



A MOUNTAIN MAN
ROMANCE

FAKING

Mr. Right

BESTSELLING ROMANCE AUTHOR

K. C. CROWNE




FAKING MR. RIGHT
A MOUNTAIN MAN'S BABY ROMANCE

K.C. CROWNE

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DESCRIPTION

“They’re watching. Let’s give these b*stards a show they’ll never forget.”

This town makes me wish I never returned.

Everyone’s pastime is sticking their nose in my love life. Or lack thereof.

Levi was a close friend of mine once. But it’s been years since we last spoke. Now he’s no longer the boy I once knew.

Mountain man dreamboat is more like it. He’s built like a lumberjack. Tall enough to tower over me. And beneath that flannel shirt...I spot a sexy chest full of hair I’d like to dig my hands into.

But I soon realize the same chest I’m drooling over has a heart that’s guarded and ice cold.

We’ve made a pact. A game of pretend to fool the world.

But I’m afraid the lines between are starting to blur.

His touches make me quiver.

Our kisses last longer than they probably should.

Did I give my heart to someone who isn’t capable of protecting it?

They say rules are meant to be broken. They probably should have added that hearts are too. This time I can’t pretend my way out of my mess.

This is a FULLY standalone novel from my Mountain Men of Liberty series. This is Levi Callaghan’s love story and a small-town, friends-to-lovers, fake marriage, surprise pregnancy romance. Each book can be read on its own. Transport yourself into this charming and magical mountain town as we follow several rugged mountain men in their quests to find lasting love. Enjoy! I know I did!

CHAPTER 1

“**T**here you are, Anna! Let me introduce you to someone,” my mom’s voice bellowed from behind me. I turned around with drink in hand and nearly choked on the vodka tonic as I stared at the man standing beside my mother. “This nice young man—”

Young, I thought to myself. If he’s young, I’m an infant.

“Edward Schmidt, correct?” I asked, interrupting my mom.

Edward smiled warmly at me, running a hand through his terrible comb over. He hadn’t had hair since I was a little girl.

“You remember me, Anna. I’m pretty surprised, to be honest.”

“You volunteer at Vacation Bible School, correct?”

My mom smiled, clearly pleased at herself.

“I do, yes.”

“I thought so. I attended with your daughter, if you remember correctly.”

Edward’s smile faltered. “Well, um, now that you mention it... I do remember that.”

“Mmhmm,” I sucked down some of my vodka tonic, a hand on my hip. “You had a little more hair back then, but not much.”

“Anna!”

“Sorry, Mom, but I think this—” I gestured wildly at her and Edward “—is just a little too creepy.”

“I didn’t realize she was that young, Rose. I forgot she and Chelsea were the same age... I swear. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Edward walked away shaking his head while my mom shot me a look of death. I shrugged and chugged more of my drink. “What?” I asked.

“You didn’t have to insinuate he was old.”

“He’s too old for me, Mom,” I replied. “And he’s right, it’s creepy. He could be my dad.”

“He’s not your dad’s age.”

“Close enough, Mom. Close enough.”

“He seemed nice, though, and his wife passed away a few years ago. I just thought...”

My mom pursed her lips and for a second, she looked just like my sisters and me, only older. Her hair was still honey blonde, either from good genes or a very good colorist, a secret she would never spill, not even to us. Her blue eyes were fierce and as stubborn as ever as she looked over the crowd at my sister’s engagement party.

“I’m not interested.”

“You’ve only been here twenty minutes; you can’t be sure of that.”

“I can, because I’m not interested.”

“Don’t you think the next few months, with all the events, would be more interesting with a date?”

“How do you know I don’t already have one?” I asked, finishing my drink and placing it on the bar. I waved the bartender over and requested another.

My mother looked incredulous. “Well, do you?”

“Anna!” my sister Grace called from somewhere in the crowd of people behind my mom. I stood on my tiptoes to see

her, and on her arm was a dark-haired man I knew from high school.

“Crap, I need to go,” I mumbled, grabbing the drink the bartender handed me and looking for somewhere to hide. This was the third suitor my sister had tried to introduce me to, and I’d been to the party for less than an hour.

I spotted a very large tree at the corner of the deck and made a dash for it.

“Excuse me, coming through,” I said, pushing through the crowd of people to get to my sweet spot.

“Anna! I have someone I want you to meet,” my sister’s voice called out from behind me, but I didn’t dare look back.

I slipped behind the tree and rested against it, taking a deep breath. I heard Grace and my mother talking.

“I lost her. She just took off!”

“You didn’t see where she went?”

“No, not at all...”

I smiled and sipped my drink, feeling the weight lift off my shoulders. Music from the party drowned out the sounds of the people, and I let myself enjoy my drink in peace.

A rustling on my left caught my attention.

And then I was no longer alone.

A man slipped behind the tree, his eyes on the engagement party instead of where he was going. His body was massive, too massive for us both to be behind the tree trunk.

“Hey! This is my tree! Find your own!”

He turned to face me, and my heart leapt into my throat. A familiar face stared back at me, all grown up and more handsome than I remembered.

“Levi Callaghan?” I muttered.

He cocked his head to the side and gave me a crooked smile.

“Anna Berkshire, right?”

“Yes.” I bit my lip and stared up into his emerald eyes. He had a sweet smile, but his jawline... Jesus Christ, those angles should be illegal.

I remembered I was hiding, and with someone his size - with his arms the size of the tree trunk itself - Levi was making it harder.

Clearing my throat, I repeated what I'd said moments before. “This is my tree... I would appreciate it if you found your own, so you don't draw attention to me.”

Levi looked around quickly and laughed. “I'm pretty sure this tree doesn't belong to anyone in particular.”

“Yeah, but I was here first.”

Levi crossed his arms over his hard chest and stared down at me. Thankfully, he was big enough to block me from any prying eyes. If either of my sisters were looking for me, I was pretty sure they wouldn't be able to see past Levi's large frame.

“Why are you hiding? Isn't Emily your sister?”

“Yes, she is, but, well, it's complicated,” I said, biting my lower lip. “And besides, I could ask you the same question. Why are you hiding?”

“It's not my sister's party.”

“So you make it a habit to hide behind trees at engagement parties?”

“Who said I'm hiding? Maybe I'm admiring the view.”

I looked behind me, unsure what he was talking about. “The bar next door really isn't much to look at.”

“I wasn't talking about that view.”

His dark eyes bore into mine, and my cheeks flushed as realization of what he meant hit me.

“Umm well, if you're trying to flirt with me, Levi, I have to tell you—”

Before I could finish thwarting his advances, I heard Grace and Emily's voice nearby. My eyes widened, and I shielded myself with Levi's massive body, standing close enough that his musky scent filled my nose. I felt the tightness of his chest against the hand I placed there to prevent myself from falling into him.

"What's--" he started to ask.

"Shhh!" I hissed, pressing my fingers to his lips.

He stayed quiet and didn't move even though I was pressed against him. I had to admit, it felt nice, but as soon as my sisters' voices moved away from us, I relaxed away from him, sliding against the tree down to the ground, my drink sloshing in my hand.

Levi looked perplexed. "Why are you hiding from your family, Anna?"

"Because they keep insisting on setting me up. My mother too," I said, finishing my drink, ice and all. I glanced over Levi and realized I couldn't get to the bar and back, so that was it. I sighed. "I just want to be left alone."

He let out a dry, deep rumble of a laugh.

"What's so funny?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Only that I get it. My family is trying to do the same thing. That's why I'm hiding too. My sister, Irene, brought someone she wanted to meet, and the girl seems nice and all, but I'm not interested."

"Only one suitor? Lucky. I've had three so far, and my sister is dragging a fourth poor sap around looking for me as we speak."

"Only one *today*. Since my entire family is married, and since I finished college and moved back, they've been relentless. I'm just tired of it, to be honest."

"Tell me about it. If only there were a way to get them off our backs..." I trailed off as a thought occurred to me. "Maybe... Nah, that's crazy..."

"What?" Levi asked.

I looked at the handsome brute of a man. The Callaghan family was well known in Sunville. Their family was respectable. I grew up alongside Levi and his brothers, and though we weren't in the same grade or the same clique, our families were always aware of each other.

And if I managed to snag the youngest of the Callaghan brothers, my family surely would be off my back for a bit.

"Well, what if there were a way to get both our families to back off, at least for the next little while? I don't plan to be in Sunville past September, so it's only a temporary solution--"

Levi raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms in front of him. "You have piqued my interest."

"Well, what if we just pretended to be dating. Just long enough to survive all the summer events. I know my schedule is filled with weddings, and since we know a lot of the same people, I'm sure you do too. Again, it would only be temporary but--"

In the distance, a female called out, "Levi? Where are you?"

Levi cringed and cut me off. "Let's do it."

"Really?" I asked, surprised he was so gung-ho without much discussion.

"That's Jenna. She's been following me around the entire evening like a sad little puppy dog. I don't know how many different ways I can tell her I'm not interested, and that it's not her - it's me. It just doesn't seem to click, and she's relentless. Even if I manage to get her off my tail, Irene will find someone else next week and I'm tired. So let's do this."

"Levi!"

"Anna!"

We were clearly in demand; everyone was looking for us. And we couldn't hide forever. I reached out my hand, Levi took it, and we shook.

"Let's do this," I said.

“I’m in.”

Levi smiled and my heart fluttered. Something about the way he looked at me made my insides warm and gooey, and it had been a while since I’d had any fun.

“Good, glad we’re on the same page,” I said, unable to control the smiling. “I guess we should get back to the party and introduce ourselves as a couple.”

Levi stood up first and reached for my hand, helping me off the ground. I patted my butt, hopeful I didn’t have any grass or mud or anything stuck to it. I caught Levi’s eyes on my ass and laughed. “Making sure I’m clean?”

“Exactly, I wouldn’t want you to have anything stuck to your dress when we return to the party. What would people think if my girlfriend was covered in grass and twigs?”

“I’m sure they’d think we slipped away for some fun...”

Levi gave me a knowing smile as he ran a hand through his shaggy dark brown hair before taking my hand and pulling straight into the madness.

CHAPTER 2

Grace's eyes narrowed on us as Anna talked.

"So you're saying the two of you have been dating, and you're just now telling us about it?" Emily asked from beside her sister, hands on her hips.

"Yeah, I mean, it's still fairly new... we didn't want to talk too soon, you know," Anna said, flashing a smile that would make a dentist jealous. I took her hand in mine and she squeezed.

It always amazed me how the Berkshire siblings looked so much alike. Almost like triplets, except Grace's hair was cut into a short, stylish bob. Anna and Emily both had long, naturally wavy, honey blonde hair. Emily wore hers in a fancy updo and a lot more makeup than her two sisters. Anna, on the other hand, seemed to go au natural with very little to no makeup, her wavy hair falling over her shoulders. In high school, she almost always wore ponytails or braids. I couldn't recall ever seeing her hair down like this - it was stunning.

Her blue eyes turned to me. "Isn't that right, Levi?"

"Uhh yes," I muttered, unsure what I was agreeing to since I had stopped paying attention to the conversation, too focused on the beautiful woman at my side.

"I don't think he was listening to a word you were saying," Emily quipped.

"He was too busy staring at Anna," Grace added, her features softening. "Clearly he's smitten."

“Can you blame me?” I laughed. “I mean - look at her.”

And I did look at her.

Her little black cocktail dress hugged every curve, showing off her hourglass figure. She was a little thicker than her sisters, another difference. She had an ass I could stare at all night, and her dress showed off enough cleavage to tease.

But if I remembered Anna correctly, she was more than just a pretty face and a hot body. The girl had some brains. She was always top of her class, and one of the only people other than me to skip a grade in Sunville.

One of the many reasons I had crushed on her back then.

“Mmhmm,” Anna said, playfully nudging me. “I was just saying you support my dreams of working at the animal reserve in Austin, and that we are going to attempt a long-distance relationship when the time comes.”

“Animal reserve?” I should have asked more about her history. “Oh yes, you’re right. Of course I support your dreams. Your love of animals is one of the things I love about you most. I just started my own little farm here in Sunville, so I get it.”

Anna looked at me curiously and cocked her head to the side. That was news to her. Something else we had in common, apparently.

I lifted Anna’s hand to my lips and dropped a kiss on the back of it.

“Well, we all thought Anna was a little crazy when she told us,” Grace said with a chuckle. “She could have gone into ordinary veterinary medicine, opened a clinic here, but that wasn’t good enough for our sister. She always did love the big animals and wanted to work with them.”

“Especially kangaroos,” Emily said with a laugh.

“And the reserve in Austin has three!” Anna exclaimed, the excitement pouring from her. I couldn’t help but smile at how adorable she was.

A second later, a dark-haired man joined Grace, and she whispered something to him as Anna leaned in close to me. “That’s Derek, the fourth guy Grace wanted to set me up with.”

“I see.”

And then I heard, “There you are!” and flinched at the high-pitched voice.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” Jenna announced. Her eyes fell on me holding hands with Anna and she frowned. “Irene didn’t mention you were dating anyone.”

“Irene doesn’t know yet. I haven’t gotten around to telling her. I like to keep my relationships private, but we are officially telling our families now. I’m sorry, Jenna.”

“I don’t believe it,” she muttered, shaking her head. Then her eyes fell on Derek, and she smiled.

Grace piped up, “He’s single, and he’s a lawyer.”

Jenna said, “What a coincidence, I’ve always had a thing for lawyers.”

Derek and Jenna started talking and wandered off toward the bar.

“Well, I guess I helped one lucky couple make a love match tonight, at least.” Grace muttered under her breath.

My sister, Irene, joined the group, walking up slowly, her eyes locked on my hand holding Anna’s. “So... what’s going on here?” she asked, pointing at our hands.

“Irene, I’d like you to meet my girlfriend, Anna Berkshire.”

“I know Anna. Grace and I are friends, remember?” she said slowly. “I didn’t know— when did you two start dating?”

“Officially, tonight,” I said with a smile. “But we’ve been interested in each other for some time.”

“Is that right?” Irene raised an eyebrow.

“Yep, I’ve had a crush on her since high school, honestly, but since we’re both back from college, we reconnected, and well, now we’ve decided to go for it.”

“You studied veterinary medicine, correct?” Irene asked Anna.

“Yes,” Anna said with a smile. “I graduated in May.”

“How did you finish undergrad and vet school so fast?”

“It helped that I went into undergrad with a bunch of college credits from high school, and then I just took a heavy load.”

“Wasn’t that difficult?”

Anna shrugged. “Not really. School has never been too hard for me, and I enjoyed what I was studying.”

Irene smiled and shook her head. “God, you sound like Levi... you are two peas in a nerd pod. Super smart. Ambitious. You both love animals. I can see why he would be smitten with you, Anna.”

I gave Anna’s hand a little squeeze. It really was perfect. We were a perfect match. People would definitely believe we were a couple.

“It’s a shame Mom isn’t around. She would be so pleased to see you and Anna together,” Irene said. The tone changed a bit; speaking of our mother was always a bit of a sore spot since she passed when we were pretty young. “She was close with your mom, Anna, or so I’ve heard.”

“Yes, they went to school together. My mom always spoke very fondly of her. Speaking of parents...” Anna said, pointing at her mom, who seemed to be looking for someone. “I think it’s about time we let my mom know what’s up.”

With Anna’s arm looped through mine, we made our way through the crowd to her mother.

“Oh, what is this?” Rose Berkshire asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Mom, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier, but the reason I’m not interested in your suitors is because I’m dating Levi Callaghan.”

“Are you serious?” Rose’s eyes widened, and she squealed with excitement as she pulled her daughter into a hug. When she was finished with her, she hugged me. “Welcome to the family, Levi. I always hoped one of my daughters would nab one of you Callaghans. Just wait until I tell your father, Anna!”

Before we could get another word in, Rose was calling for her husband. “Thomas! Come here! Anna has a boyfriend!”

“Well, if the entire party didn’t know before, they know now,” Anna said with a laugh.

Rose came back to us with Anna’s father at her side along with both of her brothers - Thomas Jr., or TJ, and Noah.

My head was spinning as we told our made-up story to more and more people. Rose was the most curious.

“So how did you reconnect after high school? Anna, you just got in town last week and haven’t left the house except with your sisters to plan the party today.”

“Well...” Anna said, looking at me as if mentally trying to get our story straight.

“We’ve been talking online,” I announced.

“Online?” Rose scrunched up her nose. “That’s not very romantic.”

Anna side-eyed me and continued. “He means, we’ve been talking online since I came and visited last Christmas. We ran into each other when I was out shopping for presents.”

“Yes, at the local— err...” I forgot every store in Sunville. “What was the name of the shop again?”

“TJ Maxx,” Anna said. “I was buying some new pants.”

I had no clue what TJ Maxx was. “Yes, that’s it. I was buying new.... socks.”

Rose held a hand up. “Wait a second, I thought you said you were shopping for presents, and TJ Maxx is pretty far...”

“Yes, I mean, I went into Salt Lake City to go shopping and decided to buy myself some pants while I was out.”

“I don’t remember you being gone that long.” Grace spoke up beside her mom.

“Well, I was. Where do you think I got that scarf for you?” Anna said matter-of-factly.

“I thought you said you picked it up before you flew out.”

Anna looked at me and for a second, I feared our entire story was about to fall apart. But she straightened and said, “You know, maybe you’re right, I can’t remember where I bought all your gifts from. But I did go to Salt Lake one day when you guys were busy.”

“And Levi was in Salt Lake shopping at TJ Maxx at the same time?”

“Yep. What a small world, right? I peered over the racks of socks and thought to myself, ‘Is that Anna Berkshire?’ and then her blue eyes locked on mine, and we smiled from across the store. It just felt like we were meant to be.”

Anna leaned into me and whispered into my ear, “Good job,” as she pretended to kiss me on the cheek.

“Do you go to TJ Maxx all the way in Salt Lake City to buy socks often, Levi?” Emily stared at me with a cocked eyebrow.

“I wasn’t there just for socks. I was shopping for my family’s gifts and thought I’d pop in for some new socks while I was there. You know, I think I’m wearing the same socks I bought that day. They’re my lucky socks.”

Anna nearly choked on her cocktail from trying to stifle a laugh, and I winked at her. She smiled and shook her head, clearly amused by my ability to spin a tall tale.

“From there, you talked online?”

“Well, mostly on WhatsApp. We texted every day for the last few months, and when I found out she was back in town, I asked if we could see each other... and tonight, I decided to make it official by asking her to be my girlfriend.”

Grace smiled. “I guess it’s not the meet-cute of rom coms, but as long as you’re happy, sis, I’m happy for you.”

“Me too,” Emily agreed.

“I have to get going,” Grace announced. “I promised the kids I’d put them to bed tonight. Nicholas is such a mama’s boy these days.”

“Tell the little munchkins Auntie Anna loves them,” Anna said, hugging her sister goodbye.

“I have to go find my fiancé. I’ve seen James for maybe five minutes all night.” Emily laughed as she scooted off to where James was sitting with his family.

Slowly but surely, the crowd of people around us dissipated as the party came to an end, leaving Anna and I alone. Finally, I could relax.

“Want one last drink?” I asked her.

“Nah, I think I’ve reached my limit for the night.”

We were still holding hands. Anna realized at the same time and dropped my hand.

“So, what are your plans for the evening?” I asked.

She stared up at me, her eyelashes fluttering around her blue eyes. She nibbled her lower lip and stepped in closer to me. “I don’t really have any plans. How about you?”

“I was just thinking... you’re welcome to come over to my place.”

Anna smiled, and the heat inside me spread throughout, moving south as my slacks suddenly grew tighter.

“I think I’d like that a lot. As long as you know there’s just fun and...well, whatever this is we’re telling our families.” She giggled.

“Of course,” I said. “It’s all about fun. Nothing serious.”

“Then let’s go,” she said, once again taking my hand in hers and leading me away from the party.

The way that dress clung to every curve, the way her ass moved with every step... She was brains and beauty, and part of me knew I was in trouble.

But there was no way I could refuse her.

CHAPTER 3

“I had no idea Uber drivers were willing to drive us to the middle of nowhere,” I teased as the car slowly drove down one of the narrowest, darkest roads I had seen.

Neither of us had been sober enough to drive home, having downed too many drinks at Emily’s party. Something I was sure to regret the next day.

Levi chuckled. “I know. I really don’t like people and want to be as far away from them as possible.”

“Same, dude. Same,” I responded as the driver pulled up to an adorable little cabin.

Levi really did live in a cabin in the middle of nowhere. There were lights around the property so it wasn’t pitch black, and the moon was bright in the sky. For a second, I was speechless at the splendor of the property and how isolated it was.

A loud screeching sound interrupted the night as well as another sound I couldn’t make out.

“Shit,” Levi said, jumping out of the car quickly and taking off toward a fenced in area.

I thanked the driver and tried to run after Levi, slipping off my heels to try to catch up. “Levi, what the hell—”

“It’s Birdtha.”

“Birdtha? What the hell is a Birdtha?”

“It’s my asshole emu, and she’s chasing Alpacacino. He broke the gate again and got into her enclosure. He’s not the brightest.”

Levi tried to hop the fence but was still tipsy. He stumbled as he climbed and fell over the other side.

“I’m going to be truthful with you, Levi. I have no idea what’s going on here.”

I heard the screeching sound; clearly it came from an animal. A bird. Birdtha, I assumed. And then out of nowhere, I saw an alpaca running toward Levi and the wagging head and neck of a giant emu right behind him.

“Jesus, Levi, you weren’t lying about the emu.”

“Why would I lie about having an emu?”

“I meant you weren’t lying about her being an asshole.”

The alpaca turned and the emu followed, which I had to admit, was a sight to behold. A giant alpaca afraid of a bird... but I knew from an internship that emus could be assholes. It was just like a natural state of being for them. And alpacas, while adorable, weren’t always the brightest.

None of that could compare to the sight of Levi chasing the emu. So now, it was an emu chasing an alpaca and a drunk Levi chasing the emu.

“Do you need some help?” I asked between laughs.

“No, I got this under control.”

“It doesn’t look like you have it under control to me,” I laughed.

“This happens a lot. I really need to finish the new enclosure for Al,” Levi called back to me.

“Alpacacino... as in Al Pacino,” I uttered to myself, finally putting it together. “Clever.”

Levi got the upper hand on the emu somehow and managed to separate it from the alpaca, because now she was chasing him instead. Al walked over near the fence where I

was standing and seemed to watch along with me as the giant bird was right on Levi's tail.

"Better him than you, huh, Al?" I said, petting the alpaca's soft fur. "Though I'm thinking he may need my help."

Just as I thought I should jump the fence and distract the emu, Levi lured the monster into an enclosure and slammed the gate. He hopped the fence, once again nearly falling flat on his face from being a little too tipsy for emu wrangling.

He picked himself up off the ground and slapped his hands on his pants, which were covered in dirt, his white shirt was no longer white. But he looked pleased as punch. I smiled and shook my head as he walked back over to Al and me.

"I see you two met," Levi said with a crooked grin.

"Yeah, he was telling me all about you."

"Was he now? I wouldn't take what he says too seriously. He's, well..." He playfully covered the alpaca's ears as he whispered, "He's not the brightest."

We only had a moment of relief before the familiar screeching was heard, and I saw the huge bird rushing up behind Levi.

"Watch out!" I cried out.

He turned and ran, leading the emu away from Al and me.

This time, I knew the poor guy needed some help. I dropped my shoes, hiked up my dress, and climbed over the fence. Al shot me a look of worry as I took off toward the emu and Levi.

Levi ran past me. "What are you doing?"

"Saving your ass," I yelled back.

"I got this under control."

"Yeah, it sure looks like you do." I laughed as Levi tried to lead the bird back to the enclosure. I rushed over and unlocked the gate for him.

“Get the back one, I forgot it last time,” Levi said breathlessly as he led the emu into the enclosure. He pointed toward the far end of the pen, and I knew exactly what he was talking about.

He ran around the space, trying to keep Birdtha from noticing me and running to the exit. I made it to the back just as Birdtha noticed me, and she changed directions, heading my way.

“Shit,” I said as I fumbled with the lock.

Just as the bird reached the end of the enclosure, the gate closed and locked.

“Ha! I won,” I teased the angry emu. But I remembered Levi was still inside the pen with her. I ran along the side, searching for him. “Levi!”

“I’m right here.”

“I don’t see you.” I tumbled over something in my way. Levi.

He had been on the ground, and I hadn’t been watching where I was walking, too focused on what was happening inside the fence.

I fell to the ground, but Levi padded my fall. I rolled off him as we both broke out into raucous laughter.

“What the hell are you doing down here?” I asked him, tears from laughing so hard running down my face.

“Well, I had just hopped the fence and I’m still a bit tipsy, so you know... I didn’t have a chance to get up yet. I tried to warn you.”

“You did, I have to give you credit for that.” My chest hurt from laughing so hard, but after a few moments, I caught my breath. “Please tell me there are no more entries or exits into this enclosure that she can escape from.”

“Nope, only the two. Her usual enclosure only has one exit and entry, but since Al broke the gate, I had to use this one. I forgot about the back exit, even though I built the damned thing myself.”

I rolled over on my side, propping myself up on my arm. “You’re still getting the hang of this, huh?”

“Yep. Just got Birdtha two weeks ago. Still working out the kinks with her.”

“What made you get an emu, of all animals?”

He shot me his famous lopsided grin. “What can I say? I like living life on the wild side.”

“Some men dream of getting tigers or pythons, but you get an emu?”

He shrugged and rolled over to face me. “Truthfully, she needed a home, and I can’t turn away an animal in need.”

“Where did she come from?”

“Some family near Liberty thought they wanted an exotic pet, but the bird terrorized their son. They were desperate to re-home her or—well, I didn’t think it was fair to the bird that she would be destroyed for simply being a bird, and since I had the space, I figured why not? But damn, she’s brutal.”

His eyes lit up when he spoke of the bird; even though the emu would have killed him if given half the chance, he still loved it. And as an animal lover, I could appreciate that.

“Yeah, a lot of people underestimate emus,” I said softly.

“People get these wild animals and don’t bother to research them, which really irks me,” he said. “They just think they’ll be pets. These people acted like they bought a canary, and it’s just so damned frustrating to me.”

“Me too.”

My cheeks hurt from smiling so much, and Levi was grinning right back at me. Even with all chiseled angles and contours, when he smiled just the right way, he was simply adorable.

Sexy, adorable and loved animals as much as me?

Dangerous combo, Anna. Be careful here.

I should have cleaned myself off and walked away, but his lips were right there... and we had talked about having some fun.

My insides were on fire. My panties were soaked at just the idea of what I wanted to do to this man.

I leaned forward and grabbed Levi's face in my hands and pressed my lips to his. He kissed me back, his hands moving over my body as he pulled me on top of him. He gripped my hips tightly as our tongues explored each other's mouths.

Feeling him pressed against me, I got a sense of his size, which just caused more wetness in my panties.

"Mmm, right here in front of the alpaca? You sure he can handle this?" I teased.

We looked at the fence where Al was munching on some hay, oblivious to us.

"I think he's far enough away to avoid being traumatized with what we're about to do."

"Oh yeah?" I licked my lips and stared deep into his green eyes; my forehead pressed to his as I ground my pelvis against his. "And what are we about to do?"

"Well, maybe if you stop talking, I can show you," he teased.

His hands worked at the zipper at the back of my dress, carefully sliding it down. He slipped the dress over my head and laid it down beside us.

I was grateful for wearing the matching lacy black bra and panties underneath.

He sucked in air as he stared at me. "Fuck, you're gorgeous."

My cheeks were burning, but a smile pulled at my lips. I couldn't recall any man ever looking at me the way Levi did in that moment. Levi's eyes took in every inch of my body, and I felt like a goddess.

He unhooked my bra and let it fall to the ground beside us, cupping my breasts overflowing his massive hands. Levi leaned forward, pressing his lips against my flesh. His tongue found my nipple and he flicked it gently.

I gasped as my body tingled with pleasure.

I wanted him, all of him, but he was wearing too many clothes to get it.

I hopped up just enough to unbuckle his pants and help him slide them down to his knees.

“I have condoms inside,” Levi said.

“I have an IUD,” I told him with a coy smile. “And I’ve known you my whole life, Levi. I trust you.”

“I trust you too,” he said softly, pushing a stray hair away from my face.

Before we could find something else to talk about, I slipped my panties to the side, rubbing his cock against my wetness.

Falling forward, I kissed Levi deeply as he pulled the pins from my hair. My long, wavy hair surrounded us like curtains, offering some semblance of privacy even though there likely wasn’t a single person within miles.

One thrust upward and Levi split me open, filling me easily with his cock. I cried out, nearly biting his lip as my body convulsed with pleasure.

“You’re so wet,” he grunted.

“You did that to me.”

“Mmm, and can you feel what you do to me?” He thrust upward, going deeper this time, and I felt every inch of him inside me.

“Yes,” I whimpered, “Oh God, yes, Levi... You feel so good.”

I began rocking back and forth on top of him, our tongues moving in almost perfect rhythm with our bodies.

He teased my nipples with his fingers, pushing me over the top. My first orgasm came out of nowhere, and I screamed out Levi's name over and over again.

My nails dug into his chest, through his shirt, as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me.

It wasn't just one orgasm, but several in quick succession. I had never experienced anything like it before, even when touching myself. The stars were aligned; his cock hit me at just the right angle. The excitement of being outside, a totally new experience for me, coupled with the fact that I was fucking Levi Callaghan. It was all too much, something straight from my fantasies but nothing I ever would have expected to experience in real life.

Levi's breath grew more and more desperate. He thrust upward, matching my movements. Then he grabbed my hips and held me down as he thrust upward, burying himself deep inside me.

"Come, Levi, please..."

"Is it okay if I—"

"Yes, of course." I felt breathless as another orgasm built inside me.

As Levi thrust into me one last time, I felt his member throbbing inside me, filling me with his seed. That was enough to send me over the edge one final time. We came together, our bodies writhing in pleasure until every last drop of him was inside me.

I laid there for what felt like an eternity, my head resting in the crook of his neck. His breathing was heavy at first but slowed as our heart rates returned to normal. Soft fingertips stroked my bare back, and my eyes grew heavy.

I slipped off Levi and rolled over to the side. He turned to face me, wrapping his arms around me. Our skin glistened with sweat, and I was grateful for the warmer than usual weather we were experiencing.

With the sound of crickets and bullfrogs in the distance, my eyes grew even heavier. Levi let out a soft snore and I gave

up trying to fight it. I fell asleep in his arms right there on the ground, underneath the Utah sky.



“What the hell—” I muttered to myself as the sound of a rooster crowing woke me up. The light was nearly blinding when I opened my eyes. It took me a second to remember where I was and why I was naked on the ground with an alpaca staring down at me.

“Argh, the downfall of having chickens, I suppose,” Levi muttered as he sat up and stretched. “Did you sleep okay?”

“For sleeping outside on the ground... actually, yes, I slept like a log.”

I reached down to scratch an itch on my leg. A bump. And another. And another.

“Ah, the mosquitoes love you,” Levi said.

“Sadly, yes, they eat me up.”

“Not that I blame them.” He shot me a crooked smile.

His hair was even shaggier than usual, standing up at all kinds of weird angles. I chuckled at his adorable bedhead before realizing I probably had a bad case of it myself. I never slept with my hair down, but Levi had removed the pins... I reached up and felt my knotted hair.

“Oh no...I probably look like cow shit right about now.”

“Nah, you’re beautiful,” Levi said, leaning forward and kissing me. “But I have a shower if that would make you feel better.”

“I’d appreciate that, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all. I can make you some breakfast too, if you have the time.”

I thought about it. My stomach growled, answering the question for me.

“Good, I make one helluva an omelet, if I do say so myself. Farm fresh eggs too.” He winked as he pulled himself up and offered me a hand. I accepted and we gathered my clothes.

In daylight, I suddenly felt very exposed, standing out in the open with an alpaca still watching us and some chickens not too far away.

“How many animals have you got here?” I asked Levi as we walked toward his cabin.

“One emu, one alpaca, a couple chickens, a rooster, and two goats so far,” he said. “I’m just getting started.”

“That’s actually a lot for someone just getting started,” I commented.

“What can I say? I dream of owning a pretty big farm here one day.”

“As in, for commercial use or—”

“Nah, just for a hobby,” he said, holding the door of his cabin open for me to enter first. “I milk the goats and collect the eggs, but I don’t plan to get into meat or anything like that. They’re like my pets, in a silly little way.”

“I don’t think that’s silly at all,” I said as I stepped into his cabin. It was a cozy place. From the outside, it didn’t look too big, even though I knew the Callaghan brothers had built a pretty successful business and Levi could have lived in a much larger place if he’d wanted. “Wow, this place is nice.”

It might have been small, but it was decked out. Only the best woods, the best cabinets, and stainless steel everything.

“It’s mostly self-sustaining, energy-wise. I’m aiming to be completely carbon neutral at some point. And these floors are bamboo...” He chuckled. “Why am I telling you all this? You likely don’t care.” He offered me a sheepish grin.

“I do care. I find it really cool to be honest,” I said. “But please tell me you have a shower with warm water and a working toilet?”

“I do,” he laughed, pointing me in the direction of the bathroom, which was right off his bedroom.

He left me alone in the bathroom, and I had to admit, it was a lot cleaner and nicer than most men’s bathrooms. And with a shower that was larger than I expected. I stepped into the shower and checked out the soap offerings. I quickly washed off and dressed again just as there was a knock on the door.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Are you okay with goat cheese? I forgot to ask.”

“I love goat cheese.”

“Good.”

I wandered to the kitchen where Levi was serving up my omelet.

“That smells amazing.”

“Eggs from my chickens, cheese from my goats, and a few secrets I will never divulge.” He pretended to zip his mouth shut as he handed me the plate.

“So you make your own goat cheese?” I asked.

“Yes, and soap.”

“Soap? Like the one in the bathroom?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he cracked some eggs into the pan for another omelet. “Goat milk soap. It’s the best kind of soap there is, in my opinion.”

“But you made it? Yourself?”

“I did, yes. Why are you so surprised?” He looked over his shoulder at me.

“It’s just— how do you find time to do all this? I know you work with your brothers too, you run a successful business, and on the side, you have this little hobby farm where you make goat cheese and goat milk and soap.”

He shrugged as he continued cooking. “I mostly keep to myself, so when I’m not working, I have a lot of time on my

hands. What can I say?" He glanced at me and noticed I wasn't eating.

"I'm waiting on you."

"No, you have to eat it while it's hot," he said.

"It'll only be a couple minutes."

"Please? You have to taste it hot. It's just not the same cold."

I laughed. "Fine, but only because you asked nicely."

I cut off a piece with my fork and brought it to my mouth. The flavors of the omelet were surprising. The strong flavor of the goat cheese. The eggs. It was easily one of the best omelets I'd ever had in my life.

"Oh my God, this is amazing. You can cook too. It's really not fair that you can like, do everything and other people can barely find the time to microwave dinner."

"You speak from experience, I take it?"

I stuck my tongue out at him playfully. "Yeah, maybe, I guess. I can cook, but when it's just for me, why bother?"

"Because you deserve delicious food too."

"I'm usually too tired after school and working and everything. I really don't know how you do it all."

Levi finished his omelet, plated it, and joined me at the counter, sitting across from me. "Well, if you're in town, you can always stop by for a delicious meal, any time. My treat."

"I thought you didn't like people much," I said, taking another bite.

"I don't."

"But I'm people, aren't I?"

He shrugged. "You're different."

"Different, eh? How so?"

"Well for one, you don't annoy me. You like animals as much as I do, and we can have intelligent conversations."

“I don’t think we’ve had a single intelligent conversation, Levi.”

He smiled. “Not yet, but we have time. We’ll be seeing a lot of each other as a fake couple this summer. With all the weddings...”

“And Summer Fest...”

“And a family reunion.”

“You have a family reunion?”

“No, but I’ve heard you do.”

“Shit, I forgot about that,” I muttered to myself. “But I may be gone by then.”

“Back to Austin?”

Hearing Austin caused my stomach to flip flop.

“Can I tell you a secret?” I asked, biting my lip and staring down at my plate. Most of my omelet was gone, but I pushed the last few bites around on my plate.

“Sure. I don’t talk to many people, so I promise it’s safe with me. And as your fake boyfriend, you can tell me anything.”

I smiled, but only for a second when I remembered what I was about to tell him. “I don’t think I have a job in Austin anymore.”

“What? Why?”

“The reserve is scheduled to close in August unless they can get more funding, and sadly, with how the economy is these days, the money isn’t coming in anymore. I believe there was some shady stuff going on with the owners pocketing donations too, but no proof of that. Sure, there could be a miracle, but I’m not counting it, and I’m currently looking for another job. My family doesn’t know yet. No one does. Well, except you.”

Levi looked at me, a softness in his eyes that made me feel even more comfortable talking to him. “Why haven’t you told your family yet? Not that it matters, I’m just curious.”

“Well, because I’m already a disappointment to them by not wanting to get married and have kids. They all told me I should specialize in small animal veterinary medicine because it’s more practical... and here I am, jobless and proving them right.”

“You’re not a disappointment, Anna. Not even close.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“No way. Your family adores you; I see it in every interaction with them. And the fact that you managed to complete high school at freaking sixteen years old, then college only three years later and vet school too, which is one of the hardest programs to get into... Do you not see how impressive you are?”

My cheeks flushed and I looked down at the plate. I couldn’t think of the words to say, since thanking him would acknowledge what he said, and I just didn’t feel very impressive. I finished the rest of my omelet, took a few deep breaths, and said, “Thank you. I really struggle with compliments. I have a hard time believing them.”

“Well, everything I stated is a fact. In fact, if you look up the word impressive on Wikipedia, there’s a picture of you.”

I shook my head and chuckled. “You’re hilarious.”

“Nah, just honest.” He finished his eggs, and I couldn’t help but sneak glances at him from across the table. Butterflies fluttered inside me, and every time he smiled at me, I couldn’t stop myself from smiling right back.

Then I remembered the arrangement.

No feelings allowed Anna.

“I should probably get going...” I knew if I stayed much longer, it would be hard to resist kissing him. We had agreed to having some fun, but this was venturing into dangerous territory.

“Alright, I can drive you home. Better than trying to get an Uber this early out here.”

“Isn’t your truck at the restaurant from last night?”

“Nah, Irene and I rode in together,” he said. “Come on, let me give you a ride”

I slid off the chair and Levi looped his arm into mine. Again, I found myself unable to stop myself from smiling.

Careful, Anna. Don't get too attached.

CHAPTER 4

“Hey, man, need some help with that?” One of my only friends, Clark Phillips, walked over and grabbed some of the feed I was carrying.

“I was fine, but thanks for the hand,” I said. “Didn’t hear your truck, or did you drive over in that fancy car?”

Clark chuckled and nodded to the chickens. “I’m not sure how you can hear much over them,” he said. “But nah, brought the truck today. I thought it might rain and I have to protect the beauty after going through all the trouble of winning it.”

Clark walked with me and helped spread the feed.

“So, what brings you over today?” I asked.

“Can’t I stop and visit a friend?”

I looked at him. “Neither one of us is very social, man. Random drop-ins are rare. Usually there’s a reason.”

Clark was a bit older than me, and we hadn’t gone to school together like I did with others I considered friends. He also lived in Liberty, so driving all the way to Sunville meant he likely had a reason.

“Alright, you got me. I wanted to get your expertise. I’m looking at building a house, but I know there are some environmental concerns, mostly with erosion, and wanted you to look over my plans to make sure I’m doing everything possible to protect the environment.” I raised an eyebrow at

him, and he chuckled. “What can I say? I think you’ve rubbed off on me.”

I laughed. “Sure, man, whatever you need.”

“I have the plans in my truck. I can leave them here with you, and we can talk about it later. There’s no rush.”

Clark and I originally met when our companies worked together on a project about a year back and being the only bachelors in our respective groups meant we’d often hang out when my brothers or his friends were busy with their families.

Clark understood me, and we could both focus on our careers. Clark had recently entered a fun little competition with his friends to see who would stay single the longest, and the winner got his stepbrother’s sports car, which he had used for street racing. It was a classic, very coveted car Clark had always wanted apparently. Now that he had it, he treated it like his one true love.

I had my animals, he had his car. We didn’t need anyone else.

We finished with the chickens, and I grabbed the hay for the goats with Clark’s help. I also had some carrots, their favorite, so we hung out there and fed them.

“She’s due any day now, huh?” Clark asked, pointing to the pregnant goat.

“Yeah, and according to her last owner, she always has twins,” I said. “So pretty soon, I’ll have four.” I grinned from ear-to-ear thinking about the baby goats and how my little farm was slowly growing.

Clark let out a low whistle. “Well, whatever makes you happy. But it sounds like you’re gonna have your hands full for a bit.”

“I know, and I love it.”

My phone buzzed with a reminder, pulling me away from the animals. I frowned at the screen.

“What’s up?”

“A wedding. Someone I knew from high school, we played football together, but I haven’t really talked to him much since we graduated.”

“Then don’t go.”

