

A romantic couple embracing in a mountain landscape. The man is on the left, smiling, wearing a white tank top and a blue denim shirt. The woman is on the right, looking at him, wearing a light blue button-down shirt. They are standing in front of a lake and mountains under a cloudy sky.

DANI  
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
COLLINS

*In Too Deep*

BOOK THREE  
BLUE SPRUCE  
*Lodge*

# *In Too Deep*

**A Blue Spruce Lodge Romance**

Dani Collins



In Too Deep

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The Blue Spruce Lodge series

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# Chapter One

“**I** HATE YOU.” Skylar’s voice was soaked in pubescent drama. “That word isn’t strong enough. *Hate.*”

“Well, maybe if you’d actually *attended* school, you would have a broader vocabulary.” Wren Snow didn’t even look at her niece as the tree-lined road that had wound up from the highway opened into the parking lot.

Blue Spruce Lodge loomed before them.

“It’s *ugly.*”

*You’re ugly.* It was the sort of comeback Sky had been throwing at her so often lately, Wren almost said it on reflex. She was above that, though. She’d been way more mature than Sky at twelve, not a bitter pill like this. No, she had put on her good-girl clothes, kept her grades up, never stayed out past eight, and malevolently plotted ways to murder people in their sleep.

*That’s* how you got through the growing pains of adolescence. Not by eviscerating the one person who gave a damn about you.

“There’s nothing even here!” Sky switched from hatred to panic and back to accusation. “Are you in the right place? ’Cause there was no mall in that town and you said there was a ski hill here. This is, like, the place people come to get killed in a horror movie.”

“I think the ski hill is...” Wren parked in a spot near the entrance that faced the lodge. She looked around, saw a handful of cars and a lane cast in shadow by the trees off the far end of the parking lot. “Nearby.”

All she could really see was the lodge—which wasn’t ugly. It was too big to be quaint, but it was charming in a Bavarian, gingerbread fairy tale way. The style was dated, but the

exterior was a welcoming, buttercup yellow with blue trim. It was the kind of place she would come for a girls' getaway if she had girlfriends, money and time.

"Oh my *Gawd*." Sky folded her arms and sank deeper into her seat. "Why would you even do this to me? I'm not doing it."

"Skylar." Wren squeezed the steering wheel and reached for the patience that was a thin, thin blanket. Tattered and worn with more holes than substance.

She tried not to be moved by the brightness coming into Sky's eyes, or the pearly knobs where the girl's knuckle bones gleamed on her tight fists, or the way Sky held her mouth in a flat line while her chin crinkled up beneath it.

The anger Skylar was throwing at her was a front. Inside she was terrified. *Wren* had been sick to her stomach for a month, ever since she had come here pretending she wanted a job and spilled beans that weren't the magic kind. More like worms out of a can. They were *everywhere*. Still squiggling.

Was she doing the right thing? She had no idea. She was twenty-four, way too young to be a parent to a kid this age, but Sky wouldn't stop asking for this. *Who is my dad? Why doesn't he want me?* It didn't matter how much that made Wren feel threatened, taken for granted, inadequate or unwanted. This had to happen.

"It's six months. If it doesn't work out, we go back to Utah for Christmas." That's why she had come here under the guise of interviewing for a job—so she could get a look at Sky's father and walk away if it didn't feel right.

Was this what 'right' felt like? No. But it felt necessary. Inevitable. Like the hard work needed to drag a sofa up a flight of stairs before you could sit on it and rest. Or like devoting yourself to your sister's kid even though you were a kid yourself.

"I'm not going to school here," Sky declared.



It was the third of June. Wren had pulled Sky out of school to make this move, partly to help out the lodge by arriving as soon as possible, partly thinking there was no point waiting for the end of the year since Sky hadn't been going to school in Utah, either.

Wren knew better than to have the go-to-school battle until she had to, though. Skylar had to complete and *pass* online courses before they would know what grade to enroll her in.

Maybe she would decide she liked home schooling and it would be a non-issue.

*Ha-ha-ha.* Seriously, if people knew what kind of comedian lurked inside this girl-next-door exterior, Wren bet she would have her own HBO special.

Biting back a sigh, Wren faced the battle she *did* have to have—getting the tween out of the car and into their new 'home.'

Taking the keys—because she wouldn't put it past Sky to steal her hatchback, drive it to California, and join a cult—Wren climbed from the car. She stretched, even though they hadn't been driving that long. They'd stayed Friday and Saturday in Butte, sharing a friend's pullout couch. Before that, she'd spent weeks of late nights packing or divesting everything they owned. It had been hard to pare down to necessities, but it was an exit strategy of sorts. If this didn't work out, they didn't have to go back to Utah. The world was their oyster.

Wren drew a deep breath of the clean mountain air, closing her eyes and letting the sunshine bathe her face. Construction noises sounded in the distance. Birdsong overlaid it with the pulse of rap music and a sudden, sharp whistle.

She opened her eyes and *Oh*. She started to flush with self-conscious heat even before she fully registered that Trigg Johansson was coming out of the lane and walking toward her. Her brain said, *Hot man alert*, then she recognized him and a

fresher, more startling rush of sexual awareness went through her.

Déjà vu all over again. *Damn it.*

When she had arrived here in May, he had been sitting in a small, open-topped ATV kind of vehicle right here where she was standing. He'd been talking to another man who'd given her a friendly nod.

She might have said, "Hi." She honestly couldn't remember because her brain had been exploding.

Trigg had given her a wolfish look that she had felt in the pit of her belly. She had recognized him, having stalked him online, but even as she had met his gaze with hysterical disbelief, her girl-parts had scanned the mouth-watering selection and ordered the full buffet.

That's why she had chickened out on speaking to him directly. She had gone inside, ears ringing with her pounding heart. He'd been gone when she walked outside again.

By then, she had secured a tentative job offer and the knowledge that her life would never be the same.

She had dreaded seeing him after that. Not just because she'd seen firsthand that he was a player. Of *course* he was a player. He had knocked up her sister when he was seventeen. He probably had a whole flock of Skylars out there.

But who could blame Mandy or any of the women he'd conquered? He was built like a god and moved like a cat, as though he knew how to use each of his muscles exactly as intended. He wore jeans and a T-shirt today and had light stubble the same color as his dark brows. His hair had been in a man-bun the last time she saw him. Today it was shaved into business on the sides, ruffled bedhead on top. His eyes were a sharp, mountain-lake blue, his smile flat and tense. Forced.

That vaguely hostile, hard expression made her heart slip and judder while her limbs felt loose and lubricated.

The way he had smiled at her the first time had been very inviting and approving.

The second time, when they'd all met in a lawyer's office for twenty minutes, he'd worn a suit and hadn't smiled at all.

She wasn't able to find a smile right now. She was standing here like a virgin on her wedding night, throat dry, waiting for him to come to her.

Something nudged her in the crotch, scaring the shit out of her.

"Oh my God!" She jerked back and clipped her hip on the driver's side mirror. Pain streaked through her hip bone while she scrabbled for balance by grasping at the warm roof of the car.

"Murphy. Sit." Trigg stopped behind her taillight and snapped his fingers by his thigh.

The dog let his haunches drop, but stayed in front of her, tail swirling like an electric beater, sweeping through bits of gravel on the concrete. His pink tongue lolled out of his black-lipped mouth and he cocked his head at her. His ears and face were black, but he had a white stripe that came down between his eyes. The stripe ended in speckles above his black nose. There were more speckles on his white chest and legs. Border collie and heeler maybe, with Labrador eyes that offered instant and eternal love.

"Quite the welcoming committee." She smoothed her hand down the short, silky fur on his hard head.

"We usually charge extra for that, but since you're a VIP..." Trigg shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. She could tell they were curled into fists. The mask of tension across his face bore an eerie resemblance to the one stonewalling in the passenger seat of her car.

His gaze took in her jeans and T-shirt, both clean this morning. Her sneakers could use an update, but keeping Sky in extra-curriculars had taken most of her disposable cash the

last few years. Anything to keep that kid out of trouble—not that it had worked.

Would this work? Would Sky magically turn into a polite, well-adjusted, academic teenager with ambitions beyond smoking cigarettes behind the mall?

Probably not, but Wren had to try. This was her last resort. *See what I did there?* Because the lodge was situated so deep in the mountains of Montana it felt like they were at the end of the earth. Last. Resort. Get it, Judd Apatow? *Why aren't you calling me?*

“Is...?” He sidled his gaze to the car.

“Nervous, I guess.” She knew exactly what she was doing with that dropped glove.

The passenger door flung open and Sky stood up to send her a how-dare-you glare across the roof of the hatchback.

At the sound, Murphy shot around the car, through the shrubs. Sky jolted with surprise and bent out of sight.

Wren looked back at Trigg and caught him giving the fit of her jeans an assessment. She waited for his gaze to come back and scowled a *Really?*

She didn't care how hot he was. This wasn't the time. Plus, he had had sex with her sister. His kid was *right there*. Remember? *Sailor?*

His mouth curled at one corner. “The dog slobbered on your leg.”

She looked down. *Fantastic.*



TRIGG DIDN'T APOLOGIZE for Murphy's lack of manners. If he started, he'd never stop. Besides, he could barely form words these days that weren't every shade of blue.

He'd had a month to get used to the idea that he had a kid, but he was still trying to wrap his brain around the reality of it.

A daughter. He was nowhere near ready for kids. He had a million other things to accomplish before ‘settling down.’ And *man*, did he hate that expression. *Settle down*. It made him feel trapped just thinking it.

She wasn’t a baby, either. Not a toddler or a tyke. A freaking twelve-year-old *girl*.

Why did she have to be a girl? Not that he thought it was more manly to produce a son. It was just too mind-bending to be the father of a girl with a face like an angel who was starting to grow into a woman’s body. From the time he’d been Sky’s age, when his balls had dropped and his stinger stood up, he’d been nothing but a bumbler to a flower. He *loved* girls and they loved him back.

Did he objectify them? He didn’t think so. Not on purpose. He was capable of platonic friendships. He trained and worked alongside women without harassing them. But flirting and charming were his go-to methods of communication. It wasn’t so much that he was forever on the prowl as making sure they knew he’d be receptive. If that meant he saw a lot of action, well that was a win-win, wasn’t it?

That’s what he’d been thinking the day he’d seen Wren arrive to interview. She’d stared him down as she walked past and if Nate’s granddad hadn’t needed help, Trigg would have shown her his medal collection upstairs.

He still thought Wren was cute as hell in a wholesome, mousy way. She wasn’t blonde or bubbly the way he recalled Mandy to be. Wren was a solemn brunette with a ponytail. Little wisps fell across her forehead and drew curved lines to her cheeks. Her mouth was a plump, round pout, her eyes slate gray. Her skin was gorgeous, like powder in the high country. The rest of her was neatly packaged on a five-five frame, feminine without being voluptuous. *Cute*.

She was nowhere near as harmless as she looked, though. Nope. She’d been planting a bomb that day. One that had started ticking that evening and went off a couple weeks later when the DNA results came back. It had blown off his legs,

forcing him to retire from competing. He was livid about that and knew he should blame his own dick, but blaming *her* felt infinitely better.

Would retiring be worth it? How could it be? His mother might have aspired to cookie-cutter fantasies when he'd been a kid, but they weren't that kind of family. You sure as shit didn't find your bliss by settling in any manner, especially by settling *down*.

"Is this your dog?" Sky straightened.

He realized he was staring at Wren's thighs again while she used a tissue to try to swipe the streak off her jeans.

"Yeah." He looked to Sky over the roof of the car and felt like the ground shifted. Her eyes were weirdly familiar. That was the first thing he'd noticed about her. It was like looking at old photos of his mom, when she'd been a stewardess. There was something in Sky's chin, too. It was strong, like his dad's had been.

"What's his name?"

"Murphy." King of the wingmen.

"I didn't know you had a dog." She looked at Wren as if this was information she should have been given.

"I didn't know, either," Wren said.

"You want some help bringing in your things?" Trigg asked.

"Sure." Wren came toward him, faltered, waited for him to step back even though there was plenty of room to get by.

Sexual awareness tingled through him.

Women reacted to him. He knew it and liked it. But this was not the time or place for his libido to twitch awake. He ignored the stir, dragged his gaze off her ass—which was sweet as a valentine and deserved to be admired if not fondled and stroked—and glared resentfully across the parking lot.

Wren opened the hatch, caught whatever nearly tumbled out, and glanced at him. The small space was stuffed with luggage, boxes, a bag full of bedding and a milk crate full of gaming stuff.

Trigg waited while she took the laptop bag then grabbed the two biggest bags.

Sky sent her aunt a glower as she reached into the back seat and shouldered a rainbow-colored backpack. She hugged a pillow and followed them on scuffling feet.

A handful of guests were in the lobby and dining room, but the lunch rush hadn't started and the lodge only had one floor open to guests. By this time next year, the resort he was developing with his brother would have summer activities like mountain bike trails and maybe a zip line. For now, most of the guests were contractors hired to construct buildings and install lifts. A lot of them arrived Monday and checked out on Friday, which made for quiet weekends.

Lina, one of the lodge employees, was behind the coffee bar. She eyed Wren as they passed, checking out the new manager.

The manager's suite was on the ground floor. Aside from the penthouse his brother Rolf was finishing for himself and Glory on the top floor, this was the only room with a kitchenette. There was also a small table with two chairs and his mother had crammed a love seat against the wall, facing the TV on the dresser.

As Trigg closed the door behind them, the one into the manager's office opened. Marvin came in beaming a smile brighter than the first day of summer. "You've arrived."

Trigg's mother had given Marvin quite the makeover in the last few months. Gone was the disheveled professor Trigg had met two years ago. He'd been replaced by a hotelier in a bespoke suit. Trigg liked the old fart either way—even though he was banging his mom.

Trigg had still been absorbing that the fifty-something pair were shacking up like teenagers when news of his blessed event with Sky had come along. Then there'd been a crisis with the resort and his abrupt retirement from the snowboard circuit. Trigg liked to think he rode the bumps like a pro, but he had a lot to deal with these days.

“Wren, it’s good to see you again.” Marvin shook her hand, warm and fatherly. “You must be Sky. I’m Marvin Cormer. Welcome to Blue Spruce Lodge.”

“Mr. Cormer owns Blue Spruce Lodge. He’s my new boss,” Wren explained to Sky.

“Marvin, please,” Marvin insisted. “I want you to feel at home. We’re one big happy family here.”

And people called *him* a dreamer, Trigg thought.

“Is this, like, a handicapped room or something?” Sky eyed the extra-wide door, brow quirking with pained dismay.

“We made this wheelchair accessible last month. It still needs to be fitted with a roll-in shower and lower sinks. We’ll remove this door into the manager’s office, too.”

Sky shifted her attention to the twin beds with a narrow night table between them. “I don’t get my own room?”

“It’s fine.” Wren smiled benignly.

“We’ve had a lot of discussions on how best to accommodate you,” Marvin said, clasping his hands in front of him and smiling his magnanimous smile.

They had, in fact, talked this shit to death. Deciding where Sky and Wren would sleep was the tip of the iceberg. How Sky’s existence affected Wikinger, which was the family corporation, and Whiskey Jack, the unfinished resort, along with Rolf and Glory’s upcoming wedding, had all been lengthy negotiations. Even whether to give Wren the manager job had been a freaking referendum. When his mother had started setting hard limits on whether she would be called ‘Grandma,’ Trigg had folded and walked away.



“We’ll work out alternate arrangements if you decide to stay into the new year,” Marvin said. “The lodge is fully booked for the wedding next month—”

“Who’s getting married?” Sky looked up from petting Murphy.

“My brother,” Trigg said.

“To my daughter,” Marvin added, shirt expanding with his swell of pride. “July fourth.”

It was a dumb day for a wedding. A Wednesday. But Glory wanted it and Rolf had backed her up. Trigg had since figured out it was the anniversary of their first shag. Glory was a romantic while Rolf was keeping his anniversary dates easy to remember.

“Hmmp.” Sky’s interest evaporated. “I thought it was, like, a celebrity or something, since they booked the whole hotel.”

*Nice one, kid.* Trigg made a mental note to repeat that to Rolf, the four-time Olympic gold medalist marrying the bestselling romance author.

“Several guests are quite famous. You can talk to your—” Marvin cleared his throat. “Um, Vivien, that is, Trigg’s mother.” Marvin glanced at Trigg the way Murphy had when he’d got his paw caught in his own collar.

“Mom thinks it should be Sky’s decision whether to tell people what’s going on.” Trigg squeezed the knotted muscles in the back of his neck, then gave the back of his head a quick scratch. It was freshly cut and still felt bristly and unfamiliar. Fucking meetings with the board. He and Rolf had been called on the carpet for firing Basco Construction, as if Wikinger wasn’t *their* company to run as they saw fit. Theirs to protect when they discovered a fox in the henhouse.

He brushed aside worrying about that right now, dropping his hand to his side.

“Mom said it’s a lot to get used to and we don’t need staff asking questions,” he explained. “That’s why we’re not all here to greet you. Mom thought that would be overwhelming. She wants you to come up for lunch where you can meet and talk in private.”

Mom wanted the home court advantage.

“That’s thoughtful. Thank you.” Wren turned a smile on Sky that said, *Isn’t that nice?*

Trigg didn’t know the definition of ‘baleful,’ but had a feeling that was what Sky sent back.

He wished he knew more about how all this had come about. Between shock and rearranging his life, Trigg hadn’t communicated much with Wren. Their lawyers had handled most of it and they’d only emailed about logistics.

He wanted to know, *Why now?* Why not years ago, when Mandy had died? Why hadn’t Mandy contacted him when she decided to have Sky? Wren had been on her own with Sky since she was nineteen. That must have been hard as hell.

Even so, Wren had been adamant that she wanted a job so she could continue supporting herself and her niece. That’s what the visit to the lawyer had been. A brief introduction of father and daughter along with signing paperwork that basically said Trigg could set aside his entire fortune for Sky if he wanted to, but Wren kept full custody. She would only accept a nominal monthly amount for child support.

Wren had been prepared to stay in Utah if Trigg didn’t want to get involved. She had also offered to find work in Haven, which was the town closest to the resort.

Sky wanted to get to know her dad, though. If Trigg had continued training and competing, he would have been gone more than he was here. Even working to rebuild the hill with Rolf was a lot of demanding hours. If Sky wanted to get to know him, living here at the lodge was their best opportunity.

Did he want to get to know her? From what Wren had said to Marvin last month, Sky had been ‘acting out.’ How? Did

Wren expect him to turn into a dad and sort that shit? Because she was barking up the wrong tree. He didn't know anything about being a parent and he'd been a hellion of a son.

He supposed he did want to know more about both of them, but this entire situation was so far beyond anything he knew how to deal with, something in him had locked down and wouldn't budge. He'd seen Rolf do this a thousand times and wanted to punch him every time, but here he was, digging in with all his strength, unable to soften, reach out, or bend. His ability to communicate had devolved into primitive grunts and barely restrained aggression.

"Vivien is organizing the wedding. She can tell you about the guest list." Marvin circled back to the topic that consumed everyone these days. Forget trying to build a resort or the fact Trigg had a kid. Did anyone have a color suggestion for the candle in the centerpieces?

"We're in room one-twenty," Marvin continued. "I'll let Vivien know you're here. But first, may I help with luggage?"

"That would be great. Thanks." Wren offered Marvin what looked like her first natural smile, jangled her keys and walked out.

Leaving Trigg alone with his kid.

## Chapter Two

SKYLAR DIDN'T LOOK at her 'dad.' She kept petting Murphy.

None of this was what she had expected. Auntie Wren had said a million times that there were no take-backs if she met her father. It was such a stupid thing to say, but she was starting to realize what she meant. She had cried last night, before Auntie Wren came to bed, and didn't know why. She thought it was because she missed her friends in Utah, but she didn't really care about them. She had just needed to cry, even though she should be happy to know who her dad was.

Auntie Wren should have told her who he was a long time ago. She had always said that he was a guy who her mom had met at a ski hill one time. *They were teenagers and had sex and it only took once. Remember that.*

Ugh. Lecture me some more. Please.

But Auntie Wren wouldn't tell her his name. Sky figured it was because Auntie Wren knew Sky would find him online and message him. Instead, Auntie Wren had pulled some sneaky bullshit last month and left Sky with Aunt Lydia while she came here for a job interview. Then she waited until they were home to say, *Your dad lives in Montana. I got a job there so we can live there and you can get to know him.*

Then it turned out her dad was super rich and a famous snowboarder. So, yeah, of course Sky said she wanted to come live in his hotel and ski for free. Who wouldn't?

But that's not how this was. She met her dad in some boring lawyer office that had been worse than a library—it was so quiet and filled with stuck-up people wearing glasses. Her dad wasn't lovey-dovey. He didn't say how happy he was that he had a kid. He looked serious and unthrilled. Auntie Wren had been all calm and nicey-nice the way Sky had seen

her when Sky came to the dentist office for a cleaning and heard a patient stand at the counter and rip Auntie Wren a new one about their bill. She never got mad or talked back. It was so gross to watch.

As soon as they left the lawyer's office, Sky had said she changed her mind and didn't want to do this.

*I just signed the papers, Auntie Wren said. I've already given up the apartment and quit my job.*

No take-backs.

Sky still felt sick about it.

At least he had Murphy. *He* was acting like he loved her on sight.

“What kind of dog is he?”

“No idea. He showed up beside my truck without a collar, looking hungry.”

She glanced at him. He looked like a robot. The *Terminator* kind.

“Auntie Wren wouldn't let us get a pet, except once we had a goldfish. It died the same weekend. She can't even keep a houseplant alive. She brought a poinsettia home from her work and it shriveled up right away.”

“She seems to have kept you alive.”

She scowled. Was he taking *her* side?

How could this be her *dad*? He wasn't much older than Tony, the guy who worked at the cell phone store in the mall. He had said she was pretty and asked how old she was. She had lied and said fourteen.

She had always known her dad was a year younger than her mom, but she had still pictured he would look like other dads, with a beer belly and going gray or bald. More like Marvin.

It was extra weird because even without knowing he was her dad, she had watched him on TV, doing tricks and jumps on his snowboard. She had thought Auntie Wren had a crush, taping to make sure she didn't miss him. After Auntie Wren told her who he was, Sky had looked him up and seen millions of photos and videos online. She'd listened to him talk about alley-oops and chicken salad and watched him sing the anthem on the podium. She had read about him being accused of smoking pot and there were a ton of comments from women who wanted to marry him and gay guys who wished he was bi.

Trigg Johansson wasn't *any* guy. He was a super star she had never expected to meet. And he was her *father*. She didn't know what to say to him.

She would if Auntie Wren hadn't kept him a secret. *Why?* Auntie Wren kept saying it was because Sky hadn't really asked about him, but that wasn't true. Sky had asked all the time. She didn't remember her mom and always wished she knew her dad.

Auntie Wren had made excuses.

The door opened and Auntie Wren came back with Marvin. They dropped a bunch more stuff on the table and the end of the bed.

That was another thing. Why had Auntie Wren sold all the furniture? Not that Sky's bed had been great. Everything had been secondhand, but Auntie Wren said if they wanted a fresh start after this, it would be a real fresh start.

"We can manage the rest," Wren said.

"I'll let Vivien know you'll be up soon," Marvin said.

He looked like a guy who would play an undertaker in a movie. Not a creepy one. The kind who tells a kid a secret about how the soul stays to listen to the music so their mom isn't really gone and everything will be okay.

"I'll meet you up there," *he* said as he left with Marvin. Was she supposed to call him 'Trigg'? What kind of name was

that, anyway? German? That's what his dad had been. His brother's name was even weirder. *Rolf*. Gag. Barf. Vomit.

The door closed and Auntie Wren let out a big breath.

"I want my mom's diary," Sky said. "The real one. Not the baby one."

"It's in my things. I'll find it as I unpack." She opened her suitcase on the bed, then opened a drawer.

"You know exactly where it is. I know when you're lying to me."

"Skylar. I said I would give it to you once we got here and I will. But we're supposed to meet..." She waved at the ceiling. "Can you wait until after lunch?"

"I know what you're doing. You're always telling me to ignore peer pressure and be careful guys don't take advantage of me, then *you* manipulate me."

"Skylar—"

"And you always say my name like that—*Skylar*—when you want me to shut up and do as I'm told."

Auntie Wren paused in dropping clothes into the drawer. "Very perceptive. That's exactly what I want."

"Well, fuck that." A jolt of power went through her. She had said 'shit' and 'damn' in front of Auntie Wren, but not that one. *Oh*, it felt good!

Auntie Wren didn't even blink. She only reached for another armload of clothes. "I don't care if you swear at me, but if you swear at other people around here, you're going to look like a spoiled brat. Your choice."

Skylar folded her arms. "Which is basically calling me a spoiled brat for swearing at *you*. I'm not stupid. Quit treating me like I am."

"Sky—" She cut it off and swung around to face her. "You are twelve years old. That sucks. I remember how much it sucks—"

Sky groaned at the ceiling. “Back in *my* day...”

“But this is what grown-up life *is*. This is why I put off telling you who he was. This doesn’t get undone. It stays exactly this uncomfortable until you figure out how to deal with it.”

“You didn’t want me to have a choice. You were afraid I would like him better than you and I *do*.”

Auntie Wren never got super mad. She got snappy sometimes and could lecture a person into a coma, but she never yelled and fought back. When she was actually mad, she put on *that* face. That blank nothing of a face and turned away to continue doing whatever she was doing. It was *so* annoying.

“I’m glad you like him. You must be eager to meet the rest of your family, too,” Auntie Wren said.

Sky wanted to yank her ponytail. Hard. Give it the biggest, hardest shake with all her strength. “I hate you *so much*.”

“That’s unfortunate because I love you.”

Seriously. *Hate*.



*IS THAT ALL you got?* That’s what Wren wanted to say.

Wren had grown a thick skin back when she was Sky’s age, surrounded by a clique of sixth graders who thought she was a bookworm freak who dressed funny. *You smell like a basement. Do you even know what a TV is?*

She had learned *very* young that it was best not to engage. Pretending you didn’t exist had been her best and only survival strategy. She still employed it.

Sky’s bitchy remarks stung, though. She used to be so full of love. She would tell Wren all the time that she loved her, out of the blue even. From two years old to eight, Sky had been a delight. They’d been best friends—which said everything about Wren’s upbringing that at sixteen, her best



friend had been her four-year-old niece, but still. So much love.

Things had started to get rocky when Wren had moved them out of her parents' house. Sky didn't seem to remember how tense things were there. All Sky remembered was that she'd had to change schools and it was Wren's fault.

By the time Sky turned ten, Wren had been going to the school to meet with the principal about bullying behavior. It hadn't shocked her that Sky was *not* the victim. Having been on the receiving end of that kind of thing made it all the more mortifying and difficult to accept. The school had been zero help, blaming Wren.

*Is this really the best arrangement? You seem awfully young to be raising a girl this age.*

They'd changed schools again.

That had coincided with Sky plumping up as puberty loomed. She'd been miserable and horribly down on herself. She started volleyball and other sports, made a few decent friends and slimmed down, more from a growth spurt than exercise, and had seemed happier for about a minute.

Then her quest for independence had started. She had expressed it in all the most challenging ways—cutting class, refusing to turn in assignments, hanging out with boys who were *way* too old for her. Like, illegal old. She'd only had two periods and barely had boobs, but guys in their twenties had started circling her—drug-dealing, predatory bastards.

Wren had been at the end of her rope when she had stalked Trigg *again* and saw there was a job opening at the lodge. Coming here last month, she had been desperate for anything, *anything*, to provide a glimmer of hope.

Of course, she was the villain again. Of course, she was. She had been at fault since Sky's conception. *Why didn't you know she left your room? You were supposed to be each other's chaperone.*

No more ski camps or other field trips after that.

But *whatever*. For the most part, Wren was as honest with her niece as was appropriate for her age. This *was* what life was—messy and hard. It was something you survived until it killed you. Sometimes there was cake to trick you into thinking the fight was worth it.

Would Vivien have cake? *Please have cake*, Wren silently pleaded as they went back to the lobby and climbed the carpeted stairs. Sunlight poured through the tall windows to add shine to the polished mahogany rails. Paintings on the wall showed landscapes that looked a lot like the surrounding area, but they were in unnatural colors of pink trees and orange mountains.

“Someone does drugs,” Sky commented.

They were strange, but interesting and compelling. This whole lodge was that way—it looked like a high-end hotel, but it had a warm, quirky vibe that drew her in and made her want to spend more time here.

When Wren had come last month, she hadn’t had any intention of actually working here. She had night-managed a small motel while getting her training for the dental office and knew this work was thankless.

Blue Spruce Lodge was different, though. It catered to upscale guests on vacation, not tired travelers looking for a cheap bed on their way through. The serene location in the wilderness beat the heck out of living in the city, working with patients who resented the cost of care they genuinely needed. In another life, she might have sought a job like this.

*You didn’t want me to have a choice.*

Sky’s accusation was way off base, yet managed to score a line against Wren’s heart anyway. Wren had never felt like she had much choice. When she had taken risks, they’d been big, heavy decisions that had overturned whatever safety and security she had managed to attain for herself. Or they’d been in Sky’s interest, not her own.

And yes, maybe that helped her justify keeping Sky to herself, rather than sharing her with the DNA that had fathered her. So what? She'd given Sky a pretty good life, not that Sky appreciated it.

She knocked on the door of room one-twenty.

Marvin welcomed them with a smile.

Trigg was there, standing by the window in the small living-dining area, arms crossed. His back was the inverted triangle that weakened every woman's knees in biological response to male strength. He had a really nice butt in jeans that cupped his muscled cheeks rather than drooping off his ass the way so many men wore them. They made his strong thighs look like tree trunks. Solid and touch-worthy.

Not that she wanted to caress his thighs. She was stress-ovulating or something. Deprivation had her in its grip. She hardly ever dated, especially lately. She was a normal woman who sometimes reacted to hot men. A late bloomer with a backlog of oats begging to be sown. *That's all.*

He turned and she averted her gaze to the saloon doors in an archway that partially hid the bedroom, but she felt his gaze linger on her cheeks. Her active imagination had her fearing he had read her thoughts and she grew hot. Blushed.

"This is nice," she said, forcing herself to scan the suite. It didn't feel like a hotel in here. It was homey with family photos and furniture that looked like it had been chosen with care, nothing made in bulk. It smelled like potpourri and exotic food.

A woman of fifty-something rose from the love seat and smiled, but in a way that was a polite welcome to strangers, not like a grandma whose favorite grandchild had just arrived.

Not that Wren knew what *that* looked like, but she had hoped for something like it for Sky.

"Vivien." Marvin set his hand behind the woman's shoulder. "This is Skylar and her aunt, Wren."

Vivien's handshake was a firm grasp in a cool, but ultra-soft hand. She wore flashy rings that Wren imagined were real gemstones, not costume. Her hair was white blonde and cut in a sophisticated, windswept style that perfectly framed her elegantly made-up face. She was tall and trim and wore crisp navy-blue slacks with a coral sweater that had a neckline low enough to reveal the chain of intricate links and sparkling stones hanging into her cleavage.

She didn't look like anyone's grandmother. She looked like she edited a fashion magazine. Wren had the feeling that was exactly what she intended.

"This has been such a surprise. But a good one," Vivien said.

What an obvious prevarication.

Vivien kept most of her focus on Sky. Her sharp blue eyes took in Sky's sullen expression, her sloppy hoodie with the homemade thumbholes in the cuffs, and the jeans with the mechanically distressed threadbare patches down the tops of her thighs.

"It's nice to meet you," Wren said, nudging Sky.

"Hi," Sky mumbled.

Vivien's smile didn't falter, but what little warmth that had existed in her smile frosted over with dismay.

Wren glanced at Trigg, hoping for intervention or guidance.

She caught him looking straight at her. His gaze skipped away when hers met his.

Her heart swooped in the same direction, bouncing off the window like a bird, then sat there stunned. Why? She didn't care if he was looking at her or what he was thinking.

What *had* he been thinking?

*The dog slobbered on your leg.*

Ugh. She wasn't going there again.

Even so, the heat of sexual awareness trickled through her in a relentless stream, heavily laced with annoyance at herself for feeling like this.

“Let’s sit,” Vivien invited. “The chef is test-driving menu items for the wedding. You can tell me what you think. There’s a lot to talk about, but where to start?”

“Indeed.” Marvin held Vivien’s chair.

Trigg moved to hold a chair for Wren, which had never been done for her. It made her feel awkward and clumsy.

Sky sent her a WTF look as she went to the chairs on the far side of the table and pulled one out for herself. After a brief pause where Trigg seemed to weigh his options, he took the seat next to Wren’s.

“Glory wants us to start without her,” Marvin said. “She’ll join us as soon as she can. She wants to walk down to the base with you.”

They knew what they were doing after lunch, then. Wren didn’t look at Sky, but felt her glare like an infrared lamp set an inch off her face.

The food was intricate and intriguing. There were little ramekins with a couple of bites of chicken, a julienne of red pepper and a leaf of cilantro. Also pastry shells with a fat prawn on top of some kind of slaw, salmon mousse piped onto black crackers, stuffed cherry tomatoes—seriously, who had time to stuff something that small with a dollop of cream cheese? Fine for a half-dozen people, but there would be two hundred at the wedding. Was the chef serious?

She helped herself to one of everything, even the sushi roll made with purple rice.

“Skylar, we’ve been discussing ways to keep you amused this summer while your aunt and, uh, Trigg are working,” Marvin said. “What sort of things do you enjoy?”

Sky shrugged. “The mall.”

“Sky has make-up classes she’ll be doing online,” Wren said.

Sky widened her eyes, appalled.

*What?* Wren sent back. *It’s true.*

Trigg’s arm brushed hers, making a *zing* go through her sharp enough that Wren jerked away. He was a lefty and she was righty. Their elbows were dueling.

Now his sleeve of tattoos drew her attention. They were nature scenes with waterfalls and evergreen trees and mountains. He smelled like fresh air and earth and cedar with a hint of something even more elemental. Something masculine and potent.

She *so* didn’t want to be this attuned to him, but couldn’t help it when the only sound was everyone trying to swallow tension. She would probably feel the heat off his body if she wasn’t throwing off her own premature hot flash of anxiety.

“These are excellent,” Wren said of a crab cake, trying to force normalcy. “All of this food is really beautiful.”

Sky was cautiously nibbling the point off a samosa. She had one spiral sandwich on her plate and a look of mistrust on her face.

“Jacques arrived a week ago to stay through the wedding and elevate our menu for the summer. We’re hoping he’ll stay into the winter. We have two very competent cooks, but the lunch and evening fare needs to meet the expectations of the clientele we intend to attract.”

“I can’t imagine what a job it’s been to plan such a big wedding.”

“Amid ongoing renovations,” Marvin interjected.

“At the time, we thought July would be Trigg’s only opportunity to attend. Rolf and Glory didn’t want to wait, either. Rolf is Trigg’s older brother,” Vivien informed Sky.

Sky met Vivien’s direct gaze. “I know.”

They held the stare. And held it.

Wren said, “Marvin mentioned you’re not expecting Sky to call you ‘Grandma.’ What would you prefer?”

“Vivien.” Vivien cut a cherry tomato in half and left one side on her plate while she ate the other. “Of course.”

“And...?” Wren looked at Trigg. Damn, he was close. His shoulders and chest and bare biceps filled up her vision, eclipsing Marvin and everything else on that side of the room. Everything, really. He was a lot of powerful man sitting there reeking sex appeal all over the place.

“Trigg?” he suggested, voice dry, and he held her gaze long enough for it to make her chest feel tight.

What a freaking nightmare. She jerked her gaze back to Sky.

Sky flicked her gaze to each face in turn, then looked at her mostly untouched plate.

Wren bit back a sigh. Sky didn’t have her ability to withstand hostile undercurrents strong as a riptide. That was a good thing. The only way to develop the muscles to endure this level of examination and judgment was to spend years living it.

She felt sorry for her niece anyway. *I tried to spare you*, she telegraphed.

“This is quite a change from being a dental receptionist,” Vivien remarked. “Are you looking forward to something new?” Vivien slid a morsel of chicken into her mouth.

Wren knew when she was being weighed and measured and found lacking. Her passive-aggressive streak gathered itself. Two of the dentists in her office had *cried* when she left. The one she detested had offered to double her salary. She made herself reliable and indispensable out of spite and she never let anyone see her suffer.

“The work isn’t that different. Clients in both situations want their experience to be painless and professional. I’ll do

my part to facilitate that.” She turned to Marvin. “I read online that the resort will be a training facility for elite athletes, but I wasn’t clear on whether you owned the lodge before the Johanssons began rebuilding it?”

His gray brows were bushy and expressive, an entertainment all on their own as they quirked into delight at being pulled into the conversation.

“Trigg brought me aboard. Glory and I lived in Seattle. My wife had recently passed when I met Trigg. He said he had plans for this hill, but needed someone to take on the lodge. I had always wanted to run a bed and breakfast. Glory and I came out a year ago January. We’ve come a long way since, haven’t we?”

Trigg responded with a little snort under his breath.

“I came out last summer,” Vivien said. “I thought this was a whim on the boys’ part, but realized they were putting down roots so I took up residence as well.”

Boys? The man beside her was going to tear through his skin like a werewolf, he was so much compacted virility and testosterone.

“I hadn’t worked in years,” Vivien continued. “But I’ve discovered how nice it is to stay busy and contribute.” She smiled at Marvin. “It turns out we make a good team.”

“We do.” Marvin returned her smile with one that was tender and sincere and self-conscious, which was a sweet way of revealing exactly how deep his feelings went.

Vivien’s expression remained more composed, which made Wren wonder how such a nice man had wound up with such a prickly woman, but her heart went, *Awww* anyway.

Sky caught her eye with a half-lidded *Can we go?* stare.

Wren dropped her gaze to Sky’s plate. *Eat.*

Scrambled footsteps sounded right before there was a knock on the exterior door. It opened before Marvin had set his hands next to his plate to rise.



“No, you have to stay outside,” a woman said as she weaseled through the crack. “Sit. Stay.” She finished her slither and closed the door with a big exhalation.

Wren recognized Glory from her author photo, but rather than wearing coiffed spirals of reddish-blond hair, she wore it in a thick ponytail of frizz at the nape of her neck. She wasn't wearing makeup and wrinkled her freckled nose as she spoke to Trigg.

“I thought you'd be finished eating so I brought him to walk with us.”

“We're almost done.” Trigg's plate was empty and Wren only had a couple of bites left. Sky's was still mostly untouched.

“Hi. I'm Glory.” She came across with a big smile and offered her hand.

Wren stood to shake. “Wren. My niece, Sky.”

Sky didn't get up. She only lifted her eyes. “Hi.”

Glory took that in without reaction and pulled out the chair next to Sky. “I'm sorry I took so long. I have to get my word count in or I'll be writing on my honeymoon. That won't go over well at all.” She skimmed her gaze over the food and popped a cherry tomato into her mouth, then bit into a samosa and set it on her plate. “This all looks great, Vivien.” She set a plastic container with a lid next to her plate. “I promised I'd deliver some for the big guy. Don't even,” she said with a warning point at Trigg.

He lifted negligent brows. “Has to keep up his strength. I get it.”

Glory rolled her eyes and started loading the container. “Are you two settling in okay? Sorry about the twin beds. Once we get the wedding over with, we can figure out something better. The staff housing should be finished by the wedding—*has* to be,” she corrected. “It'll be bedrooms with a communal kitchen and living room, but if you decide that works better for you—Do you not like those?” Glory pointed

at the sandwich on Sky's plate. "Tell me now because I'm not paying for food that people won't eat."

"You're the only person *not* paying for this wedding."

"Trigg," Vivien scolded.

Glory narrowed her eyes at him, but didn't seem offended. She made a face of remorse at Wren. "I'll apologize now for the wedding. Coming here has to be such a big deal for you both. Things would be chaotic enough if it was just a new job. Or just a renovation. The wedding puts it over the top. We're *consumed*. I would have eloped. Dad's the one who insisted on a big wedding."

"I have one daughter. I want to give you away."

"The surprise is that anyone would take you," Trigg drawled. "Rolf's never backed down from a challenge, though."

Glory opened her mouth and leaned in, but thought better of whatever she'd been about to say.

"Yes?" Trigg prompted.

"Nothing," she said sweetly. "Is everyone done? I'm dying for a walk and Rolf has already texted he's ready to eat his own arm."



GLORY WASN'T BITING these days and it was starting to piss him off. It was like she felt sorry for him or something. Like she didn't think he could handle a few sharp retorts. It was actually worse than if she had made some comeback about his failure as a father, which was what Trigg expected.

He would prefer to get the ribbing over with, actually, but his mother wanted to keep all of this under the rug. He supposed that was the fair thing for Sky, but it was one more thing that grated, putting him in a surly mood.

Which had everyone giving him a wide berth.

They left through the exterior door. His mom and Marvin stayed back. Being outside didn't make Trigg feel any less claustrophobic, though.

Glory led them to the stairs that descended from the back of the building. When they reached the bottom, Murphy bounded across from the staff housing. The building was a hive, doors and windows open, music playing over the sound of power saws and drills. Half the crew was with Roadside Renovations, the company renovating the lodge. Some of the lodge's housekeeping and other staff had been promised a cut-rate on rent if they helped with painting and other finishing work, though. The place gave off a frat-house vibe that was very much Trigg's usual jam.

Except he was too pissy to party. Too many things on his mind. This was real. His daughter was here, right beside him.

Glory pointed out the path that went around the pond. "You can also go up that slope and get over to the ski hill, but make sure you talk to the guys before you go, in case they're felling trees or something."

The women went single file ahead of him down the path below the deck that overlooked the pond. Glory was in the lead and waited for Wren and Sky to come even with her before starting down the lane to the base. Trigg whistled Murphy to his side.

"I read your book," Wren said to Glory. "I felt like a stalker since I got it purely out of curiosity about the lodge, but I really liked it. The free one of your mom's was good, too. I haven't had much time to read since, with the move and everything."

"I have tons you can borrow. What do you like, Sky?"

Sky shrugged.

Glory left a space of silence to invite her to say more. She didn't.

"Well, there's a shelf in the lobby that I've stocked for guests. You'll find some Young Adult titles there. Help

yourself.”

No response.

Wren said, “Thank you.”

Glory let herself fall back a half step so she could send Trigg a raised-brow look behind Wren and Sky’s backs.

Trigg twitched a shoulder, not knowing what to make of them, either. His mom had her work cut out for her, teaching that girl her manners. He didn’t know what Wren did with herself all day, letting Sky get away with that attitude. He’d always been a provocative little shit, but his mother *always* made sure he knew when to clean it up.

“Where’s your stick? Get your stick,” Glory said to Murphy.

The dog shot into the bushes.

“Hey, Sky. I realize you’re too young to get a job, but I have to assemble the welcome baskets for all the rooms for the wedding,” Glory said. “If you want to help, I’ll pay you.”

Sky’s bony shoulder came up a half inch.

Trigg wanted to say, *Come on. Smarten up.*

Wren said, “Getting her school year finished is the priority, but if she has time outside of that, it would be great for her to make some pocket money.”

Sky swung a glower at Wren.

Wren had a look on her face he couldn’t interpret. Not stony or angry or taking control or smug. Kind of trance-like. He almost wanted to play poker with her, but feared he’d lose his shirt.

Strip poke? *Hell, yeah.*

*Shut up, dickhead.*

Glory shoulder-checked him, startling him out of his fantasy. “Did you hear what I just said? That *I* would pay her.”

“What a hero, paying slave wages for child labor.”

She kept her attention on him, smiling with rueful sympathy, making him want to shoulder-check her into the ditch.

“I never had a sister, but if I did, I would want her to be nothing like you,” Trigg said.

Glory let him have that one, too. *Come on. Fight me.*

A truck passed them, forcing them to single-file along the edge of the lane. A minute later, they reached the base. What had been an overgrown clearing with a pile of avalanche debris eighteen months ago was now the heart of Whiskey Jack Ski Resort. Four buildings were in progress along with one of the lift lines.

“Busy place for a Sunday,” Wren commented.

“We had to fire our contractor last month. Took some time to hire all the new ones. We’re working weekends to make up for lost time.” And the board was shitting bricks, screaming at them to pump the brakes on all of this.

“If you see anything with the name Basco Construction on it, a truck or a hard hat or an invoice, *anything*, make sure to tell one of the guys right away,” Glory said. “The police haven’t been able to prove it, but it looks like he’s behind a bunch of vandalism and thefts.”

“Why? To make more work for himself?”

“Hard to say what his motive was, since he denies it,” Glory said, “but his helicopter pilot was selling the stolen equipment. He said his boss told him to do it and Rolf immediately pulled the pin on working with him. Rolf is hiring anyone who wants to burn their bridges with Basco, but he’s had to bring in out-of-towners to fill in gaps. People are *tense*. Which is exactly what we need with everything else going on.” Glory blew out an exasperated breath.

Wren glanced at him as though measuring how much of his tension was attributed to that mess. About a fifth, he wanted to say. The rest was all her and her niece.

“The board is pushing Rolf to cut our losses and sell the mountain,” he said instead.

“The board represents the shareholders in Wikinger,” Glory explained. “Rolf is the president and Rolf and Trigg own it, but the board can vote to remove Rolf if they think he’s not running things in the shareholders’ best interest.”

“Profit,” Trigg clarified. “No fu—freaking vision.” He caught himself at the last second.

Wren bit the corner of her mouth.

Trigg whistled for Murphy to heel and they crossed toward the office trailer, which was bursting at the seams as they continued to man-up without having enough desks or space. He had moved in with Rolf, which was like putting a pair of male Siamese fighting fish in the same bowl, but he hated when Rolf made decisions without his input. This way he was there for all the conversations, big or small.

Beneath the open-sided tent that had been their office last year, a foreman was looking over drawings with the operator hired to clear and level what would be their lower parking lot.

Inside the trailer, Chivonne, their project coordinator, was setting out safety vests and orientation supplies for the college students starting as general labor in the morning.

Nate, their project manager, put in twelve-to-sixteen-hour days most of the week, but Sundays belonged to his son, so his desk was empty.

Was Trigg supposed to spend weekends with Sky now, he wondered?

“Chivonne, this is Wren,” Glory said. “Our new manager at the lodge. This is her niece, Skylar. We’re showing them what’s going on here before Wren starts tomorrow.”

Glory had agreed a cover story was the sensitive way to proceed. Rolf wanted to wait for better timing to inform the board that Trigg’s past was catching up to him, given they’d birthed a cow when their star athlete announced he was

quitting his sport right before the World Cup, where he inevitably drew a huge, positive spotlight onto Wikinger.

The board loved their celebrity owners. The pressure to sell this land had eased right off when both Rolf and Trigg had swept the podiums in Vancouver, three Olympics ago. Sales of Wikinger equipment had skyrocketed and the board had fully expected that streak to continue indefinitely. Or at least until Trigg suffered a career-ending injury.

Instead, he had quit in his prime, ostensibly to help with the hill construction, which did nothing for their enthusiasm for this project. Things were going to get really tricky when he tarnished the company name with the real reason—his teen pregnancy scandal.

Trigg had never given a damn what anyone thought of him, but supposed the current secrecy was better than being labeled a deadbeat dad who hadn't been considered good enough to even know he had a kid.



WHAT FRESH HELL is this?

Sky trailed behind the adults from the main area into a smaller room crowded with two desks and crap everywhere. She glanced over the machine parts and file folders and tools and dirty boots and rolled up drawings and loose computer cables. The windows were closed except for one that held an air conditioner that was rattling and blowing cold air. The air was still stuffy, especially when Trigg reached past her to close the door.

This day was starting to feel like one of those dumb field trips where you rode a school bus for two hours so you could learn how they churned butter in the olden days. She was bored and wished the dog had come in, but he had gone to an oversized pillow in the main room. The one person who looked remotely cool and close to her age had said she was leaving to check something called ‘the operations building.’

A man as big as Trigg, maybe bigger, stood up from behind his desk. Uncle Barf. She had seen photos and videos of him. In most of them, he was talking German. They both had stubbly beards, but his hair was darker than Trigg's, his eyes brown instead of blue. Auntie Wren had said that him and Trigg had the same dad, but Rolf's mom had died, then his dad married Vivien.

Sky hadn't liked Vivien and got the feeling it was mutual. She seemed really judgy. At least she didn't want to be called 'Grandma,' or worse, 'Nana.' Whenever Auntie Wren used to take her to have lunch with Nana, Sky had had to use super good manners and kiss her cheek and act like it was every kid's dream to get a picture book of Bible stories written for a five-year-old.

"*Danke,*" Rolf said when Glory handed him the container of food. He set it on the edge of his desk and shook Auntie Wren's hand. Once. "Nice to meet you," he said in a voice that sounded like he ordered men in the army. He held out his hand to her.

Sky knew she was going to get a lecture about how rude she was being. She didn't care. She didn't want to be here, but something in the way Barf put out his hand and looked her in the eye made her put out hers.

She wasn't prepared for how firmly he would shake it. Her hand felt squished and she felt a snap in her shoulder. Not painful, but a lot like when she bumped her funny bone. She cradled her elbow and glared at him when he let go, then couldn't hold his stare and looked away first. She decided she hated him, too.

She had lied to Auntie Wren when she had said she liked Trigg better. She liked his dog. That was the only thing she liked about him or any of this. Glory reminded her of Marvin, like she was being extra nice because she felt sorry for her, which made Sky not like her much, either.

She wouldn't be staying. When she had told Tony at the mall that she had to move, he had said, *No, you don't.* She



wished she had listened, but Auntie Wren had bribed her with her mom's diary. Sky was dying to read it. She wasn't sure why. Maybe because Auntie Wren had tried saying, *When you're older*. Like it was a restricted movie. That made her think it was full of family secrets or sex.

Maybe she just wanted to know more about her mom. Did Auntie Wren ever think of that?

Trigg was pointing at a poster on the wall, talking about the ski hill. It was a map of the mountains and he was showing where they were putting all the buildings and chairlifts. Blah, blah, whatever.

"We're trying to purchase this old gravel pit and put a road in from town. It would cut the drive by thirty minutes and give us better access to the new parking lot. The owner has been refusing offers for years, most of them from Dirk Basco. We're hoping that our firing him plays in our favor."

"Why does he want it? For the gravel?" Auntie Wren asked, like anyone in the world gave a care.

"He wants to develop this whole hillside with housing."

Sky was glad she heard that bit about the shorter path to town, though. She had mostly been listening to Rolf and Glory behind her. They were talking in low voices about the food and how late he was going to work and that Glory was going into town tomorrow if he needed her to pick up anything.

Sky suddenly realized Auntie Wren and Trigg were staring at her.

"What?" she asked.

"There was a program at school the last few years." Auntie Wren seemed to be answering for her. "She went to a local hill every second Wednesday. You wound up trying both, didn't you? Skiing and snowboarding."

Is that what he'd asked her? She shrugged. "Yeah."

"And?" Trigg asked.

Sky looked to Auntie Wren, not sure what he was asking.

“Don’t put her on the spot like that,” Glory said. “Whichever one you like better is *fine*, Sky.”

She knew that, but if she had to choose... “Skiing,” she said.

She had hated waiting for her friends when she’d been on skis and they’d been boarding. She had tried snowboarding, but she hated having to clip and unclip every time they rode the chairlift. She wanted to get off and *go*. Not that she’d ever been allowed to. *Stay with the group. Stay on the green runs.* Like she was a kindergartner and had to hold onto a rope. So annoying.

