



FOR THE LOVE
OF PETE



WHITNEY
QUIST

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For the Love of Pete

By Whitney Quist

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For the Love of Pete

by

Whitney Quist

Mikaly

Skiing and nature have always been my passion. Scoring a job at the Sander's Lodge as their head ski instructor is a dream come true. On the side, I'll work with their outdoorsman, Pete, who conducts nature walks, camping and fishing trips, and all the adventures that don't take place on the slopes. I imagine we'll get on great since I love all those things. He sounds exactly like the guy's guy I'll want to hang out with at work and after hours.

Petunia

Oops. I guess, Mikaly is in for a surprise, huh? I did my research on him before he was hired, and man, does that man warm me up from only a picture. Good thing. Our first order of business is a polar bear camping trip and we'll need all the heat.

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For the Love of Pete

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I love hearing from readers! To keep in touch and follow my news, please visit me on my website at www.brynnpaulin.com.

One



Mikaly Andrich

This place was freaking fantastic. As I followed Elvin Sanders through the Sander's Lodge that had been in his family for years, my head swiveled left and right, taking in the sedate seating areas, all the dark wood and the subtle amenities to cater to vacationers. Though it was enormous and on par with a small hotel, it still managed to be homey. Outside were ski slopes and all host of other outdoor activities on the mountain and in the woods around the resort.

And it was my new place of employment.

As long as I didn't mess things up.

Or someone didn't mess things up for me. Through no fault of my own, I'd lost my last job after the boss' wife came on to me. That was so not my scene, but that didn't stop the ax from falling.

I was probably better off.

I hoped to heaven that Sander's wife wasn't like that. Single ski bunnies were one thing; married women...no.

During my interviews, I'd met Buttercup Sanders, though. Though she'd been businesslike, it had still been clear she was totally into her husband. And he was obviously enamored with her. The love between them had been unmistakable, and they'd both been horrified when I'd honestly confessed my situation.

"You don't need to worry about that here," Buttercup had exclaimed.

“He’d better not!” her husband growled, tugging her chair closer.

“Elvin,” she’d admonished, blushing. I was pretty sure he’d growled again.

Yeah...I wouldn’t experience a repeat of before.

But heck, the two of them had exactly what I wanted for myself. That kind of relationship.

Someday.

When I was settled again.

Which meant, I couldn’t screw this up.

“So, Pete should be at the Outdoorsman Headquarters. As the head ski instructor, you’ll share the building. You have an office and supply room on the slope side,” Elvin told me as we stepped onto the glassed-in porch that must double as a dining area, judging by all the tables.

Just as he reached for the door that would take us outside, his phone went off. “Dang it,” he muttered when he looked at the screen. “I’ve gotta head to the police station.”

That might have surprised me once, but I knew he was one of the town’s parttime cops. Buttercup had told me lots of people here in Sweetville wore multiple hats, though in the same breath, she’d chided Elvin about quitting the force now that the lodge was up and running and busy as ever. Apparently, he had a woodworking business, too.

“Pete’s expecting you, though,” he went on. He pointed to a brown and green outbuilding near a stand of trees. “That’s your homebase. Back behind the tree are the staff cabins. Pete will show you which one is yours. I’m sorry I have to ditch you this way.”

“No big deal. I’ve gotta learn my way around, anyway.”

“Yeah, you’ll be helping out a lot with expeditions this spring and summer while the slopes are down.” He waved a hand as if to erase his words. “Of course, you already know that. Anyway, this coming weekend, there’s an outing for a group

of kids from a group home in Hoover City, and you'll be the second chaperone-leader."

Besides skiing, the lodge offered year-round guided hiking, fishing and camping. It was right up my alley. I loved almost everything outdoors. I imagine Pete and I would get on great since I loved all those things. He sounds exactly like the guy's guy I'd want to hang out with at work and after hours.

"Sounds good." That explained why I'd had the thorough background check done, though I supposed, working with all ages of people here at the lodge, management would have to make sure I was a good guy and to ensure it was safe for me to be around any client, no matter their age.

I gave him a big grin that never failed to reassure nervous first-time skiers and worried moms, alike. "No time like the present to navigate then. Especially if I'll be helping Pete with the wilderness adventures."

He nodded. "Good attitude."

After saying goodbye to Elvin, who promised to meet up with me later, I headed outside. Pausing, I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sky, breathing in the perfect clean air here, tinged with the heavy scent of pine. The early April temperature was still brisk, but held a fresh promise that invigorated me.

Sander's Lodge and Sweetville were going to be the perfect new start.

And I should know and recognize that. I'd had plenty of new starts since I was young. That might send trepidation through some, but not me. For me, it spelled adventure.

With a sharp nod, I started for the outbuilding Elvin had indicated. Clearly, it had been painted to blend in with the pines surrounding it. The building I'd seen out front, on my drive up the private road leading here, matched this one. That one had a sign on it that had made me chuckle, though: Elvin's Workshop.

And that was another reason Buttercup thought Elvin should stop policing. The man had three jobs and a growing family.

A twinge of jealousy pulsed through me for the briefest moment. Yeah, I wanted something like that. Success. Family. But people didn't exactly see ski instructors as stable. We were like the Baywatch crew of the slopes. Seasonal hunks. Not taken seriously.

I huffed a sigh. And an outdoorsman. That was my job now, too. I knew jack about the occupation, despite loving being outside. I had a lot to learn. Elvin told me not to worry and promised this Pete guy would teach me.

I grinned, thinking of a Grizzly Adams type guy, rugged with a big beard and a gruff personality to match his weathered look. He'd call me City Slicker or Boy and tell me he didn't need friends. That would be a problem for Pete since I tended to make friends with everyone.

Maybe, that was a problem for me, too. In the past, being everyone's friend had gotten me kicked about a lot. But like the proverbial dumb puppy, I'd just kept coming back for more. Sander's Lodge would be different. I'd learned to stand up for myself years ago, now. Mostly, it worked. Unless lies were told, like at my last job.

After pulling open the building's creaky screen door, I opened the main door and stepped inside.

"Hello," I called as the spring hinge on the screen slammed it shut, making me cringe. "Pete?"

But it wasn't a grizzled mountain man who stepped from the next room. A blonde pixie appeared in the doorway, her bright blue eyes, jeans and a pink T-shirt that hugged to her shapely body, and plump lips curved into a small smile shaking me into a stupor. Her smile lifted into a smirk as if she knew she'd stunned me into silence. She crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe, studying me.

"Well, hey there. You're Mikaly?"

"Yeah..." *And you're my future wife.* I swallowed hard. "I... I'm looking for Pete."

Two



Petunia Franko

I'd expected the new ski instructor, who'd double as my assistant, to be hot. I mean wasn't that the stereotypical thing? Hot ski instructor? I'd done my research on him before he'd been hired, and man, did he warm me up from only a picture. In person, though...

He was different from what I'd expected. I hadn't expected him to be just my flavor of man, in his thirties, rugged and not as polished as the pretty boys I usually encountered on resort slopes. Heck, Anderson, the last one here, had been a transplanted surfer dude who doubled as a runway model on the off-season. That was why we'd needed a new pro. Late last spring, Anderson had been hired for full-time work by Dior or Klein or Abercrombie. I couldn't remember which one. And it didn't matter.