“I already RSVPed, back when I thought it might be fun to catch up, but truthfully, I’m a bit peopled out.” I thought about the deal with Anna. My brothers and Irene would be at this wedding too, which meant Anna should be on my arm.

“You’re smiling now? What’s up with the mood shift?”

“Oh nothing, I just realized... I RSVPed plus one—”

“When you were dating Beth?” Clark asked, speaking carefully. “I can’t recall you ever smiling before when thinking of Beth.”

“Yeah, well... things have changed. I’m over her.” I had originally planned to take Beth back with me after graduating and introducing her to my family. In my mind, this summer was going to be the summer when I got engaged to my college girlfriend, but that obviously never happened.

“Oh yeah? Well I’m glad to hear it. She did you dirty.”

“Yeah, she did. Glad I never told my family about her, or I’d be spending the summer explaining what happened over and over again.”

What had happened was simple. I’d made plans to move with her to New York City, even though I had no intention of living in a big city and had always dreamt of returning to Sunville to build my farm and work with my brothers. But Beth... she was in love with the city, and she got a job offer there, so we made plans to settle there. I’d find work at some environmental engineering firm.

Clark was the only one who knew about Beth, and I intended to keep it that way.

“I’m glad you didn’t give up everything for that woman,” Clark said.

“Yeah, me too,” I agreed. “I’m just glad I caught her before I moved to New York City and threw everything away

here.”

“So... what are you going to do about the plus one? Because as much as I love you, brother, I’m not going as your date. I got invited on my own, if you remember. My family knows the groom’s family yada yada and now I have to wear a suit and tie.”

I chuckled. “I actually have someone who looks prettier in a dress than you, man.”

Clark raised an eyebrow. “What about staying single forever?”

“Oh, it’s not like that,” I said. I told him about the deal with Anna.

“So, you’re pretending to date, while hooking up on the side?”

“Something like that,” I laughed. “Hey, you wanna beer?”

“Nah, I have to get going, but maybe another time,” Clark said, but he didn’t make any effort to leave. After a moment, he told me, “Just be careful, Levi. I saw the way you smiled when you thought about her.”

“I only smiled because I’m glad I don’t have to think or talk about Beth or why my plus one couldn’t make it.”

“Sure, man,” Clark said, patting me on the back. “Whatever you say. Just be careful.”

Clark pushed himself away from the fence and we walked to his truck together. He handed over the plans and was on his way. As soon as he left, I pulled out my phone and texted Anna.

Hey, I forgot, but I have a wedding this weekend. Black tie. Think you can make it?

She responded almost right away.

Of course! That’s the deal, isn’t it? I just don’t have much time to go shopping before then. I hope I have something formal to wear.

I'm sure whatever you wear will be perfect. And I meant it too.

I put my phone away and went back to my favorite pastime, feeding carrots to the goats. My phone pinged a few minutes later.

Is this okay? followed by a photo.

My heart raced and I forgot to breathe for a second. Anna sent me a picture of her in a slinky black dress that hugged her curves perfectly. She had the perfect hourglass figure, and this dress did nothing to hide it. It was low cut enough to show off her ample cleavage, but not so much that it would give too much away. A little cutout beneath her bust showed off a hint of tummy. It had thin straps, but she wrapped a thin scarf over her shoulders.

My jeans grew tighter just by looking at the photo.

I typed, *That dress is perfect, but I can't wait to get you out of it.*

I quickly hit backspace and deleted most of my message, leaving just, *That dress is perfect.*

Great, see you then!

I thought about what Clark had said and wondered... *am I in trouble?*

Nah, she was leaving in a few months. We couldn't develop serious feelings in only a few months. Being attracted to a gorgeous woman wasn't the same thing as love, I told myself. Just because she also happened to impress me with her intelligence and I knew she was ambitious, funny, a good conversationalist, and someone I enjoyed spending time with didn't mean we would get ourselves into trouble, right?

CHAPTER 5

W *e regret to inform you...*

That was all I needed to read to know the email contained bad news. It had come directly from the owners of the reserve in Austin. Even though I knew in my heart I no longer had a job there, the e-mail sealed the deal for me. I had prepared myself for that moment, but I still sighed deeply and collapsed backward on my bed, tears in my eyes.

Before I could collect myself, there was a knock at the door. Quickly, I sat upright, closed my e-mail, and wiped away the tears.

“Come in,” I called out.

Emily opened the door and walked into the room with a big, bright smile. “Sooo... I noticed you didn’t come home last night.”

Emily had been staying at our childhood home while she prepared to move in with her husband. Emily was slightly more conservative than I was. She had always talked about waiting until marriage for sex and all of that too, an oath I believe she’d kept since she had never once blabbed to me about sleeping with any boys and we had always been very close. We told each other everything growing up, and part of me felt bad about keeping the whole job and fake relationship thing from her.

Thankfully, the look on her face wasn’t one of judgment for having stayed over at Levi’s; she was grinning like a fool, in fact. She flopped down beside me on the bed.

“Tell me all about him,” she said before I could confirm or deny her suspicions that I had slept over.

“What do you need me to tell you?” I laughed. “You know him. You even invited him to your wedding.”

“I know of him, of course, but I don’t know him as intimately as you do.” She playfully nudged me and winked dramatically. “If you know what I mean.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “What do you want to know?”

“Tell me again how you two reconnected. I want all the details.”

My mind raced back to the night before. What did we tell her again? I’d been drinking way too much and couldn’t recall every detail of the conversation.

“I don’t see the need to bore you with that story again.”

“Oh, I’m not bored. You know I’m a hopeless romantic, I’ll never grow tired of hearing how people meet and fall in love.” She grinned at me, clasping her hands in her lap impatiently.

“Fine, alright, but it’s not very romantic.”

“I think it is.”

I sighed and closed my eyes, going over everything I could remember. “I was Christmas shopping in Salt Lake City when I ran into him.”

“At Marshall’s, right?”

“Yes, at Marshall’s. So romantic, right?”

“Oh, yes, totally,” Emily said with a chuckle. “Go on. What did he say to you when you realized you knew each other?”

I didn’t think we went into that level of detail the night before, so I was in the clear. I just had to wing it. “He said... ‘hi, Anna.’”

After a moment of silence, Emily said, “Go on.”

“That’s what he said. He didn’t say anything else.”

“So he just said, ‘hi Anna’ and that was the end of the conversation? How did you exchange contact info?”

“Oh, yeah, after we said hello, he said it would be nice if we kept in touch, so I gave him my number and we parted ways.”

“I thought you said you two went out to eat after that. You shared a dessert.”

None of that rang a bell, but Emily looked at me expectantly. I was pretty tipsy, I couldn’t recall everything we said, so maybe she was right.

“Oh yeah, after we exchanged info, we grabbed something to eat.”

“You should serve that dessert at your wedding someday,” Emily said, her grin growing wider. “What was it again?”

“Err, uhhh, tiramisu?” My sentence ended with it more as a question than a statement, and I cringed as my sister stared at me, fearing she caught me in a lie.

“That’s it!” she said, clapping her hands together.

I let out a sigh, nearly falling back against the bed in relief. But I had to keep up the act. “But don’t get ahead of yourself, sis. We only just started dating. It’s a little early to start planning a wedding.” I laughed nervously.

“Nonsense. Every little girl dreams of her wedding day, and I’m sure you’ve already pictured it in your mind, even if you’ll never tell Levi that.”

“You know I’ve never dreamt of my wedding day. I always dreamt of working at a zoo or animal reserve, but a wedding was never something I thought too much about.”

“And that hasn’t changed now that you’re in love?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m in love yet, Emily. Again, we just started dating.”

Emily was a hopeless romantic, but even still, she was acting weird. A little pushy about the wedding stuff. I let it go;

she was focused on her own wedding, and she was known to have a one-track mind sometimes.

“Ahh, I see the way you look at him... tell me, what do you like most about Levi? What made you fall for him?”

I mulled over that question for a second, thinking about Levi and everything I knew about him. A smile spread across my face and my cheeks flushed a bit.

“Well, did you know he has a small farm with a bunch of animals? And he wants even more?”

“I didn’t know that. Must be pretty new.”

“It is. But he already has an alpaca, some goats, some chickens, and even a freaking emu.” I laughed, remembering how that asshole bird chased him around the yard.

“So you both love animals? Perfect. Go on.”

“He’s the only person, besides me, who skipped a grade in our school. He’s so freaking smart, Emily. He can actually keep up with me in a conversation.”

“Yeah, yeah, you two are smarty pants. I always wondered why you didn’t get together right after high school.”

“He was a little younger than me.”

“That’s true, I often forget that since you’re both so mature and smart and stuff. But go on.”

“Go on?”

“With what you like about him, silly.”

“Oh yes, of course... well, he’s funny. Neither one of us are big about socializing, but when we’re chatting, it doesn’t wear me out like it does with other people, and we never run out of things to talk about.”

“Reminds me of James and me,” Emily said wistfully. “I predict wedding bells in your future.”

“Nah, I’m not staying in Sunville, Em. You know that. And long distance never works out, not for long.”

Emily shrugged. “I refuse to give up hope that the two of you will find a way to make it work.”

“Well, you said it yourself, you are a hopeless romantic, which isn’t always realistic, Em.”

“And you, you’re too pessimistic. Why date someone if you don’t see it going somewhere eventually?”

“Because... we have fun together?” And that was true. So far, I was having a blast with Levi. A lot of laughs. Some of the best sex of my life. “It doesn’t have to be that serious, and for Levi and me, it’s not.”

“Alright, if you say so, but I see the way you look at him and I choose to believe otherwise.” She popped off the bed. “I’m meeting James for lunch, but this isn’t the end of the conversation. I love that you and Levi are dating, and I want to hear all the details, every last bit.”

I smiled and hugged my sister before she left. As soon as she was gone, I fell to the bed with a sigh. I hated lying to my family, especially Emily, but I was also relieved that Em believed me. Considering she could read me better than anyone, the fact that she fell for our story meant the rest of my family likely would too. I wasn’t as close to my older brothers, and Grace was too busy with her family to really dive into my personal life. I just hoped Em would stay too busy with wedding planning to really dig deep or notice if I acted weird.

Knowing everyone thought I was with Levi meant less time trying to avoid being set up and more time to focus on what really mattered - the job search.

I opened my laptop and did a quick search on my college’s job board. A new job had been posted in my field and I clicked on it. The Tanzania Wildlife Reserve Internship Program.

My heart skipped a beat. I’d heard about the program from my department, and a few of our alumni had completed the program and ended up working at it full-time. The internship often led to a career with the reserve or another in Africa. It was considered one of the most prestigious opportunities in the

field of exotic animal veterinary medicine, and only a few lucky people got chosen when they were open for new interns.

I read through the requirements, checking all the boxes plus some, before heading to their website. Brilliant photos of Africa. Elephants being fed by hand. Giraffes that stuck their head in the window of your office. And I knew their reputation of being good to the animals, focusing on their care above all else, was amazing.

This truly was a dream opportunity, and they only opened the program every few years. This was my one chance.

But Africa... It was so far away.

I had always imagined leaving Sunville, and part of me had always dreamt of moving somewhere like Tanzania or Kenya one day, but I never really thought about it seriously. The thought of being on a whole other continent from my family made me sad, but at the same time, that's what airplanes were for.

I knew I likely wouldn't get chosen anyway. After all, thousands apply and only a handful get selected. The rejection rate was incredibly high. There were numerous interview rounds and tests, and it was not going to be easy.

But it was worth a shot. At least if I got denied, I could always tell myself I tried. If I didn't at least try, I might always wonder what if...

I bookmarked the page and navigated to my resume and CV and began cleaning it up. The application was long; I knew it would take me several hours, but it's not like I had anything better to do.

And in that moment, the only thing that mattered was applying for my dream job.

CHAPTER 6

I checked the time. I had an hour before I needed to get ready for the wedding and head out. Dr. Graham knelt by my mama goat with a stethoscope to her belly.

“She’s likely due any day now, but I think you already knew that,” the vet said.

“But everything seems fine?” I asked, petting Ginger’s head gently. The goat bleated at me and tried to stand up. The vet moved out of the way, and we let the goat stand up on four legs. She was so round and looked ready to burst. I’d called the vet for a routine check-up to make sure everything was going smoothly.

“Everything looks perfectly fine. I don’t see any issues. She seems healthy. Her heart rate and everything is normal.”

“Glad to hear it. It’s my first time being a goat midwife.”

The vet didn’t laugh at my joke as he packed away his tools. But I didn’t hire him for his sense of humor; I’d hired him for his knowledge of farm animals.

We walked back to his car and made some small talk.

“You have my emergency line in case you need it. If I’m not on-call, someone else will be,” he said. “And we can always be here within the hour.”

An hour. It seemed like such a long time if something went wrong, but I had to trust that nothing would go wrong. Animals gave birth in the wild without the helping hands of humans all the time, Ginger and her babies would be just fine.

“Thanks, Doc,” I said.

The vet got into his car and drove away, giving me plenty of time to get ready. But first...

“Ginger girl, you deserve a carrot for being so good for the vet.”

I went into the house, got some sliced carrots and hand fed them to her and the other goat in the enclosure with her, Gilbert.

My phone buzzed and I pulled it out to find a photo from Anna.

I borrowed a dress from Emily... what do you think, the pink or the black one from before?

The pink dress was floral and girly and very pretty with a skirt that flowed out and showed off her figure, but it just lacked the sexiness of the first one.

Beautiful, but if I get to choose, I say go with the black one.

You don't think it's too...Idk, slutty maybe?

I snorted and scared Gilbert, and I apologized to the goat before replying.

No, it's perfect.

I didn't tell her the sexiness was the main reason I loved the dress. She looked hot as hell in it, and I knew everyone would be looking at the gorgeous woman on my arm. It was still appropriate for a wedding, in my opinion, but then again... what did I know about weddings. I had to see Anna in that dress, and I had to tear it off her at the end of the night.

Alright, if you say so! See you soon!

“Sorry guys, I have a very pretty girl to get ready for,” I told the goats, giving them the last of the carrots before going inside the cabin. Considering how amazing she was going to look, I had to make sure to put some effort into my appearance as well.



Anna stepped out the front door and my jaw hit the ground.

She was never one to get all dolled up, which I appreciated about her. She was a girl-next-door, wore her hair in a braid or a ponytail, jeans, t-shirts, and she still managed to look gorgeous.

But seeing her in that slinky dress in person almost made my head explode.

Her honey blonde hair fell in soft ringlets, framing her face and going down to the middle of her back. She even wore makeup. Thick, black lashes fluttered up at me as she asked, “Well? What do you think?”

Her lips were a dark, vixen red, showing off their plumpness. I wanted nothing more than to kiss her, but I stopped in my tracks, afraid I would ruin the look as well as overstep my boundaries.

“Well?” she asked again.

My throat was parched, and I couldn’t find the words to describe how breathtakingly gorgeous she was. Everything that came to mind sounded so cliché and cheesy.

“You—you look amazing,” was the best I could come up with. “Like...really fucking amazing.”

Her lips pulled back into a sexy smile. “Good,” she said, tapping me on the chest as she passed me and walked to my truck. My gaze fell on her nice, round ass and I swear she wiggled it as she walked to entice me.

I took a step and nearly face planted into the concrete by missing the step.

Anna looked back over her shoulder and let out a breathy laugh. “Careful, Levi. I would hate for you to bust up that beautiful face of yours.” She winked and I followed, making sure to pay extra attention to each step until we got to my truck.

I opened the door and put my hands on her hips to help her into the high cab. Feeling the curve of her waist under that dress... I thought my other head might explode as I helped her slide into the seat, but somehow, I managed to keep my cool.

It's gonna be a long night, I thought to myself. Maybe I should have told her to wear the pink dress to avoid taking her into the bathroom and rocking her world at the wedding.

Nah, it would be worth it when I could finally undress her and have my way with her.

The wedding was at a country club just outside of town. I parked the truck and helped Anna to the ground.

"Thanks," she whispered. "Ready to pretend we're a real couple?"

"Ready as ever," I whispered back. For good measure, since anyone could be watching us, I gave her a quick kiss. She kissed me back. I wrapped my arms around her and held her to me.

"Get a room, you two," a voice called out from nearby.

I glanced over to find my sister, Irene, walking toward us with a cheeky grin, holding her husband Logan's hand. My brother, her twin, Clay was by their side with his wife Robin. Clay gave me a weird look.

"Irene told me you had a girlfriend," he teased. "But I didn't believe her."

"I told you!" Irene said. "Our baby brother nabbed a good one too."

"Nice to see you again, Anna," Clay said, shaking her hand. "This is my wife, Robin."

"Pleasure to meet you," Robin said.

"It's great to meet you too," Anna said, shaking Robin's hand.

"And this is my husband, Logan," Irene said, introducing her husband.

They exchanged pleasantries as well.

“So are the others here already?”

“It’s just gonna be us tonight,” Irene said. “Adam is sick, so Boone couldn’t make it, and Dylan couldn’t fly in. Brody said he had plans already.”

Anna already knew my family, but once we added in all the wives and kids, it would have been a lot. In a way, I was relieved it would just be Clay, Irene, and their partners. Easier to avoid too much scrutiny or screw ups, the less we’d have to tell our “story.”

I was praying it would be an easy evening. See my friend get married. Dance and drink a little. Then back to my place for some fun with Anna.

We walked toward the garden area where the wedding was to be held, and Irene walked on one side of me.

“So you happened to RSVP plus one months before you two began dating, huh? What’s up with that?”

I shrugged. “I just figured I’d try to find someone. Weddings are no fun to attend alone.”

“You’ve never had a problem before.”

“I haven’t been to too many black-tie weddings before either.”

“Touché.”

Irene caught up with Logan and took his hand. I laced my fingers through Anna’s as we approached the venue.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Clark walking in by himself. I waved at him, and he walked over before we sat down. His dark eyes scanned Anna quickly, and he wasn’t the only one. Pretty much every man in the place had checked out my date, many of them unable to take their eyes off her. Hell, neither could I, for that matter.

“Anna, this is my friend, Clark,” I said. “Clark, this is Anna.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Anna. I’ve heard all about you. Everything, in fact. Hey, Levi, can we talk for a moment?”

About the plans I gave you.”

“Sure, you can talk right here.”

He moved his gaze over the others in our party. “I think it would be easier if we talked alone. There’s some... proprietary information I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Okay...” I glanced at Anna. “I’ll be right back, I guess.”

As soon as we were out of earshot, Clark playfully punched me.

“What the hell, man?” I laughed.

“You know what that was for.”

“What?”

“You’re falling for her.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. I see the way you look at her.”

“You spent like two seconds with the two of us!”

His brow furrowed. “Trust me, man. I’ve seen a lot of my friends insist they weren’t falling in love when they were. And they always had this puppy dog look on their face when in the presence of the woman. I could always tell. And you, my friend, you have that look.”

“Because she’s hot, Clark. That’s it. Like... look at her.”

“I can’t deny that. She’s fucking stunning, but she’s not staying in Sunville, remember?”

“I know, and that’s why we aren’t serious. Just having some fun.”

“Uh huh. Just remember that. I was there when you came home after Beth broke your heart. I really don’t want to pick you up off the ground again, after you throw everything you’ve worked so hard for away.”

I placed a hand on Clark’s shoulder. “Trust me, Clark. I’m not going to get hurt. There’s nothing but pure, sexual attraction between us, and when she leaves at the end of the summer, that’s the end of it. I’m not going anywhere.”

Saying those words, my voice cracked. I averted my gaze and prayed Clark didn't pick up on the doubt inside my head. Sure, maybe I was lying to him, but I was lying to myself as well. Either way, she was leaving, so what did it matter? I'd deal with that when the time came.

Clark said, "Fine, if you say so. I just worry about you."

"I appreciate it, man. But you have nothing to worry about. Now can we get back to the group? The wedding is about to start."

"Sure," Clark said, shaking his head again.

I took my seat beside Anna, and we clasped hands. I placed a kiss on the back of her hand, all for show, of course, but her skin was so soft, and she smelled amazing. I closed my eyes and inhaled the sweet scent of vanilla.

The wedding march started, and one by one, the bridal party made their way down the aisle. My friend, Patton, looked pale as a ghost and stumbled a bit at the altar, causing a few chuckles from the audience.

"He looks terrified," Anna whispered to me.

"Knowing Patton, he likely just had too much to drink the night before."

"Wild bachelor party?" Anna asked, her voice low.

"Knowing him, yeah. I didn't go, not really my scene, but Patton is a bit of a wild one. Hopefully Molly will help him settle down a bit."

We all stood as the bride began her walk down the aisle. Anna gasped, and while the bride was gorgeous, she had nothing on my date. But you wouldn't know it by looking at Patton's face. The puppy dog look Clark was talking about earlier. I saw it. He was no longer pale, and his eyes filled with tears. I'd never before seen Patton cry... that was a first.

"He really loves her," Anna whispered to me, clearly seeing the same signs I did.

"That he does." I gave Anna's hand another squeeze as we took our seats once more.

My heart was racing, and I couldn't stop stealing looks at Anna.

Did I look at her the same way Patton looked at Molly, the way Logan looked at Irene, the way Clay looked at Robin?

I glanced at Clark, and as if he could read my mind, he gave me a look and mouthed, "Be careful."

CHAPTER 7

Everything about the wedding was breathtaking. The venue, with a view of the mountains in the distance, right on a lake. The natural beauty of the gardens. Even the bride's dress... While I'd never dreamt of what my wedding dress would look like, if I had, it would look exactly like that.

A simple, bohemian style that flowed freely, fluttering with each step as if the bride was on some ethereal plane all her own. A simple flower crown replaced the traditional veil, and her bouquet of sunflowers was perfect.

I felt like a little girl all of a sudden, planning a wedding of my own for the first time. Imagining the flowers, the dress, everything... but I stopped myself, snorting in laughter at my own silliness.

Levi gave me a look. "You okay?"

I covered my nose and pretended to sneeze, feeling bad because I laughed loud enough that Irene and even Clark were staring at me.

"Yeah, just allergies," I lied.

Levi patted me on the back, rubbing my shoulder as we focused on the ceremony and prepared for the kiss. Patton looked at Molly with such love in his eyes, and my tummy ached. If only someone looked at me that way one day... and I shut that thought down as quickly as it came on.

I didn't need a man to look at me that way. I didn't need anyone. Romantic love was a fairy tale. I didn't want to compromise or give up on my dreams for a man who likely

had his own dreams and ambitions. No, I didn't want any of this, I reminded myself.

The couple kissed and were pronounced husband and wife. We all stood and cheered as they walked down the aisle, smiling wide, but they looked at each other as if the rest of us weren't even there. It was just the two of them, no one else mattered.

Another ache in my belly.

Stop it, Anna. As soon as the honeymoon phase is over, they will bicker and fight just like your parents do. No relationship is perfect.

"That was beautiful," Irene said with mascara streaking down her face. She dabbed at the tears as Logan wrapped an arm over her shoulder. "Sorry, weddings always get me."

We followed them to the ballroom, hand-in-hand with Levi. I kept looking at him and smiling. I couldn't help myself.

A man in a suit was always nice on the eyes. But Levi in a suit? Holy hell, that should be illegal. I could see the single women staring at us with envy in their eyes. He could have any woman in Sunville, yet he wanted to remain single. He didn't want any of them. I understood it, of course, but it felt like such a shame that a man like him would remain a bachelor forever. I knew from our time together he was a catch, in more ways than one. He was more than a handsome face and hot body.

As we stepped into the ballroom, classical music was playing in the background. A server handed us two glasses of champagne and we helped ourselves to some appetizers.

The ballroom overlooked the lake and had giant windows with beautiful mountain views, and thankfully, our seats were by the windows.

We were seated with Irene and Clay and their partners. Clark waved at us from a table on the other side of the giant ballroom, beautiful women on either side of him, but he stared down at his hands after the wave.

“What’s up with your friend?” I asked Levi as we sipped champagne and waited for the arrival of the happy couple.

“Who, Clark?”

“Yeah. He’s surrounded by beautiful, likely single women who are eyeing him as I speak, and he doesn’t seem to be the least bit interested. He looks bored, in fact.”

“Yeah, he is determined to stay single forever,” Levi chuckled.

Irene glanced at Clark and frowned. “What a shame too. He’s not bad looking... I bet I could set him up with one of my friends.”

“Don’t bother, trust me, his friends have all tried. Clark refuses temptation at every turn. There’s a funny story about him, how he managed to beat all his friends for a car simply by staying single the longest.”

“That’s crazy!” I laughed. “I mean, I get the not wanting to settle down part—” I stopped talking before I stepped in it.

Levi kissed my hand. “Yeah, Anna was pretty determined to stay single before we met.”

“So were you, Levi,” Irene laughed. “Did he tell you how hard we tried to set him up, Anna?”

“Oh yeah, he told me,” I said, sipping more of my champagne.

“I’m glad you two reconnected. You really are perfect for each other.”

“Mmmhmm,” I said, shoving a bacon wrapped asparagus into my mouth since I couldn’t think of anything to say.

Thankfully, the music changed, and Patton and Molly Roswell entered and were announced as husband and wife. Everyone stood and cheered, and I was grateful for the conversation change.

“Her dress is amazing,” Robin said from beside me.

“Isn’t it? I love that it’s so simple, yet elegant.”

“I agree,” she said. “Have you thought about what your wedding might look like? You know, if things with Levi get serious and all?”

My smile flipped upside down. They were determined to have these conversations. Why did Levi and I have to be the center of attention, especially at someone else’s wedding?

“Uhh not really, honestly. We only started dating last week.”

“Oh, God, I’m sorry,” Robin laughed. “It’s just the way you two are together. It feels like you’ve been together forever. I didn’t realize.”

“It’s okay, we hear that a lot.”

“Well, it just means you’re a good match.”

We all took our seats again, and I tried to turn the conversation away from Levi and me. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starving.”

“I heard they’re doing a seafood spread along with sliced prime rib,” Robin said from beside me.

“That sounds fancy...and delicious,” I said, grateful the conversation had shifted at last.

As predicted, dinner was amazing. All-you-can-eat grilled shrimp and king crab. Someone paid a pretty penny for that meal, and I was going to get their money’s worth. Levi smiled at me and wiped his face as if to signal to me to do the same. With a napkin, I wiped away butter dripping from my chin.

He leaned closer to me and whispered, “I think you dropped a shrimp down the front of your dress.”

I had felt it fall down there but was hoping no one else noticed. “I’m saving it for later.”

“For me or you?” he teased.

I tapped him playfully as I did my best to pull out the shrimp without anyone noticing. The entire time, Levi was stifling a laugh. And I noticed it wasn’t just Levi. Irene was

red from trying not to laugh out loud and Robin was covering her mouth.

“Sorry, I’m not the most graceful woman in the world,” I said.

“It’s okay, I was just thinking... that’s exactly why I don’t wear low cut dresses too often,” Robin said with a laugh.

Irene finally gave in and started laughing. “Girl, you can’t help it, you’re more blessed than usual. Those things likely catch everything, I bet you’re pulling food out of them nightly.”

“To be honest, I don’t usually wear things this revealing. This was just a special occasion.”

“Considering my brother can’t keep his gaze off from your cleavage, I think you really should do it more often.” Irene shot me a playful grin.

My cheeks burned, but she was right. I’d noticed that Levi couldn’t keep his gaze off my ample bosom all night. I caught him stealing glances often. That’s likely how he knew the shrimp had fallen down there.

“You two are so cute,” Robin said. “Aren’t they?”

She turned to Clay, and he nodded. “Adorable,” he said dryly with a chuckle. “Absolutely adorable.”

Levi flipped his brother off.

I’d known his family for some time, but we’d never spent time together like this. The laughter and smiles continued throughout dinner. Clay playfully teased his baby brother, and Levi teased right back. I loved how close they all seemed; it reminded me of my own siblings.

A spotlight lit up the middle of the room, and suddenly all eyes were on Molly and Patton. A massive, tiered cake dripping with flowers was brought out, and unlike some couples, they fed each other from it very nicely. Patton even wiped away the icing on Molly’s face, and they both smiled at each other like they were the only people in the room.

My tummy started flip-flopping again.

Stop it, Anna. No, you don't want that. Because it's not real. It's all hormones and positive chemicals, but as soon as that wears off, they will grow bored with each other. It's inevitable.

Oh, but for a moment... It looked so nice, and my face hurt from smiling at them.

The cake was served to the rest of us, and I dug in. Levi chuckled.

“What?” I asked.

“You have some frosting there.” He wiped at his face. I tried to match his movement on my own face, but I felt the frosting slide around. The rest of the table tried to pretend they were oblivious, but I knew once again, I made another faux pas.

“I got ya,” Levi said, picking up a napkin and wiping the frosting from my face.

Our eyes met and my heart hammered against my ribs again. It reminded me of the scene only moments before between the bride and the groom.

He smiled as he cleaned off the frosting, his fingers briefly touching my skin. I almost leaned into that touch, savoring it, but then I'd likely spread the frosting back on my cheek.

Instead, I said, “Thank you.”

“Levi has always been so good about taking care of others,” Irene said from across the table. “He's a natural caregiver. I'm not surprised he decided to save all those animals.”

Levi shrugged and muttered something I couldn't make out.

“Always so humble too,” Irene said with a chuckle.

We finished our cake and the lights dimmed as it was announced that the bride and groom were going to have their first dance. Everyone stood to watch, walking toward the dance floor as the music began to play.

Patton held Molly in his arms as they began moving to the music. I half-expected them to just move back and forth, typical high school slow dance style, but they surprised us all when the music changed to something more upbeat. The crowd went wild, laughing and clapping as the pair executed an impressive tango. Their fun was evident, written all over their faces, and it filled the air, contagious to everyone who was watching.

I had always thought weddings had to be stuffy, formal affairs, but Molly and Patton were filled with surprises. I was on my feet, swaying to the music and clapping at their performance.

“That’s impressive,” I whispered to Levi. “Did you know he was capable of moves like that?”

“Many of us football players took dance lessons on the side,” Levi admitted with an adorable grin.

“Really?”

“Our coach encouraged it, said it would help us on the field,” Levi said. “Not that any of us would ever admit to liking it.”

“So, you can dance like that?”

Levi raised an eyebrow. “I guess you’ll just have to see, won’t you?”

“I can’t wait. I took some ballroom dancing back in the day, you know. I might give you a run for your money.”

“Ooh, is that a challenge?”

“Maybe...” I trailed off.

Truthfully, it had been years since I tried to dance, but my mom had wanted all her daughters to have experience since ballroom dancing had been her passion in her youth. I took ballet, tap, jazz and a little tiny bit of ballroom to appease my mother.

I always thought it had been a waste of time, but if I could impress Levi with my moves, well, it would all be worth it.

As the dance finished with Patton dipping Molly and kissing her, the DJ announced, “Now it’s your turn to show the crowd what you got. The dance floor is open to everyone.”

“That’s our cue,” I said, taking Levi’s hand and guiding him to the floor.

A salsa number came on, and I was about to ask Levi if he had any salsa experience when he took me in his arms and began leading me. No, we weren’t perfect, but with his lead, I was able to remember many of the moves I had been taught all those years ago. And somehow, I managed to not step on his toes, which I considered a big win.

He pulled me closer to him, and our faces were inches apart. His breath was warm on my face, his lips luscious. I knew their softness and craved feeling them against mine.

His body pressed against mine, and I felt his excitement against my belly. A warmth rushed through my entire body as I ground against him, yearning to feel him, all of him.

His hands on my hips, pulling me closer to him. Our mouths moved toward each other.

Then the music changed. It shifted from the spicy, Latin music to something softer. A slow dance. Without even a pause, Levi’s hands wrapped firmly around my waist, and I felt trapped against his body.

Not that I wanted to get away.

But the heat between my legs, the desire to kiss him and touch him and hold him... It was all too much.

It was too real for an otherwise fake relationship.

“I need some air,” I whispered.

Levi released his grip on me, and I slipped away into the crowd, nearly running for the door. I wasn’t sure if Levi tried to follow me or not; there were too many people in the way, and I didn’t bother looking back. I had my sights set on the exit and that was it.

I couldn’t breathe and it had nothing to do with the crowd and everything to do with what Levi did to me.

Dammit, Anna, I cursed myself. This is fake. It's all fake.

But it felt so real.

Too real.

I pushed open the doors and stepped into the cool, evening air. I felt better the second the cool breeze rushed over my skin and through my hair.

I sat down on a bench outside the venue and closed my eyes. *Focus, Anna. Focus on breathing and forget about Levi for two seconds. Forget about how freaking amazing he looks in that suit, and how his lips are so kissable. Forget about how he can dance better than anyone you've ever met. Forget about how good his body felt against yours...*

“Excuse me?”

I opened my eyes to find a woman standing in front of me. She was about my mother's age and had a very nice smile.

She didn't wait for a response before sitting next to me. “I'm sorry to bother you. Are you okay, miss?”

“I just needed to catch my breath but thank you.”

“I understand. Patton and Molly know a lot of people. It was getting really stuffy in there for me too,” she said with a laugh. She pulled out a cigarette and offered me one, but I shook my head since I didn't smoke.

“I usually don't smoke much anymore, gave it up twenty years ago, but this wedding planning really has taken over my life and made me pick the habit back up again.”

“Wedding planning?” I asked.

“Yes, I'm Patton's mother. Call me Carol,” she said sweetly. She seemed to think for a moment and put the cigarette away after all, maybe because I had declined. “You're here with Levi, right?”

“I am, yes.”

Carol's smile widened. “I've known Levi since he was a little bitty thing, no taller than my knees. Can you believe he was ever that small?”

“Hard to believe now,” I agreed with a smile.

“Well, I have to say, I have never seen him as happy as I have tonight, with you. The way he looks at you... I have a feeling your wedding bells aren’t too far off.”

My heart jumped. I wanted to argue with her, tell her we weren’t ever getting married, but it just felt... rude, almost. I couldn’t figure out what to say, but thankfully, I didn’t have to.

“There you are,” Levi said, walking over to the bench.

“Speaking of the devil. I knew he wouldn’t let you out of his sight for long,” Carol said. She stood up and patted the seat for Levi. “I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone.”

“Mrs. Roswell, you don’t have to—”

“No, I insist. I need to get back in there anyway. It was great seeing you, Levi, and I loved meeting you, Anna. Best of wishes to the two of you.”

The woman sauntered back into the party. Levi didn’t sit, he just stood there with his hands in his pockets, and the feeling of warmth from earlier had returned. Just looking at him... overwhelming.

“You really look good in that suit,” I told him, making the understatement of the year.

“Thanks,” he said. “And you look amazing in that dress. I swear, every guy in there was checking you out.”

I laughed, realizing I hadn’t noticed a single guy checking me out, but I hadn’t been paying attention to anyone but Levi to say for sure.

“You okay?” he asked me, taking the seat next to me.

“Yeah. Like I said, I just needed some air.”

“It’s a big party,” Levi said. “Way more people than I expected.”

“Yeah, too many people if you ask me,” I said with a laugh.

“I agree...I’m not much for crowds like that either. Do you want to get out of here?”

“So soon?”

“I told Patton and Molly congratulations, I left my gift, I did my part. I doubt they’ll even miss us to be honest. There’s at least 250 other people in there they have to talk to.”

“You’re probably right,” I said. “But I hate to make you leave your friend’s party.”

“Anna, trust me. I want to get out of here. That’s why I offered.” He chuckled.

“Two peas in a pod, huh?”

“Seems that way,” he said. He looked at me with the most earnest, most sincere smile. I remembered what Carol said, what everyone had been telling us... that the way Levi looked at me was special.

And I could feel it, the way his smiles went all the way to his eyes. The way he laughed around me. How neither of us were really people-people, but somehow never ran out of things to talk about.

Shit.

They were right.

He was falling for me.

“So... I hope this isn’t too forward, but your place or mine?” Levi asked.

I wanted to tell him neither, that we needed to stop this because one of us was going to end up hurt.

“Levi, are you sure...”

He placed fingers to my lips to shush me. “I’m sure, yes. And yes, I remember the rules to our agreement. Don’t you worry about me.”

My insides were aching, and my panties were soaked. I wanted him so badly, even though I knew it was dangerous.

“Your place,” I said softly. “If that’s okay. I’m staying with my family.”

“This time, we’ll even make it to the bedroom,” he said with a playful wink. “I promise.”

CHAPTER 8

I dropped to my knees in front of Anna, my face at her stomach level. My hands moved over her hips, scrunching up the material of the dress on either side. “We need to get this off of you,” I growled. “But first, I need a little taste...”

I nudged her back on my bed and lifted the skirt of the dress, dipping underneath it and parting her thighs so I could fit between them.

Her panties were silky and black. Sexy. As if she had planned for me to see them.

I slipped them to the side with one hand. I rubbed at her folds, feeling the softness of her up close and personal. Her hair was light and soft, as was her skin.

Parting her lips, the warmth of her on my hands sent my testosterone into overdrive. All the blood rushed down, causing my cock to grow even harder than before, something I didn't even realize was possible at that moment.

Anna let out a little gasp of pleasure as I teased at her opening.

Touching her was nice, but I wanted more.

I wanted to taste her.

I wanted all of her.

She had driven me wild all night in that sexy little dress, and I wanted nothing more than to be inside her. My body ached with the need. But I didn't want to rush this time.

Who knew how long we had together, how many opportunities I would have to be with her? I wanted to make every second last. Not just for my sake, but for hers as well. I wanted to make sure she never forgot Levi Callaghan.

I dove between her lips, my tongue pressing against her slit. Anna let out a whimper as I circled it with my tongue, her juices flooding my mouth. She was so damned wet, and I lapped up that wetness, savoring the sweet taste of her as I played with her.

“Levi...” she whimpered, falling backward onto the bed so she was lying down. “Oh God, don’t stop.”

I had no intention of stopping.

I gently slipped a finger inside her, and her back arched upward. Her groans were like music to my ears.

I slipped in a second finger, arching it to rub her g-spot. She cried out in pleasure, her hands finding the back of my head, her nails digging into my scalp and pressing my face deeper into her.

I found a rhythm with my tongue, circling and teasing her clit as I fucked her with my fingers. Her thighs tightened around me, she writhed and shook on the bed, and I knew she was close. She didn’t have to tell me when she came; she cried out my name and screamed loud enough to wake the neighbors miles away. Her body tightened around me, her nails nearly drew blood from my scalp, and for a few minutes, I couldn’t breathe. My face was buried against her, and I suffocated in the scent of her.

I loved every second of it.

She gushed more of her sweet wetness, and I lapped it up happily. Nothing had ever tasted as good as she did in that moment, and if I died from suffocation, at least I would die happy.

After a few moments, her body relaxed against the bed, and she let go of me. I pulled back and stared up at her, to see the look of pleasure on her face. Her eyes were half closed but directed at me. Her lips were pulled back in a lazy smile. Her

legs twitched around me as she laughed. “Oh my God, Levi, that was intense.”

My mouth and beard were soaked with her juices, and I licked it away as best as I could.

“Come here.” She motioned for me to crawl on top of her.

“We need to get you out of that dress first, remember?”

She let out a small groan of impatience, but she sat up and I helped her to her feet.

“I’ll make it quick, trust me,” I said.

She turned and I unzipped the dress, letting it fall to the floor. She stepped out of it, and I discovered that her bra matched her panties. Totally planned. She had wanted me to see this.

The black, lacey material was a stark contrast to her pale skin. The bra was nearly see-through, showing off hints of her perfect nipples underneath.

As sexy as she looked in them, the bra and panties had to go too. I made quick work of the bra and she slipped her panties off.

Seeing her naked, standing in front of me, my cock was throbbing. I felt like I could explode just from the sight of her, but thankfully I had more stamina than that.

“Your turn,” she said, reminding me I was still dreadfully overdressed.

“God, I hate suits,” I complained.

“They’re hard to get out of, but damn, do they look good on you, Levi,” she muttered, helping with my belt.

Our hands fumbled as we quickly got me out of my clothes. I likely ripped the buttons of the shirt as I pulled it off, but I didn’t care. I could buy another. I just needed to be naked, I needed to be inside her.

Once the clothing situation was taken care of, I grabbed Anna in my arms, lifted her off the floor, and together, we fell onto the bed. I pulled her on top of me, cupping those

magnificent, large breasts in my hands as she ground herself against me.

“Mmm, yes,” she said, soaking my cock with her wetness. “I’ve been thinking about this all night.”

“You know what they say about great minds.”

I took her nipple into my mouth, sucking it gently. Anna moaned, her thighs clenching around my body.

“I need you, Levi...” she whimpered.

“Then have me. I’m all yours.”

Anna took my cock into her tiny little hands and guided it toward her opening. Pressing against her, I thrust upward, parting her lips with the head. She slid down my member, taking every inch as she moaned in pleasure.

Her tightness gripping me was almost too much to bear. I had been ready to blow all night, and finally having her, it was even more amazing than the first time

“Fuck,” I moaned as she rocked back and forth on top of me. I grabbed her hips and helped move her up and down on my cock. Together we found a rhythm that was pure and utter bliss.

Anna leaned forward, kissing me, her tongue pushing past my lips as she continued riding me.