A female voice came through a radio on the desk. “Rolf?”

He picked it up and pressed a button. “Go for Rolf.”

“Electrician is heading into your office. Are you free to come over?”

“Be there in five.” He set down the radio and said to Trigg, “Planning the outlets. You’re tied up the rest of the day?”

“I’ll do mine tomorrow,” Trigg said.

“Please.” Auntie Wren held up a hand. “Don’t let us keep you. We’ll settle in. Adjust to the altitude.”

“I’ll walk them back, give them a tour of the lodge,” Glory said, going on tiptoe to give Rolf a kiss.

Sky averted her eyes, more interested in the map, but *ugh*. It sounded like someone sucking an ice cube.

“Take the dog,” Trigg said as Glory headed toward the door.

She rolled her eyes and opened the door. Murphy stood up from his mat. When she patted her thigh, Murphy hurried out with them.



THE DOOR CLOSED and Trigg let out his breath. He took his safety vest off the hook and shrugged into it while Rolf did the same.

Rolf wasn't a big talker, but the fact he took his time clipping on his radio, then opened his lunch to peruse what Glory had brought him, annoyed Trigg.

"Well?" he prompted. For some damned reason he needed to know what his brother thought of them.

"Marvin was right. She has Vivien's eyes."

"That's it?"

"I hope Wren works out because Glory is stretched as thin as we are."

"Yeah, yeah, and don't sleep with her. I got that memo." He was too angry with her to want her in his bed, heart-shaped ass notwithstanding.

Rolf bit into a samosa. Eyed Trigg.

Trigg braced himself. Rolf gave him shit *all the time*. But from the moment Trigg had stood in this room two weeks ago and told his brother he had a kid, Rolf had kept his opinions to himself. Mostly he asked questions. *Are you sure she's yours? Does the aunt want a piece of Wiking? What are you going to do?*

All legitimate questions, but no browbeating, which was out of character. Rolf never held back. If he was angry, if he thought Trigg had fucked up, he damned well made sure Trigg knew it.

Today, it seemed, he finally had an opinion.

"What?" Trigg said flatly.

Rolf shrugged. "Seems to me you had one job. Keep her off the poles."

"Really?" Trigg didn't care if Sky preferred skis over boarding. Much. Okay, it galled him. Especially because it pleased this smug bastard. "Don't quit your day job."

Rolf's mouth twitched.

Trigg tried to knock Rolf's lunch out of his hand as they left. Rolf blocked him with an elbow, but Trigg's mood came up a notch.

## Chapter Three

“**R**OLF COMES ACROSS as Billy Goat Gruff, but don’t let him scare you. He’s a big ol’ softy inside,” Glory said.

Wren thought both men looked like hired killers, but kept her opinion to herself.

“This is quite an undertaking,” she said instead. The amount of activity around the construction trailer and up the hill was even more overwhelming than what was going on at the lodge.

“It is.” Glory made the dog sit and they all waited for a truck to amble by before she threw a stick toward the lane that led back to the lodge. Murphy raced after it. “Summers are extra busy because we have to get as much done as we can before it starts to snow again. Then the wedding.” She rolled her eyes.

Murphy came back to drop the stick in front of Sky.

Glory nodded and advised, “Throw it to the side in case a car comes.”

Sky threw it and Murphy took off. Sky wiped her fingers on her jeans.

“Your coming here is—well, a huge surprise. Obviously. But it’s worked out well that Trigg has retired from competing to work with Rolf. Trigg was the one who pushed for this resort and was mad that Rolf was taking the lead. Now he’s part of it, not coming back to whatever decisions Rolf made. Those two *are* billy goats.” She knocked her fists together.

Murphy came back and dropped the stick in front of Glory.

“There’s a new sucker in town,” she told the dog, nodding at Sky.

Murphy kept his head low, his body ready, watchful.

Glory sighed, picked up the stick and offered it to Sky. Sky threw it and Murphy took off again.

“It’s kind of ironic, but—And I’m only telling you this because Trigg pretty much told me the first day we met. It’s also online if you dig around the gossip sites, so not exactly a secret. When Vivien married Rolf’s dad, it wasn’t even a year after Rolf’s mom died. Trigg was already three.”

Sky looked to Wren. She shook her head. She hadn’t known, either.

“So Rolf is taking this in stride. Kind of been here, done this. I’m telling you because you’re bound to see those two fighting at some point. Trust me, it’ll be over something macho and stupid, not you. Rolf is the most unfreaked-out. Dad is the most nervous and giddy,” Glory confided to Sky. “I will pay you real money to call him Grandpa and buy me a few years before I have to make babies. Kidding, but not really.”

“Marvin was really nice to me the day I came,” Wren said. She had instinctively liked him and confided that Sky was Trigg’s before she had realized she intended to.

“Yeah, Dad’s easy to talk to. Everyone loves him. And Vivien is quite sweet, once you get to know her. If she seems standoffish, it’s because of the age thing. She’ll come around.”

Murphy came back and dropped his stick in front of Wren.

Sky stole it and threw it.

“As for Trigg...” Glory wrinkled her nose. “If he seems distant right now, it’s because this is a lot to process. I’m sure it is for you, too. All of this will take time. We all know that. I’m happy to be a sounding board if either of you need one.”

“Thank you,” Wren murmured, appreciating that Glory was trying to smooth this over and extend herself, but Wren had never been one to form deep friendships. The only reason Lydia knew so much about her was because Mandy had confided in her through high school. Lydia had been Mandy’s

best friend and was still a good friend, looking out for Mandy's baby by checking in regularly with Wren.

They arrived at the lodge and Glory took them up to the patio where a pair of guests were enjoying a drink at a table overlooking the pond. The doors to the lounge had been pushed back so the lounge was open to the outside. In the far corner inside, a diorama of the ski resort showed what the hill would look like on opening day.

"Fingers crossed," Glory said, doing it with both hands, before waving at the bar where a young man was busy prepping for the evening. "Do you have your bartender's license?" she asked Wren.

"I have a piece of paper that says I'm allowed to pour alcohol." Wren had applied for it between accepting this job and arriving here. "I've never actually mixed drinks."

"It's mostly draft beer and house wine. We'll get you trained. How about coffee?" They walked around the curved horseshoe of the bar to where it became an espresso station in the dining room.

"I worked as a barista after school through high school."

"You poor thing. I did it for six months and couldn't drink coffee for three years."

Wren had saved her resentment for her peers on the customer side of the coffeehouse, who had never invited her to join them. The other aggravation had been working for tips since her wages had gone to her father, to help pay bills.

Glory pointed out a hole in the wall where a take-out window was being installed so people could grab coffee and breakfast sandwiches without coming all the way into the dining room. Then Glory issued Wren and Sky a food card and told her what times they could get buffet service before she walked them through the dining room to a pantry.

"This was my office when we first got here. Vivien wants to turn it into a gift shop, but we need it for storage." The shelves were stuffed with dishes and cases of toothpicks and

extra condiments. “Let her know if you see a good place to put the shop. Right now we have one of those vending machines at the end of the hall for incidentals like toothpaste and aspirin. It’s in the way and doesn’t hold everything we need. We all hate it.”

They briefly met the kitchen staff as they went through it. Glory showed them the basement storage and the laundry and gym, telling them to use the equipment whenever they wanted, so long as they signed in and out.

“I won’t drag you all the way to the top floor, but if you need anything, we’re in three-oh-one. Same extension if you want to phone me.” She told them how to reach Trigg, then walked them back to their apartment. “Dad usually runs the bar in the evenings. Vivien likes to have a glass of wine and check in with the guests. We don’t have a dinner hour for family. We come down for meals when it suits and sit together if we happen to be here at the same time.”

Glory asked if she could help with unpacking, but Wren assured her they were fine and closed her out, desperate to relax.

“I want my mom’s diary,” Sky said behind her.

Wren sighed.



*Dear Diary...*

“Why are there no dates?” Sky flicked the pages back and forth. There wasn’t much here, just a few pages.

Auntie Wren shrugged. “She never wrote the dates. It starts just before I was born.”

Sky slouched deeper into the corner of the love seat and started reading the childish handwriting.



Dear Diary,



Mrs. Claude who is the nurse at school gave me this notebook today. She said writing about my feelings might help me feel better. My feelings are that this is stupid. I don't know how writing about something can make you feel better. I feel sad. I miss Neil and writing about it won't make him come back.

Shut up and go away diary.

Dear Diary,

Mrs. Claude said again how it's okay to feel sad or mad. I was mad that I had to sit in her stupid office when everyone was playing dodge ball. I told her I was writing every day. I thought she might ask me to show her, but she didn't. I feel bad that I lied, so I'm writing, but I still don't see how writing about Neil would make me feel better.

Dear Diary,

Even though Mrs. Claude told me no one is supposed to read your diary unless you say they can, I don't believe it. That's why I hate writing in this notebook. But I'm at the VanderKamps' because Mama had to go to the hospital. She's having the baby. I'm finished my homework and there's nothing else to do. Mrs. VanderKamp keeps asking me if I want to eat. I just want to know if I have a little brother or sister. I want a little brother because it would be like Neil came back.

Dear Wren,

I had to see Mrs. Claude today. I asked her how come she keeps taking me out of class and she said that my teacher thinks it's best. I think it's dumb. But when she asked me about my diary and about Mama having you and how did I feel about it, I said I was happy I had a little sister, but I hate writing in my diary. She said maybe I would rather write letters to you. Since I hate writing to a fake invisible diaree-uh, I'm writing to you. Diaree-uh is poop. That's what I always think

when I write *Dear Diary*. When you're older, you'll read this, and you'll laugh so hard. And I'll say that's what was in your diapers!



SKY SNORTED, THEN glanced at Auntie Wren, self-conscious that she'd been caught up in the dumb joke, but Auntie Wren was ignoring her. She continued reading.



Dear Wren,

I love you so much. All you do is sleep and sometimes you cry, but then Mama asks me to hold you and give you a bottle and you settle down. I wish I didn't have to go to school. I wish I could hold you all day. I miss Neil, but I'm glad I have you.

Dear Wren,

Mrs. Claude said I should tell you about Neil. She said when I'm older and I want to remember my little brother I'll be happy I wrote down all my memories about him. One time we played hide-and-seek and he fell asleep under my bed and I couldn't find him. Mama got mad and we were both worried. Mama went outside to call him and the neighbors came and Papa came home from work. Then Neil woke up and Papa yelled at him. I felt really bad and that's why we're not allowed to play hide-and-seek.

Dear Wren,

Mama and Papa are fighting. I hate it. Mama gave me a bottle and told me to keep you in here with me. I think you did a huge poop. It's pretty smelly. I want to get a clean diaper, but I don't want to go out there. I know Papa will be mad if he sees me. What do babies think about?

Dear Wren,

I told Mrs. Claude that I don't mind writing letters to you and she was so happy. I don't get what makes grown-ups happy. When I came home and told Mama that I had to see Mrs. Claude today, and she was happy that I was writing in my book, Papa said he would call the school and tell them to stop making me go see her. He said I don't have to write in my notebook anymore. I should be happy about that, but I'm kind of sad.

Dear Wren,

Grandpa Snow died. We came to Michigan. It was a really long drive. Mama said we have to stay here for a couple of weeks and it doesn't matter if I miss school. The teachers will understand. The house smells like pumpkins and ashtrays. I have to watch you while Mama and Papa clean. Mama said maybe once this house gets sold we could go on a vacation to Disneyland. Papa said he could think of ten better uses for the money. Mama said you were too small to enjoy it anyway.

Dear Wren,

I just found this again. Maybe I'll start writing to you again.



SKY FLIPPED THROUGH the rest of the notebook. All the rest of the pages were blank.

“That’s *it*?”

Auntie Wren hadn't even finished unpacking her other suitcase in the time it took to read this.

“Where’s the rest? I know there’s more. There has to be. Did you tear out some pages or something?”

“No.”

“Then why would you never show this to me before?”

“Because it wasn’t addressed to you. It was addressed to me.” Auntie Wren was pretending she was being totally reasonable, but Sky knew the way she was refolding everything meant she was being sneaky.

“Is there another one?”

No answer.

“Oh my God, you psychopathic control freak.”

“Name-calling doesn’t put me in a sharing mood. Do you want to unpack your own case or shall I do it?”

“That wasn’t our deal.”

“That’s why I’m asking if you want me to do it.”

“You know what I mean.”

“And you know how to behave. When I see what I want to see, you’ll see what you want to see.”

“Oh my *Gawd*. This is why I hate you. I’m going to look for it, you know.”

“Is that our new deal?” Wren turned to face her and she was wearing her most serious face. The one she’d worn when she had asked, *Do you really want to meet your father?* “Because I respect your privacy, Sky. If you go through my things, I’ll start going through yours. Including your phone and laptop.”

Sky’s stomach felt like it had a marble rolling around in it. Or one of those balls with the spikes all over it that gladiators threw around. She thought about the messages she had been exchanging with Tony and the number of times she had snooped through her aunt’s room. She had never found anything. Not a vibrator or wart medicine or an old photo of a boyfriend or anything. All Auntie Wren did was work and cook and clean. Her big secret was that she should have bored herself to death by now.

“Can I at least have the other one, the baby one that’s addressed to *me*?”

“I already put it in your night table.”

Of course, she did.

Auntie Wren turned away so she didn't see the filthy glare Sky threw at her.



AT NINE THIRTY, Wren closed the document she'd been reading and pulled out her earbuds, then moved to plug in her laptop to charge it overnight.

“I'm going to take our dishes to the kitchen.”

“Kay.” Sky was watching something with zombies. Brains and blood were flying everywhere.

“Then we should go to bed.”

“Seriously?”

“It's a school night.”

Sky paused her show to glare at her.

“It's my first day of work tomorrow. I want a good night's sleep.”

“I'll put it on headphones.”

“You're starting your summer courses tomorrow.”

“Am I? I guess it depends how much I give a shit about my mom's letters to you, doesn't it?”

Wren ignored that and gathered the plates they'd made at the buffet and brought in here to eat. In silence.

Was she being underhanded, withholding that other diary? Hell, yes. She never would have given Sky the first one if Sky hadn't found the baby one while they were moving and reread it, then asked her if there was another one.

Wren wasn't sure why she felt so defensive giving even that first one up. Maybe because Mandy's notes to her were her only connection to her sister. Maybe because she read the signs of dysfunction and heartache between the lines of

Mandy's writing. She hated for Sky or anyone to know how pathetic her childhood had been.

She'd read a million self-help articles and even Mandy had told her she didn't have to put up with their father's bipolar fits, but Wren had been Sky's age when Mandy had said that. She hadn't been old enough to live on her own. Not unless she wanted to live on the street or send herself into foster care. Maybe she would have made a different decision if Mandy hadn't died, but once Sky was her responsibility, Wren had stayed at home because it was a roof and three squares. Simple math.

Should she tell Sky all of that? Why? Maybe she was as bad as her mother, whitewashing over the ugliness so they looked like a quiet-living, church-going family where nothing ever went wrong. But what was the point in loading Sky up with heavy family history that didn't affect her? She wasn't about to guilt-trip her by saying, *I took you out of that. You owe me.* That wasn't her motive in keeping Sky. She loved her.

Even when she was being a horrible little shit.

## Chapter Four

**S**URE SHE WOULD do homework all day. *Riiight.*

Sky checked the bus schedule from Haven online. If she missed the one going south, no problem. Another one came through a few hours later that went to Seattle. She would hitchhike if she had to. She wasn't scared.

She put a change of clothes in her backpack, would take her phone, but not her laptop. She waited until Auntie Wren had come to check on her and made sure it looked like she was doing as she was told. Then she said nice and sarcastic, "Am I allowed to go outside for some fresh air?"

"Fine."

She made sure Auntie Wren saw her come back and get a sandwich from the buffet, then go back into their room.

Throwing the sandwich into her pack, she slipped out right away and went out the back entrance of the lodge, down the path that went between the pond and the patio and into the lane to the base. There was more traffic today, but she walked like she was supposed to be there and figured if Trigg asked, she would pretend she wanted to see him. That's why she was here, right? To get to know him?

What a stupid idea. *Dear Diary, my aunt should have warned me that my dad would be a raging disappointment.*

When she reached the clearing, there was a brand-new, lumpy dirt road that cut down below the office trailer where they'd gone yesterday. The air smelled like Christmas from all the broken tree branches, but also like mud.

Trigg had said something about putting a parking lot down there, she recalled. They wanted people not cars on the hill; that's why they wanted the gravel pit road, so they could run a

shuttle from town. Locals had used the track for ATVs and snowmobiles for years, he had said.

See? She listened when it was information she needed.

As she followed the track, a loud engine noise grew louder. A big yellow excavator was pushing dirt around. She sent a friendly wave to the driver who paused and let her go by, then she headed toward the trees on the far side.

It was easy to find the path to the gravel pit. There was a huge sign that read, *Private Property. Danger. Construction Area. Keep Out.*

She didn't need to do her English homework to know that was, like, a metaphor for her life right now.

She started down the path. The construction noise was still loud enough she could hear it over the music in her earbuds. The trees closed in and the air grew chilly out of the sun, but it smelled good. She pulled up her hood and walked a little faster, trying to warm up.

She and Auntie Wren used to go for nature walks on the weekends, especially when she was fat, but Sky had started telling her she'd rather go to the mall. She didn't know why. She was so *mad* at her aunt. It wasn't just the diary or her making them move here. It was everything. The fact Auntie Wren was always telling her what to do as if she was five. Saying she respected her privacy, but always asking questions like who was she seeing at the mall and why didn't she want to do volleyball anymore. Auntie Wren thought Tony was a creep because he was twenty when she wasn't doing anything with him except smoking cigarettes. She wasn't sexting or anything. She wasn't stupid.

She didn't even expect to get away with this. Not really. But she wanted Auntie Wren to know she wasn't such hot shit. She couldn't push her around by promising a couple of letters. Auntie Wren was always like, *Wait and see. Be patient. Let me think about it.* She never *did* anything. It was infuriating.



The construction noise cut into Sky's thoughts, almost seeming to be getting louder over the music. A tingle came up her spine just as something ran past—

She screamed at the same second as she realized it was Murphy. He stopped to stare, tongue hanging out in a happy doggy grin, like he was proud of himself for scaring her to death. Doofus.

An engine stopped behind her and she turned to see Trigg on an ATV. She pushed back her hoodie and yanked out her earbuds, muscles still twitching from surprise.

“He scared me.” She reached to pat Murphy's head as he stood on her shoe.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Going for a walk.” She looked Trigg right in the eye.

He didn't call her a liar, just asked, “Do you have bear spray?”

“Really?” She knew when she was being snowed.

“The berries aren't out yet, but the bears are.”

She folded her arms. “You're trying to scare me.”

“There's more noise here this year, so they might not come around as much. Mountain lions and wolves came through this winter, though. We caught a lynx on the surveillance cameras. Coyotes usually hang out at the lower elevations. Moose aren't real common, either, but they're territorial. If you come face to face with one, get running the other direction.”

“Is that how you knew I was here? Cameras?” She latched on to the one piece of information she found most disturbing.

“The excavator operator called to ask why there was a girl with a death wish under his bucket. It's dangerous out here. If you want to come onto the site, ask me to bring you. Or stick to walking around the pond, but not alone. I'll get you a can of bear spray and show you how to use it. Come on.” He backed

the ATV into a space between two trees, crushing some ferns as he turned around.

She gritted her teeth. Was he being for real? She looked into the trees, not having thought about wild animals. Auntie Wren always lectured against getting into cars with guys she didn't know, but had never said, 'Watch out for mountain lions.'

Where had she even been brought to that getting eaten by wildlife was a thing she had to worry about?

Trigg whistled for Murphy. He came bounding out of the trees. Trigg looked at her.

Sky bit back a swear and climbed onto the seat behind him. He started back the way she'd come.



IF WREN WANTED to make such a big deal about maintaining custody, Trigg thought as he brought Sky back to the lodge, maybe she should actually *maintain custody*.

He walked in with Sky, made sure she went into her apartment, then looked for Wren. She was tied up with Marvin and the accounting consultant, Yolanda. Whatever Wren said made the older pair laugh.

She moved her hands as she spoke, pulling her white shirt against the side of her breast, drawing his eye to her curves. Really pretty curves.

A noise in the dining room snapped him back from ogling, which was a good thing. Before they'd heard about Sky's excursion into the forest, Nate had been reporting that his latest offer to the gravel pit owner had been rebuffed because Dirk's recent offer was much higher. They were essentially in a bidding war and the owner had every incentive to watch the price go through the roof before he bothered to answer his phone again. They had to figure out a new strategy.

He texted Rolf and Nate that he would bring back sandwiches, then went upstairs to leave Murphy with Glory.

“I think I just caught Sky trying to run away,” he said, which dragged her attention off her monitor.

“Really?”

“She was walking toward the gravel pit. Her backpack was pretty full. Why would she do that? She just got here.”

Glory shrugged. “It’s a lot for *you* to take in and you’re not twelve.”

*You just act like it.* He waited for her to say it and when she didn’t, it cranked his frustration level up another notch. “Her aunt should be on that, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know, Trigg. Did your mom know everything you got up to as a kid?”

“Like that time I made one?”

She tilted her head. “For instance.”

He swore at the ceiling. “Why did she bring her here if she doesn’t want to be here?”

“It’s been twenty-four hours. What do you do when the bath is too hot? You back off, wait a bit, then try again, right? Because you still want a bath.”

“*What?*”

“Sorry. My characters are doing it in the tub. I gotta give them their happy ending so I can have my own. And—” she turned to fully face him, blew out a breath “—we’ve all spent the last few weeks speculating on what motivates them. They’re here now. Ask.”

He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answers. That was the problem. That’s why he hadn’t asked Sky if she was running away. If she had said, ‘yes,’ what was he supposed to say to that? Okay, carry on? Or: You can’t because I want you in my life?

Did he?

He didn't want to think this hard. His brain was under so much pressure, it was going to fold in on itself.

"Is it filthy?" he asked instead.

"This love scene I'm writing? Word for word it's what your brother and I do every night."

"Why do you have to ruin everything?" Had Wren made Sky come here against her will? Or had the kid taken one look at him and decided she didn't want anything to do with him?

"Trigg," Glory said gently. "It's going to be okay. If it's not okay yet, the story's not over."

"This isn't one of your books."

"No, but you're writing your own story. Figure out what you want and go after it."



WREN WAS MAKING a few notes as she finished up her first day of work. Marvin had just left with a big smile on his face. He was going upstairs to change for his shift on the bar.

He had introduced her around today and walked her through some basics like how to register a guest and follow the checkout procedures. He had seemed surprised she caught on so quickly, but that was what she did. She memorized fast and tried to be the first to notice if she made a mistake so she could correct it before anyone else noticed. She wasn't perfect, or even a perfectionist. She just hated criticism.

She had even avoided some from Vivien when she'd spent an hour with her. Wren had armed herself with a list of her previous responsibilities when working at the Rise-and-Shine Motel. She and Vivien had gone over the list, added a few tasks, marked off the ones that fell into Marvin's purview, and scheduled the week to ensure Wren received appropriate training.

"I do like to be organized," Vivien said with approval when she rose to leave. "How are you settling in?"

“We slept well. Good beds,” Wren said, side-stepping the fact she hadn’t heard Sky moving around in their apartment for a while and was starting to worry.

Marvin came in with some other staff then, but she had heard Sky running water a little later, so she had relaxed.

She made some final notes about the shift schedule, working until five-oh-five. She had never been one of those cheats who cut out ten minutes before quitting time. It wasn’t so much a mark of pride as that she never wanted to give anyone a reason to complain. It was a subversive way to prove she was better than everyone around her. She could already tell that the managers Marvin had hired in the past, even the current weekend and night desk clerks, only gave a solid seventy percent.

*Prepare to look for your socks, Marvin, because I am going to knock them off.*

Someone tapped on the open door. She glanced up to see Trigg and felt his impact like a shock wave. *Please don’t blush, please don’t blush.*

“Got a minute?”

“Of course.” She faked a calm smile while her entire body went on high alert. It had been a full year since she’d last had sex. She was in her prime hunt-for-a-mate years. Biology was ambushing her with signals that asked incessantly, *How about him?*

That’s what she told herself, anyway. Even though none of the other guys around here—many of whom were her age and had glanced with varying levels of friendly interest—made her limbs feel weak or her hand want to touch her throat.

Trigg shouldn’t be the man to provoke this reaction, especially since she sensed aggression in him as he closed the door, trapping her in here. He sat down in the chair across the desk from her so they were eye level.

“How was your day?”

It sounded like a trick question. She forcibly kept her posture relaxed and an inquiring look on her face. “Good. Yours?”

“Did Sky tell you I picked her up off the trail on the far side of the base?”

“I haven’t talked to her since lunch. I was just about to finish up and head in.” She made sure she was giving him all her attention so he couldn’t tell that all the cells in the back of her brain were throwing themselves through the door, slapping all the big red panic buttons. *What the hell, Sky?* “She told me at lunch she was going outside for some air. I guess she decided to walk. Physical education break.” She smiled.

“She shouldn’t be over there without an escort. It’s dangerous. She needs to call ahead.”

“I’ll let her know.”

“She shouldn’t walk anywhere alone. It’s easy to get lost and there’s wildlife.”

Shock waves of fear and anger coursed through her with a cringe of inadequacy. She only nodded. “Of course.”

“Was she trying to run away?”

Wren pretended she was taken aback when that was exactly what she imagined Sky had been doing. “Why would she do that? We just got here.”

“You tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell. She wants to get to know you. We’re here to do that.”

He scowled, studying her with suspicion the way her father used to. *I know you’re lying.*

Deep down, she was squirming. Of course that little nightmare was trying to cut and run. Wren wasn’t entirely surprised, but she had thought that might be something they built up to, if things with Trigg didn’t work out over time. She had hoped the carrot of the diary would persuade Sky to fall in

line with the plan *they had agreed to*, but Sky wasn't bothering with warning shots or deal-making.

Wren didn't let on that she was freaking out over how to contain Sky's mutiny. If she was trying to run away on Day One, what would Day Two look like?

She kept a smooth mask on her face, though, refusing to reveal her guilty conscience. Blink, blink, blink. I'm a good girl. She *was*. She always did exactly as she was told.

"I keep wondering why Mandy never told me about her," Trigg said. "And why did you wait until Sky was twelve?"

Wren looked down and adjusted the desk blotter so it was perfectly straight along the edge of the desk.

"That's a complicated question." One she had expected would come up and one for which she had rehearsed a fairly truthful response. She licked her lips. "My mother was quite religious and my father is very strict." She had learned a long time ago that those were suitable euphemisms for 'delusional fanatic' and 'bipolar rage-aholic.' "When Mandy realized she was pregnant, she thought abortion was her only choice because she was scared of my parents' reaction if they found out."

With. Good. Reason.

Mandy had only been living at home for Wren's sake. That and because she had been held back a year after Neil died so she hadn't graduated yet.

Wren folded her left forearm over her right, calm, calm, calm. None of her feelings showed. Zero.

"Mom figured it out, though." Caught her throwing up. "They insisted Mandy have Sky, but give her up for adoption. Mandy wound up leaving and having Sky."

Wren skipped the part with the police and everything.

"It caused some bad blood with our father. I lost touch with her for a couple of years. Sky was two when I finally caught up with them. Our father was still holding a grudge and

wasn't receptive to having them back in our lives, but one of my first questions to Mandy was whether she had told Sky's dad. She said she hadn't, because you lived in Germany and she was worried you would take the baby there. Sometimes she wished she had support payments, but she said you sounded relieved when she told you she wasn't keeping the baby. She didn't know how you would react if she told you she had had Sky after all."

His jaw hardened and he looked to the window. "I was seventeen. In the moment, abortion sounded like the simplest solution. As time went on, I was more conflicted, but I figured what was done was done."

Wren realized she was pinching her own arm. She'd been tense as she brought that up. She had always wondered how he'd really felt. Mandy had used Trigg's reaction as justification for hiding Sky from him. Wren had told herself she was protecting Sky from a man who hadn't wanted her, but now she felt guilty. She could have told him sooner, but she had had all the same fears Mandy had.

"Why wasn't I informed when Mandy died? I would think... How long have you known that I'm Sky's father?"

Wren made her hand lie flat again. Kept her expression clear of all emotion, especially remorse.

"I always suspected it was you. She wasn't dating anyone at home." She hadn't been allowed. "You were the only boy I knew that she had talked to around that time. When she was alive, I thought it was her decision whether to tell you. After she died..." Wren swallowed, never able to talk about Mandy's death without her throat growing thick. "Social services asked my mother to take her. I could have spoken up and said I thought it was you, but I was around the same age Sky is now. I had just lost my sister. I didn't want to lose Sky, too."

"You thought I would take her?"



“I didn’t know. I didn’t want to risk it.” That was the absolute truth. “My mother had just lost her second child.” For once, briefly, she had stood up to her husband and insisted they take in their grandchild. Wren had promised to do all the work and had. “We both needed Sky.”

Something passed over his face. Acceptance, maybe. He had lost his father the summer before Sky was conceived.

“You never told your parents it might be me?”

She shook her head.

“What about Sky? When did you tell her?”

“When I got home from here last month.”

His chin went down and his brows went up.

She shrugged. “You’re not difficult to find online. If I had given her your name without warning you first, you would have learned about her from her.”

“It’s been a huge shock regardless. Hasn’t Sky asked about me before this?”

“Of course.”

“And you didn’t tell either of us. I get that it was hard for you right after Mandy died, but that was ten years ago.”

He was all bristled up, but so was she. She didn’t pretend for a second to be a perfect parent, but she was one wholly invested in Sky’s best interest.

“Do you want the truth?” Her heart was thumping a mile a minute, like she was creeping onto a ledge that could give way, but she had been carrying a lot of guilt and worry for a long time. This had never, ever been an easy decision. If he wanted to accuse her, the least he could do was see it from her side.

“Hit me,” he said flatly.

“Go online and pretend you’re me. Look up the man your niece wants to meet and call, ‘Dad.’”

Along with his brilliant athletic career, there were plenty of headlines and video clips where he was portrayed as a playboy who partied as hard as he trained. His social media feeds were littered with invitations to sex. He'd been exonerated from a drug scandal and one involving a married woman, but both stories came up at the top of any searches of his name.

"I've always been conscious that she will become your next headline. You tell me the appropriate age to subject her to that."

He grew more and more stone-faced. Like he was hardening into a diamond.

She looked down again, but refused to apologize. It wasn't her experience that being sorry defused animosity. If he wanted to hate her, he would.

He swore and stood, making her stiffen.

"So what are you saying? She's having second thoughts now that she's read about me?"

Wren sighed. "She's understandably ambivalent. I put this off as long as I could because it's not something that can be undone. I tried to make that clear to her before I went down this road." Or came up that one, out there. "I knew a name would never be enough. She wasn't merely curious. If I was going to tell her who her father was, it had to be like this, in a way that gives her a chance to form a connection with you."

She sat back, chewed her upper lip a moment. Whether Sky or anyone believed it, she wanted this to work. She had had to face that *she* wasn't enough for Sky. It broke her heart, but there it was.

"Sky doesn't remember her mother. My parents weren't the most affectionate people." Understatement of the year. "She has me and a lot of questions about whether anyone else in this world cares about her." Even at that, Sky seemed pretty convinced Wren was exercising a vendetta against her, but that was growing pains. Wren hoped. "If we had stayed in Utah, what would have happened? A few emails between you? She

needs to feel wanted. Maybe I should have asked you sooner if you wanted to meet her, but at least I never had to tell her you didn't. Now it's up to you to make clear to her how *you* feel about *her*."

He recoiled, pupils going so big she saw it from this side of the desk. It would have been funny to see a grown man so terrified if it wasn't so important to her that he do right by Sky. She rubbed her damp palms on her thighs.

"She seems to like your dog," she pointed out. "Perhaps, since she's so keen to walk, you could do that together." As passive-aggressive moves went, it was one of her finest. If he wanted to throw shade on her ability to keep track of Sky, he could damn well find out what a tall order it was.

He wore the exact expression Sky had worn as they drove away from their old apartment. Right up until their brief meeting at the lawyer's office, when Wren had also agreed to come live at Blue Spruce Lodge, Sky had been on board with all of this. Then the reality of moving sank in. No more skipping school to shoplift makeup and smoke with mall rats. But maybe that had been the less damaging thing she could expose Sky to.

"Sure," Trigg said through gritted teeth. "I usually take him for a run after dinner."

"Great." Wren bit back suggesting he bring a mop and bucket to clean up her murdered and dismembered body. "I'll let her know."

## Chapter Five

“**Y**OU SUCK,” SKY announced when she walked back into their pathetic excuse for an apartment.

Auntie Wren looked up from whatever boring thing was on her laptop. Sky knew it was boring because it always was. Spreadsheets or an online course or how to make frittatas.

*Make a dating profile. Buy a life. Gawd.*

“Good walk?” Auntie Wren asked.

“That’s being facetious, right?” Sky gave her a squinty, unimpressed smile.

“You’ve been studying your vocabulary words!”

“Loathe. Revile. Abhor.”

“We’re gonna get you through middle school yet.” Auntie Wren made little cheer punches with her fists.

Sky wanted to throw her the bird, but she was in the middle of changing out of her jeans and into pajamas. She threw her jeans into the laundry bag.

“Did you get those dirty? You just put them on before you left.”

“Oh my God. How about, ‘Thank you, Sky, for putting your dirty laundry in the bag’? They have dog snot on them. Is that okay with you?” Murphy was cute, but gross. Trigg had said if he pooped near the lodge, she should pick it up so guests didn’t see it or step in it. Right. She’d get right on that.

Auntie Wren got all pinchy-mouthed. “Did you talk to Trigg like that?”

“No.” Sky flopped onto her bed and checked her messages. There was no signal on the other side of the pond, which had

made the walk extra special. “I asked him if he remembered my mom and he said he remembered she was nice.”

“She was.”

“Unlike *some* people.” Sky rolled her eyes, but she didn’t feel bad about being rude to Auntie Wren. Not after she had said, *Since you like walking so much, you’re going with Trigg when he walks Murphy after dinner*, giving Sky no chance to refuse.

Which meant Trigg must have told on her about trying to run away. She put him next to Auntie Wren at minus one hundred billion on the likability scale.

Did he really remember her mom? Or was he just saying that? She had looked him up online and he had had a lot of girlfriends. She actually wanted to ask Auntie Wren if she thought he was being honest, but she was still mad at her.

Even Tony was letting her down. She had texted him and he must have changed phones because she got, *Who dis?*

Her life was total garbage.

Half bored, half wanting *someone* to be honest with her, she reached into her night table and pulled out her mom’s diary, the baby one that was addressed to her.



Dear Baby,

You need a name. The only one I can think of is Wren...



*I WOULD HAVE killed myself by now*, Sky thought.

Auntie Wren had read this to her when they first moved out of Nana and Granddad’s. Her mom’s handwriting was kind of messy and Sky had only learned how to print back then. She hadn’t been able to read it herself. Things had gotten busy and she’d forgotten it existed, only remembering it now and again.

She had found it in a drawer when they'd been moving, though, and had finally been able to read it herself. That's when she realized Auntie Wren had skipped parts when she'd been reading it aloud all those times.

*I told you that Nana and Granddad thought your mom was too young to have a baby, Auntie Wren had said. They wanted her to give you up for adoption. I didn't see the point in reading that to you when you were too little to understand.*

Lame excuses. Auntie Lame. That's what Sky should call her.

She glanced across at where Auntie Wren was propped up by the pillows she had pushed against her headboard. She was pretending she hadn't noticed what Sky was holding, but Sky could tell by her blanky-blank face that she knew.

*Lame.*



Dear Baby,

You need a name. The only one I can think of is Wren. You look just like her. I miss her so much and wish she could see you. I remember the first time I held her. She felt heavier than you do, but I was only nine so that makes sense. Everyone keeps telling me I'm too young to have a baby and I won't be able to handle it. I keep thinking I looked after my baby sister and I wasn't even a grown-up yet. I'm not that scared.

Dear Sky,

I hope you like your name. I was looking through baby name books and kept wanting to call you Wren. I told the nurse and she said what about a different bird? I never even knew that Wren was the name of a bird. When I looked it up in the baby name book, it said Wren means ruler. That made me laugh because if you knew her, you would know she's quiet and shy and not bossy like me—



“HA!” SKY SAID aloud. Auntie Wren didn’t even look over.



ISN’T THAT FUNNY? The nurse said Robin and then Skylark. There was a movie I saw once with a girl named Skylar in it. I like that better than with a k, so that’s who you are. Skylar. Do you like it?

Dear Sky,

I brought you home today and now we’re sitting in my apartment and I should put all your stuff away, but you’re asleep and I’m tired. All I can hear is the clock ticking. I’m kind of scared.

Dear Sky,

Please stop crying. I talked to the health nurse and she said it’s okay if I let you cry a little bit. She said that if you’re fed and your diaper is clean and you don’t have a fever then you’re probably okay if I let you cry it out. I need a rest from rocking you and trying to make you feel better. I was crying, too. So I left you in your room and you aren’t stopping. I feel horrible. I also feel scared. Like if I let you cry too long someone will come in and yell at me. Wren didn’t have colic. How come you do? I’m going to get you now. I’m sorry I left you in there by yourself.

Dear Sky,

Oh my God you got your first tooth! And you stopped crying! We both had a huge nap. You’re still sleeping beside me and I’m afraid to move in case you wake up. You look like an angel. I love you.

Dear Sky,

Today I was thinking about how sad I am that I don’t have my family. My brother died, and I’m not allowed to see my sister. My mom and dad are legit crazy. Even

my friend Lydia left for college and has a boyfriend there. She's doing all the things I should be doing, starting her life. I said that at group and the lady who runs it said I did start my life and that being a mom is important. But I'm just a welfare mom who spends her whole day looking after a baby. I was feeling really awful, but then you put your hands on my cheeks and tried to eat my nose and it was so cute and made me laugh. I realized you're my family. I love you so much.

Dear Sky,

I just found this book again. I guess I knocked it under the bed and forgot all about it. I used to do the same with Wren's. The funny thing is she didn't know she had a book either. I just like writing to a real person.

Dear Sky,

You said Ma today. You knew it was me and everything. It was super cute. I thought I better write down that you are ten months old. You also have eight teeth and probably are getting more because all you do is drool. The lady at group said I should think about weaning you and get you out of my bed, but we both sleep better this way. Sometimes I want to ask the lady at group if she has a baby herself and does she even know what it's like to be a single mom who isn't old enough to drink?

Dear Sky,

Please don't die. Neil got really sick and he died. Then Wren got really sick one time and it was the only time that Mama said I wasn't allowed to hold her. She had an awful cough. I came to the doctor right away when you started to sound the same. I know you're really sick. They gave you medicine and said I should bring you back if your fever spikes again. They said they would admit you if that happened. I don't think I could go home without you. Get better. I love you.



Dear Sky,

Dear God, what did you eat at daycare? Your diaper stank so bad I had to take it all the way down to the garbage. Now we're at the park and I still have that stench in my nostrils. I hope the apartment airs out by the time we get back. You're having fun trying to catch the birds. I found this notebook still in my purse from when you were in the hospital. I'm so glad you're better. I was really scared when you were sick. I remember thinking I needed Wren. Now I'm sitting here wishing she was here, even though it's just a nice day and nothing is wrong. I wish I could share you with her.

Dear Sky,

I'm sorry I had to work. I think you're getting sick again and that's why you cried when I dropped you off. Usually you're fine with it. Now I'm sitting here on my lunch and my sandwich tastes like guilt. I wish the other girls I work with had kids, but they're all like, *Aren't you happy to be out of the house?* Sometimes I am, but I miss you. Then this gross guy who was a customer asked me if I wanted to go for dinner. I said I have a baby. He walked away really fast and that made me think about what a good creep repellent you are. Sorry. That sounds mean, but it made me laugh.

Dear Sky,

My boss asked me today about the father of my baby and where is he and stuff. I wanted to tell him it was none of his business but I said your dad didn't want you just so he would go away and not ask. But it made me think that one day you would ask me and I'll have to tell you I was planning to have an abortion. Not because I didn't want you, but because I knew my mom and dad would freak out and make me give you up for adoption. They—

Dear Sky,

You were really sick today and couldn't go to daycare so I have to stay home. I just phoned into work and they fired me. Men are the worst. Remember that.



SKY FLIPPED BACK and forth. The notebook was a spiral one so there was no way to tell for sure, but... "You ripped out some pages."

"No, I didn't," Auntie Wren said, not even looking at her.

"Yeah, you did. I can tell."

"I didn't."

"You're such a liar."

Auntie Wren turned her head. "Skylar. I didn't rip out any pages. Your mother did."

"Why?"

"For reasons of her own." She turned her nose back to her laptop.

"You're lying."

"I'm not."

Sky didn't believe her.



Dear Sky,

I felt bad when I had to leave you at the new daycare. You cried, but I think I like this new job. They pay me better and the daycare is right around the corner. Maybe it's good you got sick and I got fired. Okay here comes another customer. I have to stop. I love you. Later, baby.

Dear Sky,

When you get old enough to like boys, think really hard about whether having sex is a good idea. I would

never give you back, but all the girls at work go out on Friday night. They party and I always have to say I can't go because I have to go home to my little girl. I feel like my mom who never knew how to have fun. She wouldn't even sit to color a picture with me the way I do with you. She would always say she had to do the dishes or go to church.

Sometimes I think even if I did go out with my friends from work, I would only have sex and get pregnant again and the dad wouldn't be around and my life would be twice as hard. I don't know what the answer is. I wish I had gotten a better education so I could get a better job, though. I wish I had more money. Definitely more money.

Dear Sky,

You're starting to talk a lot. Your voice is really cute and people always smile when they hear you. Except a lot of the time you say no. Then you have a total meltdown in the store and people look at me like why can't that mother control her child? One lady thought I was your nanny. I was like, yeah, this is the worst kid I've ever had to look after. Sorry, baby. I thought it was funny, though.

Dear Sky,

Today I was thinking about when I first started writing in my diary and how much I hated it. Then I started writing to Wren and now I write to you. Maybe one day I'll write to my future husband.

Dear future husband,

Where are you? I'm waiting.

Dear Sky,

Why do I think I need a husband? That's the kind of thing my mother taught me to think. I talked to Lydia about it and she said her mom's uterus would kidnap mine into an intervention if she knew I thought I

needed a husband to get by. But I think it would be easier if it wasn't just me.

Dear Sky,

Happy birthday, baby. You're two years old now. There are so many things I wish I could give you. Mostly I wish I could give you your auntie Wren. Also your uncle Neil, which is weird to think of him as an uncle because he was just a little boy when he died. But at least Auntie Wren is possible. One time I phoned our old number, but it said not in service. I'm not surprised, but I'm disappointed.

Dear Sky,

You're being the worst today. I put you in your room and you're just screaming and screaming. I'm sure the neighbors think I'm killing you. I'm hoping you'll cry yourself to sleep, but I'm starting to think you'll turn into one of those fire-starter babies and explode the whole apartment. Either way would be a win right now.

Dear Sky,

It's been a long time since I wrote to you, mostly because Wren has been coming to see us. I've been talking to her and writing to her when she goes home. I feel like there's a lot to catch up on with her. But I think you should know that I asked Lydia's mom how to make Wren your guardian. She's not old enough and nothing will happen to me. Don't worry. But Lydia's mom is always nagging me about things like this.

So I said if anything happened to me that I would want you to be with Wren. I don't want you to go to a foster home, even though I don't really want you to go to the house where I grew up either. Lydia is a good friend and I love her a lot, but she's still at school and it's a lot to ask of her. Her mom travels a lot so she's not really an option.

Wren already loves you as much as I do, though. I thought she would never forgive me, but she just missed me, same as I missed her. Maybe it sounds funny that I think it would make her happy if you lived with her, since I complain about how much hard work you are. Sometimes I feel like I want to cry because I love you so much. I want Wren to feel loved like that.



BARF, SKY THOUGHT. She did *not* love Wren like that. *Sorry, Mom.*

“Why did my mom think you wouldn’t forgive her?”

“Because she left.” Auntie Wren kept her eyes on her laptop.

“I still don’t get why you didn’t message her on Facebook, even if Granddad disapproved.” Of course, this was Auntie Wren. She was such a baby about breaking rules. Oh, no, she might have been grounded and wouldn’t have been able to go to the library to study for extra credit.

“We didn’t have a computer. I had to use the one at the school and I looked a couple of times, but Mandy only had a pay-as-you-go phone so her work and daycare could call her. She didn’t have a Smartphone so she didn’t bother setting up a profile.”

Auntie Wren hadn’t set one up until Sky had begged her to let her set up her own. She’d made one for both of them, then followed Sky to creep on her.

“You’re so weird.”

“Yup,” Auntie Wren agreed.



Dear Sky,

This is what you scribbled today, when I gave you crayons and told you to write to Santa. You don’t know what that means, but that’s okay. He’ll still come. I’m

trying to figure out how to have Christmas with Wren, even if it's on the wrong day. Until I had you, I never had Christmas. Not the kind with presents. Just the kind where we went to church at midnight. I can't get you all the things I want to, but I found some stuff at the thrift store and there was a cute top I got for Wren. I know she'll say she can't take it and I should keep it for myself, because she doesn't want our parents to know she's seeing me, but even if she just has fun opening it and likes it, that will be okay.

Dear Sky,

I know you're scared, living with people you don't know. I promise I'll do the best I can. We don't have to stay with Nana and Granddad forever. One day, I'll give you this notebook so you can get to know your mom. For now, I'm going to ask Aunt Lydia to keep it with some other stuff that belonged to your mom. She'll make sure you get it if anything ever happens to me. I love you. Auntie Wren.



SKY CLOSED THE book and sighed nice and loud with plenty of exasperation. She wanted to point out to Auntie Wren that, once again, she was forcing her to live with people she didn't know. Was this really the best she could do? Really?

She threw the diary into her nightstand, slammed the drawer and got ready for bed.

## Chapter Six

**S**TARTING A NEW job was never easy, but it said a lot that the easiest part of Wren's week was when she was going over the employee manual with Marvin and the barista piped in with a remark on the fraternization clause.

"Glory calls that the Don't Frigg Trigg rule. Goes double for managers." Lina chuckled heartily before she realized she was the only one laughing.

Was it a blessing that the dining room was empty except for the gal prepping the cold buffet with fresh ice, staring with horror, and Skylar, sitting at a table doing her homework where Wren could keep an eye on her?

Lina didn't know she was talking about Sky's dad, but when Marvin cleared his throat and said, "Lina," she realized how out-of-place the remark was and flushed.

"Sorry." She got back to work.

"There was a theft last February," Marvin said in an undertone to Wren, still bright red with embarrassment. "Our previous manager obtained some information from Trigg..."

In the bedroom, Wren presumed.

"Glory mentioned that," she assured him, skimming past the lurid details with a blithe smile.

But she couldn't help dwelling on the fact Trigg wasn't just a player online and in Europe. Clearly he had cut a swathe through the local game as well.

Wren didn't look down on hookup culture, but she didn't subscribe to it. She liked sex, but didn't want to be intimate with a stranger and rarely had time for dating and getting to know someone. Even when she did, she found that dinners and snuggling were pleasant, but she didn't enjoy talking about the

things you were supposed to talk about when you were close to someone. Silences grew longer, conversations more stilted. She wound up moving in and out of sexual relationships—pun intended—fairly quickly.

As for hooking up with Trigg, fun as it might sound in the shower, she was screamingly aware that the caustic tween she was raising was the result of Trigg's well-exercised gonads. She wouldn't dare risk unleashing another like it on the world. She was a responsible citizen. *So, Marvin, you dear old dear, watch me exceed all your previous managers' standards on this front as well.*

Later that day, she picked up an email from Lydia informing her that Sky had been in touch, wanting to know about the missing pages from Mandy's diary. *I told her that's something she has to take up with you. Sorry to throw you under the bus.*

Wren was flatter than road kill these days. One more bus wouldn't make a lick of difference.

About that time, Sky came back from walking Murphy with Trigg and Wren did a spit take with her water. "Where are your pants?"

"What?" Sky peeled off the hoodie that had been tied around her waist when she had left. "I'm wearing shorts."

They were from two years ago, before her growth spurt. Sky also wore a T-shirt, but it was snug and ended at her navel, not hiding the micro-shorts at all. "Don't wear them in public again."

"Seriously? You kids get off my lawn." Sky shook a fist.

Maybe she did sound like her mother, freaking out that a kneecap was visible. Wren didn't mean to, but that wasn't why she closed her mouth on the topic. Sky was still sensitive about her body, worried she would become chubby again. She didn't need to start feeling sexualized on top of it. Wren would just throw those things away the first chance she got.



Glory came by the next evening and said Trigg was tied up at the base. She was walking Murphy if Sky still wanted to come. Sky had curled her lip at spending time with Glory, but went because she liked the dog.

By Thursday, Vivien was asking if Sky was doing homework or gaming. Gaming, of course, but short of putting her hands over Sky's fingers on the keyboard, Wren didn't know how to *make* her do her homework. At least she knew where she was all day—sulking in the dining room.

On Thursday afternoon, Vivien tried to get Sky to try on some very nice hoodies and other clothes bearing the Wikingers logo. Sky's great-grandfather had started the sports equipment corporation, Vivien explained, originally making equipment for bandy, which was still a popular hockey-like sport in Europe. He'd also made soccer balls and took a personal interest in bobsleighs and skeletons, enjoying the sport into his seventies. Vivien had helped Rolf and Trigg's father, Oskar, expand Wikingers into the global corporation it was today. Vivien seemed very loyal to the brand and Wren would gladly take one of every color in their yoga-wear line.

Sky showed zero enthusiasm as Vivien laid the pieces on tables in the lounge.

The way Vivien oversold the running shorts, with its gathered waistband and loose overlay with slits up the sides, had Wren thinking she wasn't the only one who had noted Sky's attire the other day as inappropriate.

"No, thanks," Sky said, not very graciously.

Vivien looked at Wren as though she expected her to force Sky to love them. Wren was trying with Sky, but behind closed doors, her niece was even more obstinate. Wren smiled and asked if Vivien had considered converting the first-floor housekeeping storage room into the gift shop.

"I notice housekeeping stocks the second and third floor with linens, but those closets are on the far end of the lodge. The one on the first floor is close enough to the stairs and

dumbwaiter, they bring up what they need as they go. I looked at the space under the main stairs, where the Christmas tree is stored. The cart would fit there if the door was widened. The storage closet is a tight fit for a gift shop, but you would also have the space by the landing, where people could see it from below. I was thinking you could roll out some racks of clothes for browsing during the day, then lock them in overnight?”

Vivien parted her lips with discovery and gazed across the lobby toward the stairs. “That’s not a bad idea at all. I’ll go look right now. Skylar, will you fold these and put them back in the boxes, please?”

Sky glared at Vivien’s back, not seeming impressed at how casually Vivien had conscripted her.

Wren waited until Vivien was out of earshot before she warned through clenched teeth, “Do it. Properly.”

“Why does she always call me ‘Skylar’?”

Oh, did that make her feel like people disapproved of the way she was behaving? Maybe because they did.

Wren went back to work, but kept an eye on Sky, relieved to see she took the time to look over each item of clothing before she folded it nicely and set it in the box.

