oh, good.” He stood with his hands on his hips. “They got here. I wasn’t sure if my directions would be clear. All right, what will you have, boys?”

“We can have any of these?” Conner asked.

Elliott nodded.

Conner ran for the seafood truck. “I love shrimp!”

The rest of the boys ran up to the trucks and ordered food at the window.

Elliott must’ve ordered the trucks. Clara shook her head, heat broiling in her chest. Pumping her arms, she marched over to him. “What is going on here?”

“Well, since I can’t drive to go get lunch, lunch must come to me.” He grinned, licking his lips.

Opening her mouth, Clara counted the trucks. “What? You needed seventeen food trucks?”

“Hm.” He squinted into the distance. “I ordered eighteen.” He bent his head to focus on his phone. “The cupcake truck is running late.”

Clara slapped her thigh. She didn't know what to say. "Why?"

"I didn't know what kind of food you liked, so I just had to take one of each. Italian? Mexican? Chinese? Thai?"

"But the kids?" She squinted. Conner carried away a huge plate piled with shrimp. How would she ever pay this bill? "What will this cost?"

"Don't worry, Miss Dime-Tracker." He squinted his eyes. "It's all paid for."

Placing hands on hips, she tried to ignore the insulting title. "You won't do this every day, will you?" Having him here was terrible, but now, having him leave would be worse.

"I can order catering, if you'd prefer. Just tell me what you'd like." He leaned over her.

She avoided the attractiveness of his more casual look by staring at the trucks before her. Even the kids who were completing activities inside had caught word of the food. Lines formed at the windows. At the smell of roasting meat, her stomach burbled.

Lotus even headed toward the Cajun food truck with a huge grin on her face.

The other adults didn't ask where this heaven-sent food came from. Why did it bother her so much? A light went off like a bomb in her head. He was bribing her! That was what this was.

"Why don't you grab a plate, and we can eat inside?" He placed a hand on her back and guided her through the lineup.

Clara hoped he didn't feel the sweat through her shirt. "I won't eat your food."

"I bet you're hungry."

"Starved." Why did his good-will offering smack of a hidden agenda?

"Then why aren't you going?"

“Because I feel like this is an angle.” She tilted her head. Her gut both rumbling and suspicious.

He stood back and opened his mouth. “Are you accusing me of ulterior motives?”

“I don’t trust you.” She stared, challenging him. “Food won’t get you out of hours. I don’t care how much you pay.”

“Listen, Conner over there told me you were serving nachos for lunch. He said you only had fake cheese and stale chips.” He inhaled. “I hate nachos.”

She blew out a puff of air. “That doesn’t surprise me,” she murmured.

He stared pointedly at her. “I also wanted to do a little good. The trucks are here. The food is paid for. You might as well eat.”

Clara swallowed hard. “This isn’t a bribe.”

“A bribe? Ha! You’d know if I was trying to bribe you, and it wouldn’t be with food.” His words were laced with a hidden meaning.

She pinched her lips together.

Sighing, he rubbed the bridge of his nose. “You might as well eat. No sense turning your nose up just because of your pride.”

“My pride?” How dare he! She didn’t have any sort of pride. Heat flamed in her chest. But as she surveyed the road, she saw all the kids laughing and carrying away huge plates, piled high with food. For some, this was the most food they would see all summer.

Drawing her lips into a straight line, she stepped up to Paco’s Tacos food truck. Her stomach growled at the scent of onions and lime. “I’ll take a plate number three, please,” she grumbled, after inspecting the menu.

With a smug smile, Elliott nodded to the proprietor. “And I’ll have the same.” He turned to Clara. “You like tacos?”

She eyed him. “Yes.” She reached for payment and then remembered it was all paid for. When the chef handed her a warm plate covered in foil, she nodded. “Thank you.”

“Thank him!” With a grin, the chef pointed to Elliott with his tongs. “He paid for the whole truck. I’ve never had that happen before.” With a giant grin, the chef shook his head and handed Elliott his plate. “I can’t believe it. A whole day’s worth of food!”

Casting down her gaze, Clara lowered her plate to her waist. She was grateful, but for some reason, she resented Elliott’s gift. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” With a grin, he leaned over with his hand cupped behind his ear.

“Thank you for feeding the kids.” If only he knew what their pantry looked like. “This was a real treat. But you can’t do this every day.”

Moving away from the truck, he shrugged and popped a chip in his mouth. “Why not?”

Walking beside him, she raised her head to face him, clutching the plate for courage. “Can’t you see? You set a terrible precedent. The kids will be crushed to go back to—”

“Corn dogs and nachos? Why not enjoy it while it lasts? We have four weeks. One hundred and sixteen more hours.” He flashed her a tight smile. He headed for the bench outside.

A deep burn hit her cheeks, and it wasn’t the mid-afternoon sun. Her failure hit her gut like a punch. A part of her wished he’d never come here. He was so successful in his ventures. She failed at everything she tried.

“What was that sigh for?” He swept the bench free of bird poop and little bits falling from the coniferous trees shading them.

Clara hadn’t even realized she’d sighed. Why were they eating lunch together? She plopped on the bench and unwrapped her food.

Heavenly smells wafted up. She wanted to just pour this plate into her mouth. Instead, she picked up the fork and tried to be as genteel as she could. “I don’t know. Everything I try, fails.”

“What do you mean?” He scooped a bite into his mouth.

How could she explain to him all her struggles? He could never understand. He was probably born with money, went to a rich private school, and never had a care in the world.

She promised herself before he came that she wouldn’t mention any financial problems in front of him and made Lotus promise, too. But he wasn’t blind. He saw the state of the camp. “Nothing.”

“Now I’m curious.” He leaned closer.

The drape of his shirt fell so nicely over his chest, and how was he not sweltering in this heat? He looked as fresh as if he’d just come from a day at the office. A hint of self-consciousness about her painting clothes suddenly hit her. But why should she worry about what he thought? He wouldn’t consider her a potential...anything. She shouldn’t care. She *didn’t* care.

“As you were saying...” He waited with raised eyebrows.

“I wasn’t saying anything.” She scooped up another bite of seasoned rice, filling her tongue with wonderful tastes.

“You were supposed to be telling me about how you fail.”

“I fail.”

“But failure is part of success. You shouldn’t see it as bad. It’s part of the process.” He leaned back. “Take my company for instance. I failed three other businesses before this one caught fire.”

Nearly choking on rice, Clara raised her eyebrows. The great Elliott Bracken admitted to failure? His confession almost humanized him.

“One was for temperature-reading bracelets—terrible idea. The other two businesses were for shoes that tracked your

steps, which was soon replaced by smart watches just as we got a working prototype.”

Clara laughed. Maybe failing wasn't so bad.

“And the last one was for a massage bed. Yeah, that didn't fly. Too expensive and too uncomfortable.”

Lotus stepped into view, bracelets dangling. “I'm sorry to bother you, hon. But I was just preparing for the cooking class again. I peeked into our supplies. All of the flour is full of weevils.”

Nothing like talking about bugs during lunch. Clara placed her plate on the bench next to her. “Oh, dear. Did you check the extra stash near the pantry?”

“All of it's bad.” Lotus bit her lip and cast a glance at Elliott. “If the AC wasn't at eighty-five, the food wouldn't go bad as quickly.”

“Why is the AC so high?” Elliott dropped his plate next to him on the bench. “Is it broken?”

An awkward silence hung between them.

Clara willed Lotus not to share sensitive information. If only Clara could come up with a clever excuse.

Lotus rolled an eye in her direction. She picked at her nails. “We can't afford to leave it lower.”

Closing her eyes, Clara held her breath. “Excuse us, will you?” She jumped to her feet and motioned for Lotus to follow her away from Elliott.

“You didn't have to tell him.”

“I couldn't think of a good lie. You know me, I'm a terrible liar.”

Clara couldn't blame her. She was an equally terrible liar. She'd just have to deal with that later. “Do you have any backup plans?” Only about five kids were in each baking group, but still, five bored teenagers created a lot of problems.

“They're supposed to make muffins this afternoon to learn fractions and stuff.” She had a hoarse whisper. “But I don't

know what we can do without flour.”

Clara bit her lip. Her mom gave her a little extra cash this morning. “Let me finish lunch and grab my purse. Then I’ll drive into town and grab a couple of pounds for this afternoon. And then I suggest we keep it in the fridge—at least during the summer months.”

Lotus nodded.

Clara turned to go back to her seat. Elliott was gone. He at least rewrapped her food so the bugs wouldn’t get on it. She plopped onto the bench. She didn’t like Elliott, but she was almost, sort of, kind of looking forward to finishing lunch with him. What must he think of her?

CHAPTER 6

The next day, Clara pulled into the camp early in the morning. A huge moving van blocked the whole drive.

“Now what,” she murmured. Was it a repo team? Her bills weren’t that overdue, were they?

She shut off the engine. Walking to the truck, she noticed the back gate was up. She peered inside.

Both walls were lined with rows of clothing racks—shirts, pants, dresses all hanging from hangers. Tags still hung from their sleeves and backs.

She stepped back on the gravel drive. “What is all this?”

A rumble sounded behind her.

She turned and coughed at the dust the limo kicked up. Must he come in a limo? She rolled her eyes.

He jumped out. “Good, the truck is here.”

“What’s all this?” She pointed to the huge truck dominating the whole drive. How was the limo even going to turn around?

“I’m donating clothes to your cast-off bin.” He nodded to his driver who eased over the weedy area in the center of the drive to get around the truck.

She narrowed her eyes. “You can’t donate clothes.”

A glint shone in his eye. “Why not? You said you have a box. I just want to add to it.”

She huffed. What was he thinking? Donations were cast-offs. These were all new clothes. And everything in here would not fit in a box. “Yes. My box is about three feet by two feet. This is a truck.” She pointed to it for emphasis.

“*My* box is a semi.” Grinning his charming smile, he shrugged and climbed inside.

Clara shook her head. Was the whole month going to be like this?

With a handful of older teens—Marian, Kiva, and others—Lotus stepped out of the office front door. “Here’s the first batch.”

“Are you helping him?” Clara stood with her hands on her hips.

With wide eyes, Lotus hunched over, as if afraid of Clara’s wrath. And indeed, Clara seethed.

Lotus barely whispered, “No.”

With a huge grin, Marian climbed up the small set of stairs leading to the pop-up boutique. Clara had never seen her light up so much, except for one time when her social media post got three hundred likes.

Elliott called from inside the truck. “I called earlier instructing her to bring the kids out about five at a time to frof.”

“Frof?” Clara looked at Elliott. As much as she wanted to ignore him, she had no idea what he was talking about.

He kind of shrugged and handed a pair of overalls to Marian. “I made up the term. It’s free shopping—froping.”

Clara huffed. Only Elliott would make up a stupid term for giving away clothes to teenagers. She gritted her teeth and shook her head. How would she ever compete with this?

“We don’t have to pay for any of these clothes?” With the overalls draped on her arm, Marian stepped into the back of the moving van. She plucked at a T-shirt.

Leaning between two racks, Elliott shook his head. “They’re all donated.”

Marian’s face lit up. With a huge grin, she scooped up clothes. “These are way sicker than the donation bin. I go through that thing like once a week.”

With heat broiling in her chest, Clara climbed into the truck. A portable AC blew cool air over her. “Where did you get all these clothes?” She plucked up a shirt. It had a designer label—not one that would fetch too high of a price online, but enough that Clara knew he was no cheapskate.

“I have connections.”

He grinned with a sly sparkle in his eye. Clara hated that sparkle.

The other four kids jumped in and excitedly went through the racks. In the back was a make-shift changing room. A pile of discarded clothes started to form as kids tried on and rejected clothing. A man in the back was madly returning clothes to their hangers.

Kiva dragged in a whole armful of clothing.

“Hold on there.” She stopped Kiva. “We need to establish a limit.”

Elliott nodded. “Agreed. At least until all the kids have a chance to come and look.”

“How about five?” Clara lifted her hand.

“What?” Kiva’s shoulders sagged.

“How about ten?” Elliott raised his eyebrows. “I can always get more.”

She tugged him aside. His cologne was amazing. She noticed he had forgone the blazer today and only had on a button-up shirt. The fabric looked as smooth as silk, although she was sure he wasn’t wearing a silk shirt in this heat. She had to resist the impulse to stroke her hand down his chest. “I know you can get more, but think of these kids. They can’t go around thinking that people will just give them stuff.”

“True. Fair point.” He gave a short nod. “What will you pick out?”

She stepped back. “What do you mean?” He didn’t actually expect her to comb through his portable mall, did he? She was above that.

He stood close and put a hand on her back. “I have a women’s collection. Judging by what you’re wearing, you haven’t been clothes shopping in years.”

Clara’s face warmed. She wasn’t sure if she should take that as an insult. Why was he looking at her clothes? And why did his observation give her a chemical reaction? “I don’t have time to shop for clothes. I’m too busy running the camp.”

With a hand on her elbow, he urged her to the women’s section. “If you cannot go to the store, the store must come to you.”

She cast him a sideways glance. “You don’t like what I wore yesterday?”

“Hmm.” He tilted his head. “The paint splashes say you’re handy with a brush. But it’s not your best look.” He stared down, a slight smile touching his lips. “How about trying a different one?” He handed her a shirt on a hanger. “Should be about your size?”

The shirt was a pale green with little rosebuds on it—something she definitely would’ve picked for herself. “How do you know my size?” She swiped the shirt.

“I’ve spent a few hours with you. And I know what people want.” He stepped closer. “That quality makes me successful in business and in other things.”

“Don’t think I’m signing off on your hours early.” She caressed the fabric. Cool threads went through her fingers. The texture was as silky as it looked. She yearned for the shirt and imagined sliding it over her head.

He grinned. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

She held it up. Instead of trying it on, she hung it on the rack with a slap of the metal hanger.

Elliott dropped his jaw.

She smirked and jumped from the truck. “Now I am sure it’s a bribe.”

Once inside, she asked Carlos for the mail. Should she have taken the shirt? What if he expected something in return for his gift?

She flipped through the envelopes. “Bills, bills, bills.” She came across a strange envelope. “What’s this?” She slid her finger under the flap. “The contractor who bid the tower upgrades.” Trembling, she read the outlined proposal of all the required work. Then she ran her gaze down to the bottom total. She gulped. Tears burned at her eyes as she read the bid. Twenty thousand dollars just to fix the tower. She couldn’t afford it. She rubbed her throbbing temples.

Maybe Carlos could replace the few rotting boards and do another coat of spar urethane to protect the wood against the sun. But the last inspector said if she didn’t get that tower replaced or rebuilt by the next inspection, one of her biggest draws of the camp would have to be shut down.

She couldn’t wait. She needed money now.

After slipping the notice into her desk, she returned to the lobby. She stood in front of the windows facing the driveway and the massive truck. What could she do?

Owen carried huge armloads of clothing away from the truck. Oh, no! He didn’t.

Grinding her teeth, she marched out the front door. She couldn’t trust Elliott to keep his word.



ELLIOTT SAT BACK WITH A GRIN. His plan worked better than he thought. The kids ate up his portable shop. The van was nearly empty. Every one of those thirty kids had a new summer wardrobe thanks to him. And Clara would be happy knowing that her kids were taken care of.

Only...

The sounds of impassioned footsteps in the dirt came from the open door of the truck. He peeked out.

Clara stalked from the front lobby looking like a bull about to hit a red flag. What's got her so mad?

She climbed the stairs. "I told them five outfits." She held out her hand, fingers splayed, for emphasis.

"I know." He replaced a shirt someone rejected.

She pointed to Owen hauling away loot. "So why are they carrying away a whole armful?"

A flash of irritation went through him. Why couldn't she accept his gifts? They weren't even for her! "You said these kids had nothing. I'm confused. Are we trying to help them?"

"*We* are not helping them." She motioned between the two of them. "*I* am trying to help them learn independence and hard work. This is my program, and I get to dictate the rules. You can't come in here and throw free things around like you're some kind of benefactor and then leave them after a few weeks. Trust doesn't work that way. These kids may act like they like you, they might be grateful for the clothes, but to earn their trust you have to be here, day in and day out. For years." She slapped her palm with the back of her hand. "The hard days and the easy days. Whether they like you or not."

He folded a pair of jeans. "I don't see what you're so mad about."

Her face went purple. She stamped her foot.

She couldn't even get the words out. Elliott knew he was in trouble. She probably would've slapped him had he not backed into the corner. He held up his hands. "Okay. Okay. I'll ask the truck driver to leave." He texted the driver who was taking a break.

"Go help with the climbing tower or something." She pointed toward the back of the property.

Aaaaaand devil-woman returned. He was almost warming to her these last two days. He scowled and jumped out of the

truck.

Across from the tower, he sat on the bench with crossed legs and arms and watched the kids climb. What skills did climbing teach them anyway? He shook his head. This community service was a stupid idea and worse—a waste of time.

A motor roared to life. He checked over his shoulder to see what it was.

Clara was leaving in the van.

He faced forward again. Good riddance. He was only trying to help.

“Help!”

Elliott’s gaze shot upwards to the kid climbing the tower.

“My leg.” It was Conner.

Squinting into the sun, Elliott made out the problem. One of Conner’s harness straps around his legs had come undone. Conner panicked and flailed around. Horror raked through Elliott.

Conner was up about fifty feet. What could Elliott do?

An older teenager held onto the rope, straining against the flailing Conner.

“Don’t let go,” he told the older teen. “I’ll go up and get him.” He ran to the tower and tore up the wooden stairs. They groaned under his weight. One flight. Two flights. Sweat poured over him, soaking his shirt. The lack of breeze inside the tower made the heat and humidity unbearable. Around the fourth floor, he tore off his shirt and threw it on the stairs. After a while, he lost count.

At last, he reached the fifty feet level. He looked over the ledge.

Conner kicked up against the climbing wall. He held onto the belay rope with both hands. “Help me!”

Leaning through the open entryway, Elliott snatched Conner’s rope with the pole and brought it closer to the tower.

“Can your feet reach the floor?” He waved to the teenager on belay to give him more slack.

Conner touched down his feet on the rotting wooden planks. He nodded. Then he fell to the floor. “Oof.”

Elliott knelt beside him, tension racing through his shoulders, and picked up the boy. “You okay?”

Conner’s face was marbled with tears and dirt. “Yeah. That was so scary.”

Elliott patted him on his back. “But you were so brave.”

Conner stood. “My strap came undone.” He twisted around so Elliott could see his leg.

“The strap didn’t come undone.” He held up the buckle. It was broken. Elliott gritted his teeth. “The fabric frayed. Does anyone check these harnesses before use?”

Conner shrugged.

“Here, step out of that thing.” He helped Conner loosen the other buckle and helped him off the rope.

A flash of heat went through him. He weighed the harness in one hand. Where was Clara? They needed to talk.

CHAPTER 7

After running errands, Clara perked up when the phone rang just as she pulled into the parking lot at camp. Sophie's face appeared on her screen and the flashing caller ID.

Answering the call, Clara picked up the phone. "Hey! I haven't heard from you in a while." She cut the engine and looked for her purse in the cabin. In fact, Clara couldn't remember the last time they spoke. They had been close, once upon a time as roommates in college, but then they went their separate ways.