Her little whimpers and moans... it took everything in me not to lose control. I needed to make this the best night of her life; I didn’t want it to end in five minutes. *Focus, Levi, just not on how good it feels. Focus on...anything but the way her hair falls over your face and the way her body feels against yours.*

Fuck, that wasn’t working.

A change in position, a break to regain control.

I grabbed her hips and flipped her over so I was hovering above her, staring into her beautiful blue eyes. She smiled up at me as I penetrated her again, thrusting deep inside. Her eyes closed and her entire body arched upward to meet mine.

Her nails were digging into my back, her legs wrapped tightly around me, reminding me of moments before when I was tasting her... Jesus, she tasted so good, it wasn't even right.

Everything about this woman drove me absolutely crazy.

"Levi, I'm—I'm—" Her voice cut off into a whimper. Her body writhed underneath me.

"Come for me, Anna," I demanded.

"Yes, yes," she screamed. "Oh God, Levi!"

"Good girl. That's it, come for me, baby," I said to her, feeling as her pussy clenched around my cock, trying to milk me for everything I had.

I clenched my teeth and continued with the rhythm, straining to not release even as her body was basically demanding it of me.

No, not yet. Not yet...

She relaxed into the bed, and for a second, I wondered if perhaps she was done. Her eyes were nearly rolled back in her head and her mouth was partially open. I thought she might be asleep. But no, she was insatiable, and I loved it.

"I want more. Take me from behind, Levi."

"Your wish is my command, princess," I said, slipping off her and letting her position herself on the edge of the bed. I stood behind her, staring at that amazing, round ass for a second.

She wiggled in anticipation. "Please, Levi..."

I parted her lips and slipped my cock effortlessly inside her. She gripped the bedding as I entered her again.

I was close. Too close.

I tried to take it slow, moving in and out of her tight passage carefully and with precision, but I couldn't keep at it for long. The need grew inside me.

I couldn't hold off any longer.

“Yes, yes,” Anna encouraged me as I sped up, filling her deeper and deeper with each thrust. And when she said the words, “Come inside me, Levi,” I lost it. I lost all sense of control as I exploded inside her, my cock throbbing as pleasure coursed through every nerve in my body. Anna writhed in front of me, climaxing again, her pussy pulsing around my cock and milking me for every last drop.

I stayed like that for a second, savoring the feeling of being inside her as my cock slowly deflated. I slipped out and crawled into the bed beside her, spooning her.

She nestled against me with a satisfied sigh. “That was amazing...” Her voice sounded distant and sleepy. She rolled over to face me, her fingers lingering on my chest. Her eyes seemed to be heavy. She moved to rest her head on my chest.

“Yes, yes it was,” I whispered, stroking her hair as her body relaxed against me. Her breathing became slow and steady, and I knew she was asleep.

I stared at the beautiful woman in my bed, amazed by everything about her. Literally, every single thing about her was perfect.

Stop, Levi.

Why, I questioned myself? Maybe this is it, maybe she is the woman you've been waiting for.

No, because this isn't real, I reminded myself.

My heart ached at the reminder. My brain was right. This wasn't real. She was planning to leave. But what if... nah, stop it, Levi. You don't want a woman changing you or your dreams. It's not fair to ask her to do the same for you. Just stop and enjoy the time you have together



I couldn't sleep, couldn't shut off my brain. As soon as the sun started to rise outside, I crawled out of bed, careful not to wake Anna. I went outside and gathered the eggs, letting her

sleep as I tried to distract myself from my own internal dialogue.

I heard rustling from the bedroom and then the toilet flushed. She called out to me. “Levi?”

“In the kitchen,” I said, cracking the egg against the pan. Now that she was awake, I could start cooking.

She stumbled into the kitchen bleary eyed and out of it. Her long hair, which normally fell to her waist flawlessly, was standing up at all kinds of weird angles. She had racoon eyes from her makeup smudging. And she was wearing a robe I had left in the bathroom that was way, way too big for her. She looked like a little girl wearing her dad’s clothes.

She was absolutely adorable. So much so, I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I know, I look like a mess.”

“You look cute as hell.”

“No, I look awful,” she said. “Are you cooking breakfast?”

“I am, but if you’d like to shower first, I understand.”

“As long as you don’t mind looking at me in this state.”

I could look at her all day, every day, in that state and she would still be fucking gorgeous to me, but I kept those thoughts to myself.

“Like I said, you’re cute, so of course I don’t mind.”

I finished her omelet and handed it to her. “In case you were wondering, I do know how to cook other things.”

“Why do you need to cook other things when you make such a freaking amazing omelet?” she asked with a laugh, digging right in without me prompting her. I was glad she was getting more comfortable here, with me.

“Well, maybe I can make you dinner sometime because I make a mean lasagna as well.”

Anna stopped eating and her smile faded. “Levi, I—”

“I know, I know, I overstepped, I’m sorry. This isn’t supposed to be serious. I was just offering as a friend.” *Liar*, I called myself out internally. But I smiled. “But it’s okay, you’re right. It would probably complicate things.”

Too late. Things are already complicated... but I kept that to myself as well.

I made myself an omelet and joined her at the table.

“So, what do you have planned today?” I asked, trying to make small talk, something I wasn’t very good at.

“My sisters and I are going to pick up Emily’s wedding dress today, as well as our bridesmaid dresses.”

“Oh wow, everything is moving so fast.”

“Yeah, the entire wedding moved fast. I never knew someone who went from engaged to married in three months, but Emily said there was no reason to wait when you know you’ve found the one.”

“I get that,” I said. “Don’t worry, you can shower and head out whenever you’re ready. I won’t keep you.”

“I would like that shower now...if that’s okay.” She nibbled her lower lip like there was more to the request she wasn’t saying.

“Of course, make yourself at home.”

She slipped from the chair and walked over to me. “I was hoping you might join me.”

“That is definitely not an offer I’ll ever turn down. If I do, please, check for a pulse,” I said with a laugh.

She took my hand and led me to the bathroom.

“I noticed the shower is big enough for an orgy,” she said with a laugh. “And I thought... well, I might get lonely in this big ole shower by myself.”

“Happy to keep you company.”

I stripped down and Anna dropped the robe before stepping into the shower. She shot me the sexiest come-hither

look and I followed her. I would have followed her anywhere after a look like that.

My shower had two shower heads - one above and one on the side that could be detached from the wall. The one from above had a setting that felt like rain. I turned on the rain setting and reached for the soap I'd made myself.

I got the soap all over my hands and used them to lather Anna's amazing body. She let out a sigh of relaxation, leaning against the back of the shower as my hands explored her body, focusing on the top half first.

Her skin was so soft, so smooth, I could have massaged her breasts all day, but instead, I moved my fingers lower.

Anna's lips pulled back into a soft smile. "I like when you touch me all over."

"Good, because I love touching you," I said, resuming the washing. I slid the soapy suds around her stomach before moving even lower.

I gently slipped a hand between her thighs. I cleaned her inner thighs with my hands and Anna's eyes closed again. She was fully relaxed, sighing in pleasure.

With clean, soap-free hands, I slipped my fingers between her lips. I reached for the hand-held shower nozzle and turned it on a gentle setting. Just a light mist, nothing too intense.

I slipped it between her thighs and watched as her eyes opened wide. Her face twisted in surprise, but from the way she groaned, I could tell it was a good surprise.

Leaning forward, I kissed her deeply, holding the nozzle between her thighs, moving it just enough to provide some interesting sensations. Anna's lips parted and she kissed me back, her hands entwining in my hair, pulling me closer to her.

"Levi..." she whimpered as her body began to shake. "Oh God..."

I kept kissing her, holding the nozzle in place until her body relaxed against the back of the shower.

“You never cease to surprise me,” she said, breathless from her orgasm.

“Hopefully it was a good surprise,” I teased, even though I knew the answer.

“Always,” she said, placing a quick kiss on my lips.

I dropped to my knees and began washing her legs. My face was inches away from her most sensitive bits, and it took everything in me to not dive in for another taste. But she mentioned she had plans for the day... If I got started, I wasn't sure it would be quick. I would likely keep her in the shower, or my bed, all day.

I ran my hands up and down those thick thighs and her calves, before washing her feet gently.

I stood back up and growled, “Turn around.”

She did as she was told, and I moved her wet hair gently to the front of her body before washing her back. I massaged in the soap, focusing on the tight muscles in her shoulders and neck before moving lower.

Cupping that magnificent ass in my hands, my cock went wild. I'd already been hard, but it was throbbing now.

I reached for the shampoo and put a big dollop in my hand. Placing my hand in her hair, against her head, I massaged the shampoo into her scalp. I carefully brushed out any knots with my hands as I cleaned the entire length of her long hair before rinsing.

She reached for something else, another bottle on the floor I hadn't noticed before.

“I brought my own conditioner this time, just in case,” she said with a grin. I took the bottle from her hands and put some into my palm.

Running the silky conditioner through her strands was relaxing for both of us. I made sure her hair was coated from tip to end.

She turned around and smiled. “Need to leave it in for a minute or two.”

“Oh, whatever will we do while we wait?” I asked.

She smirked as she took the soap from my hands. “Your turn,” she said, lathering the soap in her hands and running her fingers over my chest, digging her nails in just a bit.

She moved those hands over my body, moving lower and taking my cock in her tiny hands. Gripping it slightly, she moved up and down the shaft. “Have to make sure we get it clean,” she said with a wink.

“Mmm yes, of course,” I growled.

She moved to my balls, soaping them gently before washing the rest of me. She took her time, like I had with her, massaging the soap over every inch of my body before rinsing the conditioner from her hair.

“I wish I had more time...” she murmured, nibbling her lip.

“It’s okay. We’ll see each other again soon.”

“That we will! This summer is packed with events.”

And I was so grateful. I’d never been one to be excited about a packed social calendar, but seeing Anna made it worth it.

She washed her face and kissed me one last time, her naked, wet body pressed firmly against mine.

I felt some dangerous words forming in my mouth, and they started to slip out before I could stop myself. “Anna, I—”

A phone rang from the bedroom, drawing her attention. “Oh crap, I wonder if that’s Emily. What time is it?”

I was both frustrated and relieved by the interruption. I almost said something I would regret, surely. It wasn’t, “I love you,” but I was about to express some feelings that were certainly not part of our agreement.

Anna hurried out of the shower, drying off before once again grabbing my robe and running into the bedroom where her phone was charging next to my bed.

I stepped out and started drying off when I heard a scream from the bedroom. I rushed in to find Anna jumping up and down.

“Everything okay?” I asked, then quickly realized the scream was one of joy.

“I just missed a call from my dream job. They left a message,” Anna squealed. “They want to set up a phone interview! This is huge, Levi!”

She ran over and hugged me, and feeling her happiness, I was smiling along with her. I lifted her off the ground and hugged her back. “Wow, that’s great news, Anna! I’m so happy for you.”

“This opportunity is so exclusive. Only a few people get selected when they open it for new interns,” she said, speaking a hundred miles an hour. “It’s at a reserve in Tanzania.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. “Tanzania? As in, Africa?”

“Yes! Can you believe it?” she said, dancing around the room as she threw on her bra and panties from the night before. “I might be moving to Africa.”

Africa.

She might be moving to Africa.

“That’s—That’s awesome, but it’s just so far away,” I said.

“It is, but it’s the opportunity of a lifetime, Levi. I have dreamt of this ever since I was a little girl!”

My heart was breaking with every word.

You have no right to be upset about this, I reminded myself. *She told you she was leaving.*

But I thought she might move to somewhere in the US, not a whole other continent.

Why does it matter, though? Either way, this arrangement was meant to be temporary.

You knew that going into this, Levi. You knew this.

But Africa. Fuck.

Anna got dressed as I wrestled with my feelings.

“I have to go,” she said, kissing me. Her lips lingered on mine, and there was...well, there was something there. When she pulled away, her smile had faded and was replaced by a look of surprise.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Umm, I just– well, I have to go,” she repeated, no longer looking me in the eye. Her cheeks were pink. She hurried out of the bedroom, and I followed her, but she was out the door before I could stop her and say goodbye.

She was gone.

Just like she will be in a few months.

CHAPTER 9

“These dresses, oh my God,” I exclaimed as I stepped out in the slinky pink number Emily had picked out for us. I turned in the mirror and frowned at my belly poking out, but then I remembered Levi telling me how beautiful I was, and it brought a smile to my face.

“I know, right?” Grace stepped out, wearing the same slinky dress. “These things hug every curve. I feel like a goddess.”

I heard my sister speaking, but my mind was elsewhere. The way Levi looked at me, *he* made me feel like a goddess.

“You seem distracted and extra giddy this morning. Good night with the boyfriend, I take it?” Grace asked, raising an eyebrow.

It was more than just Levi... I had a phone interview with my dream job. But I hadn't told anyone about my job in Austin falling through yet, so it felt like a big jump to tell them about the interview. Especially since it was just the first of many steps and there was still a big chance it would go nowhere.

Emily, who was in the dressing room nearby piped up, “The way you and Levi are together, it's no wonder you're giddy.”

“Yeah...” I trailed off, turning in the dress like a little girl in a princess gown. I caught sight of myself in the mirror and was grinning like a fool. “We went to Patton and Molly's wedding, and did you know Levi can dance? Like salsa

dancing! I had no idea, and he literally swept me off my feet and showed me up, even with those dance classes Mom used to make us take.”

“Oh, so that’s why you didn’t come home last night,” Emily said from the dressing room.

“Yeah, I stayed over with him. Did you know he also makes his own soap? From goat’s milk. He runs a business with his brothers, yet still has time to make goat cheese and soap. I don’t get how he has time for all that.”

“He’s a hard worker,” Grace said. “I’ve heard that about the Callaghan brothers.”

“That he is,” I agreed. “He built his own cabin. It’s all custom-designed and green and stuff... I swear, he’s so freaking smart.”

“He’s very impressive,” Grace commented, shooting me a knowing smile.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, what? Tell me why you’re looking at me like that.”

“Well, I mean, isn’t it obvious? You’re clearly in love with the guy.”

I turned away from her and faced the mirror once more, pretending to flatten the material of the dress. “Pfft, it’s too soon for that.”

“Nah, sometimes when you know, you know. Look at Emily. They’d only been dating for six months before they were engaged.”

“But I’ve known James since high school!” Emily called out.

“And Anna has known Levi since, what, grade school?”

“Something like that, but we weren’t super close since he’s a couple years behind me.”

“Yeah, but still... you’re both super smart, graduated top of your respective classes, you’ve always known of each other, and I have a feeling Levi always had a crush on you.”

I rolled my eyes. “No way.”

Emily spoke up. “No, James is friends with him and told me that in high school, when the guys were talking about who they had the hots for, Levi mentioned your name...”

Before I could think of anything to say, the door to Emily’s dressing room swung open and she stepped out.

Grace and I both let out a gasp. Emily’s dress was a mermaid style, fitted to the top half of her body but flaring out at the bottom with tulle and lace. It was way over-the-top for me, but it fit Emily’s style perfectly. Crystals outlined the bust, showing off just a little cleavage

“Holy shit,” Grace said before covering her mouth since she never swore much.

“What she means to say is you look amazing, Em.”

“It’s just... I had no idea you had such large breasts, Emily,” Grace said. “I swear, they’ve grown in the last few months.”

Emily’s cheeks flushed and she looked away. Her hands covered her belly and drew my eyes there.

Grace let out a squeak and rushed to our sister. “Do you have something to tell us, Emily?”

“What do you mean?” Emily turned bright red.

“The wedding was rushed, your breasts are suddenly bigger,” Grace said. “And am I imagining things, or is that a little bump under your hands there?”

My jaw dropped, as I hadn’t even considered that possibility.

“No, I’ve just been to one too many cake tastings,” Emily said, her cheeks turning pinker by the minute.

I knew my sister well, and I knew when she was lying. She couldn’t look you in the eye when she lied, and she always

turned the color of a tomato.

“Em!” I screeched. “You’re expecting?”

“No, I’m—” She stopped short, sighing and throwing her hands up. “Shh, come here. I don’t want everyone in the store to hear.”

Grace and I stepped closer to our sister, both of us giddy as we knew what she was about to tell us.

“Yes, fine, I’m pregnant. We just found out a couple weeks ago, but I didn’t want Mom and Dad to know I didn’t wait until marriage, since I always said I would. But it’s also—”

“Pfft, who cares about waiting until marriage,” Grace said. “Eee! I’m going to be an aunt!”

“Shh,” Emily reminded her. “No one but you two know, and James and I would like to keep it that way until we get past the three-month mark, in case of miscarriage.”

“Em! This is so exciting,” I exclaimed. “I know you want to wait to tell people, and I get it. I’m just so glad you told us!”

“I know, I hated keeping the secret from you two. We tell each other everything,” Emily said, tears filling her eyes. “I just... I just wanted to get the wedding over with first, and I didn’t want to get my hopes up about the baby. I didn’t want to get your hopes up either, but I have to admit, I feel a lot better telling you. I can’t lie to my sisters.”

Hearing her words made my stomach feel heavy, like I’d swallowed a lead weight.

My smile faded.

I had been lying to my sisters too, and she was right, we’d always told each other everything.

“No, it’s okay,” Grace assured her. “I understand why you didn’t tell us, and you told us now, so that’s all that matters.”

“No more secrets between us, please?” Emily said as her eyes drifted to me.

“No more secrets,” Grace agreed.

There was a moment of awkward silence as they waited for me to say something.

“Anna?”

“Yes?” I squeaked.

“Do you have something to tell us? You seem a little sketchy all of a sudden,” Emily asked.

I averted my gaze and knew that was one of my tells as well. Shit. They knew I was hiding something. They knew me.

I could tell them about the arrangement with Levi, but that wasn't just my secret. It involved Levi as well.

“Well... I haven't told anyone except for Levi, but the job in Austin isn't working out. They're closing the reserve. I don't have a job to return to after the wedding.”

“I knew it!” Grace said. “I knew you were keeping something from us.”

“So this means you and Levi can stay together?” Emily asked.

I bit my lip and felt like I might burst if I didn't share the next bit of news.

“Not exactly. I actually have a job interview for my dream opportunity. Though I may not get it, there's a lot of steps involved, it's still very exciting.”

“Oh, you better tell us all about that!” Emily demanded.

“It's nothing... I mean, compared to your news with the baby and the wedding and everything.”

“Oh shh, the wedding isn't new, and the baby...well, I'd rather not get my hopes up after the miscarriage I had early on, and like I said, I'm trying to temper my expectations here. So, tell me about this job!”

“Well... it's in Tanzania...”

“Is that in Texas?” Emily asked, cocking her head to the size. “Tanzania, Texas, I believe I've heard of that.”

Grace and I both laughed.

“Emily, no, there’s no Tanzania in Texas. I think there might be one in California. Or is that Tarzana?”

“You sure about that? I swear, I think I even drove through it on my way to Houston once—”

“No, it’s in Africa,” I said slowly.

Both sisters said, “Oh,” at the same time.

“That’s pretty far away, Anna.”

“I know, I know, and I may not get it, but... it is a dream of mine. But please, don’t tell Mom or Dad until I know more, okay?”

“Your secret is safe with us,” Emily said, with new tears in her eyes. “Damn pregnancy hormones, I cry at anything these days. But the thought of you being on the other side of the world... Gah. I thought Austin was far away. How does Levi feel about this?”

“We haven’t really talked about it much, but he knows that I was only planning to be here for the summer from the beginning.”

“Long distance with you in Austin is totally different from you being in Africa.”

“I know.” I wanted so badly to reassure my sisters that the arrangement with Levi was fake, but I kept my mouth shut. “Whatever happens, happens.”

“Well, either way, I’m happy if you’re happy,” Grace said, hugging me tightly. “Now I feel like I need to admit to something.”

“Do you have secrets, Grace?” I asked, glad to turn the conversation away from me.

She chuckled. “Oh don’t you know, I’m full of them. Like the other night, I had to tell Nicholas that the meat we were eating was chicken instead of venison since he just watched Bambi.”

“Wow, that’s like FBI level stuff,” Emily teased. “But seriously, can we promise each other something?” She looked

directly at me as she spoke.

“Anything,” I replied.

Emily took our hands in hers. “Can we promise each other that we will never keep secrets from each other again?”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. Grace said, “Absolutely,” while I managed a nod.

“Good,” Emily said, never taking her eyes off me. “I’m glad we had this talk. Now... let’s get out of these dresses and get something to eat. This baby is starving.”

We laughed and went our separate ways, but the guilt was beginning to eat me alive.

CHAPTER 10

“Thanks for coming over on such short notice,” Anna whispered to me as she greeted me at the door. She pulled me inside and plastered on a made-for-tv smile as we turned around and ran smack dab into her family.

Her entire family.

“Wow, I didn’t realize the whole gang would be here,” I muttered with a smile.

“I told you it was a family dinner,” she replied, taking my hand in hers.

Her mom was the first to greet me with a hug.

“Oh Levi, I’m so glad you could make it. I told Anna that if we are to have a family dinner, I wanted the entire family here. You’re practically family now, so it wouldn’t be right to not invite you.”

“I appreciate being included, Mrs. Berkshire,” I said, patting the woman on the back.

Next up was her father, Thomas, who greeted me with a firm handshake.

“Mr. Callaghan,” he said briskly.

“Mr. Berkshire, a pleasure to see you,” I replied.

The man didn’t smile, but he rarely smiled as far as I could tell. He always seemed so stern, as if he wanted to be intimidating. The type that might try to scare potential suitors

away with a shotgun, that sort of thing. I didn't take his lack of warmth personally; it seemed to be the norm for him.

Emily let out a squeal, and before I knew what was happening, she was hugging me. She whispered, "Levi, my soon-to-be brother-in-law, I can just feel it."

I chuckled uncomfortably. Her fiancé, James, shook my hand. We'd known each other since high school, so no introductions were necessary.

Grace nudged her sister away and hugged me, but less intensely as Emily, just whispering, "Welcome," before pulling away and introducing her husband, Brad.

"And these are my rugrats, Madeline and Nicholas," she said, patting the head of two little ones by her side. I wasn't good with ages, but they both looked to be no older than four.

"Looks like you have your hands full there," I said. I waved at the little ones. The boy, Nicholas, waved back but the girl hid behind her mom.

"She's shy," Grace said, rubbing the girl's back.

"It's okay, I understand."

Then it was her brothers, because of course Anna had to come from a large family not unlike my own.

"Good to see you again," TJ said as he shook my hand. "This is my wife, Lila, and my son Finn."

Then finally, the last brother, Noah introduced me to his wife, Candace, and his two daughters Olivia and Sophia.

Once the introductions were over, Mrs. Berkshire led us all into the dining room. Anna and I strayed to the back.

"Sorry, I know it's a lot... My family is a lot," she laughed.

"Trust me, I get it. Have you met mine?"

"Oh, I have," she said. "I'm glad you understand the craziness of it all."

"I do, I just didn't think *everyone* would be here. I thought it was just your mom and dad."

She flinched. “Sorry, I guess I should have been clearer.”

I squeezed her hand. “It’s okay. Like you said, I can understand the craziness.”

“I just hope my dad and brothers don’t go too hard on you.”

“Why would they?” I asked, and she gave me a look I didn’t understand as we took our seats.

It didn’t take long to figure out what she meant, however. As soon as we were seated and the food wasn’t even fully passed around, Anna’s dad turned to me and asked, “So Levi, you run a business with your brothers?”

“I do, yes. We run a camper business and—”

“Campers? Is there money in campers?” her dad asked, his brow furrowed.

“Why yes, there is. We’re actually very successful. With the tourists we see in the area each year, it’s actually a pretty big business.” Anna handed me the mashed potatoes and I put some on my plate.

“I just can’t imagine a camper business being successful,” her dad commented. “Can you, TJ?”

TJ looked at me and smiled. “I mean, if he says the business is successful, I believe him, Dad.”

“That wasn’t what I was asking,” his dad said. “You see, Levi, we’re in the financial sector and I see a lot of businesses that look successful on paper, but the reality is—”

“Dad.” TJ cleared his throat. “Maybe this isn’t the time to get into a business discussion.”

Rose cut in. “TJ is right, Thomas. Don’t interrogate the boy. If he says his business is successful, it is. Besides, I’ve heard a lot of good things about the Callaghan camper business.” She smiled sweetly as she handed Anna the plate of meatloaf.

“I just don’t see it being sustainable long-term, that’s all. I’m just looking out for Anna.”

Anna sighed as she handed me the meatloaf. “Dad, I don’t need anyone to look after me. I’m a big girl. And besides, I have my own career. It doesn’t matter what my partner does.”

“Your own career? Working at the reserve? I’m sure that won’t last long,” her father said.

Anna’s jaw clenched, but she took a few deep breaths. “Can we talk about something else? Anything else, please. I would rather not get into an argument over dinner.”

“Yes, of course,” Rose said, cutting in. “So, Levi, are you excited to be back in Sunville?”

“I am. I’ve always loved it here. It’s always been my home.”

“I wish Anna felt the same way,” Rose said.

Her brother, Noah, cut in, “Do you want kids, Levi?”

“What?” both Anna and I said at the same time.

“I’m just wondering if you plan to settle down and have a family here,” Noah said. His daughter threw a spoonful of mashed potatoes at her sister, who started crying, distracting Noah long enough to avoid the question entirely.

But his wife stepped up where he left off as Noah cleaned up the mess and tried to calm Sophia down.

“Sunville is an amazing place to raise children,” she offered with a smile. “We have some of the best school districts in Utah. Sophia has been accepted into Oxford Preparatory School.

“Is that elementary school or...”

“No, preschool,” Candace said. “A private preschool, but the waitlist is long, so if you would like to have children, Levi, you might want to add your name now.”

“But, uh, I don’t even have a child on the way.”

“The waitlist is six years long. We were lucky for Sophia. Someone I knew fell off and my dad made a sizable donation, so we were able to sneak her in. Olivia, on the other hand, I’m afraid she may have to go to public preschool.”

Lila next to her gasped as if that was the worst idea she'd ever heard. "Wouldn't you think of the Montessori school at least?"

"There's a wait list there too. Sadly, Olivia wasn't planned, so we will have to take what we can get."

I looked at Anna with my best WTF face and she responded by mouthing, "I'm sorry."

Noah, finally having calmed down the girls, turned back to me and said, "You didn't answer my question, Levi. Are you wanting to start a family?"

"I honestly don't know." And that was the God's honest truth at that point. Worrying about getting them into prep preschools and whatnot had never even occurred to me, nor did it sound enjoyable in the slightest.

"Well, you have some time," Noah said. "I mean, Anna isn't getting much younger but—"

"We have plenty of time," Anna interjected, her voice dry. "If we decided to have kids, that is. Which we haven't even discussed because we just started dating, Noah."

"Well, you know as soon as I saw Candace, I knew I wanted to put babies in her."

"Eww," Anna responded. "That was a little too much information for me, big brother."

Candace and Noah shared a look of love between them, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Sophia loading up another spoonful of mashed potatoes.

Before she could hurl it at her sister, I reached over and asked her, "Hey, can I have this? I'll show you a magic trick."

The little girl looked at me with wide eyes, and I thought she might start screaming. But she surprisingly handed the spoon of mashed potatoes to me. I cleaned out the potatoes with a napkin and said, "Now, watch this."

I moved my hands around, held a napkin up, and with a switch of my hands, made the spoon "disappear". I removed the napkin and Sophia's eyes lit up.

“Wow!”

Olivia was also staring, as were the other children, all of them with big, curious eyes. One shouted, “How did you do that?”

“It’s magic,” I said with a smile. “I’ll make it reappear if you promise not to use it to throw mashed potatoes at your sister.”

Sophia nodded vigorously.

I did the same thing with the napkin, and with a switcheroo of my hands, the spoon appeared seemingly out of nowhere

“WOW!”

I handed the spoon back to her and she stared at it for a long time before resuming eating.

“You’re good with kids, Levi,” Mrs. Berkshire said, beaming proudly. “Very good.”

“I have a lot of siblings, and now nieces and nephews. I’ve picked up some tricks over the years,” I said with a shrug.

“So about your brother, Dylan...” Mr. Berkshire started to say.

“Stop questioning him, Dad. He’s not here to be interrogated,” Anna said.

“I’m just curious since he left the business and moved away. I was curious what happened there. Family feud?”

“Not at all,” I said.

“Dad, stop,” Anna warned. “I love you, but please, can we let Levi enjoy his meal.”

“Fine,” her father said dryly.

The rest of dinner went pretty smoothly, and as soon as dessert finished, the children seemed to be wiggling from their chairs. When they were free to leave, I found all five of them by my side.

“Levi! Can you show us any more magic tricks?”

“Pweese?” Little Olivia pulled at my slacks with her tiny hands.

“Uh, sure,” I said, reaching into my pocket and digging around for some change. I pulled out a nickel. I kept it hidden from view as I pretended to pull it from little Olivia’s ear.

The girl gasped and put her hand to her ear as if trying to see if there were more where that came from. The other kids just stared with wide eyes.

“My turn!” Sophia called out.

“I’ll just put it in your ear really quick, for later,” I said with a smile. I pretended to put the nickel in Sophia’s ear and showed her my hands were empty.

Sophia felt her ear. “Where did it go?”

“Right here,” I said, turning to Nicholas and pretending to pull it from his ear.

The kids squealed.

“How’d you do that?”

“It’s magic,” I repeated.

The table full of adults chuckled, bringing me back to the real world.

“You’re really good with them,” Noah said. “You sure you don’t want a brood of your own anytime soon?”

I glanced at Anna, who was blushing. I really didn’t know how I could make it any more obvious that we simply weren’t discussing that.

“Uhhh—”

“Hey, I have an idea,” Anna said, taking my hand. “You’ve never seen my childhood room. I’d love to show it to you.”

Anna jerked me to my feet, out of the dining room, and up the stairs to her room. She shut the door behind us and fell against it. “I’m so sorry about that.”

“It’s fine,” I chuckled.

Her room looked just like a room a teenager would have. Posters on the wall. Drawings and doodles on a memory board near a vanity. Her walls were a light pink, which surprised me as Anna didn't seem like the girly type. There was a wallpaper border with tiny animals, and when I stepped closer, I noticed they were kangaroos.

The posters on her wall weren't of celebrity crushes or from movies; they were from nature magazines. A cheetah and her cub. A grizzly bear playing with a ball. And so many kangaroos.

"Your sister wasn't lying before. You really like kangaroos, huh?"

"I've always been obsessed with them." She smiled as she looked around. "I know it's weird, but I can't help it. They're just so cool... the way they carry their babies in their pouch. It's so cute!"

"What started your obsession with them?"

She shrugged and seemed to think for a second. "Nothing in particular. I just remember being around five or so, at the zoo, and seeing one. And I told my mom I wanted one as a pet. She said I couldn't have one as a pet and it broke my heart. From that day forward, I was determined to own one one day, until I realized how cruel it would be to keep it as a pet. Then I found out I could work with them at a reserve or zoo... and my career choice was set in stone."

She's literally perfect, I thought. Someone who loves animals as much as I do. I couldn't ask for anyone better.

"There aren't any kangaroos in Tanzania," I said, walking over to a picture on her dresser. It was her and her sisters when they were in high school. Her hair was in her signature ponytail, and she didn't look much different than she did today except a little curvier, which was nice.

"I know," she said. "But this opportunity could open a lot of doors. It's a two-year internship, and I likely wouldn't stay in Tanzania after that. I could then go anywhere. Australia is always a possibility."

My heart sank. Even though it didn't make a huge difference, Australia was even further away than Africa. *Levi, you already know she's not coming back to you. Stop it.*

"That's great," I said, forcing a smile. Then an idea occurred to me. "You know, you could always create a sanctuary of your own, and then you could be anywhere in the world. Even right here. There's plenty of land in Sunville."

Anna was quiet for a few moments. She walked over to her bookshelf and began straightening the already-straight books there.

"As nice as that sounds," she said, her voice low, "it's not that easy. I can't do it alone. I don't have that kind of money, and I'd need to buy land, pay employees, deal with regulations... It's a lot." She turned and looked at me with a sad smile.

"You wouldn't have to do it alone."

The words slipped from my mouth before I could stop them. I meant them. The idea of running a sanctuary with Anna would be a dream come true. I'd already started my little farm of rescue animals, but I could only do so much. With Anna's help, there were no limits to what we could do.

"Levi—"

"I know, I know. Temporary. I didn't mean it like that. It's just, well, I have similar dreams as you to help animals, but I get it. You need to do this."

"I do, and honestly, running something large-scale... even with the two of us? That's a lot. A lot more work than you probably realize."

I nodded. "Oh yeah, of course."

"We should probably get back downstairs before they think we're doing something naughty," she joked, though it felt flat. "I had just wanted to get you away from their prying questions and give you a break."

"I appreciate it."

"My family can be a bit much sometimes."

“They’re fine, I swear. I love your family, prying questions and all.”

Anna smiled. “I knew you’d understand.”

She took my hand, and since we were alone, I wasn’t sure if it was for show or because she wanted to. She guided me out the door and back downstairs to the sound of crying children. When we got down there, Nicholas and Maddy were making kissy noises toward Anna and me. I stuck my tongue out playfully.

“Sorry for leaving,” Candace said, holding a screaming Olivia while Noah tried to calm Sophia. “The girls are usually in bed at this time, and they’re starting to get grumpy.”

Grace piped up. “Yeah, we have to go soon too, or else we’ll be facing the same problem.”

“I don’t wanna go home!” Nicholas cried, his mood suddenly changing. “I wanna stay with Levi!”

“Well, I have to go home too, little guy,” I said, kneeling to Nicholas’s level. “I have work in the morning, but I’m sure we’ll see each other again.”

“Promise?” Nicholas asked.

I looked at Anna. I didn’t want to promise something I couldn’t keep. Anna nodded. “They’ll be at Summer Fest and Emily’s wedding.”

“Then yes, I promise, little man.”

“You really are so good with kids,” Grace said softly as she and Brad moved their children toward the door.

“You really are,” Mrs. Berkshire echoed with a knowing smile in our direction.

Emily quickly changed the subject. “So, sis, are you staying at Levi’s house... or is he maybe staying here to change things up?” Emily winked at me.

“Oh no, I have something to do tomorrow morning,” Anna said.

It was her phone interview, but she hadn't broken the news to her family yet.

"And I have an extra early morning tomorrow," I said, mostly a lie because every morning was extra early when you had roosters.

"Well, it was good to see you," Emily said. "It's nice seeing my sister so happy."

"I'm glad she's happy."

Anna walked me to my truck, and as soon as we were outside, she let out a sigh of relief. "We made it through another family event. I swear, we're getting better at this."

"Better at what?" I asked without thinking.

She gave me a knowing look.

"Oh yeah, that," I said, careful not to say anything in case anyone could overhear us.

"Thank you, Levi. For everything." Anna stood up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to mine, which surprised me.

I took her face in my hands and held her face next to mine, not wanting to let her go. I wanted to beg her to come home with me, and not just for the sex. I just didn't want to say goodbye. But she had her interview and insisted it would be easier to do it from her room, a place she was familiar with.

We pulled away, just a few inches, and I stared deep into her blue eyes. At first, we were both all grins and smiles, but something shifted in Anna's eyes. A darkness rolled through them. I wanted to ask her what was wrong, but I felt it too.

I knew what she was thinking.

I had been thinking about it too.

This was getting dangerous.

CHAPTER 11

I couldn't stop grinning. My face hurt from smiling so much as I closed my laptop. I jumped from the bed and started doing a little jig around my bedroom. My phone went off and I checked the message. It was Levi.

How'd it go?

I quickly typed my response.

It went so well! They told me the next step is an in-person interview at the nonprofit's office in Los Angeles and it sounded like they wanted to meet me! I'll know more soon!

I stared at my phone, no longer dancing. My smile faded as I waited for Levi to respond. My tummy was filled with butterflies until his message popped up on the screen.

That's such good news! I'm so happy for you, Anna! I knew they'd love you.

It was text, so hard to hear his tone, but it felt like Levi was truly happy for me. He was one of the only people who rooted for me, who never once doubted my dreams.

It means so much to me that you believe in me, I typed back.

Not many people had believed in me. My parents wanted me to consider a more practical field like my siblings. Lawyer. Doctor. A regular veterinarian who could open a clinic in Sunville. My parents always thought I was being difficult. They'd told me I was so smart I could be anything I wanted to be... they didn't understand that this was what I wanted. The

salary wasn't as high as some careers, but money never meant anything to me. And even Emily, who supported me more than the others, didn't fully understand that.

No one did... until Levi.

He was the first person I told the news to, and he was the first person I wanted to celebrate with when I got good news.

And if this worked out, I'd be leaving him behind.

Would we still talk? Could we still be friends at least, with me on the other side of the world? Because I knew I would miss our conversations the most. The sex was great, but when we were together, we just connected on a deeper level.

There was a knock at the door, and I put my phone away.

"Come in," I called out.

Emily stepped in. "Sooo, how'd it go?"

"It went well," I said, telling her what I'd just told Levi moments before.

She smiled, but there was a sadness behind her eyes. "I'm happy for you, Anna. But for someone who just heard they're one step closer to their dream job, you don't seem as happy as I would have thought."

"Oh, trust me, I was dancing around the room as soon as I got off the call," I said with a laugh.

"But now... you seem less than enthusiastic?"

"It's just.... Well, I'm scared, Emily. This is a big move. It's my dream, but I'm still scared to move to another continent."

"Who says you have to?" Emily said, plopping down on my bed with a smirk. "You could always stay here with Levi and your family."

"No, I can't, Emily. That's the problem. There are no opportunities for an exotic animal vet in middle-of-nowhere, Utah."

“I’m sure you could figure things out. You could travel to help private owners of exotics and—”

“No, no way. I do not believe in private ownership of exotics. It’s irresponsible.”

“Well I guess,” she mumbled.

“A lot of them end up being given away because their owners have no idea what they’re getting into. They are still wild animals, but people expect tame house cats in a larger body.”

“But you could help prevent that from happening.”

“Or I might encourage people to get more since they now have access to a vet. No, I simply can’t do that. I couldn’t ignore that an animal is being held in a cage when it should be in the wild just because their owner wants to feel badass.”

“Alright, I get it. But what does Levi think about you going all the way to Africa?”

“He’s okay with it,” I said between pursed lips.

“Really?” Emily raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I mean, we’ve talked... we aren’t sure what we have is serious. We’re just having fun and we’ll see what happens after I move. If I move.”

“Anna, I hate to pry into your romantic life, I really do... but Levi brings a spark out in you that I haven’t seen before. You just light up when you’re near him. You smile and laugh more than I have ever seen, even when you’re with me, and that says a lot because I’m funny as hell.”

I cracked a smile and sat down beside my sister. “You know, I will miss you when I leave, right? I hated being away from you in college, but this seems even bigger. And knowing that you’ll have a baby...”

“It sounds like you’re having doubts to me.”

I didn’t want to admit it out loud, but part of me was scared to leave. Not just because of Levi; he was a big part of it, but also because I had missed my family in college. I was

able to travel home often so it wasn't as bad, but it still hurt every time I left.

And while in Africa, it would be even harder to visit. I'd likely miss holidays, birthdays, weddings for friends... and if my parents got sick or something happened, it would take forever to get back here.

"There's a lot I have to consider, Em, but I also have to consider that this is what I've always wanted. This is my dream. If I don't pursue this, I will always wonder what if... and I don't want to live like that. It's only two years, and I can see what happens then. If I even get the job. There are still several steps, and I may get denied."

"You won't. You always achieve whatever you set your mind to."

"Sure, until now. But I'm competing with people just like me. People with the same dreams, with similar academic records, who are also used to achieving everything they put their mind to. I'm up against the best of the best, Em."

"Is it wrong that part of me hopes you don't get it?" Emily bit her lip and wouldn't look at me.

"Not at all," I said with a little chuckle. "But instead of thinking about what will happen when I leave, why don't we focus on the present. Like Summer Fest this evening. And your wedding is in two months. I'll be here for all of that."

"You will," Emily said with a smile. "You're right, let's enjoy the present. So, what are you wearing to Summer Fest?"

"I figured jeans and a t-shirt."

"Absolutely not. You need to look hot for Levi," Emily told me. "Let me do your makeup."

I groaned and fell backward on the bed, but I was smiling. "I don't want to wear makeup, Em. It's going to be so hot, and it will just melt right off."

"Not with the right setting spray. Trust me. You know animals, I know makeup. That's why I'm a cosmetologist, after all."

My sister was already over at my vanity inspecting my inventory with a dissatisfied frown. “This won’t do.... How old is this mascara? Ewww, you definitely need to throw that away. Have you had this foundation since high school? Good thing we’re the same color...”

I laughed and rolled over on my side. I could have argued, could have told her no, but my sister loved doing other people’s makeup. It was special to her.

So instead of telling her no and telling her I could get ready on my own, I decided to relish the time we had together. After all, if I left, who knows when I would have the opportunity for her to do my makeup again?

My heart ached at the thought, but I pushed those thoughts away and instead focused on the present like I told Emily to do.

After all, we had no idea what the future held.