Friday morning, Devon, the owner of Roadside Renovations, who had been intimidating when she had shaken Wren’s hand and said, “Nice to meet you,” marched her six-foot frame into the manager’s office and dried Wren’s mouth with her death scowl.

“Why is that jail bait girl of yours trying to hitch a ride into town with one of my guys?”

*Awesome.* “Thank you for letting me know. I’ll go speak to her.”

“Yeah. Tell her to stay off my worksite at the staff house, too. She’s a distraction.”

Wren had been dragged around by the ear more than once as a kid. It hurt like hell and she had never resorted to it with

Skylar. But, boy, was she tempted.

“There’s nobody here my age,” Skylar complained when Wren got her into their apartment. “I just went over to see what they were doing. I didn’t know that was a crime. And why can’t I get a ride into town with someone who’s going? There’s no bus. You used to let me take one to the mall. How is this different? What am I supposed to do all day? This place is So. Boring.”

“I wouldn’t have let you take the bus if I knew you were riding it instead of going to school, would I?”

Wren had also learned there *was* a bus between the lodge and town, but it brought workers in at seven thirty and left at four thirty. One of Wren’s tasks was to coordinate with Chivonne on a schedule that would service guests as well as workers, but since this was the slow season, that was a priority for another day. Based on Sky’s behavior, she wasn’t hurrying to make it a higher one.

Wren was growing frustrated enough with Sky to consider leaving, but aside from genuinely believing she was doing the right thing by keeping Sky here, she was starting to like her job. It was challenging and different each day. Every time she took a little initiative, Marvin creamed his jeans. On Friday, she showed him an app she had found online. It gave employees a means to switch shifts without requiring anyone to phone around for someone to cover them. They could just highlight the scheduled hours they wanted covered and their co-workers could tag that they would take them. It downloaded into a spreadsheet so she could double-check their hours for payroll.

Marvin almost stroked out with ecstasy. “Do you think it would work?” he asked with astonishment.

“It seems straightforward. And the schedule stays live—that way they don’t have to check the bulletin board all the time to see if it’s been updated. They can look at their phone.”

“This is...” He was so overwhelmed, she honestly thought he would cry.

At least she was ending her week on a high note. She only wished Sky would take the weekend off from driving her toward a breakdown.



AUNTIE WREN TOOK her to the town of Haven on Saturday morning and, surprise surprise, it was Boring. As. Hell. There wasn't even a movie theater. They also found out the town was too small to have a middle school. They drove by the high school and it was right beside the elementary school.

“I'm not going there.”

“The high school? No kidding. You have to finish seventh grade first. You'll be going there.” Auntie Wren pointed to the school with the playground.

Sky thought about throwing herself from the car.

They went to the main street and had lunch at a coffee shop, then looked in a couple of stores. Auntie Wren said there was no point getting a bunch of groceries since they were eating in the dining room. Sky almost forgot how mad she was and nearly said she would cook. The buffet was fine, but she missed their old, normal meals like chicken wraps or hamburger tacos.

She missed some of her old friends from school, too. Maybe if they hadn't left Utah, she and Tasha would have made up. All the girls at school had become such gossipy bitches, though. That's why Sky had started skipping. Tasha had started to act really bossy, telling Sky what to wear and how to do her hair and getting mad because a boy she liked talked to Sky. Sky couldn't help it if guys thought she was pretty. She was. So what? She still hated her life.

“Are we going back?” she cried as she realized her aunt was driving them out of town.

“You told Glory you would help her with the swag bags this afternoon.”

Because Glory had said she would give her some of the swag along with paying her. She had shown her a pair of the sunglasses that were the kind Kylie Jenner wore. Sky hadn't believed they were real and asked Glory if they were knock-offs.

Glory had laughed. “That's Vivien for you. My wedding is sponsored by all the big designers.” Glory had said there were so many famous people coming for the wedding, they had to order bigger baskets for all the stuff being sent to impress them.

Meanwhile, Auntie Wren had paid for Sky's favorite gum when they were in the drugstore. Wildberry Blast. That's what *she* got.

Fuck. My. Life.



ON SUNDAY MORNING, Trigg was more than a little hung over. He and Rolf had their differences, but Rolf kept an excellent stock of schnapps and didn't demand a lot of conversation. Trigg had invited himself into their newly finished apartment last night.

Glory had talked enough for the three of them as she got into her wine, complaining about Sky. “She wouldn't do it the way I asked her to. I showed her how I wanted each basket to look, but she kept trying different things. It was so frustrating.”

Was that his fault? Why didn't she bitch out Wren? He knew Sky wasn't perfect. He had gone up there because his mother had been chewing his ass off about how rude Sky was. *He* couldn't do anything about it, though. *Christ.*

“Dad said Wren is great, though,” Glory had assured him. “That's funny, right? We were all so worried that Wren

wouldn't be qualified and I would have to pick up the slack, but it's Sky who is the problem.”

Hilarious.

Rolf had sipped and said, “Some of the board are coming for the wedding. You'll have to make a decision soon on how you'll introduce her.”

Trigg had knocked back what was in his glass and held it out to be topped up.

Now he was paying that bill, staring at eggs he would probably taste twice. Why had he even come down for breakfast?

Without warning, small arms clamped around his thigh and a little voice said, “Gotcha!”

He looked down, head pounding, stomach unsteady, but couldn't help smirking at the little brown face grinning up at him. His frizzy black hair had been bound into zigzagging cornrows since Trigg had last seen him. How had anyone made him sit still long enough for *that*?

“Uh-oh. Bear trap.”

Aiden squeezed harder, baring his small teeth in a snarl that was about as menacing as a puppy trying to chew through a shoelace.

Trigg easily picked up Aiden with his leg, lifting him a couple inches as he pivoted to face Nate. “Where's your kid? Isn't he usually with you on Sunday mornings?”

“I don't know where he got to.” Nate slid his phone into the back pocket of his jeans. “Guess it's just you and me for breakfast. He's going to miss the waffles.”

“Probably climbed into Ilke's luggage and went to Canada.” Trigg swung the kid around again as he moved to the buffet. “Is that where your girl went? I can't keep track.”

“Yeah,” Nate replied. “I pick her up Friday night. She's home a week, then gone 'til the wedding. Doesn't leave again

until August.”

In time for Nate to be working sixteen-hour days.

Trigg had quit trying to figure out how that pair survived. Ilke was gorgeous, but locked and focused on her racing career. Trigg had known her since they were kids and she never gave men the time of day. Somehow Nate had got close to her, though, and he went from easygoing to asshole in a heartbeat if he thought she was threatened. They weren't sloppy with PDA, but when they were in the same room, they were glued to each other. Her disappearing for weeks at a time had to bother Nate, but he didn't complain.

“August is South America?” Trigg was trying not to be jealous of Ilke training for the coming season, meeting with techs and putting together the support team that would operate out of Whiskey Jack. He had quit all of that to be a dad and help with the construction of the resort, neither of which had been anything less than frustrating so far.

“She's going to Argenia,” Aiden said.

“Argenia,” Trigg repeated, looking down at the skinny arms wound like a boa constrictor around his thigh. “How's the snow in Argenia?”

“Cold.” The kid was three and a half and already knew how to crack wise. Trigg had to respect him for it.

“Aiden, how many sausages?” Nate asked.

“Two. Please. Where's Murphy?” he asked Trigg, still hanging on.

“In my room.”

“Can I play with him after?”

“Sure.” Trigg realized people were waiting for him to fill his plate and shift along.

Oh, shit, it was Sky and Wren.

Sky wore sunglasses and her hoodie over shorts. Again. She looked like she was half-naked and twice as hung over as

he was. His mother had had quite a bit to say about the way Sky was dressing. Trigg hadn't been real thrilled the other day either, when she'd been in a pair of short shorts. Some asshole working on the staff house had made a remark about him visiting the well too often if he was dipping that low with his bucket.

Trigg had almost cracked the shithead in the face with a shovel.

But for some reason, as he sensed Sky's gaze dropping behind the dark lenses to the kid hugging his leg, he felt like he was the one who was behaving in a way that needed correcting.

Trigg found himself looking to Wren. He'd barely seen her since that day when she'd made the crack about what kind of man he was online. When he came by for Sky in the evenings, he sometimes caught a glimpse of her and saw them dish up at the buffet for breakfast and dinner, but they ate in their room.

"Good morning," Wren said with a benign smile that encompassed both men. Her smile warmed as she directed it at Aiden. "Hi."

"Aiden, this is Miss Wren," Nate said. "She works here now. Skylar is her niece and she lives here with her. This is my son, Aiden. I usually have him on the weekends."

Aiden let go of Trigg's leg and sidled up against Nate, looping his arm around his father's thigh, smiling shyly, curious gaze fixed on Sky.

"Hi, Aiden." Wren bent to offer her hand. The neckline of her shirt gaped.

Trigg shouldn't have looked, but it happened before he realized who the pale, upper swells of those breasts belonged to. Why were they trapped in a utilitarian white bra? He was offended. Something that pretty shouldn't be in something that plain.

Wren seemed to enjoy dressing like a line-worker in a sandwich shop, though, wearing boot-cut jeans and shapeless



shirts when she wasn't in black polyester pants and uninspired white shirts, which was the basic uniform for lodge staff.

Trigg was surprised his mother hadn't stepped in with something tailored, but she did have her hands full with the wedding and complaining about Sky.

"Nice to meet you." Aiden tentatively shook Wren's hand.

Trigg wanted to point at the kid and say to Sky, *See? That's how it's done.*

"I was going to ask if *we* could have Murphy," Wren said to Aiden. "I haven't walked around the pond yet. Will you let us know when you're done playing with him?"

Aiden looked up at his dad. "Can we walk around the pond?"

"We could all go if that works?" Nate flicked a glance toward Trigg.

"Sure." Great idea. He could lose his breakfast in front of an audience.

They agreed to meet outside and Wren and Sky took their food to their room.

Nate and Aiden ate with gusto. Trigg wondered why he had bothered and thought about taking his plate up to his dog.

"Thanks, man," he finally made himself say. He and Sky barely exchanged three sentences when they walked in the evenings. He was desperate for a wingman.

He was desperate for a role model. He had a lot of friends, some of them even had kids, but none had a kid Sky's age. No one understood what he was going through. Who could?

Nate was one of the few people outside his family who knew Sky was his, though. Trigg wasn't sure why he'd confided in him. He'd only known Nate since Rolf had hired him for this project eighteen months ago, but they spent a lot of time together and made each other laugh. Nate listened, knew when to be sarcastic and when to be serious. When Trigg

had told Nate about Sky, Nate had been genuinely happy for him, even though ‘happy’ wasn’t what Trigg was.

He was terrified, which was highly uncomfortable. Who knew a twelve-year-old girl could strike such fear in a grown man?

“No problem,” Nate replied, picking up his coffee and casually threw out, “Understand you need a chaperone anyway.”

Now he truly did feel sick. A clammy sweat broke on his chest and his mouth filled with sour saliva. “People are talking?”

“Number one pastime around here. You know that.”

Fuck. My. Life.



YOGA. THAT WAS supposed to bring inner peace, right? Wren needed it as she tried to get through another rough week. One more day, one more day.

Then what? At least tomorrow she would have the distraction of work. Weekends were one long toothache with that kid.

She blew out a slow exhalation into the empty gym. A pair of housekeepers had been in here when she arrived, but they had finished up and left for dinner.

She liked to wait until Trigg took Sky out walking with Murphy before she came in here. She had no idea if their walks were accomplishing anything except an increase in resentment from both of them. Wren kept telling her niece, and herself, that they all had to give this time and an honest effort, but it was really freaking hard. For her and Sky and probably everyone else.

*Don't think. Empty your mind. Warrior one. Ohm.*

Thanks, Glory, for the sunglasses. Sky wore them everywhere. Wren would have argued harder for her to leave

them off, but Sky had also started laying on the makeup. Was that defiance? Or genuine exploration on Sky's part? Either way, Wren knew that saying something would only make it worse. She had to pick her battles.

Did it matter which battles she picked? She lost all of them. That's why she'd come here. To quit having battles over every little thing.

Ugh. She tried to empty her mind again. Closed her eyes as she moved into warrior two. *Breathe.*

Someone came in. She kept her eyes closed.

"We're back," Trigg said.

Awesome.

She opened her eyes. He had changed into loose, boxer-type shorts and a wife beater with armholes that revealed tattoos on his rib cage. He was lean and muscly with smooth, tanned shoulders and an unshaved chest. She would have pegged him as a manscaper, for sure. Either way, her stomach tightened in response.

She made herself hold her pose, pretending she wasn't self-conscious as hell and warming from the pit of her stomach. Her yoga-wear was loose, capri-length pants and a halter bra beneath a loose T-shirt. Nothing particularly revealing, but she felt his eyes travel over her. Was he judging? Did he find her lacking?

Every time she came face to face with him, she felt like this. Scolded and scalded, even though she was doing everything she could to make this work.

Meanwhile, he was putting in an hour a day, life barely dented by their arrival. Like on Sunday. He'd obviously been partying the night before. He'd been moving slow and smelled like stale alcohol. He had carried a cup of coffee around the pond like he was pumping a unit of badly needed plasma into his blood. He and Nate had mostly talked to each other about work. Thank God Aiden had been there, cute little bug. Why couldn't Sky be that age again?

Wren pivoted her feet to point at the other end of her mat. Reach. Hold. Breathe.

“Is it safe to leave her unattended?”

Probably not. “Why? Did something happen while you were walking?”

“No. But it still seems like she doesn’t want to be here.”

Wow, Sherlock. Apparently, their time together wasn’t wasted after all, if he was picking up clues like that.

“I keep reminding her this is going to take time.” He could consider himself reminded, too.

He grunted in response. There were some clanks. She peeked and saw him loading up the bar over the bench press.

“If you’re planning to stick around, maybe start laying down the law,” he said.

What now?

She stepped her feet together and faced him. He had *no idea* how hard she was trying. “Are you speaking in general or about something specific?”

“Both. You know she’s been smoking?”

“You *caught* her? What did you say?”

“I could smell it on her. She said she wasn’t, but...” He shrugged.

“How did she get cigarettes?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“Well, you know who lives here. You must have an idea who smokes. Who do you think would give a twelve-year-old cigarettes?”

“How about any of the ten guys she’s flirting with over at the staff house? I notice you’re not sounding particularly shocked. She’s been smoking already?”

Wren ignored the remark about flirting. She was *so* not ready for that. She split her ponytail and gave it a yank to tighten it. Bit back a groan of suffering. She *hated* confrontation. Hated even more when she fell short and right now, she was falling very short on raising a contributing member of society.

“Look, I told Marvin when I came here for the interview that one of the reasons I wanted to make a change was because she had been acting out.”

“That’s what you meant? She was smoking?”

“And skipping school.” Which they already knew.

“You know my mom is losing her shit because she keeps finding gum everywhere? I’m also supposed to mention that you should review how Sky dresses.”

*You think it’s that easy, hot shot?*

His words shouldn’t have the power to cut so deep. She had pretty much devoted her life to preventing criticism. When it did happen, she knew to weigh it against things like people having a bad day, or they were the type who couldn’t be pleased, like her father. They were small-minded high school girls. They were government types doing their due diligence and covering their own ass.

Trigg was stabbing into her Achilles’ heel, though. Sky mattered to her more than anything in this world and she already knew she was failing her, but she was plumb out of ideas on how to fix this.

Maybe if she was honest? Maybe if he saw this from her side, he’d lighten up?

“I thought the smoking and the skipping was the start of a very natural desire for independence at this age. Experimentation. Pushing boundaries. She’s always been frustrated at not knowing who her father was. I hoped getting some answers would settle her down.”

“She doesn’t want anything to do with me.” He threw up a hand in frustration. “Every question I ask gets a one-word response. How was your day? Fine. Do you want to go to a movie? Maybe. What did you do when you lived in Utah? Shop. What am I supposed to do with that?”

Wren lifted her own hands, shook her empty, helpless palms at him. “Do you think I get anything better out of her?” Actually, she got abuse. He should be so lucky. “If you have some great ideas on how to yank her into line, I’m all ears. Right now, the only thing she seems to care about is your dog. Since that’s the only way she’s willing to spend time with you, I don’t want to take that away.”

It was also the only time she wasn’t freaking out that Sky was making a break for it. She was tense right this second, aware that Sky was unsupervised and probably writing dirty limericks on the walls of their bathroom if she wasn’t climbing into a car with Nebraska tags on it.

Trigg ran a hand over his hair and swore under his breath. “I can’t come down on her. You think me being a hard-ass is going to help?”

“No,” she muttered.

“But we’re all supposed to overlook that she’s a rude brat running the show with you? I’ve heard the way she talks to you. She’s not much better with my mom or anyone else. She doesn’t do what she’s told.” Trigg slapped another weight on the bar. “And not that it matters, but every single one of us has tried to friend her on social media, and she’s ignoring all of us. She doesn’t want to be here or have anything to do with any of us.”

Wren felt the walls closing in. “What are you saying? We should leave? I should go up there and tell her *you* don’t want *her*?”

“I want you to keep an eye on her so she’s not sitting in the smoke pit with guys twice her age!”

“Oh. So, don’t have a job. Shadow her all day. Why don’t *you* do that?” It burst out of her, squeezed by all the pressure she was under.

He leveled a look at her that was lethal.

She *hated* confrontation. She rubbed her shaking hands over her upper arms, gave herself a small hug, then tried to defuse this back to civil.

“I know I haven’t handled this as well as I could have.”

“Understatement,” Trigg muttered.

Oh, she would hop right into her time machine and go back to when her father had been beating the shit out of her, trying to make her tell him who had fathered Mandy’s baby. Let Sky be his problem for the last twelve years. Would that make him happy?

She swallowed, wishing daily that she could do exactly that. Mandy might still be alive.

“I’m doing the best I can, all right?” It was the best she could come up with and she should have left on it. But it was damned hard to make a dramatic exit when her conscience demanded she wipe down her mat. Which she did.

Then, as she started to leave, she heard him mutter to the ceiling, “Your best isn’t good enough. Try harder.”

*Jerk.* She glared at him over her shoulder, but he was on his back on the bench press, not looking at her and, far as she could tell, not trying *at all*.

## Chapter Seven

**S**KY HAD HAD it. Absolutely fucking had it. After making her sit all day in the dining room doing homework, Auntie Wren had bitched her out for smoking and *grounded* her to their room. Really? Oh, really? *Fine*.

She had turned it upside down and finally found two more diaries. They looked a lot like the other two, smaller than notebooks for school, but spiral-bound with colorful patterns on the front. She could tell one was a lot older, though. It was more faded and bent up at the edges. She started reading that one first.



Dear Wren,

I feel so bad. Mama asked me to watch you while she went to church. Papa was in his workshop, but he came in and saw that we were playing with Neil's cars. You weren't even being rough. You were just using your finger to spin the tires. Papa smacked your hand and put you in the crying closet. Then he told me to go to my room and do my homework. I can hear you crying. I wish Mama would come home from church.

Dear Wren,

You said my name today. It sounded just like the way Neil used to say it. It made me so happy but sad. I never want to forget him.

Dear Wren,

Sometimes I get so fed up when I have to watch you. Why does Mama go to church so much? You're just holding on to the doorknob and crying and crying because you want to go out of our room and find her. I



don't know how to make you stop or make you understand she's not even there. I'm scared if you don't stop crying, Papa will come in. I gave you everything that you usually like but you don't want to color or play with the teddy bears or play that we're in a boat. You just keep saying Mama. Please don't get me into trouble.

Dear Wren,

Get better. I don't want you to die. But if you do, tell Neil I miss him.

Dear Wren,

I found my old diary today and read it. I thought I threw it away after they told me I had to be held back. I don't want to go to school. All of my friends are going to the middle school and these kids are going to laugh at me.

Dear Wren,

You started kindergarten today so you came on the bus and into the school with me. Usually no one talks to me, but they all asked me who you were and didn't believe you were my sister. Your hair is so much darker, I guess. When they said you weren't my sister, you cried. Then I had to leave you at the door of your classroom and you cried again. You hugged me so hard and said don't leave me. I was laughing, but I wanted to cry. I promise you I will never leave you. I love you.

Dear Wren,

I told you today that next year I go to middle school. You cried again. I can't talk to you about school. It's too stressful.

Dear Wren,

I have a locker!! I know you're sad that I'm not in your school anymore, but it's nice to have some privacy. I hope I finally make some friends.

Dear Wren,

I'm supposed to be writing an essay. It's so boring. It's about a dead guy as usual. There's this girl in my class. Her name is Lydia. She's new. She put up her hand today and said her mom is a feminist. She said we should be studying what women did in history. Mr. Cartwright said women didn't do anything and Lydia said I'd bet my mom would know better. Mr. Cartwright sent her to the principal's office. I'm a little bit scared for her. What will her dad do to her?

Dear Wren,

Chapter two in the saga of Lydia against Mr. Cartwright. Lydia's mom came into the classroom today. She ripped into Mr. Cartwright in front of the whole class. It was hilarious. We were all laughing and Mr. Cartwright was pure red. He said that she was out of line and she said something like that he is a dinosaur and not the solution. I think I want Lydia to be my best friend.

Dear Wren,

I told Lydia today that I don't even write my essays in class. I do them at home so Papa thinks I have homework and that when I'm here at school, I write to you. She said she thought her mom would approve because women have to stick together. I said I'm only twelve and not a woman and she said she was turning twelve soon, the day before I turn thirteen. I asked her what they do in their family for birthdays and she said it's not much because it's just her and her mom. Her mom makes a cake and she has a few friends over to watch movies.

I told her we don't do much either and about the same, then I felt bad for lying because I really like her. She said maybe I could have a sleepover. I really want to. But I would feel bad if you had to be alone at night.

Dear Wren,

Mama said you missed me when I was at Lydia's this weekend. I kept asking you if you did, but you said only a little bit. I didn't mean to make you sad. Sometimes I get really mad that I feel like I have to be with you all the time, and then sometimes I just wish that I could take you with me wherever I go. It's okay anyway, because I don't think Papa approved of Lydia's mom when she dropped me off. He probably won't let me go there again, even if it's just after school.

Dear Wren,

I was right. I'm not allowed any sleepovers again. I'm trying not to blame you, but Mama kept saying that you missed me. I think it's because Mama wants to sleep and needs me to watch you.

Dear Wren,

I found this in my old backpack when I was getting it ready to give to you for school. I can't believe I haven't written in it for three years. Sorry. Ha-ha. You don't even know that I write to you, so you don't care.

Dear Wren,

Bobby Fiske asked me to go to the dance today. I thought he was joking and being mean, but he wasn't. His friend wants to take Lydia and they asked us together. I already know I won't be allowed, but I said I would ask. If you never see me again, always remember that I love you.

Dear Wren,

Thank you for saying you would be good if I went to the dance.

Dear Wren,

Thank you thank you for being so good. I know you must have been super bored last night. When you

asked me if I had fun I wanted to scream yes!! I had so much fun. I wish we were closer in age and you could do fun things, too. I've been saving my tips from the café and I'm going to ask if we can go to church camp when they go skiing. I think Mama might say yes if you come too and we share a room. Cross your fingers.

Dear Wren,

I want to tell you where I went one night when we were at church camp. I'm dying to tell Lydia, but she had to go away with her mom and won't be back until January. But you remember that boy we were with on the chairlift? When you were skiing down the other run, he came up to me on his snowboard. That's why I didn't meet you at the bottom right away. We were talking and then he said did I want to go to a party later.

I really wanted to. I felt bad that I snuck out when you were asleep. I know you would have been scared if you woke up. I'm sorry! I was going to come back right away because when I found it, it was super loud and wild. It was like when Mama says those hooligans down the street are at it again. Not like the church parties, ha-ha.

So I was going to leave, but he saw me and he said where are you going? I said back to my sister. He walked me back to our room, but we went to his room, which was downstairs from us. Then we were kissing and we had sex! For real. When you're old enough, I'll tell you what it's like. It's not awful, but it's kind of funny. He had never done it before either and said it was the best sex he ever had and I said me too and we were laughing. I really like him. He gave me his phone number. I wish I could call him. I wish I could write down his name, but I'm afraid to.

Dear Wren,



sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry  
I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm  
sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry  
I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry...



SKY FLIPPED, BUT that was all her mom had written for seven pages, then it was only blank pages after that. She picked up the other one.



Dear Wren,

I saw you today. Oh my God it made me so happy and sad to see you. You just stared for a minute, like you couldn't believe it either. Then you smiled, but looked kind of scared. You waved as you got onto the bus, though. I was going into the store to get a sippy cup for Sky and bought this notebook. I'm going to keep coming back to that store and hope that you come back to that bus stop. I'm crying. I've been writing to Sky, but I forgot how good it feels when I write to you. I miss you so much.

Dear Wren,

I'm sitting here at that same bus stop. I come here every day that I'm not working, about the time school gets out. I keep hoping I'll see you again. I want to write to you, but I don't want to miss seeing you. I wish I could come get you.

Dear Wren,

I asked Lydia's mom if I could make it so you could come live with me, but she said it would be a tough sell. I don't make enough money and I already use food stamps.

Dear Wren,

Oh my God, today the lady in the store at this bus stop came out and she said are you Mandy? And I said yes and she said that you would come back on Friday after school. Now I can't wait till Friday. I'm shaking and crying and have to keep stopping writing to rock Sky because she's crying, too. You don't even know what my baby's name is. That's so funny. Except super sad. I can't wait to hug you. I miss you so much.

Dear Wren,

Best day ever. See you next Friday.

Dear Wren,

I wish that you weren't so scared. I know it's really hard to believe that things aren't the way that Mama and Papa always said. I mean, I know why you feel like you have to stay there and be good and everything. But now, when I look back and think about all the times that Mama made us so scared about going to hell, I think that we were already in it. Praying never got us out of that. I got out by leaving with Lydia's mom and the police. That's the only way. I wish I could make you see that.

Dear Wren,

I took so many pictures of you and Sky on my phone. I'm looking at them right now and they make me so happy. I wish I could send them to you.

Dear Wren,

I talked to Lydia's mom and asked her how to make it so that you can be Sky's guardian if something happens to me. She's always telling me I should name someone, but the only other person I trust is Lydia and it's a lot of work to have a baby. She's going to be a social worker and help moms like me so I shouldn't make her raise my baby. I shouldn't make you do it, either, but I can see that Sky makes you so happy. Why won't you come live with us?

Dear Wren,

You didn't show up today. I'm worried.

Dear Wren,

You asked me today if I ever told Sky's dad about her. I've been thinking about it since you left and this is why I haven't told him. He turned into a famous athlete so I'm worried he would think I just had his baby to get his money. Also, he might say that I'm just a welfare white trash mom and take Sky away from me. I love her so much I would die if he did that. Aside from you, Sky is my only family and I never get to see you so I don't want him to take her.

Also, even though he was nice to me that one night, and I liked him, I don't really know him. What if he's like Papa? Do you think he would marry me? I don't. I think he would think I'm super boring. No guys that I talk to are ever interested after they know I have a little girl. Sometimes I think it would be nice to have more money, but even when Papa got that money from his work and we went on vacation like Mom wanted, it didn't change anything.

I don't agree with much that we were taught when we were growing up, but it's true that as long as you have enough to eat and a roof over your head that's actually all that's important. That's all I have with Sky, but I love her so much, even when I want to strangle her. I'm happier now than I ever was living at home.



“WHAT THE *HELL*?”

Wren walked through the door from the manager's office, workweek finally finished, and confronted a disaster. Sky had emptied all the drawers, pulled everything from the shelves, left all the cupboard doors open and had thrown back all the sheets on Wren's bed. She had even dislodged the mattress.



Which was how she had found the diary she now held. She lifted her chin and had the gall to look angry, not guilty.

“Where are the missing pages from the other one?”

Reality began to hit.

“I can’t believe this.” Wren could tell by the towels lumped against the open door to the bathroom that the cupboard under the sink had been ransacked as well. She tried not to think of what questions Sky might have after reading the contents of the diary, but she began to tremble with outrage. “You have a lot of work ahead of you, don’t you?”

“Granddad was strict and Nana made you go to church. Oh, no. What a big secret.” Sky flipped the diary onto the bed. “My mom was going to get an abortion. I already knew that. Why wouldn’t you let me read this?”

“Because it’s mine and none of your business.” A deeper sense of betrayal quivered through her. Emotions she never let herself feel or even acknowledge, but they were rumbling through her like a train. Creating a vibration that dislodged all her compartments from their tight little spaces.

“It’s about *my* mom and dad. And what is the part with the *police*? You yell at me all the time, but I never got in trouble with the police. What happened?”

“Skylar—” She ignored the hot tendrils of fury creeping through her chest, resisted the crushing sensation of judgment and tamped down on the sting of betrayal.

“Was it about my mom? Did she get arrested? Why did she write that she was sorry sorry sorry for three hundred pages?”

“Because she was. Clean this up. Now.” Wren pointed, but that was as much movement as she was capable of. Her feet wouldn’t unstick from the floor. Something sharp had pinned her in place and was piercing from her throat, through her heart, into her belly and all the way down her legs to the feet she had curled inside her shoes.

“You are going to tell me,” Sky said, coming across to stand way too close. “And don’t give me that look.” Sky pointed at her chin. She was tall enough these days they were almost eye to eye, so full of aggression it was another jostle to Wren’s composure. A trigger. *Stand still, say you’re sorry and try harder. Be good. Don’t cry.*

But she literally felt like her blood was boiling. There was a primal scream inside her that wanted to come out.

She contained it. Pushed it down, down, down. She ignored the pressure in her chest, the sting behind her eyes. Put on her mask of indifference and told herself to feel nothing. This was just how life was. Shitty and hard and who cared? *No one.*

“I hate when you look like that. I know you’re lying when you do.”

*Liar. You know who it is.*

“You always tell me I have to be honest with you,” Skylar went on, right in Wren’s face. “That you expect me to be responsible and trust you and that you want what’s best for me. Then you completely lie to me, and hide things from me, and make me live *here* with people I *hate*. You should have left me with Nana and Granddad if you were just going to bring me here instead of raise me yourself.”

“Do you have *any* idea what my father would do to you if you talked to him like this?” Wren spat.

“Lock me in the closet? Oh, *wah.*”

“The closet was where you went when you were crying. The crying happened after you got a wooden spoon across the knuckles. That’s what you got when you talked back. Or didn’t get the dishes done fast enough. Do you know what you got when you didn’t tell your dad who got you pregnant? His *belt*. Except I grabbed his arm and said, ‘Don’t. You might hurt the baby.’ So he gave it to *me.*”

Skylar’s expression changed, but Wren barely saw it. She was back in the farmhouse in Utah, convinced she was going

to die.

“I thought my own father was going to kill me, Sky. That’s my big secret. *And it’s mine.* Does your immature brain have the ability to understand that it hurts to talk about it and that’s why I don’t? That if I do, it should be *my* decision and not *yours.*” Pain reverberated in her chest and she realized she had knocked her fist into it. Hard. “I should only have to share my pain with someone I trust. Not someone who is looking for more ammunition to hurt me. How *dare* you go through my things and demand explanations. Not everything is about you. Do you realize that? Should I have let him beat you out of her that day? Would that have made you happy? At least I wouldn’t be putting up with all of your shit right now, would I?”

She was going too far. She knew she was, but she had completely lost control of her tongue. Poison that had festered her entire life was spewing out of her in vicious clusters of noxious words.

“I have never, ever done anything to you except try to be patient and kind and loving. To protect you from all the ugliness I grew up in. I’ve tried to give you everything I got from your mother and what do I get back from you? *Him.* You think you hate me? You have no concept of what hatred really is. I hate him in ways you don’t have the experience to grasp. Go ahead and hitchhike back to Utah. Go live with him. *I dare* you. Go do whatever the hell it is that will make you happy because I am done trying to figure out what it is.”

Skylar looked like a ghost. Her face had gone gray and her parted lips were colorless. She was exactly what Wren had been aiming for after trying to prevent it all her life. Sky was traumatized.

And Wren realized that the person behaving like her father was herself.

Such a wave of shame engulfed her, she tasted it as bile in the back of her throat.

She walked out. Would she have hit Sky? She was appalled to realize she didn't know. She didn't know what kind of person she had turned into in those moments. She was someone she didn't recognize or want to acknowledge.

She kept moving, trying to put space between herself and Sky, but even more importantly, between herself and the past.

She was outside. Trotting. Not paying attention to where she was going, just moving. Picking up her feet and running. Running and running and running.



SKY HEARD A knock and it made her jolt in surprise.

She realized she had been standing in the same place for a long time. She felt awful. Sick. *Bad*. Like she had run over a dog or something.

“Sky?” It was Trigg. “It’s time to walk Murphy.”

She couldn't see and swiped her sleeve across her eyes. Mascara streaked her cuff.

“Go without me.” Her voice sounded garbled and she had to cough to clear it.

“Want to wait until after dinner?”

“No. Just go.” If he opened the door, she didn't know what she would say or do.

Had Granddad really done that? Auntie Wren had been a little bit younger than her when her mom got pregnant. Eleven. But if he had, and the police had been called, why had Auntie Wren still lived with them? Why had she brought Sky to live there?

“Are you sure?” Trigg asked through the door.

Oh my *Gawd*. “Go!”

She pushed the cuff of her hoodie under her nose and looked around at the huge mess. She remembered doing it, but it kind of felt as though Auntie Wren had created this disaster

with her voice. She hadn't even yelled. But she had been so angry. Sky had never heard Auntie Wren's voice sound like that, all tight and cold and mean. She pushed the heel of her hand into the middle of her chest where it felt achy and broken.

Maybe she was lying. Maybe Granddad hadn't done that. He had never hit *her*. Not with his hand or a wooden spoon or even yelled. In fact, he had barely come in the house, always out in his shop.

But she remembered Auntie Wren always being extra polite to him and making sure Sky said please and thank you and taking her to their bedroom if Sky got stubborn.

Sky had accused Auntie Wren of lying a lot lately, but she didn't actually think Auntie Wren lied very often at all. She didn't think she'd been lying about this. She had been kind of crazy-eyed intense in a way that made Sky feel sick and scared. Like something had happened that she wished could unhappen.

Story of her life lately.

She picked up the diary, flipping to the page of sorrys. Looking at them made her feel really gross. Like when she looked down from a place that was really high and her head felt as though it was already tumbling down while her stomach felt heavy and full of sour oatmeal.

*Should I have let him beat you out of her that day?*

She sat on the edge of the bed. Her eyes were hot as she ran her fingers over the sorrys. She kind of felt like writing a bunch of them herself.



WREN STOPPED TO catch her breath, hands on her knees, ready to puke from exertion and shame. She was still crying, but now it was with remorse. With self-hatred for dumping her baggage on a kid who had been a zygote when Wren's father

had lost control. She hadn't meant to make it sound like she blamed Sky for that.

She didn't even hate her father that much. It was more a hatred of circumstance. Fury that her parents had been messed up by the loss of their son. It had made them incapable of being decent parents. Her upbringing had been lean and hard and sad. So what? No one was promised a rose garden.

Had she tried too hard to give a rose garden to Sky? Sure, but Sky's life had been rough enough, losing her mom before she remembered her and changing schools and all the other challenges. Wren had never seen how complaining about her own childhood would have helped Sky cope with her own. She had just removed Sky from her own trashy upbringing as soon as she could, not wanting her to grow up under the same cloud. And, yeah, maybe shame of where she came from had made her keep the gory details from Sky. Why coat her in that stigma?

But she'd been telling the truth when she said it ought to be her choice when and with whom she shared her childhood pain. It was one of the few choices she'd ever had.

She heard a car coming from the lodge and turned as if she was looking across the washout, which was a stretch of stumps and burned slash greening up with spring. It wasn't a complete eyesore, but not exactly a vista one made a point of running down here to admire. She was already embarrassed on so many levels and now mortified to be caught halfway to the highway, bawling her eyes out.

Of course the truck stopped and the passenger window rolled down. Glory gave her a concerned frown. "Wren? Are you okay?"

"Totally fine." She ran her fingertips across her wet cheeks, searched for something resembling a smile.

"How did you get here? Did your car break down or something?"

“No, I walked.” Ran pell-mell down the hill like a lunatic. It was going to be a thigh-burning climb back up. “I had an argument with Sky. Needed to get some air. Clear my head.”

*I’m doing the best I can.* At least she had been, until today.

“Is she okay? Where is she?”

“Back at the lodge. We’re fine.” So not fine. She folded her arms, looked back the way she had come. She hoped the warnings about bears and other predators were real. Getting ripped apart by a pack of wolves sounded like a dream come true right now.

She heard a male voice ask something and Glory said something back. Wren glanced through and saw it wasn’t Rolf behind the wheel. It was Nate.

“We can turn around and take you back,” Glory said.

“I can mange. It’s okay.”

Glory frowned at her. “Or you could come with me,” she coaxed. “Nate’s dropping me in Haven. I’m having drinks with a friend. Rolf will come later to bring me back. It sounds like you could use a night out.”

Dear God, that sounded good right now.

“I should get back,” Wren made herself say. “Pretty sure I’m too old for running away from home.”

Nate put the truck in park and came around to open the back door of his truck.

“No, honestly—”

He retrieved a box of tissues from the floor and held it out to her. “I’m no expert on parenting a girl Sky’s age, but we all lose our cool sometimes. Don’t beat yourself up.”

His empathy was too sincere not to melt her into a puddle of gratitude. She took a tissue and blew her nose.

“I was out really of line,” she confessed with fresh compunction. “We both were.” She blew again. “But I was

worse.”

“Kids were put on this earth to test us. I live in dread of the day I can’t pick up Aiden and put him in time-out. Sky’s twelve. She’ll be fine. Hop in and take a break for the night.”

Wren hadn’t talked with Nate much outside of the day they had all walked around the pond. She really liked him, though. He was a Steady Eddy and clearly loved his son. She desperately wanted to believe him.

“I’m getting Ilke from the airport,” he added. “I don’t want to be late.”

“Oh.” She found herself moving quickly to accommodate, climbing past the car seat and fishing for the seat belt in the empty spot.

“What was the fight about?” Glory asked over her shoulder as Nate got behind the wheel.

“I’d rather not talk about it. It wasn’t about Trigg, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Twelve is a rough age,” Glory said, sitting forward again. “Dad and I started our rough patch at that age. At least I had my mom.”

“My ex is a child and youth worker. I’ll give you her number,” Nate said. “She runs a preschool these days, but she worked with all ages when we were in Sacramento.”

“Wanda’s really nice,” Glory swung around again. “You’ll love her.”

“Maybe I should walk back,” Wren said, realizing, “I didn’t bring my phone.”

“No, I’m kidnapping you,” Glory said. “If Sky was Aiden’s age, it would be different, but you guys don’t even have separate bedrooms. No wonder you’re fighting. Plus, you and I are overdue for getting to know one another. And it’s time for Trigg to level up as a parent.”



Wren had a vision of Trigg seeing the disaster Sky had made and Sky telling him all that Wren had revealed. She cringed. “Please don’t get him involved.”

“No?” Glory seemed surprised and glanced at Nate, then said, “Okay. But I’ll text Rolf where you are, in case Sky is looking for you.”

Ha. As if.



TRIGG HATED WHEN Rolf acted like he was at his beck and call. Depending on his mood, Trigg often responded with a single finger or ignored him altogether.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like his brother. These days, he didn’t like hardly anyone, but there were hundreds of reasons for animosity rather than accord between them: their age difference of eight years, the fact their dad had had an affair with Trigg’s mom, Rolf’s arrogant personality and Trigg’s insistence on pushing the envelope, sometimes just for the sake of seeing how far he could.

That’s why his mom hadn’t taken their rebuilding this resort seriously at first. She knew the two of them couldn’t work together without clashing. They did. Daily. Because the real reason for their antagonism was that they were both competitive, control-seeking pricks.

All that taken into account, Trigg had had a lot of practice reading the fine print in Rolf’s very subtle body language. He watched for it when he was trying to get a rise out of him. He always knew when flipping the bird would take things from zero to sixty in a blink.

That’s how he tuned in to Rolf’s exact level of alert tension when he showed up in the lounge, didn’t come across to speak to him, just made eye contact and jerked his head for Trigg to follow him out.

It was exactly the kind of order that would normally make Trigg tell Rolf to go fuck himself. In fact, he often thought he

should get T-shirts made and save his vocal cords. He definitely started to say that tonight. He was talking to a woman who had checked in with the cycling club for a single night. She had legs that could crack him in half and he hadn't been laid since this whole thing with Sky had started. He was hoping a shift of his attention to a stranger would erase the vision of Wren's lithe body as she had asked him why *he* wasn't shadowing Sky all day, pulling her into line.

He was starting to feel really inadequate where Sky was concerned, which wasn't a comfortable place for him. *At all*. His kid was rejecting him and even though he was the adult and knew he couldn't let it bother him, it did.

Meanwhile, as Wren had been pointing out that this was supposed to be a team effort, he'd been unable to ignore the way her breasts had been pretty little mounds under her T-shirt. Her loose pants had draped off the curve of her butt in a way that was so sexy, it was still imprinted on his brain.

He *needed* sex. If Rolf cost him this opportunity, he *would* kill him.

But his sixth sense told him Rolf wasn't yanking his chain for kicks.

Trigg signaled to Marvin to put another drink for the cyclist on his tab and excused himself to see what bug had crawled up his brother's constipated ass.

"What?" he said flatly as he came even with Rolf at the check-in desk.

Rolf only walked down the hall to knock on the door to Wren and Sky's suite.

"Who is it?" Sky said.

"Me," Trigg said after a beat, when Rolf looked to him.

"I'm getting ready for bed."

At seven thirty on a Friday?

"I need to talk to you," Trigg said, holding Rolf's gaze.

“What do you want?” Sky sounded like she was right behind the door.

“Do you know where your aunt is?” Rolf asked.

A pause, then: “Out.”

And she left Sky here alone? Trigg frowned. They had just talked about this yesterday.

“Let us in,” Rolf said, trying the door.

“Um...” Sky pushed herself into the crack and showed one eye racooned by smeared makeup.

Trigg reacted on instinct and stuck his foot in the door, pushing in. Rolf followed and they both choked out a laugh of disbelief.

“Wow.” Trigg pressed the door until it clicked. “Is this why you didn’t want to walk tonight? You were being raided by the FBI?”

Sky scowled and moved to pick up a couple of notebooks. She stood by the foot of her bed, the only thing in this room that wasn’t torn apart. She wore the same hoodie she always wore over a pair of jeans. Getting ready for bed, huh? She was also wearing her running shoes. She hugged the notebooks, looking guilty as hell.

“Signs of a struggle,” Trigg said to Rolf. “Maybe Murphy can sniff out the shallow grave.”

“Wren is in Haven,” Rolf said. “With Glory.”

Sky scowled, chin pushed out. “She left her phone. I didn’t know where she was.”

“Glory said you had a fight. She thought you might be worried about her.”

“Like a real fight?” Trigg scanned for injuries on Sky, but only saw shadows of shame and regret.

“Were you worried?” Rolf pressed.

Sky jerked her shoulder. “It’s going to be dark soon. You guys keep talking about bears.”

“What did you fight about?” Trigg took in the way she was hugging the notebooks. He had a dim recollection of Marvin saying something about Wren having Mandy’s diaries. “Are those your mom’s journals?”

“No.” Sky took a step back, though, and tightened her arms.

“Is that what you fought about? You read them? What do they say?”

“They’re letters to Auntie Wren and none of your business.” She looked pretty adamant as she said that, but scared, too.

“Not your business, either, huh?” Trigg surmised.

She flushed even darker, but she didn’t hang her head. No, she stared with belligerence right at him, daring him to make one more remark about it. There was a real *fight-me* look on her face, almost like she would relish a scrum.

Trigg looked to his brother, at a loss as to what he was supposed to do here.

Something in Rolf’s profile jangled in Trigg’s brain. It wasn’t the structure of his brother’s face so much as the aura of frustration that was radiating off him. It was the way Rolf had looked at Trigg most of his life. When Trigg looked back at Sky, he saw the same thing in her expression.

*Holy shit.*

“She looks just like you,” Rolf muttered. “You see that, right?”

“I was going to say she looks like you. That grim reaper death glare—” Trigg cut himself off.

Comprehension dawned as Rolf said in dread-heavy German, “Oh, *fuck*.”

“Hell to the fuck. She’s *Dad*,” Trigg said, switching to English. “That’s why she’s such a pain in everyone’s ass. *She’s one of us.*”

## *Chapter Eight*

**E**DEN HADN'T BATTED an eyelash when Glory brought Wren into her apartment above a mechanic's garage. Glory had pointed out the coffee shop across the street, saying it had belonged to Eden's mom and Eden ran it with her sister, Candy, now.

Wren had had lunch there with Sky last weekend. She was really cursing the lack of buses and feeling guilty and wondering how she could get back to the lodge when Eden swept them into her cluttered, one-bedroom flat.

Glory introduced them, but Eden splayed her hands to show they weren't fit for shaking, covered in streaks of rainbow colors. "I've been practicing my flowers for the cake. Come see."

Her small kitchen table was a Technicolor murder scene with blobs of icing that might have been wilted pansies or disfigured roses. It was genuinely hard to tell. There were even fingerprints. Little ones.

"Those are Zuzu's best efforts. Did I scare you?" Eden grinned at Glory.

"Play all the practical jokes on me you want. If you cross Vivien, that's your life you're taking into your hands."

Eden pulled a cookie tray from her freezer. It held a dozen wildflowers. Wren recognized the buttercups and daisies. Maybe the blue ones were flax? There were little red petals in clusters and a purple thing that dipped down from a green stem. They all looked like the real deal with intricate shading and veins. One had tiny dewdrops clinging to it.

"Corn syrup. What do you think? I'm not sure I love it. Still playing with the colors. Did you bring the swatch from the dresses?"

“I did.” Glory went back to where she had dropped her purse by the door.

“You made all this?” Wren was agog. There were chains of scalloped icing that belonged in a fancy cake shop. Looking at the canvases stacked against the wall beneath the window in the lounge, she also realized, “You did the paintings at the lodge.”

“I have friends in high places.” Her shrug dismissed her own talent.

Glory came back with a square of blue silk. “I didn’t think the flowers were going to be 3-D.”

Eden waggled her brows and set the cookie tray beside the sink, then lifted a cover off a dish beside the toaster. She revealed what looked like a roll of toilet paper covered in a glossy layer of ivory fondant. Upon that canvas, she had painted the craggy backdrop of a mountain. Grass sprung up around the base along with wildflowers, ferns and, as she turned it, a bird.

“I was thinking it would go on the top layer. You guys are here.” Eden motioned setting a bride-and-groom topper on the cake. “The bottom layer is the grass and flowers, like we planned. The second one is mostly tree tops, and the mountain will come up along one side to the top layer, so you guys are on the peak, but I thought I should break up all that sky with, duh, a whiskey jack for the resort. Right?”

“I vote yes. It’s gorgeous.”

Wren could only stand there with her mouth hanging open.

“Take this back and show her.” Eden plopped the cover over it again and picked up the cookie tray. “And eat these. Zuzu and I had so much icing today, I’m vibrating, but I can’t leave them alone.”

Glory popped one into her mouth, then showed her purple tongue.

Wren ate one to be polite, but it was butter and sugar, far too rich to eat two.

Glory helped herself to glasses and opened the wine she'd brought while Eden continued the cleanup they had interrupted, filling the sink with soapy water.

Wren didn't usually drink, but she accepted the glass Glory handed her.

"So, you're the new manager at the lodge." Eden held her glass stem in soapy fingers while they all clinked. "What do you think so far?"

"I like it." What else would she say with the owner's daughter listening?

"Dad loves you, by the way," Glory said. "Even Vivien keeps saying, 'She's very organized.'"

"High praise." Eden sounded impressed. "Vivien said to me, 'You could make something of yourself if you would focus.'" She smirked at the barbed compliment. "Then she said, 'But wait until after the wedding.' Because I'm doing the cake and helping with the catering prep."

"Also putting on a pretty blue dress and smiling in my wedding photos."

"I might even sing a song. Are you getting nervous?" she asked Glory.

"I don't know what I am. Between the book deadline and the wedding and..." She glanced briefly at Wren. "There's so much going on, I can't keep it straight in my head. I really need to decompress." Glory tilted the wine in her glass.

Wren took a healthy gulp of hers. She had already heard from Trigg that Vivien was unhappy with Sky. Were all of them frustrated? It wasn't a surprise, but it was incredibly demoralizing.

"Glory said you're raising your niece."

Wren flashed a panicked glance at Glory.



Eden caught the look and said, “What?”

“Nothing,” Glory said into her wine. “Just what I told you when we hired Wren, that she brought her niece with her. Sky is twelve.”

“How is that? Being mom instead of auntie?” Eden dried her hands on a tea towel and turned to lean against the edge of the sink. “I mean, I would kill or die for Zuzu and take her in a heartbeat if anything happened to Candy, but I *love* being auntie. Like today, we had a riot getting all messy and I got her jacked so high she was bouncing off the walls, then Candy picked her up and it’s her problem when Zuzu crashes. You don’t have that luxury, do you?”

“No. And we have our moments.” Wren found herself taking another sip. She didn’t particularly like wine and this red was really dry, but it loosened up her knots of tension. “We got into it today. That’s why Glory brought me along. To give us a break from each other.”

“It’ll be better once the ski hill opens,” Eden said. “When I was Sky’s age, we were at the ski hill all winter and at the lake all summer. Then the ski hill closed and, honestly, I was really awful. Cop’s daughter.” She gave a sheepish wince.

Wren was starting to doubt she and Sky would stay past next week. “I keep thinking I should have enrolled her in school. She doesn’t know anyone her age and being stuck at the lodge... I don’t know.”

“Is her father in the picture?”

Wren looked at Glory, not knowing how to answer that.

“Loaded question,” Glory said. “One for another day.”

Eden accepted that with a shrug and turned to rinse the sink.

Wren sipped her wine again, relaxing another notch. She didn’t know if she had expected Glory to spill her business, but it felt nice that she hadn’t. Maybe it was loyalty to Trigg

and the family she was marrying into, but it was a badly needed balm against what felt like pure betrayal from Sky.

For one reason or another, Wren had always felt isolated. She was a misfit, always had been, but in this moment, she felt like she had a friend.



SKY WISHED AUNTIE Wren would walk in the door.

She had been upset and confused and feeling really guilty, but after a while she had started to wonder where the heck Auntie Wren had gotten to. She texted and heard Auntie Wren's phone buzz on the counter, so she had figured she was somewhere in the lodge. Maybe talking to Glory or walking around the pond getting mauled by a wolf.

Sky had eaten a bar from the cupboard, not wanting to go to the dining room by herself. Besides, what if Auntie Wren came back while she was out?

It was really irresponsible of her to disappear like this. Did she realize that?

Especially when *this* happened. Two giant men pushed their way in and Rolf said Auntie Wren had gone to town and Trigg was now calling her a pain in everyone's ass, saying, "*She's one of us.*"

They both looked at her like she was one of those garbage vegetables, like kale.

She wasn't one of them, though. She was her own person, thank you. They could fuck right off. She didn't say it out loud, but made sure they read it in her face.

"Oh, that's a beauty." Trigg laughed right at her.

Rolf said, "Of all the dumbass shit you've pulled, this takes it. It really does."

"Yeah, I thought Mom was pissed with me before." Trigg scratched the stubble under his chin.

The way they were talking about her, like she was a thing, was annoying and insulting. Sky kept her chin up, wishing she was tall enough to properly look down her nose at them. They were so—*Ugh*.