"Oh. Esthetician school keeps me busy. And so does your little camp."

Clara didn't know how to respond. Most of her friends didn't understand why she spent her time with these teenagers. Clara got tired of defending her life choices and her drive to help these kids. "How are things going?"

"I have something exciting to tell you! Meet me for coffee sometime this week? I know of this cute little shop downtown."

"Um, sure." Usually Clara was so exhausted that going anywhere after the kids were settled was a lot of work, which was why she didn't often form new acquaintances. "When and where?" She glanced up. Through her bug-splattered windshield, she saw an outdoor outfitter's company van in front of the office. "Now what?" she mumbled. "Hey, Sophie, just text me the details, and I'll make it. I gotta run." She gritted her teeth and turned off the engine.

“Sure. So many exciting things to share.”

But Clara barely heard Sophie’s reply. She was already out of the truck and crossing the unpaved turnabout.

A group of kids huddled near the truck. She was only gone for three hours. What happened?

In the middle of the pack of kids, Elliott stood next to one of the outfitter’s employees. What was he doing now?

Their last conversation still angered her. And now, he was what? Handing out climbing equipment?

Elliott tossed ropes to the kids while the employee with a store shirt checked them off.

She caught his eye over the teenagers’ heads.

He didn’t smile. “We need to talk.” His brow hung heavy over his eyes.

Clara waded through the kids. “Okay.” She shrugged. “Let’s talk.”

Elliott kept distributing materials. “You don’t want to have this conversation in front of the kids.”

“Fine.” *This must be bad.* “Meet me over there, by the tree.” She clipped the van keys onto her purse and marched over to the shade, crossing her arms and tapping her foot. A sinking feeling hit her gut.

Elliott said something to the outfitter employee and handed a harness to a kid.

She waited with her hands on her hips. “What is this truck doing here? First the food, then the clothes, now this?” For the first time, she noticed he wasn’t wearing a shirt. His toned chest weakened her knees.

Elliott narrowed his eyes. “When was the last time you inspected your climbing equipment?”

“Huh?” What a weird question! Every year. “The date on the rope says it still good.”

He held up a raggedy rope. “But look how worn it is. The dates are just suggestions. And look at these.” He went to a pile of old harnesses sitting on a splintery bench. “Worn straps. Broken latches.” He held up each piece and showed her.

“I know.” A deep burn smoldered in her chest. “The wood wears out the ropes. They have a protective cloth to keep down the wear, but they’ve gotten lost. And those old harnesses aren’t supposed to be used. They were headed for the trash.”

“You can’t run a camp like this. Someone will get hurt.”

Clara struggled to keep herself from burying her face in her hands. The ropes would be more expenses. She gulped against a rising tremor in her throat.

“Today, Conner nearly fell. The strap around his leg failed. Thankfully, he didn’t get hurt. Someone could sue and close the camp.”

Tears leaked from her eyes. Poor, sweet Conner. He brought his own harness from home because sometimes there weren’t enough good ones. She closed her lids. But it didn’t matter, while they were at camp, these kids were her responsibility. Would Elliott try to close the camp? She opened her eyes. “Are you hoping someone will sue me out of existence, and then you can get out of your court-appointed service?” At the thought of losing all her kids, bile rose to her throat.

Elliott straightened his neck. “No.” He furrowed his brow.

“Then why are you even bringing up lawsuits?”

Throwing down the equipment, he huffed. “I don’t want to see the kids get hurt. I ordered new harnesses. Don’t worry.” He thrust up his chin. “I paid for them. They’ll be good for another couple of years, and they have the cloth covering to protect them from wear.”

Was he humbling her on purpose? She lowered her head. A lump formed in her throat, and her face burned so hot she wished the AC was working inside. She could never tell him about the twenty grand to repair the tower. “Listen, we have

good harnesses just not enough of them. The kids sometimes bring stuff they've bought themselves. I don't have the manpower to check every kid's harness."

Elliott inhaled, lifting his bare shoulders. "The tower could use an inspection, too."

Tears stung her eyes. Oh, it had been inspected all right. It needed repairs—repairs she couldn't afford. She'd have to shut down the tower, and all those harnesses would be useless. She eyed the group of kids excitedly trying on the new gear. The embarrassment and dread drowned her. She'd failed the kids. And her failure burned within her.

His limo arrived in a cloud of dust.

She glanced at her watch. It was nearly six o'clock. Another day wasted.

"Listen. I have to go do my real job now." His voice held an edge. "Tomorrow I can have someone look at the tower and see what repairs are needed."

Inhaling, she thrust up her chin and crossed her arms. "I'd rather die than have any more help from you."

"Have it your way." Shaking his head, he stalked away, muttering under his breath. With a hand on the open door, he stopped before entering the limo. "You know, I could report this whole camp and have it condemned. The main office area probably is growing mold, your equipment is outdated, your resources are meager. You don't deserve to be in business."

Horror raked through her. He wouldn't close it, would he? Shuttering the camp would be an easy way to get out of his sentence. Pain throbbed behind her eyes. All her hard work would evaporate in an instant. It was such a mistake having him here. She should've just left well enough alone when he got pulled over.

"See you tomorrow." He flashed her a tight smile and ducked into the darkened cabin of his limo.

"I hate you, Elliott Bracken," she muttered through clenched teeth, watching his limo kick up dust around the circle, heading back to the main road.

Still burning, she stalked to the tower and climbed the stairs. The handrails were splintery, sure. The boards groaned under her weight. Sure there were a few loose boards from the exposure to the wind and sun. Was this even safe? She shook her head. How could she ever raise twenty grand? At about the fourth turn of the stairs, she found a crumpled shirt. Furrowing her brow, she bent. Someone must've left it here. She picked it up for the donation box. But the material was buttery soft. The creases were sharp. It was the collared shirt Elliott wore today. She brought it to her face. It still smelled of his cologne. Collapsing to the rotting floorboards, she cried into the shirt. Elliott would put the camp out of business, and she couldn't do anything about it.



ELLIOTT STEWED in the back of the limo. He picked up his phone to check his messages and to see if Quinton texted him. Clara Easton was a stubborn woman. It would serve her right to get sued out of business. What neglect! He shook his head.

His phone rang. Quinton. Elliott clicked to answer. He put it on speaker to feed it throughout the cabin so he could relax. That woman was so frustrating. Settling into his cool leather seats, he let the AC blow right on him. “Speak to me, Quinton.”

“Are you ready to review our last phase?”

“I just finished up with the Witch Lady, and I’m headed your way.” He pressed a button for the bar. He needed a cool, liquid refreshment after the afternoon he just had.

A small noise came from the far side of the limo.

Elliott squinted into the darkness, then dismissed it.

“Sure you’re not too tired to work?”

“Absolutely not.” He took a sip of the ice-cold drink. “Nothing is more important than this launch.” He’d been working on this technology for months. It had to be ready by

the deadline. Still, a few bugs plagued the receptors. Why couldn't he get everything to talk to each other? "Oh, and Quinton?"

"Yes?"

"Get me a shirt."

Silence on the other end.

Elliott took another drink.

"A shirt?"

"Yes. I had an emergency."

"A shirtless emergency?"

"I don't want to talk about it." He stared out the window at the passing trees. "Let's just say Clara Easton is a fool." When she wasn't being a pill, she could almost be attractive. Why would she run her camp so carelessly?

"Captain Clara isn't a fool."

Startled, Elliott spilled his drink across his pants. *Great.* Now he needed a pair of trousers, too. Glancing up, he stared into the darkened cabin. At last, he made out a lumpy outline. "Who's there?" He hit the button to turn on the lights. "Listen, Quinton, I'll call you back." He hung up.

A dark blob sat across from him on the bench seating.

"I see you. Show yourself."

Gulping, he hit the security button. The car slowed and pulled off a ramp. "Come on. I'm done playing games."

Antonio pulled into a gas station.

Finally, the blanket moved. A girl blinked in the dim light. Her hair rose with static. She was one of the girls from Clara's camp. Marian, he thought her name was. Elliott both tensed and relaxed.

The limo stopped.

He ran a hand down his face. Now would be a great time to be fully clothed. Why didn't he keep extra shirts in his limo?

Antonio opened the door, flooding the cabin with light.

“And just who are you?” Elliott stared hard.

“Captain Clara is not a fool,” the girl repeated.

“Don’t tell her I said that, okay?” A brush of emotion flickered in his chest. He got caught talking about her behind her back. “What’s your name?”

A few heartbeats passed. “Marian.”

“And what are you doing in my ride?”

She fiddled with her flannel shirttail. “Running away.”

“Why are you running away?” Was camp that bad that kids were desperate to get out of there?

Marian kept her head down.

When she didn’t answer, Elliott glanced to Antonio who shook his head. “How did you get in here anyway?”

She stared at the floor. “When you opened your door, I sneaked around the other side and crept in and hid under the lap blanket.” She held up the lump of fabric.

“We should give her props for that.” Elliott sighed. He must’ve been too riled up from his conversation with Clara. “We have to return you to Captain Clara.” He couldn’t help but say her name with a sneer.

For the first time, she stared him in the face. “I won’t go back.”

“Is camp so bad?”

She shook her head. “Leave me here. I’ll hitchhike to camp.”

He wasn’t born yesterday. “Listen.” He refrained from letting loose an impatient sigh. “I need to get to work. I’ll call Clara, and she’ll come pick you up.”

Antonio closed the door.

Marian narrowed her eyes. “Why did you say Captain Clara’s a fool?”

Her voice had the sharp edge of accusation in it. Elliott's face burned. "Her camp is poorly managed."

"You don't know anything." She spat the words rapid-fire, like a machine gun.

But Clara doesn't know how to manage her money, Elliott wanted to say, but he kept his mouth shut. Marian's attitude made him regret being nice.

"I'm leaving." She made for the door.

Elliott hit the lock button on his control panel. "Nope."

She sat back, shoulders sagging. "You can't keep me here forever."

"Oh, trust me, I wouldn't want to. I'll just make sure you don't escape before Miss Clara comes." Somewhere he had her number. He scrolled through the contacts on his phone.

"I'll tell people you kidnapped me and held me against my will."

At last, he found it. "You do that, kid."

When the call went through, Clara picked up. "Hello?" Her connection sounded fuzzy.

"I have something of yours."

"Oh?"

"Do you know a girl named Marian?"

Clara's voice tightened. "How did you—? What is she—?"

"She stowed away in my ride." He glowered at the girl with a nose ring, flannel, and an attitude across from him. "Pick her up at the Truckees. I don't have time to bring her back. I'll be waiting."

"I'll come as soon as I can." She hung up.

"That better be now." He hung up, more than a little annoyed. This was not a delay he needed. Part of him just wanted to deposit Marian at the gas station, but that was probably exactly what she wanted. He couldn't leave. *Fine*. He

pulled out his laptop. “If you don’t mind, I’ll work while we wait for Clara.”

Marian shrugged. “It’s not like I have a say in anything.”

Digging into his latest coding bug, Elliott tried to ignore the fact that he was shirtless with a minor. Thankfully, he recorded everything in his limo.

About ten minutes later, the door opened again. A T-shirt landed on his lap. Standing in the open door, Antonio grinned.

Shaking his head, Elliott gratefully put on the tight white shirt with a giant beaver on the front. At least now, he could focus. He pushed a button for his snack stash, which appeared with a revolving door. Glaring, he crunched on his favorite cookies while he worked.

A cough came from the other side of the cabin.

He glanced up. Marian huddled in the corner. Maybe she was hungry. “Want something to eat?” He held out the tray with his snacks.

Bringing up her knees to her chest, she shook her head.

At least he offered. He bowed his head and continued to work.

After what seemed like forever, he heard a rattling transmission. The camp van pulled up alongside him.

Finally!

He set aside his laptop and stepped out, tucking in his shirt. Looking down at the silly cartoon on his chest, a hint of heat flashed in his cheeks. He brushed the tee and straightened his spine. What did he care about what Clara thought, anyway?

With eyebrows angled upward, Clara jumped down from the van and didn’t even give him a glance before running over to Marian. Clara wrapped her arms around the girl. “I was so worried about you.”

Shrugging away, Marian shook her head then tucked her face into Clara’s neck. “I can’t go back.”

“I know,” Clara cooed. Walking with her arm around the girl, she escorted her to the van. “We’ll find a solution.”

Standing with his mouth agape, Elliott huffed. He debated about saying something. Clara didn’t even say thank you for this massive inconvenience. Shaking his head, he retreated to his open door. And why didn’t the girl want to go home? He had to admit, seeing Clara act so tenderly toward the girl took the edge off of his anger.

Clara shut the door on the van, and, with jangling keys, headed toward the driver’s seat. She creaked open the door. “Thank you,” she called.

He turned, squinting into the sun. “For what?”

“For waiting with Marian.”

“She hates camp so much she has to run away?” He couldn’t help the dig. He’d had a long day, and the night held promises to be even longer.

Clara cast a glance at Marian and said something across the seat, then closed the door. She crossed the parking lot to Elliott.

A hint of a cooler night breeze swept Clara’s hair around her face. “She’s not afraid to go back to camp. Her home life is”—she sighed—“not ideal.” Clara kicked the blacktop. “She’s my runner. I have to keep a careful eye on her. She’s run away before, and no doubt she’ll do it again.”

“What’s at home?” Elliott didn’t want to get too attached to these kids, but he couldn’t help but wonder who these kids were and why they were under Clara’s care.

“Like most of the kids at my camp, Marian’s in foster care. That’s one of the reasons we don’t like phones with cameras out at camp. A lot of these kids have had rough lives being in the system. Thankfully, some families will take in these teenagers, but it’s a lot for anyone to handle. Some of these kids have been in drug rehab, others have lost parents, and half of them don’t even know who their parents are. In her case, she’s got foster parents. Bless their hearts, they are, for the

most part, nice people, but they don't know how to handle all the trauma she's had in her life."

"And you do?" He arched a brow. How was she any better than foster parents? "Are you trained to handle all the trauma?" Leaning closer, he studied her eyes—brown eyes that caught a hint of amber in the sun.

She set her jaw. "I got my degree in counseling. But honestly, all the training in the world will only help if you're willing to listen and love them."

Her words pricked Elliott's heart. He glanced away, watching the rows of cars getting gas. Thankfully, the sun was starting to set, and the scorching heat abated. He tugged on his shirt again. At least he'd thought to offer Marian some food. He coughed. "Well, I've wasted enough time here. See you tomorrow?"

"Bright and early. Tomorrow we mend fences. Dress accordingly." She flipped her keys into her hand. "You can wear that Truckees shirt." She turned before he could see her expression. Was she teasing him? Now he most definitely had to wear his nicest suit tomorrow.

CHAPTER 8

On a rare night out, Clara pulled open the door and trudged into the cafe. She scanned the crowd for a tall blonde. There, Sophie sat in a booth clear in the back. In her camp clothes, Clara was sure she smelled like sweat, sunscreen and bug spray. With Marian running away, she hadn't had time to change.

Sophie brushed back her long hair. Clara was sure those were extensions. No one grew perfect hair like that so fast. Sophie looked as if she'd come off a job as a runway model—tall, slender, tan. Her makeup, even this late at night, was still in place. Her clothes were crisp and clean.

Scratching a spot of either sap or blood from her shirt, Clara was sure what her face looked like: sunburnt, unwashed, and natural. After a quick and awkward hug, she slid into the booth across from her friend. Her feet were happy to have the weight off.

“Thanks for meeting me here.” Sophie had already ordered and was eating a small treat.

Clara's stomach rumbled at the scent of bubbling cheese and the sugar from the pastry case. She cast a sideways glance at the tempting confections sitting under the light. But finances were tight. She'd just have to grab a bite at her mom's house or go back to camp and see if anyone had leftovers from the food trucks. “So, what's going on?”

“Well, I just graduated from school, and I got a job in Dallas!” Squinting her eyes, she bounced up and down in her seat.

She was so stinking adorable. This was the type of girl Elliott should date—put together, someone well-versed in social graces, and beautiful. Clara felt sticky from her afternoon outside, teaching the kids how to build a fire. “Congratulations! When do you start?”

“In two weeks. At a really posh salon. It’s my dream come true.”

Clara had many dreams for her life and her future. None of them involved upscale salons. “That’s awesome. So I guess this is goodbye.”

“Not goodbye for forever. You can still visit me up in Dallas this summer.”

Ha! Fat chance! “That would be really nice. I just have a hard time getting away from the kids right now. Summer is the busiest time. Maybe this fall.”

“What do you expect to accomplish with those kids? They seem to eat up a lot of your time. Everyone else has jobs and careers, Clara. What are your goals? What are you doing with your life?”

Clara shook her head. Tears pricked her eyes. She coughed to relieve the pressure in her throat. “These kids need me.”

“You just need to be needed.” Flashing a tight smile, Sophie drank from her teacup. “It’s sweet.”

Clara rolled her eyes. She didn’t need to be needed, did she? “These kids need someone. They got a bum rap. If they don’t come to the camp in the summers, they’re left alone and get into trouble. And I do have a job during the school year. I am a counselor at an elementary school.”

Sophie snorted. Or at least, it sounded like a snort.

Clara exhaled. “Anyway, I love what I do. And I love those kids. I would do anything for them. I just lack the funds.”

As soon as she said it, Clara winced. Why did she bring up money? Perhaps she was feeling a little pricked from Elliott always gloating over her.

“Why don’t you ask your dad? He’d help you.”

Clara wasn’t so sure he would. She gnawed on her inner cheek. “I haven’t spoken to my dad in years—since the incident.”

Sophie furrowed her brows. It was nice to know she did get wrinkles. “I just feel like you’re living below your potential. You have the biggest heart. You should be doing bigger things.”

Sadly, money made the world go around, and Clara didn’t even have enough money to fund her small camp. She stared at the paper napkin ring sitting next to her pastry plate. “Thank you. Maybe someday I’ll get to do my big things.” But even as she said the words, she felt her life slipping through her fingers. Was running the camp the best she could do?



SITTING AT HIS DESK, Elliott finished his work for the night—or at least got as far as he could without banging his head against his desk. He needed a new way to torture Clara. He couldn’t let her win. Waking Quinton with a touch to his shoulder, Elliott leaned back in his office chair.

Quinton’s face was red with indentions of his sleeve. He reattached his glasses. “Are we done for the night?”

“I need something bigger and better than yesterday.”

“In regards to what, exactly?” Quinton rubbed his eyes under his spectacles.

“Clara. I need to bug her.”

“Why do you feel this drive, this absolutely insane need, to get under her skin?”

“She ratted me out. Of course I have to bug her. I want her to regret messing with me.”

Quinton pressed his hands against his wrinkled shirt. “Seems like a lot of work to go through just to let someone

know how much you hate them.”

Elliott flashed him a glare. “I don’t hate her. I just want her to suffer as much as I suffer.” He had an idea that would blow her mind. Sitting forward, he lifted his laptop lid. He only had to make a single request. Opening his email client he typed a quick email.

Huffing, Quinton shook his head. “What torture! You get outside of your office and hang out with kids. If you weren’t paying me so much money to be your PA and right-hand man, I’d say send me. I’d gladly do it. And it seems like you’re having fun doing it. You’ve sent me dozens of ideas for new products in this last week since you’ve started.”