Because we got this guy. Intelligence poured from him, even though I'd stunned him stupid when I'd popped out of the backroom. I'd bet my next two paychecks he had no idea who I—

“Um, is Pete here?” he asked, interrupting my thoughts as he regained his composure— pretty quickly, too. That was a good sign. You had to be a fast thinker in this job. “Do you know where he is?”

Yup. Got that one right. No idea.

The question was, would I play him or put him out of his misery right away. Decisions, decisions.

“I do.”

“Okay. If he’s busy...” Mikaly shrugged. “Elvin sent me over because I’ll be assisting him. But if Pete’s busy, maybe you can just show me around. Maybe, show me my office so I can get settled.”

“Sure. Come on back.” I jerked my head toward the way I’d come. The front of the building where he’d entered housed a few supplies, but it was mostly a place for guests to cool their heels while I got them whatever item they’d be renting for the day. The attached room I walked back through, without looking to be sure Mikaly followed me, was basically a warehouse of gear we stored on row after row of steel shelves.

“This is impressive,” he murmured. Points for him. That meant he was scoping out the area and not leering at my butt. The same couldn’t be said of most of the male coworkers I’d encountered in my position, men who thought I was too girly to possibly be a survival guide or lead outdoor adventures.

That was before I’d come to Sweetville a few years back when the lodge had reopened.

“Thanks. Since Elvin hired me two years ago, we’ve really worked to build up the inventory with top-of-the-line supplies. The lodge was closed for a long time before Elvin took over, and they never had an outdoor branch—other than the skiing anyway.”

“So...do you work with Pete? Elvin didn’t mention someone else. A team’s good, though. I...”

He trailed off as we entered my office, and I walked behind the desk. I indicated to one of the visitor chairs across from it. I rarely had guests back here, so usually the seats were piled with samples or supplies that needed to be inspected or cleaned then reshelved. Knowing Mikaly was coming, though, I’d tidied up. Sort of.

His chin angled, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully when I sat. See, I knew he was smart.

“You’re...Pete,” he said.

With raised brows and a grimaced smile, I nodded. “Guilty.”

“You could have told me, so I didn’t make a fool of myself,” he chided, returning my raised brow. That was it. No judgment about my gender. Huh. Another good sign.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the desk and my arms bent up so I could rest my chin on my fists. “Did you? Because trust me, too many men come in and here immediately start posturing and treating me like a fragile snowflake, all while demanding to see the man in charge. You didn’t.”

“No. I don’t work that way.”

“So you don’t mind working with a woman.”

His brow furrowed. This guy was earning points left and right.

“It’s not the 1950s,” he scoffed.

“Well, thank God, or I’d be considered a spinster, and my parents would be desperately trying to marry me off. I mean... not that they aren’t. The second I hit thirty and was still single two years ago, they went off into a tailspin.” I waved my hand. “Probably TMI.”

I couldn’t miss the way his dark eyes studied me, pricking feelings I’d rarely experienced. “Not at all. I hit thirty-five last month, and I’m still single.” He shrugged. “Makes you start to evaluate things.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Is that why you left your old job and came here?”

“No.”

Just no. That was it? I’d thought we were starting to have a report. Of course, he’d been here less than ten minutes. I couldn’t expect anyone to be an open book in that time.

“So this weekend, we have six boys from the Hoover City group home coming to the lodge for a camping trip. They’re arriving Friday afternoon and we’ll have them until Sunday around six. Just a simple two-night trip. It will be cold, but not quite a polar bear expedition.”

“Teaching them cold weather survival?”

I nodded. “So we’ll have to get everything together before then.”

“Will they have warm enough clothes. I know sometimes... Well, it’s just the bare minimum provided.”

I nodded, appreciating his insight on things. “They will. This is one of Buttercup’s projects. She and Elvin work directly with the home. I don’t know if I’d outright call it a charity, but they make sure those boys have the things they need, as well as some extras to make them feel more like normal kids.”

Mikaly tensed. “I’m sure they’re normal.”

“I meant kids who are in families, their families.” I shook my head, feeling at a loss to word my thoughts properly. “I wasn’t implying they’re not normal. They’re regular middle school boys.”

“You’ve met them?”

“Yeah...they’re practically my unofficial Scout troop. I take them out to do stuff about once a month, though last month, there was a blizzard, and we just hung out at the lodge. They thought they were *it*. It worked out anyway. Elvin was around to help oversee them.”

“You didn’t have an assistant?”

“You’re my first.” I winked at him, hiding the reaction that brought fluttering to life inside me. I was thirty-two, and he would not be my first in another way, but my feminine side sure wanted to get to know him as more than my outdoor assistant. “I’m not really thinking of you as an assistant, *per se*, though. More of a partner.”

Shoot, Pete, why don’t you tell him what you really want?

Mikaly settled back in his chair, studying me. His chin tipped in a single nod.

“What’s Pete short for?” he asked, taking me by surprise with the subject change. “Or did your mom and dad actually name you Pete?”

“It’s Petunia. And I swear on everything, if you call me that, I will hide your body someplace on those mountains out there

where they will never find you.”

His wide smile told me he didn't believe my threat at all. This man would test me; I just knew it.

Still, he crossed a finger over his chest. “Okay, Flower. Noted and filed away. Now, what can I do to help get ready for this outing on Friday? Point me in the right direction, and I'll do my best.”

That gave me pause, even as I snorted at the nickname. “You'll do your best? How much experience do you have?”

He pinched his thumb and forefinger together then moved them slightly apart.

Right. I was going to kill Elvin. He'd kind of oversold Mikaly's skillset.

“I guess we better get to work then. I need you to be an expert, and quick.”

Three



Mikaly

I had to work with Pete, but man, I wanted to date her. After we'd left her office earlier, she'd been all business. She gave me a list of items to retrieve off the shelves and to inspect. It really hadn't taken long, but it had been a huge relief when I'd retired to my own office then gone to the ski storage to start inventorying the supplies there. That was familiar ground, at least.

Plus it kept Pete out of my line of sight. That woman distracted me without even meaning to. Besides being the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, confidence and competence exuded from her in waves. And that was sexier than anything else. I wanted to get to know her, to see where things might lead.

But I'd just come off a job where I'd been falsely accused of impropriety. I couldn't mess up this opportunity to get my feet under me again.

"Hey," she said, rapping her knuckles on the frame of my door and startling me. "Brought you this." She held up a book. When she dropped it on my desk, I saw it was a wilderness survival guide. She nodded toward it. "It's hardly comprehensive, but it's a great start. Maybe, a little light reading, tonight."

The edges of her mouth quivered upward before she managed to school her expression.

I lifted a brow before I peered down at the two-inch thick tome. “Did I say I could read?”

Her lips parted, and I knew I’d taken her by surprise. She started to say something then stopped. Twice.

“I’m joking,” I said, taking mercy on her. “I graduated college with honors, believe it or not.”

That startled people. I wasn’t sure why. Sure, I had the jock look about me and I’d been active in one sport or another since my dad put my first pint-sized football in my hands, but athletics weren’t my whole life. Some might argue otherwise, because of my job, but I’d taken academics seriously.

“Phew,” she breathed. “I thought I’d have to teach you that, too. A guide’s gotta be able to read warning signs.”