CHAPTER 12

The air was heavy and humid. Even though it was evening and the sun had gone down, it was still warmer than normal for Utah. We weren't even mid-summer yet and the temperatures were higher than I could remember this time of year.

I arrived at Summer Fest and started scanning the crowds for Anna. Booths selling local wares crowded the walkway into the event, and the scent of fair food clung heavily in the air. I smiled as I remembered how I used to insist on a giant corn dog every year as a kid. With all the unique offerings, for some reason, I went with a fair staple while my siblings or friends went for fried Twinkies and cheeseburgers with donuts as buns.

Lights flickered in the distant evening sky. There were a few rides, nothing big, just a little something for the kids, and you could hear their laughter and joy all the way outside the gates.

I shoved my hands in my jean pockets and continued looking for Anna. We had agreed to meet outside the event and go in together, but I was starting to wonder if maybe she had arrived before me and went inside. I pulled out my phone to text her but heard my name being called.

I looked up to find Anna walking toward me, and even though I had seen her hundreds of times over the years, my heart still skipped a beat.

Her long hair was pulled back into a braided bun, but tendrils fell around her beautiful face. She was wearing makeup, which wasn't like her. Even at weddings, she tended to go more natural, but I had a feeling Emily had something to do with this. Her blue eyes popped with thick, black lashes and just a hint of shimmer.

But the makeup wasn't the reason I found it harder to breathe, oh no.

It was the sundress.

A simple white sundress nearly sent me to my knees.

The dress had thin straps, showing off the freckles on Anna's shoulders, and low enough that you got just a glimpse of her amazing cleavage. The waist hit just right, showing off her hourglass frame and flowing down to just above her knees.

It was so innocent and sweet and girl-next-door, totally Anna's aesthetic, but also showing enough skin to cause all the blood in my body to rush south. I adjusted my jeans, hoping no one would notice the erection that had formed.

"Levi!" Anna called out again, speeding up as she ran toward me and into my arms.

I hugged her tightly, kissing the top of her head and inhaling her sweet scent.

"Congratulations on the interview, beautiful," I whispered. "I knew you would blow them away."

She pulled away quickly, her eyes on the ground in front of her. Emily and James walked up behind her and greeted me, but Anna... she was acting weird, and I picked up on it right away. She wouldn't even look at me. I took her hand, but her fingers were limp in mine like she didn't want to be there. I let go of her hand.

"I think I'm going to go find Mom," Anna mumbled, her voice low.

"I'll come with you."

She nodded and we broke away from Emily and James.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I asked as soon as we were alone. “I would have thought you would be excited about the interview.”

“I am,” Anna said with little emotion in her voice.

“You don’t seem happy.”

“I’m very happy,” she said dryly, speeding up so I had to walk faster to keep up with her.

“Okay... then what’s wrong? You’re still acting weird, Anna. I don’t understand. I thought we were supposed to pretend to be dating—”

“We are,” she snapped.

“Are we? You won’t even look at me and it feels like you’re trying to lose me.”

Anna sighed and stopped, causing me to nearly run into her. “Listen, Levi. We need to talk.”

“I’m all ears,” I said, crossing my arms in front of me.

“We need to cool things down between us.”

“So you don’t want to keep pretending?”

“No, not that... the real stuff. The emotions, the—well, the sex.” She lowered her voice as she said the last bit. “I fear things are getting a little too intimate, too—”

She trailed off, but I finished her sentence for her. “Real. You fear it’s getting too real.”

“Yes, that. We both know I’m not sticking around here, and I think we’re getting in too deep.” Anna finally looked up and met my eyes.

It felt like someone had their hands around my heart, squeezing it. My throat felt like it was closing, and I couldn’t speak for a moment or two.

But I had to agree with her.

As much as I didn’t want to, I knew I had to agree with her.

“I know, I agree.”

Because I couldn't stop her from living her dream.

On the inside, I was screaming, *Tell her you're falling in love with her. Tell her you've never met anyone like her. Tell her the truth, Levi.*

But I knew what kind of pressure that would put on her, and I didn't want to do that to her.

"I'm glad we're on the same page," she said, averting her gaze yet again. "Because if we continue down the path we're on, it will be harder later... I couldn't handle a long-distance relationship on top of the internship. It's going to be a hard two years if I get it. Long hours, always on-call, little chance to come home..."

"I know," I said. My fists clenched at my sides as I fought the urge to beg her to give us a chance. I heard what she was saying. I knew what was important to her. I couldn't complicate things for her. "So what does this mean for our arrangement?"

"Well... If you're okay with it, I would like to keep that up." She bit her lip and stared at me as if she expected me to say no.

I nodded. I didn't trust myself to really say anything at that point.

"We just need to cool it on the sex, and if we aren't in front of people... we act casual. No kissing. No touching. No flirting."

Each word tightened my throat even more.

"Sure, okay, fine," I said. I knew my words were filled with tension, but I couldn't help it. I ran a hand through my hair and stared off into the distance. "Whatever you want, Anna."

"It's not just what I want, Levi. It's what's best for us."

"Yeah, I get it."

And I did get it.

I just didn't agree.

Anna took my hands in hers, surprising me for a second, but out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of my sister walking toward us.

“Levi!” my sister squealed. “Can we talk for a second? I’m sorry, Anna, I promise to bring him right back.”

“Sure. I’m going to find my mom,” she told her. “She’s probably at the craft pavilion, knowing her.”

“I’ll come find you soon,” I told her.

Anna started walking away, and I watched, oblivious to Irene standing in front of me until Anna was out of sight.

“Soo... I have something to show you,” Irene said, pulling a little box from her purse. She opened it and a ring glared at me. A deep, green emerald surrounded by diamonds. I’d seen the ring before.

“Grandma’s ring?” I asked her. “Why did you bring that out here?”

“Because I’m giving it to you,” she said.

“Why though? It’s a woman’s ring.”

Irene nudged me. “In case, you know, you want to give it to Anna.”

I froze, staring at the ring, not blinking. Not even breathing.

“You want me to...to propose to Anna? With that ring?”

“When you’re good and ready, and if you don’t have another ring picked out, I thought it might be nice. It was willed to me, but I have no use for it... I figured it should be put to use, and I see how you and Anna are together, so...” She trailed off but looked at me with puppy dog eyes.

I couldn’t say no to such a sweet gesture, even though I knew there was no way Anna and I would ever get engaged. But how could I explain that to my sister without telling her the truth about us?

“I don’t know if I should take it, Grandma wanted you to have it.”

“She wanted it to stay in the family, that’s all that mattered to her. And Anna will be family, I can almost bet on it.”

My heart sunk into my stomach. “Irene, I’m not sure—”

“Listen, just take it. Even if you don’t plan to get engaged anytime soon, you’ll have it if the moment strikes.” Irene shoved it into my hands forcibly. I tried to give it back, but she stepped away and held her hands up. “It’s yours now. You do with it what you want.”

“Well, I’m going to give it back to you,” I told her. “You should pass it down to Maddy.”

“Only if you and Anna break up,” she said with a knowing smile. “Is that a deal? We have other jewelry I can pass down to my kids, but this... this is meant to be an engagement ring, I can just feel it in my heart.”

Anna and I had a pending breakup on the calendar. That seemed to be the easiest way out of this. I could give it back to Irene once Anna went to Tanzania or wherever she ended up.

“Fine, that’s fair. I’ll keep it as long as Anna and I are together, just in case.”

“There’s no just in case. It’s going to happen, Levi.”

“Sure,” I said, staring at the beautiful ring.

It was a vintage ring, passed down through generations of the Callaghan family. It had come straight from Ireland, I was told, from my great grandma who passed it down to her daughter who passed it down to Irene after our mother passed away.

And now Irene wanted it to go to Anna.

I slipped the ring into my pocket.

Irene linked arms with me and said, “Let’s go find your girl.”

We walked toward the craft pavilion, and as expected, Rose Berkshire was there, marveling at some of the homemade jewelry. Anna was by her side. I slipped beside her and said, “Hi,” but didn’t touch her.

Anna smiled at me, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Oh hey, I was just thinking of grabbing something to eat. Would you like to join me?"

It felt so overly formal and forced, but I nodded. "Sure. I usually get a corn dog when I'm here."

She smiled wider, and it felt a little more sincere. "Of course you do, that's adorable."

For a second, the conversation from earlier had slipped our minds. Then it was like we remembered it at the exact same time and averted our gaze.

"So, what about that corndog," Anna muttered and turned toward the food court. She walked a few steps ahead of me, and I gave her some space. The first food cart we stopped at had corn dogs. "You know, I haven't had one since I was a kid, I might have one as well."

"Alright, two corn dogs," I said, speaking to the person in the truck.

"\$4.00," the person responded.

Anna reached into her purse.

"My treat," I said, reaching into my pocket and pulling out the ring box from earlier since it had gotten in the way of reaching my wallet. I held it in my hand as I paid.

"What's that?" Anna asked me.

"It's a family ring. Irene gave it to me."

"Why did Irene give it to you?"

I looked at her but looked away quickly. "Uhh in case I wanted to, you know, propose."

"Oh."

We got our corndogs and went over to a table nearby. Anna stayed quiet for a few minutes before she asked, "Can I see the ring?"

"Sure," I said, pulling it from my pocket and handing it to her.

Anna opened the box and her eyes widened. “Holy shit, this is gorgeous, Levi.”

I shrugged because what did it matter? In a few months it would be returned to Irene to give to her daughter or whatever she wanted to do with it.

“May I slip it on? It’s just so pretty.”

Again, I said, “Sure.”

Anna slipped the ring out and put it on her finger. Her eyes seemed to light up as she held her hand up, letting the lights from the fair sparkle off the emerald.

“Wow... So your sister was thinking you’d propose?”

“Yeah, she was hoping.”

Anna chuckled and while still staring at the ring with wide eyes said in a funny voice, “Why yes, Levi, I will marry you.”

It was meant to be a joke, but I didn’t find it all that funny.

A loud screeching came from behind me.

“Oh my God!” Anna’s mother rushed around me and to Anna, making sounds I couldn’t believe came from a person. “I knew it wouldn’t be long!”

I was so confused for two seconds, as was Anna, who just looked at me like, “What the fuck?”

“My baby is finally getting married!” Rose screeched.

Anna’s and my eyes locked, and I muttered, “Oh shit...”

“Actually—” I started to say, but Anna silenced me.

Anna screamed along with her mom and began jumping up and down with her. “I’m getting married!”

“Anna—”

“Aren’t you so happy, Levi?”

It put me in a spot. I could tell the truth; our entire story would fall apart and make Anna look bad.

It didn’t feel right to lie.

Not about something this big.

But I didn't know what else to say.

"Uhh yes, very happy," I said. "Can we have a moment, Anna?"

But that last bit was lost. Suddenly we were surrounded by Anna's family. Sisters, brothers, nieces, and nephews all cheering along with Anna, hugging her and congratulating me. I couldn't get the words out to tell people this wasn't what they thought. Anna and I weren't getting married.

Everyone was so happy for us.

I looked through the crowd of people and saw my sister, Irene, beaming at me. She rushed over. "Well, that didn't take long."

Shit. "How did you find out?"

"It's spreading like wildfire, Levi. Everyone is already talking about you two getting engaged. In fact, I think someone from the paper is headed this way to get some photos..."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Anna, can we—"

"Thank you so much, everyone. Levi and I couldn't be happier to share this news with all of you," she announced, taking my hand in hers. She smiled at me, and I wasn't sure how I could tell the truth now.

We were in too deep.

A flash from a camera caught my eye. Irene was right. We were going to make the local paper.

"Anna, can we please talk?"

She finally heard me and nodded, slipping away with me. We were far enough from the crowd so I could speak to her without being overheard.

"What the hell, Anna? We can't let them think we're getting married. That's a lot more serious than just thinking

we're dating."

Anna's face fell. "I'm sorry, I didn't know what to say either..."

"So what, now we're going to get fake married too? When does this end?"

"No, no, just because we're engaged doesn't mean it ends in marriage. A wedding takes time to plan, Levi, and we'll break up just like we planned."

"I don't know, this seems like a lot. I don't think it's fair to our families. They're so damn happy."

"I know," Anna said, biting her lip. "Maybe we should come clean."

She looked past me at the people celebrating our engagement. This was a mess, a mess we'd gotten into together. It was as much my fault as it was hers, and what would they think if we told them we had lied?

We were in too deep.

Anna looked at me, uncertain at first. "I hate lying to everyone."

"Me too."

"But if we tell the truth now..."

"Right, we'll look like assholes."

"Shit, we really went too far," Anna said, pacing. "I got caught up in the excitement. I really didn't want to let my mom down...and for a second, I actually believed it. I'm such an idiot."

Tears welled in her eyes, and my heart broke for her. I knew the pressure she was under to please her parents, and for a second, it seemed like she was excited about being engaged to me... which likely swayed my opinion of the entire situation.

Because I had to admit... I liked the idea too.

Even though I knew I should have stopped the plan right then and there, I said, “No, it’s fine. We can do this. Just a couple months.”

“Just a couple months,” Anna said softly, as if trying to convince herself.

CHAPTER 13

“**A** nna! Look at this one!” Emily shoved her phone into my face, showing a princess ballgown with a skirt that would make it hard to walk through doorways. “You would look so beautiful in a dress like this.”

“Uhh, it’s a little too...poofy,” I decided, sipping my lemonade and scanning the crowd for Levi. Since our little talk, he’d been keeping his distance from me, which was unusual for him.

“You’re no fun,” Emily said, playfully rolling her eyes. “But alright, a little less poof.”

“A lot less poof,” I said with a chuckle. “You know I’m not into overly girly stuff... something simple with less poof, less lace... something bohemian, perhaps.”

I closed my eyes and imagined the dress Molly had worn. *Something like that. With a little more sleeve*, I thought to myself. *Perhaps some lace would be fine too...*

“Come on, with that ring, you’re going to need something extravagant to compete with that,” Emily said.

I opened my eyes and looked down at the emerald on my finger. It was gorgeous and not my usual style. It was intricate and vintage. I’d never really pictured my engagement ring before, but seeing that ring on my finger, it was perfect.

What a shame it wasn’t real.

It hit me, again, that none of this was real.

Why was I imagining my wedding dress? I wasn't getting married.

I scanned the crowd again and saw Levi talking to his brothers with his hands shoved in his pockets. He glanced at me and caught me staring. I smiled. He didn't smile back; he looked to the ground instead.

I had hoped we could stay friends at the end of this, but I had my doubts. I'd really stepped in it this time.

"What about this bouquet?" Grace handed me her phone.

The bouquet was sunflowers. My favorite flower. Grace knew me well. I smiled weakly. "I love it. See, you know me, Grace."

"I know you too," Emily snorted. "I just think you can be a bit boring sometimes." She stuck her tongue out at me to show me that she was joking. I stuck my tongue out right back at her.

"How mature," Grace said, laughing in her usual amused, older sister way.

"So, when is the wedding day?" Emily asked.

"We haven't had a chance to pick a date yet."

"What about August?"

"As in... two months from now? No way. Besides, you're getting married in August."

"Yeah, which is why it would be perfect. Maybe we could even have a double wedding."

I side-eyed her. "You think James would be okay with it? On second thought, would *you* be okay with that? You've always dreamt of your big day."

"And what better way to celebrate than getting married next to my little sister?" Emily smirked.

I'd heard Emily talk about her wedding countless times over the years. Having a double wedding was never in her plans. She wanted to be the center of attention, to be the princess in the exquisite gown that no one could take their

eyes off of. There's no way Em would want to share the spotlight with someone else, even her little sister.

Even Grace seemed to find this strange. "Em, are you feeling okay?"

"Mmhmm, why?" Emily asked with a massive, almost fake smile on her face.

"Because this doesn't sound like you at all," I added.

"Fine," Emily said with a laugh. "If you don't want to share wedding dates with me, I don't mind if you get married around the same time. Maybe the weekend before? After that, we'll be on our honeymoon."

"Or how about I don't rush this and we plan a wedding for say, I don't know, a year or two from now?"

"Why would you want to wait that long?" Emily asked.

I would have to phrase the next bit delicately since my sister had rushed her wedding along, and I didn't want her to think there was anything wrong with it. Maybe if Levi and I were really getting married, we could discuss having a quick wedding since I wanted something small anyway. But since we weren't... I needed time to get out of Sunville to call the thing off.

"Well, I just don't feel the need to rush things. Levi and I have only been dating a couple weeks—"

"But you've known each other since childhood."

"Kinda, I guess, but we weren't in the same friend group like you and James were in high school."

"Well, you've been talking since December," Emily pushed.

"From a distance, sure, but it's not the same."

Emily shrugged. "I just don't see why you want to wait. Being married is amazing, isn't it, Grace?"

"Hey, don't pull me into this. It took me two years to plan my wedding."

“That’s because you had cold feet,” Emily said. “You don’t have cold feet, do you, Anna?”

I swallowed a big gulp of my lemonade and looked away, unsure how to answer this question.

“You do!” Emily said.

“I mean, I’m still waiting to hear about the job in Tanzania and—”

“Can’t he go with you? Do they not allow spouses?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure there would be a way to bring a spouse, but I can’t imagine Levi would want to leave everything behind in Sunville.”

“Then what are you going to do if you get this opportunity, Anna?”

“That’s why I want to wait and see, Emily.” My voice took a harsher tone than I had intended. I never yelled at my sisters, but I was officially done with this conversation. I couldn’t figure out why Emily was so pushy about us getting married quickly.

I got up from the bench and walked away, headed toward Levi before I remembered he didn’t really want to talk to me.

“Anna!” Irene’s voice called from my left.

I looked for an escape. I could hurry toward the restrooms and away from the tables we were gathered around. I could try to pretend I hadn’t heard her. It took too long for me to formulate a plan of escape, though, and Irene placed her hand on my arm.

“I was hoping to get some time alone with you,” she said with a smile. “I just wanted to say, I couldn’t be happier that you’re marrying my brother. You two are clearly two peas in a pod and made for each other. You’re so happy when you’re together.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that, Irene.”

“And if you need anything, we’re family now, so please don’t hesitate to ask.”

I'd always loved the Callaghans. They were good people. It wasn't just my family I was hurting with this lie. My stomach turned and I felt sick.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just not feeling too well, to be honest. Must have been the corn dog, or maybe the nachos. Too much junk food."

"You aren't pregnant, are you?" Irene's eyes sparkled.

"What? No, I— no, I'm not pregnant."

"Sorry," she said, patting me on the back. "I was just joking, but the look on your face made me realize it wasn't funny. I should have kept my mouth shut."

"It's okay." I feigned a smile. "But you know, I think I might run to the bathroom."

"Do you need any help or anything?"

"Oh no, I'm fine, really, just drank too much lemonade," I said with a laugh. "I'll be right back."

I hurried away from the group, checking behind me to make sure no one was following me. I needed to catch my breath. This was all too much. My heart was racing as I found the nearest tree and hid behind it. I closed my eyes and leaned against it, remembering the fateful night I ran into Levi behind a tree.

I smiled, and part of me hoped he might come hide behind the same tree with me again. Then I remembered we were taking some space from each other, cooling things off.

All while pretending to be engaged, so that was going to be hard.

My stomach turned again.

I pulled out my phone, hopeful for a distraction. I checked my e-mail to see if I had an e-mail from the animal reserve yet.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw an e-mail from the Tanzania Wildlife Reserve titled: "Interview in Los Angeles."

I opened it and found out that not only did I get chosen to move to the next round, but they had booked my flights and hotel. I'd known this was a possibility; they told me to be prepared. Everything would happen quickly.

And boy, they hadn't been kidding.

I had a few days to prepare for the next set of interviews and a trip to Los Angeles.

After that, the next step would be even bigger.

A trip to Tanzania for a two-week working interview.

My heart raced and my stomach continued to twist and turn.

CHAPTER 14

“Man... don’t you think a fake engagement is a bit too far?” Clark’s usual smirk was replaced with a look of concern. He hadn’t attended Summer Fest, but I filled him in on the details as we shared a beer later that evening at my place.

“I mean, yes, I do, but it’s a bit too late now,” I muttered. I shoved my hands in my pockets and stared at the ground.

“This girl, she’s something else. She’s really got her hooks in you.” Clark let out a low whistle as he pulled out a rag and polished a spot on his precious car.

“She doesn’t have her hooks in me.”

“So, you’re still happily a bachelor? When she leaves, you won’t be brokenhearted?”

“I’ll get over it. Whatever happens, I’ll deal with it.”

“So, you’re admitting you have feelings for her.”

“I didn’t say that,” I scoffed.

“You didn’t deny that you will be heartbroken when she leaves.”

I shrugged. “Fine. I like her a lot. She’s the type of woman I could see myself settling down with.”

“Just like Beth. You could see yourself settling down with her too.”

“That was different. Unlike Beth, Anna isn’t trying to change me. We just mesh well together and have similar goals

and interests in life.”

“Yeah, because right now, it’s not real. If it were real, things would be different.”

“I don’t know about that...”

“Just like you thought Beth was the one for you.”

“I never even introduced Beth to my family,” I countered, adding, “We never got that far, to be honest.”

“Yet you were willing to throw your life away for her.”

“No, I was willing to start a new life with her.”

“That wasn’t the life you wanted,” Clark reminded me.

“Sure, fine, you’re right.” I threw my hands up in defeat. “But in this case, Anna is going to live her life and I’m going to live mine. In a few months, we will have a fake breakup and she will head to Africa or wherever she ends up, and that’s that.”

“I sure hope so, man,” Clark said, giving me a long, hard look.

“I’ll be fine, Clark. Thanks for worrying about me, but I know what I signed up for and I’ll be okay.”

Clark checked the time on his phone. “Alright, it was good seeing you, but I have to get going. Early morning tomorrow at the office. You know what I’m talking about.”

“I do. Running your own business is tough work.” I shook his hand, and he went on his way.

I stopped by to check on the animals for the night before heading to bed. Birdtha rushed at me, but thankfully there was a fence between us.

“Ha! You thought you had me,” I said with a smile, pointing at her. She was a mean one, but I couldn’t help but love her.

The chickens were all in their coop. Al was in his enclosure, being the good boy he was. I tossed some fresh hay into the pen and went over to check on the goats.

A strange sound came from the pen, and I went from walking to running.

Ginger was laying on the ground, panting. A pool of blood had formed around her.

“Oh shit,” I muttered, dropping to her side. She was clearly in labor, and the sounds coming from her sent my heartrate into overdrive.

I texted the vet at the emergency number. It was late on a weekend, and I knew it might take him a bit to get here.

“You’re fine, Ginger,” I soothed, trying to comfort the goat as I kept checking the messages. “Shit, I have no idea how to deliver a goat.”

But Anna would...

She also lives in town, not too far. She could get here quickly...

Since it had been fifteen minutes and I hadn’t heard from the vet, I decided to reach out to Anna. I called her, and she answered surprisingly fast.

“Hey, sorry to bother you. Hope you weren’t sleeping—”

“I’m not. Is everything okay?” I told her about Ginger, and before I could even finish my sentence, she said, “I’m on my way. I’ll be there as fast as possible.”

She hung up without a goodbye and I sat by Ginger, smoothing her fur and talking to her in low whispers. The vet didn’t respond. Nothing. Not even a message to say he was busy.

“Emergency services, my ass,” I muttered to myself.

I jumped up at the sound of a car in the driveway and rushed out of the enclosure, waving to Anna as she ran toward us. She was still wearing the sundress, but her hair was pulled back and her makeup had been washed away. She still looked so damned amazing though.

“Where is she?” Anna asked.

“She’s right through here.”

I led Anna into the goat enclosure, and she fell to the ground beside Ginger. I moved Gilbert to another pen and came back to sit on the ground with Anna, who was kneeling in the blood. Her white dress had red stains at the bottom, but if that bothered her, she didn't make it obvious.

"Looks like the kid is breeched," Anna said.

"She's having twins," I told her.

"Ah, well, this just got even more complicated."

I smoothed Ginger's fur. "Tell me you can save her and the kids."

"Yes, I can do this," Anna said. "The kid looks small enough. I should be able to do this."

Anna pulled on the kid's legs firmly but gently, and I watched in amazement as the baby goat slipped out from its mother.

"Quick, I need a blanket or something."

Without thinking, I pulled off my t-shirt and handed it to her. It was the easiest thing I could think of. "Will this do?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, wrapping the baby in the shirt and standing with the goat. "This is going to look scary, but I promise you, it's what we need to do."

She started swinging the kid by its legs, gently, but it was horrifying to watch.

"To remove any amniotic fluid from its lungs. Right now, it's not breathing."

Anna gently guided the baby back and forth, and it felt like an eternity. I began fearing for the worst as the second kid was birthed beside me without issue.

"Please, baby," she whispered. "Please breathe for us."

I saw the concern in her eyes. Her brow was furrowed, sweat dripped from her forehead. Blood covered her formerly white dress. But all she cared about was the baby goat in her hands.

“Yes!” she cried, kneeling with the kid. “It’s breathing!”

She laid the kid on the ground and we both watched as its chest moved up and down. A soft sound came from the goat as it struggled to stand up.

“We did it!” Anna announced.

“No, you did it. I just watched,” I said, beaming from ear-to-ear. “Will the baby be okay?”

“Looks like it,” Anna said. “And it looks like it’s a little girl.” She checked the other. “And this one is a boy. Congrats, granddad,” she teased.

She laughed, and I laughed with her as the mama tended to her babies. We stood and watched in amazement. I really had no words.

“Anna, I– I’m just so amazed by you.”

“Thanks, Levi,” she said with a sweet smile.

“I–I–” I almost said the words but stopped short. I knew I would regret it. It would make things awkward, but in the moment, I knew.

I loved this woman.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I’m sorry about your dress. Would you like to shower? I’m sure I can drum up some clothes for you to wear home”

“I have some in the car,” she told me. “I grabbed them before I left, didn’t want to take the time to change. Figured it would get messy.”

She was still smiling. Even covered in blood and sweat, she was smiling.

“God, you’re amazing,” I said again. I stepped closer to her, fighting the urge to kiss her. She didn’t move away from me.

“So, umm, I have an awkward question,” she asked. She bit her lip, which meant she was truly nervous about the question.

“Anything. After what you’ve done for me, I owe you, big time.”

“Well, you don’t have to feel obligated, but I wanted to ask if you’d like a free trip to Los Angeles.”

I frowned. “Los Angeles? I’m confused.”

“The second stage of the interview is in Los Angeles, and well, I thought you might want to tag along.”

My heart swelled. Was she requesting my company because she wanted me to be there? Then again, this was the second interview for her internship in Africa. My heart dropped as fast as it had swelled.

“Uhh, I thought we were cooling things off?”

“I know, but I figured it would make more sense if we told people we were taking a romantic getaway than explain the interview.”

“Oh,” I said, stepping back.

“I know, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

No, she shouldn’t have asked. And I shouldn’t say yes knowing how I felt about her.

But that was easier said than done. Our time together was coming to an end, and part of me wanted to spend every minute with her, even if it meant saying goodbye would be even harder.

“I’ll do it. On one condition.”

“Anything.”

“We have separate rooms.”

Anna’s face fell, but she nodded. “Of course, I understand. You’re right.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

“Thanks, Levi. I’d hug you, but...” She motioned to her bloody dress.

“Right, of course, let’s get you in the shower and into some clean clothes.”

I led her to the cabin, and as hard as it was, I stayed in the living room while she cleaned herself off. I thought back to our shower together and my body ached with desire for her, but I stayed put.

As long as we're in separate rooms in LA, we can keep things friendly, I lied to myself.

CHAPTER 15

“**W**hat do you mean you’re overbooked?” The hotel desk clerk stared at me with a blank look on her face. “I paid for the room.”

“You weren’t charged, Ms. Berkshire,” the clerk replied dryly. “You’re only charged upon checkout.”

“Still... why would your site let me book a room if only one is available?”

“Well, there’s a number of conventions in town at the moment, and of course, usual tourist traffic—”

“You’re not answering my question,” I interrupted. “How did your site allow me to book the room if it wasn’t available?”

“Our site likely had too many people on it at once. That’s the only answer I can give you. Do you want the room we have for you here or not?” The clerk looked like she couldn’t care less.

I read her name tag. “Well, Tiffany, can you tell me if there are any hotels nearby which might have openings?”

“This weekend? With Trek Con and Anime World in town at the same time?” Tiffany chuckled but quickly stopped herself when she looked at my face. “I’m sure you could find something in Long Beach. Oh wait, no, there’s the World Scrapbooking Convention this weekend down that way, so probably not even there.”

“This is Los Angeles; how can you not have any hotels?”

Tiffany shrugged. “Because everyone wants to come here. There may be some pay by the hour places available...you could call around, but I can’t promise you the room will stay available for long.” She stared back at me smugly.

I wasn’t usually the type to ask to speak to a manager, but she was pushing me into Karen territory with her attitude. Before I could say another word, Levi, who had stayed quiet during this entire conversation, stepped in.

“We’ll take the room,” he said.

“Are you sure?” I asked him.

“What choice do we have?”

“I’m sure we could find something.”

“Within walking distance to your interview tomorrow? Doubtful,” Levi said. He turned to Tiffany. “We’ll take the room. Are there at least two doubles?”

“Sorry, we only have a king available.”

From the smirk she gave me, I had a feeling she was just trying to be difficult, but before I could argue with her, Levi said, “Fine, we’ll make do.” He reached for the key.

“Argghhhh,” I growled as we walked away, turning to scowl at Tiffany. “I hate L.A.”

“Good thing we’re only here for two days.” Levi’s voice was low as we stepped into the elevator.

“At least there’s a pool and spa. I’m very much looking forward to that.”

Levi didn’t say anything as we exited the elevator and searched for our room, which just so happened to be right next to the elevator and the ice machine.

“Tiffany really had it out for me,” I muttered to myself as I inserted the key card.

The door swung open, and within seconds, all the tension from earlier drained from my body. I was beginning to ask myself ‘Tiffany who’ as I stared at the room with the massive king bed in the center.

“Wow, this place is nice.” I wandered into the bathroom and found a tub large enough for four people along with a separate shower as well as granite counters with copper fixtures. “Are those jets in the tub? Is this thing a jacuzzi too?”

Levi still hadn't said a word. He sat down on the couch in the far corner of the room, folding his hands in his laps.

“We have like... an entire living room here, too,” I said, running a hand along the material of the chair. “And that bed, holy cow.”

Levi just sat there. In fact, for most of the flight, he only said what he absolutely had to say. I knew we had agreed to cool things down but seeing him this way was unsettling. I missed the old Levi, the person I could banter and laugh with all day long.

I took a seat across from him and said, “Talk to me, Levi.”

“About what?”

“Anything. You haven't said much all day.”

“I don't have much to say.”

“I find that hard to believe. How are the goats?”

“They're doing well.”

“Have you named the babies yet?”

“Not yet.”

I sighed. Clearly this was going nowhere.

“Would you like to go for a swim?”

“Nah, I think I'll stay here and rest.”

My heart sank, but I understood. Nodding, I said, “Alright, I'm going to change and head down. Maybe we can grab dinner afterward?”

“Sure.”

I dug my bikini out of my bag and slipped into the bathroom to change. I looked at myself in the mirror, staring at my body from all angles. I had picked out this suit thinking Levi would appreciate it because it really showed off my

cleavage. It was a turquoise blue halter style that pushed my boobs front and center, making them look amazing. The bottoms were high waisted, in a vintage style, covering my tummy, which was the area I felt most self-conscious about, but showing off my hips and thighs.

I stepped into the room and went over to my luggage to throw on some shorts to walk down in.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Levi announced.

I turned to find him standing not far from me, his eyes locked on my cleavage and a look of pure hunger in his eyes. I had to admit, I loved that look.

Smiling, I said, “Good. I was hoping you might change your mind.”

He slipped into the bathroom, and I couldn’t keep myself from grinning. I knew it was wrong; we were supposed to keep our distance... but the idea of seeing Levi in nothing but swim trunks? That vision caused me to drool before he even stepped out of the bathroom.

And once he did... “Jesus Christ.” The words slipped out before I had a chance to think about what I was saying. I slapped a hand over my mouth, my cheeks beet red.

Levi chuckled but didn’t say anything about my faux pas.

I kept the rest of my thoughts to myself. That chiseled chest with just the perfect amount of hair to make a pleasure trail. My gaze moved lower. Those rock-hard abs and perfect six pack. Still the trail led even lower, sinking beneath his tight swim trunks. My imagination went wild.

It took everything in me not to jump him.

“Ready?” he asked.

If he noticed me checking him out, he didn’t say anything.

“Uhh sure,” I said, trying to remember what I needed to grab before we left the room. I gathered the key, slipped on some flip-flops, and grabbed some towels, my head spinning as I did everything I could to avoid looking at Levi.

When I turned around, he'd put on a t-shirt. Damn. It should be illegal to cover up those perfect abs. The world should witness the magnificence; it shouldn't be hidden away.

We made our way down to the pool without much talking. I kept my gaze on the ground, as did Levi as far as I could tell. Maybe inviting him to the pool wasn't the best idea considering we were trying to keep things from getting steamy... but too late now.

My insides were warm, and before I had even stepped into the water, my bikini bottoms were drenched. *Thankfully, the pool should help cool me off*, I told myself.

The place was packed, which was no surprise, and probably for the best. *No hanky panky in the pool*, I told myself, slightly disappointed at the thought, but again, I knew it was for the best.

Levi pulled off his shirt, and I think he nearly broke the necks of several of the moms swimming with their kids. A couple men even glanced, their mouths hanging open, either from envy or because Levi had the type of body that both men and women could appreciate.

He went straight for the deep end and dove in before I even had a chance to strip down to my swimsuit. I hurried out of my shorts and went down the steps on the shallower end. *We should keep our distance*, I told myself. Still, my eyes scanned the crowded pool for any sight of him, and I found myself moving toward the deeper end slowly but surely.

A familiar face popped out of the water. His shaggy hair dripped with water as he pushed it back out of his face. His eyes turned toward me, and I smiled.

He actually smiled back.

There he was. There's the Levi I loved being around.

His smile made my stomach twist and turn, but in a good way. I felt a warmth course through my veins.

"Race you to the other end of the pool," Levi challenged, surprising me.

I wasn't a super fast swimmer, but I was nothing if not competitive.

"Sure," I said. "On the count of three... 1...2..." And just as I said, "Three," I took off, giving myself one second of a lead, knowing in my mind it wouldn't be enough.

I was right. He passed me and soared ahead, reaching the deep end of the pool before I was even at the halfway point. To drive his point home, he swam back to me and met me in the middle.

"No fair! I don't swim laps much."

"Fair enough," he said with a cocky grin. "Next time, I'll pick a competition that plays to your strengths... like removing a kidney or something."

"I don't remove kidneys," I laughed. "Well, not often, at least."

"Yeah, right. If I wake up in a tub of ice with my kidney missing, you're going to be the first person I accuse," he teased.

I splashed him and he splashed me back, both of us laughing as I dove under the water. I grabbed his legs from underneath and tried to pull him under, but he managed to break free. He swam off and shouted, "Catch me if you can."

"You know I can't!" I yelled as I popped out from the water. I still tried, swimming after him and then walking as soon as I could touch.

The pool was still crowded, and I lost him. I kept looking around until I felt two strong hands on my thighs. I knew he was trying to pull me under, but for a second, I savored the feeling of his hands on me.

And then I was pulled under water.

I pulled free and swam back to the surface, laughing so hard I nearly choked on pool water. I noticed a few people near us glaring at us, and I realized we were probably being annoying.

“Sorry!” I called out just as Levi popped his head up beside me. I dunked him while still in the middle of apologizing to the people around us. I let out a scream as Levi grabbed me around the waist and pulled me down with him.

As we both popped up laughing, the glares intensified.

A woman nearby muttered, “How childish.”

A man agreed with her. “This isn’t the place for rough housing.”

However, Levi and I couldn’t stop smiling.

“Maybe we should leave these fuddy duddies alone,” I whispered to him.

“Yeah, I’m done whenever you are.”

We walked out of the pool, and the glares turned to looks of admiration, all at Levi, certainly. I shot a look at the woman calling us childish and caught her staring at Levi’s ass. I don’t know what got into me, maybe it was jealousy, maybe I was just tired of people talking down to me, but I grabbed Levi’s ass and gave it a good squeeze, smiling at the woman as I did so.

“Hey!” Levi exclaimed with a laugh.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist... You just look so hot.” That was the truth; he was irresistible.

“Well, I can say the same about you,” he said, reaching around and giving my ass a nice squeeze, causing me to squeal in surprise.

We dried off and headed back to our room.

“So dinner...I really don’t feel like going out,” I told him. I really just wanted to spend the evening alone with Levi.

“Room service?” Levi cocked his brow. “Because yeah, I’m not really feeling like going out either.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” My face was hurting from smiling so much. I loved that Levi and I were on good terms again for the moment, and that he seemed less distant. I’d missed him.

As soon as we stepped into the room, I planned to change and grab the menu for room service, but Levi had other plans. He grabbed me by the waist and pulled me to him, his lips clashing with mine.

I should have pulled away, but the feeling of his lips on mine and the way his body pressed into mine wouldn't let me. His erection ground into my belly. My entire body shivered as I remembered how amazing it felt to have him inside me. I kissed him back, opening my mouth to him and letting our tongues explore each other's mouths as our hands explored each other's bodies.

"You're so fucking hot in that bikini," Levi growled into my mouth. "But I've been dying to get it off you since I saw you in it."

He slipped off my shorts, pulling the bottoms off with it. I stepped out of them and together we moved toward the bed.

I lifted his t-shirt and tossed it aside, and his shorts slid right off. My bikini top was the last to go. Levi kissed my cleavage, his face buried between my breasts as he unhooked the top from the back, letting it fall to the floor.

My wet hair clung to my back, and water still dripped off us, or perhaps it was the perspiration from our bodies. There was no time to dry off or clean up, Levi nudged me toward the bed, and I fell backward on it. He climbed on top of me, hovering above me, his green eyes intense as he stared deeply into mine.

"Anna..."

"Yes, Levi?"

"I need to be inside you so fucking bad. I can't take it anymore."

I wrapped my legs around his body and arched myself upward to meet his. "I need you too."

So much for cooling off, but my lizard brain forgot about everything but the feeling of his flesh against mine. The way his cock felt against my opening. The way my body responded to his every touch.

Fuck, this man drove me so crazy, I couldn't even think straight.

We didn't even need foreplay. Our playing in the pool was enough for us. Levi thrust into me, stretching me open and filling me up as he let out a low growl.

My entire body tensed as he entered me. I cried out and clung to him for dear life. My nails dug into his flesh. Our bodies found the perfect rhythm, and I arched upward, meeting his every thrust, wanting every inch of him inside me.

It didn't take long for the familiar warmth and burning. Levi could always bring me to the edge so quickly. Within minutes, I was hit with wave after wave of pleasure as my body convulsed underneath him.

"Yes, yes," I whimpered, losing control of my body as the pleasure coursed through me. "Levi..."

The pleasure slowed, though everything still felt so amazing. Levi slipped out of me, and I cried out, "No, not yet!" thinking he was quitting, but I should have known better.

He nudged me over to my side and spooned me from behind, wrapping his body around mine and sliding his member between my thighs. I positioned myself just right, giving him the perfect angle to enter me. His thrust felt as good as the first time, leaving me clinging to the sheets.

He cupped my breasts from behind, his fingers brushing my nipples, as if there were a direct line from my nipples to my pussy. Each touch sent electrical signals coursing through my body. Each thrust lit a fire inside me again.

Levi's lips brushed the back of my neck, and I shuddered at the new sensation.

"Levi, come with me..." I begged. "Please, Levi, please."

His thrusts sped up, as if he was trying to go deeper and deeper inside me. I cried out his name a thousand times as the urgency of his movements made it clear he was close. He groaned, thrusting into me again, and I could feel his cock throbbing. A warmth filled me and felt like it spilled out of me

as I came with him, our bodies writhing together as I saw stars. I couldn't tell where my body ended and his began.

Even as my body returned to normal, Levi remained nestled inside me, his body against mine, his strong arms holding me tightly against him. He didn't say anything, but I could hear him breathing heavy and deep. I thought maybe he had fallen asleep until he spoke.

“Anna, I have something to tell you...”

“Yes?” I said, my voice cracked and breathless still. “What is it?”

I turned to face him, afraid of what he might have to say. From his tone, it was serious. His green eyes met mine, and he cupped my face in his hands as he spoke the words.

“I'm falling in love with you.”

My heart skipped several beats and I forgot how to breathe for a second. I'd felt the same tingling, the same thoughts. I'd entertained the idea of us actually being together, briefly, but I was literally in Los Angeles to interview for my dream job across the world from him.

We couldn't fall in love.

We just couldn't.

But I knew from my own feelings, it might be too late for that.

“Levi...”

“You don't have to say anything,” Levi said, his voice nearly a whisper. “I just wanted you to know. That's why I've been acting the way I have been.”

That's why he had been distant.

To protect himself.

And I invited him to LA., and we'd just made love.

Shit.

Shit.

SHIT.

“Levi, I...” I thought about laying it on him, but once I spoke the words, there was no taking it back. What would it mean for our futures if I told him I was falling for him too? I couldn’t bring myself to say the words. “I need a minute.”