Lowering the laptop lid, Elliott raised his eyebrows. “I have?” He didn’t realize being outside had inspired him so much. It must be the fresh air and trees. “That’s beside the point.” He leaned forward and clasped his hands over his closed laptop. “I need something that is more obnoxious than the limo. The kids are getting used to it. The novelty’s worn off.”

“Now that is a shame. You have to make your grand entrance, don’t you?”

“This isn’t about me. This is about getting back at Clara.” Even saying her name made his blood boil. Or at least he had some kind of physical reaction. He wasn’t sure what it was. He loved seeing her frustrated and getting all high and mighty. Who did she think she was? The image of telling him to wear something suitable for repairing fences and her flipping keys at the gas station when she picked up Marian was priceless.

“You like annoying her. I can tell by your smile.”

Elliott immediately dropped his grin. Had the memory really stirred feelings? He was losing his touch.

Quinton gave him a pointed stare. “Not to change the subject too much. I do have a list of eligible ladies for the gala at the end of the month.” He turned his tablet around.

Before he could even see the list, Elliott groaned. He jumped up from his chair and stretched his muscles. Running

up all those stairs at the tower totally killed his glutes. “Why do I have to bring a date?”

“Because it rounds you out. Many important investors will be there—influential people that can help your business grow. If you look like the selfish prig you are, you might not get to your next project.”

“Hey, watch it.” Elliott pointed at Quinton. “Why do I have to choose now?”

“Because it’s only common courtesy to allow women time to order a dress, make a hair appointment, wax—”

“Okay. Okay.” *Geeze*. He wiped his hands down his face. “Do we have to talk about it tonight?” He flipped over his wrist to read the time, which was long after midnight. “I have to be at the camp at eight. I still need some sleep if I’m going to be mending fences in the morning.” The idea of getting his hands on a project sounded fun, actually. But he would never tell Clara.

“No, we don’t. Just remember, that the closer you get, the harder it will be to find someone you actually want to go with.”

Elliott ran his tongue over his teeth. They needed to be brushed. The problem was, he didn’t actually want to go with any of the women in his eligible, socially acceptable friend group. The gala would already be nerve-wracking. Who would he’d feel comfortable going with? He needed someone who was an asset, a co-creator, a loyal friend. An equal.

CHAPTER 9

Waking in her cabin in the night, Clara wasn't sure what to expect today. Would Elliott find some new fresh torture for her? She studied the peeling paint on the joists of the ceiling, tears leaking from her eyes. The food trucks would come today, sure, but what would happen when they stopped coming? The kids skipped eating the meager breakfast, anticipating the food trucks at lunch. What would the camp be like after Elliott left? It would be worse for the kids. They would be even more aware of how awful her camp had become. Which was worse—losing something wonderful after having it for a time or never having it at all?

The next morning, she awoke in her cabin, barely sleeping at all. She anticipated the weekends and sleeping in her own bed at home, with AC, and not having to wonder at every sound if Marian was running away. But little sleep or no, she had to get up. She rolled over, folding back her worn sheets. The mattress groaned underneath her.

Her eyes felt coated in lead. She stumbled into the small private bathroom. A few bugs landed in the sink. When she turned on the water, a small skink ran under the baseboards. What Sophie said struck her. Was this really the best life she could be living? The kids meant the world to her. That was what she lived for, but what if the camp were closed? Would Elliott to show up today with a lawyer, condemning the place?

She dressed. In the office, she met Lotus who handed her a cup of tea. "Today is fence day. I've been putting it off." She took a drink of the warm liquid, letting the scent of tea leaves

fill her nose. “I dread working alongside Mr. Grumpy Pants. Hopefully, he’ll keep his shirt on today.” She half-smiled.

“You know you enjoyed looking at that toned chest.” Lotus winked. Her nice perfume floated in the air between them.

“If he’s such a workaholic, how does he find the time to go to the gym?”

Lotus’s bracelets jangled. “Oh, girl. Men like him have private trainers who come to them, on *their* schedule.”

“Must be nice,” she muttered and drained the cup.

The kids made a ruckus in the nearby cafeteria. They poured outside.

Then she heard it. A sound like a giant eggbeater whooshed the tops of the trees.

A helicopter?

Clara clenched her teeth. *He didn’t*. Narrowing her eyes, she set down the cup and raced for the front door. The kids were already outside, with their phones, taking pictures of the copter landing in the middle of the grassy turnaround.

The sound of the blades blocked out all the exclamations of excitement. She guessed most of them had never been this close to this type of aircraft. Holding her flapping shirt against the powerful wind, she shook her head. What disruptions! Would every day bring some fresh new torture?

Elliott stepped out of the cockpit, buttoning his suit. With sunglasses reflecting the sun, he waved goodbye to the pilot and motioned for the kids to get back.

At least his perfect hair was mussed.

The chopper lifted above them, blowing dust and debris everywhere. Even the trees bent to its power.

Clara squinted into the sun, watching the copter get smaller and smaller, and the sound grew fainter and fainter until, at last, it was gone altogether.

But the kids. They surrounded Elliott asking him about his flight. Did he have to draw attention to himself every time he

arrived?

Clara coughed—some of that blown dirt landed in her lungs. “All right, kids, remember our routine. After breakfast, we have chores.”

A collective groan came from the kids. They looked to Elliott.

Elliott grinned. “You better listen to Captain Clara and get on with your chores.”

Clara gritted her teeth at him calling her Captain Clara. That was the kids’ nickname for her.

Ducking their heads, they slumped away, back to their cabins for the morning chores. Thankfully, she still had one adult cabin leader, Marcie, who supervised the chores. Floors needed to be swept, beds made, and the cabin adult also made sure hygiene was attended to. It’s sad that someone had to tell some of these kids to brush their teeth and change their clothes.

Finally, Clara and Elliott stood alone outside the office door. She examined the expensive cut and beautiful wool nap of his suit. “This was your best fence-mending outfit?”

He set his jaw, shifting the knot in his tie. “I don’t want to lower my standards just because I’m working on a different project.”

Brother. Clara rolled her eyes. “Well, I don’t want you taking off your shirt again. I’ll be right back.”

She went inside the office door. Somewhere in the back of her room, she had a box of... She dug around until she found it—a box of Happy Camp T-shirts in a nice Kelly green. *Perfect.* On a whim, she’d made them a few years ago, thinking it would be a great unifying item, but nobody wore them. Also, the sizing was weird, and they fit super tight around the collar and went off-grain with one wash.

Once outside again, she handed it to Elliott.

“What’s this?” He arched a brow.

“Your uniform.”

He sneered at the shirt with peeling white heat transfer on it. “I’m not wearing that.”

She actually had one of these in her drawers at home, but she never wore it. She hated the feel of the rough and thick cotton. “Why not?”

“Because it’s ugly.”

“Oh, so now you’re concerned about your looks?” She held it out again. “You either wear it, or I call the judge.” She wasn’t sure if the judge could be reached or would even side with her, but she hoped the threat held some sort of water.

Elliott flatted his lips. “Fine. I’ll wear the shirt.”

“Good. While you change, I’ll go round up the kids and the tools.”

She snagged a few older boys and Marian, who didn’t like being left out of the more physical stuff just because she was a girl. Actually, she was pretty handy with tools and a great help. Clara found a few rusted hammers in a non-weather-proofed shed. She’d love to get new tools, too. Mentally, she added that to the list of things she needed.

She met the boys and Marian in front of the office. “Where is Elliott?”

As soon as she turned, he stepped out of the office, his Kelly green shirt stretched over his chest muscles. The neck ribbing was gone and the sleeves were completely ripped off. He must’ve borrowed a pair of scissors. Although the designer suit he arrived in made Clara blush, this beat-up look wasn’t so bad, either.

She bit the inside of her lip. What was she thinking? He had no more interest in her than she did in him. They had to work together because of a court order. As soon as his time was up, he was out of here, and she would never see him again.

“Time to get to work.” Shouldering the tool belt, she frowned. “This way.” She couldn’t make eye contact with Elliott. He must never know how attractive he looks in that stupid shirt—which was saying a lot because no one looks

good in Kelly green. “We got lots to do.” How could she stay focused until he left?



ELLIOTT SMIRKED as he followed a handful of boys—who carried wood slats over their shoulders—and Clara. She was flustered for some reason. Could it be that this ripped T-shirt had an effect on her? *Oh, boy!* Just what he hoped. He couldn’t wait to get going on the fence.

He followed her, across clumps of scraggly bushes, over a few fallen trees and a small stream, to the far end of the property where several slats barely clung from crossbeams. He reached out and grabbed a slat. It fell from its nails. He examined the wood. Sun rot, wind, and rain had weathered these poor wooden posts and slats into mush. What they really needed was a beautiful teak that would withstand all the elements. “How often do you have to replace these?”

Clara set down an electric drill and a box of wood screws. Brushing back hair, she handed the boys a few hammers and a bucket of nails. “Every three to four years.”

“That’s quite the expense. With that expense. Wouldn’t it make more sense to upgrade to a teak fence? It would last a long longer.”

Clara handed Marian a drill that looked to be about a hundred years old.

One of the boys, who might be called Owen, started ripping off rotted, old vertical slats with the back of his hammer. “Because teak is expensive, duh.”

Elliott put his hands on his hips. “How about pressure treated pine? Stores carry so many more options than just these plain planks.” He nodded to the stack of cheap wood.

“We’ll stain them,” another boy, Kiva, said, removing slats along with his friend. His hat was on backwards, shielding his

neck, not his face, from the sun. “But we don’t have any money to do any fancy sh—”

Clara coughed.

Kiva shot her a glance. “Sorry, Captain Clara.” He focused forward, ripping down slats with a single swipe. They fell easily around his feet.

Another kid picked them up and started stacking them away from the workers. When the boys cleared the crossbeams of two sections between posts, they opened the cartons of nails and screws.

“You don’t have money?” Elliott focused on a crossbeam where the center was so soft, bugs and spiders burrowed in them.

“Guys against girls. Ready to race?” Clara ignored his question. He would have to come back to it.

“Sure thing, Captain Clara.” Owen palmed a handful of nails and readied the first board.

“We’re totally taking you down.” Kiva pointed his hammer at the girls.

“I don’t know. Marian is pretty handy with the power drill.”

Cocking her elbow, Marian held it up and buzzed it twice, a slow grin rising at one end of her mouth.

“What about you, Elliott? Will you join us?” Marian squinted in the sun, smiling.

Did her seeing him without his shirt on yesterday influence her? Gad, he hoped not! “Sure. I’ll be happy to compete on the winning side.” He picked up a rusted hammer and joined the boys who hovered close to the fence, raring to go. The boys outnumbered Clara and Marian by more than two to one. They had this in the bag.

With a quick raise of her brows, Clara dug into the box of screws. She nodded. “On your mark. Get set. Go!”

She held up the screws and the board while Marian pressed on the drill to push them in.

Elliott held nails and tried to hit them in, but the slats kept falling. Nails dropped through his fingers. He pinched a couple between his lips. He shot a glance down the line to the rest of the guys. All of them had the same problem. They couldn't hold their boards and nail at the same time. Doing the bottom rail was easier of course because the top was already secured in place. But getting that top one in cost them a lot of time. They only had two full slats up.

They couldn't lose to Clara and Marian. Wiping the sweat from his hands, he peeked at the girls.

Marian was beasting it out. The two made a great team. They were already halfway through their section of the fence.

Leaning his knee against the board to hold it in place, he turned to the guys. "I've got an idea. Instead of us each nailing our own boards, why don't we help each other out. One guy holds the board, the other nails."

"Sure." Kiva dropped his hammer and held a board.

Owen, instead of struggling to try to keep the board up, managed to nail it in with only a few misses. "Fleek! So much faster."

"I'll hold it up for you." Elliott left his hammer on the ground and held the nail for the first few hits, then moved his fingers. When they caught up to the girls, he let out a deep chuckle.

"Not fair!" Clara doubled to grab more screws, laughter escaping her lips.

Elliott had never heard such an infectious sound. Had he ever heard her laugh before? Her energy was amazing. Getting into his groove, he had the actions down pat: hold the board and the nail, duck to the bottom rail and hold the nail, grab the next slat while he finished nailing.

The energy increased as they got closer to the end. Elliott risked a glance. It would be close.

“Keep going, guys. We got this!” he shouted over the sounds of hammers hitting wood. He breathed in the scent of pines and sweat. How he missed this kind of action! His shoulders ached, but he wouldn’t stop to rest. They were almost done. They had one and a half more slats to go. He was in a crouch, almost finished with the second to last one when he heard—

“Done!”

Elliott stood to see the winners. Clara and Marian raised their hands and cheered. “We won! We won!”

The boys behind him finished the last slat, with slumping shoulders and grimaces.

Elliott slapped the boys on their backs. “Not a bad showing against POWER TOOLS!” Though laughing, he yelled the last two words to the girls who were still dancing in their victory, wide smiles on their faces.

“All is fair. You had twice as many boys.” Marian drilled again in the air.

“Rematch?” Elliott couldn’t help but delight in seeing Clara smile. She didn’t do it often. “But we’ll win. We’ve got our system down now. You’re going down.”

The boys turned and started tearing boards off the next section. Even that became a competition. The boys finished first. He’d really like to help this camp be sustainable. What Clara was doing was fun. Before setting up the next round, Elliott stopped by Clara. “I’m serious. How much do you charge parents tuition here?” Maybe Clara just needed to get more kids to come to camp or charge a higher tuition rate. Surely this was a fixable problem.

She flashed her gaze at the kids. Her smile faded. She nodded opposite the kids.

She wanted him to move away from the workers.

“You okay replacing the boards, kids?” She kept her focus on him. “Mix up the teams, then.”

“We got it, Captain Clara. We’ve done this before. Don’t you worry none.” With a grin, Kiva saluted with a hammer to the tip of his hat.

“We’ll be right back.” Clara elbowed Elliott. “Come with me.”

Elliott dropped his hammer next to the pile of boards. “Okay.”

They walked along the fence. Some places had missing slats altogether. Huge gaps where animals could get in, or get out. In reality, she’d need to repair nearly the whole fence line. What they brought today wasn’t enough.

“Please don’t ask questions about the kids’ parents.”

A deep burning swelled in his chest. “Sorry.” He forgot these were troubled teens. “I’m just trying to figure out why your financials are so bad. Can’t you raise tuition?”

Clara kept her head down. “These kids don’t pay me anything.”

He sneaked a glance over his shoulder to the teens. “What? They come out here, learn life skills, and you teach them how to work and to be mentors. They get tutored in schoolwork, you feed them, and no one pays you?”

“The families don’t pay me, no.” She kept her gaze on the scrubby bush beneath her feet.

He opened his mouth. Again, he glanced over his shoulder to the kids, working, goofing off a little, but working.

“These kids don’t have anyone to love them. They are in the foster care system, too old to be adopted. Who would pay for them to come here? Society rejected these kids. Here, they get to learn stuff, hang out with others, and for a brief moment, have some good, clean fun. I don’t expect you to understand.” She hurried on.

“Then how do you have money to run this place?”

She turned and stopped.

“I only want to help.”

She glanced away. “You really want to help?”

“Sure, these are good kids. If there was a way we can cut your expenses or maybe change something...”

“Fine. Meet me in my office after lunch.”

Elliott loved a challenge. He could surely tighten her bottom line. He clasped his hands and rubbed them together. This would be easy. Maybe if he saved her camp, she would let him out of his sentence early. And that was what he wanted. Wasn't it?

CHAPTER 10

After lunch, inside the office, Elliott waited for Clara. Suffocating humidity surrounded him, his armpits soaked with sweat. Was the AC broken? He stood and checked an ancient thermostat hidden on the wall.

Eighty-five! He'd roast in here. Elliott shook his head and turned it down to seventy-two. Cooler air started flowing from the vents. There, now he could concentrate.

Clara came in and pointed him toward the computer. "Here are the accounts."

Clara's computer was open to her financial page. He sat down and perused a few sheets. Their out-go exceeded their income—by quite a large margin. How in the world did she expect to keep this place open?

He scrolled down to her salary. Cool air flooded the room.

She perked up. She rushed to the thermostat. "Did you turn this down to seventy-two?"

"I did." There, he could confess to that. "It's hotter than Hades in here. You can't work in a sweat box."

"Sure I can." She glared, crossing her arms.

"I can't." He kept his gaze on her. "The kids can't either."

"I only have it set that high in here where the adults are. The kids are fine."

"As long as I'm here, the AC will be set to seventy-two." He returned his gaze to the screen. "You can send me the bill."

She sniffed. "I will."

He furrowed his brows. “Is this a way to save money? How bad are your finances?” Clicking a few icons, he reviewed more numbers.

Her gaze lowered. “We’re a little short this year.”

“Short?” He scowled at the screen. She operated in a huge black hole.

She scratched her head. “We have an endowment and a grant, but it doesn’t quite meet all our needs. If you must know, we out-pace our income. I don’t want you thinking I’m a terrible money manager or judge me.”

How much was her salary? He clicked on her expenses.

Zero.

He sat back. “You don’t pay yourself?” Her actions reminded him of when he first started his company. He made sure everyone else on payroll got paid first. Many months were fairly lean.

Her face deepened to a nice scarlet. She kept her gaze on the computer screen. “I’m just trying to close that gap. It’s temporary. I believe in what I’m doing. I have to keep Happy Camp open.”

He clicked a few columns sheets to see the last few months’ worth of transactions. She hadn’t been paid in months. What was she living off of? He shook his head. Lotus got paid but not much, either. Then the other adults, teachers, tutors, camp leaders, and even when she was getting paid, Carlos got paid more than her.

Elliott couldn’t believe her passion and her sacrifice. He read through her expenses—food, utilities, and mortgage on the place. How could he help their bottom line?

They were tighter than a tight rope. No excess or fat anywhere. She wasn’t a bad manager, that was for sure. If he had a team of Claras at his business, they’d have an incredibly great bottom line. “What drives you so much? Why do you do this for no pay?” Facing her, he turned in his seat. Early on in his business, he went without many things because he hoped

someday his product would turn a profit. What profit could you earn from an at-risk teen camp?

“Follow me.” She opened the office door.

Already, the hallway was cooler than when he came in.

She stepped down the painted hall to a place where scores of pictures hung on the wall. “This is my family wall. These kids attended my program.”

He studied the frames and photos on the wall. A handful of young kids stood with graduation caps and gowns. Some had families. Others worked at jobs. A few framed letters also hung on the wall. He ran his gaze over them.

“At-risk-teens in this area have a graduation rate of about sixty percent. Those who come to my program have a ninety-three percent graduation rate.” She shrugged. “I wish it were a hundred, but I can’t reach everyone.”

“Ninety-three?” He wished he could have that success rate. He rubbed his chin. “What’s your secret to success?”

“I don’t know.” She caressed a frame of a young adult with his infant. “These kids know I love them. While they’re here, they pretend not to care that I care, but they do. When they graduate and go off to live in the world, often they send me letters—thanking me.” She pointed to a framed letter.

Learning forward, he read it. The whole letter expressed gratitude for what Clara and the others at Happy Camp had done for him. He graduated from college, married, and now has a kid.

“Lowden was one of our first pupils.” Clara nodded toward the picture.