Oh...I was reading the signs. They told me to run from her dangerous curves. But if I were honest, those were warnings I’d probably ignore.

“If you’re about ready, I can take you over to your cabin,” she continued when I didn’t bite at her joke. “And I can show you the best place to eat around Sweetville, or... I could invite you over to dinner, since you probably don’t have supplies in your kitchen.”

“You’d be right on that. I wasn’t even sure what my lodging would look like. A hotplate and a cooler, a kitchenette, a full kitchen... Who knew? Until I saw what I was working with, I didn’t bring anything but a few jugs of water and some energy bars. So I’d welcome either option.”

Any time I could spend with her, actually.

Boy, I was really detouring away from the no fraternizing rule I’d set up in my head. I didn’t even know if that was a regulation at Sander’s Lodge.

There was just something about Pete, something different from any woman I’d ever met. Sure, on the surface, she matched many others I’d encountered over the years, but there was a spark about her, a draw I couldn’t explain. She matched until you took a moment to really take her in. Then you should see the vitality that seemed to glow around her like an aura.

Cheesy poetic? I guessed maybe, but I didn't care. My little flower was just...unique. Intriguing. Alluring. And I'd stand in the way of any other man who even wanted to glimpse her sparkle.

Which sank an iron anchor into my gut. Did she have a man? She didn't have a ring on her finger, but that didn't mean anything. Not everyone wore a wedding ring, especially when said ring could be a danger on the job, getting caught on something. Or some women thought they were a sign of patriarchy. Or she could be engaged or seriously dating.

Each possibility twisted that weight deeper into my flesh.

"You okay?" she asked, placing a hand on my arm. I hadn't even realized I'd stood and rounded my desk until she touched me. "You look ill."

"Fine. Do you have a Mr. Pete waiting for you at home? Should I run out for a case of beer or something?"

"I have beer at my place, but no Mr. Pete. Sorry. No future Mr. Pete, either."

Yet.

Whether she realized it or not, those words had sealed her fate.

"You like pasta?" she asked. "Or are you a no-carb kinda guy. I guess I could fill you up on meatballs..."

"Pasta's fine. My mom's side of the family is full-on Italian, and my mom is a first generation American. If I said I didn't like pasta, my nonna would come after me with her wooden spoon."

Pete made an eek face. "Geez, no pressure on my jar sauce and store-bought meatballs."

I laughed. "The alternative is a protein bar. Trust me; no complaints from me. I will enjoy every store-bought bite."

"I suppose your nonna or mom taught you to cook Italian?"

"A thing or two, but I don't get to cook often." More like I didn't take the time. Cooking for one blew. The dishes tasted great the first day, but eating the same thing for a week wasn't

my jam. But now, if I had someone to cook for, someone like Pete, I'd be breaking out my sauce making skills.

Four



Pete

Cavatappi noodles with jarred vodka sauce, baked meatballs and fresh Italian bread from the bakery had been a success. I'd be lying if I didn't admit I'd covertly watched Mikaly eat. More specifically, I'd watched his face for any expression that might reveal he judged the dinner I'd made.

Not a one. Unless you counted pleasure. He looked thrilled by my simple offering, and it sent a burst of pleasure through me. At thirty, I'd been in relationships, but something about this man seemed different. As much as it pained me to admit, in the past, others had been sure they could change me, make me more girly—their version of it anyway.

Why, though? Why would they want to be with me only to make me into their personal version of Barbie? Actually, that was kind of an insult to how far Barbie had come over the years. Those men I'd dated had wanted a brainless puppet to act like they thought a woman should be.

Exhibit A for why it had been years since I'd dated.

Exhibit B? Well, I kept that one to myself. No one needed to know my medical stuff—HIPPA and all, am I right? I'd just say, that was another way I'd fail in the old feminine department as far as my exes were concerned. I wasn't in a rush to go down that path again with any other guy.

But... though he didn't know it, Mikaly was dredging up yesses from me ever since he realized I was the "Pete" he looked for and hadn't cast a smidgen of judgment on me.

I pulled my knee up on my couch and turned to face him, resting my back against the armrest. He mirrored the action against the opposite side. After we ate, we'd come into my living room, which was steps away from the counter where we'd eaten dinner, and settled down here to talk shop while we each held a longneck.

Though he faced me, his gaze traveled around my place, taking in details. I'd noticed that about him. He was an observer. Now, he scanned over my living room and kitchen combo with a counter dividing the two spaces. I had to admit it wasn't terribly personal. I'd never been one to want *stuff* around me.

"Your place is just like this one," I told him. "Same layout. Main room with two bedrooms and a bathroom down the short hallway. Same furniture. Hope you like the couch. You've got one, too." I gave a slight bounce.

"It's all nicer than I expected—better than what I had before," he tagged on quickly. "My last two jobs, I rented places off the resort. Heck, when I worked in Aspen, I had a place in one of the bedroom communities an hour away. I had to share it with three other guys in order to afford it. This is a huge upgrade."

"That was your last job? In Aspen?" I asked, thinking of all the celebs and bluebloods he must have rubbed shoulders with.

"No," he replied with a laugh. "That was years ago. I figured out fast I wouldn't get ahead by staying there—not unless I wanted to be someone's boy toy. I wasn't looking for a sugar mama—or a sugar daddy, for that matter. I mean...some might think being the head ski instructor someplace isn't getting ahead, but..." He shrugged. "I get to write up all the ski programs—downhill and cross-country. It affords me time to pursue other interests on the off-seasons."

"Like what?"

"You know. Stuff. Just things other than strapping skis to my feet." He shrugged again, clearly not wanting to reveal what he did in his spare time. I mean, I didn't care if he were an expert basket weaver. I just wanted to know more about him. "What about you?"

“What about me?”

“Is this your first job? Have you been other places? How did you land here?”

So many questions from a guy who didn't seem to want to answer any of mine. “Nope. Not my first job. I've only been here since the resort reopened. Before that I worked with my parents. My dad mostly. My mom's not big on mud or bugs. Kind of like you, I knew I wouldn't get ahead staying there.”

Plus, my last ex, Brad, worked for my father. If my dad knew what a chauvinist ass the guy was, Brad would have been out on that sexist butt. Rather than cause waves, since the man was also the son of one of my dad's friends, I'd struck out on my own. My parents thankfully understood my excuse that I needed some autonomy.

Mikaly's brow furrowed as if he knew I was keeping a secret.

Goes two ways, buddy. See?

He took a sip from his longneck bottle then quickly ran his tongue along his bottom lip, drawing my attention there. Unintentionally, I was sure.

“And where was home?”

“Oregon.”

He nodded. “Pretty place. I could see how there'd be a lot of call for a skilled outdoorsman. So you've been doing this since you were a kid?”

“Guiding? No. But roughing it out in the woods and being a pint-sized survivalist? Yeah. Pretty much since my mom and dad found hiking boots in my size, I've been on the trails. Speaking of...you do have boots, right?”

“I do. I like to get out and hike, though it's usually just day trips.”

“At least, there's that, newbie,” I teased. “Tomorrow, we're going on a test run. I've gotta get you up to speed before the kids get here Friday. Since today's Monday, that should give us a couple nights to make sure you look good in front of the boys.” I took a sip of my own beer. “Better get a good night's

sleep. We'll leave at nine, and I emailed you a list of what you need to pack before we hit the trail. And make sure you dress in layers." I set my bottle on the coffee table. "Ready for me to show you your place?"