“Sure, of course,” Levi said, moving away and untangling our bodies from each other. “I think I might get some air.”

“Okay...” I wanted to tell him not to leave the room, but I knew we both needed to catch our breath. We both needed to think about what this meant for us.

Levi stepped out of the room, and I went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. I let the warm water wash over me as I closed my eyes and thought about what Levi had just told me.

He had been vulnerable with me.

He had told me how he was feeling.

And I shut it down.

Tears welled in my eyes. I felt bad for how I had handled, well, everything. This was my mess. I should have kept my distance. Not for myself, but for Levi’s sake. He deserved better than this.

He deserved better than me.

I needed to give him his space unless I was willing to commit to him, 100%, and since I couldn’t do that...

I stayed in the shower for what felt like an eternity, and I thought Levi might have come back at some point. I got out and dried off, only to find the room empty still.

He had taken his phone, so I sent him a message.

I have to get up early, so I’m going to bed. Please don’t worry about waking me. Take all the time you need.

After a second thought, I sent another text.

I’m sorry

I turned off the lights and pulled the blanket up to my chin. I kept checking my phone, hoping to hear something...

anything.

Nothing.

I reached over to the other side of the bed. It felt so empty and cold without Levi next to me.

A feeling I knew I would have to get used to.

I tossed and turned all night, hoping every sound was Levi coming back to the room, but I never did hear him come back in. I eventually fell asleep close to dawn and my alarm went off two hours later.

I sat up, and at first, I assumed Levi hadn't returned to the room since the bed was empty beside me, but as I made my way to the bathroom, I found him curled up on the couch. He seemed to be asleep, so I didn't wake him.

I got ready for my interview as quietly as possible and left.

CHAPTER 16

I heard her leave.

I hadn't been asleep, having just returned to the room moments before her alarm went off, but I pretended to be passed out. I didn't know what to say to her. Once I heard her leave the room, I rolled over and stared at the ceiling for a long time before sleep finally took over.

I don't know how long I slept, and I had woken up several times. My head was spinning.

This was it.

We'd find out if she were going to the next stage soon.

I might lose her forever.

Knowing how freaking amazing she was, I expected she would get good news today. Just the thought of her moving away made my heart drop.

I was going to lose her, and I should be happy for her. She was living her dream, something I admired more than anything in the world.

I just didn't want her to leave.

I was so torn.

Part of me wanted her to not get the job, but that was wrong. It was selfish of me. Even if she didn't get this job, there'd be others. She had no desire to stay in Sunville, and I couldn't force her to do so.

I sighed and tried to sleep a bit longer when I heard the key card open the lock. I checked the time; it was almost two and I hadn't gotten up yet. I hadn't showered. I hadn't eaten anything since the sandwich I grabbed the night before on my walk around town late at night. I wasn't hungry. I felt nothing but anxiety as I waited for Anna to enter the room.

Her reaction would tell me everything. I sat up as she entered and waited with bated breath. She just stared at me, a blank expression I couldn't read.

Finally, I said, "Well? How'd it go?"

Anna let out a scream and started dancing around the room, as if my question had given her permission to celebrate. My heart sank, but I put on a smile for her. She deserved that.

"I take it you got it?" I asked, infusing my voice with as much excitement as I could, even though I never was much of an actor.

She started speaking a hundred miles an hour. "Yes! I mean, not yet. I mean, there's another step - one last step. A two-week working interview in Tanzania! I'm going to Africa for two weeks and then we'll see, but the fact that I made it to this next round is amazing! Only ten of us out of thousands were chosen and three of us will be offered the opportunity so my odds are pretty decent... Oh my God, I'm going to Africa, Levi!"

I stood up and hugged her, mostly to hide my face in her hair, praying she wouldn't be able to see the look of defeat on my face. "Congratulations, Anna. You deserve this, and I'm so proud of you."

I meant every word. None of that was a lie.

"Thanks, Levi," she said, her voice a lot softer now.

She pulled away from the hug, and I felt sheepish, remembering what happened the night before. "Anna, I—"

Before I could apologize for telling her how I felt, she held up a hand to stop me and made a beeline for the bathroom. She slammed the door behind her, but I ran over to it and spoke to her through it. "Anna?"

I heard coughing.

“Are you okay?”

She wasn’t coughing, she was throwing up.

“Yeah, fine,” she said. More retching.

“Are you sure? You sound sick to me.”

“It’s nerves,” she called back. “I couldn’t even eat this morning, I was so nervous about the interview and, well, everything.”

That everything likely had a lot to do with me.

“I’m sorry, but clearly you wowed them, so you had nothing to worry about.”

The coughing ceased and I heard the toilet flush. Then running water from the sink. A few moments later, the door opened, and she smiled.

“Thanks, Levi. I’m feeling better now, just starving. I couldn’t even eat much of the lunch they served us. My stomach was flip flopping the entire time.”

“What if I took you out to an early dinner? To celebrate? Just as friends, of course.”

She smiled. “I’d like that, Levi. But really, you don’t have to.”

“I want to,” I said. Again, I meant it. I wanted to celebrate this amazing woman and her accomplishments. She deserved it. “I just need to get cleaned up, and I’ll see if I can find a place that can seat us early.”

My brother, Dylan, lived in L.A., and I figured I’d reach out to him for suggestions. Somewhere special for a special woman.

“I think I’m going to lie down for a bit, but definitely, I think that sounds like a fabulous idea,” she said with a smile that made me weak in the knees.



Dylan had given me the details for an exclusive, highly sought-after restaurant in Beverly Hills. Normally, it would have been impossible to get in, but with the right connections and because we were booking an early slot, they were able to fit us in.

Anna dressed for the occasion, wearing the sexiest little black dress I had ever laid eyes on. It hugged her perfect body, showing off every curve. It was hard for my eyes not to wander, but I did my best to keep them where they belonged - looking into those baby blue eyes. Which, I had to admit, were just as captivating as her figure.

Heels and matching pearl earrings and necklace made her the epitome of sophistication. I had no idea my sweet little girl next door had packed anything this classy, but she was constantly surprising me.

As we were seated, her eyes grew wide. “How did you manage to get us in here?”

Shrugging, I said, “I know some people.”

“You never cease to amaze me, Levi.”

I chuckled, remembering my own thoughts moments before. “The feeling is mutual, Anna.”

She opened the menu, and her eyes widened further.

“What?” I asked her.

“The prices... Wow.” She lowered her voice and closed the menu.

“Yeah, well, you deserve the best. This is a celebration. Don’t even look at the price tag. I knew what I was looking at when I booked the reservation.”

Before Anna could argue with me, our waiter approached and introduced himself as Henry.

“A bottle of your finest champagne,” I ordered.

Anna shook her head and covered her mouth.

“No champagne? But what kind of celebration is it without champagne?”

“Just sparkling water for me, please,” Anna said. “I’m still not feeling 100 percent. I don’t want to push it.”

“Oh, yes, right,” I said, remembering her throwing up earlier. “Sorry, make that a bottle of sparkling water.”

“You can still drink even if I don’t,” Anna said.

“Nah, I’ll have what you’re having. We’re celebrating you, after all.”

Henry walked off to get us our drinks as I perused the menu. Anna hadn’t said much all evening, and I had a feeling why. I knew I needed to nip it in the bud so we could enjoy our evening. I needed to clear the air.

Clearing my throat, I said, “Anna, I’m sorry about what happened last night. I shouldn’t have said what I did... I knew what we were doing, that this was only a casual thing. And yet I let myself fall for you. That’s on me.”

Anna turned her eyes to me. “Levi, you don’t have to apologize. I couldn’t say it last night, but, well, I’m falling for you too.”

My heart did a somersault. “Really?” I felt my lips pulling back into a grin.

“Yes, but we knew this couldn’t be serious. It’s a casual arrangement only, and I may be leaving soon. We can’t forget that.”

My heart dropped again. “Oh, yes, of course.”

What was I thinking? That she might have changed her mind about leaving?

“But I’m going to miss you, Levi. I’m going to miss our talks. You’re one of my closest friends, and I really can’t imagine losing you. I hope we can stay friends even when I move.”

“Definitely.” Henry returned with our drinks, and I clumsily poured some for Anna and myself, my hand shaking. “I was hoping for the same thing.”

“Good,” she said, smiling. “Because I really have enjoyed our time together.”

“Me too.”

“I keep thinking... if only the circumstances were different, but we want different things out of life. It sucks, but I can’t imagine either of us would be happy giving up our dreams.”

“I agree.” I felt the same way; I knew it to be true. But part of me still wished it wasn’t so.

Henry returned and asked if we were ready to order.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said, looking at Anna, who was searching the menu again. “Or maybe not.”

“No, no, I’m ready,” she said.

I was relieved for the interruption in our conversation. I didn’t really like hearing about how we’d make such good friends or how in another life maybe we could be together. It felt too bittersweet, almost cruel, to even entertain such ideas. Once she left, she would be busy with her new life. She’d meet new people, and she would forget all about me.

“Levi?” Anna was staring at me, as was Henry. I had completely dissociated for a moment.

“Oh, right, yes.” I ordered my food and Henry walked away, leaving me alone with Anna again.

“So, when are you going to tell your family about the job? We could fool them for two days out of town, but two weeks? I can’t leave my animals that long to pretend were traveling together.”

“I know, but it’s a week after my sister’s wedding... I really don’t want the attention to be pulled away from that, so I would like to keep things calm until then. As soon as Emily is married, I’ll tell them about the interview and we can stage our breakup then, if you’re okay with waiting that long.”

“Of course,” I said, my fists balled up at my sides, trying to ease the tension in my body. “That was the plan all along, after all.”

“Right,” Anna said, her voice low. She was fidgeting with the napkin and focused on that as if it were the most interesting napkin in the world.

“And I think we need to really cool things off this time.”

Anna hesitated, took a deep breath, and let it out before nodding. “You’re right.”

“Which means I’m taking the couch again tonight.”

Anna’s face fell, but again, she nodded. “Yes, I think that’s a good idea too.”

“So, are we good?” I asked. *Or as good as we can be, considering the circumstances*, I thought.

Anna nodded and offered a faint smile. “I think so. Are you good, Levi?”

“I’m good,” I said, taking a swig from the glass and regretting my decision to order water instead of something stronger. “Just a little while longer.”

CHAPTER 17

As soon as we got back to Sunville, Levi and I went our separate ways. We had time before our next event, and even though our parting was amicable, we kept our distance.

I hated every second of it. Every night, I thought about messaging him, asking him if we could see each other, but that was a bad idea. Not just for me, but for him. It wasn't fair for me to string him along or cause him more heartache.

But God, I missed him.

“Surprise!” Emily burst into my room one random Saturday morning. Grace followed and Mom behind her. Grace's kids were there too, both holding balloons that said, “Congratulations!”

“What the—” I blinked the sleep from my eyes and tried to figure out what was going on. It wasn't my birthday. I picked up my phone and checked the time. “It's eight in the morning, Em—”

“Yes! But we have a big day ahead of us, and we need to get you ready, sleepy head.”

“Ready for what?”

Emily pulled the cover off me; thankfully I was decent. Sometimes I slept in only a shirt.

“Your engagement party!” they all shouted at once.

“My what?”

“Your engagement party, silly!”

My brain wasn't working at full capacity, and I was confused.

"You know, your engagement with Levi?" Emily said with a weird smile.

"Yes, I know about that," I lied, because truthfully, I had forgotten we were supposed to be engaged for the moment. "But you said there was a party. I don't recall planning a party."

"That's because it's a surprise, silly," Emily announced. "Now get up and look pretty for your fiancé. We have a big day planned!"

Emily, with the help of my niece and nephew, took my hands and tried to pull me from the bed. "Alright, alright, I'm getting up," I said with a laugh. "But I need to change!"

"Yes, of course," Emily said. "Everyone out and let the party girl get dressed."

She helped nudge the little ones out as my mom protested that she could stay and help me pick out my outfit. Emily said, "Don't worry, we have that under control."

She shut the door but remained on my side of it.

"Umm, I could use some privacy," I said.

"Please, we change in front of each other all the time, and besides, I have another surprise for you!" She pointed at the bag she had dropped near the door. She reached inside and pulled out a blush pink cocktail dress. Layers of tulle poofed around the hip section.

"I'm not wearing that."

"Oh come on, Anna. You will look soooo pretty. I told everyone it would be cocktail attire."

"Really?" I sighed. "And who is everyone?"

"Everyone! As in, all your old friends from school, our extended family, friends and family of Levi..."

"How did you plan this and keep it a secret from us both?"

Emily smiled and shrugged. “I’m just that good, sis. Now please, get dressed, we don’t have much time! We have to be at the venue by nine.”

She thrust the dress into my hands, and I contemplated arguing some more, but I had to admit it was pretty. Not my style, a little fancier than something I’d pick out for myself, but if it made my sister happy... and it might be nice to feel fancy for a day.

“Alright. It’s a good thing I showered before bed or I’d be stinky all day,” I said and quickly changed into the dress.

Em pulled out some blush, heeled sandals and accessories to match. She had this all planned out.

“Can we say control freak?”

Emily just smirked. She didn’t deny it. She got that part of her personality from our dad, certainly.

“And what are we going to do with that mess?” Emily asked, pointing to my hair, which was pulled into a messy bun on the top of my head.

“I was just going to braid it.”

“A braid! Yes! A braided bun. Sit down, Anna.”

She pushed me in the chair and started messing with my hair. I stared at myself in the vanity and couldn’t help but smile.

I let Emily do her thing, which she did surprisingly fast. I was impressed. Loose tendrils framed my face, but my hair was up and out of the way, and in a way that was actually pretty.

“Next, makeup...”

I groaned, but also laughed. I knew it was coming.

“Don’t worry, we don’t have a lot of time to go all out, so just something simple. A little blush...some shimmer on your eyes... some gloss on your lips... and voila!”

She stepped away so I could see myself in the mirror.

I looked like me with just a little shimmer. I was okay with that. I actually liked the way she had done my makeup.

“I love it.”

“I knew you would. Now come on! I’m driving.”

My stomach gurgled and I felt a little sick, likely from not having any breakfast yet. “Please tell me there will be food at this event?”

“Of course. We’re serving a full brunch,” she said as we walked down the stairs. The rest of the family seemed to have left for the venue already.

“Seriously, how did you plan all of this and keep it a secret?” I asked.

Emily continued to just smirk as she ushered me out the door and into her car.

“And Levi? He’s going to be there?”

“Of course. What sort of engagement party would it be without the groom, silly goose?”

A lump formed in my throat. We hadn’t seen each since L.A. We hadn’t spoken much either. We had upcoming commitments, but we’d decided some time apart would be good for us. Now our families were forcing us back together.

“But how?”

“How am I getting Levi there? I worked with Irene. He thinks he’s meeting her for breakfast.”

“I bet he’s going to just love that,” I muttered to myself sarcastically.

“Of course he’s going to love it! Who wouldn’t love a surprise engagement party?”

Levi, that’s who. He didn’t really like parties to begin with, much less a surprise one. I couldn’t say that I blamed him, either.

Emily put on some pop music and sang and half-danced in the driver’s seat as we drove to the venue. I still had no idea

where we were headed until she turned into the driveway leading to a large estate tucked away in the mountains.

“The Overlook? Really?”

“Nothing but the best for my baby sister,” Emily said in a sing-song voice. “Who knows? Maybe we can book your wedding here too.”

“Uhh—”

She drove up the winding path to the largest house in all of Sunville. It was no longer a private residence, but a bed and breakfast, restaurant, and event venue. If you wanted a room with stunning mountain views from your window and within walking distance of a private lake and a budget of thousands per night, The Overlook was the place for you.

There were a dozen or so cars parked out front, many of which were familiar to me. Emily really had gone all out inviting everyone we knew.

She parked and rushed over to my side, looping her arm through mine as we walked toward the front entrance of the massive house that rivaled a French chateau, only tucked away in the middle of the mountains of Utah.

As we stepped inside the chateau, I was overtaken by the beauty. The interior followed the theme of being like a castle - intricate marble carvings on the spiral staircase leading upstairs, oriental rugs at our feet. Large windows showed off the amazing view from all angles.

“Right this way,” Emily said, ushering me into a large ballroom filled with people. A table was directly in the center overflowing with croissants, fruit, waffles, and so many toppings. My mouth started watering, but not for long. I was also hit with a wave of nausea, something I’d been dealing with the last few days.

“Here you go,” Emily said, handing me a champagne flute filled with what I assumed to be a mimosa.

“It’s a little early for alcohol,” I said.

“Come on! It’s your engagement party!”

I passed the flute back to one of the servers walking by. "I'd prefer some tea, if that's okay."

"Of course. There's coffee, tea, and several types of juices right over there." She eyed me carefully. "Is there any other reason you might be avoiding alcohol, dear sister?" She raised her eyebrows and smiled mischievously at me.

"No, of course not," I said.

I just didn't feel like drinking alcohol at nine o'clock in the morning, but once she asked the question, it got me thinking... my period was late. Not that it was abnormal for me. My period was all over the place most of my life.

"What's that look?"

"What look?" I asked her.

"You're thinking about my question," she said, then whispered, "Could you be pregnant?"

"No," I said, "I have an IUD. I can't be pregnant."

"Birth control fails sometimes."

"Very rarely," I said, trying to convince both of us as I caught sight of Levi only a few steps away from me.

He was looking at me. And he was close enough to have heard the conversation.

"Oh there he is!" Emily said, grabbing Levi's arm. "I was almost afraid you wouldn't show up."

Levi looked straight at me. "Did you know about this?"

"Not at all. I'm as surprised as you are," I said.

"I thought so," Levi muttered. "I think our sisters planned this together."

"I'm going to leave you two lovebirds alone while I talk to the coordinator about something. Be right back," Emily said.

She slipped away and left Levi and me in a crowd of our family and friends just staring at each other.

"So, umm, I heard your sister ask if you were pregnant," he said in a low voice. "Any reason we should be concerned?"

“Not really,” I said.

“Not really? That isn’t the most reassuring answer I’ve heard.”

“Well... I have an IUD and I fully trust in its efficiency, but sometimes IUDs fail. And my period is two days late, but that isn’t unusual for me so I’m not that concerned.”

“Can you take a test just to be sure?”

His question surprised me. “Uhh sure, I guess I could,” I said. “No reason I couldn’t.”

“I would appreciate it. Just in case, you know.”

“Absolutely.” I hadn’t really been concerned about pregnancy before but taking a test did worry me. What if it were positive? What would I do then?

Don’t worry about it, Anna. It won’t be positive.

“Maybe once we’re done here, or tomorrow,” I added, scanning the crowd. “Because I have no idea what Emily and Irene have planned or how long this will take.”

Levi let out a groan of disapproval and grabbed a champagne flute from a nearby waiter. “Let’s find you some tea and celebrate our engagement, I guess.”

He rolled his eyes when he said engagement, and I knew he was still not pleased with the arrangement. I grabbed his arm.

“Hey, do you want to call this whole thing off right now? Because we can do that, and I would completely understand.”

“I think it’s too late for that, Anna. After all the hard work and money that went into this affair, we might as well enjoy it. Just a few more weeks, right?”

“Just a few more weeks.”

Hopefully Emily didn’t have any other surprises up her sleeve.

“You look beautiful, by the way,” Levi said, averting his gaze when I looked him in the eye. “Just thought you should

know.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “Thanks, Levi.”

“So let’s do this,” he said. He took my hand, and together, we walked toward the table with the food and drinks.



“Thank you to everyone who made this day special for Levi and Anna,” Emily said, standing on a little stage in front of the room. “They’re both a little shy, but I can assure you, they felt the love today and appreciate your presence very much. Please feel free to move this outdoors. We have more drinks and activities out in the gardens.”

“Jesus, how long is this going to last?” I muttered to Levi behind a fake smile.

“Irene said it would be an all-day event.”

“All-day engagement party? Who does this?”

“Emily and Irene apparently,” Levi whispered with a laugh.

“Why are our families like this?”

Levi was quiet for a moment. “They just love us and want us to be happy.”

The silence between us was telling. We were assholes for doing this, but it was too late now.

I let out a sigh and waited until the crowd dispersed outside, leaving just a few stragglers behind, including Emily.

“Hey, I’m going to talk to my sister. I’ll catch up to you outside.”

Levi went out the large, French doors and I hurried over to Emily, catching her as she crammed another croissant into her mouth.

“Mmm, sorry, I just can’t get enough of these. This baby sure has an appetite,” she said with a laugh. “One day, you’ll

understand.”

She winked at me, and I tried to stop myself from flinching at the idea. A baby was not something I wanted to think about. I had to get my career started first.

“Hey, Em, we need to talk.”

“You don’t have to thank me for today. Irene helped a lot and paid for most of it.”

“I do want to thank you, and I’ve thanked Irene already, but there’s something else I need to talk to you about.”

Emily took another croissant as staff started cleaning up. She seemed to think about it before grabbing another as the tray was carried away.

“Go for it. I’m all ears.”

I took a deep breath and stared at my hands, focusing all my energy on my pink nail polish - courtesy of Emily, of course. It was chipping on the thumb and suddenly became the most interesting thing in the world as I tried to avoid the conversation I was about to have.

“Anna?”

“Well, I had the interview for the Animal Reserve, and it went really, really well. There’s a good chance I’ll be going to Tanzania for a few weeks for the last stage of the process and, well, I’m not sure what this will mean for Levi and me if I get this.”

Emily finished her croissants and shook off the crumbs from her dress. She frowned, deep lines appearing on her forehead that I’d never noticed on her before.

“Well, Anna, you need to consider what’s most important to you. What do you want?”

It surprised me that Emily would actually encourage me to leave Sunville. She stared at me with a serious look.

“I know I need to do what’s right for me.”

“You do,” Emily said, speaking slowly. “And you need to think long and hard about what is best for you. It may not be

the most obvious choice.”

I nodded. “I know.”

“I know you’ve worked hard for this, Anna. I just want you to be happy.”

“Thank you, Emily.”

Tears stung at my eyes, and before I knew what was happening, Emily pulled me into a hug. I held back the tears, but I cherished that hug. I loved my sister. I loved all my family, and I would miss them so much if I were to leave. Yes, they drove me crazy sometimes, but I would miss them so much.

Grace spoke up from somewhere, “Hey! No sisterly hugs without me!”

Before I knew it, I was being squashed in a group hug. “God, I’m going to miss you two so much.”

And it wasn’t just them. It was my mom. My dad. My nieces and nephews. I’d likely miss the birth of Emily’s baby. I’d miss Christmases and birthdays and celebrations.

“Mommy!” Madeline ran over to us with tears in her eyes. “I got owwie!”

We broke up the hug as Grace tended to her daughter’s scraped knee.

“I think people are looking for you outside,” Grace said. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back out soon. I can handle this.”

Emily walked with me outside into the garden, and my eyes scanned the crowd. I wasn’t even sure who I was looking for until I found him. Levi was off to the side, and at first, I thought he was by himself. He threw a ball into the distance and my nephew, Nicholas, caught it.

“Good catch!” Levi called out.

I stopped nearby and watched, smiling as Levi played ball with my nephew.

It wasn’t just the big events that I would miss out on by moving.

It was moments like this.

Just a simple game with my nephew.

Levi caught me watching them and waved at me with a big, genuine smile on his face. He really was the perfect man, and he'd make an amazing father one day.

My heart fell as I reminded myself - he'd be doing that with another woman.

Not me.

Because I was leaving.

CHAPTER 18

“**Y**ou want to come back to my place?” I asked. I quickly added, “For the test, as we talked about earlier.”

Anna looked tired.

Our sisters had planned a long day. After brunch, there were games in the garden that lasted for several hours. A late lunch was served. And then speeches by it seemed like everyone who had ever met us had just wrapped up. Emily said we were free to leave, or at least she’d told the crowd that. I prayed it included us as well.

“Uhh sure,” Anna said. “Let’s say goodbye to everyone.”

“Of course,” Levi said.

I had already thanked Irene and said goodbye to my family, but I hadn’t spent much time with Anna’s family, something I felt bad about even though technically, we weren’t getting married.

“You leaving?” Emily asked as she munched on a chocolate covered strawberry.

“Yeah, I’m tired,” Anna said. “But today was so much fun. Thank you for planning it.”

“Yes, thank you, Emily.” I felt bad. That’s one reason I avoided everyone. They did all of this for us, and it was fake. All this money, all this work... for a lie. I felt like such a terrible person.

“Of course! I’m just so happy for you guys,” Emily said. “Don’t forget the gifts. James can help carry them to your truck, though it seems most people gave you money.”

My heart dropped.

“Gifts?” Anna and I both choked out at the same time.

“Yes... people often give gifts at engagement parties.”

“We didn’t need any gifts, though,” I stammered.

Shit. People gave us gifts and money. For a fake engagement. I would never forgive myself.

Anna looked over at me and her face showed concern. She was not smiling or putting on a fake happiness.

“Is everything okay?” Emily asked.

“It’s just— well, what if—” Anna stumbled over her words. “I don’t know, what if the wedding doesn’t happen for some reason? You know what I told you earlier and—”

Emily put a hand on Anna’s arm. “I have faith in you two, and I trust you’ll work it out. Whatever happens, I believe in your love, and the people who gave you gifts do too.”

Anna and I looked at each other, then stared down at the ground.

We said our goodbyes to others, and before leaving, Emily started piling our arms with gifts. I couldn’t even look anyone in the eye after that, even as they stopped and congratulated us on the way out.

This had gone too far.

Anna and I walked to my truck with our arms full, silence our third companion. Even the drive back to my place - complete with a stop in town to pick up a pregnancy test - was quiet. I gripped the steering wheel and kept my eyes straight ahead. Rage seethed inside me, but I only had myself to blame for letting it get this far.

When Anna and I got to my place, we lingered a bit in the living room, staring at the gifts.

“We’ll keep the name tags with the gifts and return them to everyone when we call this off,” Anna said. “The money too. It will all go back to them.”

“But people went out of their way to buy us gifts, Anna. They’re invested in this.” I shoved my hands into my pockets and just stared at the brightly colored packages.

“I know,” Anna said. “And trust me, I feel bad too. But what else can we do?”

“I don’t know.” I grabbed the bag from the pharmacy and handed it to Anna. “Can we do this? I’d like to know the results before we go any further.”

“Why? What does it matter if it’s positive?” Anna asked. “What does it change?”

“What will it change? Are you serious, Anna? It would change everything.”

Anna burst into tears. Even through my anger at the situation, I held her and stroked her hair. “It will be okay. Let’s find out the results before we freak out.”

Anna sniffed and nodded. “It’s going to be negative. I’m protected.”

“I know, but birth control fails. I should have been more careful.”

“It’s on me too,” she said softly. She took the bag and went into the bathroom. I asked if she’d like me to join her, but she said no.

I waited in the bedroom, pacing back and forth. “How much longer?”

“A few more minutes.”

“You said that a few minutes ago.”

“No, I said it just a minute ago, Levi. You keep asking me.”

I sighed and sat on the bed with my head in my hands.

The weight of everything felt heavy on my shoulders. The room was silent. I heard the toilet flush and the water running in the bathroom. I stood up and rushed to the door before she had a chance to exit.

“So?” I asked.

She showed me the test with a blank look on her face.

“I don’t know how to read that.”

“It says I’m not pregnant, Levi. I told you. I have an IUD.” Her tone surprised me. She wouldn’t look me in the eye as she tossed the test in the trash. “Can we drop this whole pregnancy thing now?”

“Yes, of course,” I said. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to be sure before you ran off to Africa.”

“I understand,” Anna said, though her tone was still a little colder than usual. “But we have nothing to worry about.”

I sat down on the bed. *I should be relieved*, I told myself. *Why am I not relieved?* In fact, there was a weight in the pit of my stomach. Was I disappointed?

I looked up to find Anna staring at me. She didn’t look pleased either.

Shit.

This fake relationship was getting too real if I was disappointed over her not being pregnant with my child. We’d said we’d cool things down, but would that be enough? We still had a few other weddings to get through, including Emily’s.

I wasn’t sure I could do it.

“Well, I think I should be leaving.”

It took me a second to figure out why she was still standing there. “Oh, right, you need me to drive you.”

“Yep.”

I stood up and we walked into the living room to leave. The gifts were staring back at me.

“Can you take those? I can’t handle looking at them,” I asked.

She let out a sigh and rolled her eyes. “Sure, let’s load them back in the truck, I guess.”

“No need to get snippy with me.”

“I’m not being snippy.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.” She paused. “Well, now I am, because I don’t like being accused of being snippy when I’m not.”

“Fine, let’s leave them,” I said, grabbing the keys and heading for the truck.

“Levi, we can take them—”

“Fuck it, I’ll put them in a closet somewhere until we return them,” I said. I kept walking toward the truck and Anna rushed to catch up with me.

“If you’re going to act like this the entire drive, I’d rather call Emily to pick me up.”

“Fine,” I said, shrugging. “Saves me the gas anyway.”

I turned to walk back toward the house. Anna still followed me.

“What’s your problem, Levi?”

“What’s my problem?” I stopped in my tracks. “How about the fact that we are lying to everyone, and they have gone through a lot of trouble and money celebrating an engagement that doesn’t exist.”

“I told you we could call it off at any time.”

“I know you did! That’s why I’m just as pissed at myself for letting this happen. And for—”

“For what?” Anna said, putting her hands on her hips.

“Nothing.”

“No, what is it? I’m sure that’s my fault too.”

“It’s not your fault,” I muttered.

“Then what is it?”

“You already know, Anna! I told you! I’m falling in love with you, and I can’t deal with this anymore... this lying, my feelings, the disappointment from today...” That last bit slipped out before I could stop myself.

“Disappointment in what? That I’m not pregnant?”

I didn’t answer her. I didn’t want to admit it to her and to myself.

“Just please call your sister,” I said, speaking slowly and trying to be as calm as possible. “See if she can pick you up. I need some space.”

Anna shot off a text and said, “She’ll be here in ten minutes. She’s already in the area heading back from The Overlook.”

“Good.”

“You don’t have to wait out here with me.”

I didn’t want to leave her either. I never wanted to leave her.

But I meant it. I needed my space. She was getting to me, and the fact that I had wanted her to be pregnant with my child told me it had gone too far.

I felt like I couldn’t breathe around her.

I needed to breathe.

“Let me know if she—”

“She’ll be here,” Anna said softly before turning her back to me. “I need some space too, Levi.”

I went back inside and gave it to her.

CHAPTER 19

“**A**nna! Are you ready?”

It wasn't even twenty-four hours after the engagement party, and I had to go out again. This time for Emily's bachelorette party.

“I'm almost ready.”

Truth be told, I was tired and had spent the last twenty-four hours locked in my room, trying to recover from everything that had happened the day before. I had cried more than I had in a long time. I certainly wasn't up for yet another celebration.

I'd told my sister we had a little fight yesterday, that's why I had asked her to pick me up, but I didn't go into the details. I had stressed that it was no big deal.

It felt anything but little now.

I looked in the mirror. At least I could be casual today, just jeans and a t-shirt. My hair was pulled back into a high ponytail. No makeup. I could just be me.

I grabbed my purse and exited my room to find both Grace and Emily all decked out. Emily didn't surprise me; she used any excuse to dress up. But Grace had gone above and beyond - wearing a slinky black dress and high heels. Her hair was curled, and she wore more makeup than I'd ever seen her wear before.

“Emily got a hold of you?”

“Since you turned her away, she found me,” Grace said, running a hand through her curls. “But honestly, it’s been a while since I got dressed up and went out. It’s nice. Makes me feel young again.”

“Hush, you aren’t old.”

“Yeah, but I’m a mom now, so I automatically feel ten years older than I am. Just you wait and see, Em.”

Emily beamed.

We were taking it pretty easy. The old, non-pregnant Emily likely would have wanted to head to the clubs. Since she couldn’t drink, however, she settled for something a little more laid back. A local band she and James had liked since high school were playing at an outdoor venue nearby. Family friendly. Nothing too wild. There’d be dancing and some music, but mostly low key.

I followed my sisters, mostly keeping to myself as they talked about kids and babies and what Emily’s life would be like in a few months. I had nothing to offer to the conversation, but my heart sank thinking about the day before.

Levi had been disappointed that the test was negative.

He wasn’t the only one.

I hated to admit it to myself, and I knew feelings were complicated, but I found myself nearly in tears when I stared at the negative test. I had secretly hoped it would be positive. If it were, I wouldn’t be able to leave. I couldn’t go to Africa if I were expecting his child. The decision would be out of my hands and Levi and I could settle down, have a family... but I knew, in my heart, that if I missed out on this chance, I might always regret it.

Yet part of me had hoped the decision was taken out of my hands.

“Earth to Anna!” Emily and Grace were waiting for me to get in the car.

“Oh right, sorry.” I’d been so lost in thought, I forgot what I was doing.

I needed to forget about the test. It had been negative. There would be no baby. I'd never thought I wanted children, but hearing my sisters talk about their babies caused a pang in my chest.

I stayed quiet for the trip to the venue, and as we got out of the car, Emily asked me, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I lied.

"Is it the fight with Levi?" she asked me in hushed tones. "Please tell me it wasn't more serious than you told me about yesterday."

"No, no, it wasn't," I lied. "Just a lover's spat. We've already made up."

I hadn't spoken to Levi since I left his house.

"Well good, because I kinda invited him out with us. Well, not me, but James since they knew each other in school and all." Emily bit her lip and made a face like, "I hope that's okay."

I stared at her. "What?"

"Yeah... I thought it might be good for the two of you to, you know, talk after what happened yesterday and all."

"We don't need to talk, Em." Before I could finish, I saw James and his friends walking toward us, with Levi in tow.

Shit.

He seemed surprised to see me.

"Oh, hey Anna..."

"Sorry, I forgot to mention we were meeting up with the ladies," James said, hugging and kissing Emily in a sickly-sweet fashion.

"It's good to see you, Levi," I said, trying to force a smile the others would believe.

"Yeah, it's good to see you too." Levi's voice was flat and cold. "I'm going to get a drink." He walked away before anyone could say anything else.

I looked around; we weren't fooling anyone.

"Is everything okay?" James asked with a genuinely confused look on his face.

"Yeah, lover's spat," Emily said, speaking softly. "They just need to talk. I'm sure it'll solve everything." She nudged me toward the refreshment booths where Levi was standing in line.

"Yeah, I'll go talk to him."

Begrudgingly, I put one foot in front of the other and walked toward Levi. I took a deep breath before tapping him on the shoulder. He turned, and when he saw it was me, he wouldn't even look at me.

"Levi, I'm sorry about yesterday."

"You have nothing to be sorry about." He shoved his hands in his pockets and faced forward. "I'm the one who developed feelings when we both agreed it wouldn't happen. That's on me."

"It's not just you, just so you know."

He glanced at me but didn't say anything.

"I was also disappointed, for a moment, that the test was negative."

His body visibly relaxed. "Really?"

"Yeah, but then I realized, it's for the best."

"I know," he said softly. "It's just nice to know that my feelings weren't one-sided."

"They weren't."

"As silly as they were..."

"They're not silly. I see how you are with my nieces and nephews. You are going to make an amazing father one day."

"I never thought about being a father until yesterday."

"And I never thought about being a mother until then either."

“Do you want kids? You know, one day?” he asked, moving a step forward in line.

“I don’t know. I never thought so before, but now that I had a scare and after spending time with my nieces and nephews... I feel like maybe I do. But I’ve always told myself I didn’t want to be chained down. I wanted my career so badly; I just didn’t plan for anything else.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

“So what about you? Think you might have kids one day?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know if it’s meant to be, Anna.”

“Why not?”

“Because, well, you’re leaving. One way or another, you’re leaving.”

It felt like someone had slapped me hard in the chest. All the air left my lungs at once as I tried to speak the next sentence. “You could find someone else.”

Those words hurt. They broke my heart and punched me in the gut at the same time. Tears stung at my eyes as I imagined attending Levi’s wedding to someone else one day, but I needed to say it.

I needed to give him permission to move on once I left.

He deserved that. He deserved to be happy.

Levi didn’t say anything, he just stepped up in line again. By then, it was our turn. He ordered himself a Coke and asked if I wanted anything.

“Just a lemonade, please.”

I reached for my wallet, but of course Levi took care of it. He handed me my drink and we didn’t hurry back to the others. We lingered around the booth, not saying anything for a long time.

“Whatever we’re dealing with,” Levi said, speaking slowly, “we should put it behind us for tonight. For Emily and James’ sake. I thought it was just a bachelor party when I

accepted, I had no idea we'd be seeing each other and I was unprepared for that, but I can deal. We owe it to them."

A lump formed in my throat, but I managed a nod. "Absolutely."

He took my hand in his, stroking it gently before dropping it.

"Well, we should get back to the party," he said.

Slowly, we walked back and re-joined the group just as the opening act went on stage. Levi took my hand again as we got closer. I knew it was part of the act, but I savored that touch.

Emily smiled as we sat down in the grass beside her. "You made up?" she whispered to me.

"Yes," I said softly.

"Good," she mouthed, turning back to the show.

I tried to smile, but I couldn't. Tears ran down my cheeks faster than I could wipe them away.

"Excuse me," I said, standing up and looking for somewhere, anywhere to escape. I saw the bathrooms and made a beeline for them.

I didn't even realize Emily was following me until I opened the doors and stepped inside and she called out to me. "Wait, Anna."

She came into the restrooms with me and locked the door behind me. "What's wrong? And remember, we agreed we wouldn't lie to each other," she said, crossing her arms in front of her.

"I'm crying because I have been lying to you." And I let it all out. "I've been lying to you all this time, and I'm so sorry."

After everything she had done for us and seeing how much she cared about Levi's and my relationship, I couldn't do it anymore.

"What do you mean?" Emily asked.

I had to believe that Levi would forgive me for telling Emily. He'd felt as guilty as I had, and besides, I knew I could trust her.

“Levi and me... we aren't engaged. We aren't even dating. I'm so sorry. We just wanted our families to leave us alone and stop pressuring us to date people. You threw us that big, beautiful party yesterday and we've been lying to you.”

Once the floodgates were open, I told her everything.

“I took a test yesterday and it was negative, but I really wanted it to be positive even though I know that would mean giving up my dreams... but maybe my dream has changed? I don't even know what I want anymore. I'm developing feelings for Levi, and I don't want to leave you guys. I'll miss you so much...”

Emily hugged me tightly and let me cry it out.

“You aren't mad at me?”

“Why would I be mad at you?” she asked.

“Because I lied to you about Levi.”

Emily let out a snort, then apologized. “Sorry, I shouldn't laugh. But sis, I haven't been honest with you either because I knew your relationship was fake all along.”

“What? But the party yesterday!”

She shrugged. “I see the way you two look at each other. Your relationship may be fake, but the feelings you two share are very real, and I was hoping you two might eventually come to your senses and realize it.”

“But if you noticed we had feelings for each other, how did you know I'd been lying?”

“Your story kept changing, and I even tricked you a few times. You couldn't even remember what you told me and what you hadn't,” she said with a laugh. “You may be the book smart one in the family, but I'm no dummy.”

“I know you're not.”

“But you thought you could keep it from your dear old sister who knows you better than you know yourself,” she said with a tsking sound.

“Who else knows it’s fake? Does Grace know? What about Irene?”

“No, I wanted to tell Grace, but I figured this is your secret to share. She’s so caught up in her life and her kids, she doesn’t have time to nitpick your stories the way I do. And Irene is clueless too. I ended up paying for everything yesterday. It didn’t feel right that she pay for something under false pretenses.”

“You knew...and even threw us a party...”

Emily smirked proudly. “It was a fantastic party, wasn’t it? I was hoping it would get you two thinking about getting married for real, if you saw everyone who loved you all in one place, celebrating you. But I guess it didn’t work since you two are clearly not okay.”

“Em, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know we’ve been really pushy trying to find you a boyfriend. That’s on us. We should have given you space. But honestly, I see how happy you are with Levi... I think you two have something special.”

“I know we do,” I said with a deep sigh. I rubbed my temples. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You have to decide what you want to do.”

“I want it all. I want the job in Africa. I want a relationship with Levi. I want a family with him, I think. I want to be here, with my family and never miss anything.”

“Anna, sweetie, you can’t have it all. You have to choose.”

“But what if I can’t choose?”

“Then the choices will likely be made for you, and you may not be happy with the results.”

CHAPTER 20

Hey, Clark. Do you know anything about the land for sale off Highway 9?

I waited for a response from Clark as I watched the bathrooms. Anna had stepped away more than fifteen minutes ago, and I was beginning to worry. Her sister was with her, though, and there was only one entrance and exit into the private stall.... But I wondered what was taking her so long.

My phone buzzed.

Yeah, man, my brother and I looked at it, but we aren't likely to buy it. Thinking of moving?

I thought about what I would tell him.

Just thinking. I may need more space for my farm one day.

Which wasn't a complete lie if I wanted to expand and have more and more animals, especially large ones.

I can send you the details, if you'd like. I know the realtor too, if you'd like me to set up a viewing.

I typed a response as I noticed Anna and Emily heading back.