“Do you know when Auntie Wren will be back?” she asked Rolf, making sure he knew *he* was the garbage vegetable.

“You think she’s coming back?” Trigg scanned the mess Sky had made. “I feel bad.” He looked at Rolf. “I had no idea. I thought she was raising Mandy’s kid and I just mailed in a few chromosomes, but now I genuinely feel bad.”

“You should,” Rolf agreed, folding his arms.

Sky felt like she should be scared. They were big and stood between her and the door, but she just felt judged and irritated. Their sarcasm was not required, thanks.

*Auntie Wren, get back here.*

“Can you find out when I should expect her?” Sky asked Rolf.

“I’ll leave for Haven soon. You have time to clean up.”

She squinted her eyes. *You’re not the boss of me.*

Rolf snorted and turned to Trigg. “I’ll leave *you* to clean up *your* mess.” He smacked Trigg on the shoulder as he crossed to the door. “*Viel glück.*”

“Good luck,” Trigg translated as Rolf left. “You’ll have to learn German.”

She snorted. *Right.*

“Yeah. You will,” Trigg said, sounding like he thought *he* was the boss of her. “Now start cleaning up or I’m taking those notebooks.”

Sky tightened her grip on them, genuinely scared. Auntie Wren would *kill* her.

Which had never bothered her before because her aunt loved to lecture and her being angry was a giant *whatever*.

This was different, though. Auntie Wren had been different.

*I should only have to share it with someone I trust.*

Auntie Wren wouldn't be just angry or disappointed. She would be upset. *Hurt*.

“Don't,” Sky said, glaring at him in a way that told him she *would* fight him.

Except that made her think about Auntie Wren trying to fight her own dad. That hadn't worked out so well.

She didn't *want* to believe Granddad had hit Auntie Wren with a belt. Every time she started to, the backs of her eyes got really hot and her throat closed up.

“Are you going to clean up?” Trigg asked, making it sound like an ultimatum.

Sky hadn't thought about being able to hurt Auntie Wren. Not in a really deep-down way. She had always wanted her aunt to fight back when they argued. Really fight back. Maybe she had wanted to see how far she had to go to make her lose her temper. She wasn't sure why she was so hard on her. It just bothered her that her aunt would take whatever Sky dished out. To Sky, it had felt like Auntie Wren didn't really care what Sky said or did since it didn't seem to do anything but annoy her a little bit.

Now she felt like maybe Auntie Wren had learned not to talk back or cry and always be polite and calm and reasonable because she would only have been smacked around and put in the pantry if she said what she really thought and felt.

“Sky.”

She threw the notebooks into her night table and went around to shove Auntie Wren's mattress back into place with her knee. Her chest felt tight and anger made her push too

hard. The mattress skewed off the other side. She had to charge around and knock it the other way.

He stood there watching while she screwed it up *again*.

“I’ll clean up,” she snarled. “*Go*.”

“I’ll stay and keep you on task.” He looked through the game cases by the TV. Then he picked one out and played it while she worked. *Jerk*.



WREN ONLY HAD two glasses of wine and Eden had fed them an amazing leek soup with sourdough bread, but she was a lightweight when it came to alcohol. She felt clumsy and nauseous when Rolf arrived to take them home.

Maybe it was a resurgence of angst over her fight with Sky. No more pretending it hadn’t happened by talking movies and wedding plans and where to buy a decent bra.

Rolf opened the back door for her at the same time he opened the passenger door for Glory, which made her falter and mumble, “Thanks.” Queen of Sophistication over here. She climbed into the back of the SUV.

As Rolf settled behind the wheel, Glory said, “Oh! I forgot the cake to show Vivien.” She threw open her door and ran back up the stairs into Eden’s flat.

Wren already knew that Rolf didn’t talk much unless he had something to say. Everyone at the lodge seemed to jump to keep him happy. On the few occasions when he’d asked her for something, like fresh coffee, she had obliged as quickly and efficiently as possible.

It should have been a comfortable silence. She wasn’t a big talker herself. She was friendly and could make all manner of small talk across a reception desk, but always let others guide that. She didn’t have to fill a silence.

This one felt loaded, though. She got the feeling he was watching her in the mirror, which made her stomach tighten

like she was in trouble.

On her side, she was dying to ask him about his brother. Really puerile stuff, too. *Is he mad at me? Does he like me?* She couldn't waste brain space on Trigg. Not in any capacity but as Sky's father.

She was relieved when Glory reappeared and he climbed out to hold her door again.

"Do you want me to take that?" Wren offered.

"No, I'm good. Thanks."

Moments later, they were off, but Wren's sense of being on Rolf's radar intensified. Even Glory asked him, "Everything okay?"

"Thinking," he responded.

"Hey, you know what Eden mentioned? That some locals were in the coffee shop gossiping about you firing Basco Construction. One said it sounds like Dirk was up to his old tricks. He was part of the reason the original owners of the ski hill had to sell. It wasn't just the recession. He sold them a snowcat that tied up their cash and he was on the town council when they voted to increase taxes."

"Kurt already told me there were rumors back then that Basco had been trying to push them into receivership, but he didn't have the money to buy them out. Not then. And we turned down his lowball offers three times in the last decade. What would he even want it for? Without a resort, there's no draw for people to buy the houses he wants to build. None of this makes sense."

They fell silent, forcing Wren to think about what she would say to Sky. She was hurt, damn it. Ashamed of herself for losing her temper, but genuinely, deeply hurt that Sky had turned on her. She had always tried to love her and shield her and give her everything Mandy would have wanted for her. Why didn't Sky love her back? She desperately wanted a good relationship with her. She didn't have anyone *but* Sky.

Which was her own fault. She knew that. She didn't trust easily. Lydia and her mom had helped her at different times, but Wren always thought that was old loyalty toward Mandy, not about her. Wren was friendly with people she worked with, but never confided in them to any degree. No one except Mandy had ever cared that she was hurting or scared or worried or angry.

She missed Mandy so hard. Mandy had understood the heavy stuff without Wren having to talk about it. She just *knew*.

Now Sky knew some of it and did she care? Nope. Not one iota.

Wren swallowed the ache in her throat.

Rolf parked and said, "I'll come around."

She could open her own door, but waited. He took the cake from Glory as she and Wren slid out.

"Thanks for tonight. It was fun," Wren said, digging up a smile of gratitude for Glory. "And the lift," she added toward Rolf. "Good night."

"Wren." His firm voice halted her.

She turned with unease. Here it came. She had known she was in trouble.

"Your hard work isn't going unnoticed."

It said something about how taken for granted she had been feeling that she almost cried at hearing him say that.

"If anything comes up that makes you think about leaving, talk to me first."

Glory's expression grew concerned. She tipped her face upward beneath the glow of the floodlight. "Like what?"

How much time did she have? Wren thought dryly.

"Like anything that would drag *you* back into lodge business." Rolf took hold of Glory's chin and planted a firm

kiss on her lips. “Happy wife, happy life.”

Ah. So his offer wasn’t about her.

“Thanks,” Wren mumbled and went into the lodge through the kitchen entrance.



FINALLY, *FINALLY*, AUNTIE Wren came back.

Sky had all the lights off and the TV turned to its lowest volume. She had told Trigg she was going to bed, but she was playing Crash Bandicoot. He had played it the whole time she was cleaning up, making her listen to him breaking boxes and collecting gems and completing levels. Super annoying, especially since she’d been stuck on level six since she got the game for Christmas—mostly because Auntie Wren took it away every time Sky skipped school. Sky had asked him if he had his own game player in his room and suggested he go use it, but he said he hadn’t played video games in years.

Now she could see he had unlocked a bunch of bonus levels. How? Everyone she talked to said it was a legit hard game. He hadn’t looked up any cheats on his phone and even if he knew how, you still had to be able to do it.

Auntie Wren didn’t say anything and didn’t look at her, just crossed in front of the glow of the TV and went into the bathroom.

Sky paused her game to listen. Auntie Wren never banged things around to let anyone know she was mad, but she might tell her to go to bed or say something else. Sky kind of wanted her to talk first, so she could figure out how mad she was.

Oh, yuck. Was she throwing up?

She listened harder. Yeah, that was a cough and a spit and a flush. *Gross*.

The water ran. A minute later, she heard a toothbrush going back into its cup. Auntie Wren came out wearing only her underwear. She opened the top drawer of the dresser,



which Sky had probably put away wrong. Auntie Wren pushed things around, then put on her peace-sign pajama shirt with her flower pajama pants.

“Wait,” Sky said, turning off her game. “I want to leave. Tonight.” As the TV went off, the room went dark. Sky tried to click on the lamp, but the switch was set the wrong way on the wall and it didn’t come on. Stupid antique wiring.

She half expected Auntie Wren to say something like, *I want to win a million dollars and go on a cruise*. She said that sometimes when she didn’t want to have an argument, but wanted to say ‘no.’

Tonight, she only said, “I’ve been drinking.” She didn’t even try to turn on her lamp by her bed, just pulled the covers back.

“Is that why you threw up? Are you drunk?” *That* was a new Auntie Wren.

Sky moved to sit on the edge of her own bed, facing her aunt as she tried the lamp on her nightstand. Same problem as the other lamp. Stupid old lodge.

“I made myself throw up. I don’t want to be hung over.” Auntie Wren climbed into bed and rolled so her back was to Sky.

Sky refused to take the hint. “Trigg was here. He said I have to have breakfast with him. At *seven*. It’s Saturday tomorrow.”

He also said, *Skip the makeup and sunglasses. You’re not a real housewife of Montana*.

“Okay,” Auntie Wren murmured.

“No!” It wasn’t okay. This was the part where Sky understood what burning bridges meant. Auntie Wren might be so mad at her, she would make her do it. “I don’t want to. He said he wants to tell people I’m his daughter. I just want to leave. Can we go? Before breakfast?” She should have started packing. She had meant to. It was just so annoying that he had

played so well. She had wanted to figure out how and pack when Auntie Wren got back.

“They said it would be your decision whether to say anything about him being your dad.” Auntie Wren sounded confused.

“I know. But he asked me if I knew Sunday was Father’s Day. He said he would ask Vivien to do a press release. That means it’ll go online, right?” He had told Sky to lock down all her social media so no one could creep her once her name got out.

“Why does he want to do that?”

*She’s one of us.*

“I don’t know,” Sky mumbled. “He was being really bossy and said he would take the diaries if I didn’t clean up—”

Auntie Wren flopped onto her back. Her eyes held dots of white from the light that came through the closed blinds from the parking lot outside the window, but Sky could tell she was staring right at her, really hard.

Sky felt squirmy inside. “I didn’t say anything or let him read them or anything.”

Auntie Wren turned away and let out a breath like she was really fed up.

“I swear,” Sky insisted.

“I’ll talk to him before he does anything.” She sounded tired, but sad.

Sky had thought she would feel relieved when her aunt got back, that all she needed was for Auntie Wren to say she would fix it and all of this would be okay.

She felt bad for asking, though. Auntie Wren wasn’t saying anything about where she had gone or thanks for cleaning up or sorry she had disappeared or if she was still mad.

She *was* mad. That’s why she was lying there with her back turned, but she was still promising to talk to Trigg. That

made Sky's throat feel hot and filled with lumps.

Should she apologize? She felt like she should, but for what? Making a mess? Reading the diary? Getting so far into her aunt's face, Auntie Wren had told her something that was so awful, Sky wouldn't want to talk about it either?

Maybe she should apologize for making Auntie Wren find Trigg and ruining what they used to have?

She wanted that again. She had been so angry that Auntie Wren didn't want to find Trigg. She had pushed and pushed and now she had what she asked for and didn't want it. She didn't want Trigg to make her the center of attention and tell her to learn German.

Did Auntie Wren even want her anymore? Her chest felt like someone sat on it.

She realized her eyes were wet and scrubbed the damp cuff of her hoodie across them, holding her breath so Auntie Wren wouldn't know she was crying.

"Are you waiting for me to fall asleep so you can run away? I honestly can't take any more right now. I promise I'll talk to him first thing. *Please* lie down and go to sleep so I can."

Sky's mouth pulled down at the corners.

Then she did something really babyish and dumb, but she felt so *miserable*. She kept thinking of Auntie Wren as a little girl and it made her throat hurt.

She lifted the covers on this side of Auntie Wren's bed and lay down so they were back to back.

Auntie Wren gave a sigh that seemed to shake her whole body. "Thank you."

Skylar stared at the drawer of the night table for a long time.

## Chapter Nine

AT SIX FORTY-FIVE, with her teeth and hair freshly brushed, Wren texted Trigg and was invited to ‘come up.’ When she got to his room, his door was cracked open with the swing bolt. She knocked lightly and went in, then quickly blocked Murphy from one of his too-friendly greetings.

Trigg’s was a corner suite, bigger than Marvin and Vivien’s and arranged differently with standard-issue lodge furniture that included a desk, a love seat and an armchair. His bed was unmade and the only other personal touches were the dog bed and his dirty laundry in a basket in the corner.

Trigg was framed by the open door of the bathroom, jaw covered in shaving cream. Half of it was already swept away by a razor. He wore jeans, but no shirt. His tattoos painted his shoulder, pec and rib cage in evergreen boughs and rocky waterfalls and mountain peaks. His stomach was flat, his feet bare.

*Whew.* Was it hot in here? She looked to the window where the curtain billowed along the edge, telling her it was cracked to let in fresh air. Even so.

He flicked his gaze down her long blue skirt and the yellow button shirt she had left open and knotted over a baby-pink tank.

“I told her to let you sleep in.” He gave the razor a swirl in the sink and made a face in the mirror, then scraped away more foam. “What’s up?”

She removed the lever on the door so it closed completely. “Sky said you want to start telling people?”

“Yeah.” He contorted his face to scritch across his upper lip.

“But you said it would be her decision. I agree with that.”

“Yeah, but...” He made her wait while he went after a spot on his cheek. “That never felt right. Now I understand why.”

“Oh?” *Pray tell.* She folded her arms, waiting, but he seemed determined to finish shaving before he finished their discussion.

She should have asked him to meet her in the office. This felt really intimate. She had never watched a man shave and Trigg was a man’s man. Virile. Potent.

Was this what it was like to be married? How many women had shared that king bed? She bet he was one of those gymnasts who used every corner of the mat.

She had woken half an hour ago nearly falling off the edge of her twin. Sky was a bed hog and still fast asleep. Despite their fight, Wren had heard the remorse and worry in her niece’s voice last night. Sky wasn’t ready to be outed.

Wren hadn’t wanted her listening through the door into the office, though. So she had come up here to beard the lion in his den, ha-ha. Who knew it would make her feel so much like a mouse under a heavy paw?

He bent and splashed water on his face, double-checked his work, then used a hand towel to dry off. He leaned in the doorjamb, flipping the towel onto his shoulder.

Seriously, did he have a catalogue that showed him how to pose like a rakish sex god?

And was it her imagination, or had something in him changed? He still had an aura of dynamic tension, but where she had read animosity before, he seemed charged with purpose this morning, which felt even more dangerous. It was the difference between the lion prowling and growling versus the bunched energy once he had locked on to his chosen gazelle.

She wasn’t the gazelle, was she? He was looking at her the way he had that first day, without the mask of enmity he’d been wearing ever since. Speculative. Unabashed in how much sex appeal he gave off.

And she had zero defenses against it. It was as if an invisible wall between them had been dropped. Smashed. His masculinity shone that much brighter and more intense. She could smell him from over here, all spicy with shaving smells and damp skin and man.

She wanted to look at his tattoos, but got tangled in his hot, blue eyes. So many questions as he searched her gaze, suggested he was seeing her more clearly, more up close, than before. Which was horrifyingly uncomfortable.

She looked away. Swallowed. Tried to pretend she wasn't reacting to him when there were definitely more important topics to discuss. "Sky?" she prompted.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat. "Turns out she's my kid." He ran a hand across his hair in a move that was charming in its self-deprecation. "I know the test said she was, but last night I *saw* it. I get it. She's *mine*." He sounded proud, but rueful.

A fracture of trepidation went through her. A sense of threat that had always been there, but now grew wider and deeper. Pledged greater pain.

"I see," she said carefully.

"It made me realize I've been going about this all wrong. And I don't usually care if I screw up on the way to getting something right. You don't master a backside ten-eighty without crashing and burning a few times. Maybe you even break a few bones. But I didn't see a lot of room for error on this. It's been stressful."

*Poor him.* She folded her arms, tensing further.

"But last night I realized what you call 'acting out'..." he air-quoted with his fingers "...that's her personality. It's not going away."

Wren stiffened. Stood taller. "That's not true. You don't know her. She's going through a lot."

“She ripped your room apart like a gangster sending a message.”

A stoplight burned hot and red in her throat. She didn't want to talk about last night, but her protective instincts rose, urging her to downplay and apologize and fix.

“We had a disagreement.”

He snorted.

“She'll settle down,” she insisted.

He held up a hand. “We Johanssons never settle. We especially don't settle *down*. How long has she been pushing boundaries? Be honest.”

She squirmed. “It's natural at her age.”

“A year?”

She clenched her teeth, not wanting to lie, but not wanting to give him ammunition. “It's been a difficult few years. We had to change schools a couple of times.”

“Why?”

“I moved out of my parents' house.”

“Why?”

It was like talking to Sky. Like succumbing to a dentist's drill without anesthetic. Simple answers weren't enough. More, more, more. Wren clawed for patience.

“It was always my plan to take full custody. That's what Mandy wanted, for me to raise her.” She leapt on the opportunity to reiterate that.

“So there were no problems when you were living with your parents?”

“Well, it wasn't ideal. She was a toddler and my parents were getting older. Of course there were times when Sky's energy level was higher than they appreciated.”

Her father had learned his lesson after Mandy left, not even using the wooden spoon after that because he didn't want

the police coming around again, or the church making him attend counseling, so he had stayed out of the house altogether. Sky had been exuberant and headstrong, though. Wren had had to run constant interference. Between after-school care, youth group and play dates, Wren had never left Sky at home with her parents without being there herself.

That was her own baggage, though, trying to keep Sky in her life while sparing her a visit to the inside of the family closet—literally and figuratively.

Trigg didn't have to look so smug about it, as if he knew how hard it had been.

“Maybe she does have a mind of her own,” Wren said. “I happen to think that's a great quality, especially in a girl. I'm not going to be the one to discourage it.” She still had trouble standing up for herself. She was shaking in her sandals right now and never wanted Sky to feel so intimidated by anyone, especially a man with power over her.

“Is that what we're calling it? A mind of her own?” He quirked a skeptical brow, then gave her a condescending smile. “Here's what I see. Sky is trying to take charge of your two-person pack. You're trying to lead because you're the adult, but Johanssons are dominant a-holes who are programmed to take the reins.”

“Don't call her that!”

“A Johansson? She is. That's what I mean about seeing myself in her. Rolf and I have spent our whole lives living this dynamic, with our dad and with each other. I know exactly what I'm dealing with. That's why *I'm* making the decision that it's time to acknowledge our relationship.” He tapped his chest. “Leaving that decision with her was driving me crazy. I can't allow a twelve-year-old to hold that over me.”

“Oh, so the patriarch is exerting control over a girl with no agency?” Confrontation might make her barf, but fighting for Sky was a no-brainer. “Sorry, *man*, but I won't let you.”



“No need to burn your bra,” he drawled. “I’m Sky’s dad. That’s true and I’ll state it loud and proud if I want to.”

“*No*,” Wren insisted. Commanded. Begged. “I just told Sky I would stop you.”

“Feels like you’re dealing with two sides of the same bent quarter, doesn’t it?” He smirked, coming toward her with such smooth menace, she stumbled back a step.

He opened a drawer in the dresser, gaze staying on her, mirth at her expense indenting the corners of his mouth. It was fascinating and attractive and should have reassured her that this was a friendly conversation. But something playful and male in his body language told her he knew exactly what he was doing with his half-naked masculinity.

He knew he had power over *her*. In all kinds of ways. And he was enjoying the hell out of it.

While she was in danger of losing what was most precious to her.

“It feels like I’m dealing with someone who isn’t giving due consideration to the damage he’s doing to a child.” If she sounded stuck-up, she didn’t care.

“She’s not some delicate flower that needs protecting. Trust me when I say that kid has a hide as thick as mine. She can handle everything I’m going to throw at her and I swear she’ll thrive on it. So will I.”

He pulled the shirt over his head, threading in one arm, then the other, exposing the tufts of hair under his arms, making the muscles on his chest flex, drawing her gaze to his brown nipples.

“She needs something as hard as I am to push up against or she will continue attacking you. How is that working out for you, by the way?”

She looked up to his eyes and saw he knew where hers had strayed.

“She’s attacking me because she feels threatened. By *you*.” *She* felt threatened. On so many levels. This wasn’t going the way she needed it to, at *all*. “I’m not going to make it worse by letting some *man* take control of her life and break her.”

His face hardened. “I’m not going to *break* her.”

“No, you won’t. Because I won’t *let* you.” It took everything in her to stand there and say that. He was a man who could squash her if he wanted to, but if she didn’t have Sky, she didn’t have anything.

“She’s a Johansson. We don’t break. We don’t ask permission from anyone to be who and what we are. And look around.” He pointed in the general direction of the resort. “We’re pretty fucking awesome. She deserves to know that. She deserves everything I can give her and even more importantly, she needs to understand the expectations and responsibilities that come with being one of us. She needs to know how to live up to who we are.” He came across and pointed at her. “So I’ll tell you what I won’t let *you* do. I won’t let you deny her that. Not anymore.”

Wow. A knife to the heart and a twist for good measure. Her pulse was racing with yes, no, stop, go. She fought revealing it.

“So do you want to lawyer up?” he threatened. “Or go to breakfast?”

“That—” She pointed at his freshly shaved jaw. “That threat right there. *That* is why I didn’t want to tell you she’s yours.”



WREN SWUNG AWAY.

Trigg grabbed her arm.

She froze, yet something slammed into him like a punch. Her accusation that he would ‘break’ Sky had been bad enough, but the way Wren braced herself suggested she thought he was going to hit her.

The floor seemed to shift beneath him. Trigg loosened his hold, lifted his hand away.

Wren rubbed the spot on her arm with her other hand, pivoting to face him, but stepping back at the same time. Watchful.

His heart lurched.

“Did you—” He didn’t even want to say the question aloud.

It occurred to him that he’d been tapping in a thumbtack with a sledgehammer. It had been a big night. The whole time he’d been mindlessly playing a video game while Sky cleaned up, he’d been trying to process that he was a father. *Feeling* it, for the first time. Fatherhood was a heavy mantle. He was still shifting under it, trying to figure out how it fit. But the more he accepted Sky as his, the more he mentally took the wheel on how to steer their relationship and the better he felt. It wasn’t in him to back-pedal. Ever.

Maybe he didn’t have to mow down everyone in his path, though. Last night he’d actually felt some pity for Wren, having to deal with someone as headstrong as he was for all these years.

“What are you going to do?” he asked, tempering his tone.

She made a little choking noise. “What choice do I have?”

He could think of a thousand ways she could come at him, but he would block every one of them. She knew it, too. He could see it in her eyes. The defeat. Not the kind where you picked yourself up and said, ‘Next time,’ either. The kind of loss that went bone deep.

Something teetered in him. This wasn’t a contest where there was only one winner. Couldn’t be. That wasn’t good for Sky.

“I’ll tell her she has to go to breakfast. That I think it’s best.” Her tone of quiet dignity sheared against his conscience.

Trigg didn't let up when he wanted something, but he wasn't a bully. "I'll tell her I didn't give you a choice."

"Either way, *I* failed to stand up for her."

"Wren..." He held up an open palm. He wasn't trying to destroy her relationship with Sky, but, "You've had her all this time. It's my turn."

"I know that." Her voice held a scrape. "You think I haven't spent a decade working through every scenario, trying to come to terms with the fact that if she met her father, he might take her from me? And I might have to *let* him? For *her* sake?"

Her profile was pale and vulnerable and young. He kept forgetting how damned young she was. He'd been trying to ignore how feminine she was with her flouncy skirt and her breasts plumped against the snug tank, playing peek-a-boo behind the fall of yellow. He wanted to view her as an adversary to be conquered, but she struck him as someone to be protected. Delicate.

"Look." He tried a different tactic. "You've had a lot to carry all those years. This is a chance to—"

"Don't." She snapped her head around, expression still stark, but hard. Hard as any resolve or purpose he might possess within him. "Don't act like you're doing me a favor. I'm doing you one by letting her hate me so she might actually turn to you. You're welcome." Her voice cracked and she turned toward the door again.

He lifted his hand again, but had to let her go.

He stood there for a long minute, going over their conversation the way he would if he'd had a bad run. Where had he miscalculated? How did he fix it for next time?

Murphy nudged his thigh.

Trigg gave his ear a ruffle, then finished dressing and left the dog in his room. Murphy had already been out for a sniff and a pee. He'd be fine for an hour.

The dining room was pretty quiet since it was early and a Saturday. Tradesmen were getting the message about using the carry-out window on their way to the base. There were only two tables with guests and a carpenter filling his travel mug before heading upstairs to finish the lodge rooms before the wedding.

Wren and Sky were at the buffet. Nate was ahead of them and already filling his plate.

“I thought you brought your Swedish home last night,” Trigg said, glancing for Ilke.

“She’s sleeping in. Then laundry, gym, check in with the boss before we get Aiden. She said to tell you she’d take the dog for a run if you want.”

“She’ll have to ask my daughter.” Trigg’s heart turned over as he said it aloud, but the dizzying sensation was a lot like when he got to the bottom of the half-pipe after a flawless run. Being a father wasn’t the result of a blood test anymore. It was a real thing inside him that was both powerful, yet made him feel oddly susceptible. Like he had inadvertently left a flank open.

Nate paused in shaking hot sauce across his scrambled eggs to give Sky a nod of acknowledgment. “I’ll let her know.”

Sky reddened and glared blame into the side of Wren’s head.

Wren said nothing, didn’t even send a sarcastic, *You’re welcome* his way. Her expression was so unreadable, it was spooky.

“Sit with us,” he said, wanting her to realize he wasn’t trying to carve her out of Sky’s life completely.

Her response was a barely perceptible nod, one that agreed to comply with an order.

The energy coming off Sky was downright blistering. She put one triangle of toast on her plate and followed Wren. They

sat across from Nate.

“Have fun at Eden’s last night?” Nate asked Wren, proving how he excelled at his job. No matter what Nate faced, he kept cool.

Wren nodded. “She’s really funny. Such a good artist.”

“Yeah, she sings and plays a bunch of instruments, makes great food at the coffee shop. How is one person so good at so many things?”

“Wait until you see the wedding cake.”

“Yeah?”

Rolf arrived as Trigg was pulling out the chair next to Nate’s. Rolf rapped the end of the table with his knuckles as he went by. “I read it. Looks good.”

“The press release,” Trigg explained when Wren looked up.

Sky sent another round of death rays into the side of Wren’s face.

Okay. That was starting to bother him. Time to get her antagonism pointed at someone who could take it.

“Good news,” Trigg said as Rolf pulled out the chair at the table beside them. “We’re getting help at the base. For the foreseeable future, actually.”

Rolf sent him a dry look that asked if he knew what he was doing.

Trigg responded the way he always did, with a shit-eating grin that claimed of course he did.

He never did.

“You’ll want to eat a bigger breakfast,” Trigg told Sky. “No break ’til lunch.”

“It’s Saturday.”

“With a natural talent like that, we’ll put you in charge of scheduling.”

Sky wasn't amused. She looked to Wren. "You said we would find the movie theater today."

"I guess it's laundry day." Wren didn't lift her eyes off her plate. "We'll do that tomorrow."

Trigg wanted to tell her to take a proper day off, enjoy herself. *Don't act like you're doing me a favor.*

"Ilke and I are taking Aiden to a movie in Kalispell on Sunday. Come with us," Nate offered. "It's a multiplex. You don't have to watch the cartoon."

"I'll look it up. See what's playing." Wren smiled. "Thank you."

Sky looked like she was plotting a murder.

"Finished?" Trigg asked her. "Get Murphy from my room. Meet me outside." Trigg stabbed his last cubes of hash browns.

Sky glared at him.

"Leave him for Ilke, then?"

Sky curled her lip and rose. He told her the code and reminded her to use the service stairs or go through the outside door. His mother didn't like the dog coming through the lobby.

As Sky walked out, Trigg reached to finish his coffee.

"Take some yogurt," Nate advised. "A hungry kid never cooperates."

"She likes the strawberry-vanilla ones," Wren said, but didn't look up and didn't say anything else, not even, 'Have a nice day.'



SKY WAS SO mad. Auntie Wren had come back from talking to Trigg wearing her blanky-blank face. She said all those same things about this was what Sky wanted and swore she wasn't punishing Sky for last night, but that's how it felt.

And Trigg—no way she was calling him ‘Dad’—was worse. Auntie Wren could go ahead and put her in foster care if she was just going to abandon her to *him*.

Nate drove Rolf down to the base in a truck that had the Whiskey Jack logo on the door, but Trigg made her walk with him. She thought it was to wear out Murphy, but halfway there he said, “You need better shoes. We’re going to be doing a lot of hiking. Johanssons are like dogs. You gotta run ’em or they get aggressive.”

“Is that what’s wrong with you?”

“Better believe it. I’m used to training six hours a day. Riding a desk is making me crazy. At least I walk the site a lot. You should have seen your uncle when he retired. I was going to kill him as a public service. Still might.” He winked.

She had expected him to tell her she was being disrespectful. She kept to herself that she always felt better when she ran on the treadmill for an hour.

They reached the base, which was busy with traffic and workers, but inside the trailer only Nate was working on his computer and Rolf was at his desk.

Trigg brought her into their office and pointed her to take the chair pushed against the wall. He used his foot to slide an open box toward her. “Go through this. Pick out the ones you like.”

“Vivien already made me look at clothes. I like my hoodie.” *Try and take it. I will hurt you.*

“I didn’t say you could have any of it, princess. I said pick out what you like. It’s time to approve Wikingers’ colors and styles for next year. If your picks sell well, I’ll arrange for you to meet with our designers to work on a line that appeals to your demographic. Kids your age.”

“I know what demographic means.” Was he being serious? Because she didn’t plan to be here next week, let alone long enough to design something.



Although, that did sound cool. How did it even work? Would she be able to say she wanted jeans with pockets that actually fit her phone? Because it made her so mad when she got new jeans and the pockets were barely big enough for a lip gloss. Or fake. That put her right over the edge.

“Do you know what ‘brand ambassador’ means?” Trigg asked. “Because you’re going to get a lot of attention soon. You should wear the logo that feeds you.”

She bit the inside of her cheek. “So...Blue Spruce Lodge?”

“It would be better than that security blanket you’re wearing.”

*Rude.* She sat on her hands and stared at him while he typed something into his computer. It chimed with emails.

She was determined not to cooperate, but couldn’t help wondering how much free stuff she could get. What if she had her own lip gloss with her name on it? That would be hilarious.

“I’m Team Wren,” Rolf said. He had a stack of papers in front of him and signed one, then flipped it like a page, leaving it face down and off to the side so he could read the one underneath. He pointed the end of his pen at Sky. “Which means you can’t ask her to leave and you—” he pointed at Trigg “—can’t drive her out. Or the other way around.” The pen came back to Sky. “No more messes like yesterday.”

God, he was good at staring contests. Sky realized the pain in her spine was from pressing it into the back of her chair. It hurt, but she held and held his stare until her eyes started to sting.

“He means he’s Team Glory,” Trigg said, giving her an excuse to look away and blink and straighten her back. “Glory doesn’t want to work the front desk unless it’s an emergency. Don’t create emergencies.”

“That, too. But I like Wren. She makes good coffee. Doesn’t yammer.” Rolf flipped another stapled bunch of

papers. “Whatever pissing match you two get into, leave Wren out of it.”

“It pains me to agree with him, but I have to,” Trigg said. “If you want to pick a fight, go after someone who can take it.” Trigg nodded at Rolf. “Like him.”

“You can’t take it?” Sky tilted her head in pretend sympathy.

“Build your confidence before you come after me, princess. And he needs the exercise. At his age? Keep him sharp or he’ll go senile.”

Rolf didn’t react. She wasn’t even sure he was paying attention.

“See? Halfway there already.”

She refused to smile, but it *was* kind of funny.

“Nate,” Rolf called without lifting his head. “Did Ilke say what time she’s coming down here?”

Trigg got a peeved look on his face that made her think Rolf only asked as some kind of comeback against Trigg.

“Eleven, unless you tell her otherwise,” Nate said.

“How’s your open relationship with Nate coming along?” Trigg asked Rolf, then called, “Nate? Is Rolf as good a kisser as Ilke?”

“Not as good as you, if that’s what you’re asking. Quit being needy,” Nate said.

Sky snickered. She couldn’t help it.

“Shoot. Forgot you were in there, Sky. I’ll clean it up,” Nate promised.

“Can we get some work done?” Rolf lifted his head, looked at Sky. “Would you set an example?”

Much as she wanted to hold her ground and refuse, just to let them all know they couldn’t boss her, her eyes kept being

drawn to a flash of neon blue inside the box. W.W.T.K.D. What Would The Kardashians Do?

She reached in and pulled out a light jacket with a hood and cute diamond patterns on the sleeves. She loved it. Making sure neither of them was watching and acting smug, she started what she considered her 'yes' pile.



WREN DIDN'T CRY. Until yesterday, she hadn't cried in years. Far better to subvert her emotions and get on with whatever work would move her toward better circumstances. Did she have choices? Sure. As long as she didn't provoke Trigg into taking legal action, she was still Sky's guardian and could take her wherever she wanted.

Would Sky go anywhere with her? Hard to say. Whatever remorse might have prompted Sky to clean up and snuggle into Wren's bed had evaporated the second Wren had come back and said she 'thought it was best' if Sky went to breakfast with Trigg.

"Is this my punishment for yesterday?" Sky had asked with outrage.

"Of course not." Wren always stuck to time-out and taking away privileges, not outright punishment. "I appreciate that you cleaned up. We both acted poorly yesterday. We'll do better next time."

Sky hadn't given any indication she would adjust her behavior at all.

Now she was at the base with Trigg, and Wren was exploring her options online so she wouldn't hold a knee-hugging pity party in the shower. It didn't matter how bad a day started. You went through with it, same as all the rest.

A knock sounded on the door from the manager's office, surprising her.

"Come in," she called.

Marvin peeked around it. “It’s your day off. We want to respect that, but Vivien wondered if you’d mind popping up to see her for a few minutes. More of a personal matter.”

Wren had wondered if this was coming. If they were to recognize Sky, Wren would have to take her in hand so she would uphold the family name or something.

With a forced smile, she said, “Of course,” and walked upstairs on heavy feet.

Vivien let her in with a welcoming smile, inviting her to the sitting area. The coffee table held a proper china tea set with a matching three-tier plate stand full of scones and crustless sandwiches.

Wren cautiously lowered onto the sofa. “Test-driving a high tea for the wedding?”

Vivien blinked, taking a moment before saying, “We *should* have a high tea. That is an excellent idea. I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. We’ll come back to it. Remind me. But no, dear.” She inched forward to pour the tea. “This is an apology.”

“For?” Was she about to be fired? Her mind spun off in so many directions, she barely heard Vivien continue.

“I can’t believe I didn’t see it. Call me a sexist. It didn’t occur to me a girl would possess that streak of superiority and drive—even though Rolf has an aunt who is an absolute treasure when she’s not being a nightmare. You’re to be commended. Managing Sky by yourself all this time? When I married Oskar, Trigg was only three and I was ready to drown him.”

Vivien nudged a cup on a saucer toward Wren. She sat back holding her own, stirring in sugar while she reminisced.

“Trigg was a tremendous handful. I thought all little boys climbed onto the refrigerator and rode books down stairs. I made the assumption you did, that he was acting out because I married Oskar and moved us to Germany.” Her spoon clinked as she set it on her saucer. “He wouldn’t leave Rolf alone.

Crawled on him like a puppy on a wolf. They gravitate to strength until they decide they're better than whomever it is they're emulating. Then they do something delightful, like flush your diamond watch down the toilet to let you know they're annoyed with you." She lifted an exasperated brow as she brought her cup to her lips. Her bracelet rattled as she sipped.

Wren copied her actions, not knowing what else to do.

"That was Trigg who did that, but Rolf was a magnificent bastard, especially that first year. Every worst shade of Johansson." She held up a hand. "The circumstances weren't ideal, obviously. He was hurting from losing his mother and saw us as interlopers, but I couldn't let him hurt Trigg to hurt me. It broke my heart. I suppose that's where I found the strength to sit him down—he was about Sky's age, but taller and already filling out across the shoulders. Quite intimidating, I assure you. But I told him to cut the crap and show Trigg what kind of person he expected him to become. I mean, honestly, what else can you do?"

Wren wanted to smile politely and eat a cookie and go find a job on the other side of the country. Instead, she was sitting here like she had a bag of popcorn in her lap, unable to look away.

"I wish I could tell you that managing them is as simple as one direct conversation. It's actually a thousand of them. Clear expectations and plenty of love. I know you've done your best on that. Appealing to their ego works sometimes. Or impugning it."

*Been there, done that.* Wren tried her own tea.

"It's important they be encouraged toward achievement, though. Winning in a healthy way. Was Sky playing sports at all?"

"Volleyball. But there were personality conflicts—"

Vivien's throaty laugh cut her off. "No doubt. Team sports? Please. Obviously, we hope Sky will take to skiing or

boarding. So embarrassing if she doesn't." She chortled again. "We've joked more than once about Rolf winding up with a folk singer or a history major. Boy, would that child know his history." She continued smiling. "It would certainly be just desserts for Trigg if Sky had a passion for needlepoint."

Wren smiled weakly. "Not something she's ever mentioned."

"No," Vivien murmured, still with that lilt of amusement. "Nor I, despite many of my contemporaries turning to knitting and quilting at this age." Vivien clinked her cup into the saucer. "I'll admit my vanity has been in the way since you arrived. I thought my *stepson* would ease me into this role while allowing me to maintain the illusion I wasn't old enough to be a grandmother. But I shall embrace the title from this point forward. Champions don't arrive on a podium without a first-class support team and I intend to do my part. You are no longer alone in your attempts to mold a well-rounded person. We're all here to help, especially me."

Wren felt her lips part, but didn't know what to say. There was a part of her that wanted to take Vivien's words to heart. She had felt so overwhelmed for so long, she desperately longed to lean on someone and rest.

But even though she said a polite, "Thank you," she knew it wasn't that easy. Not for her. She was ultra responsible. Plus, Sky was all she had. Giving up any part of Sky's upbringing was like sectioning off a piece of her own heart.

Vivien smiled and the tension left her shoulders. She set down her tea and clasped her hands in her lap. "Related to that, I have a favor to ask."

Ah. Here came the other shoe.

"It's your weekend. If you have other plans, please don't let me keep you. But I could use your help with the wedding arrangements. I've talked to Marvin about paying you overtime. Much of this falls outside the sort of thing we'd ask of you in your capacity as manager."

“Oh, um,” Wren brushed that aside. “Not necessary.” What else was she going to do while Sky was with her father? “Do you need me to make some calls or something?”

“It’s the seating plan. You’re so methodical and efficient. I know you’ll have some good ideas without scrapping the whole thing and starting again, which is what I’m tempted to do.”

Vivien rose and invited her to the dining room table where a huge drawing had been unrolled. Its curled edges were braced with clean water glasses on each corner.

“I had this finalized a week ago and now everything changes with you and Sky becoming part of the wedding party. I think we need to add a table here. Yes?”

“I—” What now?

## Chapter Ten

TRIGG HAD WRITTEN the book on how to be an obstinate jackass and expected plenty of pushback from Sky, but she went through the box of clothing. Then he showed her the budget figures on previous years' sales and estimated sales into various markets. When he converted the Euros to show her the dollar values they were playing with, her eyes goggled. He ran the profit margins and went through the rest of the exercise of approving the final styles that would wind up on racks in sportswear shops around the globe a year from now.

"If no one buys them and we go broke, that's on you." His father had said the same to him once, except they'd done it with boots and boards. His father had been trying to find common ground with Trigg while motivating him to take an interest in running Wikinger—*which requires an education, little girl.*

"Ha-ha," Sky said, but gave the box a second look, maybe rethinking her decisions with this new information under her cap. She'd mostly picked the same things Trigg preferred, though. He was fine with gambling on a few items to see whose instincts were better.

"Every decision matters," he told her. In this case, he considered the value of piquing her curiosity worth more than any potential dip in their clothing line profits.

Despite his reputation as glib and carefree, Trigg knew where his bread was buttered and took his responsibilities very seriously. If he hadn't trusted Rolf to run the company while he competed, he would have left the circuit years ago.

He *had* thought this resort would be his own pet project eventually, but hadn't properly made the time to get it off the ground. He had needed Rolf to get the money out of Wikinger's board. Of course, as soon as he got Rolf to take an



interest, big brother had moved in and started acting like he owned the place.

There was plenty of work to go around, though.

“Truth is, the biggest risk for Wiker right now is this resort. It’s a money pit. We *have* to open this season and it *has* to be profitable.”

“Or what?”

“Or your aunt goes back to working for a dentist and we all move in with you.”

She wrinkled her nose.

A joke, obviously, but he was tempted to ask her about Wren. His attitude toward Sky’s aunt was undergoing as sharp a shift as his view of Sky, but in a completely different way. He kept seeing that moment of stillness in her. The bracing. It left a scorched sensation behind his breastbone, dry and gritty. And a razor-edged question.

*Who?*

Sky had never shown a similar timidity. In fact, she was damned bold for a kid in a new environment. Her response to his authority was sulking and defiance, not fear. Which was good, but he didn’t want Wren to fear him, either.

He wasn’t sure what he wanted from her. His libido knew what it wanted, but he had to ignore that animal. It might have been easier if he wasn’t so closely linked to her through Sky and if her appeal for him was strictly physical. He had a lot of curiosity about her, though, which wasn’t his normal Keep It Simple Stupid approach to women.

It was frustrating. And his daughter was supposed to be his focus. Not her aunt.

“Come on. Let’s go put out some fires.”

He walked her down to where the land had been leveled and prepped for gravel that should have arrived Friday.

“What do you even do here?” she asked.

“This. I walk around and look for things that are behind or not done right. Rolf pushes for things to keep moving forward and signs the checks. Nate hires the contractors and makes sure they’re meeting their deadlines. Chivonne helps him with procurement—finding what we need and buying it, then following up when it doesn’t show up.”

Trigg voiced an email to Chivonne to check on the gravel delivery first thing tomorrow morning. “I bat cleanup.”

“I thought there was a gravel pit down there.”

“Yeah. Basco Construction tried to buy it years ago. Things got nasty when the old guy who owns it refused. Basco opened his own toward Kalispell and ran this guy out of business. Old man Petersen is hanging on to his property out of spite. I’ll bet you our gravel, which is coming from Whitefish now, is running late because Basco made a call, trying to put pressure on us.”

“Why is he doing all these things to stop the resort?”

“If you could Scooby Doo that and get back to me, I’d appreciate it.”

They walked up to what would be a vibrant village come winter, but all the buildings were still in various stages of construction.

“Eventually, our office trailer will be the liftie break room. It might be our ski school first, though, given how this building is coming along.” He showed Sky where the spring runoff had been miscalculated and caused erosion under a corner of the foundation. “Nate’s working on a solve.”

The day lodge was in good shape. The lockers had been installed in the lower change room. The future retail shop was almost at lock-up. “The bar will definitely be ready by the time you’re old enough to drink,” he told her as they walked up to where the restaurant would open onto a patio.

The workmen stopped their power tools long enough to call a greeting. “Is it bring your daughter to work day?” one asked.

Sky stiffened.

“How’d you know she’s my daughter?” Trigg asked. The press release wasn’t supposed to go out until later.

The guy let his drill hand fall to his side. “I was joking. Are you shi—kidding me? I didn’t know you had a daughter.”

“Me either,” Trigg admitted, enjoying the men’s flummoxed expressions.

“Are you serious right now?” the guy with the nail gun asked. “Be real.”

Sky had her hands stuffed deep into the kangaroo pocket of her hoodie. Her shoulders were hunched, but she snorted at the men’s confused astonishment.

“It was news to me, but it’s true. This is Sky. Any problems here?”

They shook off their bafflement and one jerked his head to indicate Trigg should follow him. “The plumber fu—udged up. Need you to tell us what to do here.”

They crossed paths with Nate a little later in the operations building, talking to the HVAC contractor in the rooms that would become the daycare.

“They’ll need their own thermostat,” Nate was saying. “The rest of us will come and go in our winter clothes, but they’ll want it warmer in here for the kids.”

They all trailed upstairs to where Trigg’s office had unfinished walls looking into Rolf and Nate’s. All three rooms had views up the slope.

“Where are the secretaries sitting?” the tradesman asked. “The ladies will want their own or you’ll have thermostat wars that won’t quit.”

“Sexist,” Skylar muttered under her breath.

“No kidding. Some of them will work in accounting,” Trigg said.

“Dude,” Nate snorted, shaking his head.

Sky didn't crack a smile. “Some of them will be running this place,” she said with a lofty arch of her brows. “Which one is *my* office?”

Trigg grinned. *That's my girl.*



“IS SHE STAGING a hunger strike?”

Trigg's voice behind her startled Wren. She nearly tipped her Szechuan noodles back into the buffet, onto the bright pink prawns.

He wore a short-sleeved shirt that strained against his biceps. *Such* a flat stomach. *Such* broad shoulders and such an intensely blue and all-seeing gaze as he took in her plaid pedal pushers and white sleeveless top.

“Pardon?” She grew even warmer and more self-conscious as she forced her attention off his ripped and animalistic frame to the beef and beans under the sneeze guard.

“I told Sky to join me.” He reached for a plate. “She was supposed to invite you.”

Thank God that wouldn't be necessary. “Your mother requested her company.”

Wren's day had been one of riding the emotional rapids he'd thrust her into, from despair to resignation, timid hope, guilt and resentment, loneliness and inadequacy and yearning. She wanted Sky to be happy, she kept reminding herself.

Whatever she felt toward Trigg, and whatever he felt toward her, had no bearing.

What did he feel? Did he hate her? He'd been so overbearing this morning. She hated him a little bit, even though she knew his claiming of Sky was something Sky needed. She had to feel wanted. Wren wanted that for her, since she had never felt it herself. But the net result was Trigg

holding enormous power over her. Sky wasn't just hers anymore. She was *theirs*.

Wren could feel people staring at them, reading her nerves and making her self-consciousness worse. She didn't know how the news had traveled so quickly, but she'd been walking toward the service stairs mid-morning, intending to turn over her laundry, when she'd realized the whispers had started.

Ilke had been on her way out, taking a bag of sandwiches to the base. *It's the drawback to living where you work. Everyone knows your business*, Ilke had said with an empathetic shrug. *It passes*.

Like a gallstone.

"Vivien is measuring Sky for a bridesmaid dress." And giving her a 'cut the crap' lecture, if Wren had read between the lines correctly.

She believed Vivien was sincere in her remorse over not welcoming Sky more warmly, however. Plus, much as she might want to, Wren couldn't limit and manage the relationships Sky was building with Trigg and his family. That was what she had been trying to come to terms with all day.

"I wondered if that would happen," Trigg said. "Should I go up and make sure Mom hasn't left any scissors out?"

"Sky prefers to slay with sarcasm. I understand your mother was fitted with a thick skin when you were young."

"Look at you, getting to know us so well." His crooked grin was warm enough to put heat in her cheeks. Charming enough to disarm when keeping her guard up with him was more important than ever.

"Inside that fleece armor she calls a hoodie, Sky is a girlie girl. She'll come around once she sees the dresses. They're really pretty."

Sky's dismay about going upstairs had mostly been over having to endure another meal in Vivien's apartment, this time alone.

“You’ve had your fitting?”

“For sarcasm, yes. For the dress, I bowed out.” Wren’s plate was full. She took a step and offered a meaningless smile, signaling she was excusing herself from this conversation as well.

“Mom didn’t let you get away with that.”

“I’m not a member of the family,” she pointed out with the same neutral tone she had used on Vivien. “Your mother and Marvin need me at the helm of the lodge during the wedding so they can concentrate on Rolf and Glory and the guests.”

Also, adding only Sky and her escort, rather than assigning a date for Wren and making room for four, had been a simpler fix on the seating plan. Wren had come up with a dozen reasons she didn’t have to be squeezed into the ceremony, but didn’t bother repeating them to Trigg.

“Enjoy your dinner,” she said with a nod, gathering cutlery.

“Wren.”

How did he make her name sound like a caress against her skin?

“Let’s kiss and make up from this morning. Sit outside with me.”

“What—?” Dear Lord. It was a *joke*. No need to get all flustered like he’d asked her to prom.

He looked briefly unsettled, as if he belatedly heard the words as sexual when he hadn’t meant them that way at all. His crooked grin was rueful. Yeah, that was just the way he talked. He had just never talked to *her* that way.

Which made her feel stupid for reading more into it, even for a second. It was too much a betrayal of this infernal attraction.

“We need a peace treaty,” he said with the barest brush of his fingertips against her elbow. How did that make her

nipples tingle? She was trying very hard to despise him. At least *blame* him.

For what? Making Sky in the first place? God, this was awful.

He motioned for her to lead him past the bar, through the lounge, and out to the patio. It was mostly empty, just a pair of Canadians and a couple from town. Another cycling club was checking in tomorrow and once the contractors arrived Monday, only the unfinished rooms on the top floor would be empty.

They chose a high-topped table at the rail overlooking the pond. It was a nice evening, cooling off, but the sun was still high since it was nearing the equinox. The pond was glassy as a mirror, offering a perfect reflection of the variegated greens of the trees with dots of wildflower reds and yellows climbing the hill to the dark blue sky. Acoustic music came through the speakers mounted above the open doors.

If this had been a date, which it *wasn't*, she would have complimented him on bringing her to a really nice place.

“Beer? Wine?” he asked, ordering a beer for himself.

“Water’s fine.”

The server nodded and walked away.

She started to eat, but he didn’t. She glanced at him.

“I came on pretty strong this morning.” He looked right through her skin into her soul, mortifying her. “I want things to be okay between us, but I don’t know how to get there.”

“Everything’s fine,” she lied, because what was the alternative? Admit she didn’t know how to handle him? “Sky said you told her you’d support her financially if she chose to compete, even after she finished school, but *only* if she finished school. That she could work or go to school, but Johanssons aren’t bums so she had to do one or the other.”

He looked for a moment like he wouldn’t let her deflect, then started eating. “Do you have a problem with any of that? I

was repeating to her what my father said to me when I decided school was beneath me.”

“When was that?” she asked, curious despite her wariness of him.

“I was thirteen. I *was* competing and Dad threatened to pull my funding if I didn’t bring my grades up. I told him to go for it.”

“What did he do?”

“Caved and let me snowboard. I was skiing because that’s what Johanssons *did*, but I hated being in Rolf’s shadow. He was eight years older and had just won his first gold in Salt Lake. There was no catching him. I didn’t see any point in trying and was happy to quit the family.”

She spared a pang of empathy for Vivien. No wonder she was such a tough, imperious woman, trying to hold her own against three hardheaded men.

“Vivien said your grandfather was a brakeman on a bobsleigh.”

“Yeah, we’re a long line of maniacs who hurl down frozen mountains. But Dad *hated* snowboards. Thought it was a dumb fad and boarders were ruining the pistes. Then he began seeing the profit in manufacturing the equipment. When I showed talent, he bought this hill, to make a snow park for me.”