"Yeah," he said before finishing his own drink. "Sounds like I need to get unpacked. So I can repack."

But a flicker in his eyes told me he didn't mind at all. The idea of us alone out on the mountain interested him—maybe as much as it interested me, not that I'd admit it.

Five



Mikaly

My Flower was a sadist. I was in fantastic condition. That wasn't ego; it was a necessity for my profession. Still, the woman was kicking my butt on this outing.

We'd left at nine on the nose and, laden down with our gear, had been hiking for hours, with only two short breaks. Honestly, I thought maybe I should re-nickname my little dynamo Energizer Bunny. She really did keep going and going and going. And I wanted to find the nearest boulder and lean on it for at least an hour.

"Are we almost there?" I asked, feeling like a kid on a long car trip. I swore it was getting colder, though I'd worked up some heat on this excursion, so it was difficult to tell.

"Almost. The trail flattens out into a small clearing in about fifteen minutes. We can setup there." She threw me a grin over the shoulder of her pink puffy coat, twisting slightly to see around her pack. "You need a break?"

"No." Even if I did, I would have said the same. Pete might not officially be my woman yet, but I didn't want to look weak—weaker—in her eyes. I wanted her to know she could rely on me, that I was a partner and not a liability.

My feet felt like lead after hours plodding on the shallow upward trajectory, but I forced myself to keep going. It wasn't weariness that had me pausing when we broke through the trees into the clearing, however.

Sun glistened on the pristine snow covering the ground, unbroken by human or animal tracks. The icy crystals coated the branches of the pines surrounding us and created a breathtaking, sparkly winter paradise. Though it was cold, a stream ran nearby. The breeze seemed to lessen some, too.

“This is my favorite camping spot,” Pete told me. “Isn’t it great?”

I glanced over at her, seeing the same sunlight glinting off her hair, but the luster in her eyes was all her inner light.

“Gorgeous.”

“Yeah” she breathed, turning in a small circle and unaware she’d stolen my breath. Again.

How was it that this dynamic powerhouse hadn’t been snapped up by some man? Everything about her enticed me. Of course, knowing her was a new thing. Maybe, something I disliked would emerge. Doubtful. I’d endured this death march up a mountain while she’d teased me, and I just wanted more of her.

She pointed. “We’ll set up camp there. The trees will somewhat shelter us from the wind.”

“Okay.” I started to take off my pack.

“We need to dig out our area before the tent goes up. Setting up on top of the snow won’t work because it’s fresh and not packed down. You start digging there.” She pointed. “And I’ll clear this spot and get a fire started.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

“Glad you understand how things are,” she teased. She paused and lifted up her face, then took off her glove and reached out her arm. She pointed to the west. “When you shovel, make a bank there. It will act as an additional windbreak for our shelter.”

“Will do,” I agreed again, already in awe as she took charge and showed me what to do. I liked to be outside and to hike, but I’d never been winter camping. I had a feeling, without direction, I’d do everything wrong.

“Is this where we’ll camp with the boys?” I asked while we worked.

“No. We have a spot farther down the mountain nearer to the lodge. With them, I prefer to be closer to help if we needed it. Plus with them getting here in the afternoon, it’s better to choose someplace we can get to quicker.”

“But not with me?” I countered.

“I wanted to see what you have in you.”

“You mean if I’d wuss out halfway up?”

“Something like that,” she laughed. Finished clearing the snow where she intended to build the fire, she started digging a divot into the ground for the firepit. I finished clearing the area for our tent.

“Is it always this dark in midafternoon?” I asked, realizing how dark it had gotten. “Is it the angle of the sun to the mountain?”

“No...” she said slowly, peering up at the heavy clouds that had rolled in, then whispered, “Shoot.”

It sounded like a curse and lifted the hair on the back of my neck.

“What’s wrong?”

“I checked the forecast—all of them actually, on three different channels. We were supposed to have clear weather the whole time we planned to be out. When I’d checked, I’d seen the same.

“That looks like a storm,” I said, peering at the clouds again. I knew snow clouds when I saw them. We were about to get dumped on.

“We need to get the tent up. Now,” she said, heading for my pack and not hers. For the first time, I actually realized we were sharing a shelter. I wasn’t sure why that hadn’t clicked before when I kept thinking of *our* tent.

“Will the tent work for this?” I asked as flurries started to swirl around us. “Should we head back down.”

“No time. We’ll get caught on the trail. We’re better off hunkering down. This is a Geertop, four season tent. We’ll be okay in it.”

Together, we put down the base layers then got the tent erected. By the time we were stowing our gear inside, the snow already fell in a thick blanket, making it difficult to see more than a couple yards.

“Well...this isn’t exactly what I planned,” Pete grumbled as we got our sleeping mats and bags rolled out.

“No? I thought this was part of your test.,” I teased.

Though the tent was shadowy, I still saw her roll her eyes at me. “Not a test. It’s training.”

“Gotcha. So how do we stay warm? Body heat?” Okay, yes, I was hopeful she’d say yes.

“Layers. Which we both have already.”

Right. She had made sure of that before we left.

“And I have a battery powered heater in my pack. Won’t last long, though. I’d hoped to have a fire going and let its heat seep this way. The tent will insulate us well. And our sleeping bags are rated for subzero temps. We’ll be okay.”

Her teeth were chattering as she spoke, though, so I wasn’t so sure of that.

Six



Pete

What the heck? Really. This trip was supposed to be a primer for Mikaly to get his feet wet, so to speak, to ensure he was prepared for cold weather camping with the boys this weekend. It was not supposed to be blizzard camping.

“I checked the weather, too,” he told me after I’d grumbled about it. “It’s one of the things I do first thing in the morning to help me prepare for the day. Kind of a habit I picked up as a teen after our English teacher made us read about the children’s blizzard.” He winked. “See? I can read.”

“I didn’t doubt it,” I laughed, trying not to shiver as the wind battered our tent. I could only imagine how bad it would be if we didn’t have a wind break built up and if the trees weren’t nearby. The canvas structure was doing a fair job of protecting us, but there was no escaping that there was a storm outside while we had questionable protection.

“So what was the agenda for this trip?” he asked, distracting me.

“Step one was getting here and setting up camp, so you’d know what we had to do for maximum protection from the cold. I guess we got that part accomplished.”

“Go us.”

“We were supposed to get a fire going and collect some water, cook over the open flame, forage in order to get in some

winter weather plant identification, do more hiking after we'd set up camp. You know... Basic outdoorsy stuff."

His gloved hand landed on my arm as we sat crossed legged across from each other on our pallets that we'd butted together. "You know, Pete... I *am* used to cold weather. That's the other reason I check the weather all the time. I spend hours at a time on the hill—or leading cross-country groups. I have to know what to expect to keep my students and outing participants safe. It's okay. We'll be alright. You've got us all set up and made sure we had cold temperature supplies. We might be chilly and uncomfortable, but we'll make it."

Cue the choir singing. Dang it, he'd just confirmed what I'd suspected yesterday when he didn't freak out about me being a woman, rather than the man he'd expected. Mikaly Andrich was a good man.

I nodded, acknowledging his reassurance.