Yes, please.

I put my phone away just as Anna sat down beside me. She sniffled and wiped at her nose. Had she been crying, and if so, why?

“Hey, Anna, can we talk for a minute?”

The main band was about to perform. Unlike the rest of them, however, I had never heard any of their music and couldn't care less about missing the band, but we should have plenty of time.

Anna nodded. "Sure."

We walked a few feet from where everyone else was sitting. Anna crossed her arms in front of her chest and stayed further away from me than usual. Her gaze never met mine.

I took a deep breath. *Here goes nothing. Tell her Levi. Tell her you'll make her dreams come true here in Sunville, that you'll do anything to be together.* She wiped at her eyes, changing my concern entirely.

"First of all, are you okay? You seem to be upset about something."

"I'm fine," she said, but she sighed and shook her head. "Actually no, I'm not fine. I have a lot on my plate right now. And I'm sorry for how I've treated you, how messy this whole thing has gotten."

"It's okay, Anna," I said. "I just wanted to say, I understand you have dreams, and I don't want to stand in the way of those dreams."

"Thank you, Levi. I'm so glad you understand," she said. "Because truthfully, leaving you will be harder than I expected... but I know it's something I have to do."

My heart sank. The words I had planned in my head, telling her about everything I was willing to do to keep her in Sunville went right out the window.

She knew what she wanted more than I did, and she had a right to chase her dreams.

I had no right to ask her to stay.

"I have to do this, Levi. It's the opportunity of a lifetime, and if I don't go, I will forever wonder what if..."

"I understand that all too well."

“I knew you would,” she said, offering me a small smile. “I hope we can remain friends and stay in touch.”

My throat nearly closed, but I nodded. “Of course.”

“Anyway, you wanted to talk to me?” she asked.

I knew she didn’t believe she could have her dreams in Sunville. Nothing I said even mattered; it wouldn’t change. I had to *show her* it was possible, and that I was serious about making her dreams of owning her own reserve a reality.

But I couldn’t just talk to her about it. I had to prove it to her, and I would.

“I just wanted to let you know, I’m thinking of heading out.”

“Already?” Anna looked at the time on her phone. “The main act hasn’t even started yet.”

“Yeah, their music’s not really my thing, and I don’t know why I told James I’d come.”

“Well, you’ll be missed.”

“I have something to show you. Think you’ll be free later this week?”

Anna looked at me strangely. “Sure... but I do have a lot of stuff for my sister’s wedding.”

“We can work around that.”

Anna seemed to want to ask me more, to dig deeper into what I wanted to show her, but Emily called out, “Anna! They’re getting ready to start!”

“Go, be with your sister. I’ll text you later about it.”

“Alright...” She hesitated, and we hugged awkwardly before she hurried back to her sister, and I headed for the exit.



“I got you an appointment with the realtor for tomorrow at noon,” Clark said. “He told me the sellers are eager and

willing to move quickly on the sale.”

“Thanks, man,” I said, speaking into the phone as I stared out the window at my little farm. I’d always dreamt of something bigger. My land was plenty big enough for what I had in mind, though. Of course, I’d always intended on sticking to goats, chickens, maybe some turkeys or a cow or two. Anna had me thinking bigger now.

A lot bigger.

“Are you going to tell me what this is all about?”

I hesitated, not wanting to tell Clark my true motivation. I knew he would try to talk me out of it. “I’m just looking to expand.”

“Your land not big enough for your plans?”

I was quiet for a second. “I’m thinking bigger, yes. I have big plans in store, perhaps a nonprofit of my own.”

“Of your own or with a certain someone?”

I rubbed my temples and cursed the headache I’d had since leaving the concert.

“It’s for me, but if Anna wanted to stay and work for me, of course I wouldn’t be opposed to that.”

I waited for Clark to lay into me. After all, we were happily bachelors for life, supposedly. He surprised me, however. “Just be careful, Levi. She seems pretty sure of leaving.”

“I know, and if that’s what she wants, I won’t force her to stay.”

“You just want to present other opportunities?”

“Exactly. And regardless, the land would be a good investment. I could always develop it or do my own thing without her. So it’s a win-win.”

“I hope so, man.”

I got off the phone with Clark, telling him I needed to feed the animals and head to bed since I had a busy day the

following morning. It was partially true. I did need to care for the critters, and I did have plans tomorrow, but being a Saturday, I had nothing but the visit to the property the next day.

I fed the chickens, made sure Al was settled in for the night, and checked on Birdtha. She was pissed off as usual, but I fed and checked her water.

Then my favorite part... I headed to the goat's pen and found one of the kids climbing on top of the hay bale. He jumped off, splaying out his legs, and he looked as happy as could be. I chuckled. They were so adorable.

The little girl goat followed her brother and did the same thing.

I still hadn't named the babies and felt bad about that, but my head had been elsewhere.

I really thought I was going to be a father there for a short while. And the idea had appealed to me more than I expected.

Maybe having kids, real kids and not goats, was something I wanted for my life. One day. After all, my brothers all seemed very happy with wives and kids. Maybe I was missing out on something. Of course, I would have to find the right woman, and Anna likely wouldn't be it.

My heart ached in my chest.

No, it can't be Anna. You can't pin all your dreams and hopes on one woman. A woman who has made it clear repeatedly that she is leaving and doesn't want the same things in life.

The idea of finding someone else who fit so well with me and the life I led felt like an impossible task.

And even if I could find someone else, they would never be Anna.

Jesus, man, what are you doing? You knew better. You fucking knew better.

I knew I had one last shot to show her she could have everything she wanted here, but even that felt pretty weak and

flimsy compared to a dream job in Africa.

Still, I had to try. And if she left, she left. I would have to come to terms with that and move on. But I wouldn't do it without giving us a fighting chance.

I quickly googled the reserve in Austin she was supposed to work for. They were closing. They needed somewhere to place the animals. I would call them in the morning, see what I could find out.

I had no idea what I was doing, but I had to try.

CHAPTER 21

“Can I peek now?” I asked with a giggle.

The truck had come to a stop; I could sense that. I heard the engine cut off, so it seemed like we had arrived at our secret destination. Levi hadn't told me a thing about where we were going or why it had to be a secret.

“Sure, go ahead.”

I pulled off the scarf and stared at the vast wilderness before us. Familiar mountains dotted the landscape in the distance. We were up on a hill overlooking acres and acres of forested land.

My eyes fell on a sign near the gate. For Sale. Or it was. Now there was an Under Contract sign slapped over it.

“I don't understand,” I said slowly.

“Come on,” Levi said, getting out of the truck. He walked around and helped me get down to the ground.

“Did you buy this land?” I asked. “Or are we trespassing?”

“It's mine, or it will be. I put in an offer and we're working out the details of the contract, but it will be mine, and I have permission to be here.”

“Okay.... So why did you buy another plot of land?”

“You'll see. Follow me.” He took my hand in his, which surprised me. I didn't pull away, I let him guide me down the hill and onto the property.

“I was thinking of building the main house here,” he said.
“What do you think?”

“But you already have a house, Levi.”

He shrugged and continued without looking at me. His eyes were glazed over as he started pointing and waving his arms around, seemingly mapping out the property in his mind.

“And while we may not be able to have elephants or big cats here, I was thinking we could house some kangaroos over there. I talked to the sanctuary in Austin, and they haven’t placed the three they have yet....”

I held up my hand. “Wait a second, you called the reserve in Austin? You want kangaroos?”

And then it hit me. He’d bought this land for me.

“Levi—”

“And I think we could build a vet station here—”

“Levi!”

He seemed to break out of his trance and stared at me for the first time. “Yes?”

“Did you— did you buy this to open a sanctuary with me?”

His lips pulled back into a crooked grin and my heart dropped. I had my answer.

“I can’t take this, Levi... It’s too much.”

“At least hear me out, Anna.”

“Levi, you don’t know the first thing about running a sanctuary.”

“I know, but I’ve signed up for some classes, and we could hire people. I’ve run the finances and can afford to bring on some staff.”

“Levi...”

“Just walk the property with me and let me explain my plan to you, please. That’s all I ask.” His smile had been replaced by a furrowed brow.

“Okay.”

I already knew there was no way I could do this. I couldn't expect him to cover all the costs for something like this. It was way too much. There would be so much work, work neither of us were prepared for.

“The reserve said they also had two zebras and a serval, which I think we would be able to house. I looked up their specific needs, and I think we could make it work. No predators, obviously, but I think we could fence in the entire back portion of the property for the larger animals to roam freely. Just imagine, for a second, some zebras against the backdrop of the mountains.”

For a second, I *could* imagine it.

As Levi spoke about where things like employee buildings could go, and how we could use solar panels and gray water to make the property green, there was a flickering inside me.

Hope.

“And the cabin could be all yours,” he said. “I'd stay where I am, unless....”

There was that crooked smile again. He too felt hope that maybe this could work out. Not just for me, but for us.

“This is amazing, Levi,” I said softly. Tears welled up in my eyes as I watched my dreams unfold. But then reality hit in. “But this is too big. I can't accept this from you.”

“Think of it like an investment then. I would be running a not-for-profit alongside you. It's not a gift, but something I want as well. You know I love animals as much as you do, Anna. Let's do this.”

He took my other hand in his and faced me. His smile, and the way he looked at me made me want to say yes to anything he ever asked of me. I got caught up in the moment and smiled back, leaning in for a kiss when reality slapped me in the face again.

“Levi, stop please.” My heart fell. “You know I'm going to Tanzania for two weeks for the trial.”

“I know they offered that to you, but what if you could do what you wanted here? Close to your family. Close to me.”

“Levi, please, I have to do this.”

He looked so defeated. “I know,” he finally said with a sigh.

“I’m sorry. I hate that you bought this property and everything. You should have asked first—”

“It’s not just for you, Anna. It’s for me too. I have dreams as well, and you’ve made me rethink what I want out of life. Don’t worry, with or without you, this place will be turned into a sanctuary. My plans will happen regardless. I just thought I’d invite you to join me, but I know I can’t make you stay.”

Tears streamed down my cheeks. The dream of doing this with Levi did sound nice.

“Thank you, Levi.”

He took a deep breath and pulled away from the hug. “And honestly, until you know what you want, I can’t keep doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“Pretending we’re together.”

I nodded and wiped my eyes. “I understand. It’s hard for me too. It’s making it even harder to leave.”

I knew the easy answer would be, “Then don’t,” but Levi didn’t ask that of me. Because he knew he couldn’t do that.

Him being so thoughtful, knowing me so well, just made everything hurt even more.

CHAPTER 22

“I’m thinking of breaking my number one rule,” I told Clark a few days later, hoping he might be able to talk some sense into me.

He took a long gulp from his beer and stared off into the distance. “I already know what you’re going to say, man, and I know that even if I try to talk you out of it, it will be useless.”

I finished my beer and glanced at the pens next to my house. Al was munching on some hay. His goofy face always made me smile. I loved that damned animal so much. I loved all of them, even the asshole emu.

They were the closest thing I had to children.

It would kill me to leave them.

However, losing Anna... that pain would be too deep. I wasn’t sure I could ever get over that.

“I feel like I need to give us a chance,” I confessed.

Clark sighed. “You’re going to throw your life away for a woman.”

“I’m not throwing my life away.”

Clark raised an eyebrow and stared at me for a moment. “You going to take your farm with you to Kenya?”

“Tanzania,” I corrected him.

“Same difference. You going to bring all this with you, everything you worked for and built for yourself?”

“I’ll build a new life.”

Clark let out a disgruntled sound, but he didn’t say anything else. I knew he thought this was a mistake.

“I love her,” I said softly.

“You love her? I thought this entire thing was fake and casual?”

“It was supposed to be, but I realized she’s amazing in every way. I don’t think I’ll ever meet someone like her again.”

“You are a lovesick puppy dog, man. She’s beautiful, and you two have fun, but that isn’t enough to uproot your entire life. That’s not love.”

“It’s more than that, Clark. She is beautiful, yes. She’s the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. She’s a lot of fun too, that’s true. But when we get together, we just... we work, you know? I can’t explain it, but when there’s a crowd of people, I look for Anna. She’s the only person I want to spend all my time with.”

Clark sighed. He placed his beer on the table, running a hand over his face as if giving him a moment to think of a response. “You know what, man? This is your life. I think you’re making a big mistake, but who am I to stop you? Can you really leave this?”

He motioned at the farm around me. In the distance, the sound of crickets and bullfrogs created a simple kind of music. The clear, mountain air filled my lungs, and it made me feel more alive. The mountains in the distance. And of course, the animals.

I looked at Al. He was staring at me with his usual blank expression. The goats, including the kid I hadn’t had a chance to name yet. I had something here.

“I don’t know,” I said, truthfully. “But I know I can’t just let her go.” I took another long swig and checked the time. “Dammit. I have to get ready for Emily’s wedding.”

Clark raised an eyebrow. “Even though you two agreed you weren’t going to keep faking it?”

I shrugged. “We agreed to be there for each other through all the events this summer, and this is the most important one.”

“And then this whole thing was supposed to be called off, right?”

“Yep.” But it wouldn’t be if I had any say in it.

Clark let out a low whistle and stood up. He grabbed his beer and my empty can and tossed them into the nearby dumpster without saying a word.

“I guess I’ll be seeing you after the wedding, man. Please don’t do anything stupid, take things slow and really think about this.”

“I will, Clark,” I said. I didn’t bother to tell him that I had already thought about it and had made up my mind. I knew what I had to do.

I couldn’t let Anna go.



I hadn’t seen Anna since the day at the property. We hadn’t talked either. I had no idea what to expect when I showed up at the church that evening. I arrived early, before anyone else, because I hoped to talk to Anna before the ceremony started. I waited outside the church, admiring the view of the mountains in the distance and the forest around us.

I’d always loved living in Sunville. Even growing up when people talked about leaving, I knew I would always live here with my family. In my youth, I imagined marrying and raising my own children in the very town I had grown up in. It had always been the plan for me. But now, I was thinking of leaving it all behind.

A limo pulled up to the church and I straightened. Anna and Grace got out of the limo first, but neither had seen me since they were helping Emily get out of the back. Anna was

so meticulous about fixing her sister's dress and straightening it for her.

Anna's pink dress was totally the opposite of what she would normally wear, but it hugged her curves perfectly, showing off her amazing figure. Her hair was pulled up into a curly updo, tendrils of blonde hair falling around her beautiful face. Her makeup was done tastefully, just enough to appease Emily most likely, but not so much so that she looked different to me.

My heart skipped several beats as I walked closer to her.

She stood up and our eyes met. Her mouth opened in a small O of surprise, but she quickly closed it and offered me a small smile. I walked over to her.

"Emily, you look beautiful," I said, greeting her sister as I approached her. "You too, Grace."

Grace blushed, "Thanks, Levi."

Then my gaze returned to Anna, and it was like everyone else had disappeared. I'm pretty sure Emily thanked me and was talking to me as well, but her voice sounded like it was so far away.

Anna's cheeks flushed and she averted her gaze. "Hi Levi," she said. "I wasn't sure if you would be here today."

"Why wouldn't I?" I looked at her sisters, who also averted their gazes.

"Because of the fight."

Was this part of the story she had told them?

I reached for her hand and laid a gentle kiss upon it. "I told you I would be here," I said. "And I want to be here with you."

"I'm glad you're here," she said, speaking softly but still not looking me in the eye.

"Do you think we can talk, alone, at some point?"

Anna looked at her sisters, who both acted like they wanted to disappear.

“We can go inside and—”

“No,” Anna interrupted. “We have a lot to do right now.”

“Really? I thought we were mostly ready,” Emily said, before realizing something. “Oh, that’s right. Yes, we have to... umm, set up the flowers, yes.”

“Don’t we have a coordinator for that?” Grace asked, clearly lost.

“We do, but I want to make sure it’s perfect, just like I want them,” Emily said through gritted teeth, as if trying to send Grace a message.

“It’s fine,” I said. “We can talk later. There’s no rush.”

Anna was trying to avoid me, but I also didn’t want to make a scene. The day wasn’t about us, it was about Emily. If Anna didn’t want to talk to me, I would have to accept that. “But if you need any help, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, Levi,” Emily said with a giant smile that felt genuine. “You’re the best.”

A car was coming down the driveway and Emily looked that way.

“Uh oh, that’s James. We need to get inside before he sees me! Levi, keep him out here until we can get to the back, please.”

“Of course,” I said.

Her sisters ushered her inside, and Anna glanced back at me and mouthed, “Sorry” before hurrying inside the church.

CHAPTER 23

I breathed a sigh of relief as the church door closed behind us. My heart had sped up to a dangerous pace as soon as my eyes fell on Levi. Him in that suit... Jesus Christ, I wasn't sure how I could be in the same room with him looking like that.

"What was that about?" Grace asked as soon as we were alone. "Why are you trying to avoid loverboy?"

"They had a fight," Emily said as we hurried to the private room set up for us in the church.

"Another fight? About what?" Grace asked.

"I'd rather not talk about it," I muttered.

I hadn't told Grace I was going to Tanzania after the wedding. I would have to tell everyone eventually, but I didn't want to deal with it at that time. I wanted to focus on Emily and her wedding.

We reached our private room and found our mother already waiting.

"Finally," she sighed. "I thought you might have gotten cold feet and run off or something."

I checked the time. "We're only five minutes late."

"Well, you never know," Mom said with a shrug. "There's still time, you know." Mom liked James, or so I thought. We stared at her for a long time, and she finally burst out laughing. "I'm kidding."

“Are you, though?” I asked.

“Well, you know, when you’ve been married as long as I have, sometimes you grow a little cynical. I’m sure you’ll understand in a few years, honey.”

I didn’t want to understand. I hated the whole boomer humor of marriage being miserable, but part of me felt like perhaps it was inevitable after so long. Which is why I focused on my education and career first. Those things would never leave me for a secretary one day.

“Mom!” Emily said. “No negative marriage talk on my wedding day, please.”

“Sorry, sweetie. It was just a joke.”

I shared a look with my sisters, and thankfully there was a knock on the door to stop my mom or Emily saying something they might regret.

“Look who’s here!” my sister-in-law, Candace, said as she stepped into the room. My other sister-in-law, Lila, was behind her with a hoard of kids. They’d been watching Grace’s children during the preparation earlier, and Madeline ran and hugged her mom. She was the flower girl and Candace had her dressed in her fluffy white gown and tiara.

“Oh my God, she’s so stinkin’ cute!” I exclaimed.

“Just wait until you see Nicholas in his suit.” Candace said, speaking of my nephew who was the ring bearer. “When I asked him what he thought about it, you know what he told me? He said, ‘I look funny,’ but as soon as he saw TJ step out in his suit, he started laughing and felt better about the suit.”

My face was hurting from all the smiling. As soon as my family got together, with the children and everything, I truly felt like I was home.

Madeline swirled in her dress, letting it fly out around her as she did circles. She did so many, she got dizzy and fell on her butt. I laughed and helped her stand up, but she fell right back down. “Whoa!” she said with a laugh, falling on her back and kicking her legs up as she wiggled around on the floor.

“Madeline Anne!” Grace chided, using her middle name so we both knew her mom was serious. “Get off that floor! You’re going to get your dress dirty.”

I helped her to her feet, and we tried to contain our chuckles.

“Anne like Anna,” Madeline said as if putting two-and-two together.

“Yep, you’re named after me!” I told her. “And I was named after our Grandma Anne.”

“Anna Banana!”

Madeline started spinning again, but I took her little hand and stopped her before she fell down again. She smiled at me. She looked so much like Grace with her big, blue eyes and blonde hair. My heart swelled with love. I had no idea it was possible to love someone as much as I did my nieces and nephews.

The coordinator poked her head in the door. “Are you ready to line up or do you need a few more minutes? The guys are lined up in the front and ready to start when you are.”

“I think we’re ready,” I said, looking around at the women of my family. My brothers were at the altar with James. “Are you ready, Em?”

Emily’s eyes filled with tears, which she wiped away, careful not to ruin her makeup. “Yes. I’ve been ready since senior year of high school.”

Anyone would be lucky to find someone who made them feel the way my sister felt about James. My smile wavered as I realized what I was thinking.

Maybe I have...

I tried to push any and all thoughts of Levi out of my head, and as I walked down the aisle, I kept my eyes to the front of the room, on my brothers and James. Nicholas did, indeed, look adorable in his little suit. I chuckled as I noticed him picking his nose. Others noticed and giggled along with me.

I took my place in the front and focused my attention on the back of the church. The music changed and my sister waltzed down the aisle accompanied by our mother and father. Tears welled in my eyes as I noticed she was crying. I looked at James; tears shone in his eyes.

To be loved like that...

Emily looked gorgeous. Her dress fit her perfectly, and the veil spilling down around her shoulders made her look angelic. She smiled at me as she took her place next to James.

My eyes moved over the guests, and before I knew what I was doing, I found who I was looking for. Levi was looking right at me, his gaze never wavering.

My heart thundered in my chest, and I felt dizzy. I took a deep breath and focused my attention on the happy couple.

I would have to talk to him eventually. I couldn't hide from Levi forever, but for now, I at least had the wedding to focus on and to keep up apart.

I felt weak in the knees thinking about him.

Of telling him it was time to end this arrangement.

My eyes filled with tears again, and this time, they weren't tears of joy.



Many people don't want kids at a wedding, and to be honest, I couldn't understand it. I mean, I did... but they also seemed to just bring so much fun with them.

They were the first to enter the reception venue, rushing inside and marveling at the massive dance floor. They started wiggling even before music had started.

To think, I had another niece or nephew on the way. A baby. One I could actually watch grow up if I decided to stay local.

But you're not staying in Sunville, I reminded myself.

My eyes darted around the room, my heart racing as I caught sight of Levi in the corner. He hadn't seen me yet; he was focused on the kids. His eyes were so bright and his smile so genuine. He really loved them. I never knew I had a soft spot for men who were good with kids until that moment.

I stepped into the room, and his gaze moved from Nicholas trying his best to do the worm in the middle of the dance floor to me. I audibly gasped as the air exited my lungs. I forgot how to breathe for a moment.

His green eyes were like emeralds, and they were completely focused on me. The look on his face was one I'd never seen before in any man's eyes, not when it came to me. It was the way James looked at Emily, the way Brad looked at Grace. The way my brothers looked at their wives.

He slowly walked toward me, and I had nowhere to run. Not that I could. My legs turned to jelly and forgot how to move. I placed a hand on the column next to me to steady myself.

Others were entering the reception hall. Grace rushed over to Nicholas, and I could hear her voice in the distance telling him to get off the floor. Classical music started playing softly in the background.

"Anna, I—" Before he could finish, however, people flooded around us, entering the venue and putting space between us.

Levi pushed through the crowd to get to me, and I stayed firmly planted, convinced I forgot how to walk. Slowly, the crowd dispersed as people found their seats, and Levi made his way to me, taking my hands in his.

"Anna, I wanted to talk to you."

The music changed in an instant, and the DJ said, "Please welcome the bride and groom, Emily and James!"

I knew we needed to move out of the way, and Levi helped me to step aside, never letting go of my hand as we took some seats not too far from the entrance. In the nick of time too,

since Emily and James entered the ballroom to the roar of applause.

Whatever Levi wanted to tell me, it would have to wait. I was honestly relieved by the distraction; it gave me a chance to steady my heartbeat and plan for whatever he might want to tell me. I assumed it would be about the end of our fake arrangement, the deadline coming up. I wasn't sure I was ready for that conversation yet, and my shaking hands likely gave my feelings away.

Levi stroked my hand as if trying to calm me.

And it worked.

Because of course it did.

Levi always managed to make me feel safe. I wasn't much of a people person, but Levi was one of the few people I never had anxiety around - unless I started thinking about how our relationship would soon come to an end.

Emily and James went right into their first dance, breaking tradition a bit and surprising everyone. They had trained for this moment, breaking into a beautiful waltz that made it seem like the two of them were dancing amongst the clouds. The music was soft and romantic, and I found myself leaning into Levi, resting my head on his shoulder, my knee touching his. I yearned to be closer to him, to touch him.

Soon. Soon, we'd have to have the talk, but at that moment, I was content to forget about the future and live in the present. Levi put a hand on my knee, and I looked up at him and smiled. Levi's lips pressed against my forehead, and I could have melted.

The couple ended their dance with a kiss, and again, everyone in attendance cheered, standing up to celebrate them. Levi helped me to my feet and only let go of my hand to clap alongside everyone else.

We quickly moved to our assigned seats - I was to sit by my sister and Levi would join the spouses at a table nearby. We split up and went our separate ways, and as I took the seat

between Emily and Grace, Grace whispered, “Looks like you two made up.”

I nodded at her but didn’t say another word. I found Levi in the crowd; he was staring at me.

I wanted dinner and the speeches to end, and I didn’t at the same time. I hardly heard James’ best man give his speech, and I was grateful that I told my sister I couldn’t speak - public speaking wasn’t my forte - and Grace was doing the maid of honor speech instead. I wasn’t sure if I could focus on the words. My head was spinning, and it wasn’t just Levi dancing around inside my skull.

It was everything.

My family. My beautiful, amazing family. They drove me absolutely batshit crazy sometimes, but I loved them and would miss so much of their lives when I left.

I didn’t even touch my champagne, as the stress got to be too much for me. My stomach was rumbling and twisting into knots. So much so, I finally decided it would be better to have the conversation with Levi so I could enjoy the rest of the evening.

As soon as Grace finished her speech and everyone had finished eating, the DJ opened the dance floor for everyone. I rushed over to Levi, who was already heading toward me.

“Anna, I—”

“Levi, we need to—”

“Go ahead,” we said at the same time. I chuckled. “Seriously, go ahead. I just wanted to say we need to talk.”

He cleared his throat and I felt like I might pass out as I waited for the dreaded ‘This ends now’ speech.

But that’s not what I got.

“Anna, I know I said I would never give up my dreams or my life here in Sunville, not after what happened with Beth, but I’ve come to realize something,” he said, speaking almost too quickly. This wasn’t like him at all. He took my hands in his and stared into my eyes. “Dreams change and mine have.

Before you came along, my dream was to live a quiet life on my farm, alone for the most part. However, none of that holds a candle to what I dream about now.”

“What do you dream about now?” My voice cracked.

He smiled shyly. “I dream of a life with you. Either here or Tanzania or wherever your job takes you. I dream of what it would be like if we could stop pretending and try this for real.”

“Levi—”

“I mean it. You can go to Africa, and I will follow you, if you let me.”

I stared into his eyes, and I believed him. I believed he meant it with all his heart, and it broke my heart.

“What about Al? And the kids? And Birdtha! Who would take Birdtha?”

He seemed to flinch at the words, as if I slapped him. “A sanctuary, I’m sure.”

“Levi, I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“Good thing you’re not asking. I’m telling you that if you want to be with me, we can make this happen.”

I reached up and stroked his cheek, feeling his warm skin against my palm. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I wasn’t sure if they were happy or sad tears or a combination of both. I stood on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to Levi’s since I couldn’t find the words to tell him how I felt and hoped a kiss would be enough until I could find my voice again.

God, I love this man.

CHAPTER 24

Emily had taken the microphone from the DJ and turned down the music.

“Everyone, today is a special day for James and me, no doubt about that, but I’m not the only one celebrating today. My beloved little sister Anna has some news to share as well.”

I looked at Anna, who looked as white as a sheet.

“Anna, would you like to tell them, or should I?”

“I wasn’t planning on making the announcement like this,” Anna whispered to her sister.

“I thought we talked about it,” Emily said, trying to muffle the mic and failing.

“I said I would tell everyone after your wedding, but not like this.”

“I said I’d give you the floor—”

“I didn’t hear that,” Anna insisted.

Even though they tried to talk in hushed whispers, the mic meant their words could be heard by everyone. Anna looked out at the crowd and cleared her throat, taking the microphone from her sister.

“Sorry, I think there was a misunderstanding. I’m really not one for public speeches and all that.”

“Go on,” Emily said, urging her sister with a big smile.

“I really didn’t want to take the attention off my beautiful sister and her groom—”

“It’s okay!” Emily giggled. “Just tell them already.”

Anna took a deep breath and closed her eyes as if she was imparting some bad news on the guests that evening. “Well, it looks like next week, I’ll be going to Africa. For two weeks, at first. It’s for a job opportunity with an animal reserve out of Tanzania, a dream of mine ever since I was a little girl. If the trial goes well, I could be moving there for a few years... or longer.”

People clapped for her. Anna opened her eyes, but she wasn’t smiling or cheering with them. She handed the microphone back to Emily and left the spotlight, rushing to me with tears in her eyes.

“Anna, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know if I can do this, Levi,” she said.

Before I could ask her why she wasn’t happier about everything, her mother rushed to her side. “Anna! Why am I just finding out about this now?”

“I meant to tell you in a more private way. There was a misunderstanding with Emily. I’m sorry, Mom.”

Her mother put her hands on her hips and scowled until wrinkles appeared on her forehead. “And what about Levi? Are you just going to leave your fiancé?”

“We’re working on that,” Anna said, speaking slowly and glancing at me. “We have a lot to talk about, and I don’t have the job yet. This is just a trial.”

“Levi isn’t going to move all the way to Africa, is he?”

I started to say that I would, but Anna stopped me. “I said we’re talking about it.”

“Anna—”

“I need some air.”

Anna hurried away from us, heading for the exit. I apologized to her mom and followed her outside, the door

nearly hitting me on the way out.

“Anna, wait—”

She stopped a few feet from the entrance and turned toward me, her mascara streaking her cheeks like a raccoon. She wiped at her eyes and cursed to herself.

“Anna, talk to me, please. I understand that speaking in front of everyone sucks, but this seems like more than a fear of public speaking.”

I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her to my chest. “Talk to me, please.”

“It’s just— I don’t know if I want to go,” she said.

“To Tanzania?”

“Yes.” She lifted her head and stared deep into my eyes. “On one hand, I will forever regret not going and trying... but I can’t imagine leaving all this.”

“Sunville? But I thought you wanted out of here?”

“I did, but now I have so many reasons to stay. I have my family, my nieces and nephews I’ll miss so much. Emily’s baby. And you, Levi. I don’t want to leave you.”

“I already told you,” I said softly. “You don’t have to leave me. I’ll go with you.”

“But I know it will break something inside you to give up your life here, and you won’t be the same, Levi. And that kills me to think about.”

“Anna...”

“Auntie Anna!” a tiny voice called from the entrance of the hall. Grace was standing there with Madeline and Nicholas at her side. Madeline rushed forward and into Anna’s arms, while Nicholas made his way over to me.

I picked the little guy up and he laughed.

“They were looking for you two,” Grace said as she walked toward us. “I think they’re getting a bit bored.”

“Bored? At a wedding? No way,” I teased.

“Dance with us!” Madeline said, tugging on Anna’s hand.
“Pweese Auntie Anna?”

“Pleeease!” Nicholas begged too, putting his hands together and pleading with everything he had.

“How can we say no to that?” I asked, glancing at Anna.

We had a lot we still needed to talk about, but I’d told Anna what I was willing to do - and I meant it. She wouldn’t have to lose me, that was final. I’d made my decision. If she was right, it might kill something inside me to leave. I knew it would just open opportunities for re-birth, a life I’d never even imagined for myself.

Hand-in-hand with the kids, we walked back inside the reception just as some cheesy pop song came on. I’d never heard it, but Madeline and Nicholas clearly had. They started cheering and wiggling, dancing and rolling around on the floor. Anna and I stood off to the side, unable to join them in their fun for the meantime, and Grace trying - and failing - to keep them off the floor.

The look in Anna’s eyes, the way her entire face lit up when she was around her family, I knew it would be hard for her to leave them. But she wouldn’t have to do it alone.

I took her hand in mine and gave it a squeeze just as the music shifted to a slow song. A ballad. I pulled her closer to me and held her in my arms, staring into those baby blue eyes.

“I love you, Anna,” I said, kissing her sweet lips. Her body tensed a bit, so I placed my fingers against her lips before she could say anything. “Listen, I don’t expect you to say it back to me. Please don’t feel like you have to. I just wanted to let you know. If you don’t feel the same, it’s okay.”

She flashed me an awkward smile and kissed me back, pressing those soft lips to mine. She may not love me, not yet, but I knew the kiss was real.

She had feelings for me too.

Which is why I couldn’t give up on us.

The evening began winding down, and Anna pulled me aside. “I know when I’m leaving for the trial,” she said. She wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Oh yeah?”

“It’s only for two weeks.”

“I know,” I said. I also knew Anna; she was amazing, and she would nail this trial and she would succeed at getting the job. “So when do you leave?”

“In two days.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Two days?”

“Yes, I leave Monday morning.”

CHAPTER 25

The day finally arrived. My flight was bright and early, six a.m. out of Salt Lake City with a layover in New York City and another in London. All in all, I'd be traveling for almost an entire day.

Emily and James had left for their honeymoon, but Grace had offered to drive me.

The drive to the airport seemed to take forever, and I pretended to sleep some of the drive just to keep myself from talking. I could feel the tears stinging my eyes, and all it would take is one wrong word and it would be like a waterfall I feared would not stop.

Two weeks. It's only two weeks, Anna, I reminded myself. I'd been apart from my family for longer. What did it matter that this was the entire other side of the world, or that since being back in Sunville, I'd grown closer to my family and realized just how much I loved being around them?

And of course, there was Levi too.

Grace parked the car and was helping unload my suitcases when a familiar voice called out to us.

"Anna! Grace!" Levi jogged closer.

"What are you doing here?"

"Saying goodbye, of course," he said with a goofy little grin.

"But I didn't tell you when my flight left." I had specifically not told him; I said my goodbyes the night of the

wedding. Seeing him before I left would only make things harder. I wouldn't be able to hold back the tears if he was here, and I hated crying in front of people.

"Emily mentioned it to me," he said. "I'm sorry if you didn't want me here, I just thought..."

"No, of course we want you here," Grace assured him, shooting me a weird look. I'd once again told her we'd had a fight, when in reality, I was just trying to avoid Levi.

Levi looked at me, his green eyes seeming to look right through me.

"I'm sorry, I just knew saying goodbye would be hard."

"It's okay," he said softly, taking the luggage from my sister and me. "Which airline?"

"Delta," I said.

"Alright, let's get this show on the road then." He didn't sound too enthusiastic.

Levi and I walked ahead, and Grace stayed a couple steps behind. I tried to call her up to walk beside us, but she said she wanted to give us ample time together. She had a huge smile on her face.

We checked my bags and headed toward security, slowing our pace since we would have to say our goodbyes at that point. We stopped short of the line, and I adjusted my carry-on bag, distracting myself from the inevitable rush of emotion.

Grace stepped up first and we hugged. "I'm going to miss you, sis," she whispered to me. "But I'm so happy for you, and I'll admit, a tad jealous that you get to do this. Knock 'em dead out there, Anna." She wiped the tears from her eyes.

"It's only two weeks," I said, my eyes stinging.

"But we both know you're going to get the job," she said. "Take care of yourself, and take pictures for me, please."

She stepped back, and Levi stepped up, staring at the ground with his hands shoved in his pockets.

Grace cleared her throat. "I'm going to hit the road and try to miss rush hour."

"It's too early for rush hour." I realized what she was doing as she waved and headed out of the airport, leaving me alone with Levi.

"So, this is it," he said softly.

"Well, just for two weeks."

"Like Grace said, you're going to get it, Anna."

I wasn't so sure, but I loved that my family and friends had such faith in me. I wiped away the tears drenching my cheeks and checked the time. "Crap, I have to get moving."

"Come here," he said, pulling me into a hug.

He kissed the top of my head and held me as I cried into his chest. He slowly lifted my chin until I met his gaze. He pressed his lips against mine, and I put everything I had into that kiss. I kissed him like I might never get to kiss him again. Who knew, maybe I wouldn't?

"Just remember what I said. I will give up everything I have here and move to Tanzania to be with you."

"Levi, I can't--"

"Shhh," he said, kissing me again.

I never wanted to let him go, but I couldn't ask him to give up everything for me. It wouldn't be fair, and eventually, he would grow to resent me. I knew how important it was to him not to lose himself in a relationship, I couldn't ask him to do that for me. I wouldn't. If I took the job, it would be the end; it would have to be.

I started sobbing, tears staining his shirt as I buried my face against him.

Why did this have to be so hard? Why did I have to complicate things by falling for Levi?

"You need to go," he said softly, his voice sounding pained.

I knew those words were difficult. He wanted to ask me to stay, yet he didn't. Because he knew me, he knew I needed this, and he wouldn't ask me to change my dreams for him.

Just like I couldn't ask that of him.

I wiped my tears. Levi helped me find some tissues in my bag, and he helped wipe the tears away from my cheeks.

As we parted ways, I wondered if Grace was already back on the highway toward home. Her kids would be waking up soon. I wondered if Madeline might ask about me.

My heart ached as I thought about my family.

I wasn't just leaving Levi behind.



“Good evening, folks. We are beginning our descent into Julius Nyerere International Airport in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Please make sure your seatbelts are fastened and your tray tables and seat backs are in the upright and locked position as we prepare to land.”

My heart was racing as I stared out the window at the city below. So many Americans mistakenly believe that Africa is all savannas and jungle, but the city below us was vibrant and filled with life. I knew this already, but it still surprised me to see the modern buildings below us.

It had been a long day, and the last leg of the flight had seemingly taken forever. I'd tried to sleep as much as possible, but I was both nervous and excited, counting down the minutes until I landed.

The plane landed and moved toward the gate at a snail's pace. My legs were getting twitchy; I needed to stand up.

“Come on...”

I had tried to determine if any of my fellow intern candidates were on my flight. The reserve had tried to book our flights at similar times, though some folks arrived earlier,

and a couple were arriving the following day due to scheduling issues.

The light went off and I removed my seat belt. Everyone jumped to their feet at the same time, as eager as I was to get off the plane.

The adrenaline coursed through my veins as we slowly disembarked the plane. I grabbed my carry on and made my way down the aisle and into the terminal. As soon as I was able, I rushed around the person walking slowly in front of me and made a beeline for the exit. The reserve had given me a map of the airport and where to meet them at baggage claim.

I had to get through customs and everything first, which took longer than I expected. It felt like hurrying up and waiting as I was finally approved to enter the country and head to where I would be meeting everyone.

As soon as I stepped into the open area, I saw the signs. A giant banner saying, "Welcome to Tanzania!" and smaller signs with names on it, including mine. I hurried over and found the person I had interviewed with in Los Angeles, my main contact.

"Busara! Good to see you again," I said as the woman hugged me.

"Good to see you too, Anna," she said with a broad smile.

Several others stood with Busara - representing people from all over the globe. I knew they recruited internationally, not just Americans, and it was interesting to be surrounded by so many different cultures and to know I was chosen amongst thousands of candidates all across the world.

I introduced myself to the others - a Korean woman, an Egyptian man, two other women from the United States, and a man from Brazil. There were some local candidates as well who I would meet later, along with those who arrived earlier or later.

"You are the last one to arrive today," Busara said. "So if you've collected your luggage, we can head out."

The trip to the reserve from the airport took several hours, so my travels weren't done for the day. Unlike in the plane, however, I had the view of a lifetime.

We were traveling away from the coastal city, so before long the modern buildings and skyscrapers were replaced with lush greenery and dense forests. Several hours into the drive, the road narrowed and didn't resemble much of a road at all. We were truly leaving everything behind as the reserve was isolated from most major cities to protect the animals. As the road narrowed, Busara told us we should look out for elephants, as they could sometimes be spotted in the area.

Not too long after that, she called out, "Look!"

And like a child, I pressed my face to the window and gasped as the bus slowed down to let us see the magnificent creatures.

Busara explained, "There is a large watering hole nearby, and this is the time of the day they normally travel there."

She was beaming as if she hadn't witnessed this countless times in her life, which I imagined she had. I hoped that like her, I would never become accustomed to seeing animals like this. I had a feeling it would always be just as exciting, especially seeing them in the wild like this.

I snapped a few photos as the herd of elephants crossed the road in front of us. In the distance, the sun was setting against the lush forest, the sky a brilliant pink and orange.

I will never grow tired of seeing this every day, I thought to myself.

The elephants retreated slowly away from us, almost oblivious to our existence, as if they were used to a bus full of people staring at them. Considering the tourist industry here, they probably were used to it.

The bus slowly started moving again as Busara continued to point out local wildlife. A lot of birds and some wildebeest. The sun set before we reached the reserve, and an almost pure darkness enveloped us. Only the headlights from the bus and the moon lit the surroundings. Anything could be out there,

including some big cats hunting in the cover of night. My heart raced thinking about it.

The bus ride was long, but eventually we pulled into the gates of the reserve and parked. Busara handed out some welcome packets with a schedule, information on the reserve, our keys, and some gifts as well, including a water bottle and a giraffe keychain to represent Tanzania's national animal.

“Welcome. I will lead you to the dorms and then you are free for the rest of the evening. As you can see on the schedule, we will start bright and early tomorrow with our introduction meeting and some health screenings. Mostly paperwork tomorrow morning. But as soon as we get finished with all that, the internship trial can begin, and you'll get your schedules and assignments.”