A spark lit in his mind. He often got ideas this way. “Why don’t you ask your former pupils to help you with the shortfall?”

Huffing, she shook her head. She almost laughed. “I can’t do that. I’m here to give, not to take.”

“But surely they see—no, they’re living proof of your success.” He pointed to a woman graduating from college.

“They would want to give back.”

“I don’t know where they live.” She shrugged.

“They have social media?” Even though he despised social media as a time-waster, he had to admit, it allowed people to keep in touch.

“Probably.” She waved a dismissive hand.

He pointed to the picture. “You should look them up and ask for a humble donation. A thousand bucks or two. That’s the cost of a night out to eat, right?”

She raised her hand and opened her mouth. “Two thousand is not a small sum.”

He stopped her. He often forgot what was considered a lot of money. He wouldn’t think twice about dropping a thousand dollars. “You should at least ask. Don’t put a limit or ask for a certain amount. Call it a fundraising drive. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“They could say no.” She scratched behind her ponytail.

Elliott inclined his neck. “But you wouldn’t be any worse off than what you are now.”

“Still. I don’t know that their donations would solve all my problems. That might help for a year, maybe two. But we’ll always run short. If I can’t keep the camp running, I’ll have to close. The kids won’t have a place to go. Already, operating with such a low budget, I feel like such a failure.”

He grabbed her shoulders. “Look at this wall. You’re not a failure. These people believe in you. They are living proof that your concept works. Now we just need to make it self-sustaining.” He couldn’t believe after all he’d read and the pictures he’d seen that she thought she was a failure. He had to make sure she succeeded.

She lifted her chin. “Thank you for your encouragement. I’ve been tossing around the idea of a bake sale. We’ll see where that takes us.”

He nodded to show his support. But really? A bake sale? No bake sale in the history of bake sales ever made the kind of

money she needed for sustainability. She needed big guns. Was there any way he could help on the sly? He had a sneaking suspicion she wouldn't accept an overt offering to pay for bills. How could he help with her financials? He'd have to think about it.

He followed her back into her office. "The problem with a bake sale is that you buy supplies up front. Why not do a car wash?"

"Where's my pen?" She sat at her desk and shuffled through papers on the side of her desk. "I shot the car wash down because we aren't allowed to take most of the students away from here."

A paper slipped from the pile and fell to the floor.

Elliott bent to pick it up. He glanced at the words across the top. "This is a bid to repair the climbing tower."

She nodded. "I got it the day you scolded me for not having it in proper repair."

"The inspector recommends closing the tower if you can't repair it within thirty days."

She snatched it away and tucked it into her pile of papers. "That's none of your business." Clara stared at her computer.

"It is now. I just invested in climbing equipment." He snatched back the paper. "The company wants twenty thousand to repair or replace it."

She turned to him, tears brimming in her eyes. "Now do you see why we're in such desperate straits? That stupid climbing tower is one of the main draws for the kids. When the kids come, we can teach them other things. If we close it, it will only be a matter of time before the kids won't want to stay. We'd have to close."

"Then we have to find a way to save it." The words came from him, but he couldn't say he instigated the thought. Did he just offer to work with Clara on something without putting up a stink or fighting?

She huffed. "We?"

He cracked a grin. “At least for the next three weeks I’m a part of the staff.”

A guffaw burst out of her. “Are you serious?”

“I couldn’t be more so.”

She shook her head. “You can’t just hand us the money. The people in this camp have to earn it.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorframe. “You sure are persnickety about that.”

“I have my reasons.” Her brows furrowed.

And now he wanted to discover what her reasons were.

“Well, then.” He clapped his hands. “Let’s start with the bake sale, then.”



RESEARCHING a bake sale required all of Clara’s free time. Anytime she wasn’t busy in the camp, she sat in her office, searching the Internet for recipes that would provide variety, but also require the least variance in ingredients so she could actually make money.

Cookies turned the most profit. Cupcakes looked better and also sold for a higher price. But... Frosting, cupcake liners, and bags all added up—the profit might be lost. Cupcakes were a show-stopper and more importantly, a people-stopper. They certainly brought in crowds. She didn’t want anything to go to waste.

Earlier that day, she called local stores and asked if her kids could sit outside their establishments and pawn these creations. She sighed, leaning back into her groaning chair. Some part of her wished Elliott would just hand her a big pile of cash and say, here, all fixed. But she couldn’t take his money. She stared out the small office window. He was watching the kids at the pool. This time he brought a swimsuit. At least he had a good reason to be shirtless this time. He reclined in a sun-rotted chaise near the pool, which needed to

be resurfaced and cleaned. No one was swimming in the greenish pool.

Marian leaned over him in her bikini, talking and laughing. Maybe Clara should ask someone else to supervise the kids at the pool. Clara heard footsteps and looked toward the door.

Lotus popped her head in. “How’s it going?”

Inhaling, Clara refocused on the calculations on her computer. “We might be able to make a few thousand on a bake sale.”

A frown waxed larger on Lotus’s lips. “A few thousand won’t be enough to cover our expenses, and it certainly won’t fix the tower.”

Clara furrowed her brows and ran a hand down her face. “I figure if we have a few bake sales throughout the year, we can maybe pay off the tower—”

“In a hundred years.” Lotus pointed at her. “Clara, you need something that brings in real cash. Bake sales are for earning money for special projects, but they aren’t a panacea for a problem like yours. You need cashflow income, not fundraisers.”

Clara buried her face in her hands. “We have to start somewhere.”

“Well, a few thousand is enough for the down payment we need to start work on the tower.” She cast Clara a skeptical stare. “Then we can hope that money shows up when we need it.”

“Yes.” Clara straightened and clicked on the numbers. “Let’s speak positively. Right now, hope will have to be enough to power me through.” She read through the list of ingredients. “Now, I can go and buy these ingredients, but we need the kids to bake.” They had one week to prepare everything and sell them on Saturday. She found three stores willing to let them sell in front of their establishments.

“In that oven?” Lotus crossed her arms and shook her head. “No way are we even going to save half of what we make. Those cookies will be so burnt, no one will eat them.”

Clara couldn't do anything about the oven. "Let's start with things like the marshmallow and crispy cereal treats. The kids can't mess those up." She handed Lotus the recipe.

"Don't underestimate them." She tucked the recipe under her arm.

The sound of footsteps running down the hall made Clara sit up. Lotus turned.

Kiva stuck his head in. "Come quick! You gotta see this!" Slapping the door frame, he dashed out as quickly as he came.

Lotus stared at Clara.

"What is going on now?" Clara rose from her chair and followed Lotus down the hall. She opened the front door.

A huge truck rumbled to a stop. What was it with huge trucks? Clara shielded her eyes from the sun. This had Elliott's fingerprints all over it.

The driver hopped out with a tablet. "Miss Clara Easton?"

"That's me."

"I have a delivery for you." He went to the back and pulled up the back gate.

"What is it?" Clara followed him and stared into the truck. Brown boxes lined the sides, strapped in with cords.

"What is it?" The man shook his head. "Don't you know?"

Clara felt a little foolish.

"It's a new oven. Top of the line professional quality."

Clara inhaled. Where was Elliott? She turned to see if he came running with a handful of other kids. Instead, the crowd of kids gathered as the man lowered the loader with the new oven.

With an appliance dolly, he steered it toward the kitchen. "I understand I'm taking away an old one."

"Uh, I guess so." She bit her lip as she followed him through the cooler main area.

She was a little embarrassed at the state of the kitchen. Though it was clean, everything was really outdated. An old stainless-steel sink sat under a window. A center island with a stainless-steel top dominated the room. The oven was just inside the door to the left.

The appliance man pulled out the old oven. Grease stained the walls beside the oven. “Looks like you have a three-prong not four for this new range.”

He unboxed the oven, removing the cardboard protective casing. The range gleamed in the light. No scratches, dents, or burnt stains had yet marred the new arrival.

Disappointment shattered through her. That beautiful oven within her reach, but now it was totally useless. “What can we do?” She couldn’t hire an electrician to come and replace the outlet.

He held up the cord for the old oven. “You can take this three-prong and wire it to the new oven until you get it fixed. I don’t recommend leaving it like that too long. Best to have an electrician come and fix it.”

Clara shook her head. “I’ll upgrade the outlet.” She still had no working oven. Maybe some of the money raised by the bake sale could be used to fix the outlet. She sighed. But she didn’t have a way to cook anything. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. Why did these gifts always come with a stinger? “Leave it there for now, please.”

The appliance man nodded, gathered the trash, stacked it on the old oven and wheeled it from the kitchen.

Clara stood in the middle of the room admiring the newest addition.

“Hey, sorry I missed it. Glad the oven got here.” Elliott stood in the doorway in his swimsuit and, thankfully a shirt. He had a large splotch of sunscreen across the bridge of his nose.

“Yes, but we don’t have a four-prong outlet.”

He grinned, holding up a bag. “I know. I already inspected it.” Opening the lips of the bag, he whipped out a brand-new

four-prong outlet. “I happen to be an electrical engineer. I can fix it.” He gathered a few tools.

“Are you serious?” All this time, she couldn’t imagine him being handy at anything. She just pictured him always paying someone else to fix things.

“Kiva, go find the breaker and shut it off.”

Still in his swimsuit, Kiva nodded. “Sure thing, Captain Clara.”

In a few seconds, the whole kitchen went dark except for the light coming from the tiny window above the sink.

“Still better test it.” Clara didn’t want Elliott to get fried.

“Of course.” He moved the oven and stuck a pronged light into the socket. It didn’t light up. “It’s off.”

“Stand guard at the breaker to make sure some joker doesn’t turn it on.”

“I’ll go.” Lotus nodded. “Come on, the rest of you. Let him work without an audience.”

Clara made a move to follow Lotus.

Elliott touched her forearm. “I could actually use your help here. We still have to add the cord to the back of the oven. If you want to do that while I upgrade the electrical, we can get it in so much faster.”

Clara nodded. She squeezed into the area between the oven and wall, wishing she had made the kids clean behind the oven more thoroughly. The confined space didn’t give her much room to maneuver.

Behind her, Elliott squatted and worked at replacing the outlet.

“What am I supposed to do?” She stared at a thick, gray cord with three looping terminals.

Removing a vented panel from the back, he pointed. “The cord needs to be attached to the bottom oven. Right there.” He handed her a metal piece. “Put these ears through the bottom there.”

His elbows brushed against her. Her body flushed.

Bending, she did as he asked.

“Turn it.” He knelt beside her.

She nodded. Why was she trembling? His scent of sweat and sunscreen made her heart race.

“Okay. Fish the wire through the strain release.” He held his hand under the hole.

“Like this?” She stuffed the wires up the metal clearing. Their hands brushed. A shot of lightning shot through her. What was going on? Had she been electrocuted?

“Now attach the leads to the terminals.” She hooked the ends of the wire to the screws.

“I’ll tighten the strain relief to keep them in place.” Shoulder to shoulder, they hovered over the back of the oven as he used a screwdriver underneath the strain relief.

So near him, Clara couldn’t swallow. His warmth enveloped her.

“Now let’s screw these in up here.” He followed up to the loops near the screws. “The center white one is neutral. Here.” He handed her the screwdriver. “You can do it.”

“I’ve never learned to do things like this.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, well it pays to be handy. You can save a lot of money.”

“I do need to save money.” She tightened it until it was secure.

He shoved her slightly with his shoulder. “No, you need to *earn* money.”

“That, too.”

“So, next you want to do the left hot terminal.” He pointed to the black wires above the screw.

She screwed in the left side.

“Now the right.”

She relished the proximity. His scent called to her. *Steady*. They were just fixing an oven. An oven he bought for her. For the kids. Why did he do that? Did he feel sorry for her or something deeper? She really needed to focus.

He leaned away from her. Cold air rushed between them. Her heart thundered in her chest.

“All done.” He grinned. “Now just replace the cover, and I’ll finish up the outlet, and you can start baking.”

A weird feeling grew in her chest. “Where did you learn to do this?”

He finished. They were both squished together. “My father actually.”

“I wish my father had taught me something useful.”

“Oh?”

“Growing up my father always paid someone to do the menial tasks. I never once saw him fix anything around the house or even screw in a lightbulb.”

“He must’ve been a busy man.”

“Oh, he was. *Is* a busy man.” She couldn’t keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Elliott sat with his back against the wall, his feet against his chest. “But you learned other things from your father, surely.”

With her shoulder next to his, Clara huffed. “Yeah, he taught me what *not* to be. He was a great example of what not to do.”

“And what was that?”

Clara inhaled. A shroud of closeness swallowed her. Her guard was slipping. She felt almost as if she could tell him everything in her history.

One of the boys stomped into the kitchen. “Are you finished? We want to get baking, and Lotus says she’s tired of sitting by the breaker in the heat.”

Clara exhaled, relieved she didn't have to answer his question. "Help me push this back, boys."

"We're done." Elliott stood, collected the tools. "She can turn it back on." Then he turned and offered his hand to Clara who was still on the floor. "This conversation isn't over, by the way."

More kids flooded the room, oohing and ahing over the new stove. The intimacy and quietness she had with Elliott behind the stove vanished in a cacophony of excited teenagers.

Clara stared at his hand then glanced up at him. She took his hand.

He easily lifted her to her feet, but didn't let go of her hand.

Warmth flooded her, sending heat radiating from her. "Thank you." She nodded. She couldn't believe she almost told him. Withdrawing her hand, she ducked her chin and scooted around him, addressing the teenagers while Elliott leveled the stove. "What shall we bake first?"

CHAPTER 11

On the night before the first bake sale, the kids were all home for the weekend. She planned to meet them early in the morning at the stores. She still had to wrap a thousand or more treats between now and then. The kids had been baking non-stop for the last week.

All the other lights were off in the building. Standing in the kitchen with a single light over the stainless-steel island, she used little bags to wrap treats. Cookies, crispy rice treats, cupcakes, homemade bread, and sweet breads were spread over the kitchen. Would she have enough food? Would it be too much and lose money? Would people buy cake pops?

Her phone rang. She glanced at her caller ID. She didn't recognize the number. Whoever called her would just have to leave a message. She placed it on the counter and wrapped ribbon around a bag of cookies.

She was glad she had a weekend—two whole days—without Elliott. Although this week had been something else. So many surprises. His “service” was infuriating. Every gift felt like he was offering bribes to buy her out of her deal. He couldn't persuade her to sign off on his hours early. *Ha! No way!* She'd rather see the man every day than to let him get out of his sentence. She almost looked forward to seeing his cocky grin, his teasing smile, his luscious lips. What kind of a kisser—

“Why didn't you pick up the phone?”

Clara jumped at the voice, adrenaline coursing through her. She'd finished ten bags of cookies since the phone had rung.

Elliott stood in the doorway, wearing a gray shirt and slacks. He chuckled.

“What are you doing here?” She held a hand to her heart, still beating like crazy in her chest.

“I have to go out of town next week, so I thought I’d slip in a few weekend hours.”

She leaned against the stainless-steel counter. “Huh?” Good thing he couldn’t read her mind. She warmed at her thoughts.

“Lotus called and said you were still here.” He strolled through the darkened kitchen and picked up a bag of chocolate chip cookies. Then he tossed them back on the pile. “I almost thought you weren’t here because all the lights were off.”

“Saving money.” She continued with the tying. Best to keep her mind and fingers busy.

“Ah.” He gave her a short nod. “She also gave me your number. I was trying to call, so I wouldn’t startle you. Guess that didn’t work.” He grinned and shoved his hands in his pockets.

A voicemail pinged on her phone. “Yeah, that wasn’t great planning.” She’d have to listen to that later. “The oven works great by the way. Perfect temperature.”

“Thank you.”

“But sadly that didn’t keep the kids from burning a whole bunch. That pile over there are the discards.” She nodded toward a pile of misshapen cake balls, burnt cookies and other unsellable sweets. She’d have to toss half of it.

He stepped closer. “I am serious. I have to go out of town for one day next week. I thought you might need help tonight preparing for the bake sale.” He came closer. “Get in a few makeup hours tonight.”

The scent of his designer cologne overpowered the smell of sugar. Her knees weakened. She swallowed. “I could use another set of hands. Lotus took the kids home for the weekend.”

He looked around. “Where do I start?”

“Uh, well, those need ribbons.” She nodded toward bagged cookies. “These,” she pointed to treats still in the pan across from her on the sink, “need to be cut and then placed in bags. And then they’ll need ribbon.” She held up a giant spool of ribbon. Her hands trembled. Why was she so nervous around him? He was there to work for her.

“How many treats do you have?” He found a knife and started cutting the cookies in the pan into bars.

She brushed back her hair with the back of her wrist. “Over two thousand. The kids outdid themselves.”

He pointed around the kitchen to the unwrapped and uncut treats. “This was too much work for one person. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I wouldn’t get any sleep tonight.” She flashed him a wry smile, then she focused on her hands. Her fingers trembled, making tying ribbon hard. She tried a few times to tie the ribbon with no success. Having him here was worse than doing everything by herself. “So where are you going?”

“Uh, when?” When he finished cutting the cookie bars, he licked a smear of chocolate off his thumb.

“You said you were going out of town?”

“Yes. Just for a day.” He turned the pan and started scooping the bars out. “I have a friend— Uh. It’s kind of hard to explain.”

“Oh. No need.” Her face flushed. Heat rose out of the top of her shirt. Of course he had a girlfriend. Why did she even ask? Where he went was none of her business. But she needed to know. Why did her throat get so tight? She yearned to know about his life—as opposite as it was from hers. Did he travel in a yacht? “Where you headed? You flying out in a private jet?”

He grinned, but only continued stuffing bar cookies into the bags. “Colorado Bend State Park.”

She crumpled her brow. She didn’t expect him to say that.

He glanced over. “The trip actually has to do with my new product launch.”

A wave of relief washed through her. His travel was for business not for personal reasons. “Are you meeting your friend there?”

After finishing wrapping the bar cookies, he started on the crispy rice treats. “It’s a long story.”

Shrugging, she faced him, unwrapping ribbon from the spool. “I’m not doing anything else right now. Just wrapping all these. I’m all ears.”

“It’s a sad story, but it has a happy ending.” He paused his work and leaned against the stainless-steel counter.

“That’s good.” Why did he look so uncomfortable? He bit his lip in such an attractive way. The memory of their intimate conversation behind the oven flashed in her mind.

“I’m just trying to figure out how to tell the story. Not many people know about it.”

Clara set down her coil of ribbon. Even if she had to be here all night, she wanted to give him her complete attention.



ELLIOTT CLEARED HIS THROAT, but emotion created a knot in his neck, making it difficult for him to breathe. Why did he feel so compelled to tell Clara about his past? Because she genuinely cared for people? The tribute in her hall told him everything. She was a person with a heart. And she would understand his drive to get this product out. Or was it because he wanted her to understand why he was so driven with his product launch?

He found a rag and wiped his fingers free of chocolate. The smell of sugar overwhelmed him. He swallowed. “Back when I was in junior high school, I was an avid outdoorsman.”

Clara dropped her jaw.