"I guess we can talk while this thing rages outside. Hopefully, it won't continue for the whole time we're here. I should call down to town and see if I can get an update."

He shook his head. "I don't have a signal on my phone."

"Satellite phone."

"Don't you have to go outside for that?" he asked. He wasn't wrong.

I sighed. "Yeah, and with this cloud cover, it probably won't work. I should try, though."

He held out his hand. "Let me. You stay here where it's warm. No offense meant by this, but I have more bulk to combat a deep chill."

Mikaly was already uncovering from the thermal blanket he had over his lap, peeling off one of the extra pairs of socks he'd put on after we'd settled, and reaching for his boots. I wanted to argue with him, but he wasn't wrong.

I opened the phone and thumbed to the correct contact. "Hit the one for Jory. He's with the fire department and is always my town contact when I head out on trips." My chin lowered

while I raised an eyebrow at Mikaly. “That’s one of the safety rules—always make sure someone knows where you are. Jory and Elvin both know exactly where we’re camping. They likely won’t try to come up here in a storm, but if they don’t hear from us, they’re going to start considering a rescue expedition.”

“Hopefully, I can get through then.” Taking the phone, he shoved it in his pocket, grabbed the folding shovel then unzipped the tent. A burst of cold gushed inside, but he moved quickly. He was out and the door rezipped in moments.

Raising my knees, I rested my arms on them dropped my head onto the cushioned sleeves. This was a thousand percent not okay. I knew weather happened, but now, I was all weak female while Mikaly took care of things. That wasn’t okay with my psyche and went against the grain of everything I’d fought for in this industry.

He wasn’t wrong, though. It was safer for him to venture out. At least for the moment. While he was out there, I rummaged for some high-fat energy bars, packets of dried berries and water. I could do that at least. We’d mostly be grabbing water from the stream, but I’d still brought canteens for initial backups. Prepping for tomorrow—or later today, if we were lucky—I opened the collapsible water collector.

We brought food for the trip, since I hadn’t planned for us to hunt this time, water and a water source, as well as a way to be relatively sheltered. I cuddled back under my blanket, still shivering as Mikaly came back in, bringing another gust of frigid air.

“No dice on the phone,” he said, handing it back to me after he’d closed us back into the semi-darkness and taken off his boots. Reaching for my pack, I pulled out a small lantern. After the fact, I realized it illuminated our space like the glow of candlelight—romantic candlelight, creating a surprising ambiance around us, while we faced each other and shared our meal.

“You’re being a good sport about this,” I commented, opening the wrapper for my bar.

“Call me crazy, but I like spending time with you. Even in the cold.”

My hands froze, and my gaze lifted to look into his dark eyes. They were somewhat shrouded in shadows, from the angle of illumination from the small lantern, but their intensity still burned into me. He felt this too, this connection I hadn't thought could be real.

“Same,” I answered. I'd never been great with words, especially those that opened me up to intimacy. “I... It's... It's taken me by surprise, actually.”

“Me, too. I came into this job determined I wouldn't have anything to do with a coworker, and here I am, wanting to have everything to do with you.”

My brow furrowed at that revelation that probably revealed more than he thought about his past. “Why did you decide that?”

He grimaced. “I guess it's going to come out sooner or later, especially as we get closer.” He leaned toward me, his warm breath welcome against my chilly cheeks. “And we are going to get closer, Flower.”

A shiver went through me that had nothing to do with the cold.

“Okay,” I breathed. “Tell me your secrets.”

And maybe, I'll tell you mine.

“I got fired from my last job for having an affair with the boss' wife.” He held up his hand. “Which I didn't do. That's not me. If my parents taught me anything—and they taught me a lot—it's about the sanctity of marriage, specifically that married ladies are off-limits, no matter how much they might come on to you.”

“So she wanted you and...”

“When I said no, she decided to tell her friends that there was something between us, that I'd slept with her when her husband was away. Of course, it got back to him. If socialites can do one thing, it's gossip and backstab. So I was out a job for sticking to my morals—though, if I had slept with her, I'm

pretty sure it would have had the same result—except I would have felt dirty for going against my principles.”

He shrugged, pursing his lips in visible annoyance. “So I went home and worked for the family business until I got hired by the Sanders.”

“What’s that? The business, I mean.”

Even in the dark, I saw the light dance in his eyes and he smiled. “My parents own a chain of Italian restaurants.”

I groaned and flopped back on my pallet.

“*No...*”

Mikaly leaned over me. “Yes.”

Then his lips brushed over mine, and suddenly, I didn’t feel quite as cold.

Seven



Mikaly

I was kissing Pete. Her lips were soft yet firm beneath mine, showing me she was all into this action, while she reached up and wrapped her arms around my neck. We sighed together, the pleased sound filling the air around us.

Our foreheads rested together as we each absorbed the moment, both knowing kissing was as far as this would go. For various reasons. For now.

“I didn’t envision kissing you when we came up here,” she murmured. “Okay, that’s not exactly true. I *envisioned* it. I just didn’t think it would happen.”

A chuckle escaped me, and I brushed my mouth over hers again. “I thought about it a lot, too. That and us getting to know each other. Now you know that I owe you some of my nonna’s cooking.”

I didn’t mention my old job and what had happened with Angelina. If I had my way, I would never mention her or that incident again.

Pete’s gloved thumbs brushed over my cheeks while she looked up at me. “Yeah. You do. I...” She frowned. “I left my old job with my dad because of my ex. He’s the son of one of my dad’s friends. He couldn’t handle me being...me. And then he turned into a total jerk, calling all parts of me being a woman into question.”

“Sounds like a Grade-A dick to me; a sore loser at that.”

“Yeah,” she agreed with a humorless huff of laughter. “You could say that. My dad wasn’t happy when I left Oregon to come here. He didn’t understand it. I couldn’t tell him what was going on with Brad and mess up his friendship.”

I disagreed with that, but kept it to myself for now. I had sisters, and I knew how I’d feel if they were harassed. If my daughter was having issues with some guy, I’d want to know. Even if that guy was the son of one of my friends. Heck, I’d want to tell my buddy to kick his kid’s rear into a better place and to stop messing with my girl.

“I’m sorry that happened. Just so you know, I’m not like that —”

“I know,” she interrupted. “I could tell that as soon as you accepted I was ‘Pete’ and didn’t scoff at me being the lodge’s outdoorsman.”

“Did I tell you I have four sisters? I’m the youngest of the five of us. They would put me in my place if I ever implied they couldn’t do something or *shouldn’t* do something because it’s a ‘man’ thing.”

Unable to help myself, I kissed her again. I liked this, us cuddled together so close to each other, talking, our mouths inches apart, stealing kisses.

“So there are five of you?”

“Seven now. My parents fostered then adopted my two younger brothers. We keep telling them they should adopt two more boys to help the numbers—give us guys the advantage in something—but they say seven is enough kids. I bet you, they will adopt the one they’re fostering now. Four boys. Four girls. Practically a Brady Bunch—except I’m blood related to my sisters and my parents have been together since high school.”

Pete smiled. “That explains a lot. You got a little tense when we were talking about the boys yesterday.”

“My brothers have been through a lot. Treated as ‘less than’, if you know what I mean. They just got the short end of the stick, you know.”