Must be nice. “But there was an avalanche?”

“Yeah. Dad’s heart was nothing but sausage and cigars. Losing this investment did him in. All of Wikinger was on thin ice without him. The board took the insurance payout to shore up the company and this project was back-burnered for fifteen years.”

“Did your dad at least see you earn a medal?” She knew Trigg had won his first gold in Canada and had still been winning in South Korea earlier this year.

“He did not.”



“I’m sorry.” She meant it.

“Me, too.” He shrugged fatalistically. Then narrowed his eyes. “What’s your family like?”

A jolt of adrenaline went through her. Oh, he was good. Lulling her like that, then sucker-punching her.

She concentrated on gathering a bite of noodles. Gathered the point-form version of her childhood that she had confided in the odd co-worker over the years.

“My parents had a son between Mandy and me. Neil. He had cystic fibrosis. His illness wiped out my parents financially. My mother was pregnant with me when he died. It colored my upbringing.” She always tried to make allowances for that, trying not to hate them for being broke and broken.

“Are they still alive?”

“My father is. My mother passed a couple of years ago. Diagnosed in September, gone by Christmas. Refused treatment. Wanted to be with Neil and Mandy and God. She was very religious. My father went the other way. Hated God for taking his son. It made for tension between them.”

Layers of ice and silence, disapproval and rejection.

“Are you close to him?”

“My dad? No.” She sipped her water, trying to ease her tight throat.

“Because of Sky? You said there was bad blood even after Mandy died.”

“Mandy told me stories about how our father used to play with her and Neil in the yard, but I never saw that man. I barely saw *him*. He lives in his workshop. He lost his job when they lost Neil. He fixes cars, bicycles, makes signs and bird houses.”

“That’s his only income?”

She could tell what he was thinking.

“There was government money when Sky came to live with us, because she would have been in the foster system otherwise.” That had been the only reason her father had agreed to Sky living with them. “We always had groceries and it paid for her daycare until she was in school. It wasn’t fancy, but it was fine.”

It had been a hideous struggle, actually, and he seemed to suspect it. He looked from one of her eyes to the other.

She looked down, feeling judged. Guilty.

“I needed Sky in my life,” she said, wincing at how selfish it sounded, but: “I honestly couldn’t imagine you loving her as much as I did.”

She wasn’t trying to put him on the spot, but his cheeks hollowed as he absorbed that, maybe because he couldn’t say that he did love Sky. Not yet. Would he? She certainly hoped so, but judging him by his online antics and contentious relationship with his father and brother, she had to reserve judgment.

“You didn’t even give me a chance, Wren.”

She bit the inside of her cheek, but he seemed determined to dig all the way to the bottom of this.

“True,” she acknowledged. “But how would you have felt twelve years ago, before you even had a single gold medal? Was your mother going to raise her? What would that have looked like for you?”

“To paraphrase *you*, don’t act like you’ve done me a favor.”

She dropped her gaze, stinging with shame. Maybe even regret, but the *what-if* game was an endless list of alternate realities. What if Neil had lived? Her childhood might have been a happier one, but Sky might not exist. If Wren hadn’t come back into Mandy’s life, and Mandy hadn’t been rushing to meet her, would she still have been hit by that car? If Trigg had taken Sky when she was a baby, would she be a happier child now? Would Mandy still be alive?

Wren had learned a long time ago that she couldn't fix the past or control the future. All she could do was her best in the now.

Was she doing her best by Sky? She honestly didn't know.

Trigg seemed to attack the rest of his plate as though hurrying to finish. She had lost her own appetite and wanted to leave. This conversation had taken an emotional toll, not that she let it show, but inside she was churning with angst. She didn't want him to hate her for the choices she had made. She'd been young and scared and sad. Still was, to be honest.

"I don't know what I would have done," he admitted in a low voice. "Mom was a wreck after losing Dad. She was doing what she could with Wikinger, but the board was giving her a hard time. Rolf shut down, barely talked to anyone. When Mandy called, she sounded like the decision was made and my input didn't matter."

He stared into the distance, seeming to go back in time.

"Although...I was shocked and didn't say much. I believe in a woman's right to choose. But I didn't offer her any alternatives. I have to own that." His gaze came back to Wren, grave. "I was scared. I didn't see how I could fit an unplanned pregnancy into my life. I couldn't go to Mom with it, so I left it up to Mandy."

He had his forearms braced on either side of his plate, voice so quiet, she strained to hear him.

"When I won my first gold, I knew it was because Mandy had made that decision. All of my wins have been bittersweet. I *had* to win, given that I might not have had the chance if I'd had to get married or..." He shrugged. "I've never let myself think too much about what I would have done."

Because he hadn't been given a chance to.

She firmed her mouth against a tremble and looked away.

A flash of movement by the pond caught her eye. Aiden throwing sticks for Murphy. Nate and Ilke had their hands

linked and were exchanging remarks that made each other smile. Aiden said something and Ilke squatted to fix his shoe. Aiden propped his hand on her shoulder. She made a face at him and the side of his cheek grew round with a grin. Murphy bounded up and shook the water off his fur, making them all turn away with cries of protest.

They were a picture-perfect, adorable family. A jagged lump of envy lodged behind Wren's sternum.

"Have you felt held back?" Trigg asked.

"From?"

"Whatever you would have pursued if you hadn't been raising Sky."

She dredged up a self-deprecating tilt of her lips. "Keeping us clothed and fed was challenge enough." And she had done a pretty good job, in her humble opinion.

Had she dreamed of one day being part of a family like the one she was watching at the edge of the pond? Maybe, deep down, below all the layers of practicality and acceptance of reality, but she had learned to keep her ambitions achievable. Life was too depressing otherwise.

"My dream was to give Sky whatever she needed, but she obviously needed you. Which makes me feel like I wasn't enough. That's hard."



TRIGG HADN'T INVITED her to eat with him so they could wade through emotional sludge. He was rarely this serious. If he shared some of his past, it was in a throwaway manner. Until a few months ago, he'd never told a soul about Mandy. Nate had been the first and even then, Trigg had tried not to think or feel too deeply.

He couldn't avoid his feelings with Wren, though, no matter how uncomfortable they were. Animosity and a sense of being cheated were the easy ones to acknowledge and accept. But as selfish as her actions were in keeping Sky's

existence from him, she hadn't done it maliciously. Her devotion to Sky was actually quite selfless.

Meanwhile, one of his *many* goals was to provide for Sky. He wouldn't even call it a goal. Goals were things you had to work at. Looking after Sky was a matter of pulling a credit card from his wallet. The fact Wren had struggled to feed his daughter sent a prickling sensation into the pit of his gut. She'd literally been a kid raising a kid, younger than he would have been if he'd somehow raised Sky himself.

Could he honestly argue that his mother hiring a nanny would have given Sky a better start?

Maybe if Wren had been complaining about how hard it had been, he could stay indignant, but she was beating herself up for not being the father Sky had a very natural desire to know. For not being *enough*.

He would always be bitter he hadn't known Sky sooner, but a sense of gratitude toward Wren kept rolling through him. Admiration for the way she had stepped up. It made him all the more determined to do his part now, and do it well. He intended to be whatever Sky needed in ways that were both material and abstract.

Even though he didn't have a freaking clue what that might entail.

Even though he could see that everything he offered Sky moving forward would have a cost for Wren. It would highlight what she wasn't able to give Sky. That wasn't his intention. He didn't want to be malicious. He just wanted to do right by his daughter.

If only he *could* resent Wren. It would make this a hell of a lot easier, but she sat there looking so innocent and vulnerable with her lack of makeup and casual ponytail and wistful gaze toward the pond. She tugged at something inside his chest that rarely moved.

He glanced to see what held her attention. Nate and Ilke were sealed together like conjoined twins, watching Aiden

throw the stick for the dog.

Try as he might, Trigg couldn't picture himself doing something like that with Mandy. She'd been sweet, but Wren was right. He would have chafed at marriage, insisting on training. He had been self-interested, stubborn, and immature back then. They would have divorced within a year.

He glanced back at Wren and she twitched her mouth into a half-smile.

“I was thinking it's too bad there's no gazebo. It would be a beautiful place for the wedding photos. Everyone could watch the ceremony from the balconies.”

Something in her expression made him doubt that's what she'd been thinking, but he was thrilled to move on to a neutral topic.

“It was discussed at length, but the bottom of the pond is two feet of silt on bedrock. Tough to get posts into it. That little beach along with the one on the other side are grandfathered in for canoe and kayak access, but building a foundation for a gazebo would have damaged the shoreline when the whole resort is trying to keep its image as green as possible. Then there's the ice rink. The hockey players on staff were vocal about not wanting a gazebo clogging up their end zone.”

She pointed to the far side of the pond. “When I saw the lodge from that side, it made me think of a field trip I went on once, to an old fort on a river. We went across on one of those cable ferries that you crank by hand—What?” Her face fell as he let his exasperation show.

“It could be removed for winter and tourists would love it. Where the hell were you four months ago when Mom was having kittens because she wanted a gazebo so bad?” He kept his teasing frown of mock impatience on his face as he picked up his phone and speed-dialed Nate.

Down by the water, Nate drew his phone from his back pocket and looked at the screen, then brought it to his ear. “Go

for Nate.”

“Get your mechanical pencil out, Frank Lloyd Wright. You’re designing a wedding present for your boss and Glory. We can even take up a collection from everyone who’s been asking if the happy couple needs a blender or a Crock-Pot. Wren and I are coming down to talk it out.”

# Chapter Eleven

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Jun 17th

Trigg Johansson

Whiskey Jack Resort

c/o Wikinger Sports

America's Favorite Snowboarder Takes on His Greatest Challenge:  
Fatherhood

Haven, MT: Trigg Johansson, half-pipe, super-pipe, and slope-style snowboard champion, learned recently that he is a father. The girl's mother is deceased, but her family reached out to provide Skylar Snow a chance to meet her father. "My entire family is delighted to welcome Skylar into our lives. I retired to make time for her and look forward to building our relationship," Johansson states.

Johansson, twenty-nine, left competition shortly after dominating at the Olympics in Pyeongchang, and recently achieved his tenth gold and eighteenth medal overall at the Winter X Games. Johansson currently holds the position of vice president at Whiskey Jack Resort, the elite winter-sport training facility scheduled to open this fall.

The resort is owned by Wikinger Sports, which operates out of Berlin, Germany. Wikinger is a leading manufacturer of sports equipment and apparel, posting revenue of nine billion dollars last quarter. The company is headed by Johansson's brother, Rolf Johansson, former alpine ski champion, who is soon to marry Glory Corner, romance author and daughter of bestselling romance novelist Kathleen Corner.

Skylar, twelve, hasn't grown up in the spotlight. Johansson requests the media keep inquiries to a minimum as the family takes this important time getting to know one another.





SKY READ THE press release when it came out, but didn't think much of it. She had already suffered through being introduced around the base yesterday and people staring at her in the dining room. One of the housekeepers had passed her in the hallway and said, "You're really Trigg's kid? That's so wild!" The guy who'd been giving her cigarettes had basically told her to get lost. "You should have told me. I need this job."

She was so glad when Auntie Wren told her they were making a day of going to the movies and picking up some things for Nate in Kalispell. Part of her wanted to stay mad about everything and for Auntie Wren to keep driving until she didn't have to think about any of this anymore.

But part of her felt okay about staying at Blue Spruce Lodge. It was still boring as recycled toilet paper, but she had a dog, which was a huge bonus. She had had to let Vivien feel her up, taking her measurements and telling her she had to be part of the wedding, but the picture of the dress was really pretty. She couldn't wait to try it on.

Vivien had told her the guest list included a supermodel who was married to one of Rolf and Trigg's ski buddies. There was also an actress Sky had seen in two movies, a *sir* who was related to Will and Harry, and a deejay from Berlin who she'd looked up and learned had worked with *all* the megastars. It was sick that she was going to hang out with famous people, even if they were adults and probably just as boring as normal ones.

She had also learned how rich Trigg was. He'd been a bit of a dick about it, saying he would give her an allowance so he could take it away when he thought she was out of line. She had thought Auntie Wren was a pain about rules and grounding and stuff.

She still felt bad about their fight, like she was a horrible niece. She couldn't tell if Auntie Wren was still mad. She was being really quiet, but said they deserved some retail therapy, thanks to her first full paycheck. After they shopped in Kalispell, which was *not* a huge city, they went to a busy café

for lunch. It felt a lot like one of their old, normal weekends where they hung out and said, “Yeah, that’s cute,” and “What are you having?” Just a nice, chill day.

Except Sky nervously dunked her ice cubes with the end of her straw, trying to figure out if she would make things worse if she asked what she wanted to ask.

“What’s wrong?” Auntie Wren asked as they waited for their food.

“I keep wondering... Why did my mom tear out the pages and where did they go? If you don’t want to tell me, I understand.” She made herself say that, even though it would kill her if Auntie Wren said she didn’t want to talk about it.

Auntie Wren sighed. Sipped her own water. Folded her arms on the table and looked blanky-blank, but she didn’t say, *Maybe later.*

“Your mom missed her appointment at the clinic and stopped going to school. Aunt Lydia called a couple times, but Nana wouldn’t let Mandy talk to her. After a few weeks, Lydia’s mom came with a policeman. Your mom was old enough to go with them, so she did. She wanted to take me with her, but Granddad said no. Your mom told the policeman what he had done, but there weren’t any welts or anything. The policeman said I’d have to go into foster care until things were sorted out. I didn’t want to go to a stranger’s house, so I said nothing happened.”

“But—”

“I know.” Auntie Wren looked like a super-sad robot. “I should have been honest, but your mom was leaving and Nana was crying. The police were talking about taking Granddad to jail. I was really scared and said what I thought would put things back to normal. Some of Nana’s church friends were there, trying to talk your mom out of leaving. I went to stay with Mrs. VanderKamp for a few nights. Then I went home and Granddad went to classes with the pastor and got medication. I thought I would be able to talk to your mom

after things settled down, but Aunt Lydia went away to college and I didn't know how to get her number."

"Did Granddad ever hit you again?"

"No." Auntie Wren was talking so quiet, it was hard to hear her over all the other voices in the restaurant. "After I saw your mom again, she was mad that I was still living with them, but it was honestly okay. Just lonely. She wrote everything into your diary and ripped it out and gave it to me. She said I should use it to get out of the house. If I could have lived with you and her, I would have, but she couldn't afford it and I didn't want to be taken away from Nana and sent to foster care. I asked Aunt Lydia to hang on to them. When your mom died, I told Nana about the pages, so she would know I could use them if Granddad ever did anything to you, but it was fine."

"Does Aunt Lydia still have them?"

"No. I made a will when Nana got sick. It says that you're Trigg's, so I knew if anything happened to me, you would go to him, not Granddad. Then I burned them."

Sky wanted to ask why, even though she thought she understood without asking why Auntie Wren would want to destroy that proof.

Then she was distracted by Auntie Wren looking past her with her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open.

Sky turned around and saw a picture of herself with Trigg on the television. It was tuned to a sports channel. It was too noisy to hear what they were saying and no one was even looking at them or the TV, but Sky slouched deeper into their booth.

"Are you okay?" Auntie Wren asked.

"I'm on TV." She was freaking out.

"Have you heard from any of your friends since the press release went out?"

“A couple. Vivien said I shouldn’t answer right away. I mean, *Grandma* said that.” She rolled her eyes, but her insides felt really, really squishy and maybe this was her very first asthma attack.

Auntie Wren wrinkled her nose. “Does that bother you?”

“Calling her *Grandma*? I don’t know.” She didn’t want any of this to bother her. She didn’t want Auntie Wren to ask how she was feeling and she especially didn’t want to feel like she wanted to tell her. She wanted to stay mad, which was way easier.

“I don’t want to tell you that you were right,” Sky said.

“About?”

Sky groaned. “About all of this being something I can’t undo. Or that I have to give it a chance and that it’ll be awkward until I get used to it. This bites.”

“Not from this side of the table. You just told me I’m right.” Auntie Wren pretended to lick her finger and add a point to a scoreboard.

“So cool. It’s really astonishing I give you such a hard time.”

Their food arrived and Auntie Wren bit the end off one of her fries, but she wasn’t laughing or even smiling. She was wearing her serious face.

“I honestly don’t know if I’m in the right or wrong. Maybe I waited too long on a bunch of things with you.” Her eyebrows crinkled together and her mouth went down at the corners. “I had to grow up really fast. I wanted to let you be a carefree kid as long as possible. But maybe I’ve been trying to protect you when you’re mature enough to handle more than I give you credit for.”

*You think?* That’s what Sky wanted to say, but more because she wanted to hide that she was so uncomfortable. Auntie Wren was talking to her like she was a grown-up. It was scary. Life was way easier when Auntie Wren bossed her

around and she could blame her for everything that was wrong in her life.

Growing up sucked. That's what she was learning. Part of her really wanted to go back to her old school in Utah and do math homework with Tasha while talking about their favorite cartoons from when they were little.

“Did she really ask you to call her ‘Grandma’?”

“Or *Oma*, which is German. But we're both American, so I said ‘Grandma.’ And Marvin *really* wants me to call him ‘Grandpa.’ Glory was right. He's dying to give me peppermints and teach me astronomy and show me how to fish.”

Auntie Wren laughed, which made Sky feel good.

“What about Rolf? Are you going to call him Uncle?”

Sky remembered something and sat up to lean forward, keeping her voice down. “I heard him and Glory have a *huge* fight.”

“When?” Auntie Wren leaned in, too.

“Last night, when I was leaving Grandma's.” She only said ‘grandma’ with a tiny bit of sarcasm. “I saw you guys down at the pond so I came out the balcony way. I heard them in the stairwell on the third floor when I got to the stairs. Glory was like, *How dare you*. And Rolf was like, *It was only one question and don't run away. You're not a child*. Glory said she didn't even want to look at him right now because he was being a domineering jerk and why would she even want to marry that.”

“Really?” Auntie Wren's eyes went giant.

Sky nodded. She hadn't known if she should go into the stairwell because she didn't want them to see her, but hadn't been able to go the other way because it was cut off by construction stuff.

“Glory said it was none of his business if she still worked for her dead mom and that if he thought they didn't have

enough time for each other, he should quit coaching Ilke. Rolf said he only asked Marvin if he had thought about hiring someone to look after her mom's business because Glory was so stressed by the wedding. Then he said he would take her into town right now and marry her at the courthouse. They could tell everyone coming for the wedding to fuck off because he wouldn't lose her over one stupid question."

Auntie Wren didn't say anything about the swear, just bit back her smile. "So romantic."

"Right? Then Glory said she was only going to go to the coffee shop to finish her book because her deadline was what was really stressing her out and did he want to solve that for her, since he wanted to fix her problems so bad. Then he said he couldn't fix anything if she walked away so come back inside. And she said only if he planned to evolve. Then he said she knew what she was marrying when she agreed to it and were they going to town or not. Then she said she was upset because her mom couldn't be at the wedding and sounded like she was crying. Then I heard the door close so I guess they went inside." For make-up sex, probably, but she'd been trying not to think about that.

"Wow." Auntie Wren dipped her chin. "Kind of bad that you eavesdropped and even worse that you repeated it."

"You listened."

"I know. Bad example. But that's sad, isn't it? I guess we would have heard this morning if they were calling off the wedding."

"I don't think they are. I saw him going upstairs with a plate from the buffet this morning. I think it was for her."

"That man sure says what he means, doesn't he? And Glory's so nice. It can't be easy to hold her own against him."

"I think she's like Grandma." Sky reached for the catsup. "Only mostly nice."

Auntie Wren sat up straighter. "What do you mean by that?"

“Oh. Not like she’s mean. Just...like Rolf and Trigg say whatever they want, even if they disagree. Especially with each other. Trigg makes it a joke, but they say whatever they mean and don’t care. Grandma and Glory *try* to say things in a nice way, but if they disagree, they say so. Marvin never wants to say anything mean or wrong. He wants to be nice all the time and have everyone like him.”

“Ah. What am I?” Auntie Wren looked like she already knew she was a Marvin.

Sky decided it would be a good time to taste her fries.

“What are you?” Auntie Wren asked.

*She’s one of us.*

“I don’t know,” she lied, channeling her new grandmother. “When I was at the base, I started to feel like I could say any opinion and Trigg wouldn’t get mad. He told me not to swear in front of other grown-ups, especially his mom, but even when I was sarcastic, he wasn’t mad. He was sarcastic back, saying things like, ‘Get it all out.’”

It had been kind of funny, actually.

“But I felt like... I don’t know. Like I could be totally myself and not worry about it. When he was being critical, he wasn’t putting me down. He just wants me to know what he expects. When I talk to you, I feel like I have to think about what I’m going to say. Like, if I say it wrong, I’ll hurt your feelings.” Lately, she hadn’t bothered to think anything through, saying the meanest things for no reason. Why had she been so awful?

Sky bit her lip, sure that she was hurting Auntie Wren’s feelings right now when she *really* didn’t mean to.

Auntie Wren nodded, but her face was blanky-blank again. Definitely pretending she was totally fine when she wasn’t. Sky wanted to groan.

“Sometimes I feel like you don’t say what *you’re* really thinking or feeling and that means I shouldn’t,” Sky said,

trying to make her understand. She swirled the tip of her fry in the catsup. “But now I know that you weren’t allowed to talk back or be honest when you were little. It’s still hard for me to be that—” she didn’t know what the word was: something like claustrophobic “—careful,” she decided.

Auntie Wren still didn’t say anything, just spooned up her soup.

“Are you mad?”

“No. You’re right. I don’t like making waves. Disagreeing with or criticizing my parents wasn’t an option. But I want you to have a voice.” She sounded extra serious. Like this was sex ed or the drug lecture. “I didn’t see that I was holding you back. I thought I was teaching you how to keep yourself out of trouble.” One side of her mouth smiled while the other side stayed down. “I’m glad you’re confident in who you are.”

Sky felt funny inside. Sad for her aunt, but good, too. Like they were making up from their fight, properly. She wanted to say she loved her, but she hadn’t said it in a long time. Why had she been so awful? She wanted to take it all back.

“You should be trying to give me away. I’ve been a brat for, like, ever.”

“Tell me about it,” Auntie Wren said. Then widened her eyes. “Oh, sorry, am I being too honest?”

They both cracked up.



WREN FOUND IT enormously ironic that she spent the week transferring calls to Vivien’s PR specialist that were inquiries about how to reach *her*. She even stared down a reporter from Billings who came right up to the desk and asked if Wren knew how to contact Sky’s family.

“All inquiries are being directed to this email. I’m not allowed to comment.” She handed over a copy of the memo that all staff had received, stating exactly that. “Help yourself



to our information brochures if you're interested in the lodge." She waved toward the rack by the fireplace.

She didn't know what she would say about all of this anyway. She had heard through Vivien that the board was livid they hadn't been told about Sky before the press release went out. Vivien was unabashed and so, according to Sky, was Trigg. Wren didn't fully understand how the board could take it so personally, but supposed it had to do with the company image—which wasn't tarnished, in her opinion. He was stepping up to his role. That was a good thing, wasn't it?

Did she want to defend him, though? Since their dinner, they had kept conversation light between them and mostly about Sky. It felt more like armed truce than understanding. Fortunately, they were all so busy, they barely saw one another.

When Wren wasn't on the phone, she had a million tasks to organize, including filling the flower boxes on the balconies with geraniums, finding places to store yet more goods arriving for the wedding, and assigning the rooms in the staff house.

Of course, the minute she went to publish the room list, she was informed that Lina was no longer sleeping with Joey and preferred to share a bunk bed room with Corinna from the kitchen. Joey didn't want to pay extra for a double bed if he wasn't sharing it, leaving Wren with the delightful task of asking whether anyone wanted to change their status to 'in a relationship' and use one of the couples rooms.

Foreseeing even more bed hopping than shift-switching, she spoke to Marvin, then pulled Paula into the office. Paula was friendly and smart, ran housekeeping like a first mate ran a ship, and could pinch-hit in almost every position when necessary.

"How do you feel about supervising the staff house?" Wren had asked her.

A small raise, a handshake and twenty minutes later, they had sorted out the room assignments, the chore list, and a draft of house rules on noise, alcohol and guests.

Along with all the other activity this week, the staff had been moving out of the last unfinished rooms in the lodge so those could be made guest-ready by the wedding. Tonight—Friday night, no less—they were having a housewarming barbecue. They had invited Roadside Renovations since Devon’s crew had built the bunkhouse, but also because they wanted to borrow their grill. Marvin sanctioned the event, providing frozen burgers, buns and a “You kids have fun, but be careful” speech.

Wren offered to cover the coffee bar in the morning, to save Lina the trouble of calling in hung over. Like the rest of them, Lina had been talking about this party all week. Wren didn’t begrudge them having fun. There were a lot of demands on everyone right now. The staff needed a morale booster to get them through the wedding.

She wasn’t the type to let loose with heavy drinking and dancing herself, though. Her idea of stress-busting involved leaving Sky with Vivien and slipping behind the lodge to the spot Nate had staked out to build a raft. She wanted to paint the rails that would be decorated with silk flowers and ivy, but would also keep riders from falling into the water.

Aiden had made her laugh when Nate had asked him last weekend if he wanted to visit the lumberyard to make Rolf and Glory a present. The little guy had fist-bumped his dad, saying, “The lumberyard. *Yes.*”

Wren had picked up the motor and controls that would power the ferry while she and Sky were in Kalispell. Posts had been installed at the shoreline, the cable was on order, the pontoons had arrived and a carpet had been cut to cover the floor of the raft on special occasions.

Vivien had been over the moon when Trigg had told her what they were planning. She had grabbed Wren by the arm and said, “I love how innovative you are!”

Wren hadn't let it go to her head. She'd grown up looking at her father's cheap fixes for badly needed repairs and didn't consider herself so much an innovator as a rip-off artist.

With her nonstop days, she was relieved Sky was tied up with Trigg, but she was starting to worry about Sky's school assignments. When she had broached the topic, however, Sky had said a blistering, "I'm *working*."

'Work' seemed to consist of driving the little green ute back and forth from the base. Wren needed to have a chat with Trigg about that. Which was another reason she had come out here. Trigg had been working late every night, but she figured if she was out here when he got back from the base, she might catch him.

Meanwhile, she tried to let all of the stress and phone calls and second-guessing dissipate as she sank into the whisper of the paintbrush methodically stroking across boards. Sweep, sweep, sweep. *Dip*. Sweep, sweep, sweep—

A wet nose goosed the back of her thigh where her shorts stopped.

"Murphy!" She flipped the paintbrush into the air, tried to catch it, felt the swipe of wet paint hit her arm, then the brush landed on her shoe and bounced into the dirt.

Murphy immediately went to it, but Trigg was there, tugging him away before the dog got paint on his nose. He was laughing.

"You're not even wearing earbuds. How did you not hear us coming?"

"I was thinking." She picked up a rag and rubbed at the paint on her arm. Her shoe was a lost cause, but they were begging to be replaced anyway.

"About what? The Middle East crisis? String theory?"

"Okay, you got me. I was trying *not* to think. It's been a busy week and it'll get worse before it gets better."

“I hear that.” Trigg took the rag and tipped the can of solvent, wetting the corner. He handed the rag to her then he poured a small measure into a jar. Wren set the brush in it then used the damp rag to rub the paint from her arm.

While she hosed the solvent off her skin, Trigg used the rag to get the last of the dirt off the brush, then dipped it into the can and took over painting.

“Oh, you don’t have to—”

“It’s just this board. I got it.”

“Um, thanks.” She held the hose for Murphy to lap at the stream then turned it off and stood there feeling awkward. Not sure how to broach a conversation that might turn into a confrontation. She wasn’t trying to start anything.

Gosh, he moved beautifully. Like a dancer with those long, easy stretches of his arm, efficient, yet thorough.

*Snap out of it.*

“I, um, wanted to talk to you about Sky’s schoolwork.”

“Yeah, I wanted to ask you how you think we should tag-team that one. I’ve been trying to get her invested in the resort so she has some incentive to get a business degree. What have you got? Where is she, by the way?”

Wren faltered with surprise, not having expected that he had given it thought, taken action, or wanted her opinion. She quickly recovered.

“With your mom. The dress arrived. She’s trying it on, then dinner, then Vivien asked Sky to show her how to load family photos into a slide show.”

“Mom doesn’t need help with that.” He crouched to tickle into a corner with the brush, sending a sly grin up at her.

Her heart tripped. She wanted to look away, but couldn’t make herself. Her breasts grew sensitive, as though her nipples were tightening. She folded her arms to hide the reaction.

“I was surprised myself. Your mom doesn’t hesitate when she’s showing me something on a spreadsheet or in the payroll program—which is a total bear.”

“She’s keeping Sky out of trouble.” He nodded toward the music and laughter filtering through the trees from the staff house.

“Shrewd. I’ll thank her later. As for school...” She skipped past all the conversation points she had prepared, still taken by that phrase ‘tag-team.’ Vivien had said something similar and it still disconcerted her. Aside from her sister, she’d never had an ally. “I think Sky’s nervous about being the kid with the famous dad.”

“Nothing I can do about that.” He finished up with a last few sweeps of the brush.

“I know.” Wren toed at the gravel, thinking she kept forgetting that Trigg was famous. He made her tongue-tied because he was hot. “The night I was at Eden’s, she mentioned a day camp for kids her age. It won’t start until mid-July. I’m hoping once she makes some friends, she’ll want to go to school to be with them, but that could go either way.”

“Worth a try, I guess.” He stirred the brush in the jar of solvent then used the rag to dry it. “Turns out parenting is a lot of hard decisions. I didn’t know that before. Did you?”

“Why do you think I’m out here getting high on paint fumes?”

His mouth twitched. “You’re funny sometimes.”

Only sometimes? If she didn’t make jokes on a regular basis, she’d be on a bridge somewhere thinking about a swim.

“Smell those burgers. I’m starving. That traitor dog of mine is already there. Come on.” He washed his hands with the hose.

“Oh, I’m not going.” She looked around for something to tidy, but aside from closing the can of paint, there was nothing left to do.

“What do you mean you’re not going?”

“They don’t want their supervisor there. Talk about a killjoy.”

“Some of them work for me and I’m going. Rolf and Glory are making an appearance. Marvin would go, but he’s watching the desk so the night manager can attend.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize. I’ll go tell him—”

“Wren. No. *You* have to go.”

“Why? No, I’m just this weird person who showed up a few weeks ago and got a job through nepotism. They won’t even notice if I’m there or not.”

He looked like he couldn’t tell if she was joking. “They don’t think of you like that. Everyone says you’re a great manager. What’s really going on? Social anxiety?”

She didn’t want to admit that, yes, it felt too much like the high school cafeteria at lunch where she had always sat alone. Unless she was picked on. She squinted one eye at him.

“Don’t you feel like you’re a chaperone or one of their parents?” she asked.

“*Ouch*. No. How do you feel like that when you’re the same age as most of them? Ohhh.” His face blanked with sudden realization. “You’ve had a kid since you were fourteen. You never got to be one, did you?” He searched her face like he saw right through to the alien she was under her plain-Jane, earthling skin. “You never partied? Went to the bar on Friday night with the girls?”

“Year-end staff parties at work sometimes. Church socials,” she added with a shrug. “It was tricky with Sky. I don’t miss it.” That was one hundred percent true.

“Because you don’t know what you’re missing. Come on.” He grabbed her hand with his damp one and started tugging her across the lot. “Like everyone else around here, you need to relax for a couple of hours. You said yourself things are going to get worse before they get better.”

She wanted to point out that things were especially uncomfortable now that everyone knew about Sky, which was his fault. Him holding her hand didn't help at all, but she stumbled along behind him while the music grew louder. A cheer went up as a group sitting on the stoop spotted Trigg.

Wren wormed her hand free and folded her arms, smiled with closed lips, and began planning to slip away as quickly as possible.



“WE’LL COME BACK,” Trigg promised the kids on the stoop.

He *did* see them as kids when a year ago, they’d been his peers. The shift wasn’t just the arrival of Sky. He had already been veering away from a decade of nomadic wandering, but Sky’s appearance had accelerated him light years ahead of the twenty-somethings who had dropped out of college to take a job where they only had to work hard enough to play on the slopes all winter.

Oh, to be so carefree again.

It was really humbling to think of all the partying he’d done over the years while Wren had attended a handful of ice-cream socials, too busy being a parent to be a kid.

Tonight, he would make sure she had a chance to act her age. He pointed her to lead the way around the corner of the building. “Let’s get a burger.”

Around the back, a small concrete pad held the barbecue and a picnic table. The table was full of paper plates, salads, buns, condiments and a cake that read, “Let them eat cake.” People in lawn chairs sat in clusters and a Roadside Renovations truck was parked at an angle, tailgate open. A handful of their crew sat in the bed on the wheel wells and around the edges.

Another cheer went up for Trigg. A few people gave Wren a polite smile while she looked apologetic and self-conscious.

Someone offered him a beer and he handed it to Wren before accepting one for himself.

She said, "Thank you," and sipped, but he could tell she didn't plan to finish it. When she belled up to the table, she scanned the food and said, "Are you out of cheese? I thought Marvin ordered a box of singles. I'll see if it's in the lodge kitchen."

"It's in the fridge inside." Paula rose. "I'll get it."

*Nice try*, Trigg thought, watching Wren as she fixed a bun and took her plate to the cook at the barbecue. She carried her burger to where Devon sat on the tailgate and set her plate on the other end. She was practically in the trees, half hidden from the party by the bulk of the truck. Such a cute little wallflower.

Trigg kept an eye on her while he helped himself to salad, taking fresh ribbing about Sky.

"*You* should be manning that barbecue, *Dad*."

"Forgot my License to Grill apron." He wondered how much Wren had dated. She was so adorable, thinking no one wanted her here when he knew of at least three guys who were dying for an opportunity to approach her in a social setting. Four. One of the Roadside tradesmen took note of where she had stationed herself and was already shifting his body away from his boys, working up his line as he prepared to cross toward her.

Trigg moved to cock-block. He told himself he was keeping the lamb from the wolves, but there were other things at play. His palm could still feel the soft heat of her slender fingers. Her bare legs were impossible to ignore, all smooth and lightly tanned, toned and tapering to pretty ankles. Since when did he have a thing for knees with dimples? Suddenly he was imagining all sorts of dirty ways to worship hers.

Since when did he want something as complicated as messing around with his newly discovered daughter's aunt? He didn't. He wasn't that stupid.



His dick was, though. His dick responded to everything about her no matter how many discussions they had on the topic. When he'd been mad at her, he'd found it a lot easier to ignore her, but now they talked over breakfast and he always found himself watching her mouth. There weren't words to describe it except flowery ones like luscious and blooming. The shape of her lips was a poem. That's what he'd decided.

He joined her in time to hear her compliment Devon on the staff house and the restoration of the lodge.

"Glory was telling me what the lodge looked like when you first came here. It must be strange to stay in one place for a year, then move on to something else. Do you have family you're looking forward to getting back to? Or are you headed to a new job somewhere else when the lodge is done?"

"I got family in Minnesota and thought two months ago that we'd be going to Kentucky after this. Nate asked us to bid on finishing the base village, though, when they fired Basco. Looks like we got work here through the fall." Devon drank straight from her bottle of beer. "I don't mind sticking around. Devil you know, right?" She winked as she nodded at Trigg, then looked back at Wren. "What about you? You like it here?"

"I do," Wren said, sounding surprised. "It's pretty. Marvin is great to work for and everyone else is really nice."

Devon's mouth quirked in affectionate disgust as she said, "I should have known that niece of yours was his, way she was carrying on."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Trigg propped an elbow on the wall of the truck bed and took a healthy bite of his burger. "Unless you mean that she's a superior human being, exactly like me."

"You keep telling yourself that, son." Devon grinned as she drank her beer.

"Wren was telling me she hasn't partied since the wild nights at the dentist office, when they spiked the punch bowl

with fluoride rinse.”

“Yeah?” Devon looked at Wren, knowing better than to take anything he said seriously.

“Instead of being hung over in the morning, you have really white teeth,” Wren said, straight as a plumb line.

Trigg grinned. Sky had wit, but he had given his own genes credit for it. He remembered Mandy as giggly, but not particularly funny. Wren was quick, though. It was one more thing that made her really, really attractive to him.

Nate showed up with a Ping-Pong table, something Rolf wanted on hand for guests through the wedding.

“You want to play?” Trigg asked when he noticed Wren watching the game that started. “Don’t say you were planning to leave. We’ll play the winners,” he called. “Are you any good? Don’t embarrass me.”

“What do you think we did at church socials? Smoke pot and paint graffiti?” She took a bite of her burger.

He chuckled and they were called up as they finished eating.

“You’re a lefty, aren’t you?” she said, switching onto his right side. She hunched into ready stance.

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Don’t *you* embarrass *me*.”

She was *spectacular*. He had excellent hand-eye coordination and moved fast, but she had next-level precision skills, adding backspins and somehow landing the ball right on the edge of the table where their opponents least expected it.

They won seven games in a row, finally losing to Nate and Rolf who teamed up in a deliberate effort to take them down. Trigg and Wren were getting tired by then, which is how the men won, but they didn’t make it easy for them.

They all high-fived and left the tournament grinning. Rolf veered away to sit with Glory while Nate went for cake.

Trigg followed Wren back to where their beer had gone warm.

“Where did *that* come from?” he asked her.

“What? Girls can be good at sports.”

“Lot’s of people are good at sports. I’m talking about your cutthroat competitive streak.”

“Oh. That.” She wrinkled her nose. “I didn’t have a lot of friends growing up. When people went after me in dodge ball, I got straight A’s and screwed them with the bell curve. When they said mean things about my sister being held back and getting pregnant, I trounced them at Ping-Pong in front of God.” She widened her eyes to imply there was nothing more profoundly cruel. “Which didn’t help in the making of friends department. It was a vicious cycle. They called me Gump. But I *won*.”

“You scare me.” Not true at all. He was fascinated and could only think of getting closer. Knowing more.

“I’m only mean when I’ve been drinking.” She sipped her beer, made a face at the warm liquid, and set it aside. Then pointed toward the lodge. “I’m going now.”

“No. We’re having fun.”

“This has been fun. Thank you. You were right. I needed to do this. But if I go back now, Sky won’t have an excuse to come looking for me.”

Fair, but he was genuinely disappointed. This wasn’t the let-down of a woman cutting short a date. He’d been enjoying the hell out of watching her laugh and move fast and crack jokes. He wanted to keep spending time with her.

“I’ll walk you back.”

“It’s not even dark. I’ll be fine. Stay and have cake. Actually, I’ll take a piece for Sky.” She moved to grab a square already on a paper plate.

“All right. See you at breakfast?”

“I’m working the coffee counter, so yes, you will. G’ night.”

*Sleep tight.* He watched her leave, admiring the fit of her jeans until he felt a nudge against his arm.

“Probably not the best use of your time,” Nate said, scooping a forkful of cake into his mouth.

A dart of guilt went into Trigg’s conscience and stayed there, stinging.

“I need a fresh beer.” He opened a cold one and splashed it against the tightness in his throat.

## Chapter Twelve

**T**RIGG THOUGHT HE was so smart, but Sky knew what he was doing, dragging her around the base to show her how she needed to learn math and geometry and *German* if she ever wanted to work for the family business.

Trigg and Rolf took lots of calls in German and spoke it to each other quite a bit. At first she thought they were doing it to keep things from her, but she realized that most of the time, they were just saying the first word that came to mind. Or they were swearing at each other. She'd figured out *those* words really fast.

But even though spending time at the base made her feel as though she was on the longest field trip of her life, it was kind of cool when everyone gathered around the bottom of the lift station on the Thursday before the wedding. Nate pushed a button and the one chair that was mounted started moving.

Everyone clapped and yelled, "Yeah!" and high-fived each other. Then they all had to be quiet and listen to the radio. Other guys up the mountain said that the chair cleared all the towers to the top and they watched it come back with no problems. When it stopped and still held the hard hat Nate had placed on it, there was more high-fiving and cheering.

Sky had never given one single thought to how chairlifts worked. Now she knew how much they cost and how much weight they could bear and how fast they were allowed to go. She knew that human resources managers, like Orin, had to write up things like job descriptions and employment contracts just so lifties could stand at the bottom and look at the tags on ski jackets and drop the bar in front of people when they sat down.

She had learned building inspectors could be your best friend or worst enemy. She knew that even when you were

smart and had experience, education mattered. Chivonne was really popular and everyone said she did a great job as Nate's assistant, but she was taking classes online to get the same certification as Nate. When Sky asked her why, Chivonne said, "Money, honey."

So Sky got it. She knew she had to get serious about finishing her school year. She didn't *want* to be a dropout failure at twelve. Duh. But when she did have a minute while Auntie Wren was in the shower, and looked up the courses she had to take, she realized how far behind she really was and felt pretty barfy about it.

Maybe after the wedding.

She shut down and pulled up Crash Bandicoot. She had finally broken down the other day and asked Trigg how he had played it so well that night. He said he used to play it as a kid. Hers was the re-mastered edition, so a lot of it was the same.

Auntie Wren came out of the bathroom in her bra and underwear. "Finish up. I'm hungry," she said, pulling clothes out of a drawer.

Sky did and stood to look for her hoodie, but it was warm out. She hadn't been wearing it much. She wore her new skort, the one she'd got on their shopping trip last weekend. Trigg had given her one of the Wikinger T-shirts out of the box after she caught up a bunch of filing for the office and she only had to put on her new sandals.

Auntie Wren was wearing one of her long skirts, a new one and not as frumpy as the ones she usually wore. Sky thought of them as her church clothes, since she used to wear them on Sundays if they went to church with Nana. This one had a wide waistband and a pretty flower pattern around the bottom. Her top was a sleeveless blue sweater in a halter style that left her shoulders bare. It made her look really stacked. Her hair was loose, not in a ponytail.

"Are you wearing makeup?" Auntie Wren looked surprisingly hot. Like she was going on a date.

“Wedding guests are starting to arrive.” Auntie Wren wrinkled her nose. “I feel like I’ll reflect badly if I don’t make an effort.”

“Ew.” Sky hadn’t realized this was a beauty pageant. “Do I have to dress up?”

“You look great. They’re not allowed to criticize you anyway. I’m the one who kept you under a rock all this time.”

“Well, I don’t want to look like that’s where I crawled from.” She went into the bathroom and put on mascara and lip gloss, then combed out her ponytail. “I thought people were mostly coming Monday because all the guys are going to Las Vegas this weekend.”

“Honestly, I can’t keep up. Some of the men are meeting there and coming back with Trigg and Rolf. I guess some of the older relatives are checking in this weekend, so they can adjust to the time change. Instead of a bachelorette party, Glory wanted to go to a spa, but Vivien arranged for a traveling spa to come in Saturday with massage tables and mani-pedi chairs. I think there’s even a hot tub. They’re setting up in one of the empty buildings at the base, where Vivien wants to put a real spa eventually. And did you know she has one of those makeup trailers coming in? The kind that go to movie sets?”

“Yeah. We had to move out of the office trailer into the operations building so the *security* company can use the office trailer. Whiskey Jack hired a bunch of guards and some of the guests have their own bodyguards. There’s going to be, like, twenty guys with earpieces and *guns*. Like an actual movie.”

“Is it a romcom? Or a spy thriller?”

“Hello.” Sky held up her hand. “Coming of age. Obviously.”



WREN WOULD HAVE loaded her plate at the buffet and hidden in their room given the chance, but along with all the other ‘soft

opening' changes that Vivien had been rolling out, tonight the lodge was shifting to only offering a buffet at breakfast. They would offer menu service the rest of the day from now on, except for special occasions. Wren and Sky even had to wait to be seated.

“Oh, hey Sky.”

A man about Trigg's age joined them at the entrance to the dining room. He was really good-looking. Blond, blue-eyed with a red-gold stubble highlighting his strong jawline. His T-shirt was painted across his muscled chest. It had a logo that was a Q with the tail crossed so it was an X.

“I'm supposed to meet your dad. You know where he is?” His gaze traveled to Wren's, warm and friendly in the male way that signaled he was open to conversation.

She immediately felt overdressed. Flattered, because he was way out of her league, but obvious. She had tried too hard and was sending the wrong signals. Life was so much easier when she was invisible. She looked to Sky rather than meet his gaze.

“He probably took Murphy out. He'll show up soon. This is, um, my aunt. Wren. This is Quinn. He's filming the wedding and doing the documentary about building the resort. He was there today when the chairlift started.”

“Oh, Quinn Baxter.” Wren offered her hand. “I should have recognized you. Glory sent me a link to your documentary about the race across Mongolia.” He filmed extreme sports, not weddings. “I only watched the trailer and haven't had a chance to watch the rest.”

He shook her hand, then glanced past her to say, “Four. Thanks.”

Oh. Apparently he was joining them. She bit her lips as they were shown to a table. Sky sat beside her and he sat across from them.

“Weddings don't seem like your usual gig,” Wren said.



“Turns out I can be bought for the low cost of a season’s pass to a resort that doesn’t exist. Do you ski? Board?”

“I went to a ski camp when I was eleven, but that’s it. Sky took lessons at school.” She glanced at her niece, trying to deflect Quinn’s attention.

*I’m really quite boring. Don’t bother.*

“You’re morally obligated to board, aren’t you?” Quinn asked Sky. “Trigg wouldn’t let you do anything else.”

“He said he would disown me if I skied. I asked if that was a threat or a promise.”

One corner of Quinn’s mouth pulled into a grin. “You two were cracking me up today. I should have known his kid would be funny. It’s good. Keep him on his toes.”

Stupidly, now Wren felt like she wasn’t part of the inner circle. She told herself she didn’t care and smiled as they placed their drink orders.

“What do you do, Wren?” Quinn’s blue eyes came back to her. A different blue from Trigg’s. Solid blue where Trigg’s had a navy circle around his irises.

“I’m the manager here at the lodge.”

“Ah.” He blinked, seeming to wait for her to say more. His mouth twitched. “I’m used to asking questions and letting people say everything they have to say, then asking another question.”

“I’m used to letting guests spill their life story then telling them to enjoy their stay.”

He smiled with bemusement. “Sky?”

“I’m used to being sarcastic. How much do you want?”

“Careful,” Wren warned. “It’s a limitless supply.”



TRIGG POKED HIS head into the dining room and saw his buddy Quinn on a date with Wren. What the *fuck*?

“Hey,” he said, walking up to where Quinn was leaning forward from his side of the table, saying something that had pasted a gorgeous smile across Wren’s sexy lips.

Wren’s lashes, darker and longer than usual, swept up with surprise. She was caught mid-laugh, face pink, hair loose and wavy. Her top was sexy as hell. He wanted to brush her hair back and taste her bare shoulders, work his way up to her earlobe and cheekbone.

He pulled out the chair beside her and sent Quinn a look that made his friend sit back, eyebrows lifting. *Yeah, that’s how it is*, he let Quinn know, holding his gaze.

“Oh, um, Sky’s there.” Wren didn’t catch the exchange, too busy shoving her hands into her lap after nearly getting one caught under his ass as he sat. “She ran up to ask Vivien if she could have one of the baby drones from the swag bags. Quinn said he would show her how to pair it to her phone.”

Her eyes were big and still sparkly with laughter.

“Cool.” Trigg moved the cola with the straw to the setting beside Quinn and set his elbow on the back of Wren’s chair. “What were you two talking about?”

A beat of silence, then Quinn said, “Crazy fixes we’ve had to do on the fly.”

“I, um, was saying that one time the wheel came off of Sky’s stroller. It was right after she came to live with us. She was screaming blue murder. I didn’t know yet that I should have water and snacks on hand at all times.”

She was laughing at herself, but Trigg didn’t think it was funny. He was suddenly picturing an overwhelmed teenager out of her depth. “Where was your mom?”

“Oh, she was always at church,” she dismissed. “Or sleeping.”

“She MacGyvered it with the tape off a disposable diaper,” Quinn chuckled. “That’s genius. Especially under high-pressure conditions.”

“I didn’t even have the benefit of having watched that show. We didn’t have a TV. That was all me.” She tapped her temple.

“Why didn’t you have a TV?” Quinn frowned, perplexed.

“Why didn’t you call your dad to pick you up?” Trigg interjected. “Where were you? At the mall?”

“No. It was half a mile down a dirt road from where the bus let us off. Even if I’d had a cell phone, we didn’t have coverage that far out of town. I limped that poor stroller up and down that road for months. I was so happy when she was out of diapers and I could piggy back her if she got tired.”

“Why did you live so remote?” Quinn asked. “Are you Amish or something?”

“Or something,” Wren dismissed lightly. She smiled as Sky returned.

“I was sitting there.” Sky gave Trigg a disgruntled look and took the chair across from him, but quickly brightened as Quinn nodded and assured her it was the right kind of drone.

As the two peeled open the box and started unwinding twist-ties, Trigg looked at Wren. She was straightening her cutlery, making sure her setting was neat and tidy.

“How was your day?” he asked, trying not to betray how irritated he was.

“Good,” she replied with surprise, as if she hadn’t expected him to ask. “Yours?”

“Good.”

She reached for her menu and said, “Do you mind if we order? I’m helping in the bar tonight. I should eat and get over there.”

“I’ll have the steak,” he said without opening his menu.

He caught Quinn watching them and silently asked his friend what he thought he was doing, getting to know things about Wren that she hadn’t shared with him?

That was his lizard brain. The civilized lobe knew that Wren could talk to whomever she wanted about whatever she wanted and if she was into Quinn, that was her choice. Trigg had no claim on her and couldn't make one.

Even so, he really wanted his good buddy Quinn to fuck the hell off.

Quinn also ordered the steak. Sky and Wren had Cobb salads. The rest of the meal was comfortable and entertaining. Sky's social pH was coming up from acidic to something more balanced. She kept things lively. Wren tended to let the rest of them banter, but she got around to asking how he and Quinn had met.

Trigg winced. "You tell it, darling. You tell it better."

Quinn curled his lip. "I gave him mouth-to-mouth at a surf competition in Sydney. Saved his useless life."

Sky and Wren widened their eyes in shock, then burst out laughing.

"Wait. Are you gay?" Sky asked Quinn.

"No."

"Nor is he a gentleman. He didn't even buy me dinner first. In fact, he made *me* buy the beer after," Trigg said.

"Did you win at least?" Wren turned her head. Her expression was amused and relaxed. She was so utterly stunning, it took him a second to process what she'd asked.

"Not even close," he managed to say. "I still surf, but humbly. I got into it thinking that falling in water would be softer than snow, but it turns out you can drown. Who knew?"

"It's as if the word 'lifeguard' means they're guarding actual lives."

"I know. I thought it was all riding Jet Skis and babe-watching."

"Ew. Grow up," Sky said with a sneer of disgust, making them all laugh.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go.” Wren touched Trigg’s shoulder, sending a tingle up his neck. She quickly tucked her hand back into her lap. “I’ll put this on my card.”

“I’ll use mine.” He was mildly insulted by her suggestion and highly reluctant to let her go. “We’ll come in for a beer after we’ve tried the drone.”

“Sounds good.”

He stood and pushed in his chair so she could come through the space, but at the last second, a server came toward them with a loaded tray and a tray stand. Trigg had to corral Wren back into the space behind his chair.

Wren was looking the other way and wasn’t expecting it. She bumped flush into him, then took a startled step back. She looked at the floor, hair falling to curtain her cheeks as she blushed. Hard.