We followed Busara to the dorms, and I located my room. I told everyone good night as I unlocked the door and stepped inside.

I wasn't expecting much, but the room was nice and cozy overall. A mosquito net surrounded the bed and included in our packet was repellent and notes about diseases that can spread from them. I'd gotten all my required vaccines shortly after the interview in Los Angeles, just to be ready for this moment, but there was still a lot to be aware of.

I walked over to the small window on the opposite side of the room and stared out of it. It was pitch black outside, so I couldn't take any photos or see much of anything, but just the realization that I was there, in Africa, hit me and I couldn't stop smiling.

The room was pretty small, which I expected. Just a bed, a small dresser, and a desk. I shared a bathroom with the others in the dorm, something that would take some getting used to, since I hadn't done that since college. No kitchenette, but there was a small shelf for snacks. A communal kitchen and dining area was nearby. On my desk was a bowl of fruit, which was perfect since I needed something to eat before going to bed and didn't feel like trying to locate the dining area in the

middle of the night. I just wanted to sleep so tomorrow would come already.

I grabbed a banana and headed to the bed. I frowned as I realized I would have to figure out how to get in and out of bed with a net over it. I looked everywhere for a zipper, something to allow entrance. I walked around the bed two or three times before I found a spot where the net overlapped, and I separated the material.

“All that college and I could be bested by a mosquito net,” I muttered to myself as I slipped inside and sat on the bed with my phone and the banana.

It was eerily quiet. I had previously heard my fellow intern candidates moving around in their rooms nearby, but now they were silent. They had likely gone to bed or went in search of some food.

Being alone and in my thoughts meant the loneliness hit me pretty quickly. I was so far away from everyone I knew.

I sent the pictures I’d taken earlier to Grace and waited for a response before checking the time.

Oh, it’s one pm there, I realized. Grace would be at work still.

I sent the same picture to Emily, saying, “I’m here!”

She was on her honeymoon in Cabo, though, so I didn’t expect to get a response.

I laid back on the bed and opened Facebook, unable to sleep even though I was tired. My mind was racing. I was thankful for Wi-Fi even in the middle of nowhere.

Emily had posted some photos from her honeymoon. She was in a pink bikini posing proudly, her baby bump visible and obvious to anyone who knew what they were looking at.

Grace had posted some photos of the twins a few hours earlier, including a drawing Madeline had made at preschool that showed her family. I was off to the side beside what I only assumed was a giraffe since it had a very long neck. I smiled, but my heart literally ached.

I missed them already.

I had just arrived, and I missed them like crazy.

I loved being able to drop in and see my nieces and nephews anytime I wanted. I loved being able to go shopping with Emily or grab lunch with Grace. I could only imagine how much fun shopping for Emily's little bundle of joy would be, and the baby shower would be epic. All things I would miss if I got this job.

Feeling sadder and more torn by the minute, I decided I needed to talk to someone from back home.

I hesitated to reach out to Levi because of the complicated feelings between us. He made me want to throw all this way, though it wasn't just him. I missed him too. So much so, I sent him the photos of the elephants and went back to Facebook, assuming he was at work or too busy to respond in the middle of the day.

A second later, there was a buzz and a message from him.

Wow, that is amazing! Thanks for letting me know you arrived safely. It was followed by a heart emoji. He sent a second message, a picture of the baby goats I'd helped deliver. I smiled remembering my part in their birth.

He texted, *They may not be elephants but they're getting big.*

They really are, I responded. I followed it up with a question, just to keep the conversation going. I didn't want the conversation to end. *Did you finally decide on names for them yet?*

No clue. Do you have any suggestions?

Their parents were Ginger and Gilbert, which surprised me at first since they seemed like normal names and not silly puns, but Levi had told me they were short for Ginger Baaaahgers and Gilbert Goatfried.

I smiled and tried to think of something, anything. But I wasn't as funny as Levi. *I'm really not great with puns*

His response was quick. *They don't have to be puns. I was thinking Goaty McGoatface for the boy.*

I burst out laughing. *See? That's why you're in charge of naming all the critters, not me.*

Come on, you helped bring them into the world, at least help name the girl? It doesn't have to be punny or funny, just whatever name speaks to you.

I thought long and hard and chuckled as I finally managed a pun that would surely impress the likes of Levi.

What about Baaaabara Streisand?

I nibbled my lip and thought about the cute little goat, which I could see being called Barbara. Levi responded and included a photo of the little goat.

Perfect. I love it.

He followed it up with another text. *Sorry, have to go. A meeting with my brothers about a job. Talk later?*

My heart dropped saying goodbye to him, because I knew I would be alone with my thoughts. I told him we'd talk later, and we said goodbye. I curled up in bed and laid my head against the pillow, staring out the window into the darkness beyond. I fell asleep at some point and had a dream.

I was back in Sunville, waking up in bed next to Levi. A baby was crying nearby. A baby? Even in the dream, it seemed weird to think I had a baby, but I got up and cradled the little girl in my arms. There was a second crib with blue bedding. A boy and a girl, just like the twin baby goats.

Levi wrapped his arms around me, and I truly felt like I was there, I believed it.

The dream jumped forward, and we were caring for the kangaroos from Austin. Other animals surrounded us. We'd done it; we had our own little reserve.

My phone alarm pulled me out of the reverie, and as soon as I realized it was all a dream, my heart sank.

I slipped from the bed and walked over to the window. The sun was rising in the distance, and the sky was a rainbow of colors. Trees and grasslands could be seen for miles and miles, rolling hills as far as the eye could see. Those hills were filled with wildlife, animals I had only ever seen in a zoo before.

Perfection. I was living in a dream, yet I wanted to go back to the dream I'd been having when I was asleep.

I stared out at the landscape and spoke to myself, "I don't know if I can do this."

CHAPTER 26

“**W**hat’s up, little man?”

I noticed as soon as I entered the pen that Goaty wasn’t standing. His sister was jumping around and trying to get him to play, but Goaty didn’t join her. His sister head-butted him playfully, and Goaty tried to push himself up on his legs but immediately fell to the ground. My heart dropped into my stomach. I feared something was wrong with the little guy.

I knelt beside him, and even though I was no vet, he felt cooler than usual.

My first instinct was to call Anna. I was about to hit her number when I remembered she was on the other side of the world, and who knew what time it was there.

I called the emergency line at the vet instead and left a message since no one answered.

I felt so hopeless, unsure what to do for the baby goat. I sat beside him and tried to get him to eat some hay, to no avail. I ran inside and chopped up some carrots. He wouldn’t eat those either. Nothing. He just stared at me with his big eyes, looking helpless.

I checked my phone every two minutes, cursing how long it was taking for the vet to get back to me. I knew he had other clients, likely had other emergencies, but I wanted to find out what was wrong with Goaty. I wanted to make sure he was okay.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I gave in and checked the time in Africa. It was early evening there. I texted

Anna, afraid she would be busy.

Sorry to bother you, but something is wrong with Goaty.

My phone rang a second later.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as soon as I answered. No hello, nothing. Straight to the point, which I appreciated.

I told her how he tried to stand up but was too weak, how he was refusing food and wouldn’t even interact with his sister. “And he feels cool to the touch,” I added.

“Poor thing. Has he been eating enough?”

“I believe so, but Ginger has been pushing them away more. I thought it was natural to try and wean them.”

“What’s the weather like there?”

“It’s been really hot, but I installed some swamp coolers to help keep their area cooler.”

“Maybe a bit too cold?”

“It felt nice and chilled when I entered this morning.”

“That may be it, but it could also be bacterial or viral... Your vet really needs to run some tests.”

“I’m waiting for him to call me back.”

“If he doesn’t get back to you, I can try to look up some others who may be able to help you in the area. One second,” Anna seemed to muffle the phone, and I heard her talking to someone in the background.

“If you need to go—”

“No, it’s fine, I’m just waiting for my physical and health check. They just need me to fill out some paperwork.”

“Health check?”

“Yeah, just to make sure I’m vaccinated and in good health, not immunocompromised or pregnant, that sort of thing, since the trial will involve a lot of heavy lifting and coming into contact with animals which could spread disease.”

“Makes sense,” I said, scratching between Goaty’s little ears.

God, I wish Anna was here right now, I thought to myself. I hated waiting, and I trusted her insight into things like this. I trusted her more than a random vet I had found online.

My phone buzzed. “Oh, looks like the vet is getting back to me. I’ll let you go.”

“Yes, but please keep me updated. I worry about the little guy.”

“Will do,” I said, saying goodbye and switching over to the other call.

We said hello, and I launched into everything that was going on. As suspected, the vet said we would need to run some tests. He suggested I bring Goaty in, if possible. He was small enough that I could carry him and transport him in my truck, so I agreed.

The goat was almost limp in my arms. He didn’t even fight too much as I carried him to my truck. I feared the worst as I drove to the vet’s office, glancing back every few seconds to make sure Goaty was still with us.

“Please be okay,” I kept muttering to myself. I’d only known the little guy for a couple weeks, but I loved him so much already. I loved all my animals. The thought of losing him made my eyes sting with tears and I just kept praying he would be okay.



I came back to the farm empty handed. My heart ached ever since walking out of the vet without Goaty. I hadn’t lost him, thank God, but he was in poor condition. He needed a lot of tests and medicine and to be somewhere they could monitor him. I feared I would get a call later in the day telling me he didn’t make it.

I went back to the pen to check on Barbara, Ginger, and Gilbert. Maybe it was my imagination, but I swore Ginger was

searching for her missing baby. She bleated at me more than usual and followed me around as if to say, “Lead me to my baby.” But I couldn’t because he wasn’t there.

Barbara seemed to be a bit confused about her missing brother too, but thankfully she had a lot of energy and seemed to be eating just fine. I worried that whatever Goaty had, he might pass it to his twin sister, but so far, she seemed healthy.

Anna wanted me to update her, so I sent a quick message to tell her that Goaty was hospitalized, and they still weren’t sure what was wrong with him, but they were getting to the bottom of it. I wanted to add, “I wish you were here,” but left that out. I didn’t want to make her feel guilty, nor did I want to weigh her down. She should be enjoying her experience and focused on making her dreams come true, not with our lives back here.

I sat on the ground next to Ginger as she ate some hay. I had often found solitude and peace in the goat pen, as they were some of my favorite animals.

Soon, this could all be history.

A lump formed in my throat.

It was hard enough to not have Goaty with us. The idea of leaving him at the vet killed me. If I kept my word to Anna, it would mean finding homes for all my critters and likely never seeing them again.

The thought of that felt like a lead weight in my stomach.

I loved Anna, and I had to make a choice. I told her I would follow her, and I would. But sitting there with the goats, worried about losing Goaty, the reality of actually doing it me hard. Part of me knew Anna was right - I wouldn’t be the same if I left this behind.

CHAPTER 27

I sat on the crinkly examining table, alone in a doctor's office located on the reserve. I kicked my feet and tapped my fingers, eager to get the ball rolling. I was waiting for some bloodwork to come back, just to make sure everything was normal. It was the last piece of information they needed from me before I could start working.

There was a knock on the door and a nurse entered with a smile.

"We got some interesting results back," she announced.

"Interesting? As in, I'm part alien or something?" My joke fell flat as the nurse took a seat across from me.

"You said in your paperwork there was no chance you could be pregnant, correct?"

"Correct. I have an IUD, and I actually took a pregnancy test not too long ago, after the last time I'd had intercourse. So I don't think there's any way for me to be pregnant." The nurse's smile wavered, and concern filled me. "Why do you ask?"

"Well... because your blood results and urine results both came back positive."

"Positive for what?"

"For pregnancy," she said.

"That's impossible. Run them again."

“Both tests, Ms. Berkshire. Blood test results for pregnancy are very accurate, I might add. How long after intercourse did you take the pregnancy test?”

“Uhhh, a couple of weeks, I don’t know.” My head was spinning.

“Did you only take one test?”

“Yes.”

“It may have been too early. You might not have had enough hormones for a positive test at that time.”

“But the IUD?”

“We will want to get the IUD out right away, and check that it hasn’t migrated.”

“No, I mean, the IUD should have prevented pregnancy. I mean, I know accidents happen, but they’re rare...”

“They are rare, but sometimes IUD’s migrate or even fall out. Which is why we want to be sure yours isn’t somewhere it shouldn’t be.”

“No, seriously, I can’t be pregnant.” My head was spinning, and I felt like the room was closing in on me.

“I can assure you that you are,” the nurse said kindly.

“But the internship...”

The clinic was connected to the reserve and had a close relationship with them. The nurse knew exactly why I was there and what this would mean for me.

“Well, you will have to talk to the coordinators, but one thing you need to consider is that Zika poses a risk for pregnant women here, and the nature of the work is intense at times. I cannot recommend for a pregnant woman to take a position. In Tanzania, your options are limited, but if you are going back to the US before the internship starts, you have more options.”

“More options. As in—” *Oh God. I’m pregnant. She’s not lying to me. This isn’t a mistake. I have choices to make. My*

hand fell on my stomach as the realization hit me that the pregnancy test was wrong a few weeks ago.

“Right now, I’m going to send you in for an ultrasound,” she said.

“For the baby?”

“No, for the IUD. It’s likely too early to see much of the baby,” the nurse said, her smile returning.

Everything else happened so fast. One second, I was in the tiny little office, the next I was lying flat in another room with an ultrasound wand on my belly. I kept looking at the screen, wondering what I was looking at and if I could see any sign of my baby.

“No sign of an IUD at all,” the tech said to me.

“What do you mean no sign of one? Meaning it didn’t migrate or—”

“You don’t have one,” the tech said.

“I don’t understand. I remember getting it placed.”

“Did your doctor check for the strings after insertion, or have you had any pap smears since then to make sure it’s been in place?”

“No.”

“Sometimes after insertion they can fall out and you don’t realize it.”

“How can it just fall out? It hurt like hell going in. You would think I’d feel it coming out!” I stopped short. I remembered the intense cramping a couple days after insertion. I thought it was normal, but if what they were saying was true... it might have fallen out of me.

The tech had the nurse come in and explain to me how sometimes they fall out, but I was no longer listening. I had choices to make, and I needed to talk to Levi.

I went through the motions to get discharged so I could return to my dorm. I knew that they wouldn’t let me do the work needed to prove myself during the trial. They wouldn’t

send me home, but I'd be limited in what I could do because of the pregnancy.

I stood at my window and stared out at the landscape. *I should be heartbroken*, I told myself. I should be upset or crying or even angry. Something. Instead, I felt pretty empty.

My phone buzzed with a message from Grace. She sent me a video of Madeline swimming. Madeline had been afraid of water before, and Grace told me, "She did it! Look at her go!" And I felt so much pride for my niece for getting over her fear and learning something new.

Maybe this baby was a sign... maybe it was telling me what I needed to do.

I didn't want to make such a choice on a whim, however. I sent a message to Busara and told her my health check was finished and that I needed to talk.

I had options, as the nurse had told me. This wasn't a choice being made for me.

I had to make a decision.

And I had to make a decision quickly.

CHAPTER 28

It had been two days and Goaty was still at the vet's office awaiting some more test results as the source of his illness had been elusive so far. I was feeding the animals when the sound of tires on gravel took me by surprise. I wasn't expecting anyone. Was it Clark stopping by unannounced? Or one of my brothers?

I stepped out of the pen and saw Anna's car heading down the driveway.

As it got closer, I squinted my eyes and could make out the outline of the driver.

"Is that..." I muttered, unable to comprehend how Anna could be driving down my driveway when she was on the other side of the world in Africa.

The car stopped and I walked toward it. The door flung open and Anna hopped out of the driver's seat and ran toward me. She was in my arms within seconds and my lips were pressed against hers before either of us could even mutter a hello.

Finally, when we both took a breath, I asked, "What's going on? Why are you here?"

"I forgot to tell you something before I left," she said, beaming up at me. Her hair was in a messy bun, and she looked tired, but she was still the most beautiful woman in the world to me.

"You couldn't have called or texted me?"

“No, I needed to say this in person,” she said, kissing me again, her soft hands cupping my face. “I love you too, Levi. I’m sorry I didn’t say it before I left, but I was scared. I was terrified that admitting it out loud would somehow make it harder to leave you, but not saying it didn’t make it any easier.”

“Anna, I told you—”

“Shh,” she said, kissing me again, her tongue moving into my mouth as her hands went for my belt buckle. “I need you right now. We can talk later, but I’ve missed you so much and can’t wait another second.”

I wasn’t about to say no to that. I picked Anna up off her feet and she let out a little squeal of surprise. I carried her inside my cabin and into my bedroom, laying her gently on the bed. Questions swirled in my mind, and I pinched myself to make sure this wasn’t a dream.

She was there, not in Africa. She was right there in my bedroom.

“Levi, please,” she whimpered as she finished removing my belt, tossing it to the floor.

I made quick work of her clothing as she fought to get me out of mine at the same time. Within seconds, we were naked and laying on my bed together, her face in my hands as I kissed her and snuggled against her warm, soft skin.

I inhaled her scent, still not believing she was there, with me, even as I touched and kissed her.

“Make love to me,” she whispered against my lips.

We rolled until I hovered above her, staring deep into her eyes. Her hands guided my cock, rubbing the tip of it against her. Her warmth sent a shudder throughout my body.

I thrust inside her as she wrapped her body around me, arching upward as if to take all of me in at once. A groan escaped her lips along with the words, “Yes, Levi, yes.”

I slipped out of her completely, rubbing my head against her opening. Her body writhed underneath me, her arms and

legs wrapping tighter around me, trying to pull me into her. Her body was literally begging for it.

I thrust into her again, nice and slow, and her moans were music to my ears. I wanted nothing more than to make her orgasm again and again and again. I didn't even care about my own pleasure; I just wanted to make Anna feel amazing.

We found a rhythm, our bodies moving in perfect harmony as I kissed her everywhere I could - her lips, her face, her neck, a little nibble on her earlobe which elicited a soft whimper and a shiver throughout her entire body.

I gripped the headboard of the bed for leverage, thrusting into her faster, more determined than ever to bring her to the edge.

She didn't even have to tell me she was close; I could hear it in her breathing, in the sounds she made. The way she cried out my name before her body began shaking wildly underneath me. I remained steady, trying to keep the same rhythm that had brought her here, even as her body kept moving underneath mine.

"Oh God." Her pussy clenched around my cock, pulsing against me, milking me. I clenched my jaw and steadied myself, not wanting things to end this quickly. I knew Anna was good for several orgasms, at least, and I wanted to give them all to her.

Her body relaxed against the bed, her hands kneading my bare back.

"Roll over," she said with a mischievous grin.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, flipping around until I was on my back.

Anna climbed on top of me, rubbing her warm wetness against my member. I reached up and removed the scrunchie from her hair, letting her soft waves surround us like a curtain. Anna kissed me long and hard before moving lower and placing delicate little kisses on my chest, all while grinding against me.

Then she took my cock into her hands and guided it inside her, sliding down my pole until I was completely sheathed.

She sat upright, offering me an amazing view of her body. Her large breasts bounced as she rode me. I cupped them in my hands and ran my fingers over the nipples, a sensation that caused Anna's pussy to tighten around my cock. "Mmm, God, I missed this," she said as she began moving faster, rocking back and forth.

As her movements became more and more erratic, the pleasure seeming to build inside her, I knew she was about to orgasm. I grabbed her hips and helped continue her movements, pulling her against me and lifting her up only to help slam her down against me once more. Anna's mouth opened in a perfect "O" shape, and she cried out in pleasure, not even forming any words as her thighs seemed to vibrate underneath my hands.

Each one of her orgasms brought me closer to my own. Feeling her pussy clench around mine, watching her face contort into a look of pleasure, hearing her moans... it was too much for me.

Anna slipped off me and laid back down on her back with a come hither look on her gorgeous face. She crooked her finger and motioned for me to get on top again.

I rolled over and hovered above her, staying on my knees with her legs practically thrown over my shoulders. I thrust into her nice and deep. She closed her eyes and muttered "mmm" as I filled her up.

I could feel the tension growing inside me, and I knew I wouldn't be able to last long. Anna squeezed her Kegel muscles with a devious grin, as if she were trying to push me over the edge. Not that she would have to try too hard.

A few thrusts and I felt like I was going to boil over. I fell forward, her legs wrapping around me as I thrust into her one last time, exploding inside her.

She moaned my name as I filled her with my seed.

We stayed like that for a moment or two after the pleasure subsided. Anna kneaded my back gently and kissed me. Her eyes looked heavy with exhaustion.

I slipped my deflated member from her and laid down beside her, pulling her closer to me, our bodies entangled. Once I could breathe normally and could speak, I asked her, “So tell me, please, what really happened and what did I do to deserve you flying all the way from Africa to tell me you love me?”

Her smile wavered a bit and she looked away, but I lifted her chin to look at me again. “What is it, Anna? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said. “It’s just— well, the pregnancy test we did a while back? Apparently, it was a false negative.”

Her words theoretically made sense, but at the same time, I wasn’t sure I understood what she was saying.

“What do you mean? Are you saying you’re pregnant?”

She chuckled nervously. “That’s exactly what I’m saying, Levi. They took a blood and urine test at the clinic in Tanzania, and apparently, I’m pregnant. My IUD was missing, likely just fell out.”

My heart raced and my thoughts were going a hundred miles a second.

She was pregnant.

I was going to be a dad.

That is, if she wanted to keep the baby. I knew it would impact her dreams. What if she...

“What does this— I mean, what are you planning to do?” I asked before getting my hopes up.

“What do you mean?” She stared at me. “I’m going to keep the baby, Levi, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“What about the internship?”

She shrugged and let out a deep sigh, rolling over onto her back and staring at the ceiling. “I told them to take me out of consideration. There’s no way I can do it while pregnant or with a newborn. The job is too grueling.”

I was both relieved and saddened to hear that. Emotions are complex beasts. I was happy she wouldn’t be leaving, excited about being parents... but knew this opportunity had meant so much to her.

“I’m sorry, Anna,” I said softly.

She rolled back over to look at me, a faint smile on her face. “Nothing to be sorry about, Levi. I’m sad, don’t get me wrong, but once I was out there, as amazing as it was, I found myself really yearning to be back here. Not just for you, but for my family as well. And finding out I was pregnant,” she shrugged, “well, I take it as a sign that it’s not meant to be. I’m meant to be here. I don’t know what I’m going to do about my career, but I’ll figure it out.”

“I still have the land I bought. We could open our own reserve like I proposed. We’d start small, of course, but it has a lot of potential. I’ve been doing my research and talking to other reserve owners around the country. I think we could do it.”

“Levi, that land was so expensive. I couldn’t do that.”

“It’s not a gift, Anna. It’s an investment into our future. This is my dream as well, and I want to do it with you. We may not be able to get elephants, but the kangaroos still need a new home and I found some more asshole emus we could take in. We could start small and see where things go.”

Anna’s smile grew a bit bigger, and her eyes seemed to glow. “That does sound nice,” she said.

I took her hand and brought it to my lips, dotting a kiss on her knuckles. “I think it sounds very nice. You, me, and baby running our own little reserve and building a life together.”

I placed a hand on her tummy, and she rested her hand against mine.

“Let’s do this,” she said as she kissed me. “Let’s start planning for our family’s future.”

CHAPTER 29

“Goaty seems to be doing better,” I said as I scratched the little goat between the ears.

“All thanks to you nursing him back to health the last couple of weeks,” Levi said, kissing me on the top of the head.

The goat had stayed at the vet for a few days before being released. He’d had a bacterial infection, so we had to give him antibiotics and feed him from a bottle to make sure he was eating enough. Hand feeding the little guy had really cemented my decision to stay in Sunville and build our own reserve. We’d already started the legwork for it, working out the permits and building the enclosures, and it was coming along nicely - albeit a little slowly, as to be expected considering the scale of the project.

Levi helped me up off the floor of the pen where I’d been feeding Goaty, and I brushed the hay and dirt off my jeans.

“I don’t have much time to change before our appointment. Hopefully the doctor doesn’t mind me smelling like a barnyard.” I chuckled as we exited the pen.

We were going to our first ultrasound, or the first one where we’d be able to see the baby, which was both exciting and scary. It made it even more real. Levi and I were going to be parents. I had never really thought too much about being a mother, at least not anytime soon, but I already loved the little bean growing inside me and had no doubt we’d be able to make it work. Especially with a man like Levi at my side.

I took his hand in mine as we walked to the truck. On the drive to the clinic, we started talking about names.

“What do you think about Emilia Grace, if it’s a girl? After my sisters.”

“That’s pretty,” he said. “But what if it’s a boy?”

“Well, do you have any names picked out?” I asked, cracking a smile. “And no silly puns either.”

Levi laughed. “I’m better at naming animals, I’m afraid.”

“Come on, you don’t have anyone you’d like to name the baby after?”

Levi thought long and hard before saying, “Well, there’s my grandfather, Theodore. What about the name Theo?”

“I love it,” I said, letting the name roll over in my head. “What about Theodore Thomas? Or is that too many Ts.”

“T-n-T... we could call him dynamite.” I shot him a look and he added, “Or not.”

We both laughed so hard it caused a cramp in my tummy. I bent over and cried out, but I kept laughing through the cramp.

“We’re going to totally nail this parenthood gig,” Levi said.

“Oh totally! We’re going to be the coolest parents alive.”

“I mean, how many kids get to grow up around kangaroos and emus?”

“I think we should keep Birdtha far away from our kid, at least until he or she is old enough to defend themselves.”

Levi grinned. “I think she’s getting better.”

“Oh yeah?” I cocked an eyebrow.

“Yeah. She came up to the fence when I was feeding her the other day.”

“Did she try to peck your eye out?”

“Well, yeah, but I think she just wanted attention.” He winked at me to let me know he was kidding.

“Oh Levi,” I laughed some more. “Never a dull moment with us, is it?”

“Never,” he said, pulling into the parking lot of the clinic.

He rushed over to help me out of the truck, and I slipped down from my seat into his arms. His green eyes stared deeply into mine, and for a moment, we just stood there like that, completely smitten with each other.

“We have an appointment.” I reminded us both.

He placed me down on my feet and took my hand in his. We rarely went anywhere without holding hands. Maybe it was still the honeymoon phase of our relationship, but I loved that he was so affectionate with me. I hoped we would grow old together, holding each other’s hands well into our nineties.

We didn’t have to wait long before we were called back for the ultrasound. Just like with the one for my IUD, they put a cold gel on my belly and moved the wand around. At first, the doctor didn’t say much. She muttered, “Interesting...”

“Interesting?” Levi and I asked at the same time.

“Yes. I just want to verify a few things first...” The doctor moved the wand, and a smile broke out on her face. “Ahh yes, it’s confirmed. Congratulations you two, you’re expecting twins.”

“Twins?” Again, Levi and I echoed each other.

I leaned up and tried to see the monitor clearer. “You can tell?”

“Yes, we can. Two heartbeats, and if you look closely, you can see Twin A here and Twin B.”

Levi’s hand tightened on mine, and I turned to look at him. He was grinning larger than I’d ever seen him grin before.

“Wow,” I said, relaxing back onto the exam table. “Twins. That’s...going to be a handful.”

“But we can handle it,” Levi said with complete optimism.

“They look very healthy, and everything seems to be coming along just fine. We will of course want to monitor you

more often due to being at higher risk with twins.”

Twins. It still didn't feel real to me.

Also, higher risk. Did this mean I would have to slow down? Later in the pregnancy, I might be bedridden and watched closely. I placed a hand on my tummy as the doctor cleaned me up.

It would be worth it, though. They were worth it.

Levi continued smiling like a fool. If he was concerned about what this would mean for our life, well, he didn't let it show. He was happier than I had ever seen him. As soon as we were dismissed, he told me, “Twins! We're going to have twins!”

“We are!”

“You're meeting with Emily in a bit, right?”

I had plans to meet with my sister after the ultrasound, but my head was spinning, and I forgot all about it until Levi mentioned it. “Uh, yes, I guess I have some big news to share now.”

Levi hugged me tightly, lifting my feet from the ground as he kissed me. “I'm so happy, Anna. I love you so freaking much.”

“I love you too,” I said with a laugh. “I had no idea you dreamt of being a dad, Levi.”

“I hadn't, not really. But as soon as you told me you were pregnant, it clicked. I see my brothers with their children and see how happy they are... and now I get to have a family too. With you.”

My phone buzzed and it was Emily.

“I'll drop you off at the restaurant,” Levi said. “I'm going to head over and see Irene. Do you mind if I tell her the news?”

“Of course not. Tell anyone you want.”

The fact that he was aching to tell his family just made my insides all warm and mushy. He was so sweet, such a good

heart, and he was mine. I couldn't have asked for a better man to raise my children with.

He drove me to the restaurant where I was meeting Emily and kissed me a hundred times before letting me go. I hurried inside and slipped into the booth, Emily smirking across from me, having witnessed our very public PDA.

"I guess the ultrasound went well," she said. "You two are so stinking cute together."

Her belly was starting to show at last, and she'd told everyone the news of her pregnancy. We were already planning a baby shower for her little one.

"It went very well. I have some big news," I said.

"What, are you having twins or something?" she quipped.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Actually, yes!"

"Jesus, Anna, look at you. You always did show me up at everything!" She winked at me playfully. "No, seriously though, I couldn't be happier and I'm honestly glad it's you and not me. One baby seems like it's going to be a handful for me, but you? I know you're going to rock as a twin mom."

"Thanks, Emily," I said. "And how's your little one doing?"

"Little Rosie is still growing like normal; everything is going well."

"I can't wait for our kids to grow up together," I said.

"Me too!"

The waitress approached and we placed our respective orders, but it was clear she was dying to get back to the baby talk. As soon as we ordered, Emily turned back to me. "Sooo.... Are you waiting to get married after the babies are born then?"

"Married?" I'd just taken a drink of water, and it nearly came out of my nose from laughing. "We haven't talked about that. You know the engagement was fake, right? We aren't even officially engaged yet, and honestly, there's no rush."

“It’s only a matter of time,” Emily said in a sing-song voice. “I see the way he looks at you. Either he thinks the wedding is still on or he plans to ask you for real soon.”

“Nah, we’re not like that. There’s no rush. He knows I love him, and he loves me, and we will love our beautiful babies. That’s all that matters.”

I’d thought about it, even though I wouldn’t admit it out loud. I’d thought about asking Levi what his thoughts were. What did we call each other? Girlfriend and boyfriend? Seemed a bit silly for two people preparing to raise children together, but a lot of people did that. I’d mostly been calling him my partner, and I stopped wearing the ring before leaving for Tanzania. I wasn’t even sure where it was. I left it at Levi’s. So I didn’t consider us engaged, and I was pretty sure he didn’t either.

But like I told Emily, there was no rush. I was pregnant with twins. Unless we ran off to the courthouse, it was very unlikely we could plan a wedding before my baby bump made it impossible to fit into a wedding dress, and we were so busy trying to get our nonprofit animal sanctuary up and running, it didn’t really feel like a priority.

Maybe one day, I thought to myself as I finished lunch with my sister.



“Where are we going?” I asked as Levi turned the opposite direction from his cabin.

“Just going to show you the property and how far along it’s come already.” Levi looked at me and smiled.

I hadn’t been out to the property since the day Levi initially showed it to me, but we had looked over plans and I approved some things. Levi was working out there, and his brothers were helping him, but I had no idea how far along any of it was.

Levi pulled into the driveway and drove to the end of it.

“Oh wow, you started on the house first?” I exclaimed.

“Yes, thankfully so, since my cabin is only a one bedroom. We’ll need another one soon.”

“True... and more in the future.”

“Which is why I’m glad we decided to build the extra rooms, for future expansion of our family.” We hadn’t talked about having more kids after this, but I was open to the possibility, as I knew he was too.

“We also finished the pens for the kangaroos,” Levi said, hopping from the truck and running over to help me get out. “I wanted to show them to you.”

The kangaroo area wasn’t too far from the main house, and I was giddy when I realized it was finished.

“We talked to Austin, and we’ve fast-tracked all the paperwork and everything, so they should arrive in the next month or two, at most. They are eager to get them here.”

I still couldn’t believe we were going to have kangaroos! My favorite animal, the main reason I went into the field. Pretty soon we’d have some to care for, all thanks to Levi’s hard work and dedication.

“I know it’s not Africa...” Levi said, trailing off as we walked the property.

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned on my heels to face him. “Levi, this is even better than the opportunity in Africa. After all, Tanzania doesn’t have kangaroos.... or you.”

Levi wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into him. “I hope you mean that, and I hope you’re happy with how life has turned out. I never want you to regret your choice to stay here.”

“I mean it with all of my heart,” I said, standing on my tiptoes and pressing my lips against his. “I feel like I’m right where I’m meant to be.”

Levi took my hand in his and looked down at my ring finger. “You’re not wearing the ring anymore. Does this mean we’re no longer engaged?”

“I gave it back to you, remember. Before I left for Africa.”

He shot me a cheeky grin. “I know, I was just being silly.” He pulled something from his pocket, and I recognized it a second later. He opened the ring box and dropped to his knee.

“Levi...”

“You can always say no if you want to,” he said with a nervous chuckle. “But I was thinking... if you’re okay with it, I’d love to make our engagement official. Will you marry me, Anna?”

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest, and I was jumping up and down. My hands covered my mouth so at first, my response was muffled.

“Yes, Levi, yes,” I said over and over again. I’d thought I was good with waiting, that we had all the time in the world, but thinking about making it official with this man filled me with such joy, I felt like I might explode from it.

He slipped the ring back on my finger. “Right where it belongs,” he said softly before kissing my knuckles.

CHAPTER 30

I surveyed the property. A couple capybaras were headed our way, and we'd gotten another emu to keep Birdtha company. The goats had been relocated and a few more acquired. We had a regular petting zoo with them and Al. I hoped to secure another alpaca or two at some point as well.

Things were finally coming together.

Anna was on bedrest for the remainder of her pregnancy with a month to go, give or take. But we'd been able to hire enough employees to keep the place up and running. I'd mostly retired from my brothers' business, instead focusing on my family and the non-profit. I still helped out, but my heart wasn't in it as much as it was for the others. My little animal sanctuary was where it was at, though.

My phone buzzed. Anna was at the cabin since our house up here wasn't quite finished. I answered it.

"Hello? Everything okay?"

"I don't think so, Levi," she said, and my heart skipped a beat. I could hear the pain in her voice. "I think I'm in labor. The bed is soaked... oh God, Levi!"

"I'll be right there. I'll call an ambulance on the way, just stay calm," I said.

"I'm trying," she said through heavy breathing.

I got off the phone with her and rushed to my truck, dialing 9-1-1 while I sprinted. I told them my wife was in labor, or at least suspected it, and hurried home as quickly as possible.

Thankfully the land was only about a ten-minute drive from my place. I pulled into the driveway at a hundred miles an hour and parked all wonky. I beat the ambulance and ran inside to find Anna in bed in a fetal position. She was wearing just a nightgown, and everything was soaked. Her water had clearly broken.

“The ambulance is on the way,” I said as I dropped to her side. I had no idea how to deliver a baby, no idea what I was doing or how I could help. I cradled her hand in mine and she squeezed it tightly and let out a cry of pain.

“The contractions...are...coming...fast...”

“Breathe, sweetie. Just breathe. Don’t worry about talking.”

I could hear the sirens in the distance, thank God. They were close.

Tears streamed down Anna’s cheeks as she looked at me with absolute terror. I thought she was fearful of the labor, but as soon as her contractions died down, she whispered, “The babies... it’s too soon.”

“They’re early, yes, but we expected this with twins,” I reminded her gently.

“But we were hoping for at least another week or two,” she said. “At a minimum.”

“I know, sweetie. I know, but they’re coming whether we’re ready or not. We can do this. You can do this. You’ve done so much. I have no doubt you can birth healthy babies right now. I believe in you.”

She closed her eyes and nodded, focusing on her breathing.

There was a knock at the door.

“It’s open,” I called out, not wanting to leave Anna’s side.

Paramedics flooded the little cabin and rushed into the bedroom. I let them take over, trusting they knew what they were doing.

“We have to get her to the hospital,” one of them said, stating the obvious.

Another added, “We don’t have time. A baby is coming already.”

The paramedic knelt between Anna’s legs, and another told me to hold her hand and comfort her. I stood by her side, trying to find the words to help her through it as the paramedic delivered the first baby.

“It’s a boy,” he announced.

The room was quiet. Too quiet.

“Why isn’t he crying?” I asked.

The paramedic handed him to another, and that one started swishing a finger in the baby’s mouth. It felt like the entire earth stood still for that one moment. I watched as he worked on my son, who was so tiny in his hands. Too tiny to be real. I started to worry that maybe Anna was right, maybe it was too soon.... Anna let out a scream and I wasn’t sure if it was another contraction or the panic of not hearing our son cry.

But a second later, the little boy let out a whimper and a cry. It was the most precious sound I’d ever heard. Anna seemed to relax into the bed just as another contraction seemed to hit her.

“Number two is on its way,” the paramedic said.

Anna squeezed my hand, and I thought she might break the bones in her fingers by how tightly she gripped, but a second later, the paramedic said, “It’s a girl!”

Right away, our daughter had lungs of steel, crying out as the paramedic cleaned her off. Both our babies were here, and they were crying. I kissed Anna on the forehead and said, “You did it, sweetie. You did so good.”

The paramedics handed us the babies, Anna took the girl and I held the little boy. They were preparing to take everyone into the hospital, but for a split second, we got to see our precious babies.

“They’re so tiny,” I said, and again I worried maybe they were too little. They were alive, but that was just the first step. I knew there were so many possible complications in the days and weeks to come.

Within seconds, the babies and Anna were loaded into the ambulance, and I was right there with them, on the way to the hospital.



Anna was in a room, and our babies had been whisked away to the NICU. We were told that as soon as they were set up and stable, we could see them. They were born several weeks early, but the doctors were optimistic.

Anna appeared to be sleeping, and she needed the rest. I sat by her side, hand in mine. Every few minutes, another nurse or doctor would poke their head in and check Anna’s vitals or look at her stitches, but no one had any news about our babies. We just kept hearing, “Soon.”

A knock came at the door and a female doctor came in with a cheery smile. “My name is Dr. Fitzgerald,” she said, “And I’m a neonatologist. I’m taking care of your babies in the NICU.”

“How are they?” Anna asked.

“They’re doing wonderfully. Have you picked out names for them yet?”

Anna looked at me and we both nodded. “Emilia for the little girl and Theodore - Theo - for the boy.”

“Great names,” the doctor said with a smile. “Well, Theo’s lungs haven’t fully developed, but this is common in preemies. He’s going to need a little help breathing, but I’m confident we can help his lungs develop and that he will be just fine. And Emilia, she is the bigger of the two babies, but still rather small. Her lungs need a little help as well, which again, is normal. They are going to be here for at least a week... but I would count on them being here longer.”

“Whatever it takes to make sure they’re okay,” I said.

“I’m confident we can get them where they need to be,” the doctor assured us.

Anna sighed. “I’m relieved to hear that. When can we see them?”

“I can take you to the NICU right now, if you’d like.”

“Yes,” Anna said, and she tried to stand. Both the doctor and I reached for her at the same time.

“Not so fast! Let me get a wheelchair for you,” the doctor said. “You just had two babies; you need to take it easy.”

“I’m fine.” Anna was stubborn as ever.

“It will take her two seconds to get the wheelchair,” I said, speaking softly.

Anna relented with a huff and stayed on the bed while the doctor ran out into the hallway. “I just want to hold my babies,” she mumbled, her voice cracking.

“I know, me too, sweetie.”

A second later, a nurse came in with a wheelchair and helped Anna into it. The walk down to the NICU was mostly done in silence, with the sound of the hospital beeping all around us. The nurse pushed Anna up to a window and I stood beside her, looking into the room filled with incubators and tiny little babies.

“Yours are right there,” the nurse said, pointing to the two in front, closest to the glass. The name “Berkshire-Callaghan” was clear to me now. Their first names had not been added yet, but I knew Theo was the smallest of the two.

They were too unstable to be held, and I knew it pained Anna. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at our babies in their little incubators, unable to get to them.

“Soon,” I told her, giving her hand a squeeze. “We’ll bring them home soon and we can cuddle them all we want.”

Anna nodded. “Soon.”

CHAPTER 31

The babies had to be in the NICU for three weeks. Eventually, we were able to hold them as they got stronger, but every day, I wished more than anything to take them home. Every day, though, I was thankful they were there because I knew they were safe.

Our home was finished being built, and I took the extra weeks to work on the nursery. It was ready for our little angels as soon as they were released. We, of course, went with an animal-zoo theme. Light green walls with outlines of the jungle with a border of lions, tigers, elephants and of course, kangaroos.

I couldn't wait to bring Emilia and Theo home.

Our sanctuary was coming together. The kangaroos from Austin were settled in, and I tried to keep busy by caring for them, even through recovery. We had adopted a second emu, and he was a lot sweeter than Birdtha. We had a couple capybaras, and we were making a name for ourselves in the industry already. We would eventually open to the public, allowing people to come see the animals, and in the case of the goats, feed them. My dreams were finally becoming a reality, right there in Sunville. Who could have imagined?