“I know. You look at my skin, untouched by sun for years, and make assumptions about me. I get it.” He grinned. “But back in the day, you would see me outside—mountain-biking, hiking, canoeing. Any sport I could do outside, I would do it.” Clara’s camp reminded him of his care-free summers. “But I could only do it thanks to a friend. My middle school buddy always invited me to do these activities because, uh—” Tears stung his eyes. “Wow. I did not expect to cry. My dad passed when I was ten. And my mom didn’t have a college education. She worked two jobs. She worked at the front office during the day and then cleaned it at night. Life was hard in those days. My friend Bryan invited me to escape. He had the bikes, the canoes etc. Once I started high school, I worked after school to help my mom, so we couldn’t go on our adventures. Sometimes I got the weekends off. But most of the time, I worked.” He gulped around a large lump in his throat.

“You need a drink.” Without asking, Clara moved to the sink to fill a glass of water.

This was what he loved about Clara. Always putting others first. He watched her hair swishing in her ponytail. It was so youthful, energetic.

As he took the glass, his fingers brushed against hers. A thrilling sensation zinged through him. He knocked back the water. It tasted of dirt, but he didn’t mind. Its coolness tempered his emotion. “Bryan often went hiking alone. He always invited me, but I prioritized my family. Well, one weekend he went hiking and”—he swallowed hard—“he fell from a cliff, broke his leg, and uh, died.” Thinking of Bryan agonizing for days, suffering in the sun, broken and in pain, filled Elliott with anguish. Bryan’s death haunted his dreams, terrorized his thoughts, and motivated him to work harder.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry.” Clara covered her mouth.

He nodded. Sweat poured from him, despite the AC. “It took us weeks to find his body.” He inhaled, remembering those long days combing through underbrush fatigued him. He remembered the dogs barking, the smell of the river as he waded through looking for signs—a shoe, anything. Did she

think he was crazy? He peeked at her reaction. She only imparted a sweet smile.

Clara held his arm. “That must’ve been awful.”

He cleared his throat again. “All these years, I’ve been working on a project. I call it the Buddy Backpack. Using GPS-enabled locating systems, I with a push of a button.”

“That sounds stalkerish.”

“Well, in a way it is. These hiking backpacks allow our system to track hikers in even the densest forests where cell phone service is weak if—available at all. Then if you don’t hear from a person in twenty-four hours, you hit the button on the receiver and the solar-powered transmitter comes to life. It uses low-energy battery reserve throughout the hike. The battery can be solar- or bank-charged, but when you need it, when you need to find someone who is lost or hurt, you can track the backpack. It can also be turned on by a hiker. Say he falls and breaks his leg and can’t get out of a canyon. The transmitter is immediately picked up and our system alerts EMS and S&R to locate the person.”

Clara dropped open her mouth. “That is genius and so needed today. I’ve heard of many solo hikers who are lost, sometimes for good. No one can track them.”

“That’s why I go back to the park once a year. I’m sorry I won’t be able to come and do my service on Monday. But to make up for it, I’ll help you tonight and tomorrow at the bake sale.” He didn’t want her to think he was just skipping out. Not that he cared what she thought. Or did he? Clara was an amazing, healing, and caring person. He didn’t want her to think poorly of him.

He took up the knife to cut a pan of rice-marshmallow mixture into squares. His hands still shook from his story, and the knife slipped from his fingers, slicing his hand. Blood poured from his palm onto the crispy treats.

“Oh, no, I’ve ruined your treats.”

Clara jumped into action. She rushed him over to the sink and turned on the water to warm and washed the wound. Her

hands gently held his. The pleasure of her touch far outweighed any pain the cut gave him. The sound of water running into the sink calmed him.

This close, her hair smelled of light floral scents. He wished he could run his fingers through it. Everything about her was natural. No overdone makeup. No enhanced body parts. No overly bleached and treated hair. In fact, the humidity curled her hair into misshapen ringlets.

“I have a first aid kit in the closet. Stay here.” She found a paper towel and patted his hand dry.

How she fussed about! All for a little cut. “I’m fine. It’s only a scratch.”

Crossing the room, she pulled a red box from the closet and propped it open. “I have antibiotic ointment and bandages in here.”

“That’s fine. I don’t think I’ll need stitches.” He had a private doctor on retainer. Yet Clara far exceeded his doctor’s attention.

“But your hands are important. You work every day. Hold out your palm.”

“I’ll be all right.” She made a bigger fuss than she should have. Maybe this was why all the teenagers loved her. She mothered them, cared for them, even when they didn’t admit they wanted it. A fierce strange pull of attraction hit him with full force. His body flashed with heat.

She spread the ointment over the bandage and wrapped his hand. The warmth from her touch sent tingling sensations all through him. His heart out-paced his breath. He inhaled her. She smelled of outdoors, of sunshine, and of wind.

What would she do if he kissed her?

CHAPTER 12

Clara's heart pounded in her chest as she placed the bandage over the small gash in his skin. She soothed the adhesive to his palm. She lifted her chin to check his reaction.

His face was so near to hers. His breath whispered across her cheeks.

Every detail about his face became vivid. His lashes were thick and dark. His lips turned up slightly. A five-o'clock shadow graced his chin. The scent of his skin overpowered her. All she had to do was lift her chin a little higher, and her lips would meet his.

Energy coursed through her. Her heart beat slow and hard as if counting down the space and time between them.

His gaze flicked to her lips.

An intense desire swept through her. She didn't dare breathe. What if his hand pressed her into him? She willed it to happen. She leaned forward.

A chime dinged from somewhere.

Her head buzzed. She couldn't quite make out where it came from. Her phone? Her gaze slid to her phone on the counter. No, it was still dark.

Elliott stepped back with a sigh. He slid his good hand into his pants and brought out his phone. "Ugh, Quinton." He answered it, stepping away from Clara, leaving cool air to sweep between them.

What was that? Did she almost kiss him? What was she thinking? Still trembling, she went back to her side of the kitchen and continued wrapping cookies, trying not to, but also secretly listening in to his conversation.

“No, I haven’t asked anyone. I know they have to make place cards for this weekend.” Pause. “I’m sure the printer wants to know.” Pause. “Can’t we just leave it blank?”

Clara had no idea what he was talking about. Thankfully that phone call kept her from making a huge fool of herself. What would he have thought if she’d leaned three inches closer? Would he have returned the kiss or laughed at her?

She shook her head and cut off more ribbon.

“I’ll let you know by the end of the weekend. How about that?” Pause. “All right. Have a good night. Thank you.” He slipped the phone into his pocket.

“More stuff about the launch?”

“No, actually.” He took the pan of bloody crispy treats and threw them in the trash.

Maybe he didn’t want to talk about it. She didn’t push the questions.

“You wouldn’t—”

She turned and faced him.

He stood with the pan by the trash. He squinted his eyes as if he were in pain. Was his cut hurting him?

“You wouldn’t want to go to a fancy dress up ball-type thing would you?” He slightly shook his head.

Clara raised her eyebrows. A shot of adrenaline coursed through her. He actually looked pained. Would her company cause him grief?

“I dunno. Why are you asking me?”

He brought the pan over to the counter. “I need a plus one to go the company anniversary party where we kick off our product launch and”—he inhaled—“I was wondering if you’d like to go. With me. As my date.”

The pair of scissors dropped from her hand to the floor. She bent to pick them up. Her face burned red. “You want me to go with you?”

“If you aren’t busy.”

“No, the weekends are usually good. Friday or Saturday?”

“Friday.”

“What time?” Her throat was suddenly parched.

“Starts at six.”

She bit her lip. “Lotus will have to drop the kids off at the school. But other than that, I’m free.” She always dropped the kids from San Marcos off since the bus line didn’t go down there. The only problem was dress code. “But I don’t have anything to wear.”

“I’ll take you shopping.”

“When?” They had the bake sale these next two days. Then the rest of the week, she was absolutely booked with the kids and trying to find twenty thousand dollars and a sustainable budget.

He righted the stack of sweets. “I always say, if you cannot go to the store, the store must come to you.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I will have a team of professionals here Friday. Be ready and be prepared to have your mind blown. We can do a complete makeover here.”

Clara shook her head. She wasn’t so sure about his methods of mind-blowing. “I don’t need a makeover.” She found a semi-burnt cookie and chucked it at him.

“Hey!” He brushed the grease stain from his collar. “This is my favorite shirt. You’ll pay for this one, missy.” He picked up a crumbled cake ball and chucked it at her.

“I thought you said you only wore them once.” She ducked, but he hit her. A smear of pink showed up across her pants. “Oh, no you don’t. You’ll pay for that, but not with money, by wearing a cupcake.” She picked up one of the

decorated cupcakes from a tray one of the kids dropped on the floor earlier and soft lobbed it across the room.

He ducked behind the island. “Missed.” He stuck his head out a little. His hand crept across the top and snagged more disintegrated cake balls.

Clara loaded up her arms with the defunct frosted cupcakes. The blue smeared across her arms. She giggled. She didn’t care. She crouched lower than the island and went around the other side.

“Where did you go?” Elliott shouted.

She came around the corner of the island and pegged him with a cupcake. “Ha! Take that.” A fit of laughter burst from her chest.

A perfect blue circle marred the back of his shirt. He jumped, examined the back of his shirt and threw cake balls crumbs at the same time, launching an onslaught of sugar.

The smell of sugar surrounded her. She closed her eyes against cake and frosting, candy coating, and sprinkles. She threw cupcakes blindly, squinting open every once in a while to get her bearings.

Elliott bounced out of the way to avoid her clumsy throws. But the floor was covered in slick frosting and crumbs. He backed into a corner and picked up another handful of burnt sugar cookies and flung them at her like throwing stars.

She laughed at his quick tosses. “Ow.” She rubbed her shoulder. “No fair.” She snatched at the plate of overcooked snickerdoodles and tossed them like frisbees.

He held up his hands and batted away the cookies. He picked up a cake with heaps of frosting and opened the lid.

“No! No!” She held up her hands in protest, but her laughs betrayed her words. “That’s a good one!”

He smashed the cake over her head.

Lemon custard seeped down her head. A large chunk of it fell to the floor. She picked it up and smashed it into his face.

He wiped his eyes free, but as he went to move toward her, his feet slipped on the icing beneath him. He launched forward and grabbed onto Clara, dragging her down with him.

She fell next to him in a sugary, lemony, crumbly mess. She rolled over to face him.

His eyes blazed with the fun. Bits of crumbs stuck to his hair, eyelashes, and chin scruff. His chest rose and fell.

She reached over and plucked frosting off his chin.

He snatched her hand and licked her finger.

Her heart lunged. She wished he'd pull her closer.



“WHAT IS GOING ON IN HERE?”

The voice raked Elliott’s ears. He rolled onto his back, the moment gone. He wanted to kill whoever interrupted them. For the second time, his chance to kiss Clara was foiled. He lifted his head.

Lotus stood at the door with her hands on her hips.

“I—” Clara started.

Lotus cut her off. “What a mess! And what a waste! These were supposed to be for our bake sale tomorrow.”

“No, no! These were the discards—the mistakes from the kids. The cake balls crumbled, the overcooked cookies. Mason dropped a whole pan of cupcakes on the floor.”

“Well, that lemon cake wasn’t bad, was it?”

Clara lowered her head.

“Don’t worry. I’ll pay for it.” He sat up. He’d never seen Lotus so angry before.

Near him, Clara was covered in frosting, crumbs, and lemon curd. She raised her head.

“But this mess!”

“We’ll clean it up.” Clara jumped to her feet.

Suddenly, the realization of what they’d done hit him. “Don’t worry. We’ll get this all right.”

Lotus scowled. “Miss Clara wouldn’t waste food. Food was still good even if it was misshapen.”

“It was my fault.” Elliott brushed crumbs from his shirt. “Here.” He opened his wallet and handed her a couple of hundreds. “For the cake.”

Lotus seemed pacified.

Clara grabbed a broom. But the frosting just smeared across the floor. “Yes, we couldn’t sell all of that. I promise.”

“I came late to check on Miss Clara to make sure she wasn’t alone. I wanted to tell her something. I can’t keep working for peanuts. I know you’re dealing with a lot, but I have another job offer. If we can’t make Camp Happy sustainable and profitable enough to where we get a decent salary, I’m quitting. I gotta support myself. I hope you realize that times are tough.”

Clara stared at her hands. “I understand.”

Lotus nodded. “Well, I better get.” Tsking, Lotus shook her head.

“And we’ve got a mess to clean.” She kept her gaze on the floor.

Her whole manner changed in so short a time. In a matter of minutes, Clara went from carefree and happy to depressed. “She’s right. We might all as well quit. I won’t be able to hire the right personnel. I won’t be able to buy the equipment and fix the existing activities. Kids will stop coming. Right now, it’s all voluntary. No one makes them come. And if they don’t like being here, Happy Camp will lose its success rate and will fail.”

He squatted and with a giant spatula, dug under the mess. “No, you’re not quitting. We’ll find a solution. I promise.” Scraping the frosting from the floor, he vowed he would not let Happy Camp fail. He would not let it fail. Nodding toward

her, he focused on his efforts. “How about you finish the treats, and I’ll clean up.”

With peaked eyebrows, she went back to wrapping cookies.

And he needed to explore what happened tonight. Was he really falling for a smart, hardworking, athletic woman who ran a non-profit? Shaking his head, he wiped frosting and crumbs from countertops. He wasn’t ready for a relationship and yet, he’d nearly kissed her. Twice.

He grabbed the broom to finish off the floor. And what would she think? Was she wondering if he was still just trying to get out of his community service? His efforts may have started that way, but now he wanted so much more, to make an impact like she had made on those kids.

He glanced up from his sweeping.

She caught his gaze.

Energy buzzed in the air between them, invisible but powerful like transmitting waves or electricity. Could she feel the buzz, too?

She looked away and refocused on the cookies in her hands.

He felt she was aware of him, tracking his movements even if not directly looking at him.

Working his way around the island in the center of the kitchen, he finally stood behind her.

The scent of vanilla and frosting rose to his nose.

He stood close enough to feel her heat. The curve of her neck begged for a kiss. With a hand, he brushed the hair back from her neck. Then tenderly, oh, so tenderly, he brushed his lips against her neck.

She melted under his touch.

He turned her around and immediately found her lips. The draw was intense. Every other thought paled in comparison to his exploding senses.

He took a sudden step back. “What is happening?”

She held her hand up to her mouth, smothering a giggle. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t know either, but I like it.” His mind whirled with this action. He was in danger of falling in love, but with Clara, the prospect didn’t seem so painful. But still, he didn’t have time for a relationship—not before the product launch and giving service here cut his time in half. “I’d better go. It’s late.”

He didn’t want to keep her from finishing the treats. If he had his druthers, nothing would get accomplished the rest of the night. But alas, she needed the money a successful bake sale would bring.

“Um-hum.” She nodded. “I just finished the last wrapping.”

Her gaze rested upon him in such a cute irresistible manner that he had to ask for one last kiss. He stepped forward.

She lifted her chin.

He cupped his hand under her jaw. Where the first kiss was filled with passion and pent desire, this was a sweet parting kiss. Time stood still. He had no idea how long they kissed. At last, he stepped aside again. “It’s late. We should get some sleep.”

“Who needs sleep?”

A sly smile sprang upon her lips. This time she kissed him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Heat rocked his body. He’d better be careful.

At last, she broke away. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bright and early.” He backed away from her—every step a painful separation. Once out to his limo, he woke up Antonio.

“Where to?” Antonio sat up in the driver’s seat where he was snoozing and opened the car door for Elliott.

He shook his head. The drive back into Austin would take nearly forty-five minutes. Would driving out again in a few hours be worth it? “Let’s just sleep here.”

Antonio was used to sleeping in the car. Many a time he waited at events, parties, work things, even before Elliott lost his license. Poor guy. Elliott made a mental note to pay him more. Everything seemed brighter. He glanced up at the stars before getting into the limo. Was it his imagination or did they shine brighter tonight? Everything held more meaning, more happiness. For the first time since Bryan passed away six years ago, Elliott felt a little bubble of brightness in his chest. And the brightness had a name: Clara.

What could he do to help her? He had all his money at his disposal, but she refused any charity. But what if he helped in a way where she didn’t know? Maybe he could set up a recurring source of income for her. But what could he do that wouldn’t upset her?

CHAPTER 13

Clara couldn't sleep. Afraid to wake her cabin mate, she opted to sleep in the office. She tossed on the spring-ridden office couch and stared into the darkness. Above her, the window glowed with stars. Did they shine extra bright just for her tonight? Her heart seemed to float above her chest.

Imagine! She'd kissed Elliott Bracken. No one would believe her. Technically, he kissed her first. But she wanted him to.

She turned toward the back of the couch so she wouldn't have to see the stars. Oh, yes. She wanted him so badly. The cookie fight was amazing. She hadn't laughed that hard since...When was the last time she laughed as much? For years, the weight of Happy Camp's future weighed on her, pressed on her chest, and filled her thoughts. For once, she couldn't sleep because her mind buzzed with sweet memories of Elliott's kisses instead of red ledger lines.

She savored his breath upon her neck, his embrace, and his warmth. Would he regret his actions of tonight? Would he call her in the morning and say it was all a mistake?

How many times had guys dumped her after their first kiss? Too many to count. Would Elliott be like all the other guys?

Sunlight streamed through the same window the stars shone the night before. Clara didn't remember falling asleep. Her eyelids felt like they weighed a hundred pounds, and she wanted nothing more than to turn over and continue her nap. But she needed to load all the treats into the van. She threw

back the small tablecloth she'd used as a blanket and slipped on her shoes. Duty called.

She carried the first box out to the driveway. She stopped.

Elliott's limo was parked there. Did he not go home last night?

The door popped open.

Elliott stepped out, still wearing the clothes from last night, his five o'clock shadow darker and even more attractive. Clara's heart raced. The memories of the kisses—or were they dreams?—flashed in her mind.

“We're not taking that beater van.”

“But I have to pick up the kids in San Marcos.” A deep heat hit her face.

“We'll pick them up in the limo. Come on.” He offered his arm.

Clara stood with her box, mouth open. How would the kids respond to driving in a limo? Was his idea a good thing or a bad thing?

His driver took the box and opened the trunk.

Grateful to be relieved of the burden, Clara jabbed a thumb over her shoulder. “I have three more boxes inside.” She fiddled with the keys. Should she grab them?

“Antonio.” Elliott pointed his head toward the office. “Fetch the rest.”

She took his proffered elbow. What it must be like to have a man grab all your items for you!

“Did you get any sleep last night?” He leaned closer and whispered.

Her face burned even hotter. “I might ask you the same question.”

He ducked his head to his chest, allowing her to enter the back of the car first. “I stretched out in the limo. But I'll admit, I didn't sleep much.”

Clara entered the darkened cabin. The scent of leather seats that lined the back and sides was strong. Inlay wood was embedded in the doors. She crawled into the seats, feeling ensconced in luxury. “Same. I was on the couch in the office.” But that wasn’t what kept her up—at all. Did Elliott have a hard time sleeping too because he was riddled with regret? Or did he actually enjoy last night’s embrace?

He winced. “That couldn’t have been comfortable. Maybe I should’ve invited you to sleep out here.”

She hit him.

He rubbed his bicep where she walloped him. “I would’ve slept on the couch inside. Geeze! What were you thinking?”

Would he have really swapped places with her? This wasn’t the self-centered, selfish man who walked into the camp. This was an entirely different Elliott. What made him change?