He had caught a few glances from her at different times. He had suspected she found him attractive. Most women did. He had liked the way she looked from the minute he had seen her, before he knew who she was.

But this was the first time he realized exactly how disconcerted she was by her attraction to him—which meant it was more intense than she was comfortable with.

Talk about fuel to the fire. That bump had shaken something loose in him. An ember rolled out from its containment to catch with more determination on all the fuel she provided.

Trigg heard an exhaled, “Thank you,” as the server whisked by.

He pulled himself together and stepped back into the aisle.

Wren flickered a nervous smile at him as she left, but her gaze dodged meeting his.

He could hardly breathe. He still felt the light press of her body against his front. She had smelled like girl shampoo and something earthy and fine that he intrinsically knew was *her*.

It was erotic enough to pulse heat behind his fly as he sat again. He had to splay his thighs under the table to give himself room.

“Can I get Murphy?” Sky asked.

“Do you want him to eat your drone?”

“No. Can I be excused to go try it, then? Or do you want me to wait for you?”

“We’ll finish our beer and be right out.”

She nodded, thanked him for dinner, and left.

“She’s great,” Quinn said.

Trigg jerked his attention from signaling for their check. “Sky? Thanks. I can’t take much credit, though.”

“Wren gets that?” Quinn tilted the dregs of his beer, tongue touching his bottom lip. “She’s great, too. Smart. Funny.”

“She doesn’t need ‘here for a good time, not a long time,’” Trigg warned.

“You don’t know what I want.” Quinn got real serious real fast, shedding the easygoing façade he typically wore to reveal the man who had the grit to get what he wanted in subzero weather, wearing gloves, and carrying a hundred pounds of equipment on his back for twenty miles.

“So long as I’ve made it clear what I want.” Trigg smiled to keep it light, but it was like trying to put on a coat that was too small. It pulled tension across his shoulders.

The arrival of their bill ended the conversation.



SHE MISSED HIM. What was wrong with her that she actually missed Trigg when the men disappeared Friday morning? The lodge shouldn’t have felt so empty. They all went down to the base every day, but this was a different quiet. Wren knew he had climbed on a plane. There was no chance of glancing up or turning a corner and accidentally running into him.

Why did she want to? If she had a legitimate reason to talk to him, she texted or emailed a quick note. *Sky needs to see the dentist. Do you want to drive her or should I?* They had arrived at having civilized conversations broken up by a few dumb jokes. It was the rapport every divorced couple wanted.

Except they had never had sex and she was starting to obsess about what it would be like if they did. It had started with physical attraction that had worsened after they played Ping-Pong, bumping into each other as they fought to return the ball. It was being whipped into a frenzy by his being nice to her, acting as if they were partners where Sky was concerned.

Then there'd been that strange evening with Quinn.

Over dinner, she had thought Quinn might be hitting on her, which had been a nice boost for her ego. Then Trigg showed up and acted... Had he been possessive? It had been hard to read his mood. And equally difficult to figure out how she felt about his behavior. He had seemed to sit beside her deliberately and his knee had nudged the side of her thigh beneath the table more than once.

She had already been tingling and fighting to hide it when she had stood to leave and walked right into the wall of his chest—which was a work of art. It really was. If she hadn't curled her fist into her own shoulder, she would have tested the hard muscles of his pecs with her fingertips and followed the contours into the dip of his sternum. The compulsion to press the side of her face against that firm warmth, and splay her hand across the drum-taut skin of his abdomen, had been nearly overwhelming.

She should have had herself under control by the time they came into the bar an hour later. Maybe she would have been able to stop thinking about him if Trigg and Quinn had taken one of the empty tables, but they had sat on the stools and watched her practice bartending. They had teased her when she goofed a pour, but had included her in their conversations when she was nearby and could spare her attention.

She had felt pleased to the point of giddy.

It was so silly. She was acting Sky's age, wondering if Trigg *liked* her. She was used to making herself indispensable, working hard to be appreciated and valued as an employee, but she didn't think of herself as particularly interesting or fun to be around. She was comfortable as an observer of life and preferred to keep her expectations low. Less room for disappointment.

So thinking of Trigg as anything but the father of her niece was dumb.

Dumb, dumb, dumb.

She tried to push him from her mind, busying herself with inspecting the last of the renovated rooms, signing off on Devon's invoice so Marvin could approve her final payment, then working with Glory and Sky to put swag bags and other welcome gifts in them. Some of the guests were getting *extra* special treatment. Plush robes with the lodge logo that they could take home, bottles of forty-year-old scotch whiskey with a 'compliments of Whiskey Jack' tag, or a bottle of wine with the wedding label that Glory had ordered from a vineyard in California. Books, chocolates, fruit and flowers went into all the rooms with a printed program for the week.

Somehow she wound up having drinks with Glory and Vivien and a handful of their friends and relatives on Saturday night. Sky joined them, pretty much the only person serious about folding cloth napkins into swans, despite everyone agreeing that many hands would make light work.

Wren didn't drink much, but she stayed up late, which was why she was so foggy Sunday morning when Glory and Ilke showed up at her door.

"Almost ready?" Glory asked.

"Hmm? Sky," she called toward the bathroom, yawning and still in her pajamas. "She'll be right out."

"You're coming, too, aren't you?"



“It’s a family thing. Isn’t that what you were saying last night? I was going to help Vivien with the high tea.”

“I meant a bunch of Rolf’s relatives are meeting us there. No, Vivien knows you’re coming with us.”

Sky came out of the bathroom in her shorts and T-shirt, bathing suit straps visible where they tied behind her neck. She faltered as she heard Glory.

“You’re not coming?” Sky asked with dismay.

“I’m not really into—” being dragged behind a boat; Wren hesitated to diss what everyone seemed to think sounded awesome “—water-skiing.”

“Wakeboarding,” Glory said. “I’m not doing it either. I’m going to lie under the shade and ask my future husband to bring me mimosas. Come on. It’ll be fun.”

“You have to come,” Sky said, slowing down on stuffing things into her daypack. “I don’t know anyone. What if they all speak German?” Sky gave her a look between scared puppy and rabid wolf. She was meeting her cousins, including the fourteen-year-old who would escort her at the wedding.

“I only have my one-piece,” Wren reminded Sky. “The one I use for water aerobics. It’s awful.”

“Wear your swim shorts. The ones you wore at the water slides.”

“Here,” Ilke said, pulling a pink and turquoise bathing suit from the beach bag slung over her shoulder. “I brought it to have a dry one, but you use it.”

Wren did not have Ilke’s figure, but the suit tied at the hips and behind her neck and back. She easily customized it in the bathroom, then pulled on her swim shorts over the bottoms. When she came out, she drew on a button blouse and left it open, kicked into flip-flops, grabbed her sunglasses and reluctantly followed them out to the car.

“Wren, you take the front seat,” Ilke said. “Unless you like dog breath.”

Murphy leapt into the back of Glory's SUV and turned a few circles of excitement.

"So the men are going straight there from the flight from Vegas?" Wren asked as Glory pulled away.

"They landed an hour ago." Ilke scratched under Murphy's chin as he hung his head over the back of the seat between her and Sky.

"Has Nate been texting you the whole time? So much for 'what happens in Vegas.'" Glory snickered.

"*Nothing* happened in Vegas. Rolf walked straight back out of the strip club. Some of the men stayed, but Nate and Trigg and Quinn went zip-lining on Freemont Street with Rolf. Then they sat at a bar, gambled a little, drank 'til two and called it a night. The indoor skydiving on Saturday was a hit, though. And the climbing wall."

"Poor Trigg. He was really looking forward to making history. I guess now that he's a dad, he can't party like he used to." Glory tilted a smile into the rearview mirror.

"I don't get bachelor parties," Sky said. "I mean, it's like a funeral for being single, right? But if you want to be single, why get married? It doesn't make sense."

"Amen, sister," Glory said, twisting her arm to offer her palm for a low-five.

"Even so, will they be in any shape for waterskiing?" Wren asked.

"Doesn't matter. We're doing it," Glory said. "There's method to the madness. This is a long way for guests to come. We had to make it worth their spending a few days here. It's also a PR stunt for the skeptics in Haven. We keep telling them the resort will bring more business to town. They've been hurting a long time and don't want to invest in painting their storefronts and bringing in new stock only to see the town die again. So we organized the boats and baseball tourney and other stuff to put Haven on the map as a fun place to visit."

Wren didn't want to ask how much that was costing, but Sky partially answered that question by piping up from the back. "The board lost it on Rolf the other day when they found out about him ordering wet suits and life jackets and everything."

"Oh, the board," Glory muttered. "They keep threatening to fire him, but he offered all the shareholders a choice between a transferrable season pass or the dollar value. Almost everyone chose the pass."

"With accommodation?" Wren asked, instantly alarmed. She'd seen the reservations and the lodge was booked pretty solid into spring.

"They'll have to find something in Haven. Most of them will use it for a week here and there because they're coming from so far away. The cost to the hill is actually pretty low, but the shareholders are happy and the board can't use the resort as an excuse to fire Rolf."

Super sneaky.

"They're mad he keeps offering passes for wedding stuff, too," Glory continued. "Like the boats, today. He's giving passes to the four guys who own them. He still has to pay their fuel and travel, but they're operating them, which means we don't have to stress about licensing and liability. He's trading passes and equipment for a ton of stuff, but it's like me giving away free books. People can try it once and if they like it, they'll probably come back or tell their friends. The board doesn't seem to get that."

They arrived at the marina to find three dozen people milling around. Glory parked and went to find Rolf. Ilke went in search of Nate. Sky leashed Murphy to go looking for Trigg.

Wren used the excuse of reading the information map on a bulletin board to hang back. It looked pretty new, possibly erected by the local tourism office in response to all the claims Rolf was making about drawing more visitors to Haven.

Clearwater Lake was used mostly by fishermen, the bulletin board claimed. It was thought to be too cold for summer sports, but its glacial water was warmed by a fissure that leaked hot spring waters into the far end, which accounted for the abundance of fish. The undeveloped shoreline belonged to a reserve.

The next section offered a history lesson on early copper mining and how a proposal to harness the power of the thermal energy had almost reinvigorated the copper mine twenty years ago. It would have gouged into the ski resort, a proposal that had divided the town at the time, pitting skiers and nature lovers against family men who wanted good paying jobs. Ultimately, the amount of copper had been deemed too low for the venture to be profitable.

A sharp whistle pulled Wren's attention to the group.



“WHERE’S YOUR AUNT?” Trigg asked as soon as Sky appeared.

“I thought she was right behind me.”

He was ridiculously relieved when he caught sight of Wren being her cute self, wearing her ponytail and managing to work on her day off by reading the information board about the lake.

He whistled to get her attention. She scanned the boats as she approached. All four were shiny and powerful, tricked out with wakeboards and skis loaded in the racks. The first one was pulling away with some of Rolf’s relatives on his mother’s side. One of the groomsmen, also from that side of the family, hung his head over the water, still recovering from the excesses of Vegas.

Nate cast off the blue boat, then leapt aboard it. Ilke sat next to Aiden on one of the benches inside it. He smiled and waved at Wren. Eden had her niece, Zuzu, with her on the opposite side. They were hosting Rolf’s friends from Germany, a couple with two little ones close to Aiden’s age.

“Sky,” Rolf said, thumbing toward his boat. “I’ve got Bruno.”

Bruno was Sky’s escort. His grandmother was Trigg and Rolf’s aunt Gerta, their father’s sister. Bruno flew Johansson colors pretty loud. He was already in the boat, suiting up, eager to show Rolf his latest moves.

Sky took one look at Bruno’s bare back and the shoulders he was growing on his weedy frame. “I’ll go with my dad,” she said.

It was the first time she had acknowledged Trigg that way. The word sent a punch of emotion straight into his chest, stealing his breath.

“Thanks, kid.” He held out his fist for a bump.

She glowered. Apparently it wasn’t supposed to be a big deal. With a graze of her knuckles against his own, she climbed on the boat and bent to scrub Murphy’s ears, kissing him between the eyes.

“There’s a blanket in the bow,” Trigg told her. “Make sure he stays on that, and doesn’t jump on the benches. His nails will wreck the upholstery.”

Sky nodded and moved to settle the dog.

“Wren?” Rolf invited. “You want to come with us?”

“Hmm?” She was staring at Quinn who was taking back the GoPro from Bruno to tighten the straps while Bruno pulled a life vest over his wet suit.

Quinn winked at her. He’d been smirking since Rolf had vetoed the strippers and Trigg had left with them, rather than stay with the men who were on the prowl. The best man had to stay with the groom, Trigg had claimed. The truth was, there was only one woman he was interested in these days. It was aggravating as hell.

“She’s with us,” he decided for her, then had to touch Wren’s elbow to get her attention. “Aren’t you?”

“Pardon? That’s not a helmet, is it?” she asked, looking over her shoulder as she gripped Trigg’s hand and climbed aboard his boat.

“Camera,” Trigg said.

“Oh. Of course. Duh.” She laughed at herself. “For his head? Why?”

“You’ll see,” he said dryly and cast them off.

Trigg introduced her and Sky to the two couples who had come with him. The women were Trigg’s cousins, Bruno’s older sisters, close to Wren’s age. One had brought her fiancé, the other her boyfriend. Trigg suspected the men had climbed aboard his boat expecting it would be the party boat. They seemed disappointed when Sky came aboard.

They all spoke English and the women were openly curious about Sky, but nice about it, welcoming her to the family.

“I didn’t know I had cousins,” Sky responded shyly. “I thought I would have to wait until Auntie Wren had kids.”

“Maybe your dad will have more kids and you’ll have a brother or sister.”

“Maybe he already has,” his other cousin shot back. Both women laughed.

*Ha-ha-ha, very funny.*

“You want to find out how cold that water is?” Trigg pretended to take the joke on the chin, but he’d heard it enough that it was wearing thin.

The fiancé finished suiting up and dropped behind the boat to jump the wake as they zoomed up the lake, music tuned to hard rock. The sisters moved to the bow seats while Murphy paced nervously until Sky got him to sit in front of her so she could scratch under his collar.

Trigg tucked his back against the windshield, standing between the driver and where Wren sat facing backward on the

bench beneath the shade.

“Oh, wow. Look,” Sky said, pointing to where Bruno was doing flips and spins behind Rolf’s boat, their own music wailing.

Wren stood on her knees. “Oh, he’s really good.”

Trigg divided his attention between spotting and glancing at Bruno. “Yeah, he’s coming along fast.” He and Bruno had been shredding the mountains of Europe as often as possible since the kid could walk. Rolf had already given him a Wikinger junior sponsorship.

Trigg was host so he offered all the guests a turn before he took his. The boyfriend wanted to hot dog, but didn’t have the skills. He fell a lot, not listening to the tips Trigg gave him and too arrogant to take his advice anyway. Trigg’s younger cousin went out and played it safe, working herself across the wake in conservative leaps, not even getting her hair wet.

Trigg offered Wren and Sky a turn. They both declined.

“You can tube,” he said, pointing in the direction they’d seen Eden putter by, flat on her stomach on an inflated disk with Aiden and Zuzu screaming with excitement under each of her arms.

“I’m okay,” Wren said. “You go. I’ll spot you.”

Did he show off for her and his daughter? Hell, yeah. Besides, it felt good to push himself after months of workouts that weren’t getting played out. He caught huge air, flipped and spun and had them all clapping and cheering, even from the other boats.

He wiped out twice and Murphy jumped in after him the third time. He switched out for a board that let him surf the wake, got the dog onto it and skimmed behind the boat for a while. Murphy balanced with his front legs wide. He snapped at the foam and dangled his tongue, clearly in doggy heaven. The sun was shining, the music pumping, and life was pretty freaking great.

“If the dog can do it, you can,” Trigg told Sky when he came aboard, pleasantly worn out.

She made a face, then glanced to where the guys had joined their girls in the bow. There was only one other boat trailing them in the distance so her audience was down to him and Wren—a safe enough stage that she suited up.

Trigg tutored her on how to get up on the board and keep going. She fell twice, then set her chin with determination.

“She’s mad now,” Wren murmured. “She’ll get it or die trying.”

Sky got the hang of it and trailed comfortably behind the boat for a short distance.

“It’s like watching a baby learn to walk,” Wren said with a chuckle. “I’m so excited I can’t take my eyes off her.”

“Me, either. You’re doing really good,” he called, grinning with pride. “Keep your eyes on the boat.”

Sky nodded, but grew clumsy and uncertain again, jostling into the wake.

Trigg quickly realized she was doing it on purpose, testing what happened as she tried different postures. She bent and straightened her elbows and knees, raised and lowered the rope, and shifted her weight to find her edges.

He caught back a laugh of excitement at how quickly she was catching on, easily correcting before she was pulled off-balance. He couldn’t have looked away if they’d hit an iceberg.

Sky moved into the wake, which made her wobble as it pushed her away. She expected it, though, and compensated, not letting it knock her down.

“Stay on your edge. Lean on the line,” he called.

Sky darted glances into the wake and kept pushing into it, bumpy and—



“Ohh!” She fell, but got right back up and wanted to keep going.

Trigg gave her a couple of tips then settled into his spot standing next to Wren.

This time, Sky edged into the wake with more purpose, testing its strength before she swung out and back in, committing. She rode cleanly over the two bumps, made it to the other side, then fought to stay up, managing to bring herself back under control.

“Nice!” Trigg clapped and glanced at Wren. “She’s done this before.”

“No,” Wren assured him, sitting up with attention. “Boarding lessons one year, but mostly skiing. Volleyball and softball. Hated soccer, but wanted to try trampoline at the Y. We couldn’t make it fit the schedule, though.”

Sky indicated with a thumbs-up that she wanted to go faster.

Trigg rolled his wrist to tell the driver to pick up speed, gaze pinned on Sky. “Stand tall. Drop your back hand and dig your edge with your toes—Yeah!” He shouted with full-throated excitement when Sky made the leap to the other side of the wake.

She wobbled and fought to get a grip with two hands again, but stayed up and got herself back under control.

Trigg clapped and whistled encouragement. The other four came through from the bow to see what they were cheering about.

Sky scowled with deep concentration, seeming to look for an opportunity to jump again.

Trigg took a scan of the water. “Is my brother seeing this?” He spotted Rolf’s boat gaining on them. He let out a piercing whistle, then used his whole arm to point at Sky, like he was landing an aircraft.

Rolf jumped his own wake to veer from behind his own boat, which was traveling a lot faster than this one. Rolf settled into a comfortable lean as he watched Sky.

She nudged into the wake again, backed off, then managed another jump, this one catching a fraction of air. She landed clean and everyone on both boats screamed with excitement.

At which point the nose of her board caught. She tumbled with a huge splash and they all groaned.

Their driver cut his speed and circled back while Rolf's boat caught up to her. Rolf let go of his line and skimmed toward her, sinking into the water beside her and offering a palm to high-five.

Sky smacked his hand, but complained, "If you guys weren't yelling so much, I would have stayed up longer."

"Go again with us," Rolf said. "I want footage."

"I got some," Quinn said from Rolf's boat, holding up his hand-held.

"You got me falling?" Sky asked with horror. "Let me see." She paddled toward Rolf's boat.

Quinn moved to sit on the platform, bare feet dangling in the water.

Rolf heaved himself up beside him, then shifted to make space between them. Both men grabbed Sky's arms to pull her up and plopped her in the middle. They reviewed the footage while everyone else exchanged words across the hulls.

"I know what you're doing," Trigg told his brother as he heard Rolf suggesting ways she could maintain control and level up.

"I can't help it if your daughter has the natural skill you lack. You want to try?" he asked her.

Sky nodded.

Trigg accepted defeat and took the wakeboard that Sky removed, waving her off to try waterskiing with her uncle.

Either way he was proud as hell.



MURPHY DIDN'T KNOW what to do with himself. As the boats bobbed and everyone talked at once, he paced and tried to jump onto the seats to see, even looked to the water off the stern as though he wanted to leap in and swim to the other boat.

Wren coaxed him into the bow where his blanket was crumpled on the deck. She spread it out and showed him his water dish, then did her best to settle him down.

A few minutes later, the two boats parted. Sky stayed with Rolf and Murphy tried to get up and go to the stern, but Wren held his collar and talked him into relaxing. She lay down on the bench above him and dangled her arm to pet him.

He settled on his stomach, then let his head drop onto his paws.

The boyfriend of Trigg's cousin wanted another turn on the water, not liking that a girl had outshone him. The bunch exchanged a few laughs as he suited up.

Trigg handed out sub sandwiches, then brought two into the bow with a couple of Wikinger's reusable water bottles. He dropped onto the bench across from her. "Turkey or meat lover?"

"Turkey, thanks. But I should wash my hands."

"These are tap water," he said, offering a bottle.

She went onto her knees to lean out and pour water over her hands. The backs of her thighs tingled, but she didn't dare glance back to see if Trigg was eyeing her butt. She sat back on her heels and dried her hands on the tails of her open shirt, then settled with her back in the point of the bow and unwrapped her sandwich.

Murphy groaned and rolled onto his side, taking up the narrow triangle of deck, forcing Trigg to lift his feet. They

both could have faced forward, but he swiveled so he was shoulder-to-shoulder in the point of the bow with her, both of them extending their legs down the benches toward the driver.

“Are you mad that she wants to try skiing?” Wren asked, mostly to hide the fact she was so aware of the bulk of his shoulder almost brushing her own. She bit into her sandwich.

“Hell, no. My head is exploding with possibility. Rolf and I had pretty much agreed to wait a couple years before developing a club for kids. Now, I don’t know how we’ll make it work, but if she wants to get serious, we will.”

“Are you really thinking about how to turn her into a gold-medal athlete? Because I was shooting for high school graduate. Whatever you think is best, though. I *guess*.”

“We’re on the same page with that.” He eyed her over his sunglasses to let her know her sarcasm had come through loud and clear. “But she’s got the stuff you can’t teach. I knew she was competitive and stubborn, but she’s got the coordination and ability to overcome fear. If we start developing skills on top of that potential, yes, we have a champion. Can’t start soon enough.”

“Can I ask you something?” The day dimmed a little. She adjusted the wrapper on her sandwich, exposing the next bite. “What if she doesn’t want that? What if she had fallen apart out there and said she hated all sports?”

He tucked his chin, mouth tight enough to tell her he was insulted. “I’d be fine. Disappointed, now that I’ve seen what she might be capable of, but it’s not a condition of acceptance, if that’s what you’re asking.”

It was. “Okay. Good.”

They both ate in silence.

“But I hope she takes to competing. I’m sure she will and it’s something we could have in common.” He sounded as though he was speaking as he thought. “I need something we can build on. I want *that*. A way we can interact. If she wanted to pursue macramé, I’d find a way to like it, but it’d be a

bumpier road while I figured it out. This one is paved and eight lanes wide. *That's* why I'm excited." With a self-deprecating curl of his lip, he added, "But I'd be a lousy businessman if I didn't also see the advantage to Wikinger if we produced another Johansson medalist, especially if she came out of the resort our board is so dead set against us building."

"Shameless."

"Always."

At least he was honest about it.

Wren bit back a grin, genuinely hoping Sky would bond with Trigg in a way that built her confidence. Sky *was* competitive. She also had a streak of perfectionism that needed guidance. Otherwise she would measure herself against unhealthy standards set by fashion magazines and trolls on social media.

"Would coaching her also be a way for you to get back into competition? You miss it, don't you?"

"So fucking much," he breathed, slouching lower so his shoulder was against her upper arm and his head was tilted back against the top of the cushion, nose and chin angled to the sky. "I haven't ruled out going back in a couple of years. Lots of athletes take time to have a kid or recover from an injury, then spend a couple years getting back onto the circuit and working their way up again. This was the right decision and I don't regret it, but I need that carrot to help me live with the deprivation."

"You make it sound like an addiction."

"Pretty much. It's funny—Not really, but I have to laugh about how different Rolf's retirement was from mine. His body would have fallen apart if he hadn't quit. Wikinger was in really bad shape. One of us had to get in there and sort things. No *way* was I ready to quit. But, he was such a prick when he quit. We always give each other shit, but there aren't words for the way he came after me. I was ready to kill him, I

really was. Then I met Marvin and started to get the resort off the ground. I was honestly looking for a way to get away from Rolf, but, no. He came here and dug in. I was so mad.” He tore a bite off his sandwich like a savage eating the heart out of his enemy.

“I thought it might have been...” She shifted so she wasn’t touching him, but curled her knees to the side and faced him, elbow propped on the top of the cushion near his ear. “Glory mentioned that your mom had an affair with your dad while he was still married to Rolf’s mom. I thought that’s why you two don’t always get along.”

“I wondered that, too, but we got along pretty well when I was little, between five and ten or so. I thought for a while he might finally be working Dad’s cheating out of his system, or just hated that I’m younger, smarter, funnier and better-looking. Quit laughing. Why is that funny? It’s the truth.”

“Mmm,” she agreed, suppressing the chuckle that stayed in her throat.

“Do you think he’s better-looking than me?” His mouth was on the verge of laughter and she wanted to dip her head and kiss it.

“He’s very good-looking,” she said, gazing across the horizon, living dangerously because it felt exciting and fun to tease him.

“You need glasses.”

“So it was a clash of egos?”

His mouth twitched. “We’re competitive as hell, especially with each other, but no. I see now that Rolf was jealous. Green-eyed, insanely jealous that I was still doing what he couldn’t. He wasn’t mad that I was winning, he was mad that he wasn’t.”

“You Johanssons are very complicated people.”

“Aren’t we?” he agreed dryly. “Working on the resort gave him some of what he was missing, though. Getting laid didn’t

hurt, either. I have *no* idea what Glory sees in him, but she keeps him human, so I'm grateful."

"And you? I thought learning about Sky made you mad, but is some of it anger about retiring?"

"A lot of it is. Rolf spent two years talking himself into quitting. I knew I would have to do it pretty much from the minute Mom told me why you had come here. I fought admitting it. I thought maybe Sky wouldn't be mine, but I knew if she was, then this is what I would have to do. Which isn't to say I didn't want her to be mine, just—"

"I know." She picked at the triangle of cheese poking out the side of her sandwich and ate the little morsel. "How did he react to that? Sky, I mean." Rolf wasn't the warmest of men, but he'd never been anything less than polite to both of them. Sky spent time with him at the base and didn't seem to dislike or fear him.

"I thought he'd lay into me, but he never has. I said I should probably retire and he agreed. Didn't rub it in. Which isn't to say he's not hard on me in other ways. He dumps some of the crappiest, most challenging tasks on me, but I'm starting to realize he knows I have to operate at crisis level so I don't dwell on what I'm missing. Otherwise, I'll take an axe to my desk."

"Your big brother is being supportive? That's sweet."

He made a face of pithy disdain that was so much like Sky's, Wren burst out laughing.

"I guess you showed him a good time at his bachelor party to thank him?"

His lip curled and she felt his gaze like a laser from behind the mirrored finish on his sunglasses. "You heard it was a bust? I *knew* Nanny Nate was texting Ilke the whole time. Those two."

"They're cute."

“So sweet I need insulin shots.” He bunched the wrapper from his sandwich and set the balled paper into a cup holder. “Nah, they’re all right. They spend more time apart than together so I didn’t expect him to go no-contact. And I knew Rolf wouldn’t be into the strippers. The rest of the party expected it, though. I paid a lot of money for two minutes of sequined bikinis. Never even saw the tops come off.”

“That’s too bad. The male strippers who came to the lodge stayed until midnight and they went full monty. I’m kidding!” She laughed heartily at the outraged way he snapped his head around.

“You’re a brat.”

Still chuckling, she shrugged, hot enough to want to take off her blouse, but not wanting to sit here half-naked in her borrowed bikini. She already felt exposed enough around him. This was such a strange tension. Alluring, yet terrifying. She didn’t want him to know how she felt, but yearned for him to reciprocate this wonderful, petrifying excitement. Wanted to bask in his presence like he was the sun.

Refusing to look at his mouth, despite *desperately* wanting to, she made herself fix her gaze on the far shore. Her heart thumped, though. Her skin tingled and she swore she could feel the glide of her blood in her veins, silky as a caress.

“Are we going to talk about it?” he asked quietly. “Or just keep ignoring it?”

Her scalp tightened and she had to suppress a shiver. Her throat flexed and her breasts grew heavy and hard. Her nipples pressed up against the thin pads of her suit and swirls of anxious excitement fluttered through her abdomen.

She started to ask what he was talking about, but her voice was caught in her throat. She could see her own face, distorted in miniature, gaze trying to pierce those silvery lenses to read his eyes behind them. So close, and yet impossibly out of reach.



If she asked him what he was talking about, he might shatter her illusions and reveal he knew exactly what she was struggling against. She didn't want to know this was all on her side. If she didn't acknowledge it, she wouldn't feel rejected.

On the other hand, if she said nothing, she was making a huge admission. She nipped her bottom lip between her teeth, cheeks stinging with mortification.

"Ignore, I guess," he murmured.

Did he sound disappointed? Rueful? She tried to swallow past the rod of hot tension in the back of her throat.

Their boat picked up speed and the wind felt good against her hot cheeks.

He leaned to open the cushion under her feet, forcing her to shift and draw her knees up. "Can I ask you about something else?"

He showed her a can of iced tea. She nodded and he cracked it for her, then opened one for himself.

"What?" She sipped cautiously as he settled back into the space beside her.

He thumbed the tab on his can, tilting his head so he side-eyed her from behind the arm of his sunglasses.

"That day you were in my room... Did you think I was going to hurt you? Because I never would."

*Oh God.*

She swiveled so she faced the driver again, searched the horizon, searched for Sky as if she could somehow hide behind her. Rolf's boat was so far away, she wasn't even sure if that was Sky riding the wake or someone else.

Wren brought her feet in closer to her bum, knees up as she faced forward, not looking at him. She took a gulp and wound up coughing against the astringency in the authentic green tea. She sipped again, trying to ease the scraped feeling in the back of her throat. It didn't help.

Her voice strained past it, even though she tried to sound as dispassionate as possible. “I didn’t mean to react like that. My dad believed in corporal punishment. When I get in a confrontation, I get defensive.”

He swore under his breath.

She jerked her shoulder, wound up bumping into his, which made her shift abruptly so there was as much space as possible between them without her having to turn and face him.

“That’s not right, Wren.”

“He didn’t do it after Mandy left,” she hurried to assure him. “I wouldn’t have let Sky come live with us if I thought he would hurt her. I—” Her breaths backed up, making her whole torso feel pressurized.

If she hadn’t just been through this with Sky, she probably wouldn’t have been able to do this. If she and Sky had still been at terrible odds, she wouldn’t have been able to do it. If she and Trigg weren’t finding something like friendship, there was no way she could have done this.

But they had been sharing a lot of really intimate stuff. She felt like it was safe to let this unwind out of her.

“When he realized Mandy was pregnant, he was going to take his belt to her. I stopped him, but he said I should have known she left our room. He thought I knew your name. At the time, I didn’t.”

“Jesus Christ. Where were the authorities?”

In her periphery, he was a statue, frozen as he stared at her.

She touched where a drop of condensation had fallen off her can to dribble down the front of her bare thigh.

“When Mandy left, her friend’s mom brought the police, but I would have gone to foster care. Our mom was freaking out. Her church friends intervened, said they would make sure my father got help. He went to group classes, went on

medication. He was like a zombie after that. When Mandy died...the social workers wanted to leave Sky with us.”

“Didn’t he have a record or something?”

“Spanking isn’t always seen as child abuse. They were told to ‘watch’ him, but that was it.” She shrugged. “Mom and I both wanted her, but I was scared for her. I remember standing at the grave, watching my dad, trying to decide if I should try to get hold of you. He didn’t even cry. He just looked old and shriveled and broken. I realized I wasn’t scared of him anymore. Living there was just something to be endured. If he had so much as raised his voice to her, though, I would have got her out of there. I swear.”

His stare was hot enough to melt the sunscreen off her face.

“Was that another reason you didn’t tell me? Were you worried I would be that kind of father? Because I wouldn’t.”

She didn’t say, *I know*. She wanted to believe it and hearing the words made it feel a lot more certain. “Good.”

She watched his cousin appear and disappear behind their boat. For a few minutes, the blaring music and the whirr of the motor were the only sounds.

“Where is he?” His voice was so lethal, the hairs stood up on her arms and scalp.

“Utah. My number is on his fridge, but he never uses it. I call the neighbor every few weeks. They check on him. I haven’t seen him since my mom died.”



*NOT GOOD ENOUGH*, Trigg was thinking. She damned well should have contacted him. Surely he was a better bet than *that*?

“Please don’t tell me I should have done things differently. I know that, but we all make decisions, good, bad and ugly, that bring us to today. And today is a great day.”

He had a feeling he'd enjoyed more good days than she had. It made his chest ache. He wanted to scoop his arm across her shoulders and tuck her in to his side. Shelter her.

She sat up to fix her ponytail, putting space between them. Then she applied fresh sunscreen to her face and throat, down onto her chest, pretty as a mermaid, but vulnerable as hell with only that thin sheen of ointment against a fucking *belt*.

“Look.” She nodded, mouth curving into a smile.

Sky went flying past behind Rolf's boat, Bruno beside her. They were doing their best to soak each other with rooster tails.

The ache in his chest deepened and expanded, but in a good way.

Today *was* a great day. He let out his breath and savored it.

## Chapter Thirteen

WHEN THEY RETURNED to the lodge, the ‘Private Function’ signs had been set out. All the staff cars had been moved to the lower lot at the base and guest parking was filling up. A lot of the older folks had come to the lodge and checked in rather than spend the day on the water. Now the younger crowd arrived with luggage and a desire to shower off their sunscreen before eating.

Wren jumped behind the check-in desk still wearing her boating clothes, helping get everyone their room keys. Sky showed Bruno’s family to their block of rooms and came back to help the couple whose little ones had fallen asleep in their arms.

“Did you have fun today?” Wren asked when she and Sky got into their room and took turns using the shower and getting changed.

“Bruno’s English isn’t very good. We’re using a translation app. It’s hilarious. I said my arms were sore and he said his were wet pasta.”

“That is funny. But, um...” Wren scratched her cheek as she ventured into *very* dangerous territory. “You know he’s your cousin, right?”

“Ugh. Really? He’s also got a boyfriend.” She rolled her eyes.

“Oh.” Wren bit the corner of her mouth. “Okay, then.”

They went out to the lobby. Canapés and wine were on offer in the lounge and on the patio. The dining room was full, but the menu was limited and people were getting their meals fairly quickly.

Wren chatted briefly with all the staff, ensuring they had things under control, then joined Marvin and another server

behind the bar. “I can do this if you want to visit,” she offered.

“I am visiting.” He introduced her to some of his and Glory’s relatives from Seattle seated at the bar.

The evening passed in convivial busyness with people circulating, sometimes carrying meals from the dining room to the patio, coming back in search of matches for the candles or a blanket against the cooling night air.

Wren turned on the outdoor fireplace and plugged in the heat lamps, then covered a break on the coffee counter and bussed the dining room as it emptied.

“Wren.” Trigg came to get her as she was setting out an urn of drip coffee for stragglers. “You have to see this.” He was grinning so hard, she smiled in reflex.

“What is it?”

Outside, on the sofa that faced the fireplace, Sky was curled into the arm at one end, fast asleep. Bruno was on the other, head back, legs straight out, limp and also dead asleep. Murphy was in a ball between them. He lifted only his eyes, keeping his tail tucked against his nose, fully aware he had no business being on the furniture.

“They’re all played out.”

“Did you take a photo?”

“So fast.”

Wren chuckled and gave Sky’s shoulder a rub. “Sky? Let’s get you to bed.”

Sky made a noise and didn’t even swat at her hand, only flickered her fingers.

“Come on. You have to walk or Trigg will have to carry you.” It seemed like an embarrassing enough threat that Sky would push herself to her feet.

“Kay,” Sky breathed, not moving.

Wren looked at him.

“Probably the only chance I’ll get.” Something tender and poignant moved across his shadowed expression. He nudged Sky’s knee. “You want me carry you?”

Only her lips moved as she whispered, “Yes.”

Wren had to wonder if there wasn’t a part of Sky that needed this as badly as Trigg did and she was playing dead to give herself this memory—which threatened to rend Wren’s heart right open.

Trigg scooped Sky up. She suddenly looked like the little girl she hadn’t been in years. Her head drooped onto his shoulder and her hand went to the side of his neck. It was probably the sweetest thing Wren had ever seen. It made her eyes feel hot and her uterus ache.

She hurried ahead of Trigg, unlocking their door and pulling back Sky’s covers so he could set her right into the bed. Sky wore shorts and her hoodie. Her shoes were still on the patio. Wren didn’t bother undressing her, just drew the blankets over her.

Trigg wore such a look of rawness and regret, her heart was wrenched.

Rather than go into the hall with him, she drew him through the connecting door to the manager’s office where they could have a moment of privacy. The lights were off, but the bulbs over the parking lot drew stripes through the blinds onto the desk and floor.

“I’m sorry,” she said, pressing the door closed and taking advantage of the dark so her remorse was easier to bear and express. Her lungs felt like they were made of lava, suffocating and heavy and hot. “I should have called you sooner. I should have let you have more of those moments.” She nodded beyond the closed door where Sky now slept.

“Wren.” His hand came onto her arm and squeezed. “All I had to say was ‘Wait.’ When Mandy called, I should have said it. I could have said a lot of things. But I didn’t.” He cleared his throat, hand still tight on her arm. “What you said today is

true. We can't go back and undo anything. All we can do is try to make better decisions going forward."

She nodded and tightened her mouth to fight its trembling, overcome by what sounded like forgiveness. Understanding. Remorse. She swallowed. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*." The earnestness in his tone nearly buckled her knees. "She's perfect. You did a great job."

"Don't make me cry, you idiot." She lifted her free hand and swiped the heel of her palm beneath her eye.

He chuckled and hooked his arm around her, drew her in and gave her a bear hug that crumpled her defenses. People didn't usually touch her, which she always told herself she preferred, but his strong arms popped her thin shell of defenses like an egg, leaving her melty and gooey against the warmth of his chest. Her head dropped onto the hard pillow of his pec and her arms slid around his waist. She clung as waves of emotion swept over her, threatening to unmoor her completely.

This wasn't a pass. It was platonic and sweet. It was kindness and friendship and something she hadn't ever experienced—a shared moment of alignment. It was a kaleidoscope of emotions that she sensed turning in him as they turned in her, reshaping into new patterns that were startling and beautiful.

Then his hand moved to her hair and his lips touched her brow. He probably meant it as brotherly, but she instantly became aware of his heartbeat, the firmness of his chest beneath the side of her face, the scent of him in his T-shirt and the way his hard thighs brushed against hers.

She tried to think of something light to say, lifted her head and tilted it back, but he read it as a signal. He dipped his head and halted at the last second.

"Damn." His breath heated her lips as he hovered with his lips so close to hers, her mouth tingled in anticipation. "We were going to ignore this, weren't we?"



Where she found the courage to be so honest, she didn't know, but she said, "I thought I was the only one who had to."

She stayed right where she was, leaning in to him so the pressure of his chest soothed the growing ache in her breasts while her heart slammed in terror at what she had revealed.

His choke of laughter feathered across her mouth. "No," he said, thumb caressing her cheekbone. "No, I'm trying like hell to pretend—"

Before she realized what she was doing, her toes had dug into the floor and she closed the distance herself, sealing them into the kiss.

He groaned. Then he cradled the back of her head in his wide hand and kissed her, deep and thorough. Opened his mouth across hers and explored and possessed and rubbed and captured and kissed the hell out of her. Kissed her until she couldn't breathe.

She didn't care, so long as he kept up that unhurried, masterful, hungry ravaging. Her hands moved to explore his back, reveling in the dips and flex of his muscles. He tagged her tongue with his, sending a jolt of excitement through her, then deepened the kiss even more, shifting so she was against the edge of the desk.

Her hands went up to his head, discovering stubble and silky strands, warm skin and the pound of his pulse in his throat. His mouth went down the side of her neck while his hands went down to her butt, squeezing, rubbing, getting under her cheeks and lifting so she sat on the desktop. He stroked her thighs, parting her legs as he moved between them, sending tendrils of pleasure through her abdomen and into her loins. Then he cupped her butt again and drew her to the edge, so they were eye to eye. Mouth to mouth. Sex to sex.

She shuddered in reaction and braced her arms across his shoulders, legs reflexively twining around his waist. He lifted his head and she met his glittering gaze.

They were going too far, but she wasn't ready to stop. Her heart was racing and her whole body felt alive. She drew him into another kiss and this time she was the one to offer her tongue. His breath hissed in and he leaned on a hand so his hips had a better angle between her thighs. He rocked to let her feel how aroused he was.

Oh, that felt good. Glittering sensations raced through her. She clung to him, wanting to fall on her back, but loving the feel of him so tight against her chest. She didn't care how they rubbed against each other, so long as they kept making out, necking and grinding, growing hotter and hotter.

She couldn't remember ever being so turned on. His mouth was a meal, his hand at her lower back primitive in the way he held her in place. She felt deliciously trapped and squirmed with excitement, unable to escape the rolling waves of pleasure moving with increasing strength through her. She fought against releasing the noises of pleasure that filled her throat, trying not to get too carried away. Anyone could walk in on them, but it felt so *good*. Intense and pushing her really close to—

With a gasp, she crested a sudden peak, shivering in reaction under ripples of completion. She clutched at him in shock, panting with reaction while he dragged his head up, hips tight against her loins, the rock-hard feel of his cock aggressive and undeniable.

“Was that an orgasm?” he whispered in astonishment.

“A little one. I'm sorry.” She tucked her forehead onto his collarbone, mortified.

“Don't *apologize*.” He breathed a soft chuckle, making her hair tickle her ear. He sounded stunned. “I'm about to come in my jeans. Let's go to my room.”

“We can't.” She tried to find her feet.

He held her on the edge of the desk for two solid heartbeats, his whole body hardening to a prison of warm steel. The firm line of his erection stayed intimately against

flesh that was still throbbing and yearning for deeper contact. Penetration.

“You know we can’t.” She lifted her head, terrified he could talk her into having sex right here, right now. Real sex. Other women fell for him all the time. Her sister had.

That chilling thought was enough to make her press her hand with more insistence against his shoulder.

He slowly straightened and released her, leaving her leaning weakly against the edge of the desk. He paced away a couple of steps. Swore. One hand went to his hip, the other to the back of his neck. He swore again.

What must he think of her, going off like a rocket? She didn’t think much of herself. It was hugely embarrassing. She covered her hot cheeks and tried to read his body language in his silhouette.

“You’re right,” he muttered. “I know you’re right. We should have ignored it.” He ran his hand down his face.

It didn’t matter that what he said was true. His quick regret felt like a rebuff.

She gripped her elbows. “I’ll go this way. You go that. G’ night.” She slipped into her suite and locked both doors, dying of embarrassment and rejection.

It was several minutes before she heard him leave through the office door.



TRIGG TRIED, BUT he couldn’t think of anything else but Wren. Not just the carnal possibilities, either, even though his libido was clawing unrelentingly, frantic to see where things would go if they had an hour of privacy.

He hadn’t even meant to let that kiss happen. One minute he’d been hugging her, barely thinking as his heart was ripped wide by a kid he wished he had never dismissed. The only

person who came close to understanding how big that was for him was Wren.

But the air had shifted and going in for a kiss had felt natural. He'd had one millisecond of sense, then she had banished it to the far corners of the universe, pressing her mouth to his.

That gorgeous, round mouth of hers had become his world. Her smell, the slightness of her, the faint hum of need she'd made in her throat. His own desire had rattled in his chest, barely restrained.

Moving with her had been exactly that. She'd been *with* him. He didn't even remember picking her up and setting her on the desk. Maybe he should have stopped it when he realized the heat in the crook of her thighs was against his raging cock, but the glaze of passion in her expression had undone him. His mother could have brought the entire guest list on a walk-through and he would have stayed right there, between Wren's thighs.

Then she'd released a broken cry and he'd felt as though he held shimmering magic. *A little one*, she had called it, the adorable minx. What would a big one be like? What would it feel like to be inside her when she shattered unexpectedly like that?

The idea kept him up, solid and hard and aching.

Sex had always been straightforward for him. Yes or no. If it was no, he didn't obsess or push for a different answer. He moved on and tried not to be a dick about it.

As for relationships, he kept those simple as well. Sweet and brief. Between his father's infidelity against Rolf's mother with his own, and Rolf's unpleasant divorce, Trigg hadn't seen a lot of examples of successful monogamy. Mandy's call had made him realize what a close shave he'd had with something *very* serious. All that combined to hold him back from getting deeply involved with any woman. He had fallen into a pattern of casual connections while being hyper-careful to avoid

pregnancy. His training and travel schedule hadn't been conducive to relationships either, which had made for a convenient excuse not to try long-term.

He wasn't ready for long-term now, despite the number of family members who were making inquiries, pointing out that he had a daughter. His brother was *settling down*. Was he thinking about doing the same?

Hell, no. Trigg had dozens of goals and ambitions he intended to accomplish before he even thought about a wife and more kids. His timeline had been rearranged thanks to Sky and the resort, but he had been completely honest with Wren when he'd said he would like to go back to competing in a couple of years. This was a hiatus, not a permanent withdrawal from what he loved. Once he had a solid idea where he and Sky stood, he would make a fresh five-year plan and it *wouldn't* include picket fences that hemmed him in.

In fact, Sky was a gift. He didn't have to look back in twenty years and wonder if he should have had kids sooner. He had one. She was everything he could want. Having a second kid wouldn't give him the time with Sky that he'd missed.

He thought about the way Wren had apologized for keeping them apart. Her remorse had sliced him deep, forcing him to reckon with his own failings. He probably should have processed that without kissing an orgasm out of her.

*We can't. You know we can't.*

He knew they *shouldn't*, but he had always had problems accepting *can't*.

"Where's Murphy?" Sky's voice dragged him from his introspection.

"Hmm?" He pulled his blank stare off the pond and realized he had lost his dog. He whistled and the goofball came crashing back from sniffing through the underbrush.

"Me and Bruno are going to walk him around the pond. Is that okay?" Sky thumbed to where her cousin was sitting on

the stoop of the back entrance, tying his shoes. “Bruno said he’ll hold the leash. I can’t. My arms are *so sore*.” She let them hang limply at her sides.

Trig wasn’t surprised. Rather than taking yesterday to recover, she had spent it in a kayak on the pond, trying to splash Bruno while he flicked water back at her and Murphy paddled between them.

“Check in with Mom as soon as you’re back. We have wedding rehearsal this morning.” And a million other things before the wedding tomorrow. He had to write his best man speech and conduct a tour of the base this afternoon. Board members were arriving. *Yay*.

He didn’t have time to ruminate about Wren, let alone ask her what she was thinking or feeling. Hell, he was barely catching sight of her. She was as busy as he was, zipping in and out of his periphery before he had a chance to say, ‘Good morning.’

“Sky.” Trigg stopped her from walking away. “Has your aunt ever had a boyfriend?”

She quirked up a brow. “Two. Why?”

Ouch. Why did hearing that Wren had been serious about other men sting like a jellyfish tentacle across the chest? He pushed his balled fists deeper into his pockets.

“She said once that she doesn’t go out much. She never seems to stop working.”

“Yeah, she’s queen of multitasking. Even if she reads a book, she does it while she’s on the elliptical.”

She looked at Murphy, then dropped his leash, saying, “Go see Bruno.” She patted him on his haunch, then straightened and folded her arms. Winced, but shrugged.

“It’s kind of my fault. The first guy was from Nana’s church. She wanted Auntie Wren to get married because she didn’t think Auntie Wren could take care of me by herself. He didn’t want her to do the dentist course. He was mad she was

working nights to pay for it instead of coming to Bible study with him. He said she should trust him to take care of us. I guess she didn't, 'cause they broke up and we moved out of Nana's."

"Who was the other guy?"

"Kevin." She spat the name. "He told her to find my dad because he didn't want to support me. Maybe I wasn't as nice as I could have been." She looked to the cloudless sky. "I was mad about changing schools."

"He still sounds like a world-class dick."

"He was. I think she likes Quinn, though. I'm *sure* he likes her." Sky tilted her head in speculation. "He seems cool. I wouldn't mind."

*I would.* The certainty was a fist clenched in his gut.

Bruno came toward them, making Sky turn. "I will not run," she told him in passable German.

He called her a wimp.

"*Genug!*" Sky was so spot-on as Rolf when he was losing patience, they all cracked up. The kids started down the path that ringed the pond.

Trigg wondered what Wren would do now that he was supporting Sky and taking a hand in raising her. For probably the first time in her life, she had options. She could take a job anywhere she wanted. Date, if she wanted to.

Huh. Where, exactly, would he bury Quinn's body?



DURING THE WEDDING rehearsal, it was determined that the raft needed a platform to raise the happy couple to a more visible height. The raft would also have to stay near the shore so the wedding guests would feel they were part of the exchange of VOWS.

Cameras would be mounted on the decorated posts on the raft, projecting the entire ceremony onto a big screen as it recorded. Employees planned to line the lodge balconies, taking a break from setting tables and preparing food to witness Rolf and Glory commit their lives to one another.

Wren was given that update by Sky between finding the sacks of potatoes and speaking to the workers erecting the tent.

Thankfully, many of the guests disappeared during the day Monday and Tuesday, either running into town for the ball tournament, jet-skiing on the lake, or shopping for last-minute items. However, more guests checked in and reporters kept ignoring her voicemail that said the lodge was closed for a private function. They called her cell and were annoyingly persistent in their quest for gossip on the guests.

Her phone was exploding with texts and calls as it was. The on-site staff swelled as extra catering, housekeeping, and other temporary laborers arrived to pitch in. Marvin and Vivien were continuously drawn into visiting with friends and family so it was very much on Wren to keep things rolling.

No easy task when traffic gridlocked the front parking lot. Trailers full of equipment, entertainers, food, flowers and furniture arrived, but they couldn't get past the line of stretch limos and shiny SUVs. Two of Devon's tradesmen who had moved their own trailers to the base directed traffic for hours until the worst of it was cleared.

The tent went up, the last of the decorations were finished inside the lodge, and a constant flow of food and drink turned over in the dining room and lounge.

Sky and Bruno had become quite the inseparable pair, helping Eden set up a scavenger hunt for the younger children and playing video games with them in the evenings. Wren didn't have time to run down to the makeup trailer Tuesday, despite both Vivien and Glory urging her to take an hour to relax, but Skylar came back with a fresh manicure and excitement about being told she could wear false eyelashes tomorrow along with rose buds in her hair.



A few spits of rain and a light wind overnight had everyone biting their newly polished nails, but the wedding day dawned with only a few fluffy white clouds and a minimal sweep of needles for cleanup.

After a bustling breakfast, Wren closed the dining room so it could be used as a staging area for everything from cocktails to cake. The cube van full of tables and chairs arrived and backed up to the tent. She made sure they knew they had to move as soon as they were unloaded so the truck with linens and the fourteen-piece table settings could get in right behind them.

“Wren, dear.” Vivien was still in the pantsuit she had worn to breakfast, but her hair and makeup were coiffed to elegant perfection.

“It’s all under control, Vivien, I swear.”

“I know it is. If you weren’t taking all of this in hand, I would be the one running around like a chicken with its head cut off. Promise me you’ll sit down at dinner and have a drink with me after.” She clasped both of her buttery-soft hands over Wren’s. “And use the appointment I’ve made for you in the spa tomorrow. I’ve booked all the staff for mani-pedis before the girls leave on Friday, as a thank you for the long hours and hard work. If you don’t take advantage of that, I’ll be angry.” She made a point of giving Wren’s unpolished nails an askance look.