Goaty had fully healed and was doing a lot better.

Life was good. I had everything I could ever want; I was just missing my babies.

The day they were released from the hospital was one of the happiest days of my life. Our entire family and friends

were at the house waiting for us. Emily bought her daughter, Rosie, and all my nieces and nephews were there too. It was a lot, but my heart was full.

Between Irene, Grace, and Emily, I hardly had a chance to hold my own babies, but it was fine. They were home now, and I'd have all the time in the world with them.

Levi was by my side, beaming proudly and playing with Nicholas and Madeline while our sisters fought over our adorable, perfect twins. He was so good with them, and I knew he was going to be the perfect father for our munchkins.

My parents, mostly my mom, were fighting alongside our sisters to see the twins. Everyone agreed we would have to set up a schedule to allow people to come over and help us.

As the day went on, and the babies - and Levi and I - were getting sleepy, we kicked everyone out. My mom was the last to leave, always super stubborn and wanting to help, but eventually, it was just my little family.

I put Emilia to sleep while Levi handled Theo and seeing them in their cribs in their perfect little nursery filled my heart with such joy. We stood there and watched them in silence for what felt like an eternity, until Levi suggested, "We should probably get some sleep. They'll be up for feeding time in a matter of hours."

With two, it meant even less sleep. Taking shifts was harder. Levi was right.

Knowing my babies were safe and sound in the nursery connected to our bedroom made it a bit easier, but I didn't want to leave them. I never wanted to leave them.

Levi nudged me into our bedroom and helped me dress in nightclothes. My eyes were so heavy, I barely made it into bed.

Levi snuggled close to me, and I rested my head against his chest.

"Did you ever expect life to turn out this way?" I asked him sleepily.

“No, never. Had you told me a year ago that I’d be settling down to bed with my fiancé with my children in the next room, I would have laughed you right out of the room.”

“But you’re happy, right?” I looked at him, seeking reassurance due to the damned pregnancy hormones causing me to feel all kinds of weird emotions.

“Of course,” he said with a serious look. “I could never have planned any of this, even if I had tried, but Anna... this is exactly where I’m meant to be, and I have no doubt about it. I was lonely before. I just never admitted it to anyone. But now I have you and our babies... and I have never been happier.”

“Good,” I said, dotting a kiss on his bare chest as I settled against him. “Because I never imagined life this way either, but my heart has never been fuller.”

Levi stroked my hair softly. “And would you say your dreams have come true, as far as your career goes?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “Owning my own reserve is far better than working for anyone else, and I get to be right here with you and my family, something I never thought possible while pursuing my dreams.”

My eyes soon grew too heavy to keep open, and reality now seemed better than any dream I could ever have, but I allowed myself to slip off to sleep. I needed the rest. We had a very busy life with twins and the reserve and a wedding to plan.

But I meant it when I said I couldn’t be happier.

Sometimes even the best laid plans were no comparison for what life had in store for you, and in my case, I certainly found that to be true.

EPILOGUE I

One Year Later

“Seeing the goats walk down the aisle almost killed me,” Irene said with a snort. “I mean, you guys told me the goats were going to be your ring bearer and flower girl, but I really didn’t believe you.”

Levi was grinning and laughing along with his sister with Emilia in his arms. Theo was sitting on the dance floor with Rosie and Madeline, wiggling along to the music.

“Your wedding was one of the most beautiful I’ve been to,” Emily said. “Second to my own, of course.” She smiled playfully.

“Most beautiful and scariest. When Birdtha got out... the look of terror on Levi’s face as he chased her, I tried not to laugh, but I think the champagne came out my nose in front of God and everybody,” Grace added.

The reception was wrapping up, but we still had some music and food going. The wedding itself had been a bit of a blur. We had decided to have it at our sanctuary and include as many of the animals as possible, which was a comedy of errors, and made sure our wedding was one no one would soon forget.

Emilia was getting fussy in Levi’s arms, so he put her down next to her brother. She looked at him and offered a big grin and started wiggling along with him.

It was past their bedtime, but there was so much excitement and cake and everything, they were still wide awake. Another reason we had chosen to get married at home was that it made it easy to just pick up the kids and put them to bed, no driving home, nothing like that.

“So where are you going on your honeymoon?” Irene asked. “Levi said it was a surprise and wouldn’t even tell me.”

“I don’t even know. I don’t think we planned anything yet,” I said with a laugh. “We have the babies and the reserve and everything.”

“Come on, you have to have a honeymoon. Even a weekend away in Denver or something.”

I shrugged. I really didn’t stress about it. The wedding was just a small, family affair. Don’t get me wrong, it was perfect - the absolute dream wedding for me, someone who never wanted a large or expensive affair.

“Well... we’re doing more than just going to Denver. Anna just doesn’t know it yet.”

“I don’t?”

“It’s a wedding gift, actually.”

“Do grooms typically give gifts to the bride? I’m totally new at this whole wedding etiquette thing.”

“I don’t know, but this groom does,” Levi pulled out his phone and a second later, held it up for me to see an e-mail confirmation.

“Your trip to Tanzania and Kenya has been booked,” I read aloud. “Holy crap, really?” I continued reading. This wasn’t just a trip where we went and spent a few nights in a hotel. He went all out. “You booked us at Giraffe Manor?”

“What’s Giraffe Manor?” Grace asked.

“Whatever it is, it sounds adorable.”

“It’s a giraffe sanctuary where they literally stick their heads in the windows. You eat breakfast and a giraffe can join

you, and you can feed them and pet them and oh my God, I never thought I would be able to go!”

He'd booked safaris. Everything. He'd gone all out and didn't spare a single expense.

“This is literally the vacation of a lifetime,” I said, still in shock. “But the kids, what about them?”

“They can come along,” he said. “I booked tickets for them as well as some kid-friendly activities. But for things they can't join us on, well, I have some good news there too....”

“What is it?”

“Emily and Grace are joining us and helping to watch the kids. The guys will be on duty with their little ones here.”

“Wait, seriously? They agreed to this?” My sisters smirked at me, all smug-like. “Hey, what happened to no secrets between us?”

“This was a surprise. It's different. Are you okay with us coming? I promise we'll keep to ourselves and leave you two lovebirds alone.”

“Am I okay with it? I'm ecstatic! I love it!”

I hugged my sisters before turning to Levi and kissing him. “Thank you,” I said, tears streaming down my cheeks. “Thank you for making me the happiest woman on earth.”

Our first family trip was planned, and I knew there'd be more where that came from. Levi and I had the same interests, and we had a lot of love and support. Staying in Sunville had been the absolute best decision for me. Who knew I could have it all?

EPILOGUE II

Four Years Later

“Daddy!” Theo hopped on my chest and woke me up like he did most mornings. His toothy grin was better than coffee for cheering me up first thing in the morning. Anna and I were morning people before, but our kids seemed to take that to new extremes.

Emilia was right behind him, climbing into our bed and situating herself between Anna and me. The baby stirred in the crib.

“Cici is up!” Emilia said, wiggling between us. “Cici, come lay with us, pweese?”

Cecilia, otherwise known as Cici by Emilia, let out a soft cry, and Anna, who didn’t have a hyper child sitting on her chest, climbed from the bed and picked up our three-month-old daughter.

Anna pulled down her top and started feeding our youngest, our normal morning routine around these parts. In the distance, our roosters crowed, telling everyone at the little sanctuary that it was time to get up.

“I feed the emus today, Daddy?” Theo asked with wide eyes.

Anna raised an eyebrow and waited for me to respond.

“Why don’t you feed Leonardo instead.”

Leonardo DiCapybara was our newest resident at the sanctuary, and one of the gentlest we had. We’d rescued him

from a family who thought owning a capybara would be no different than owning a guinea pig, putting the big guy in a cage away from water and everything he needed to be happy - including other capybaras, since they were critters that did better in family groups. We had two already, so Leo fit right in with our bunch and quickly became some of my favorite animals on the entire property.

Tied with Al and the other alpacas and the goats, of course.

“I wanna feed Birdtha,” Theo said, sticking his lower lip out and crossing his tiny arms across his chest.

“One day, little man. Even your dear old dad is no match for Birdtha,” I said, ruffling his hair, which was blonde like his mom’s. “You can feed Leo some carrots, though. I’m sure he’d really like that.”

“Eww, who likes carrots?” Emilia said from beside us, scrunching up her adorable little face.

“Good thing the animals love carrots, means less of them for you, right?” I teased my oldest daughter.

Anna finished feeding the baby, and it was about time to get our day started. Anna was on a limited schedule, still recovering from the birth of the baby and taking it easy, but she usually took a walk around the sanctuary and checked in on the animals and the staff we’d hired to help us out. She was no longer the only vet on staff here. We had two others, which made it a lot easier not just while she was pregnant, but in general. It meant we weren’t on call 24/7 in case of an emergency.

We had grown a lot over the years - a lot larger than even I had imagined in such a short amount of time. We had goats, alpaca, emus, and chickens like before, when I had my own little farm. We had the three kangaroos from the Austin sanctuary. Plus, now we had three capybaras and were open to getting even more. In addition to all of that, we had a serval, one of the most exotic animals in our little sanctuary and one of Anna’s favorites. Severus the Serval came to us when someone thought exotic cats could be domesticated. He wasn’t

aggressive in the slightest, but he was still very much a wild animal and did a lot of damage to their home before they finally understood that maybe fifty pounds is just a bit too much cat for them.

I had to check in with some contacts I'd reached out to. We were talking to another reserve about possibly getting a zebra or two. Yet another sanctuary was closing. Times were tough, but we were thriving in the middle of Utah. We'd opened to guests and the community welcomed us with open arms, and animal lovers came from all over the state and the neighboring ones to see our unique critters.

I got Emilia and Theo dressed while Anna put Cici in a sling around her body, cradling our youngest to her chest for our daily walk and feedings. We had staff to feed most of the critters, but it brought us joy to interact with our animals and to have our kids with us, helping, so we reserved some tasks for us. Emilia was really fond of feeding the chickens and the turkeys. She would gobble gobble at them, and they'd gobble right back, always making her giggle in delight.

Theo was fascinated with the emus, but even our gentler Emmanuel was not to be trusted with the little guy yet. Emus were dangerous birds, but our son seemed to have an interest in the more dangerous critters. Thankfully, we didn't have anything too dangerous, and that was never our plan. We weren't looking to bring in tigers or lions or bears. Those animals might be great for tourists, but we weren't cut out for that. We wanted to keep it small, family-friendly, and safe for the community as well as the animals. It was never about getting rich or impressing people with dangerous predators, it was about caring for the animals and letting our children be raised around them, having a helping hand around the premises where possible.

Anna's smile was always so big when she was out there, in her zone, working with the animals. Even with a baby strapped to her chest, she didn't let it stop her from doing what she loved. She was an amazing mother and an amazing vet.

My phone buzzed as the kids were feeding the chickens.

“Yes!” I said out loud.

“What is it?” Anna asked.

“The zebras! We got them! I’ll tell Hank to start prepping the area we reserved for them. They’ll be here next month.”

“Zebras?” both little ones shouted at the same time. “We’re getting zebras!”

“Yes, isn’t that exciting?”

“I’m gonna get a saddle and ride one,” Theo said.

We laughed. “I’m afraid you can’t ride them, Theo.”

“Why not?”

I looked at Anna, who was more likely to have the answers to that. Anna just laughed. “We’ll get you a horse one day, when you’re older.”

“Me too, Mommy!” Emilia piped up.

“Of course, and Cici will have her own pony too.”

While those words might sound like empty promises for some families, I knew Anna meant it.

“I’mma name mine Horace.”

Horace the horse,” Anna said, shaking her head. “You get your naming skills from your father, clearly.”

“Chip off the old block,” I said proudly, patting the little guy on the head.

He grinned up at me as Emilia tried to come up with names for her own future horse. “Nala!”

“She’s a lion, not a horse.”

“So?” Emilia said stubbornly. “I can name my horse Nala if I want, right Mommy?”

“Yes, of course, sweetie,” she said gently.

Emilia threw a handful of feed toward the chickens with a satisfied and happy smile on her face, her pigtails bobbing in the wind.

“Jesus,” I said to myself, but Anna overheard me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” I said. “I just keep asking myself... how did I get so damned lucky?”

Anna took my hand in hers. “I dunno, but I ask myself that every single day.”

I leaned over and kissed her lips, planting a kiss on top of Cici’s little head as well. She was fast asleep in her mother’s bosom.

Three kids. A wife. An animal sanctuary that put my dreams of owning a farm one day to shame. Life certainly hadn’t gone as I had planned it all those years ago and thank God for that. It was better than anything I could have ever imagined.

The End!

But the party only just started...

I hope you loved Levi and Anna’s love story. I’ve got great news. You can read about the rest of the jaw-dropping Callaghan brothers now.

[Clay - casanova- Callaghan](#)

[Boone - sexy single daddy- Callaghan](#)

[Brody- sweet-talking - Callaghan](#)

[Dylan- dare devil - Callaghan](#)

I’ve included a sexy sneak peek into Brody’s loved story on the next page!

BIG DADDY (PREVIEW)



Trapped elevator. *Check!*

Sexy-as-heck lumberjack. *Check!*

A strong urge to serenade elevator. *Ding! Ding! Ding!!!*

But apparently Mr. Perfect is actually my father's sworn enemy.

Just my luck.

Now I can't get the man out of my mind.

His touch. That unbelievably built body.

Or the way he turns me on with just one look.

Thing is...

I broke my cardinal rule, *repeatedly. Woops!!*

Now I need to deal with the rumors...

And the LOOMING risk of my ruthless father finding out.

And I'd better get to strategizing...

Because I've got two positive lines on a pregnancy test that are starring at me right in the face.

CHAPTER 1

KATE



S*hit. Shit. Shit.*

The elevator car jerked violently.

It came to a complete stop, the onboard alarm blaring loudly over my head.

The decrescendo whir of the ventilation system knocked the breath from my lungs as the light-up buttons of the panel flickered and died.

The air was immediately hot and sticky, and my heart thundered in my ear.

“Shit,” I hissed this time outloud.

“Well, this is inconvenient.”

I wasn't alone in the elevator. I hadn't yet had a good look at him but from my peripherals, the guy stood at a little over six feet, and seemed to be dressed like a lumberjack.

While I had on my fitted Chanel dress, red-bottom stilettos, and my late mother's string of elegant pearls, the man was in a pair of dark jeans and a white Henley, his red and black plaid jacket draped over his forearm.

Office chic versus lumberjack catalog.

I would have thought the juxtaposition amusing had I not been on the verge of a panic attack.

A curiosity grew within me to get a good look at his face.

If I was going to be stuck in this elevator with a stranger I should at least make an educated determination if he was a serial killer or a normal cat but I was too distracted at this point to think of anything but the elevator.

Me. Small spaces. Suspended several feet up in the air by a cable that could snap at any moment. It was a perfect concoction —my fear of heights and my fear of tight spaces. And to wrap everything up in a pretty little bow, I was also running severely late for several important meetings.

Now my head was spinning.

Great. Just great.

The guy pressed several of the buttons, all to no avail.

It was then a voice crackled over the elevator's speakers.

"Hey, is everyone alright in there?" someone from security asked.

"We're fine," the man said.

If I wasn't seconds away from hyperventilating, I would have appreciated the deepness of his voice.

It was a low rumble that reminded me very much of the darker tones of a cello.

"Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"There was some sort of power surge in the breaker room. The whole building's shut down. Maintenance is on the way, but they're caught up in traffic. Could be another hour or so."

"An *hour*?" I rasped. The walls were closing in. This was an absolute nightmare. "I think I need to..."

"Ma'am?" the guy said to me. "Are you okay—"

My knees buckled out from under me. Before I could fall on my ass and make a complete fool of myself, the man reached out and carefully grasped me by the elbows, guiding me down softly to the elevator floor.

I sat with my back against the wall, so lightheaded I thought my skull was about to float right off my neck.

“Take a deep breath,” he said calmly, crouched down in front of me. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “I just really hate tight spaces.”

“You don’t have to apologize, ma’am. I hate tight spaces, too.”

“Well, you’re handling it much better than I am.”

He shrugged. “Believe me, I’m mentally shaking in my boots.”

A soft laugh bubbled past my lips. It caught me by surprise.

Now that we were face-to-face, I finally managed to drink him in.

He had dark brown hair and mesmerizing green eyes with flecks of brown around the edges.

His beard was full and well-trimmed, thin lips pressed into a charming, sexy grin.

There was something trustworthy about his face, something reassuring about his general presence.

Staring deep into his eyes left me in a state of tranquility, of comfort.

I had to wonder if it was because he smelled of petrichor, a soothing scent that never failed to ease my nerves.

“Kate,” I bumbled.

“Pardon?”

“My name. Kate.”

His smile was brilliant, probably the sexiest thing I’d ever seen in my life.

My stomach flipped when he stuck his massive hand out.

“Brody,” he said. “Pleasure to meet you. Sorry it’s not under better circumstances.”

All of a sudden, the elevator car shook. Someone was probably trying to turn the power back on, or maybe the

emergency generators were trying to start up.

The lights flickered on only to shut off again. The jolt sent me spiraling, intrusive thoughts stabbing their way through my mind.

“Shit,” I hissed, squeezing my eyes shut. I hugged my knees close to my chest. “What if the cable snaps? Are we going to run out of air?”

Brody smiled, amused. “That’s not how elevators work, and no, I don’t think we’re going to run out of air.”

The elevator shook again, this time much more violently. My heart leapt up into my throat, choking off my yelp of surprise. My hands wouldn’t stop trembling and my stomach wouldn’t stop rolling. This was *not* how I wanted to go out.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Hey, look at me. It’s going to be okay.”

I almost couldn’t hear him over my wheezing. “You don’t know that. You don’t—”

“Kate.”

My eyes flitted up and locked with his. “W-what?”

“Close your eyes for me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Just trust me, alright? Take a deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth.”

I wasn’t sure what compelled me to follow his instructions, but I did.

“Now what?”

“I want you to blank your mind. Listen carefully to the sound of my voice.”

His low timbre sent a shiver racing up my spine.

His words were like honey, warm and sweet and thick.

“Imagine a scene full of mountains, their peaks covered in freshly fallen snow. When you breathe in, you smell the pinewood and the wet forest floor. You hear birds chirping,

along with the distant rush of a river somewhere far away. It's a bit cold here beneath the shade of the towering trees, but there are patches of warmth where the sunlight streams through the canopy. Every now and then a breeze passes by and you take a deep breath. Fresh, crisp air fills your lungs and leaves you feeling totally, undeniably at peace."

I exhaled, a wonderful sense of calm washing over me. I could picture it all. The mountains, the trees, the leaves, the sunlight. I opened my eyes slowly, breathless.

"You're really good at that," I whispered. "You should narrate audiobooks. Or maybe meditation guides."

Brody smiled wide. It was a little crooked, I realized, but I found it incredibly endearing. "I've never heard that one before, but thank you. Do you feel better now?"

"A little, yes." I huffed—a half-laugh, half-sigh. "I swear I'm not normally this much of a pansy. I've been trapped in elevators before and let me tell you it's exactly *zero* fun."

"Oh, so you wouldn't recommend it? And here I was hoping to make a whole day of it."

I didn't bother suppressing my laughter.

Not only was this guy incredibly sexy, in a burly lumberjack sort of way, he was warm and funny. I wanted to play around with him some more.

"I think you need a better hobby."

"You're probably right."

Just when I thought things were finally settling down, the elevator shook once again. It felt like the floor was going to fall out from under us.

The thought of us plummeting down the shaft to our untimely demise sent my heart racing. My chest was so tight and my nerves so frayed I thought for sure that this was what dying felt like.

When the elevator jolted again, Brody lost his footing and fell forward. His head made contact with the wall with a heavy *thud*.

“Ow.”

My hand shot into his hair, alarmed, feeling around for any signs of a bump. “Jesus, are you okay? That sounded like it hurt.”

“I’m fine,” he mumbled, eyes fluttering closed. “This feels nice.”

It was then that I realized I was still playing with his hair, combing my fingers through it absentmindedly.

He didn’t seem bothered in the slightest, breathing out a low hum.

He sat next to me, our shoulders touching and only a few inches between our faces. I hardly knew this stranger, and yet this intimate, quiet display felt like the most natural thing in the world.

“Do you want me to move?” he asked after a moment.

I shook my head. “No, no, this is... really nice. I’ve never ran my fingers through the hair of a human I’d only just met but this feels... natural.” I let out a breath of embarrassment. “Wow! I probably sound like a nut case. Do you want me to stop?”

“Nuh-uh.” Brody reached up and placed his hand over mine, his signal to keep going.

I laughed softly, turning my knees towards him so I could better play with his hair. “So soft. What kind of shampoo do you use?”

“I buy from a local vendor. They use honey or something like that in their formula. Organic stuff.”

“Wow. I might have to get myself a bottle. My hair is such a pain to maintain and it’s always so dry.”

“I think it’s beautiful.”

Heat pooled in my cheeks. I took my hands back and rested them on my lap. Brody looked disappointed.

“Well, I guess there are worse ways to spend an hour trapped in an elevator,” I said. “I hope you don’t have

anywhere pressing to be.”

“Actually, I kind of do.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I was on my way to a meeting upstairs. Looks like I might have to reschedule.”

“I was on my way to a meeting, too. Hopefully you’re not missing anything too important.”

Brody made a face, his nose scrunching up a little.

“It kind of is. I’m here to speak with someone from Emerald Clover Construction & Development about an upcoming project. I’ve got a couple of complaints I need to air. Boring stuff.”

“Emerald Clover?” I echoed. “What a coincidence, I happen to work there.”

“You do? You don’t look—”

“What?” I teased. “If you’re about to tell me that I’m too pretty to be in construction, I’ll have to deck you.”

Brody smirked, the corners of his eyes crinkling with delight. “I wasn’t going to say that at all.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“*I wasn’t.*” His eyes flitted down to my lips, lingering there for a moment before coming back up to hold my gaze. “It feels like fate’s trying to tell us something,” he said softly, “locking us in here.”

“You believe in that sort of thing?”

“Sure, why not? The world’s full of mystery and wonder. Anything’s possible.”

“The words of a dreamer. Have you ever considered becoming a poet?”

“Poetry won’t pay the bills.”

“What is it that you do?” I asked him, drawn in by his deep voice. I felt entranced, unable to focus on anything else apart

from the way he spoke or the gentle rhythm of his breathing or the warmth radiating off of his skin.

“I run a business with my brothers,” he explained. “We rent out campers and RVs down in Sunville. Ever been?”

“Can’t say that I have. I’ve heard of it, though. I usually don’t ever leave the city.”

“Well, I highly recommend it, city girl. There are phenomenal hiking trails at Grey Peak National Park that you might like.”

I smiled. “You know what? If we ever get out of this hell box, I’ll definitely consider it.”

“Yeah? I could give you a tour, if you’d like. Maybe you should give me your num—”

The lights flicked on. The ventilation system came back online. The elevator quickly ascended, the sudden change in altitude making my ears pop. Brody and I stood up as the doors opened up once we reached the top floor.

I stepped out and breathed a sigh of relief. “We’re finally free!”

“Kate!” I heard Erin, my personal assistant, cry out. She rushed over with an iPad pressed to her chest like a security blanket. “I was so worried about you! Are you okay? I had no idea you were trapped in there.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Sorry for worrying you.” I turned to face Brody and grinned. “Maybe it was a sign that we should both start using the stairs.”

He chuckled. “Could be.”

“You mentioned that you had an appointment? I can have Erin try and sneak you in so that you don’t have to reschedule. Hopefully whoever you’re meeting will understand. If not, I’ll give them a serious talking to.”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

Erin diligently tapped her iPad’s screen, pulling up my company’s shared calendar. “Who were you here to see,

mister...”

“Callaghan. Broderick Callaghan. I’m here to see Katherine O’Porter.”

My face fell. “Oh.”

“Is something the matter?”

“*I’m* Katherine O’Porter.”

Brody stiffened, his expression hardening. Any semblance of that cool, comforting air around him dissipated into nothing. His jaw tensed as something conflicted flashed across his green eyes.

“Well, this is inconvenient,” he grumbled under his breath.

CHAPTER 2

BRODY



I had a game plan. I drove all the way up to Salt Lake City first thing this morning to give the CEO of Emerald Clover Construction & Development a piece of my mind.

There was no way in hell I was going to let them build a highway right beside the national park. The damage to the surrounding forest would be astronomical!

Flora and fauna displaced.

Habitat fragmentation.

Noise and light pollution.

And all to save commuters an hour on the road?

Not on my watch.

I'd never met Katherine O'Porter, but I had no qualms about giving her a piece of my mind. I hated dealing with city folks. Whenever they walked up to the counter at Callaghan Campers, they brought with them an air of whiny entitlement.

They wanted the best service, the best RVs—but always at the cheapest price possible.

Most of them didn't even want to go camping to begin with, and yet the slightest inconvenience made them the most deplorable customers. I couldn't count how many times my brothers and I had been threatened with poor Yelp reviews because we wouldn't budge on a late check-in time or we wouldn't give someone a free upgrade.

My eldest brother Boone ran the day-to-day operations. My big brother Clay preferred to handle general repair and maintenance. My younger brother Dylan took care of the website and anything related to the technological side of our business, and my baby brother Dylan manned the front desk with our father, Bill. But my specialty?

Dealing with difficult customers.

My brothers liked to tease me about being a tree hugger, a land-loving hippie. It was true that I preferred to go with the flow, but when the going got tough, I knew exactly how to stand my ground.

I had no problem with conflict. I had a talent for putting people in their place, so I figured I'd be able to handle a no-good, money hungry city slicker just fine.

I'd convinced myself that Katherine O'Porter was a frumpy, middle-aged woman with a permanent scowl stomping around in a strained sweater and an unflattering pencil skirt. And then I was trapped in an elevator with her and my game plan went right out the window.

Much to my dismay, Kate was beautiful.

Funny.

Sexy.

She even had a sweet innocence to her.

Nothing like I'd imagined.

Her gorgeous red hair reminded me of the sunset, closer to a golden orange than a fiery crimson.

She had bright, brilliant blue eyes like the ocean with long, fluttering lashes that took my breath away the second we made eye-contact.

She was an entire foot shorter than myself, but she had legs for days that made me the tiniest bit upset because how on Earth was any of this *fair*?

Fuck.

“You said you had complaints,” she said coolly, standing behind her expensive-looking glass desk.

Her office was impressive, almost an apartment suite. There was a seating area furnished with a lavish three-piece set, an entire corner dedicated to trophies and award plaques that she’d apparently earned over the years, and there was even a private coffee station next to the floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a gorgeous view of Salt Lake City below.

I ignored the dryness in my throat and nodded. “Your proposed freeway project in Sunville. You need to reconsider.”

“Why on Earth would I do that, Mr. Callaghan?”

My jaw tensed. “It’s terrible for the environment. It’s way too close to Grey Peak. The damage to the local habitat will be astronomical, and that’s only in the short-term. There’s no telling what sort of long-term effects your freeway will cause to the wildlife.”

Kate pursed her lips. I couldn’t believe that I wanted to kiss that very mouth not even twenty minutes ago. Now I could hardly bring myself to look at her. “My company operates above board. We’ve been given clearance by the state to begin construction as early as March.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I never joke about my work, Mr. Callaghan.”

Mr. Callaghan, Mr. Callaghan... I hated the formality of it. Especially after our... *connection* in the elevator. I felt like I was going crazy. Was I the only one who felt it?

“Our plans for construction will be a safe distance away from the national park,” Kate said firmly. “We wouldn’t have been granted zoning rights otherwise.”

“So the project’s already been greenlit?”

“No, not in an official capacity, but it’s only a matter of time.”

“The plot isn’t unused,” I pointed out sharply. “There are already people who live there. You can’t just plow through it

without their permission.”

“I’m more than aware. They’ve already been offered generous buyouts for their properties.”

“There are public parks and hiking trails.”

“That people haven’t used in years. The state-hired surveyor deemed the majority of the trails unusable due to lack of proper upkeep.”

Frustration burned deep in my gut. “I need you to reconsider.”

Kate stared at me for a moment. She was still —not like a statue, but a panther waiting for the right opportunity to pounce. She went straight for the jugular. “What do you even care, Mr. Callaghan? What’s it to you?”

I tensed, gritting my teeth together. “None of your business.”

“It kind of is, Mr. Calla—”

“Would you stop calling me that?”

Kate sighed. “Tell me why you’re so adamant about my company dropping the contract. And maybe —just maybe— I’ll consider it.”

I squinted, trying to get a read on her. “No, you won’t,” I realized aloud.

“No, I won’t,” she relented after a few seconds.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. It was like talking to a wall, one that wasn’t going to budge. Irritation licked at the pit of my stomach, a burning fire within my chest. This wasn’t how this conversation was supposed to go.

“My decision is final,” she said. “You should be taking your concerns to the Department of Transportation, not with me.”

I stood there, partially stunned and partially impressed. When I pushed, I didn’t ever expect to be pushed *back*.

She was just so... *fierce*. Kate spoke with a careful edge to her tone, her every word clipped and controlled. There was a force to her, something indescribable that intrigued me. She was a volcano on the brink of eruption, or a star about to go supernova. A smart man would have left by now out of self-preservation, but I wanted nothing more than to hold my breath and see what happened next.

“This isn’t over,” I grumbled.

“Actually, I think you’ll find that it is. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m sure you know where the elevators are. I hope I won’t need to call security.”

I was so ready to put the little lady over one knee and give her a good spanking.

But that would have likely landed me in jail.

There wasn’t much else I could do.

I need to collect myself and figure out my next move.

Without a word, I turned on my heels and left.



It was late afternoon by the time I got home. My cabin was on the other side of Sunville, by far the furthest away from the rest of my siblings. A few years ago, I finally scraped together enough funds to buy myself a small plot of land to call my own. There was something incredibly satisfying about molding it to my will, taking only what I needed while trying to give back in other ways.

I built my cabin from the ground up with my own two hands. I had a very specific vision in mind, and instead of trying to articulate my ideas to an outside contractor, it was easier to do the job myself. Every inch of the roof was covered in solar panels, which provided me with more than enough electricity to live a comfortable life. Excess power was stored in the large batteries I had hooked up in the shed.

Water collection tanks sat against the southernmost wall of my cabin. I had three in total —one for drinking, one for plumbing, and one that I could use to water the small orchard I had growing at the back of my land. I had a couple of apple and peach trees, but it was the cherry trees that I liked best. Their white blossoms come springtime were beautiful to look at.

They were Mom's favorite, too.

I parked my hybrid out front and headed inside just in time to hear the home phone start to ring.

“Hello?”

“Brody,” greeted Dr. Huxley. “Is now a good time?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “Of course. Do you have any news for me, doc?”

“Yes, I do. I just got your CT scan back from the lab. I’m afraid we found a mass in your left lung.”

A cold dread washed over me, bringing with it a powerful shudder. I sucked in a sharp breath. “How can that be?” I murmured. “I don’t smoke, I don’t drink... Do you think it’s cancerous?”

“I would need to perform a biopsy to be certain,” Dr. Huxley said gravely. “I don’t wish to alarm you, but your mother and grandmother both passed as a result of cancer. There may be a chance that it’s hereditary.”

I ran a hand through my hair and exhaled slowly. How did my day go from bad, to worse, to downright awful? Did I piss someone off in a past life or something?

“When do you think you can make it in?” Dr. Huxley asked. “The sooner we can perform the biopsy, the better. If you require a doctor’s note to ask for time off from work—”

“That won’t be necessary,” I interrupted quickly. “I co-own a business with my brothers. I’ll just tell them I need a day. They likely won’t ask questions.”

“Actually, it may be a good idea to bring a member of your family with you. You might feel a bit loopy after the

procedure, so it's highly advisable that someone drives you to and from the hospital."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. "No, I... I can handle this myself. I don't want to tell them."

"It's probably none of my business, but are you certain?"

I nodded even though I knew my doctor couldn't see me. Maybe I was trying to convince *myself*. "After what happened to our mother... I can't do that to them. If this mass turns out to be benign, then I'll have worried them for nothing."

"Alright, if you're sure. What day would work best for you? Our first available slot is next Saturday morning."

"Works for me."

"Excellent. I'll see you then."

"Thanks, doc."

I hung up and sank down onto my couch, gently scraping my fingers over my scalp. When I closed my eyes, I could almost picture *her* doing it instead. So gentle, so sweet.

What do you even care, Mr. Callaghan? What's it to you?

I could have told her the truth. I could have told her then and there that the land she and her company planned to bulldoze and replace with ugly gray concrete used to be Mom's favorite place to go. In the months leading up to her final days, the only thing that seemed to bring her any semblance of peace was out on those hiking trails or in those parks. When Mom still had the strength to take us out on long walks amidst the towering trees and distant mountains, it was the only time we could forget.

Out there, when we were surrounded on all sides by nature, we didn't speak about her losing battle. We didn't discuss the inevitable. We didn't talk about what was going to come after. We could pretend everything was normal out there. Just another family on a day-trip through the forest, not a worry to be found.

I couldn't let Kate take that from me. I just couldn't.

I needed a new game plan.

CHAPTER 3

KATE



“M ommy!”

Sabrina jumped into my arms the second I made it in through the front door. I scooped her up and squeezed her tight, kissing her little cheeks as she giggled wildly.

“Hey, sugarplum! Did you have fun at school today?”

“Yes! We’re learning about gravity.”

“Is that so? Will you tell me about it while I get dinner ready?”

“Okay!”

The moment I set her down, Sabrina raced down the hall toward the kitchen in her fuzzy pink Hello Kitty socks, sliding the last foot or so before dashing around the corner with a laugh. Despite my disastrously long day at work, my niece always managed to make me smile.

I’d adopted Sabrina almost two years ago. She knew I was biologically her aunt, but after her own mother Angela decided to leave without a word, I wanted Sabrina to know that she would *always* have a mother in me.

I tried not to think about my little sister anymore. Between running the company our father passed down to me and raising her child, I didn’t have enough time in the day to think about Angela. The last time she bothered to call was on Sabrina’s fifth birthday. She was seven now and we hadn’t heard from Angela since. I didn’t hate her. I didn’t even miss her. I didn’t feel *anything* when it came to my sister. The only good thing

she ever did was gift me with my beautiful, wonderful little girl.

“I want pizza!” Sabrina declared when I finally arrived in the kitchen.

“We had pizza yesterday, sweetie. Let’s have something different. How about chicken Caesar salad wraps? I know how much you like them.”

“Can we have curly fries, too?”

I grinned. “You know my motto. Curly fries or bust. Let me grab the air fryer.”

“Yay!”

Three sharp knocks followed by the sound of jingling keys at the front door signaled someone’s arrival. I didn’t need three guesses to determine who.

“Sorry I’m late!” Erin called, shuffling into the kitchen with two big bags of groceries. “Since it’s Monday Movie Night, I thought I’d stop by the store to pick up snacks.”

I grinned at her. “Did you get me Twizzlers?”

“Do I look like an idiot? Of course I got you Twizzlers.”

At work, Erin was my personal assistant. We were very good about remaining professional while at the office. No special treatment, no playing favorites. She was phenomenal at her job. Sometimes I was convinced I’d lose my head were it not for her organizational skills and eye for detail.

Outside of work, she was my best friend. We were college roommates and had been joined at the hip ever since. She was more of a sister to me than my real one, and a phenomenal aunt to Sabrina to boot.

“Set everything down on the counter,” I told her. “We’ll pop a movie in after dinner.”

“What are we watching?”

“*Iron Man.*”

Erin gasped. “My favorite.”

Sabrina scrunched her nose up. “*Captain America* is cooler.”

“You better take that back or I’ll—” Her aunt blew a raspberry against her cheek. “Take that!”

My daughter squealed. “Mercy!”

“No mercy here!” Erin cackled maniacally like an evil super villain. “If only you had a hero to come swoop in like your mom.”

“What do you mean?”

“She didn’t tell you? Your mother got trapped in the elevator today with a *very* handsome superhero.”

Sabrina gasped. “Really?”

I rolled my eyes as I tossed half a bag of frozen curly fries into my air fryer. “Auntie Erin’s being dramatic. He wasn’t that handsome.”

Erin laughed. “Are you kidding? He was *so* hot.”

I glared at her and promptly looked to Sabrina. “I’d rather not have this conversation with a child present.”

“I’m not a child!” Sabrina pouted with an indignant stomp of her foot. “What happened?”

“Oh, nothing terrible. The electricity cut out and I was stuck in the elevator with a stranger.”

“A very handsome stranger,” Erin repeated cheekily.

“Yes, you’ve mentioned that more than once. Sabrina, sweetie, can you set the table, please?”

“Okay.”

While Sabrina arranged the cutlery and napkins, Erin sauntered over to the counter I was working at and bumped her hip against mine. “I need details. Did anything interesting happen with Mr. Lumberjack?”

I swallowed hard, ignoring the way my cheeks warmed. “Of course not.”

“Really? Because the way you were giving each other googly eyes when you walked out—”

“Nothing. Happened.”

“Ah, so something *did* happen.”

“You’re the worst.”

“Come on, Kate. Spill already. You know my love life is DOA. I need all the juicy gossip I can get.”

“If you quote *Friends* to me one more time, you won’t get any curly fries.” With a heavy sigh, I nibbled on my bottom lip. “He was sweet. I was about to have a panic attack, but he talked me down. That’s all. And I might have... put my hands in his hair a bit.”

Erin gasped, bouncing in place like a kid in a candy shop. “Oh my God, that means you’re practically married. Did you get his number? Why did he make an appointment to see you?”

“You know that guy who filed, like, twenty complaints about our freeway project about a week and a half ago? The one who sent a gajillion emails pestering me for a meeting?”

“Yeah?”

“It was him.”

Erin stilled. “Oh.”

“Exactly.”

“Things just got spicy. You should call him.”

“Why would I do that?”

“To—” she pumped her brows suggestively, “—*negotiate*.”

“You’re ridiculous. He’s not even my type. Besides, I’m too busy with work. The last thing I’m worried about is dating.”

“Who said anything about dating?”

“Jesus.”

“What?” Erin giggled. “Come on, Kate. You’re allowed to have indulgences. And type *schmype*. You looked ready to swoon by the time you got out of there.”

“It was hot.”

“I’ll bet it was.”

“No, because the vents weren’t working.”

“Mm-hmm. Bet it took your breath away.”

“You’re the worst.”

“You love me.”

“If you’re so horny for him, maybe *you* should be the one to call Brody.”

“Oh? I didn’t realize you were on a first-name basis with him.”

I snorted. “You know what? Sabrina’s right. *Iron Man* sucks.”

“How dare you.”

“Dinner’s ready!” I chimed.

Erin sighed. “Could you *be* any more uptight?”

I gave her curly fries to Sabrina.



Sleep eluded me, as it normally did. I was convinced it had something to do with all my screen time exposure. If it wasn’t my laptop, it was my iPad. If it wasn’t my iPad, it was my phone. It wasn’t like I was goofing around on Twitter or Facebook or TikTok —Sabrina introduced me to it and it was a little distressing how addictive it was.

No, I was working.

Dad retired about a year ago and left me to run the company. I always knew I would take over Emerald Clover. There wasn’t a day that went by that Dad didn’t remind me of the responsibilities I’d one day inherit. It was a family

business, passed down from generation to generation. My great grandfather, Eoin O’Porter, founded the company after immigrating from Ireland, building it from the ground up until we were one of the biggest names in all of Salt Lake City construction.

It never occurred to me that I might be interested in anything else. I lived, breathed, *loved* this company. I liked being my own boss, calling the shots. I couldn’t imagine doing anything else. The freeway project was my first major state-level contract, and I wanted everything to go perfectly.

This isn’t over.

Brody’s voice rumbled around inside my skull. Low and strong, practically a built-in subwoofer for vocal cords.

I took a deep breath, thinking about how—in the oddest twist of events—being stuck in a confined space with a stranger wound up being the most memorable experience of my life. Despite all my grumbling and protesting, I knew Erin was right. Brody *was* insanely hot, and not just physically, either.

It was his presence. The authority of his posture and the gentleness of his hands. The burning focus of his gaze made me feel all kinds of exposed. When he looked at me, I felt like a live wire, ready to erupt in a shower of sparks at any given moment.

I shifted under the covers, pressing my knees together. I did my best to clear my mind, but thoughts of Brody kept cropping up no matter what I tried.

Hey, look at me. It’s going to be okay.

An aching heat bloomed between my thighs.

Close your eyes for me.

I reached down the front of my panties and slipped a finger between my folds, gathering the wetness pooling there. I drew a small, tentative circle against my clit. I pictured his big hands roaming my body, imagined the way his lips might have felt if I only had the strength to kiss him when I had the

chance. Would he be gentle? Or would he be rough? Would he indulge me if I asked for a bit of both?

Maybe you should give me your number—

I trembled as climax rushed through me, exhaustion quickly seeping into my bones. I drifted off quickly after that, an odd tightness in my chest.

Oh, well. I doubt I'll ever see him again.



END OF PREVIEW

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.C. Crowne is an Amazon Top 10 bestseller.

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