“I do.” She pulled her lip between her teeth, and I dipped forward to tug it free with mine, taking her mouth again for a deeper kiss that lasted longer than a few featherlight touches. I groaned when she parted her lips and allowed me access to explore a little more intimately.

“Flower,” I breathed. “Tell me this is real.”

“It’s real.”

Turning on my side, I pulled her to cuddle into me. Our blankets wrapped around us, and I wondered if we’d zip together our sleeping bags later. She notched her head beneath my chin, both of us forgetting we’d been about to eat when I’d kissed her.

“I’ll probably adopt,” she murmured.

“Yeah?”

“Not a baby, though. Maybe an older child—more than one, in the end—who can come with me when I do expeditions. Ones who are safe to go on them. Although, barring this outing and getting caught in a storm, nearly everything I do is family friendly. Elvin doesn’t want anyone risked, and neither do I. The Sander’s Lodge is about adventure but not high adventure like climbing Everest or free soloing.”

“You don’t want to have a baby?” I asked, surprised. Every time she talked about the boys who came here from the group home, you could tell how much she cared about kids.

Pete was silent for a long while.

“Can’t,” she finally said in a whisper. She tensed and started to pull away, and a million things became clear. She was moving from my embrace before she thought I’d push her away. My arms tightened, holding her there. And...I was willing to bet her jerk of an ex had used this knowledge as a weapon against her. No wonder she’d fled home.

I’d always wanted kids, but I’d never felt about a woman the way I did my Flower. There was no consideration to be made past that. If she couldn’t; we couldn’t. Was it weird that I could know that so quickly? From the outside, someone might think that. I just knew, though.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“You’re not going to ask?” she asked just as quietly.

“It’s not my business until you want it to be.”

“You really *do* have sisters. I feel like I need to send them all thank you gifts.”

“Please don’t. They’re already a bit unbearable sometimes.” I chuckled because really, I adored my sisters, but they never let me forget I was their *little* brother.

She laughed with me. “We should eat, but it so comfortable, right here.”

Pete snuggled into me to amplify her point.

“I can probably reach our food. If you’re hungry.”

“We need to fuel up, feeling hungry or not. Survival 101. It burns a lot of energy to keep the body warm.”

I ignored the obvious alternatives to heat us up, not wanting to be *that* guy, and hugged her tighter before releasing her when I just wanted to hold and kiss her some more.

Eight



Pete

“Yeah, we’re okay,” I said, lifting my face toward the bright sun. “Up to our knees in snow, but okay.”

“You need a rescue?” Jory asked.

“First of all, no. Second, there’s no need to send anyone out into this for no reason—even if you want an excuse to snowmobile up here. Plus, you know one of them wouldn’t get up these trails.”

“Fine. Ruin my fun.”

I grinned, glancing over at Mikaly and watching him pile wood near the fire we’d started as soon as we’d emerged from the tent this morning. “We’re fine. We’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

“If you’re sure...”

“Trying to get out of plowing the roads, Jory?” The Sweetville firefighters took over plow duties whenever it snowed.

“Caught,” he said.

“Go bother your wife. I’ll call to check in this evening. Let Elvin know we’re all good.”

“Will do—on both fronts. I think it’s time to go scam a cinnamon roll off Penny.”

I snorted. The entire town joked that Jory fell in love with his wife because of those huge cinnamon rolls she made for her Simply Sweets bakery. They also teased him and told him he

had to get himself to the gym because of his sweet tooth—not that one would know looking at him. With all the physical work he did at the lodge and for his shifts at the fire station, he was in great shape.

Not as great a shape as Mikaly. My eyes drifted to him again. He'd grabbed the water collector to get water from the stream. The lodge's head of the ski program, my assistant, cut a powerful figure against the white landscape in his red cap, gray ski jacket and jeans.

It was movement beyond him that got my attention.

Mikaly froze, and I gasped.

“Bear. Got to go, Jory. I'll call you back,” I rushed to tell him, already in action. One hand shoved away the phone while the other reached for the canister in my other pocket.

“Ahh,” I yelled, running forward, flipping open the release on the repellent can in case I needed the spray. I probably wouldn't.

“Pete, no!” Mikaly yelled. “Run. Get in the trees—up a tree. Hide.”

The bear was already loping away as Mikaly caught me, ready to heft me up and flee from the ‘danger’. He was lucky he didn't get a face full of bear spray.

“Mikaly...” I murmured, both annoyed at him and touched that he'd been willing to shield me from the bear. “What were you going to do? While I ran and climbed a tree?”

“Protect you from the bear...however I needed to. Or climb a tree, too, once I knew you were safe.”

“It was a black bear,” I said, looking to see its little lumbering butt had disappeared from sight. I flipped the safety back in place on the repellent canister.

“Yeah. A bear.”

“First of all, we probably surprised him. Bears have a great sense of smell, but he was probably just doo-dahing along, half asleep and wondering why this snow so late in spring.”

“I understand that feeling,” Mikaly muttered. Reaching up, I drew him down for a kiss.

“Thank you for being my knight.”

“Always,” he promised, sending little tremors of pleasure through me.

“But I’ve gotta tell you about black bears.”

“He looked...light brown.”

“Yeah, but it was a black bear. They actually come in a range of colors. And mostly, they’re more scared of you than you are of them. And if for some reason, they’re not, you fight. You spray them.” I lifted the canister. “Or bop them on the nose. Make yourself not worth their while.”

“Or run,” he offered.

“They climb trees like champs, Mikaly. That’s what they do when *they’re* scared. I mean, I’m not saying they’re not dangerous. But you’re better off scaring them away than trying to climb a tree.”

He turned me so we were chest to chest and bent his head so he could kiss me more fully. “What would I do without you?”

“Be treed by a bear while he ate all your rations?”

“Anyone ever tell you, you’re kind of a brat.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. My phone rang then, interrupting us. “It’s probably Jory. I yelled bear and hung up on him.”

“We’re fine, Jory,” I said, answering while we laughed.

“Not Jory, baby.”

My whole world ground to a stop at that voice, and I stepped away from Mikaly. “What do you want?”

“Came to see what you’ve gotten up to,” Brad said. “It’s been two years. Your dad wants you to come home.”

“Not happening. And what do you mean you came? Where are you?”

“I’m at the lodge, baby.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Where are you? When are you going to be back?”

I glanced at Mikaly, who could obviously hear Brad. His eyes were narrowed, and anger crossed his features. Of course. He’d lost his last job because of a woman wanting to cheat. I sure hoped he wasn’t thinking that about me.

“I’m on a campout,” I told Brad. I stared into Mikaly’s face, meeting his eyes. “With my boyfriend. We won’t be back until tomorrow, and I sure hope you’ve got the sense to be gone by then.”

“Baby...”

“I swear to heaven, if you call me that one more time, I’m calling my dad and telling him exactly what happened with us. Do you want that?”

“I’ll see you when you get back,” Brad replied darkly. And why did that sound a bit like a threat?

The hand holding the phone dropped to my side, and my head hung forward.

“I’d rather deal with a bear,” I groaned under my breath.

“Boyfriend?” Mikaly asked.

“No, he’s—”

“I meant what you called me.”

I sighed. Yeah. I’d overstepped there, too. “Yeah...I... I’m sorry. I just needed to tell him something to get him to go away—which didn’t seem to work anyway. I... You...”