“That’s very generous, Vivien. Of course. Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Now.” Her grip tightened. “Do you have *any* idea where my son is?”

“Trigg?” How many other sons did she have? And why did the question make her blush guiltily? Wren was way too busy to track his whereabouts. Or should be, but it didn’t stop her from trying. “With the groom, I think.”

“Oh, yes. The bridal party is in the trailer so I’m sure they’re suiting up in Rolf and Glory’s suite. I’ll call him from my room. This is the last time I’m climbing those stairs before

I go to bed after the ceremony, I *swear*. You should get dressed, too, dear.”

“I thought it might be easier if I stayed in uniform. Then people know I’m—”

“Wren.” Vivien caught her hand again. “Oskar’s sister has already asked me why I’m treating you like the scullery maid. She’s the one I told you about.” Vivien leaned in to confide. “Please come to the wedding as yourself, so I can introduce you properly.”

“But—” She *liked* lurking behind the scenes. Playing Sky’s wingman to get her on a boat was one thing, but Wren *wasn’t* family. Now the ice was broken, Sky was fitting in to the Johansson clan as if she’d known them all her life. It was wonderful and heartbreaking at the same time. It also meant Sky wasn’t *her* wingman.

“Here she comes,” Vivien muttered, still holding Wren’s hand, but dropping it between them as she turned Wren to face the stylish, silver-haired woman of seventy. “Gerta. *Guten tag*.”

“You’re not wearing that,” the other woman said with a sniff.

“Of course not. I was just reminding Wren to change. She’ll be joining us for dinner. I don’t think you’ve properly met.”

“The aunt,” Gerta said as they shook hands. “You’ll sit with me at the reception.”

It was the most frightening thing anyone had ever threatened. Wren’s heart shrank into a ball and her lungs seized.

Vivien’s smile stayed in place, but her nostrils twitched. “I have you beside Sir Charles and his fiancée.”

“Him?” Gerta’s mouth twitched with dismay even though the man was one of the most exalted guests, known mostly for

his acting career, but also as a tremendously well-regarded humanitarian related to the royal family.

“I’ll have a look at the seating plan, see what I can work out,” Wren promised. “You finish getting ready, Vivien. May I bring you a mimosa, Gerta? Before I change?”

“I’d prefer a martini.”

At ten o’clock in the morning? “Of course.”



TRIGG WAS TOLD Wren had gone onto the patio, but when he came out of the lounge, he found only Quinn standing at the rail, chatting up a fine-looking woman Trigg didn’t—

*Holy shit.* Wren had changed out of her work uniform into a blue and white dress that was demure and sweet, yet sexy as hell. The top was a sleeveless T-shirt style, but snug to her curves. It was covered in white and blue sequins that formed a zigzag pattern down to her short blue skirt, which was full and breezy with a playful ruffle where it ended mid-thigh. Her gorgeous legs were golden from their day on the water. Strappy white sandals with a fat cork heel finished the outfit.

Instead of her usual ponytail, she had twisted her hair into a loose bun that left wisps around her face. When she glanced at him as he touched her arm, her eyes were sparkling. They dimmed with wariness, then her lashes dropped shyly. A hint of pink stole across her cheekbones.

His dick twitched, remembering too.

He gave Quinn a look, silently demanding, *What are you doing?*

“We both missed breakfast. Wren snuck us some hors d’oeuvres to get us through the ceremony.”

She swallowed and said, “They’ll be set out as soon as the ceremony is over, so people can nibble while the photos are being taken. And,” she said to Quinn, “I watered down the mimosas so people aren’t smashed before the reception starts.”

“You really do think of everything. Seriously, if you ever want a job traveling eight or ten months of the year, living like a Bedouin, working on projects that have no budget and may not make any money, call me.”

“I don’t know if I could work for someone who oversells the way you do.”

Quinn chuckled and Trigg wanted to punch him in the face.

“I have to get back inside.” Wren picked up the plate they had shared and thumbed toward the inside of the lounge. “T minus...?”

“Twenty,” Quinn answered with a glance at his smartwatch. “Thanks,” Quinn said with a nod at the plate, glancing at Trigg. “Are you looking for me?”

“Wren.” *Hit the road*, he scowled at Quinn, clearing his expression as he looked at Wren.

“What’s wrong?” Her brow quirked in alarm.

He was overplaying his hand. “Nothing. I need to ask you a favor.”

“Okay,” she said cautiously.

“I have a surprise guest coming. Can you slip away before the dancing starts and run down to the highway? Use Glory’s SUV.” He handed her the keys.

“Oh. Sure.” She frowned, eyeing him with suspicion.

“Park in Glory’s spot and bring him down the path so no one sees.” He pointed down between the patio footings and the pond. “I’ll wait for you beside the stage.”

“Okay.” She nodded and started to turn away.

He caught her arm.

This time when she froze at his touch, she caught her breath and snapped her head around, blushing while goose bumps rose on her arm.

His scalp tightened. A shiver of pleasure raced up his own arm and the desire to smooth away her goose bumps was overwhelming.

He made himself let go and worked his fingers against his palm, both soothing and trying to hold on to the tingles there. The question he wanted to ask seemed really juvenile now.

“Are we okay?” he asked under his breath.

“Of course,” she said, cheeks flushing darker while her gaze skittered away.

“Are you and Quinn...? You seem to be spending a lot of time with him.”

Her brows came together, confused and defensive. She looked around like she thought she was being punked, then frowned with exasperation. Maybe even accusation.

“*You’re* spending a lot of time with a lot of people. What assumptions should I draw from that?” She was bright red now, with impatience and something else. Something anxious and hurt.

Shit. Whatever conclusions she had drawn from the extremely warm greetings he had received from a few of the female guests couldn’t be good. Not that he had made a point of remembering any of the room numbers he’d been given. He knew every single offer was a hell of a lot less complicated than whatever was going on between him and Wren, but he wasn’t interested.

“Why would I even take notice?” she muttered, seeming to ask, *Why would you?*

It struck him that she didn’t have any idea how truly enthralling she was.

“I need to check the kitchen,” she muttered, dropping her lashes so he couldn’t read her gaze. “You should get your mom seated and Rolf in place so we start on time.”

“All right,” he muttered.

“But hey.” She swung back to face him. “Can you do *me* a favor?”

“Of course.” Anything to ease the sudden friction between them.

“Your aunt Gerta wants the seating plan changed so I can sit at her table. Will you let her know you’ve asked me to run out for your guest so I’ll be sitting where I was assigned and will catch up with her later?”

“You *are* mad at me,” he accused.

Her mouth twitched and she hurried away.

## Chapter Fourteen

“WHAT IF I trip?” Sky felt really shaky as she stood near the doors from the lounge to the patio.

“You won’t trip. You look really beautiful.” Auntie Wren smiled the way she did when Sky came home with a certificate or made a good play on the volleyball court or let an old person have her seat on the bus. She handed Sky a bouquet.

Carpet had been laid in a long path across the patio, down the stairs, over the stretch of lawn and down the aisle between all the wooden folding chairs that were covered in white skirts with blue ribbons and yellow silk flowers.

All of this had seemed super exciting until Sky had caught her heel and almost landed on her face coming down here. Then it hit her that *she* was going first down the aisle. There were famous people in the audience along with the new cousins and other family she wanted to like her. Quinn was filming the whole thing.

She might go viral with a hashtag: bridesmaid fail.

Was there time to poop? What if she threw up and ruined the carpet where Glory was supposed to walk in her wedding gown?

“Ready?” Auntie Wren said.

No!

But Auntie Wren was talking to Glory and Glory nodded. *Auntie* Glory, she had asked Sky to call her.

Auntie Wren stepped outside and waved. The music faded and the piano player started. The guitar player changed to a violin and someone else switched to a cello.

Auntie Wren moved to stand beside the door. She nodded at Sky. “Go.”

*Onkel* Rolf had told Sky while they were on the water that she needed to learn to tune out spectators so it wouldn't mess her up. *Focus on your muscles. Breathe.*

She thought about the way her feet felt in her shoes, making each step firm and steady. She smiled and breathed slowly, trying to catch the smell of the flowers she held. She looked to where she was going, not at everyone who was staring at her.

Before she knew it, she was looking straight at her dad. It was so bizarre to see him smiling at her the way Auntie Wren had, like she was winning a race when all she had done was walk as normal as possible. It hit her that one day she might walk down an aisle in a dress like Auntie Glory's and she would hold *his* arm and...

Oh, wow. She was going to start crying for no reason.

She blinked really hard and made herself look for the little gold star on the carpet where she was supposed to stand. When she was in place, she looked back the way she had come. Bruno's older sisters were coming now, then Eden's sister, Candy. She was super pregnant. Then Eden, the maid of honor.

Now Aiden and Zuzu were coming. Zuzu was Candy's little girl, named for her grandmother Suzanne. They were adorable, Aiden in his suit and Zuzu in a white dress that had a big, fluffy skirt and a wide belt the same purplish blue as the bridesmaid dresses.

Zuzu froze as she realized everyone was staring at her. Her eyes got really big and scared. Her mouth turned down and her bottom lip quivered.

*I feel ya*, Sky thought, while Candy and Eden coaxed her to keep walking toward them. Aiden dropped his pillow with the rings tied to them and put his arm around her.

"Come on, Zuzu." He tried to nudge her along, but she shook her head, face crumpling as she threw down her basket of rose petals.



Everyone started chuckling into their hands. Sky felt so sorry for her, she hurried back up the aisle.

“It’s okay,” she said, crouching to hand Aiden the pillow. “We’ll all go together. You can hold my hand. Okay? Let’s go see your mom.”

Zuzu walked a few steps with her, then started to cry and ran the rest of the way, straight into Candy’s round belly. Aiden got spooked and ran to Nate, dropping his pillow again and holding up his arms to be lifted by his dad.

Sky picked up the pillow and basket, handing them to Trigg since he needed to give the rings to Rolf.

“I said, ‘let Murphy bring the rings.’ You said ‘no,’” Trigg reminded Rolf.

The people who heard him laughed. Then the music changed again, making everyone turn to watch Grandpa Marvin bring Glory down the aisle. He wore a fancy suit and he was smiling so huge his face should have broken. Tears were on his cheeks.

Glory looked *so* pretty. Her dress was covered in lace. It was mermaid style, but the skirt was more like a trumpet and the sleeves were only lace, no liner. Sky had seen the back already and it was cut out to show most of her back with a single button at the top of her spine. Her curly reddish hair was done up like Kate Winslet’s in *Titanic*, only Glory’s headband was made of tiny flowers. Little ringlets hung against her temples. She was smiling really big, but it was wobbly and she was blinking really fast.

Marvin used his hanky to blow his nose as he sat down.

Then Rolf took Glory’s hands and said, “I know you wish your mom was here. Let me quote words she wrote, so she’ll be with us in spirit. ‘Love is not a game. It’s not something to be won or lost. It’s a gift to be cherished. I promise to cherish you, my love, for the rest of my life.’”

Big tears rolled down each of Auntie Glory’s cheeks. *Onkel* Rolf had to take out his pocket square and mop her up.

He looked worried.

“I didn’t mean to upset you. I thought you would like it.”

“I do,” she sniffed, hands shaking as she took the square and tried to get herself under control. “When you’re thoughtful like that, I realize how perfect you are. How well you know me and want to make me happy. I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” He finished drying her cheek and kissed her.

“No skipping to the good part, dude,” Trigg said. “Get married, already.”

Glory laughed and so did everyone else. The rest of the ceremony went like it did in all the best movies. They said their vows and exchanged their rings and kissed while the band played a big swell of music. Then it was time for everyone to pair off and walk back up the aisle.

Sky and Bruno were last. He held out his arm and called her a wimp in German because her eyes were wet. He looked bright-eyed, though. She would have to look up ‘cry-baby’ as soon as she could exchange her bouquet for her phone.

For now, she settled on sticking her tongue out at him.



WREN THOUGHT OF weddings as ‘things that other people do,’ like being in a parade instead of watching it. Or writing a book or putting up quirky videos online. She knew people all over the world did it, but she never aspired to do it herself.

The one time she had talked to Lydia about it, Lydia had said she was probably too young to imagine herself getting married, but it went deeper than that. It might even go back to her mother’s marriage and belief that vows in front of God couldn’t be broken, no matter how bad things had become with her husband.

That had left Wren thinking it was best not to make such a vow, if you might not want to keep it.

Her hang-ups weren't everyone's, though. She could watch a wedding and feel the collective joy. Glory and Rolf's was probably the most beautiful, romantic, love-affirming ceremony she would ever see. She grinned through tears with everyone else.

Then it was time to keep the milling guests amused while the wedding party was photographed against the backdrop of the pond and the mountainside behind it. Wren made a point of seeking out those guests standing alone to offer a mimosa and ask if they had downloaded the photo-sharing app that would aggregate the casual snaps taken today. She helped guests find their names on the seating chart, which was a wall of cards with pressed flowers upon them. Each was a keepsake they carried to their table with a line of trivia about Rolf and Glory on the back, so they could share it with their tablemates as an icebreaker.

"I want you to consider a shift to event manager," Vivien said as she appeared beside her. "This has been positively seamless."

"You organized it, Vivien. I'm only the executioner." She didn't bother mentioning the disaster with a tray of sixty amuse-bouche or the blown fuse that had the kitchen stringing an extension cord from the dining room, or the temp server she'd had to fire because she kept trying to take selfies with the celebrities.

"Is it time for everyone to take their seats? I'll signal the band."

"Where are you sitting?" Vivien asked sharply.

"Trigg took care of it. I'm with Ilke, at the table with the wedding party dates."

"Are you comfortable with that? Because—"

"Perfectly," Wren assured her.

"Thank you." Vivien squeezed her arm. "I've been living and breathing this thing for half a year. All I want is to get through the next few hours without a disaster."

Wren was doing her best.

Minutes later, as champagne was poured into fresh glasses, the wedding party and newlyweds were played into their seats.

Glory's uncle on her mother's side was the MC. He introduced Marvin who made a wonderful speech about how proud he was of Glory, how much he wished her mother could be here, and how pleased he was to welcome Rolf to the family.

"My dream in purchasing Blue Spruce Lodge was that you and I would find our way to a happier place. Even though this isn't the way I foresaw that, I'll take credit for the joy you've found," Marvin concluded with a wink.

Everyone laughed and Rolf stood to speak. He thanked Marvin for the hard work in bringing Blue Spruce Lodge back to its potential in time for the wedding then gave his stepmother a look that was affectionate and sincere.

"I wish my own parents could be here, especially my mother, but I've been blessed with two. You have never treated me as anything less than your son, Vivien. You have made the most important day of my life a beautiful one. I love you."

"*Bärchen.*" Vivien blew him a kiss, then covered her mouth and shook her head, overcome. Marvin hugged his arm around her and she ducked her face into his collar.

Rolf had special words for everyone who helped, especially Eden, "who plays a vital role in maintaining Glory's sanity, especially when she has lost patience with me." He toasted the bridesmaids and singled out his niece as, "a welcome addition to our family who delights me daily with her wit."

Sky blushed and rolled her eyes. "How can you say that? You never laugh."

He barely smiled now, only kept up his speech.

"Wren... Where are you? Ah." Rolf held up his glass. "I wasn't kidding when I told you that your hard work doesn't go

unnoticed. Vivien excels at delegation. I know who is really responsible for today running with clockwork precision. Thank you.”

Everyone laughed and Vivien nodded, admitting, “I do.”

“Finally, I must thank my brother, my best man.” Rolf made a face as though debating the adjective, which prompted knowing guffaws. “I am eternally grateful to Trigg, who found Marvin, who brought to me the woman I didn’t know I needed—my gorgeous, funny, passionate, exceptionally talented wife.”

Glasses were raised, then clapping and clinking of glasses ensued, demanding a kiss. Rolf and Glory stood to comply, but the MC soon brought the room to order.

“The groom has asked me to mention that he will kiss his wife when he damned well wants to. Save your cutlery and glasses for the food. Now.” He cleared his throat. “We’ll hear from the best man. Good luck following him, Trigg.”

Trigg gave a pained look as he arrived at the mic. “I don’t follow. I one-up. Hold my beer.”

He shuffled some cards, then threw them over his shoulder, leaning on the podium as though getting comfortable, making everyone laugh.

“I looked up what the best man is supposed to say. I did my homework, *Skylar*,” he said with a stern look toward his daughter at the far end of the head table.

She rolled her eyes again.

“Apparently, I’m to mention how I know Rolf. It’s rumored we share a father. We also share a competitive spirit that has pushed Rolf to set a bar I have always felt compelled to surpass. If I am any kind of ‘best’ man, it’s keeping up with him that has driven me. Having said that, we’ve had our differences...”

Trigg recounted their explosive argument when Trigg rejected skis in favor of a snowboard, which culminated in

Trigg breaking his skis, then Rolf leaving him, “in the forest without even a trail of breadcrumbs to follow.” Trigg provided a list of times Rolf had been proven wrong. “It does happen and I do keep score.” He summed up a poll taken on the sly by people who knew Rolf best. “It turns out we all think you’re a terse, pigheaded, single-minded perfectionist with impossible standards.”

Rolf kept an unbothered expression on his face, one that asked Trigg if that was all he had.

“There were also many votes for fair, generous, witty—I don’t know how that one got on there—and unshakably loyal. And, ‘the guy I want in my corner if I’m in trouble.’ That one was mine. Thanks for never telling Mom about that time I called from Morocco. Mom, you don’t want to know.”

“I’m sure I don’t,” Vivien swore, hands against her cheeks.

Trigg looked to the bride. “Glory, I keep asking you what you see in him, but Rolf is the guy who will slay your dragons. Isn’t he?”

She was sitting crooked on her chair so she could lean back in to her husband while watching the speeches. She smiled and lifted her hand to Rolf’s jaw in a loving caress. “Yes.”

“Well, since I know you to be the woman who will hand him the sword and tell him where to stick it, I think you’re perfect for one another.”

“True.” Rolf chuckled and tightened his arm across her collarbone, kissing her temple.

Trigg held up a finger to stop the laughter. “I had more to say, but I hear your wedding gift arriving.” He cocked his head as the sound of a helicopter grew louder. “It’ll be down at the base when you’re ready to leave. Limos are *so* last year.”

“Are you serious?” Glory stood to peer from beneath the edge of the tent, agog.

The pilot kept his distance so he didn't stir up more than a slight whoosh in the treetops. The sound increased then faded while Rolf gave Trigg an exasperated look.

“Show-off.”

“What can I say? I put the ‘best’ in best man. Got it in the color you wanted and everything, Bro.” Then he said out of the side of his mouth, “We’ll talk about the payments when you get back from your honeymoon.”

After a final toast to the happy couple, Trigg sat down and the first course came out. Dinner was a fun, lively affair. Wren found herself enjoying her tablemates. She only had to jump up once to resolve a small issue, then it was time to cut the cake. Eden’s creation was a masterpiece, but she insisted on sharing credit with her sister. “Candy makes it taste as good as I make it look.”

“I don’t want to cut it,” Glory complained. “It’s too beautiful.”

There were already a thousand photos of it, though, so she and Rolf sank a beribboned knife into it.

“Do you mind running down the hill now?” Trigg asked, fingertips warm where he touched the inside of her upper arm. He had removed his jacket and bow tie, but still looked amazing in a tuxedo shirt that somehow accented his wide shoulders and tailored pants that fit neatly across his hips.

She shivered in surprised reaction, prickling all over. “Of course.” But she was a little sad she might not be able to watch the first dance. The day had been storybook perfect. She didn’t want to miss a minute of it.

But of course Trigg’s surprise guest wasn’t just *anyone*.

Wren hadn’t really thought about why the special guest couldn’t come up to the lodge, but when she saw the tour bus and trailer of equipment she realized it would spoil the surprise.

Maverick Jace, which had to be a stage name, was one of America's most popular singer-songwriters, currently topping the charts with his acoustic album. He wore jeans with holes, a black T-shirt and had brown hair scrabbled this way and that. He carried his guitar by the neck as he climbed into Glory's SUV.

Wren tried not to be star-struck, but as she forgot to take off the emergency brake and wound up revving the engine and looking like she didn't know how to drive, she had to admit, "Nerves. Sorry. I'm a big fan."

"No problem," he said easily.

"How, um, do you know Rolf and Trigg?"

"I was surfing with friends a couple years ago. Trigg joined us. He called me a few months ago, asked if I wanted a season's pass for the new resort. I was going to be in the neighborhood so..." He shrugged. "It's nice to do an intimate show. Most of mine are arenas these days."

She knew. She'd tried to get tickets once and the scalpers had wanted a fortune. Even if she did get married someday, her ceremony would never be something like this, where the wedding music featured a live performance by a Grammy winner.

Moments later, she parked. As they crept toward the back of the stage, they could hear Eden speaking.

"...so honored when Glory asked me to sing her favorite song for her first dance with Rolf. This is 'It's Always a Good Day When I Wake Up Beside You,' by Maverick Jace."

The first notes began. Eden took up the lyrics in a voice that had a sweet and quirky indie sound with a hint of breathiness and rasp.

Trigg was watching for them and pumped his fist in triumph when they appeared. He ran up the steps onto the stage. "Sorry, Eden," he said, cutting her off.



The band petered out and the whole tent went silent in shock.

Wren moved so she could see the dance floor and stage. Rolf and Glory stood dumbfounded by Trigg's interruption. Trigg put his arm around Eden as he nudged her aside to speak into the microphone.

"I know you've been working really hard on this song and it sounded great, but it turns out one of our guests is peeved he's not getting royalties from your cover of his song. Maverick Jace is here to sing it himself."

Amid screams of shock and excitement, Maverick came onstage with a casual grin and wave. Trigg and Eden moved aside and Maverick said, "Congratulations," to Rolf and Glory.

Glory had both her hands over her gaping mouth while Rolf blistered Trigg with, "*Show-off*" again.

Trigg shrugged and leapt off the stage to accept Glory's hug. He picked her up and gave her a spin, saying, "Welcome to the family, Sis."

Maverick glanced at Eden as he strummed to tune his guitar. "You sounded great. Join me?"

"I'd love to." She nodded and they started the song over.

It was a waltz beat and Rolf and Glory were beautiful together. Wren was captivated by this special day all over again. Marvin cut in on Rolf so he could dance with his daughter. Rolf moved to draw Vivien onto the dance floor.

That's when Trigg came up to Wren and snagged her hand.

"What—?" She tried to pull away, wide-eyed with horror. "Sky is—"

"No, you." Trigg tugged her onto the floor. "We're done work. Let's have fun."

"But I was going to check—oh!"

If she had thought Rolf was athletically graceful to watch, being scooped against the wall of Trigg's chest by his firm arm

and led into swirling steps with confident power and casual elegance was enough to make her bones turn to baby powder.

She felt like a virgin in a historical romance, overwhelmed by his potent masculinity. She hadn't forgotten their kiss the other day. Not one second of it. The gleam in his eye told her he was thinking of it, too. He drew her closer so he gently squashed her breasts and their thighs brushed.

She fought the glow of pleasure that suffused her. Thank goodness everyone was more interested in finding a partner and joining the dancing than watching them, because she suspected her face was a neon sign of sexual attraction.

His hand splayed at the base of her spine, as though he was trying to touch as much of her as possible within the confines of what was allowed in public. His nose dipped toward her temple and his breath warmed her ear.

“You dance really well.”

“Jazzercise.” Why did she say that? It only made him chuckle so her hair tickled the side of her face.

She let go of his hand to brush at her cheek, then had to put her hand back in his, which felt very deliberate and intimate for some stupid reason.

“Would you quit looking at me like—”

“What?” he prompted.

Like he wanted to kiss her again.

“Like I think you're sexy as hell? You are.” He lifted her hand over her head and sent her into a twirl, taking in the glimpse of her legs as her skirt flared. When he pulled her back in, the admiration in his expression was even more carnal.

She indulged herself for one second by leaning in to him. A near-unbearable longing clenched in her. She was a master at suppressing her emotions. She nearly always countered temper with patience, worry with hope, fear with caution.

She didn't know how to block this desire, though. Not this kind, not tonight, not with this man. The men who'd been in her life in the past had never seeped into her system this far. This deep. When she had given in to sexual curiosity, she'd done it carefully. She wasn't an impulsive person. And she always, *always* put Sky's interests before her own.

As she remembered her niece, Trigg's *daughter*, she started to push away from him, saying, "You should dance with Sky."

His arms hardened, keeping her pinned against him while a fierce light sparked behind his gaze. With a dismayed twitch of his mouth, he slowly released her. "Save your last dance for me."

A lurching sensation in her chest made her catch her breath. She gave a jerky nod because she didn't know what else to do and walked away, trying not to stumble.



IF TRIGG HAD to watch one more guy hit on Wren, he was going to kill someone. He watched her dance with Quinn—who rarely danced, the prick—along with a friend of Rolf's who was too old for her and a contractor Trigg usually trusted, but as he watched him make Wren laugh, became convinced the man was a piece of shit. Even Torsten, a board member with a reputation for stepping out on his wife with younger women, took a turn around the floor with her.

His mother took Wren in hand after that, introducing her to all the relatives. Trigg danced with his cousins and Glory and Eden and a handful of guests who draped their arms around his neck with annoying possessiveness.

He was glad when Maverick finished up and the band took a break. Trigg was able to escape and offer the singer a beer. They shot the shit and took some selfies with Sky and a few other guests before he drove Maverick back to his tour bus.

He returned in time to see the bride and groom loading their suitcases into the back of the ute. Rolf had changed into

jeans and one of Wikinger's long-sleeved, lightweight shirts. Glory wore jeans and ankle boots with a shirt that had ruffles framing her plunging neckline. Her hair was still up and her smile very much in place. Even in the dimness of the growing dusk, she glowed.

"I arrange high-class transport and this oaf puts you in a golf cart?"

"We couldn't find my keys. But the best view of the fireworks will be from the helicopter pad, so we gotta move it, move it."

"Right." They hadn't been allowed to set off fireworks here at the hill because of the forest fire risk. The display over the lake in Haven had been quite good last year and Whiskey Jack had donated to ensure this year's would impress the wedding guests even from afar.

"We don't mind leaving early. We're ready for vacation." Glory slid her arms around Trigg's waist and squeezed. "Thank you for Maverick. You're the brother I never wanted, but I'm glad to have you." She drew back. "Where is this helicopter taking us, anyway?"

"Surprise number three. I got you the best hotel room in Billings so you don't have to get up so early for that flight out of Kalispell. But I'm warning you." He pointed at her nose. "If you break the bed, that's on you. I'm not paying for it."

"Sometimes we like to use the desk if they have one."

"Not that either. And quit polluting my head with visions I don't want. You're a horrible woman. You two deserve each other."

"I love you, too." She kissed the tip of his chin and stepped away.

"*Danke schön*," Rolf said, holding out his hand for a shake.

Trigg switched up their grip and yanked his big brother in for a one-armed hug.

“Don’t burn the place down while I’m gone,” Rolf said, knocking his fist into Trigg’s back.

“Elephant dung works as bug repellent. Use lots. You too, Glory.”

“I’ve packed erotic lubricant that—”

“*Stop it.*”

Glory snickered and climbed into the passenger side of the ute. Rolf backed it up and pattered around the lodge. He would have to pass the tent. The crowd would likely follow them down to the base. Trigg decided to bring Murphy out for a pee before he went down there himself. He started into the lodge as Wren came out.

“Oh.” She looked toward the outer stairs. “Where are Glory and Rolf? I heard they came to get their luggage. Do they need her keys?” She held them up.

“They took the ute. I’ll take those.”

She handed them over. “So... Are you walking down to the base?” She thumbed toward the path under the patio.

“I thought I’d bring Murphy out while it’s quiet, before the crowd comes back and parties all night.”

“Sky has him. Aiden and Zuzu wanted to see him. Nate is there. He said he didn’t think you’d mind. She kept him on his leash.”

“Great.” His brain emptied of all thought except the fact that, aside from security making rounds and staff bashing around the kitchen, they had the lodge to themselves.

She might have come to that same conclusion. The silence between them stretched. In the fading light, he saw her throat flex.

*Come upstairs with me,* he willed.

A cheer in the distance made her glance in the direction of the tent.

“Wren.” Her name rumbled from the bottom of his chest where his breath was thick and hot in his lungs. He turned his free hand up in invitation.

“Trigg.”

He heard the refusal. Read it in the way she closed her eyes as though hiding from something painful.

He fisted his hand and shoved it deep into his pocket. Bit back a curse.

This was impossible. Made more impossible because he could tell she was trying to be the voice of reason, but wanted this as badly as he did.

They stood there with a fire raging between them. She had the sense not to walk through it. He was willing to risk it. In fact, he couldn't wait for it to incinerate him.

The scabble of paws alerted him right before Murphy ran up, dragging his leash. Sky trailed behind him, still in her dress. She stopped as she saw them in the doorway.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” Wren gave her a stiff smile. “I was going to walk down to watch the fireworks. Aren't you going?”

“Nate said Murphy might not like the noise so I'm putting him in our room. I wanted to get changed anyway.”

“I'll do that, too.” Wren turned in to the lodge.

“What were you guys talking about?” Sky asked clearly sensing undercurrents.

“It doesn't matter. I'll take Murphy to my room. See you down there.”

She gave him a disgruntled look, but followed Wren inside.

He picked up his dog's leash and blew another frustrated curse at the stars appearing in the indigo sky.

## Chapter Fifteen

**W**REN WENT TO bed at two, leaving Sky in the lounge with Trigg and the rest of her new relatives. Sky came to bed a few hours later and was still sleeping when Wren made herself get up.

The morning-after atmosphere in the lodge was less frenzied than the days leading up to yesterday's wedding, but there was still a lot to do. A number of guests were checking out through the morning to catch flights. Some were staying until Blue Spruce Lodge's official grand opening on Friday. All the rooms needed turning over with clean towels and sundries. Pretty much every soul in the building wanted fresh coffee.

Wren stepped behind the coffee counter between working the desk and helping a few sleepy parents carry breakfast trays to their rooms and tune the television to the children's station.

Outside, trucks came and went, taking away dishes, tables, chairs, and tents. Some of the lodge staff were sluggish as they raked, picked up litter, and vacuumed, but they had all worked a lot of long days in a row without complaint. Wren couldn't take issue with any of them.

She was feeling lazy herself, stealing a moment on a barstool before the lounge opened for brunch. The ducks on the pond went out of focus and she forgot what she was eating as she recalled those interminable moments with Trigg last night.

Had he been on the verge of inviting her to his room? Had she nearly accepted? She had been tempted. Impossibly tempted.

“Good morning.”

Speak of the gravelly-voiced devil.

Her heart leaped and her cheeks stung before she had turned her head to meet Trigg's heavy-lidded gaze. He was showered but unshaven, hair damp and scrabbled around in the way Sky said made him look like an anime character. His shirt and shorts were Wikinger, the rest of him pure, high-octane man.

She realized he was walking toward her on the inside of the bar.

"Oh. What do you need?" She started to get up.

"You eat." He reached for a glass and ran a wedge of lime around the rim, then set it in the plate of seasoning salt. He turned to the fridge. "Want a Caesar?"

"The one with clam juice? No." She didn't hide her disgust. "Thanks anyway. Have you given any thought to how a clam is 'juiced'?"

"They milk them, don't they?" He set the juice on the bar.

"In the clam barn," she said in a tone of discovery. "Of course."

"Now you're just being silly." He efficiently scooped ice into his glass, poured an ounce of vodka over it, then added the questionable product that looked like tomato juice and tasted like 'clam.' He splashed heavy doses of hot sauce and Worcestershire over it, then jabbed a spear of celery into it. "Try it." He nudged it toward her. "If you like it, I'll make another for myself."

"Is it supposed cure a hang over? I'm fine."

"So am I. Just tired and needing something to get me through another day of visiting when I feel like I should be working. Or at least working out." He used a little plastic sword to steal one of her hash brown cubes and bit it off the spear. "You're not working, are you?" He noticed her uniform and scowled. "I'm starting to think you have a problem."

"Did I spill?" She looked down.



When she looked up, he was staring at her chest. Her tailored uniform had arrived and the vest tapered to flatter her figure.

He started to say something, but his phone buzzed with a couple of texts. He drew it from his pocket to read it, snorted, and showed it to her.

Bruno had texted: *Give us your dog.*

Sky added: *Or else.*

He pressed a button and brought the phone to his ear. “Where are you?” He listened, then, “Okay. I just had him out. Get him from my room, but let him have a break from the little kids. The last few days have been a lot.” He ended the call and stuck the phone in his pocket. “They’re going to play video games in your room. You mind?”

“Not at all. But I’m astonished by how they’ve taken to each other. I honestly can’t think of anyone she’s liked that fast or that much.”

“I’m impressed, too. Bruno’s a great kid, but he was very unthrilled to be pulled into the wedding party as escort for a girl he didn’t know. He thought it was one more raw deal this family has handed him.”

“What do you mean?”

“For starters, his mother introduces him as her happy surprise. Always has.”

“Oh, I heard that. Yeah, that’ll do it.”

“Right? And he’s not just a lot younger than his sisters. He’s the youngest cousin. He was always sent to bed early when we got together, wanted to play the games we’d grown out of. He feels like he has to catch up, or prove something. It’s fun for him to have someone he can lead for a change.”

“Yet another relationship Sky could have been building all this time,” Wren murmured.

“Hey.” Trigg folded his arms on the bar across from her plate. They were eye to eye and something about being this close made her pulse thrum in her throat. “We’re not looking back anymore. That’s our deal, right?”

The deal they’d sealed with a scorching kiss.

Her whole body grew hot and she might have descended into mortifyingly lascivious thoughts if he hadn’t picked up her triangle toast and bit the corner off it.

“The buffet is right over there.” She pointed to the wall that separated the bar from the dining room.

“This is right here.”

His eyes were full of lazy humor, his lips buttered and smiling as he chewed. He was so cocky and handsome she could hardly breathe.

This wasn’t just physical attraction. She was teetering on the edge of genuine feelings for this sexy, sharp, shameless man.

“You finish this, then.” She nudged the plate toward him. “I should get back to work.”

“Wren.” He stayed leaning on the bar, frowning now. “I’m serious. You better be logging these hours to take time later.”

“Your mom booked me for a mani-pedi today. *During work hours.*”

“All right, then.” He finished the toast in three bites. Picked up her fork and collected several potatoes. “You’re really not going to finish this?”

She couldn’t believe he intended to. Sharing food was what couples did.

“It’s all yours. But touch this?” She wrapped her hands around her coffee cup. “And you’ll die.”



TRIGG GAVE WHAT he hoped was his final site tour Thursday afternoon. Work had continued as much as possible this week, but Nate had put off anything that could be considered a safety hazard, given they had so many guests on site. They had beefed up security patrols and offered guided tours almost constantly, trying to keep things orderly and active, reducing the chance that some lone wolf—or minion of Dirk Basco’s—could creep on site to cut wiring or steal their fifty-thousand-dollar electrical transformers.

Sky and Bruno were escorting the last group back to the lodge along with Murphy. Trigg stayed behind. Nate was working and Trigg wanted to make sure there weren’t any concerns that couldn’t wait until Monday. Nate looked like he was simply unpacking and setting up his office after their move from the trailer, but Trigg wouldn’t mind an hour to do that himself. He also had a metric crap-ton of emails to read and answer. He wanted to stay on top of that since he would be receiving all of Rolf’s correspondence while he and Glory were off-grid.

Nate was still in his own office when Trigg got up there, but aside from distant hammering, the operations building was quiet. Chivonne was away at an intensive project-scheduling course. Orin was traveling to a string of job fairs and the rest of the staff were taking the only summer vacation they were likely to get.

“I thought you had Aiden until Sunday,” Trigg said.

“Ilke twisted her ankle on her run. Wants to rest it and ice it.”

“Oh, shit.”

“She’s being over-cautious, making sure it doesn’t turn into anything. I think she just wanted to watch *The Fox and The Hound*. Aiden looked like he would fall asleep so I thought I’d see what I could get done around here.”

“You know that sounds like your sex tape, right?”

“At least I have one.”

The fact he wasn't getting laid was at the top of his mind for Trigg. He'd give almost anything to see what sparks would fly between him and Wren if he could do it without screwing up the tentative relationship he was building with his daughter.

"How's *your* ankle?" Trigg asked. "Can you walk?" He couldn't sit down and read freaking emails. "I saw a few things on my tour we should talk about."

Nate rose and shrugged on his reflective vest. They caught up with Devon swinging a hammer in the day lodge and asked her to join them as they finished their checkup on the various buildings, skipping the future spa because his mother still had people polishing and primping in there. They found a few small issues, but nothing that couldn't be fixed or caught up fairly quickly.

When they got back to the operations building, Nate started a fresh pot of coffee in the new drip brewer in the staff room. He had even stocked the fridge with leftover creamers from the wedding reception.

"You're spoiling me."

Nate shrugged it off. "The caterers were going to throw them out."

"My marriage proposal still stands."

"Find a girl your size. This one's taken."

"I don't know what Ilke has that I don't." Trigg blew across his mug.

"*Me*. Pay attention."

Trigg chuckled, thinking, *This is good*. Not just the banter over fresh coffee, but the kitchen, the building, the progress they were making. His dream taking shape. The fact they hadn't found any major problems on their walk.

"With so much going on around here, and Rolf leaving, I was worried we would come across a nightmare today." Of all the responsibilities Trigg was taking on while Rolf was gone, preventing a major incident was priority one.

“I’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop, too. Maybe the townies are finally getting the message this resort is a good thing.”

“Has it been the townies, though? Or Basco? Seems a big coincidence that since we called him out, we haven’t had another incident.”

Nate acknowledged that with a tilt of his head. “Maybe that’s an end to it. Sure be nice if it was.”

“Amen.”

“Trigg?” Wren’s voice was a dart gun of aphrodisiac, spreading instant heat through him.

He turned to see she had changed out of her smart, tailored uniform into a pair of Wikinger yoga pants in shades of purple and pink. They clung like paint and ended below her knees. His hands itched to smooth over that slippery fabric and test the suppleness of her thighs. Her shins were bare, her feet in a pair of flip-flops similar to the ones all the women had been wearing from the swag bags. They had colored soles and sparkly white straps that underlined her toes, drawing his eye to the fresh, pink polish.

He dragged his gaze up. Her loose shirt read, *Heavily Meditated*. Its ragged bottom hung across her hips and its oversized armholes revealed the sides of her blue sports bra. Her hair was in its ponytail, her face clean of makeup, but anxious.

His heart lurched. “What’s wrong? Is Sky okay?”

“I thought she was here with you, having a tour.”

“She went back to the lodge.”

“She’s probably fine. I’ve been in the spa, getting my mani-pedi.” She held up her hands to show him the half-moons on her baby-pink fingernails. “This isn’t about her. Do you have a minute?” She glanced at Nate. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure...”

“I’ll be in my office,” Nate said, shooting Trigg a glance loaded with speculation.

“Let’s go to mine.” Trigg led the way and shut the door. “What’s up?”

She stopped in the middle of the room and turned, brow a landscape of worry. “I think one of your board members, Torsten, is working with Dirk Basco. And has been for a long time.”



TRIGG DIDN’T MOVE. He stood by the door, arms folded. After a beat, he said quiet and dangerous, “Why do you say that?”

She didn’t expect him to believe her. Not right away. She definitely hadn’t wanted to be the messenger. She was nervous, instinctively wanting to weave her hands together only to remember her fresh polish. She splayed her fingers and dropped her hands to her sides.

“I was at the spa.” Obviously. “The nail tech, Rhonda, does your mom’s nails in town. She organized all of the girls who came out to work this week.”

He nodded, impatient for her to get to the point.

“There’s a lot to unpack.” She’d been sitting there for almost three hours feeling as though she was watching more and more explosives getting tamped into the barrel. “I don’t think anyone realized I was Sky’s aunt or the manager. They knew all the appointments today were lodge staff, which is why they were talking so freely. Rhonda said they’ve been on their best behavior with all the guests because she could tell a lot of them thought they were a bunch of hicks who didn’t know what they were doing. Then this other woman—I think her name is Jess or Jessie—she said, ‘We *are* hicks,’ and talked about how she and her brother used to sneak out of their grandparents’ house to come up to the abandoned lodge to party, when they were in high school. Her grandfather owns the gravel pit.” Wren pointed, but she was all turned around and realized she was pointing toward the lodge.

“Petersen,” Trigg said, and went to open the door. “Nate. You should hear this. Start again,” Trigg said, moving to lean his hips on his desk while Nate closed the door.

She caught him up then continued. “Rhonda said Jess should tell her grandfather to sell the gravel pit to the resort. Jess said there was no way he would, because he hates Dirk Basco and believes he’s the reason the previous owners of this hill had to sell. And he blames Wikinger for not rebuilding after the avalanche. Thinks it was an insurance scam and blames Wikinger and Basco for Haven being such a ghost town all these years.”

Trigg shook his head. “The hill hadn’t opened for the season when Dad bought it. They were already broke. He asked the previous owners to stay on and run it, but they took the money and moved away. Dirk suggested leaving it closed until the spring so he could upgrade the day lodge. It was supposed to open for spring skiing, but the avalanche happened before they could do that.”

“Jess said her grandfather was close with the previous owners. Basco was pressing them to sell to him. He was doing little things to make it harder and harder for them to hang on to it.”

“We heard some things like that. Basco was on the board of the credit union and their loan extension was denied. Stuff like that. How does Torsten fit in?”

“Wait. About the avalanche... Her grandfather volunteered with the ski patrol back then. He says the snowpack was high that year, but the risk was low. People were sledding and cross-country skiing up there even though the hill was closed. But it just so happens that the day the hill was empty, there was an avalanche. She said everyone was in town for Nordic Days. I don’t know what that is.”

“A festival in town. Happens in March,” Nate said. “Funny how we had that fire when everyone was in town for last year’s Fourth of July fireworks. And the theft happened when everyone went to town for Suzanne’s funeral.”

“Insurance should have been able to tell if the avalanche was deliberate,” Trigg said. “There’d be powder stains on the snow. How else do you start an avalanche?”

Nate shook his head. “I’d say running across it with your snowmobile would do it, but it sounds like they were already doing that. I could ask... What was his name?” Nate snapped his fingers. “Gerald. That geophysicist we had out here last year.”

“Call Kurt, too. Ask him if he ever heard these rumors of the avalanche being deliberate. Eden’s dad,” Trigg explained to her. “Chief of police.”

Nate nodded and left.

“Kurt might not have heard it. Jess’s family moved away years ago because her dad needed work. She only came back because Rhonda asked her to help with the wedding. Now she’s thinking of moving back here because the hill is going to open and the town will get busy again.”

“And Torsten?”

“Right. So Rhonda said she used to do Mrs. Basco’s hair, before she left Dirk and moved to Missoula. Rhonda said his wife was stressed out after your dad swooped in and bought the hill because Dirk was losing his shit about it. Jess said her grandfather calls Dirk a vulture because Dirk was driving the price to rock bottom, thinking no one else would be interested. The owners of the ski hill basically sold on the spot to your dad as a giant F.U. to Dirk. That’s when your mom walked in with Torsten.”

“Into the spa? Today? You’re sure it was him?”

A fair question. All the board members seemed to be later-aged men with salt-and-pepper hair, so it was easy to confuse them.

“I danced with him last night. His wife is the one who shows you photos of her horses and does dressage, right? He’s your CFO? Because I got the impression your mom was showing him the spa so he would see the different ways the



resort would be financially viable, especially because she wants it to be open year-round.”

Trigg winced and rubbed his jaw. “I don’t disagree with her. We need all the reasons we can dream up for the filthy rich to come here, but we simply don’t have the resources to get that off the ground this year. How did he react?”

“Skeptical. But it’s concrete floors and a couple of pedicure chairs right now.”

Vivien had painted a picture of soothing colors, burbling table fountains, massage rooms full of physiotherapists who specialized in sports injuries and a menu of services that included all the latest mud baths, sugar scrubs and salt glows.

“Rhonda made a joke about how Vivien was trying to steal her town business and you could have heard a pin drop. They left and Rhonda goes, ‘*That fucking guy.*’”

“She recognized him?” Trigg dropped his hands to the edge of his desk, on either side of his hips and leaned forward, eyebrows shooting into his hairline.

“He’s been bringing women to Haven for years. Rhonda says that’s how she knows it’s spring. Dirk calls and acts like a big shot. ‘Rhonda, sweetheart, my partner is in town. Can you fit his ‘lady friend’ in today while we talk business?’ Then Torsten drops off a twenty-something and Rhonda goes to work on her.”

Trigg closed one eye in a wince. “It’s no secret he enjoys younger women.”

“Ick. And I danced with him? I thought he was just being nice. Does his wife know?”

“Mom says things like, ‘I don’t know why she puts up with it,’ so yeah. Pretty sure she knows.”

Gross, but Wren only scratched her cheek, relieved she didn’t have to torture herself over whether to bring this up with the man’s wife.

“Well, Rhonda said she hasn’t seen him since Rolf showed up to start work on the resort.”

“Interesting.”

“Is there a legitimate reason he would have come here every year? Like, to check on the property or whatever? Maybe this was just his secret getaway for his affairs.”

“He’s been our CFO since Dad’s time. Closed the deal on the original purchase and came with us when we flew in last January with Marvin. He also came out to inspect after the avalanche and I know he was here for the insurance investigation. He lobbied hard afterward to keep the payout and sell the hill, rather than invest in rebuilding.”

“Maybe he helped Dirk cover up that the avalanche was deliberate?”

“Maybe. At the time, it looked like taking the insurance money was sound financial advice. Wikinger was over-extended from the purchase. Mom almost caved to the pressure from the board to sell. Then Rolf got married and had a lot more say in how things were run. I told him I’d kill him if he unloaded this property, then we both medaled in Vancouver. Stock in Wikinger went—” He thumbed upward. “The board backed off and this real estate sat on the books until Rolf retired from racing and I started pushing him to rebuild it.”

Wren frowned. “How did Rolf getting married give him more say?”

“The way Dad structured Wikinger, we get a seat at the table when we marry or turn thirty. Dad’s father had the same philosophy, that a man with mouths to feed makes more practical decisions than the average twenty-something bachelor. I turn thirty in August and the board is already on notice that Rolf and I will clean house if they aren’t fully behind Whiskey Jack by then.”

Nate came back. “That was enlightening.” He closed the door. “I left a message for Kurt, but Gerald pointed out the land use agreement here includes mining.”

“For copper,” Trigg said. “We’ve always known that. It played out years ago. That’s why it was turned into a ski hill. Dad had a gentlemen’s agreement with the previous owners not to reopen the mine.” Trigg looked to Wren. “That’s how we understood the deal, that they sold to Dad because he planned to develop the hill for winter sports, not mining.”

“What do you know about molybdenum?” Nate asked.

“Couldn’t even spell it,” Trigg said.

“It’s used to harden stainless steel,” Wren said. “It’s also heat resistant. Good for cars and planes.”

“How the hell do you know that?” Trigg demanded.

She shrugged. “School project in grade nine.”

“Well, guess what can be mined as a byproduct of copper?” Nate asked. “Production is actually on the rise.”

“And Gerald said we have some?”

“Enough to make it profitable to mine the remaining copper at a loss. He told Rolf last year, but Rolf said he doesn’t want to move mountains, he wants to ski down them.”

“Ditto.” Trigg folded his arms and crossed his ankles. “And Kurt went down this avenue. Literally. The houses Basco bought are on the road that runs to the gravel pit. Kurt wondered if he was trying to revive the thermal energy project, but Basco simply doesn’t have that kind of money. Not enough to open a copper mine, either.”

“What if he has a silent partner in Torsten?” Wren asked.

“That’s a huge conflict of interest.” Trigg narrowed his eyes to dangerous slits.

“Why would Dirk let you get this far with building the resort without challenging you sooner?” Wren asked. “Why was he even working for you on this project?”

“Because we were paying him. A lot,” Nate said. “He’s probably been waiting for Torsten to turn this around at the board level, not wanting to tip his hand about the mine.”

“And Torsten has been working that angle, trying to get Rolf to sell rather than rebuild. He’s got to be in bed with Dirk or he would have mentioned the mining potential years ago. The prick.” Trigg gave Wren a long look of reassessment. Then he abruptly pushed off the desk and came right at her, cupped her face and planted a single, loud kiss on her startled mouth. “Thank you.”

A jolt of pure, electric power went through her, as much from the energy crackling off him as the sexual attraction between them. She jerked back in surprise, fingertips going onto her tingling mouth as she blushed in reaction.

“I just sat there and listened.” Actually, she had had to surreptitiously work the conversation back a few times when talk digressed to gossip about people she didn’t know, jewelry parties, and recipes for quick casseroles.

“Then you brought it to me, you little sleeper agent, you.”

She sent a flustered look toward Nate. He was giving the corner of the ceiling a hard study.

“Nate, try Kurt again. See if he has time to chat today. I’m going to catch Torsten before he leaves.”



“HAVE YOU TALKED to Rolf?” his mother asked when Trigg caught up to her as she was dressing for dinner.

He was crackling with temper after a catching Torsten at the airport in Kalispell, then repeating their conversation to Kurt.

“It’s not a death in the family. Pretty sure it can wait until he’s back in Cape Town. He might have to detour through Berlin on his way home, but I don’t want him to miss his honeymoon.” Trigg helped himself to his mother’s bottle of schnapps. “Even if Torsten goes to the board and confesses he’s been trying to brew a deal with Dirk Basco for the last fifteen years, they can’t move on it. Not without Rolf’s approval. So...”

Torsten had pointed the finger at Dirk for all the thefts and vandalism, saying the American had acted alone. Torsten had come here on Dirk's invitation every year, though, allowing Dirk to wine and dine him toward a mining deal. He swore no money had changed hands. Kurt was doing what he could to verify that.

*But this could be very lucrative for Wiking, Torsten had said to Trigg. If you brought this to the board, they would support it.*

Trigg had heard the invitation to stab his brother in the back and responded with, *I don't want stainless fucking steel. I want to play in the snow. And so does Rolf.*

"Torsten won't take it to the board, will he?" Trigg asked his mom. "It would come out that he's been screwing around on Winnie all these years."

"She knows." His mother took a deep swallow of chardonnay. Tapped her finger against the rim of her glass. "She endured the embarrassment because she enjoys her horse shows and designer handbags, but she said something about the irony of attending a wedding as her own marriage dissolved. I didn't get into it, but if they're divorcing, it will cost him."

"Meaning he's looking for a quicker ROI than the resort." Trigg swore under his breath. "Still, he's not going to stage a coup in the nine days Rolf is off-grid. Go back and call an emergency meeting?" Would he? Trigg swore again. "I *told* Rolf to book the wedding for after I turn thirty." He and Rolf had been playing a waiting game, making concessions until the board would have to quit pretending they were 'protecting' Trigg's interests along with the shareholders.

"Things are in the air while Torsten is in the air," his mother said in her controlled fashion. "Let's discuss your options once he lands."

"There is only one option open to me. You know it as well as I do. And I don't know if it would be enough."

“About that.” His mother drew a breath. “There are things you should know.”

## *Chapter Sixteen*

**M**ARVIN HAD BEEN the proudest father Wren had ever seen at the wedding, but from the day she'd been hired, he'd shown equal excitement for the day he would present his other baby to the world, fussing about the grand opening celebration like a first-time mom headed to the kindergarten classroom.