“And now to the bake sale!” Elliott pointed forward.

Clara held her breath. How much money would they make today? She hoped it was enough to keep the camp going.



WHEN THEY ARRIVED at the school to pick up the kids, Elliott loved watching their expressions as they pulled into the parking lot in his limo.

The kids all had open mouths.

When Clara jumped out and told them they were *riding* in a limo they clapped their hands. “Dude, Captain Clara, you should totally get one of these.” A boy ran his hand over the leather seats. “So much better than your old beater.”

“I can’t even afford the van, you guys. This is only temporary. After Elliott leaves, we’re back to the van.”

They groaned.

She sat back with Elliott.

They drove to the first grocery store where they met more kids. On the way, the high schoolers plucked at everything, rolled down the window, used the intercom, even turned on the interior lights.

“Okay you guys. Let’s treat Mr. Bracken’s stuff with respect.”

They stopped messing with everything. But they still didn’t calm down.

At the store, Clara unloaded one box. “Off to the next one.”

“How many stores are we visiting?”

Clara nodded toward the store front. “Lotus is here with these kids. One of the other camp councilors is at the next store, and then I guess I’ll stay at the last one. You honestly don’t have to stay for the whole thing.”

“We’ll see.” He had plans of his own.

At the third and final store, he got out and helped set up the table. One of the kids brought a sign Conner made. Only cookies was spelled with a Y.

Elliott pointed it out to him.

“It makes us look more desperate.” Conner grinned.

Elliott couldn’t tell if he misspelled it on purpose or not. He squinted. Smart kid. An out-of-the-box thinker. “Well, it makes us look something, that’s for sure.” He organized baked goods on a card table.

“You don’t have to stay.” Clara brushed his forearm.

“I know.” He jabbed a finger behind him. “I’ll probably go inside and walk around a bit. Grab some breakfast. You hungry?”

“Starved. Thank you.” She set out the cookies.

He went inside the store, just far enough that Clara couldn’t see him. He took out a bunch of cash from his wallet. Why didn’t he have anything smaller than a a hundred-dollar

bill. He shook his head and went to the service counter. “Can I get small bills for these?”

He slipped a thousand dollars in hundreds under the glass.

The customer service guy gave him a strange look. *Great.* He probably thought he was a drug dealer. “I’m just trying to help some kids out with a bake sale outside.”

That didn’t improve the employee’s expression. He had to go to the back safe and pull out petty cash. When he returned, he handed over the thousand dollars in fives and tens and ones.

Elliott snagged the wad. “Thank you.” He saluted him with the cash, then he stood just inside the door where Clara couldn’t see him. As people went out the door, Elliott snagged them. The first was a young lady with her dachshund tucked under her arm.

“Hey, will you do me a favor? Will you take this five-dollar bill and buy a treat at the bake sale outside?”

The young woman was probably in college. She stared at him and then blinked. “What?”

“Go outside, and you’ll find a bake sale. Pick up a few treats with this five-dollar bill.”

An older lady scowled at him as she passed. Now he looked like he was hustling.

“I don’t eat sugar.”

“Fine. Throw the treats away when you’re done. Just please go buy five dollars’ worth.”

She hesitantly took the five-dollar bill. “And you’re just giving me the money?”

“Sure. I just want to do a good deed. The kids need the money for a school camp. They’ve been working hard on this bake sale, please?”

At last, a smile brightened her face. “All right. Thank you.”

He caught a boy and his mom, an old man with a cane, and three sisters. He clapped his hands. He forgot breakfast.

Without wasting any more time, he snagged a breakfast burrito from the deli section and brought it out to her.

“Thank you!” She grinned and looked around. “We’ve had a good morning so far. Lots of customers. Nearly everybody who comes out bought something. This was a lucky spot.”

He nodded. “I’m just going back inside for a few minutes. I want to pick up a few groceries.”

Her smile fell, but she nodded.

Elliott rushed inside. He handed out bills to the next ten customers.

The cashier across from the door gave him funny looks. As long as she didn’t call security, he was fine. He stood by the door, passing out as much cash as he could. At last, he only had a few bills left.

Clara came marching in. “What are you doing?”

“Uh-oh.” His face burned. “Caught.”

CHAPTER 14

Clara couldn't believe it! How dare Elliott do this. Heat poured over her. She stood facing him in the store. She didn't want to yell and make a scene, but she wasn't sure she could control her voice either. "Are you paying people to come and buy treats?"

Elliott hurriedly hid a handful of bills. "No."

"When I asked a woman what she wanted, she said she didn't care because she didn't want any treats. She was just told to buy something at the bake sale."

Elliott cringed. "I should've told them not to tell anyone."

"How could you do this?" Clara paced in front of him. All that money came from him? She should've just saved herself the trip out here and had him pay up front. But then, what would the kids learn?

"I didn't want you to fail."

"You think I'll fail, and the only way I wouldn't is if you paid people to buy our goods?"

"No. That's not what I thought at all."

His face turned beet red.

"I knew I should've been suspicious when you said you needed groceries. What man in your position shops for himself?" She gritted her teeth.

"I was only trying to help. Me buying the treats doesn't negate the work."

“You can’t help them by giving stuff to them. They have to learn how to work, how to sell. If everything is given to them—if it’s too easy, you cripple them.” She shook her head.

“But it doesn’t matter where the money comes from.”

“Yes, it does!” She nearly yelled. “If it’s earned, it means more. If it’s just given, they won’t learn the lesson.”

Elliott stared. “I sense a story there.”

A sharp pain lanced through her heart. Tears pricked her eyes. “You want to know why I work so hard to teach them self-reliance?”

He rolled his eyes. “You come from a poor background, so you know nobody will give you anything?”

“No.” She huffed. If only that were the case. “My father is one of the richest men in Austin. You might know him. He probably runs in the same circles as you—ever heard of Jule Electric Cars?”

Elliott dropped his jaw.

“Yeah, my father is the founder. Manning Easton.”

“I do know him. Why didn’t I make that connection before?”

“Because I don’t drive a fancy car, you assume I’m poor?” She pointed at the limo in the back of the parking lot.

“No, I just. My paradigm shifted. You’re wealthy, too?”

“Ha! No! My father and mother split. My mother wants nothing to do with her ex—my father. Do you know why?”

“He’s some terrible philanderer?”

“I wish. He never cheated on my mom, at least not that I know of, but he doted on my older brother. Gave him everything. He grew up self-centered, self-entitled because he had everything given to him. He never had to work a day in his life. He figured once Daddy died, he’d inherit everything. My brother was the biggest loser. He got involved in drugs and the ‘good life’ of partying and drinking and wasting money. For the longest time, my dad bailed him out of jail, over and

over again. My brother grew more self-indulgent rather than being grateful for being spared. Then it all caught up with him. Police found my brother dead. Shot by one of the drug dealers in a deal that went wrong. If you ask me, it was probably because my brother was being a prick.” She licked her dry mouth. “So yeah, when you ask me why I care so much for these kids it’s because whether it’s Daddy or someone else, whenever someone gives you something to the point where you start to expect it, instead of being grateful for it, you lose yourself.”

“I’m so sorry to hear about your brother.” His tone sobered.

Clara checked his expression. He wasn’t being flippant.

“His death was so preventable. And I despise my father for it.” She inhaled. “There, now you know way more about me than anyone else does.” She looked away from him. Why did she even tell him that story?

“Have you talked to your father about this?”

“I haven’t talked to him since Aaron’s funeral. My mom blamed him. They divorced. He left. I never want to see him again.” She couldn’t believe she just confessed her whole life to Elliott.

“Maybe you should talk to him.”

Clara huffed. “He doesn’t deserve reconciliation.”

“It’s not for you him. It’s for you.” He gathered his eyebrows. “I understand now why you made sure I got my punishment. You didn’t want me to be like your brother.”

Clara focused on the floor. True. But a part of her felt as if she’d agitated a festering wound. “I didn’t want my kids to see you getting away with stuff.”

“You don’t want the kids to end up like your brother.”

She sighed. “These kids are nothing like my brother.” Aaron’s face, hollow and gaunt, haunted her dreams. The manipulation, the lies, the tears her mother shed all broke Clara’s heart. “But no one learns when something is given to

them. Hard work is the best payoff.” With a sigh, Clara nodded. “Come and watch them sell. You’ll see they don’t need your cash.”

“All right.”

She stepped outside. The kids were respectfully bold and approaching people without being annoying or pesky. Her chest swelled, and she lifted her chin.

“I’ll admit. I was wrong.” He stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Oh, and by the way. The reason I was speeding through the school zone was because I was chasing after a dog.”

“A dog?”

“My first invention, the one that kicked my business into a multi-billion-dollar business, was a pet collar that, like the Buddy Bag, had a GPS-enabled chip. One of my coworkers lost her dog, and I was chasing after it.”

“Why didn’t you let someone else do it?”

“Because I had the fastest car.” He grinned.

So he wasn’t a complete villain. Her heart warmed. She stepped closer to the kids who were getting swamped by customers.

“Do me a favor?” Taking money from a customer, he slipped it into the cash box.

She gulped. Here it came. The promise to never mention his moment of weakness from the kiss the night before. Or the brush off. “Sure.”

She handed a lady a couple of cupcakes. The lady wandered away with a large smile.

“Will you give me a proposal of what your camp can do for my business?” He reached down and plucked up Clara’s hand.

Her heartbeat kicked up to a wild pace. His hand was warm and comforting. He walked her back away from the crowded table.

The kids continued selling and taking money. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you have a great resource here. I’ve been watching them work all day.” He nodded toward the sign taped to the table, the kids being proactive. “You have creative, able-bodied teenagers who are learning skills. What if you took that a step further? Think of what you can do for my business.”

Clara gulped. She’d never thought that the kids were a resource—especially troublesome kids who required a great deal of care. “I don’t know.” Clara stared at kids helping customers. “Maybe we could do product testing. We do a lot of adventure sports. We could test things out like your new solo buddy backpacks.”

“The Buddy Bag! I love it. I’ll have Quinton arrange to drop off a dozen or so for you to try out. I want to hear about everything; wear and tear, how much stuff fits in them.”

“That would be a good start.” Clara sat back with a sigh. She might not be at the end of the shortfall yet, but she had an optimistic feeling. And with Elliott holding her hand, she felt so powerful.

“But that won’t be enough. We’ll have to think of something more.”

At the end of the morning, the kids sold their last cookie. She turned to Elliott, holding out their receipts. Would the box of cash be enough to save the tower?



“HOW MUCH MONEY DID WE MAKE?” Elliott leaned over Clara after a long, hard morning of being on his feet and not enough sleep. The lack of sleep was usual—being on his feet was not.

Lotus had picked up and then dropped off the kids earlier that afternoon. The two of them were alone, counting the profits.

A gurgle of hunger came from his stomach.

Clara counted each crisp bill. “A little less than a thousand dollars.”

Less than a thousand dollars? He gave more cash than that to the people he asked to buy goodies. He should’ve just donated the money to the cause. He shook his head. “That’s great!”

With a grin, she stacked the bills neatly and slipped them into an envelope. “Yes, and the other groups made much more. Not enough to pay off the twenty-thousand-dollar invoice, but it is a start—enough to set up a payment plan and to keep the tower from being condemned.”

He broke down the table and threw away the poster board. “I’ve got to head back to the office. When I come in on Tuesday, I have a surprise for you.”

A smile slid across her face. “What?”

“Clear your schedule and make sure someone’s watching the kids.”

“Why?”

“Because you aren’t going to be there.” He bent and kissed her cheek. He had a lot of strings to pull this weekend.



TUESDAY MORNING DAWNED. He rolled into the driveway with Antonio. Elliott hid a smile. He hadn’t had this much fun since... He shook his head. He couldn’t remember when he enjoyed being with a woman. Most of the women he’d been with droned on about boring stuff. Clara was selfless, hardworking, and daring. He couldn’t wait to show her his surprise.

She stood outside the office, squinting into the morning sun just cresting the trees. She looked fabulous in her faded jeans and fitted t-shirt.

He opened his own door this time and jumped out and grabbed her and gave her a kiss.

Antonio unloaded all the bags.

“As promised, the Buddy Bags.” He pointed out all the features—pockets on the sides, two water bottle holders, clasps, pockets for phones, clips for keys, all the bells and whistles. “And here is where you activate the distress signal.” He showed her a little disk in the front flap. “All you have to do is hit this real hard, pinch it between your fingers, and this light activates, sending a signal virtually from anywhere. We pick it up and track it using a mobile device.”

“That sounds amazing.” Clara opened the door to the office. “Just leave them in here. We’ll assign them to the younger kids when they take their hiking adventures. This is really more than I can ever thank you for.”

“You are now our official testing facility, so therefore, I get to send you money.”

She shook her head. “Not too much. Just enough to take care of the kids.”

“And you.” He kissed her cheek. “You are super lucky. If your older teens want to start posting pictures of the Buddy Bags on social media, they can. The rest of the world won’t get a peek until this weekend at the gala. And speaking of the gala.” He pressed his hands together and beckoned her out the office door. “You’re coming with me right now.” He tugged her hand.

She resisted. “I don’t have time. We have to hand out the bags and make sure—”

He held up his hand. “Someone else can do it. Come, I’ve gone through a lot of trouble making appointments for you.”

She furrowed her brow and eventually stopped resisting.

He couldn’t wait to show her what he had planned. This time, he opened the door to the limo. “To the airport, Antonio.”

Clara dropped her jaw. “We’re flying, right now? I thought we were going later.”

“I changed my mind. We’re not leaving the country or anything. In fact, we’re not leaving Texas. However, traffic is one thing I abhor, and when you have a private jet, it must get used.”

Clara rolled her eyes. “Where are we going?”

He grinned. “Shopping.”

CHAPTER 15

Clara let out a small noise. “Shopping? Why are we flying to go shopping?”

“Because the place I want to take you is in Dallas.”

Clara settled back into her seat. “Dallas.” She wasn’t sure how she felt about all this. “And what are we shopping for?”

“A dress for the gala this weekend. You said you wouldn’t have anything suitable to wear.” He cast her a sideways glance.

She probably still had some old Homecoming dresses from high school stashed in the back of her closet, but really, those were over ten years old and probably not in style.

The limo headed toward the airport. “Either way, as my date, I’m treating you to the first-class treatment. I want you to get used to this.”

Clara gulped. Why should she get used to driving in a limo and flying in a private jet?

“I have work in Dallas anyway. I thought I’d bring you along to go shopping in a few of the best stores.”

Once at the airport, instead of going through security inside, they parked outside alongside an army of private jets. One had a small staircase leading up to the curved door. “When you fly in your own plane, they don’t care so much about who goes with you because you’re the one taking the risk.” Elliott still had to declare who was going with him on a manifest, but no pat-downs by the security were required.

No waiting in lines? No removing shoes? Clara could get used to this. Clutching her purse, she stepped up the stairs with a fluttering heart.

A woman in a blue fitted dress suit greeted her with a warm smile. “Welcome aboard, Miss Easton. It’s a pleasure to serve you today. If you ever have need of anything, let me know. Follow me.”

Clara blinked. She stepped inside with a brush of air.

Inside the jet was even more beautiful than outside. Inlaid wood paneling filled the hall past a row of windows to her right.

“And here is the bedroom.”

Gulping, Clara flushed. A huge king-sized bed dominated the small room. She doubted she’d need a nap on the quick trip to Dallas.

“And the en suite bathroom.”

Clara peeked in to see a full-sized marble-topped sink and full shower, again, inlaid with wood. Draperies hung around the windows. Sumptuous linens covered the bed. A robe hung in the corner. Had Elliott invited other women to stay here?

Her neck felt hot.

Someone touched her back.

Elliott motioned to continue to the next room. “It’s just a short flight. We won’t be using the bedroom.”

A leather couch sat in the corner of a private lounge. A TV and coffee table finished off the room.

She slid under a throw blanket and swept her hands across the buttery soft leather.

The flight attendant entered and brought her a glass while they waited to depart.

The entire flight was amazingly quick and smooth. They landed in Dallas after a short time in the air.

Clara thanked the flight attendant and descended into the heat of a mid-morning Dallas.

“I hired a private car to take you dress shopping and then to an afternoon at the spa. I figured you deserved a massage.” He leaned in and whispered in her ear, “My only regret is that I won’t be the one giving it to you.”

His breath sent shivers down her spine, despite the heat and humidity on the tarmac.

He kissed her neck then helped her into the black sedan. The driver drove her to a store with whitewashed front. Large windows showcased special occasion dresses with puffy skirts. It reminded her of a perfect social media post.

A valet came out to open her door.

Inside the air-conditioned boutique, a large fiddle-leaf fig plant graced the windows. A sumptuous leather Chesterfield couch sat in the center of the room. Huge black and white photos of brides filled the walls.

A woman in a pantsuit clacked across the white floors. “Hello, Miss Easton?”

Clara nodded.

“I’m Veronica. I’ll be your stylist for today. Can I get you something to drink? We have red wine, espresso, soda, and water.”

Clara gulped. “Water is fine.”

A woman with long blonde hair, also in a pantsuit, brought her a glass of water—in a real glass tumbler! Taking the napkin as well, Clara held the cool drink in her hands.

“Shall we get started? Mr. Bracken said you had an appointment at the day spa at one.” Veronica clacked across the floor again to a private viewing area where a row of colorful dresses hung on an ornate clothing rack. “Mr. Bracken guessed your size, and we pulled our inventory with colors Mr. Bracken said would favor you. Which would you like to try first?”

Clara had never had such an attentive assistant when she shopped. Usually she asked her mom to go fetch a bigger size jeans from the stack lining the walls at a discount store.

The blonde woman held out each piece by the hanger and scooped her other hand under the skirt and paraded the dress in front of Clara.

Clara sipped on her water and nodded. “That one’s nice.”

The blonde lady brought out another.

This went on for a while.

Veronica cleared her throat. “You need to start narrowing your choices, dear.”

Clara glanced over to the rack. She hadn’t discarded any of her choices.

“Shall we try them on?”

Clara set down her glass on the coffee table and followed Veronica and the blonde lady.

They opened a small room the size of Clara’s bedroom. “Which would you like to see first?”

“Bring me the black one, the light blue one, and the blush one, please?”

The blonde nodded and obediently brought the three dresses.

Clara closed the door.

She sat on a tufted velvet bench to remove her shoes. When she dropped her faded jeans, she shook her head. “What am I doing?”

She slid off her shirt that still smelled of pine needles and camp and slipped on the satiny fabric of the first dress.

A knock sounded on the door. “Need help with any fasteners?”

Veronica performed her job with precision. Could Veronica come with her the next time she shopped for clothes?

“I’m good.” Clara zipped up the back and admired herself in the mirror. She opened the door to the two women. “What do you think?”

“Come.” Veronica led her by the hand to the center of their private viewing area.

Veronica performed her job with precision. Could Veronica come with her the next time she shopped for clothes?

Clara stood on a dais before a giant trifold mirror. She looked at each side. Not bad. A little tight around the bottom area. A little low in the front. What would her teenagers think of the dress? What would *Elliott* think? She imagined his expression. It was way too revealing and too different from what she normally wore. It just wasn’t her. She pulled at the fabric. “Next?”