Stepping close, he cupped my face. A slow smile curled his lips. “Consider yourself boyfriended up, Flower.”

Nine



Mikaly

Walking close to Pete as we hiked down the mountain, slogging through snowdrifts, my thoughts kept slipping back to last night, as well as the night before. I'd held her in my arms, clasped to my chest both times, and it was the best sleep of my life.

After only a couple days, I couldn't imagine not having her at my side. I'd think it was crazy if not for knowing my parents and how quickly they'd *known*. My dad had always claimed he'd seen Mom their first day of their senior year of high school, and it had been over. There had never been a flicker of doubt they were intended for each other.

When it clicked, it clicked, he'd always said. You just know.

I never understood. I'd thought he was romanticizing the whole thing. Until it happened to me.

"Come out to dinner with me tonight?" I asked Pete.

Pausing, she turned and looked back at me. She had to swivel her whole upper body for the move, due to her backpack, and I couldn't help my grin. She'd been leading the way down the path because she knew it better than me, and it was too narrow for us to walk side by side. I didn't like it. I felt an innate need to go first, to protect her, but I knew better than to voice that feeling. As compact a little pixie as she was, I had no doubt Pete would kick my butt if I tried to go all alpha male on her.

“You can tell me the best place to go in town or we can drive over to Hoover City. There’s bound to be places there,” I added.

“I’d like that. There’s a steak place on the edge of Hoover—on the Sweetville side.”

“Let’s do it. Consider it a date.”

“You’re taking this boyfriend thing seriously,” she said, the words coming over her shoulder as we started back down the path. Thankfully, it was an easy slope, and we didn’t run much risk of tumbling or slipping in the snow.

“You have no idea. And it’s not about Brad; just so you know.”

“The kissing and cuddling gave me a clue there.”

I caught the back of her pack and pulled her to me, turning her to face me again. “You mean *this*?”

My mouth settled over hers, feathering, pressing. Pete moaned and parted her lips, letting me lick inside and connect with her deeper. My hand skimmed along her side and slipped around her waist, wedging beneath her backpack to pull her closer.

“I can’t wait to hold you tonight without fifty-six layers between us,” I muttered against her mouth.

She giggled. “If you’re lucky.”

“Tell me I’ll be lucky.” I wasn’t talking about sex, and I hoped she knew that. “I want to dance with you. Hold you.”

“I guarantee you’ll be lucky enough for both those things. Might even throw in some kissing and cuddling, too.”

“Yeah?” I kissed her again for good measure. Heck, I couldn’t keep my mouth off hers. I’d lost track of the number of kisses we’d shared—not that the number mattered, as long as all her kisses were shared with me. And only me from now on.

“We gotta go,” she said regretfully, “or we won’t get back in time for that date. And they might find two kissing popsicles frozen on the trail.”

“But what a way to go.”

“I can think of better. Like fifty years from now.”

“You’re right. Let’s go.”

And hour and a half later, the lodge and outbuildings came into sight. I wasn’t sure I’d ever been so relieved. My body ached, and I couldn’t wait to jump under a hot shower.

To my surprise, I heard Pete growl. We were walking side by side now that we’d broken the tree line and left the path, so her annoyed sound was loud and clear.

That’s when I saw the guy striding toward us, dressed remarkably similar to how we were.

“Brad?” I asked, reaching for her hand.

“Yeah.”

I glared his direction, but it wasn’t enough to make him stop rushing toward us with his arms out.

Not on my watch.

I stepped in front of Pete, hoping she wouldn’t be pissed by the move. “You’ll stop right there, if you’re smart,” I growled. “Touch her, and I’ll ram my ski poles where the sun don’t shine, *friend*.”

Pete’s fingers curled around my arm, but she didn’t attempt to move me. She did shift so she was only partially behind me, though, reminding me this wasn’t my battle—or she thought it wasn’t anyway.

Brad stopped, because apparently, he wasn’t as stupid as I’d thought, and crossed his arms. He glared at Pete.

“What is this, Petunia?”

“Excuse me?” she asked. And if that wasn’t a death threat, I wasn’t sure what was. Everything in her tone put him on notice.

He chose to ignore that.

“This.” His hand waved at me.

“First of all, I broke up with you almost three years ago. “And second, what the heck are you doing here?”

“You’re supposed to marry me.”

When I glanced over at Pete, her brows couldn’t have been any further into her hairline. This was news to her.

“Let me guess,” I said, wedging my hand beneath Pete’s pack again and pulling her to my side. I pressed my lips to the top of her head. All the while, I kept my glare on Brad. “You didn’t tell Daddy that you and Pete broke up. You’ve been pretending everything’s fine, and you’re having a long distance thing—”

I looked down at Pete. “Which would never fly in my book, Flower. Just so you know.”

My eyes narrowed back on Brad. “And now you’re here because it’s time to lay proof to your lies. Tell me if I’m warm.”

If he could have shot lasers from his eyes, I would have been dead. “You don’t know anything.”

“But don’t I?” I asked. Yeah, maybe, I was ready to take him in a fight after he threw the first punch. I might have to defer to Pete out in the wilderness, because that was her jam and she knew way more than I did. But down here, when dealing with spoiled punks... No one was messing with my girl, and I’d be her wall of defense.

Now, I crossed my arms and stared *him* down. “I have plenty of experience recognizing guys like you. So I think maybe I’m right on the nose, here. When’s the supposed wedding?”

Still beside me, Pete gasped. I pressed my lips to the top of her head again. “Not happening, Flower. The only one you’re marrying is me.”

“That a proposal?” she asked as if Brad wasn’t gaping at us and making strangled sounds. “I mean...it’s only been a minute and we haven’t really—”

“Yeah, it has only been a minute, but...will you marry me? I’ll get you a ring later.”

“Are you kidding me?” Brad yelled beside us. “Petunia, I have your ring, and you’re going to marry me.”

I ignored him. So did Pete as she looked up at me. “My Flower, in all my life, I’ve never met anyone like you. It’s like...I *know*. I knew it the moment I saw you. You’re my girl. The woman I want to be my wife. My light. My bear fighter.”

I thought that might bring a chuckle from her, but her happiness seeped from her face, instead. “But kids...”

My hand cupped her cheek, and I couldn’t help but kiss her pale lips. “I’m sure there are plenty of kids around who’d love to have parents to take them on adventures. Heck, kids who just want parents.”

“Mikaly...” She sagged into me, pulling me down to kiss her again.

“Petunia!” Brad yelled.

“Geez, dude, take the hint. She’s not marrying you, even if you’ve been spreading around that crap like manure,” a guy I didn’t know said. Judging from his firefighter uniform, I had to guess it was Jory. Not far from him stood Elvin, his arms crossed while he watched us.

Crap. Was there a rule against fraternization here?

“I’ll quit if I have to,” I blurted.

“What?” Pete asked, unaware of what I saw. She didn’t even seem to notice Jory hustling away an arguing Brad. I was sure we’d have to deal with that man later, though hopefully, we’d be married by then.

“You’re amazing at your job. If we can’t be together and still both work here, then I’ll quit.”

“Uh, let’s not jump the track here,” Elvin said, coming over to us. “Why would you quit? You just started.”

“I still need an assistant outdoorsman. And the lodge will still need a ski instructor,” Pete added.

“Is Pete that difficult?” my boss teased.

“I mean, I do want to kiss her all the time.” I glanced down at her, drawn once more but fighting the urge while I talked to Elvin.

“I can think of worse things,” Pete murmured.

“She’s amazing, though,” I continued. “The lodge is lucky to have her. You could get another head ski instructor, but she’s irreplaceable.”

“I guess I’m not following,” Elvin said.

“Me, either,” Pete added. “Thanks for the compliment, though.”

I kissed her cheek, unwilling to hide my affection for her. “I don’t know the lodge’s policy for coworkers being together.”

“Trust me when I say, I’d find myself in one of the many bedrooms that’s *not* mine if my wife even thought I’d try to break up two people in love. As long as your relationship doesn’t impact our guests, it’s fine with me.”

Disentangling myself from Pete, I stepped toward Elvin and held out my hand to him. “Thank you. We’ll be professional.”

He nodded, shaking my hand, then looked from one of us to the other, grinning. “Congratulations.”

Before either of us could say anything, he strode away. I didn’t doubt he was headed inside to find his wife.

I turned to Pete. “Will you? Marry me? If you need time to think about it—a few days. Months—I guess, I’m not going anywhere.”

She smiled, closing the space between us and wrapping her arms around me. “Yeah, I’m not going anywhere, either. Yes...” She took a deep breath. “I’ll marry you. Are we crazy?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe, we just know. Why wait when it’s right? We can have a long engagement, if you’re worried what people think, though.”

“Around here? You have no idea how many times we’re going to hear about Sweetville magic.”

Magic. Just knowing. Finding my soul mate. I didn’t care how people put it, as long as My Flower was mine. “How about late summer? Do you think that will be long enough?”

Her arms tightened. “Yeah. Maybe, too long, but I guess we’ll see.”

“I guess we will. I love you, Pete.”

“I love you, too. Now, let’s go shower. You owe me a date and some dancing.”

“And kissing.”

She turned her face up to mine again, going to her toes and inviting just that. “Yeah, lots of kissing.”

My mouth covered hers. For my love of Pete, how could I say no?

Epilogue



Pete

A year later

“This is a good idea,” Mikaly said, as we stood in knee-deep snow outside our tent. I wasn’t sure he meant it. We were in the same spot where we’d camped during that first polar bear excursion. It was super cold. This time, there hadn’t been a snowstorm, at least.

I hugged my arms around my husband. “We don’t have much alone time, so I thought—”

“We’d find it,” he finished. “We always will, just like we enjoy all our time with the kids.”

I believed him. Mikaly had an uncanny knack for being right. Not that this time was that much of a stretch. I knew he was right, too. Since even before we married six months ago, we’d always found ways to make magic. And to make a family.

It was completely unconventional and unusual, but we’d gotten a new place—a bigger place—and taken in all six of the kids who’d come to the lodge for camping the weekend after I met Mikaly. I knew it made possible because of my reputation with the home, as well as several influential people, including Elvin and Mikaly’s dad, pulling strings and greasing wheels.

We didn’t care. We had our boys, and they had us. Was it easy parenting six kids all aged twelve and thirteen? Nope. Did we make it happen and was everyone happy? Yes and most of the time. We were a family. And this weekend, they were staying with Elvin and Buttercup at the lodge, with my parents and Mikaly’s parents there to help.

Both sets of parents had become fast friends over the wedding preparations. Once mine got over the shock of me *not* marrying Brad, that was. When I sat down and explained

everything to them, they understood why I left. And my dad had been pissed. I couldn't be sad how things had gone, forcing me to leave Oregon. I'd met Mikaly.

Of course, Mikaly insisted we were destined and would have ended up together anyway.

I had to believe him.

Brad hadn't been down for it. When my dad fired him, he'd vandalized the business, doing thousands of dollars of damage and landing himself in jail. I'd felt awful but both Mikaly and my father told me over and over it wasn't my fault.

"Now that we're all alone, we can spend the weekend snuggling and making our own heat," Mikaly suggested. "It'll be better than last time. And we'll make so much noise, we'll scare away any early rising bears."

"Oh...I'm liking this even better," I said, ready to retire now.

"Oh," he echoed. "You're going to like it *a lot*, Flower"

"Yeah? I think you better prove it, Big Talker." I squealed when he swooped me up into his arms. His long strides ate up the distance to the tent. I kissed his neck. "This is what you signed up for when you married a woman like me."

Squatting, he unzipped the door and pushed me inside before following. "Smartest thing I ever did. Now, let's get warm, woman."

Want a heads up on my upcoming projects?

I'd love if you'd join me over on [*Brynn's Place*](#) on Facebook!

(Yep. I'm Brynn and Brynn is me).

Or join in on the fun and extras on [*Patreon*](#).

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Girl on a Beach Blanket

Guy with a Starfish Tattoo

Cherish Cove: The Wellston

Step Challenge

Finding His Love

Waiting For You

Cherish Cove: Home For the Holidays

Jingle Belle's Rock

Ex Scrooge Me

Loving St. Nix

Beast of Christmas Past

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Light My Fire

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Postcards in the Sand

Cuddle Up, Buttercup

Pants on Fire

No More Running

In Plain Sight

His Sugarplum Kisses

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Amaze Me

Something So Sweet

The Monster Misterys

Vampire Bait

Wife Bait

Monster Bait

**Not the Good Guy (with Kyra Nyx)
and Kuznetsov Mafia (only Brynn)**

Enforcer

Soldier

Room Fifteen: Making Her Obey

Empire

Wedded

Lawfully Wedded By Mistake

Unlawfully Wedded

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Tales Undone

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Falling for Forever

#Bridesmaid Again

Hunter

Chords

Rising Storm

Rush

Dare to Love

Half Past Normal

Billionaire's Bunny

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Weathering the Storm

Penalty Call

Switched Up

Merry Loves Bright

Daly Way

Belonging to Them

Plays Well With Others

Fill Her Up

One for the Team

Briar's Cowboys

Roped by the Team

His Old Kentucky Home

Eye of Her Storm

Santa Secret

Mad About Her Cowboys

Passing Through

Under Their Protection

Tradition Bound

On Your Knees

In His Chains

Chain Me Up

Hers to Obey

Circle of Three

Boy Toys

Tempting Tamera

Halloween Pleasure

Forgotten Forever

Cruentus Dragons

Dragons Blood

Blood Bought

Blood Mates

Taboo Wishes

Punished

Kidnap and Kink

Yuletide Greetings

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Dick Does Jane

Sybil Disobedience

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Billionaire's Christmas Cruise

Billionaire's Beautiful Runaway

Billionaire's Best Frienemy

North Springs

Stocking Full of Cole

Love Notes

Standalone Books

Gifted

Broken Perfection

Shirtless in New York

Farmer Takes a Wife

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Romero and Julian, a m/m romance

Holiday Bound, a m/m romance

Forbidden Reunion, a m/m romance

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Special Force

Wedding Jitters

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Grave Destiny

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Fallen for Her

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Ménage

Two Plus One

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Pride

Snows

Lynxed

Historical

Twice an Eternity (Dual time period story)

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In the Dark

Brynn Dark

Mine Every Night

Forbidden Obsession

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