“It’s not your favorite?”

Clara shook her head.

This went on for several dresses—a blue one, a long sheath dress, a mermaid. At last she found a powder blue fit-and-flair, cocktail-length dress. She could imagine her hair up, makeup done, a small clutch, and heels. Most importantly, she could imagine Elliott’s smile when he saw her. Yes, this was the dress. A flash of anticipation burned in her stomach.

The shop saleswoman wrapped the dress in a protective covering and hung it on a rack near the cashier’s desk.

The driver pulled up to the curb.

She glanced at her watch. Right on time. The blonde saleswoman brought her purchase out to the car and the driver put it in the trunk.

Clara climbed in the cool interior of the car. What did Elliott order for her at the spa?



APPROACHING the spa's booking desk, Clara's heart thundered in her chest. She didn't really need a massage. But she couldn't leave now. Her driver dropped her off. Biting her lip, she scoured the high-end spa with her gaze. Candles glowed on the high receptionist desk. Incense burned in the corner, giving off a sweet scent. Sumptuous, heavy drapes blocked out light and sound. The decor looked straight from a magazine. The floor was marble, the colors soothing and tasteful. Even the women who worked here all looked gorgeous and—

Was that Sophie?

Clara squinted her eyes to get a better view in the darkened receptionist area.

The woman's blonde hair covered her face, but Clara swore it was her friend. "Sophie?"

The woman's head shot up.

It was Sophie!

"Clara! What are you doing here?"

"I have an appointment for one."

Sophie narrowed her gaze. "So you're the mystery woman that Elliott Bracken's personal secretary made an appointment for."

Clara gulped. "Yeah." A forced laugh burst from her throat. "We met and..." Clara didn't know what they were. Were they friends with benefits? Did bringing her with him to Dallas signify more? They had kissed, but did that mean as much to him as it did to her? Clara had no idea. "We're just friends." They were that at least, right?

"He is the most eligible bachelor in Texas." Sophie held up a copy of a recent *Texas Bi-Monthly*. Elliott graced the cover in a denim shirt, rolled up to three-quarter sleeves, looking as smart and sexy as ever. "You have to introduce him to me."

Clara'd made a huge mistake referring to him as a friend. She clenched her jaw.

"Is he coming here to pick you up? Did he drop you off? Oh, I want to meet him. I wonder if he'll let me take a selfie

with him for my social media account.” Sophie picked up a small mirror and patted the ends of her hair.

“Good luck with that,” Clara murmured. Elliott hated being on social media. His products yes, but him, no. “His driver dropped me off.” Clara kicked herself. That sounded even less personal. “He’s here in Dallas for business and asked me to come along.” But was that something he did for a lot of women or was she unique?

“That man will never settle down with a woman. In this article, he professes to be married to his business.” Sophie laughed, bringing her hand to her chest.

A spear of pain shot through Clara’s heart.

“Oh, look! Here he is!” She fluttered around the reception desk, stacking papers and grabbing pens. “Where’s my phone?”

Clara spun.

Elliott walked through the glass doors. “Something’s come up. We have to head back to Austin. I’m so sorry.”

“No worries.” She wanted to get him away from Sophie as soon as possible.

He grabbed her hand.

A clicking of a shutter sounded behind her.

She turned.

Sophie hurriedly put down her phone. “Come again. You’re welcome to cancel on us anytime.”

Clara frowned and shook her head. Why was Sophie being so weird? “Thank you. It was nice to see you again.”

Clara sank into the back of the car.

Elliott launched into what was wrong back in Austin, but Clara zoned out. Did Sophie take a picture? Would she post it to social media? What would Elliott think about that?

“Hey, you okay?” He lifted his brow and took her hand.

She shook off the gloom that poured over her since Sophie recognized Elliott. “Yeah, I’m so sorry. Things went haywire at the office. We should get back as soon as possible.” He eyed her package. “I can’t wait to see the dress you picked out.”

She tugged it closer to her chest. “Well, it’s a surprise. I won’t let you see it until the night of the gala.”

“Shall my driver pick us up around five then?”

“As long as Lotus can drop off the kids back in San Marcos.”

“Tell her that her paycheck should be increasing this month. That will help.”

Clara nodded.

When they returned to Austin, Antonio drove her home. He retrieved her bag out of the trunk at her mother’s house.

The sun beat down at its hottest right before it set behind the skyline.

She entered the house. Paying the bills at the camp wasn’t weighting on her chest as much as it had. Finally, her mind could rest on that score for a night, but Sophie’s assertion that he wasn’t looking for a relationship introduced doubt. Was he just using her for the weekend gala? After the weekend, would he toss her aside like he’d done with every other woman in his life? Clara’s heart ached at that possibility.

CHAPTER 16

Friday, Clara couldn't wait to get ready for the gala. She worked up a sweat with the kids outside on a hiking trip with the new Buddy Bag all morning. At three, she met with Lotus in the now-cool office, the cold breeze feeling great against her hot forehead and armpits.

"Be sure to take Kiva, Owen, Marian, and the others from San Marcos home. We usually leave here at five or so, that way their parents know when we drop them off. If we keep the time consistent, we don't get angry parents calling with annoyances that they were there, but we were not."

Lotus nodded. "Of course. You don't have to worry about the kids or me. Have a great time."

"Elliott promised you a bigger paycheck this month. I hope it's enough."

"I know. I saw the numbers. We'll talk about it later." Lotus placed her hands on her back and pushed her toward the door. "You go and get ready for your date. I can't wait to see the pictures. Now, get, so you won't be late."

"All right." Clara walked back into the lobby. A pile of Buddy Bags was on the floor where she left them from this afternoon. She did a quick count of her precious cargo. Eleven. "Lotus, didn't we have twelve backpacks?"

Lotus counted the bags. "There are only eleven."

"One of the kids must've forgotten to turn in their backpack after the hike this afternoon. Before everyone goes home, will you do me a favor and see if you can track it

down?” She bit her lip. Did one of the kids steal one? That would crush the relationship of trust she’d built up.

“Sure thing, honey. You better go. The ball awaits.”

With a secret grin, Clara drove back to her mom’s house in the city, a thrill trilling in her stomach. With nervous tremors, she showered and wrapped her hair on top of her head. Carefully handling the dress and all its beadwork, she slid the sumptuous fabric over her head with a rustle of fabric. Where could this possibly go? He had a track record of dumping women. Would he cast her aside like all the other women in his life? Her stomach soured at the thought. Surely she meant more to him than that. She bit her lip.

“If you crease your forehead, you’ll get permanent wrinkles.”

Clara spun.

Her mother stood in the bathroom doorway.

“Egad. You scared me.” Clara applied more eyeshadow to her lids.

“You looked unhappy. When you look so beautiful, you should only smile.”

She faced her mother. Tremors shot all through her. She felt about to throw up. “I’m just nervous about tonight. What if Elliott suddenly realizes that I’m unworthy of him, that he could do so much better and drops me like a hot potato.”

“Well, if he drops you, it won’t be because of this dress.” Her mother turned her toward the full-length mirror in the bathroom corner. “You look beautiful.”

Clara looked at her reflection, warmth swelling in her chest.

“Yes, your gown is stunning and comes with an outrageous price tag, but I see a woman who works hard, who cares about people, who sacrifices a lot for those she loves, even those who are considered the least in society. If he doesn’t admire you for that, then this dress won’t change his mind. Beauty is

only skin deep. From what you've told me, Elliott strikes me as the type of person who admires hard work."

"Is that what Dad saw in you?"

Her smile turned to a frown. Lines filled her forehead. "Your dad and I split because he couldn't see what he did to Aaron. Your dad couldn't see that choices have consequences. Elliott isn't like your dad."

True. He was making good on his court order. And he'd established a long-term commitment to the camp, going above and beyond restoring his good name. And he would pay the camp for testing the Buddy Bags. It was not an end-all solution, but they were getting there.

"Have you talked to Dad recently?"

Her mother's brows gathered. She glanced down and scuffed her feet on the tile floor. "No. I try to think of or speak to him as little as possible."

"Have you forgiven him?"

Her mother grabbed her cheeks and kissed them. "You don't have to worry about such things tonight. Go. Have fun. Let the relationship with Elliott grow or die. You know how to nurture; if the relationship dies, it wasn't meant to be."

Clara inhaled. Her mother's words encouraged her. Relationships were never static. They were always growing or shrinking. Tonight would be pivotal, though. A turning point. She slid dangling earrings into her lobes, kissed her mother, and waited for Elliott. She couldn't help peeking out the front window. Which car would he choose tonight?

When she saw the orange car hugging the tight curves of her neighborhood streets, she put a hand over her face. *Not that car.*

When the soft purr of the motor stopped in front of her house, she saw him exit the passenger side in a black tuxedo. He looked amazing. He still had a bit of chin scruff as if he were saying to the world, "I'm too busy running this company to shave." But it suited him.

She swallowed back nervous tremors and waited until the knock sounded at the door.

She counted to ten before opening it.



ELLIOTT STOOD ON THE DOORSTEP. He shuffled his feet and stuck his hands in his pockets. He gulped. The door opened.

Clara opened the door in a vision. Elliott blinked to make sure what stood before him was real. She looked beautiful. Even in her worn jeans and painting clothes, she always looked beautiful. But tonight, she glowed. He didn't feel worthy of being her date. He felt like a plug nickel next to a diamond.

He realized he'd been staring at her and hadn't said anything. "You look—Wow! Amazing." He stepped into the house and smelled her perfume as he leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek. In his haste to get to the door, he'd forgotten to grab the flowers for her. They were in the back seat of the sports car.

"Thank you." She tilted her head down and clutched her purse between both hands. "You look great, too."

He plucked at his lapel. "You mean I look better in this than the green Happy Camp shirt?"

She laughed. "Of course."

"Shall we?" He pointed toward the car. Antonio stood with the car door open.

He caught one of her neighbors at the window, staring at his car. He smiled to himself. He enjoyed making a splash.

Offering her his hand, he helped her into the low-slung car. On second thought, maybe he should've had a car that wasn't so low because it might be difficult for her to get in and out with that skirt.

"Are these for me?"

“Oh, yes.” She must’ve seen the flowers. He slid across the leather seats next to her. The whole car smelled like fresh flowers. “I forgot to take those up to the door. I want to thank you for all that you’ve done to help me with the launch of the product.”

Antonio started the car.

“I didn’t do anything.” She stuck her nose into the bouquet of roses he’d bought her. “If anything, I distracted you from it.”

He inhaled the heady floral scent. “Your kids have raised so much awareness on social media. Already they are doing so much good, and we haven’t even launched yet. Our pre-order sales are through the roof. I’m starting to see that social platforms are not entirely bad.”

She let loose a delightful laugh. “No, indeed. They might actually be good.”

Chuckling, he leaned back and wrapped his arm around her. “I’m not ready to admit that yet.” He wanted to ask her about their relationship. Was he moving too fast? Would he kill the blossom of his love by pulling up and examining the roots? Ever since they kissed, he’d been dying to talk to her about what she expected from their relationship.

“Listen.” He coughed into his fist. “After the gala tonight, I’d like to talk about us, if that’s okay.”

She lowered the bouquet. “Um, sure.” She stilled, focusing straight ahead.

Was he moving too fast? All the other women he’d been with bored him. Clara thrilled him. Every waking thought was filled with her, and he was sure his dreams were occupied with her as well.

A pit formed in his stomach. He’d just have to wait until tonight after the gala. No use worrying about it. He needed to be able to focus on all his investors and his workers tonight.

Antonio dropped them off at the venue—one of Austin’s historical buildings downtown—the Henderson house, built in the 1900s by Alex Henderson, who built the house for his wife

after successfully investing in Austin businesses, amassing great wealth. Each subsequent generation added on to the mansion until it sprawled a whole city block.

Elliott asked Quinton to pick this venue because he felt Alex Henderson was lucky in both his personal life—he married his true love—and in business. The house reflected it. The original house boasted ten bedrooms for their eleven kids.

In more recent years, several interior walls had been knocked down to allow for more space to accommodate large gatherings.

When Elliott and Clara walked in, he noticed the string quartet in the front room, playing on the lush carpet, surrounded by all his supporters and investors. A lump formed in his throat. This project was so personal. With his hand on Clara's back, he worked his way through the crowd. Friends, hires, investors—all shook his hand.

Despite all this, his thoughts continued to whirl. He swallowed hard. He hoped he could convince Clara to be with him. What would she say? He wouldn't trade one success for failure elsewhere.

At last, he found himself outside. The summer heat had mostly dissipated by evening. A cool breeze swept in from the lake. The shade in the atrium covered all the grass.

At seven, he was supposed to give a toast and a small speech about his latest product and preview the next few products, but his mind couldn't focus. Clara was a huge distraction. In that dress, she looked so amazing, he could forget everything. Her smile strengthened him, made him feel stronger and invincible.

He fiddled with his cards in his breast pocket—a safety precaution in case he forgot his speech. He was supposed to speak when everyone had enough alcohol that everything he said would be funny, and no one would remember anything.

The VP of Operations was introducing him over the microphone set up in the grassy backyard.

“I’m sure you saw this.” Leaning closer, Quinton held out his tablet.

Elliott was so distracted he struggled to focus on the images before him. “What is this?”

“Your Insta-chat is blowing up again.” Quinton flipped through the carousel.

Each one featured a picture of Clara and him at the spa, taken without his permission. The worst was the caption. “Will Austin’s most eligible bachelor soon be trading in his single status for marital bliss?” It went on to say he’d have to stop being married to his business and give up his demanding role as CEO of his company if he wanted to make his relationships work. That right there could sabotage his stock prices.

“Who is Sophia?” And why was she posting pictures of him and Clara? He liked to keep his personal life private.

“Who knows.” Quinton clicked on her profile picture. She worked at the spa in Dallas.

Elliott clicked on mutual follows. There was only one name they mutually followed: Clara Easton.

“Did Clara ask her to post these?”

The audience erupted with applause.

“I don’t know. You should ask her, but you’ll have to do it later because you’re on.”

“Tell them to wait. Tell a joke. Tell them anything. Just stall.” He had his reputation to protect.

CHAPTER 17

Clara caught sight of a man coming toward her. He looked older than when she last spoke to him at Aaron's funeral. More wrinkles around his eyes, more gray hairs next to his temples. His girth had grown over his belt—probably from too many late nights working. His eyes looked hollowed out, even in his pleading expression.

Manning Easton was not a man easily forgotten.

She clamped her mouth shut and turned away from her father. How dare Elliott invite him when he knew they were not on speaking terms!

“Clara, wait! I want to talk to you.”

“I have nothing to say to you that won't cause a scene.” She glanced around to the others at the venue, waiting to hear Elliott's speech. Any argument would distract from his moment.

“I would like to try to have a relationship.”

She spun and faced him. “I can't forgive what happened to Aaron.”

“I was wrong. I see that now.”

“And what have you changed?”

He sighed, glancing at the partygoers around him. “Can we talk more privately?”

Clara wanted to walk away to cause him as much pain as he caused her over the years. How could he think that a simple apology would erase the past? No amount of contrition would

bring Aaron back. Part of her wanted to have her father in her life, like other people. But what would it cost her? “I don’t think I can do that.” She stomped away to the shadows of a few trees on the edge of the property. She looked over Lady Bird Lake in the distance, listening to the cars on a nearby street, wishing this would all go away.

She heard applause. Was that Elliott’s speech? Turning, she swept her gaze across the crowd, searching for him.

Elliott crossed the lawn toward her. But instead of triumph, anger flashed in his eyes. “Do you know a Sophia who works at the spa in Dallas?”

Clara stepped back, shocked. “Yes. We were college roommates.”

“You knew I hate social media. Right before a big product launch. Why did you let her post pictures of me? Of us? Right on the eve of a project launch! The assumptions people make when they see something on social media...”

Clara had no idea what he was talking about. “Why did you invite my father?”

“Your father? He’s an investor. Why wouldn’t he be invited?”

She pointed in her father’s general direction. “You knew we were not on speaking terms.”

“Then speak to him. Forgive him. Stop being so proud.”

She set her jaw. “Don’t tell me what I should do. You barely know what’s going on.” Elliott’s words about social media sank in. “You’re worried people are making assumptions about our relationship? You’re worried about your product launch?” Her stomach soured. She fought to keep tears from springing to her eyes. “Ouch.”

Elliott frowned, backing away. “It’s a violation of my privacy.”

Pain raked through her. She shook her head and stared at her feet. Sophia was right. He didn’t care for her. For a few seconds, she didn’t realize her phone buzzed.

She opened her clutch and pulled it out.

Lotus.

Listening to Lotus, Clara gulped back a lump in her throat. She barely comprehended anything she said. “Could you repeat that? I can’t hear you. The party is so noisy.”

“Marian. I couldn’t find her. When I went to take the kids back to San Marcos, she was gone. I think—” Lotus’s voice choked. “I think she ran away. I don’t have proof, but she’s not anywhere at camp.”

Clara’s heart thundered in her throat. She couldn’t breathe. Marian was her runner. Now what? If she lost a kid at camp, she could never live down the guilt.

“I have kids here looking for her. Should we call the police? Should I call her parents? I haven’t yet, but I thought I’d call you. I know you’re having your party with Mr. Hotty.”

“Don’t worry about that. We need to find her.”



ELLIOTT SHOOK his head as he stalked away. Clara made assumptions about their relationship and unrightfully blamed him for her run-in with her father. She knew social media was off-limits for him. Why would she allow someone else to post assumptions about his business and relationships?

Hank handed him the microphone.

Taking the mic, he glanced down at the crowd. Many people supported his efforts. From Quinton, his PA, to the person who thought of the clasps in design—Elliott saw them all. A wave of emotion stole his words. He lowered the microphone and fought the rush of tears that threatened to make an appearance. If only Bryan was alive today to see this. If only Elliott could’ve prevented his death. Tears stung his eyes as he fought to recover his voice. Emotion stuck in his throat. He was here today because of everyone who supported and believed in him.

Calming the applause, his gaze continued to sweep the crowd until he reached the back where Clara stood, her phone to her ear, her eyes wide in alarm. She made eye contact with him.

Something was wrong. He wanted to go to her, ask her what he could do—but all these people were staring at him, anticipating the speech of his life.

This was his big launch, the moment many investors had waited for. If he walked away now, it could tank his reputation, his stock, and his company. He yearned to tell them all about Bryan, his years of searching for a solution and all the trials they encountered—the real story of the Buddy Bags.

Did he care more about his company? He'd already chewed her out for her friend posting stuff on social media. How much did he care about Clara? In a split second, he thought about her compassion, her strength, her diligence in keeping Happy Camp alive. He knew what he wanted the most. And it wasn't the crowd standing in front of him.

But Clara was heading toward the gate, still holding the phone to her ear. Leaving.

He had to stop her.

Something stupid tumbled out of his mouth. "Quinton will tell you all about the new product." He passed the microphone without even looking at Quinton's expression and then jumped from the makeshift stage.

He searched for Clara in the crowd. Now that he was on the ground, she was harder to spot.

Thankfully, he spotted her as she reached the front gate.

"Clara!" Chasing after her, he called her name again. Nothing else mattered, not his company not his reputation. His anger vanished.

He finally reached her, touching her shoulder.

She spun. "What do you want?" Her voice held an edge.

He held her shoulders. "I saw the look of horror on your face. What happened?"

CHAPTER 18

“H old on, Lotus.” Clara lowered the phone.

How did he know she was distressed? “Marian ran away.” She blinked back tears. Her voice sounded high pitched. A wave of panic swept through her.

Elliott shook his head. “I knew one of the kids was in trouble.”

A moment of hysteria throttled her throat. “What can I do? Those kids are my responsibility, and I left them.”

People stared.

He moved her away from the crowd. “She likely would’ve run away tonight whether you were there or not. What has been done to locate her?”

“Lotus doesn’t know if she should call the police or her foster parents.”

“I’d call parents. Did she leave any kind of runaway note?”

“I’ll ask Lotus.”

“Not that I’ve seen.” Lotus must’ve overheard the conversation.

Elliott drew his lips into a straight line. “Call her parents because they’ll worry about her, but not the police just yet. At least let them know why you’re late bringing the kids home.”

“Will do.” Lotus hung up.

“What’s our next step?”

Clara felt silly in the dress and shoes. She wanted trainers and jeans. “I don’t know. Miles of wilderness surround the camp. She could be anywhere.”

“Let’s head back there and see what clues she might’ve left.”

Clara didn’t realize she’d been crying. “You’re coming with me? But what about the social media post, your supporters, your business.” She pointed to the crowd of people staring in their direction.

“They will just have to understand. Quinton will make an announcement. Someone will get us some clothes. I’ll find someone to drive us. Meet us at the car?”

The rest was a blur. Crossing the street to the valet parking, she asked where Elliott’s car was. After looking through the markets, the head valet helped her make her way through several imported cars until she she found Elliott at the car. Alone. “I gave Antonio the rest of the night off. He’s out. I was expecting to be here a little longer. Would you mind?”

Clara leaned closer. “Mind what?”

“Driving?”

“Your sports car?” Horror raked through her. She’d never driven such an expensive car. “Why don’t you drive?”

A corner of his lips turned upward. “I don’t have a license, remember?”

“Geeze.” She rolled her eyes.

“Can you drive a stick?” He held out the keys. “I don’t want you killing my clutch.” With a grin, he elbowed her.

She swiped at the keys. “I can drive a stick.” But she was in no state of mind to drive. Removing her heels and tossing them in the back, she slid into the driver’s seat. The car was really low to the ground, and she had to move the seat forward to reach the pedals. Pulling up her skirt to around her thighs, she gulped. How much was this car worth, anyway? “We should make an exception for you to drive tonight.”

He shook his head. “Nope. I have to pay the full weight of the consequences of my actions.” He seemed to enjoy this.

With the beautiful sound of the engine, she pulled out into the road. “Help me drive, okay? These windows are tiny. And the accelerator is sensitive.”

“Indeed.” He grinned, breaking some tension.

“You are enjoying this way too much.” She headed into the flow of traffic watching and paying extra attention.

“Despite the circumstances, you look so hot—barefoot, in your evening dress, driving my sports car.”

She furrowed her brow and moved into traffic on the Seventy-One. “This handles way differently than my van.” She sped the whole way there, blowing past the normal speed of traffic.

“You’re such a hypocrite.” He tsked, keeping his voice light.

“Hey, this is for a good cause.”

“I happen to know that this car gets pulled over quite often. I think it’s the color. Cops can see the orange.”

She laughed. “Fine. I’m a hypocrite. Just keep an eye out for cops. It’s way easier to speed in this than my van.”

“Yeah, we’re going to get you better transportation, too.”

She clutched the steering wheel with white knuckles. “Breathe,” she whispered. So much stress riddled her veins.

An alarm went off.

“What’s that?” She focused on the bumper ahead of her, keeping a safe distance.

He scowled at his phone. “Someone activated one of the Buddy Bag prototypes.”

“Do you think Marian has one of the bags?” She risked a quick glance in his direction.

“It’s possible.” The light partially lit his face. His jaw clenched. “Judging by the map and the locating system, she’s

already a couple of miles away from camp.” He lowered his phone.

“I asked Lotus to put away all the bags tonight. One was missing. She might have taken one.”

“This one is definitely moving.” He nodded toward his phone.

“Maybe an animal picked it up.”

“Possible. But by the pace, I’d say it’s her.”

The rest of the way went by in a ninety-mile-an-hour blur. Clara focused her thoughts on Marian. Clara’s neck ached, and her grip hurt by the time she pulled into Happy Camp.

Lotus met them at the front door. “I activated the find button and alerted S&R already. They should be here in forty-five minutes they said.”

“We can’t wait that long. We’re going after her. Elliot is getting a reading on one of the backpacks.”

Lotus took her arm. “Girl, you can’t go out like that. Grab some clothes from the donation box.”

Clara dug around in the donation box that smelled like moth balls and found the shirt she loved from the clothing truck. She shook her head. How dare he!

She went into the bathroom and pulled off the dress and slipped on the shirt and a pair of boys’ swim trunks. It wasn’t the most glamorous outfit, and it looked hilarious with her hair up and overdone makeup. But she rushed out to Elliott, who’d found a few flashlights and a pair of sandals.

“Better than heels.” She slipped them on. “Lotus, wait for the S&R to get here. They don’t have the locating beacon. It isn’t set up on anything but on Elliott’s phone yet, but here’s a screen shot of where we’ll be.”

Following his phone, they went through the trees. “We’ll have to run to catch up to her.”

She ran through darkened trees. Limbs lacerated her face. She tripped on more than one tree root. Her knees throbbed. A

trickle of blood oozed from the right one.

Elliot had shed his jacket and tie. His white shirt stood out in the dark.

They ran, holding hands, jumping over fallen logs, dodging trees.

He paused and consulted his phone again. “This way.” He pointed off to the right.

A small creek ran about three miles away from camp. They hoped they would catch her before she hit that.

When they got closer, Clara yelled, “Marian!” She listened to the forest sounds. “Marian,” she called again.

A dark lump next to a fallen tree caught her eye. “There she is.”

Please let her be alive. That’s all she wanted. She just wanted her alive.

“Marian.” Clara knelt beside the girl. She touched her shoulder so she could see her face.

Tears streamed down Marian’s cheeks. “You came. How did you find me?”

Clara’s heart was in her throat. Marian was alive. “You have one of the Buddy Bags, don’t you?”

Marian gave her a wan smile. “They were so lit. I knew we got them for free. Some of the kids thought they were cool, so I took one.”

She hugged Marian. “I’m so glad you did. These backpacks have beacons in them.”

Marian’s eyebrows raised. “I didn’t want to go to my foster parents’ house. They just don’t understand how hard it is to be a teenager. They make all these rules.”

Clara helped her to her feet. “Hey, rules aren’t a bad thing, are they?” Her relief turned to chills. Despite the heat, she shivered.

Marian trudged through the bushes. “Sometimes. I don’t know. I wish everyone was like you, Captain Clara. You listen to me. You talk to us like we’re adults, not kids.”

Clara blushed. “I know it’s hard. Your foster parents are doing the best they can. They probably don’t know how to raise a kid like you. Did you ever think of that?”

She shook her head.

Clara shined a light on the forest floor. “I wish I could do more for you. Camp will be improving. We’ve got more income coming in. We’ve got more support than ever.” She flashed a glance at Elliott, who had been oddly quiet. “Things are going to change around here, too. Maybe we’ll be able to be here all summer long, not just by-the-week camp. Would you like that? And maybe even during the school year, like after school.”

“That would be amazing. I want my last summer to be the best summer.”

“Maybe we could even take field trips and go places.”

“Thank you, Captain Clara for caring about us.” She stopped and swept her hands around Clara’s neck. “I’d really love to learn to do things outside of the camp.”

Marian’s words struck a chord of an idea. Holding her close, smelling leaves and pine, Clara had a lump in her throat. “Thank you. You guys are worth it. You are tough. You are survivors. Don’t run away again.”

The S&R met them at the office. They checked Marian out for any cuts or bruises. They treated a few scrapes and then left.

Lotus took Marian and the other San Marcos kids home.

With a sigh, Clara leaned against Elliott’s car. “I think we can safely say that was a successful first run.”

Elliott huffed. “I didn’t expect y’all to use the technology so quickly.”

“Yes, well you know us—never a dull moment.” She glanced up to the stars. “I’m sorry you had to miss your big

speech.”

Shaking his head, he turned to her. “This was a big moment here. You saved a girl from making a big mistake.”

Clara faced him, the scent of pine filling her. “Yeah. Thanks to your tech, we were able to find her.”

“I am grateful for that.” He wrapped his arms around her.

“I had an idea tonight. I think my kids are bright enough to work for you.”

Elliott nodded. “Well, I’m sure they can learn skills. Maybe the older kids could apply for internships. In fact, that would be brilliant. They could do internships.”

Her mind whirled with the possibilities. “I don’t know what your company needs exactly, but if you could bring in a handful of kids and teach them real-life, practical business skills or give them on-the-job training experience that would be amazing.” High schoolers would be able to work in real-life jobs. Imagine how helpful that would be, how great that would look on future resumes. She rubbed her chin. Why hadn’t she thought of this before?

“That’s a great idea. Who are your oldest ones?” He curled his arm around the back of the seat.

“I have at least five seniors I could recommend today.” Marian, Kiva, and Owen were all seniors this coming year.

“I’d pay them a comparable wage, but also what if I gave the camp a kickback for referring the personnel?”

Clara sat back. She never thought of monetizing her kids. “I don’t know how I feel about it.”

Elliott lifted his chin. “You’d be my recruiter. I would only take suggestions from you and train seniors you think are ready for job experience.”

She dropped open her mouth. “That’s a lot of pressure. What if my kids don’t pan out? What if they end up being a disappointment?”

He placed his hand over hers. “I trust you.” He paused. “I’m sorry for snapping at you. About the post back there.”

“I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

He poked her shoulder. “You really should make up with your dad.”

“You need to get over your fear of social media.” She slugged his arm.

He flashed her an impish grin. “Maybe I do.”

“This will be the beginning of a beautiful relationship.”



SIX MONTHS LATER...

Happy Camp had a fresh coat of paint, a new climbing tower, better food in the cafeteria. Clara was finally able to pay herself a salary during the summer months and upgrade her van. She quit her job at school and now worked full time at the camp, providing after school activities as well as summer camp.

A knock sounded on her office door. New drywall was installed and painted. Only shelves were lacking. She glanced up.

Elliott stood there. “Happy birthday!”

“Oh, thank you!” She’d been working so hard, she’d nearly forgotten.

“I’m ordering food later.” He stepped into the office. “How are you coming along with the internships?”

She flashed him a huge grin. “Great. I’ve created an application for all those interested. We’ve got a few great seniors this year that could really benefit from this experience as well as bring something to your company. A lot of them are social media savvy and could help you with your platform. They are good at reaching untapped audiences.”

He curled his arm around her. “See? You’re really doing me a favor.”

She faced him, drawing close to his unshaven cheek, the scent of his cologne delivering sweet memories. “Come now. You can afford to hire professionals.”

“I could, I suppose, but these seniors will offer a whole different perspective.” He kissed her on her temple. “I have a good feeling about this venture. I’ve created a C corp for you to supply interns as well as test my products. I’m super excited about where we will go from here.”

“Me, too!”

He hesitated, picking up her hand. “I have something for you outside.”

“What?” He’d already surprised the camp with so many new things: new pool decking and upgrade, a tennis court, football field as well as an upgraded air conditioner. Clara felt so spoiled.

She followed him outside.

“Surprise!” Hundreds of her former pupils waited outside.

Emotion caught in her throat. Students she hadn’t seen in years were there—babes in arms, successful, happy.

Clara clasped her hands over her face. “How did they all get here?”

“Lotus helped me find and contact them.”

Lowden walked forward. “Thank you, Miss Clara for believing in us.” He swept her up into his arms.

She held him, but she wasn’t sure who was crying more.

He released her and wiped his face. “Come meet my wife and little girl.”

Clara followed him to meet a woman with long locks holding a little baby. “Lovely to meet you.”

She exchanged a few words. Lowden filled her in on the details of his work and family life.

“Captain Clara, over here.”

A knot caught in her throat. Another one of her former pupils caught her elbow. “Marissa!” She hugged the girl, swallowed in her perfume.

“You are the best, Captain Clara. Thank you for taking a chance on me. For loving us. For loving all of us.”

Scores more of her former campers surrounded her. One kid in the back, Chris, even wore his ugly Kelly green Happy Camp T-shirt. They crowded her and hugged her. She didn’t rest until she’d embraced each one.

“We have cake inside for everyone.” Lotus stood on the front porch, waving everyone inside.

The hordes of campers went inside. Clara promised to talk with them more during dessert.

Elliott stood near the rear of the crowd.

She crossed the front drive, patting more students on the back, saying hi, until she reached him. “Thank you. This is the most thoughtful birthday gift ever.” She wrapped her arms around him. With all his money, he could’ve showered her with diamonds, but he understood her. Her greatest joy came from making a difference in the lives of others.

“There’s more,” Elliott said when he broke from her. “Someone wants to talk to you in there.” He pointed to a black sedan parked in the circular drive.

Clara furrowed her brows. Who could it be? She crossed the lawn through the crowd, greeting old friends and pupils.

Antonio opened the door. She stuck her head inside.

Her father looked small in the backseat. She thought about running away and then changed her mind and crawled onto the seat next to him. All the happiness and joy she felt a few moments ago evaporated. “What are you doing here?”

Her father’s eyebrows peaked. “Please, let us start over again. Aaron’s death was my fault. I indulged him too much. I didn’t want to see it. I didn’t want to admit it to myself for so long. I don’t want to also lose my daughter.”

Clara studied the stitching on the leather seat. Could she forgive the man who'd caused her brother's death? She inhaled. She didn't have to today, but she could leave room for forgiveness and healing moving forward. Gulping, she stuck out her hand. "Let's start over. My name is Clara Easton. I run Happy Camp."

"I've seen all those kids. I'm proud of you." His gaze swept past her to the throng outside. "You have an amazing talent, Clara. You always have. I'm glad you've found a way to keep the camp going. You are doing great things." Tentatively, he wrapped his arm around her.

He didn't say she would do great things. He praised her for what she was doing now.

Clara resisted at first, then fell into his soft chest, breathing in his familiar scent. She missed being held by her father. Why hadn't they made up years ago? "Come inside for some cake?"

"Why not?"

Her father's chauffeur opened the door. Manning Easton, one of Austin's richest men, was going to eat cake with a bunch of foster kids. Clara couldn't believe the surprises her birthday brought.

Elliott held her back after her father stepped through the screened door to the lobby.

"One last thing." Elliott plopped down on one knee in the dirt, propping open a case with the most radiant ring. The two-carat cut diamond sparkled in rainbow colors, nearly blinding her. "Clara Easton, your compassion and hard work has changed the lives of scores of people. You inspire so many of us to do and be better. I want you to be in my life, to walk together in this journey, to be my better half. I love you for your goodness, your friendship, and wisdom. Will you marry me?"

Tears leaked from her eyes. "Yes!" She cried as he removed the ring and slipped it on her finger. "This is the happiest day." Now she could invite her father to her wedding. "But you can't just dump money on our camp."

He picked her up and caught her up into his arms, holding her close. When he planted a kiss on her lips, her whole body erupted in flames.

“Why not?”

She grinned and kissed him more. “Because this has to be self-sustaining and not a drain. If my camp starts to fall behind, we’ll figure out a way to make it profitable again.”

“That’s respectable.” He held out his hand. “Deal. But only if we get better food out here.”

“Okay. Fine.” She rolled her eyes. “We’ll hire a chef.”

Elliott held up a finger. “A five-star chef.

“Why?” Clara cared little for food when she worked.

“Because you deserve so much more than nachos.”

She brought her face closer. “The kids won’t appreciate it.”

He swept a hand through her hair. “The chef isn’t for the kids. It’s for you. You do enough caring for them. They’ll get better food, too.” He unfolded a letter from his breast pocket. “I wanted to share this letter with you before you go back inside to those kids.”

“What is it?”

He shone his phone on the paper. “A few of your former students who couldn’t make it today agreed to send you an annual gift to help keep your camp going.” He handed her the paper. “Quinton put it together in a document.”

She scanned the paper. Several of her former students pledged hundreds of dollars a year. Others gave a more modest sum. Tears pricked her eyes. She couldn’t swallow around the lump in her throat. These little token offers meant more than all the money in the world.

He gave her a side hug. “You are doing something incredibly important here. And you’re going to keep doing it.”

She looked up into his eyes, shining in the dim light of the stars. “Thank you. I don’t know how to repay you.” Clara clutched the paper to her heart.

“You don’t need to repay me—just be with me. Be by my side, Clara. You inspire me to be and do better. Promise me that you’ll be with me and nurture our love together.”

Clara wrapped her arms around him and drew him closer.

His hands traced her back.

She stared into his eyes and brushed his nose with hers. “Of course.”

His lips fluttered over hers.

A thrill trilled up her spine as she met his lips. Her heart nearly exploded with joy. Heat poured through her.

He broke from their embrace. “Together we’ll be unstoppable.”

Clara laughed and kissed him again.

KEEP READING FOR A FREE EBOOK!

FREE EBOOK!

[Click here](https://tinyurl.com/38ahfay8) or copy into your browser <https://tinyurl.com/38ahfay8> to get The Love Project ebook for free, with newsletter sign-up.



AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Billionaires Don't Go to Camp*. I love the enemies-to-lovers trope as it give characters so many opportunities for change and growth. In *Billionaires Don't Go to Camp*, we see Elliott change and realize that Clara isn't a huge brat. Clara comes to understand that Elliott is actually a decent human being. But the moment that they fall in love is the moment I love—when you realize that you make excuses to see the person you adore is one that will never get old in books for me. I love the food fight scene. Their chemistry is amazing. I originally wanted this to be a 20k word novella. And now we see that I can't tell a short story. So here is a story that still feels short but not rushed. I hope you all enjoyed it. Please leave a review if you appreciated the time we've spent together. I also love hearing from my readers az@ameyzeigler.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all those who helped me write this book. To my husband and his never-ending patience with me and my writing. He's my alpha reader and it shows. And to my children to laugh at, er, laugh with me when I tell them stories. To Wendy for being a great Beta reader and offering feedback and advice. And to Lorie my editor. Thank you to Trish Howard from Howard Marketing Group for my cover.

ALSO BY AMEY ZEIGLER

A White Christmas Lie

August Blues

Baker's Dozen: a romantic suspense mystery

Certainly Will Die: A Baker's Dozen Mystery

Summer of Sundaes

Swiss Mistletoe and Macarons

The Casserole Dish

The Love Project

The Swiss Mishap

Wylder Bride

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amey Zeigler is an award-winning author of romantic comedies and mysteries. Her laugh-out-loud Rom-Com, *The Swiss Mishap*, won third place in the Book Buyer's Best for Contemporary Romance. Her ten years of theater training in college and high school inspired her to narrate her own books. She spins stories with humor, charm, and heart, often with a dash of action and adventure. When she's not writing, she is teasing her three kids, globe-trotting with her husband (for book research of course!), or trying new things. Sign up for her newsletter www.ameyzeigler.com