At eleven a.m., Friday the sixth of July, he cut the ribbon they'd hung across the front door and officially opened Blue Spruce Lodge.

The lobby was decorated with balloons and leftover floral arrangements from the wedding. All the guests were offered commemorative gifts, cake and mimosas, but the ceremony was largely symbolic. Photos and press interviews had been going on all week. The lodge itself was only sixty percent booked, now that the wedding guests were checked out, but the dining room was reserved for two turn-overs of their special five-course menu this evening. A lot of people from town were coming out along with a band that would play a few sets in the lounge.

For staff, it was business as usual. In fact, they were all burnt out on celebrating and ready to simply do their jobs. Wren let them go about it and conscripted Sky to help her hand out the cake. Sky was blue about Bruno having left first thing and needed the distraction.

Maybe Marvin was equally let down by the departure of his colleagues and relatives since he seemed uncharacteristically subdued as he circulated with the guests in the lounge, thanking them for being part of his special day. Vivien hovered near the diorama of the ski hill, explaining the stages of development planned for the next few years, but her smile seemed even more rehearsed than usual.

“You wish Glory was here,” Wren guessed, when Marvin followed her into the office to help bring out more of the Blue Spruce Lodge key chains and Whiskey Jack lip balms they were giving away.

“That would have been nice,” Marvin acknowledged with a smile that faded as quickly as it appeared. “But it’s better that she’s not.”

“Why do you say that?” Wren slowed in using the scissors to cut open the tape on the box.

Marvin hesitated, then closed the door. “I wouldn’t bring this up with you, but you were the one to bring the situation with Torsten to Trigg’s attention. Vivien is quite worried. *I’m* worried. About my investment.” His thick brows steepled as he looked to the ceiling and the three floors above them that he’d spent over a year and hundreds of thousands of dollars restoring.

Her hand dropped, letting the scissors hit the desktop with a *thunk*. “Should I be worried? About my job?”

The way he tightened his mouth and silently pleaded for understanding made a terrible, slithery feeling drip through her.

“I have every confidence you and Skylar will be well taken care of by Trigg,” Marvin said. “But if the board were to pull the rug from under the boys and demand Wikingier pursue mining rather than the resort, I would lose the lodge and everyone here would lose their jobs.”

“But I like this job. I like working for you.” Why was life so unfair? She still had the sweetness of icing on her lips, but the universe was threatening to take a giant dump on that little bit of happiness she was enjoying. *Why?*

“I shouldn’t have upset you.” Marvin squeezed her arm. “I have every faith in Trigg. He won’t let that happen, not without a heck of a fight.”

It was going to be a *fight?*



She nodded dumbly, finished opening the boxes and they carried them out to the lobby. It seemed so futile now, giving away promotional items for places that might not exist by the time these people took them home to use them.

Wren looked to Vivien who had a hand on Sky's shoulder as she introduced her as her granddaughter. Sky had blossomed here, where she had connected with her father's family and had begun to understand who she was. How had Blue Spruce Lodge begun to feel like home when they didn't even use their kitchenette or sit on furniture that belonged to them? It was silly to suddenly be near tears when they'd both shown up here with such dread one short month ago.

"Where's Trigg?" Wren asked Vivien when the crowd began breaking up. She wanted to hear directly from him how bad things were.

"Nate had a concern at the base. Trigg ran down for a quick meeting with Devon. He'll be back as soon as he can. He wanted to toast Marvin's success. If those two hadn't met in a coffee shop in Seattle, none of us would be here today." She kept her smile pinned, but up close, Wren could read the stress behind it.

"Vivien, how—"

"*Motherfucker.*"

Trigg's voice widened their eyes and caused the people still milling in the lounge to send edgy looks toward the lobby.

Wren moved with Vivien to see Trigg standing inside the front doors, which had been thrown wide in welcome. The two halves of the ribbon Marvin had cut were still wafting in the breeze on either side of him.

Trigg held his cell phone in a fist, looking like he wanted to throw it or snap it in half.

"Is that language necessary?" Vivien asked, moving with calm authority into the lobby. "I'm sorry," she murmured to the people staring. "My son has forgotten this is no longer a worksite."

“Shit. Sorry,” Trigg muttered, skimming his gaze across the startled faces then locking on to Wren. “Come with me.” He started for the stairs.

“What? Why?” She was aware of Sky coming to stand beside her and had the strongest urge to take her niece’s hand. Maybe even hide behind her.

He sounded so *mad*.

He paused halfway up the first flight and scowled down at her. “Because I need to talk to you.”

Vivien had her fingers on her pearls, her face raised to Trigg. Her expression didn’t look confused. If anything, she looked resolved. Even nodded slightly as if she knew what was coming and only hoped he could pull it off.

“We’ll be fine down here, dear. You can run up for a few moments.” Vivien turned her head to send a meaningless smile toward Wren.

“But what is it about?” She was scared. Genuinely scared. This felt too much like the times when her father had said, *Put out your hand*. A cold chill washed over her and her stomach was in knots.

It was a dumb overreaction. Trigg would never hurt her. Ever. She was ninety-nine percent sure of it.

“What’s wrong?” Sky was brave enough to move to the bottom of the stairs, which had Wren moving reflexively to shadow her. “Is it about me? Where’s Murphy?”

“He’s at the base with Nate. He’s fine.” Trigg paused halfway up the second flight. “You’re not in trouble. I just have to talk to your aunt.”

“What about?” Sky asked.

“It’s private.” He scanned the listening crowd with irritation. “I didn’t mean to make a scene. Enjoy your stay.”

“*Dad*.” Sky threw out the word with frustrated insistence.

“Skylar. You’ll know when you need to know,” Trigg said, ordering, “Wren,” as he continued up the stairs.

Vivien hurried across to Sky. “Will you help me in the office, please?”



TRIGG LOOKED BACK and saw Wren’s gaze dart after Sky as his mother hustled her away. She set reluctant feet on the stairs. Her lips were white and trembling. When she realized he was looking at her, she straightened her expression into the unreadable one he always found frustrating and moved with more purpose.

He was scaring the hell out of her. *Fuck*. Exhaustion washed over him and he ran his hand down his face.

“You’re not in trouble, either,” he muttered as she met him at the top. “I’ve barely slept and—” He dragged his heavy feet to his door and thumbed in his code, then held the door open for her.

She still looked wary, but walked in ahead of him.

Housekeeping only came in when he asked so the bed was unmade. His wet towel was on the floor and his breakfast dishes were next to his open, black-screened laptop.

“Things have gone from bad to worse since yesterday,” he said, closing his door.

“Marvin told me there was some concern about the board trying to shut down the resort in favor of mining.” She wove her fingers together and bit her lip.

“It’s a full fucking revolt over Wikinger.” He sat on the armchair and pushed the heels of his hands into the gravel that seemed to inhabit his eye sockets. “It’s really bad, Wren. Torsten is trying to raise the support to unseat Rolf as president and install himself as interim, so he can push the board to approve the mine.”

“Have you told Rolf?”

“He’s on the fucking savanna! Which was *my* genius idea. I suggested it and Glory jumped on it. Couldn’t wait to go a week without electronics. I’ve sent a message by carrier pigeon, but this could all be over before he even hears about it.”

“Okay.” She started to sit on the love seat, glanced at the paperwork on the coffee table and gasped.

It was his copy of the document he’d signed, agreeing to wait at least six months before opening custody discussions. Even then, they had to go through lawyers.

Fresh terror came into her expression. “What—” Her voice thinned to smoke. “What kind of options?”

“I pointed out I’m a father and as such, I should be given full voting rights. But seeing as I don’t have custody...”

“No,” she breathed. Her mouth was trembling and she covered it with her two hands as she sank onto the love seat. Tears rose to glass her eyes as she stared at him with betrayal. “You can’t ask me to do that, Trigg. You *can’t*.”

His heart lurched. He hitched forward on the cushion, elbows braced on his thighs. “Listen—”

“I know, I know.” She held up a hand, brows pulled into a knot of torture. “The company is Sky’s future, but she’s *mine*.” Her voice was quiet and fierce. Petrified. Then agonized. “But it’s not just her, is it? It’s everyone’s future. Marvin’s business. My job. Which way would the town vote, do you think?”

“Straight down the middle, if history repeated itself. We’d be dead in a sea of debates for years. We have to contain this before it gets that far.”

He could see the weight settling on her the way it was pressing on him. He let her absorb it. It was important she understand exactly how grave this was, but it hurt to see her struggling with it.

“Wren—”

She sniffed and scraped together her composure, using her fingertips to clear her eyes and leaving little smudges of charcoal across them.

“Shared, though. Right?” Her voice cracked, but she held her chin steady. Bravely high. “Because I can’t—”

He almost crumpled into a heap of gratitude. If only it were that simple.

“Wren, there’s no time for that.”

She frowned and he hitched forward again, so his ass was barely on the edge of the cushion. Distantly he was aware of his thighs burning, of other discomforts like an ache of tension in his shoulders and jaw. The wired weariness of a sleepless night and too much caffeine. His stomach had ulcerated hours ago and his skin felt as though it was coated in fever sweat.

“The board is calling an emergency meeting tomorrow afternoon. That’s the email I got a few minutes ago. Rumors are circulating that Wikinger is going to stop payment for all the contractors currently working on the resort. That’s why I was down at the base this morning. Devon is ready to pull up stakes and leave us in the lurch.”

“Torsten said that?”

“Pretty sure Dirk is the source and it’s another level of fucking sabotage. He’s trying to make it impossible for us to open this season. If we fall that far behind, the board really will have grounds to unseat Rolf.”

*Don’t burn the place down.* How about if he blew it up and took everyone with it?

Wren’s curled fingers were white, one cupped hand cradled by the other on her lap. He could see the tremble in her bright white nail tips.

“Okay,” she whispered in a little squeak. “What do you need me to do? This *is* Sky’s future. How do we proceed?”

His hands went clammy. He rubbed them on his thighs.

“My lawyer says that even if you and I agree to fast-track a shared custody arrangement, I would be thirty before all the dust settled. If I could wait until I’m thirty...” He snorted. So near and yet so far. “I *do* want custody, by the way. Not for the company, but because Sky is my daughter. I want a say in her life. But that’s something you and I can talk about later.”

He looked at the floor between them, wondered if he was supposed to kneel, but stayed where he was as he lifted his gaze to meet her solemn one. His insides went into free fall.

“After you and I get married.”



“WHAT?”

Wren felt as though wind was whipping past her ears, making hearing impossible. She was on a roller coaster, something she usually avoided because they made her so dizzy and weak.

“You heard me.” He rolled his lips into a flat grimace, then set his elbows on his knees so he was leaning toward her. “Even if Rolf somehow flies to Berlin for that meeting, it doesn’t matter. They know his position. I know which members will side with him and which ones are profit-driven. Torsten will say it’s in the best interest of the shareholders to exploit the mine. Less risk, more money. But I can vote if I’m married.” He hesitated, then added, “So could you.”

“*What?*” The roller coaster flew down another wild dip.

“I didn’t know about the spouses either. Mom told me last night, when I floated the idea of marrying you. Rolf’s first wife didn’t have his kid. That’s why she didn’t have voting rights. Glory will get a say when she pumps one out. You, as Sky’s guardian, are the *de facto* mother of *my* child.”

“I—You—” Her brain was going supernova while the rest of her wanted to scamper like a bunny into a bolt-hole. “How would we even—”

“I looked it up last night. We go to the courthouse in Haven, buy a license, then ask a judge to marry us. Right now. Then we fly to Berlin and kick some ass.”

“*Now?*”

She wanted to jerk to her feet and pace off the adrenaline shooting through her veins, but her heart was slamming so hard, she was light-headed. If she stood up, she might fall down.

“But—” She had to clear her throat again. “It would be like a green card marriage? We’d get a divorce as soon as possible?”

He kind of jerked as she said that, as though she’d hit him. “I guess.”

“What do you mean you *guess*?” She lurched to her feet and put as much distance as the room allowed between them. “I always thought that if I got married...” She held on to her own elbows like they were a lifesaver that could keep her from drowning. “That it would be because I loved someone so much I couldn’t say ‘no.’”

“You love Sky that much. I know you do.”

His words neatly sidestepped admitting any feelings for her, which scored across her heart like a razor, thin and neat. “You know what I mean.”

“Wren.” He came toward her, hands out like he was asking her to dance. Or inviting her into another kind of embrace.

Illogically, she wished he would take her in his arms. The one time he had hugged her, she had felt safer than she ever had in her whole life. She longed for that right now, when she felt as though he was asking her to jump off the edge of a cliff with him.

“We share a child. Her future is threatened. As parents, we’re supposed to unite to protect her.”

“And that’s all this is?” She searched his face, not sure what answer she wanted from him. What if he said this went

deeper for him? Did she want it to?

“Do you have a better idea? Because dusting my hands is not an option. And we’re out of time.”

A knock sounded on the door.

“Busy,” he barked, but the lock was already beeping and humming as it released.

Sky pushed in, chin set at a belligerent angle. “I want to know what’s going on.”

“Note to self,” Trigg said with a dry look toward Wren. “Start using the *Do Not Disturb* feature.”

*Ha-ha.* She hugged her ribs and looked at the floor. Was she really going to agree to this?

“Your aunt and I are getting married,” Trigg said.

Guess so.

“*What?!*” Sky screeched. Her blue eyes went big as basketballs. Her arms hung at her sides. “Are you joking?”

“So Trigg can vote against the board,” Wren said. “Instead of the resort, they want to open a mine, but we have to do it quickly.”

“How quickly?” Sky frowned.

“We have to drive into Haven right now, to the courthouse,” Trigg said.

“Seriously?” Sky pulled her phone from her jeans pocket. “I’m telling Bruno—”

“*No.*” Trigg plucked it from her hand. “We’re doing this quickly and *quietly*. You can’t tell anyone.”

“But—” She scowled and tried to take back her phone.

“Sky. This is important.” He touched a finger to her collarbone. “No one can know what we’re doing.” He stuffed her phone into his back pocket. “I have to talk to Mom and make a couple of calls, then we’ll leave for Haven.” He paused



on his way to the door, saying to Wren, “Pack for a few days. Bring your passport. We’ll head to the airport right after.”



“SHOULD I PUT on my bridesmaid dress?” Sky asked as she watched Auntie Wren put on her long skirt with the flowers around the bottom.

“We don’t want to draw too much attention. Maybe your skirt and a nice top?”

Sky did it, and put on a bit of makeup, but this felt completely unreal. “Will I have to call you Mom?” Sky had never, ever in a million years thought she would have to think about things like this.

“Of course not. We both know who your mom is.” Auntie Wren smiled a little, but mostly she was stiff and blank. “And it’s only temporary, to get Trigg the vote.”

Good. At least she wouldn’t wake up to see her dad in the bed beside her, playing Dutch oven with Auntie Wren.

She thought about how uptight her dad had sounded, which was way worse than even when she had first come to Blue Spruce Lodge. He’d been sarcastic and gruff then, not tired and serious as a heart attack, taking her *phone*. Telling her he didn’t want anyone to know he was marrying her aunt.

That seemed pretty extreme.

“Should I be worried?” she asked Auntie Wren.

“No.” Auntie Wren smiled again, this time a little more real. “Have you met your dad? He won’t let them get away with this. Even if things got dragged out and he went broke fighting them, you and I will always be fine.” Auntie Wren stopped brushing out her hair and took Sky’s shoulders. “In a worst-case scenario, I can get back my job at the dentist office, or at a different one. I have savings. Enough for a fresh start anywhere. Aunt Lydia would take us in if we were in a real bind. We have lots of options. One way or another, we’ll get through this.”

That didn't make her feel much better. Sky stuck her feet into her sandals.

"I love Aunt Lydia, but I don't want to live with her. Or—" she squinched up her face so Auntie Wren would know it killed her to admit this "—or go back to Utah. I like it here. And if you lick your finger and mark a point for yourself because I said that," she warned quickly, "I will punch you."

"None of this was my idea, if you recall," Auntie Wren said dryly, moving back to the mirror and picking up her lipstick. "Point to Sky for getting what she wants."

Auntie Wren was trying to tease her, to make it seem like everything was okay, but she seemed sad or stressed or like she was wishing for something, maybe.

She didn't look the way Auntie Glory had, when she'd been getting ready to marry *Onkel* Rolf.

"I was trying to fix you up with Quinn," Sky confessed. "He said he would ask you to dinner next time he comes to the lodge."

Auntie Wren froze, then finished putting on her lipstick. "That might be awkward."

"Do you like him?"

"Enough to go to dinner with him, but it doesn't matter." Auntie Wren was blanky-blank again, putting her bag of makeup and shampoo into her suitcase. "You're my priority."

Sky stared at the suitcase. An uncomfortable twist in her chest made her want to rub the bone in the middle. Auntie Wren hardly ever went anywhere without her. The last time she had, it had been to come here, and everything had changed after that.

*Point to Sky.*

She wasn't like her aunt, always thinking things to death, but she had ears. She'd heard tons of people say over the years that Auntie Wren was too young to be raising her, or that she was making such a huge sacrifice of her own future by doing

it. She had never really thought about all that Auntie Wren had done for her, mostly concentrating on what she hadn't.

Now she thought about Auntie Wren not having a boyfriend because of her. Not being able to date Quinn because she would be married to Trigg. They seemed to get along, but she was pretty sure they didn't love each other.

She wasn't even sure if *she* loved her dad yet. Coming here had been weird at first, but in some ways, he was better than she had imagined. Not because he was rich. That was awesome, obviously, but he was rich in relatives. He was funny and popular. He liked *her*. And made her feel like he expected great things from her, but not like one of those movie dads who were jerks about it. He made her think she could *do* great things, which made her believe she could, too.

So she thought she should be happy that her aunt and dad were getting married, but she didn't know what to think. *That's* why she wanted to talk to Bruno. Sometimes when Sky suggested something, Auntie Wren would say, *That looks good on paper. It doesn't play as well in real life.*

Sky had a feeling that's what this marriage was going to be. Something on a piece of paper that would turn out to be a bad idea.

And she didn't know what that would mean for her.



WREN KEPT REMINDING herself this was temporary. It was the quickest, least knotty solution. But she still wished she could breathe into a paper bag.

Nate met them at the courthouse to stand up as Trigg's best man and to drive Vivien and Sky back to the lodge after the ceremony. They had to wait twenty minutes for another couple to get married, but within the hour, they were saying, "I do."

"Do you have rings?" the judge asked.

"Oh." Vivien hurried to open her purse. "Here we are." She handed a gorgeous engagement and wedding band set to

Trigg. "Oskar gave those to me. I know you'll treasure them as much as I always have. And pass them along to Sky when the time comes," Vivien added in a pert tone.

*Oh, Vivien.* Wren was so close to hysteria, she nearly laughed aloud. But Trigg was threading the rings onto her weak finger and her voice dried up. They fit perfectly and she wished, just for a heartbeat or two, that this was real.

The judge pronounced them husband and wife. Trigg touched his mouth to hers in a chaste kiss, but a spark seemed to shoot between them, making her lips sting as though branded. Something flashed in his eyes and they both hesitated to draw away. She could swear she heard his heart beating as hard as her own.

Then they both stepped back and forced smiles. Hers had to be flustered. They signed as instructed and a few minutes later, Trigg was handing her the copies they would take to Germany, asking if she would carry them in her purse. For some reason, that made her feel *very* married.

"Wait," Sky said as they walked out to say their goodbyes on the courthouse steps. "Was that *it*? I thought he was asking you if you really wanted to do it. Like, lecturing you on the importance, then we would go somewhere else for the actual wedding. That wasn't like Glory and Rolf's at *all*. You didn't even have a bouquet!"

"It's a formality," Wren reminded her.

"We can do it bigger later," Trigg said.

"I don't want bigger," Wren insisted. Her worst nightmare would be a production like Glory and Rolf's. "This was fine."

It was exactly the right tone for a loveless marriage. Anything else would have raised her expectations and she preferred to keep hers low. No room for disappointment.

She ignored the hollow sensation that resided in her chest.

## Chapter Seventeen

THEY LANDED AT one in the afternoon, Berlin time.

Wren had slept a little on the flight, but not well. She felt like a zombie. She texted Sky that they had landed safely and Sky wrote back that Lydia was there.

Inviting Aunt Lydia had been Sky's idea, requested at the last second. Despite her contentious relationship with Sky in the last few years, Wren had rarely been away from her. Wren trusted Vivien to look after her, but Lydia had been waiting for an invitation to visit and was happy to run up for the weekend and it made Wren feel better to know the two were reconnecting.

Trigg took her to an apartment he said Vivien had bought when she downsized. Rolf had given up his old place and they all used this one if they were in Berlin.

It was pristinely beautiful with a view of the Spree River, but had the stillness of a place that was rarely used. The doorman set their luggage in a room down the hall, then came back to say something in German.

*"Das ist gut,"* Trigg replied, dismissing him before saying, "Mom's stylist will be here soon. Clothes have already been delivered. They're in her room."

"I can comb my own hair." She dropped onto the sofa and stared dumbly at him. "What time is the meeting?"

"Four." He toed off his shoes. "Don't take it as criticism. Mom believes in armor and Charmaine has had years of experience as her blacksmith. Are you hungry?"

She curled on her side, closing her eyes. "Can I sleep until she gets here?"

“He,” he corrected, and picked up a plaid throw off the back of the sofa, draping it over her.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Seconds later, something brushed the side of her face—a caress that felt really nice. Tender. She drew a deep breath and dragged open her eyes.

Trigg’s hot blue gaze was inches from her own and a place on her cheek held the lingering impression of warmth and dampness. He was blinking heavy eyelids as though he’d just woken up. With his jaw unshaven, he looked the way he would if they woke together after a night of lovemaking. Rakish and sexy.

“Charmaine is here. He’s setting up in Mom’s room. You want a quick shower? Wash away the travel?”

“Mmm,” she moaned in agreement and protest. “I’ll marry you for a cup of coffee.”

“Done.” He shoved to his feet and walked into the kitchen.

She showered in the spare room and pulled on a thick robe, wanting its warmth, but feeling like a sophomore seeking false reassurance by wearing the football captain’s letterman sweater.

“Charmaine,” Trigg introduced her a minute later. “My wife, Wren.”

Wife. It made her all prickly, but Charmaine quickly distracted her. He was a man with bright pink hair, rectangular purple glasses, and a diamond earring in his nostril.

“Vivien promised me the gossip scoop of the year if I threw over my regulars for you. I *hate* you for taking the man that I love, but I *adore* you for achieving what I sincerely believed no one could.” He sat her down at Vivien’s makeup table and dove his hands into her damp hair, claiming to be in love with the rich dark brown, but scolded her about split ends. “You poor *orphan*. You’re safe now.”

Wren kept to herself that she chopped her own bangs, only going for a real haircut a couple of times a year, the last being right before they left Utah.

“At least your manicure is passable. That gives me more time to work on this three-piece luggage set beneath your eyes.” Charmaine took her chin and turned her head to study her profile from both sides.

“I prefer a natural look,” she murmured as she noticed the tiered pallets of rainbow colors he’d set out.

“Of course, you do. You have nothing to *hide*. Not a single blemish. No, this is a matter of bringing *out* the pretty little *Zuckerm Maus* peeking from within.”

Trigg did a small spit-take with the coffee he’d brought in. “Oh, sugar mouse, that’s your new name. Worth whatever fortune Charmaine charges me.”

She reminded him with a stern look that this marriage was pretend. “Endearments will not be necessary.”

“But it’s cute. Like you.” Trigg tugged a damp tendril of her hair.

“Women don’t want to be cute. They want to be sexy and dangerous,” Charmaine rebuked. “Go.” He shooed Trigg from the room.

An hour later, her hair had been cut and styled into a sophisticated mid-length bob with bold, straight bangs that drew attention to her eyes. She had never considered them her best feature, but Charmaine had dabbed and painted and brushed a hundred different beige pigments onto her face. Her eyes were as big as lakes of slate blue and she wasn’t even wearing false eyelashes. Her cheekbones were pronounced, giving her a waifish air while her mouth was a soft pout wearing an innocent pink shine.

This wasn’t sexy and dangerous. It wasn’t armor. She looked even more defenseless and vulnerable than she usually felt. Charmaine had *exposed* her.

Charmaine smiled with pride. “Let’s find you something to wear.”

A rack of clothes had stood in the background all this time, each outfit covered in a thin film. She suspected the prices were in Euros, not dollars. Either way, they were exorbitant. She held up a yellow plaid skirt with a matching jacket.

“Too schoolgirl. Your husband isn’t a fetishist.”

They had heard the distant drone of Trigg’s voice several times as he made calls to unknown parties.

“See how this fits.” Charmaine unwrapped a navy-blue tube dress with a short-sleeved jacket. “Oh, please,” he said, stopping her from taking it into the bathroom. “I’ve seen hundreds of naked women. Not one has done a thing for me.”

She stepped into the pair of rose-colored cheekies he handed her before she dropped the robe, then tried on a strapless pink bra. It fit, so she held up her arms. Charmaine drew the dress into place, smoothing a hand at her hip and straightening a seam, eyeing her critically from several angles before pronouncing, “Lovely.”

The short-sleeved jacket had ivory piping down the edges and across the faux-pockets. It closed with a series of hooks at her belly button, forming a wide belt that emphasized her waist. The edges were cut to remain open, revealing the severe line of the dress cutting across the tops of her breasts. The outfit bordered on conservative, yet accentuated her figure very stylishly, making it clear she was a woman embarking into a man’s world.

“I would kill for a wide-brimmed hat and a pair of gloves.” He helped her step into a pair of shiny navy-blue pumps, then stepped back. “But I think this is more disarming. May I take our photo?”



TRIGG HAD NEVER felt so possessive of a woman in his life. Not like this. It wasn’t because Wren looked more beautiful and



more fragile than he'd ever seen her—although, the way her pupils were dilated definitely provoked the protector in him.

It was more than that. It was the fact that she had married him at all, to help him battle back an attack on his entire family. It was the way she turned his mother's rings on her finger and said, "I hate confrontation." It was the solemn smile she had worn when Trigg had stepped into her photo with Charmaine.

"Give us an hour before you post that," Trigg had requested. "Just before four o'clock would be perfect. And let's be mysterious. Call her Mrs. Johansson for now. Do you mind?" he asked Wren.

"Is it Christmas already?" Charmaine had asked with avid delight. "If I could be a fly on that boardroom wall..."

'That boardroom' went tomb-like when he and Wren walked in. Wikinger offered flex-weeks so plenty of staff worked Saturdays. They knew something was up if the board was coming in for an unexpected meeting. They didn't call out their usual greetings as Trigg led Wren from the elevator toward the executive offices.

Wren's hand was icy in his, fingernails digging into his skin. She was scared and that had his adrenaline ramping even higher, wanting to tuck her in to his side while he kept his sword arm free.

Rolf's executive assistant, a gorgeous and heavily pregnant redhead, was the only one who smiled when she saw him.

"What a lovely surprise." She came across to kiss his cheek, the stern look in her eye warning him to *fix this*. Rolf had plucked her out of a low-paying clerical position weeks after he became president and considered her worth her late-term pregnancy weight in gold. She was fiercely loyal to him. "I wasn't able to travel so I missed the wedding. The photos were stunning. Hello. I'm Adelina." She shook Wren's hand.

"Wren," Trigg provided, hearing "*Die Tante*," grumbled in a corner of the room.

The board was a pile of grandfathered hold-outs from his father's era. Rolf had played a game of politics in nominating the same men term after term, buying their loyalty to some extent. It had worked until he had pushed the resort project eighteen months ago. Now all bets were off and everyone knew it.

"Rolf has spoken highly of you," Adelina was saying to Wren, as if ensuring the room knew that detail. "Gentlemen, I think that's everyone." Adelina turned to the men who were standing around in pockets of allies. "If you'd like to take your seats, I'm sure the chairman would like to start. I'll be right outside if you need anything."

She left and men began pulling out chairs.

The chairman had the balls to say to Trigg, "Kind of you to come all this way to hear the results, but you'll have to excuse us while we vote."

"English please. Wren doesn't speak German and we'll be staying for these discussions." Trigg understood why sharks smiled the way they did. The scent of blood was so intoxicating. He met each pair of eyes, then went back to Torsten's narrowed, blistering gaze. "I believe some of you met Wren earlier this week, at my brother's wedding. She is the aunt of my daughter. She is also—" he twisted his wrist so the rings on Wren's left hand were showing "—my wife."



WREN WASN'T ONE to make a stand or get in trouble. The more she had thought about this meeting, the worse she had pictured it becoming. They weren't going to stone her to death. She knew that in her head, but her body was reacting like they were a pack of hyenas that had cornered her. She was genuinely terrified.

And every last one of them looked like her father, barrel-chested, iron-haired and glaring with judgment. At the words, *my wife*, there was a collective bluster of outrage.

“Bullshit,” Torsten said, standing to slap his hand on the table.

“You brought the certificate, didn’t you, *Liebchen*?”

Trigg’s hand splayed in the middle of her back. She warily moved to set her purse on the long table, feeling all eyes upon her. Her hands trembled as she withdrew the pages and carefully unfolded them.

Trigg peeled off a copy and handed it to the man nearest him. He glanced at it and passed it along to the next one.

“I don’t care what backwater hippy blessed your union. We don’t recognize it,” Torsten said.

“It was a judge in the town courthouse.” Trigg snorted. “You go to Haven every year. If it’s good enough for your mistresses, it can’t be *that* backward.”

A few heads turned to regard Torsten.

Trigg’s phone pinged. He reached for it and showed it to her. “That turned out well, didn’t it?” Charmaine’s post of their photo read:

*BE JEALOUS. I met the charming, NEWEST Mrs. Johansson. Isn’t she GORGEOUS? I take no credit. #CantImproveOnPerfection #Zuckermans*

“Just a photo announcing our marriage,” Trigg dismissed casually, setting aside his phone. “I expect it will go viral shortly. What will that do to our share price, I wonder? We should start this meeting before we begin receiving calls. Wren?” He held a chair for her.

She gratefully sank into it. Trigg remained standing and so did Torsten at the far end. To her shock, Torsten glared his contempt at *her*.

“Was this what you were holding out for?” he demanded. “Because if we don’t recognize the marriage, you get nothing. No vote. No share. Do you understand that?”

“You’re not a fucking *king*, Torsten.” Trigg set his hands flat on the table so he leaned in with threat. “You don’t get to

rule on whether our marriage is legitimate. The sum total of your power is to raise a motion to remove Rolf as president. As a founding-family member who has just attained *full voting rights*, I am his successor in that position until you have a case against me. You don't even have one against Rolf, so fuck off."

"You're faking a marriage to assume rights you don't have. That makes you unfit to run this company," Torsten lobbed back.

Trigg let the silence drag out an extra second before he drawled, "I'm sorry. I wasn't listening. I was remembering making love with my *wife*."

*Oh, dear God.* Wren closed her eyes.

"Case dismissed," Torsten said flatly. "He can't even take this meeting seriously."

"You have been nursing the 'Trigg is too impulsive to take seriously' narrative for years, using it to push back on my efforts to go forward with the resort—"

"Is reality a better one? How many more children will appear out of thin air? This image you are cultivating needs to be buried, not carried to a mountaintop on a five-million-dollar gondola!"

"One child. One wife," Trigg said flatly, counting on his finger and thumb. "And as a spouse who has provided me with issue, Wren is entitled to vote."

Torsten took a step back, but quickly rallied with, "That is wild and desperate, even for you. If *anyone* is looking to unseat Rolf, I would say it's *you*."

"Do you want me to come across this table right now?" Trigg warned darkly.

Wren gathered her courage and wrapped her clammy hand around Trigg's tensile wrist. Looking up into his eyes, because it was easier than looking at anyone else, she said, "If they

won't acknowledge my right to vote as your wife, I can still sue Wikinger for Sky's share. What would happen then?"

Surprise blanked Trigg's expression.

The whole room went so silent she could hear someone breathing.

"That would be very bad for the company," Trigg said, quiet and grave. "Auditors would come in, maybe even an interim management team. Even if a big decision was made today, like passing a vote to abandon the resort and switch to mining, progress on that would be held up while the dust settled on your claim."

"Because one of the lawyers who called me—"

"Lawyers called you?" That took him aback even more. He was cautious and still, looking at her the way he might if he happened to come face to face with a rattlesnake.

"Of course. The minute you sent out the press release about Sky being your daughter I had several offers of representation. They were all willing to work on a contingency fee. I took that to mean they thought I could get a lot and quite easily." Her hands were so cold and clammy, she could barely stand the touch of her own fingers against her skin. "I already had a lawyer who had fully briefed me on my options, but one who called was convinced I could and should push for a seat at this table regardless of any other arrangements I had already made."

Now there was the sound of a fly on its back, buzzing and stopping, buzzing and stopping. Maybe it was a phone in someone's pocket. Maybe it was the blood rushing in her ears, cutting out as her heart pumped and stalled, pumped and stalled.

"You said she waived the right to sue," Torsten said in a thick, lethal voice.

"My right, yes," Wren said, flicking a glance into Torsten's livid one. "I wasn't allowed to waive Sky's. She's a child. And my understanding on signing the agreement not to sue was

based on Rolf being president and there being a resort in Montana where I could work while Sky got to know her family.”

“But if those circumstances change significantly, you could challenge that agreement,” Trigg deduced swiftly.

“Yes.” She buried her hands deeper into her lap as stunned faces reassessed her. “As Sky’s guardian, I have a duty to act in her best interest. Suing her father didn’t strike me as a promising start to their relationship, but I have no qualms suing people who *don’t* have her best interest at heart.” Sweat glued her palms together and her own nails bit into the backs of her hands, but she took the needed seconds to meet each pair of astounded eyes. “Whether you recognize my marriage or not, I expect to vote on decisions that affect her inheritance and future. I will pursue a means to do so.”

She watched it dawn on all their faces that she was dead serious.

Trigg straightened and folded his arms, regarding her a long minute before he snorted. “You thought Rolf was a tough piece of meat to chew,” he said to the table at large.

“If the value of her inheritance is your priority, read the mining proposal,” Torsten ordered her, cold and forceful.

“The proposal that suggests working with a man who has actively been sabotaging our worksite?” Trigg asked with a choke. “Lay off the nasal drops, Torsten. And call your lawyer. A conflict of interest charge is pending against you.”

“My hands are clean.” Torsten held them up as though to prove it.

“Doubtful. But defending yourself will be expensive and you already have a divorce to litigate. Or you can submit your resignation. Immediately. That offer is open for the next ten minutes and won’t be extended again.”

“Your *brother* can ask for my resignation.” Torsten gave his suit lapels an affronted tug. “Not you.”

“My brother can *fire* you. I can suggest you show some dignity and leave before I find ways to make things worse for you.” Trigg looked around the table. “I want the resignation of anyone who isn’t behind the resort a hundred and ten percent. Right now.”

The buzzing noise was definitely phones. Several more were going off, causing brows to furrow.

“Inquiries about our happy news.” Trigg smiled like a Bond villain relishing the torture chamber he had just revealed. “You’re wrong, by the way,” he told Torsten. “Ours is a great story. I’ve just married the aunt of my surprise daughter on the heels of a society wedding that has the entire world trying to book into a much-anticipated resort. Right now would be a good time to sell your shares, before the price plummets because we’re writing off retainers to a company *you* paid to *stop* our project.” Trigg looked to the man on his immediate left. “Do *you* think we should mine?”

The man looked down at the page before him, written in German, but that Wren had deduced was a synopsis of today’s order of business. The man licked his lips and pronounced a clear and careful, “*Nein*. I do not.”

Trigg moved to the next one, going man by man, pressing each for his reply. Two abstained and one other voted ‘yes’ with Torsten.

“We will be going forward with the resort,” Trigg summed up, adding to Torsten, “*Auf Wiedersehen*.”

Torsten muttered something in German that Wren took to be his resignation. He and the other man left, expressions stiff.

As the door closed, the remaining men sat back and let out a collective exhalation. It seemed to neutralize the pressure in the room. Some reached for their phones while one looked to Trigg with an exasperated stare.

“Never a dull moment with you, is there?”



TRIGG HAD BEEN ready to flip the twenty-foot long, solid mahogany boardroom table with his bare hands. Now it was all he could do not to leap onto it and stomp with triumphant elation. *Fuck yes*. They'd done it.

*She* had.

He swung Wren's chair out and scooped her up to kiss her startled lips before releasing her to accept handshakes and introduce her properly. Adelina came back in to pour a round of schnapps so the board could toast his success.

*His marriage*.

He sent a quick message to his mother and Rolf, then excused them from further invitations for celebration. "Jet lag is going to hit us like a tranquilizer dart."

It wasn't quite true. He suspected they were both too keyed up to sleep, but Wren looked shell-shocked beneath her Audrey Hepburn mask of harmlessness. Forget *Zuckerm Maus*. She was his little *Schnecke*. 'Snail' was a common German endearment, but she was one of those tropical ones with teeth you didn't see and venom strong enough to kill a man before he'd finished his last cigarette.

From the moment his mother had told him about Sky, Trigg had known Wren was more than she appeared on the surface. He was still thinking about her latest bombshell as they entered the apartment, peeled off their jackets and kicked away their shoes.

"If you could have threatened to sue them to stop the vote, why did you marry me?" he asked, moving to pour fresh drinks.

"Because you wanted two votes, otherwise you wouldn't have taken me with you. And I would have had to go through with the suit," Wren said simply. "Do you mind if I make coffee?"

Was she being evasive? He followed her into the kitchen where he brought the beans out of the cupboard for her. Her



face was the smooth mask she wore when she was feeling threatened.

“The resort would have been delayed, possibly halted altogether,” she continued after grinding the beans. “Things would have been very difficult between all of us, moving forward.”

She glanced at him and there was a question there. Would he have preferred she had mentioned that option, rather than allow him to marry her? He wasn't sure.

“I could have sued for a settlement or voting rights any time in the last ten years if that was something I truly wanted.” She added water and flicked the button to brew.

“You still could have talked to me about it.”

“When?” she asked with a semi-hysterical laugh. “While you were telling me what I owed Sky? Were you really in a mindset at that point to hear I would prefer to lock us both in a nightmare of litigation that ultimately wouldn't serve any of us, rather than marry you?”

“You were afraid to suggest it? Is that's what you're saying?”

“I'm saying everything about agreeing to marry you was a lot less complicated and contentious than any other path open to me. It's also easier to dissolve than going through with a lawsuit. We can probably have this marriage annulled.”

“That's what you want?” he asked while something curled into his vitals, talon sharp.

“Well, I don't plan to claim that after twenty-four hours I have a right to half your assets. Not unless you plan to fight me for custody of Sky.” She eyed him warily as she issued the warning. “As for voting at the board level... That's something I wouldn't mind holding on to since it genuinely affects her future, but it's not a deal breaker.”

“That wasn't what I meant.” He pushed his balled fists into his pockets and moved restlessly to the window. “I was

thinking about the press release that officially announces this marriage. Torsten had a point about my image. This would play better as a real marriage.”

“A real marriage.” She had the intelligence to weigh out the best strategy for taking down twelve angry men, but she was too naïve to grasp what he was suggesting?

As their eye contact prolonged, and he let the hunger that was eating him alive show in his expression, she turned to search for cups.

“You don’t want that,” she dismissed.

“Don’t want *you*?” he asked with incredulity. He sipped the schnapps he’d carried in from the lounge, responding on a purely carnal level as he took in her bare shoulders and the lift of her breast as she reached. The lithe shape of her body as she turned to the refrigerator was a lure. The way her dress hugged the curve of her ass as she bent to take the creamer from a low shelf on the door was pure seduction. “We both know better.”

She spilled a few drops as she poured the coffee into the cups.

“That’s physical. It wears off. We’re very different people. There’s no basis for a *relationship*. Not the kind that sustains a lifelong marriage. If it’s not going to last, why prolong it?” She added a dollop of cream to hers. “I mean, what would this marriage look like in a few years, when you decide to go off and compete again? What happens when Sky graduates high school and we no longer have a child to hold us together?”

“We could have more kids.” It sprang from the place inside him growing into the role of ‘father.’

She recoiled so hard, a jostle of coffee splattered onto the floor at her feet. She stared at him, dumbfounded.

“You don’t want kids of your own?” He snagged the tea towel off the hook and dropped it onto the spill.

“Oh, my God.” She clunked her coffee onto the counter and covered her face a moment. “I went from being a

browbeaten child to a teen mom. In six years, I might, *might*, be able to think about what *I* want. I don't even like saying that aloud for fear of jinxing it. But I can say quite confidently that I do not want to be in a loveless marriage, raising the children of a man who doesn't come home at night."

"You don't know that's what it would look like."

"I'm not like you, Trigg! You said you don't mind getting hurt on the way to getting something right, but marriage is one of those things I don't feel has a lot of room for error. If we stay married, Sky will have certain expectations. It's not just about whether you and I can make it work and divorce is there if it doesn't. Do you realize how hard that would be on her? I can't in good conscience give her a front-row seat on watching us fail."

"Then don't fail," he said with the drive that was as much a part of his core as his spine. "Do you realize how hard I work to get things right? When I commit to something, I fucking *commit*." And the more she told him this wouldn't work, the more perversely he desired to prove her wrong. "Give me some credit. Give us both credit. I know you'll put in the work as much as I will."

"Work," she choked, blinking at the ceiling. "Gosh, I haven't had enough of *that*."

"So you want to go home and end this marriage before we even *try*?"



WREN TRIED TO say a firm, *Yes*, but it came out as, "Do you honestly want to be married to anyone? Because you look an awful lot like a confirmed bachelor."

His mouth tightened and his shoulder hitched. Okay, there were a lot of women in his past. Definitely more than *two*. But: "I don't want to be married to 'anyone,' no. Sky coming into my life has made it less likely I would marry, not more. I'll always have to consider her in my future relationships. But

marrying you? This ticks a lot of boxes for all of us. You know it does.”

“Putting the convenience in ‘marriage of convenience.’”

“Half the world still has arranged marriages,” he said with a wave toward the window. “It can be done. Successfully.”

“Those women don’t have other choices.” Her heart was pounding like she’d run ten thousand miles. “They’re trapped. I know what that’s like. I don’t want to be trapped again. Okay?”

“I’m not—” He let out a long exhalation. “For God’s sake, Wren. I should have asked Mandy to marry me. I should have been supporting Sky all this time. You have carried all of that and it bothers me. I want to man up. I want to take care of both of you. That’s important to me. I’m not trying to *take* something from you. I’m offering...” his hands came up, palms out “...*me*. All that I have.”

Her heart swerved.

This man. She saw the same relentlessness that she knew and yes, loved, in Sky. In him it was so much bigger, his confidence so much more impossible to dent. Not that it made her afraid of him, but afraid of herself. She wanted to believe that the entire world wasn’t her responsibility, that she could trust him to take the wheel.

“Trigg, we’ve known each other a *month*.” A little more, if they counted from her first visit to the lodge, but still not long enough to be able to make a real commitment.

“Look how far we’ve come since then.”

She shook her head, picked up her coffee and sipped. Tried to ignore the fact she had told him things she had never imagined telling anyone.

“That’s still not a reason to go all the way.”

“This desire won’t go away,” he said dryly. “It won’t wear off. Not until we’ve at least satisfied our curiosity.”

“Oh. Would you like to go bang that off right now, then? So we can stop wondering and make an informed decision?” she shot back facetiously, thumbing toward the bedrooms.

“I would love to.” His voice made all the hair on her body stand up. He smiled. “I always call a bluff, sugar mouse. Every. Single. Time.”

Her eyes went hot as she shifted her gaze to the window. All of her was hot. Blushing. With guilt? Because she *wanted* him to call her bluff? With anticipation because they were out from under the microscope and *married*? Each of her breaths flowed like velvet into her, awakening cells and receptors and nerve endings. Each one whispered, *What if*.

“Are you really going to wait six *years* before you go after something you want, *Schnecke*?”

In her head she was thinking she could *show* him. *Prove* to him that whatever curiosity had been aroused by their *one* kiss would fizzle once he realized how boring she really was.

“I’m going to have a shower,” he said. “We can go to dinner after. Talk this out more. Or...” his expression altered, gaze heating while his mouth curved in a faint smile “...you can join me and we’ll finish this discussion there.”

## Chapter Eighteen

**T**RIGG HAD SHAVED first, giving her time to come to him. Willing her to. Now he leaned a hand against the translucent bricks that made up a wall in the shower. The setting sun gleamed through them, throwing rosy luminescence onto the brushed nickel fixtures and ivory tiles.

And she wasn't here. Damn. He was going to have to switch the hot to cold. Or ease the ache between his thighs another w—

The door clicked.

He jerked his head up, pushed off the wall and swiped the fog from the glass.

“This isn't agreement to stay married,” she said. “But if it doesn't work, there really is nothing to discuss.”

He probably should have said something, but couldn't form words. Especially when she wiggled as she dragged her dress up and over her head.

The view fogged, turning her pale figure into a nymph in the mist, two bands of rosy pink splashed across the curves of her breasts and the flare of her hips. He squeaked his hand across the glass to clear a bigger circle, shaking the water out of his eyes.

She took the time to turn her dress right side out and hang it on the hook behind the door. She seemed to hesitate for a breath of courage, then unhooked her strapless bra and dangled it over the knob. Her dark pink areolas were high, seductive dots atop the scooped ice cream of her breasts.

His cock pulsed in approval.

The only sound was the hiss of the shower. He swept a big Z, biting back a groan as she rocked her hips, wiggling her

cheekies down her thighs to reveal a smudge of dark at the top of her thighs. She released the panties to land on the floor. Her hand wavered, as though to shield her pretty little bush. Then she picked her feet out of her panties and looked at him.

He opened the door of the shower so the steam billowed out, rolling to engulf this sprite and draw her into this world where nothing existed but them. He offered a hand to steady her and the slightness of her fingers on his made his heart slam like an angry bull inside his rib cage, bashing powerfully, threatening to fracture his bones.

He pulled her cool body against his hot one, the difference in temperature so great it made her gasp. Warm water rained down on her face as she blinked up at him, lips parting in surprise.

He captured her wet mouth in the most possessive kiss of his life. No lead-in, no teasing her past inhibitions. He was too far gone and could only drag her into the hot, wet, blatant place he already inhabited.

She blossomed after one startled second, opening her mouth to the rapacious sweep of his tongue and tickling hers against it.

A jolt of electric thrill went through him. Triumph. She pushed her tongue into his mouth in a flagrant move that had him groaning with approval. *Greed.*

He reeled from the sheer assault of sensation. The taste of her mouth, the shape of her ass in his hands, the slippery traces of soap on his chest that lubricated her breasts and stomach against his torso. A light, foreign fragrance came off her hair as it dampened, a scent he understood to be *her*. He inhaled deeply, wanting to memorize it.

And then there were her hands. She skimmed them across his back, used her wiry strength to press so tightly against the shape of his hard cock, it should have left an indent on her belly. She wasn't shy, seeming to want to learn him as thoroughly as he wanted to learn her, circling her palms over

his ass and tracing his crack and touching the back of his thigh so his cock strained even harder with anticipation. Her other arm came up to circle around his neck, lifting her breast and resettling against him so she could go on tiptoes and kiss him.

He filled both his hands with her plump cheeks, squeezing and massaging, lifting her against him so he could feel her mound against his cock, rubbed against her in mock thrusts as they kissed.

She clung tighter, moving with him and making him want to eat her alive.

With a growl, he cupped the swell of her breast and dipped his head to suck on her nipple. Hard. Harder. Without mercy so a keening noise left her throat. Her knees softened. He had to take her weight on his arm, but he loved it. Loved that her hands scrambled in his hair and pressed him into his work, begging for more. Such pretty little nipples. So sweet and firm as a raspberry against his tongue. So responsive.

He twisted her for the lick of his tongue on the other breast, keeping one hand free to fondle the first. She was magic, sweet erotic magic, moaning with drunken pleasure and dragging his head back so she could kiss him. She ran her open mouth across his cheek and down to his throat. She bit his chin, then sucked on his bottom lip until his hair stood on end.

She took him in hand. Two hands. Blatant and carnal in the way she rolled her thumb across his tip, but even sexier was the glaze of passion in her eyes when she looked up from her work to see if he liked it.

He was going to explode if he didn't take back control from her. Fast.

He pressed her back against the tiles. Then he cupped her mound and spread her folds with two fingers. He tried not to be rough, but he was too aroused for finesse.

He thought constantly about the way she came that day he had kissed her. And he had wanted this. He wanted the right to



touch her like this, flagrant and thorough. He stroked her clit with little catches of friction, until she was biting her lip. He licked her neck, sucked briefly, licked to soothe and pushed his thick finger into her, making her whimper. Her nails bit into his shoulders.

He made a noise of apology and started to withdraw.

“No. It feels good. Really good.” She sounded on the verge of tears.

He growled and bent to her breast again. Sucking as he rocked his touch deeper into her, encouraged by the way she clung to his intrusion, the way her breath changed to a ragged pant. He was utterly captivated by the tiny quakes that chased over her as though she stood on the edge of an orgasm.

It was so entrancing, he made wordless noises, not even knowing what this dark and commanding thing inside him wanted to say. Only knew he was possessive and pleased and wanted to own her, yet he was dropping to his knees to serve her.

It was self-serving, too. He parted and looked, thought the thud of his pulse echoed in time with hers. Then he licked. *Claimed.*

A strangled noise escaped her. She shivered in this hot, humid place. Once, twice. Her legs trembled and her hands skimmed the slippery tiles as though searching for something to brace herself. He focused on the magnificent taste of her. On the sensual, agonized noises she made as he teased with swirls and dips and sweeps of his tongue.

He stroked and licked and pushed a second finger into her. A sharp, deep spasm stole through her. She released more of those animalistic noises and bucked against his mouth and the contractions of her muscles tightened and released.

He damned near lost it himself, it was so fucking sexy. When they began to fade, he moved his hand to her shaking thigh, bit once at her quivering belly and rose to roll his face through the spray before he slammed the water off.

And finally he found a word. “Bed.”



SHE WAS SO seldom touched. So seldom had the right to touch back. Not like this where she gave in to every lascivious instinct. She ran her hands greedily over him as they dried off, distantly thinking she had lied to herself. She had come in here pretending she wanted to prove what a mismatch they were. Secretly, deep in her heart, she had wanted this. To study every last tattoo, to feel the hardness of his jaw, to nuzzle her mouth against the damp hair in the center of his chest and chase her way to his small, tight nipples.

His stomach contracted as she did it. His big hand cradled the back of her neck and his other one moved restlessly across her back.

She lifted her head and twined her arms around his neck, wanting to feel him with every single inch of her naked body.

If he had let her just do that, rub herself against him all night, it would have been enough. But he acted as though he was equally starved and determined to consume her.

He picked her up without effort, just a flex of his bicep and a sweep of her feet. Then he carried her into the bedroom.

Something biological in her went crazy for his steely muscles. He was hard everywhere, but especially *there*. He set her on the bed and his cock thrust imperiously against her thigh, turgid and thick. She couldn't help reaching for him. Squeezing.

Yearning swirled through her pelvis in enticing throbs and echoes of orgasm. She didn't know if her eyes were open or closed. Her entire being was focused on the need to feel him inside her.

She tore her mouth from his passionate kiss and squeezed him hard enough to make his nostrils flare and his breath hiss in.

“I can’t wait.” She lifted her knee to his hip, brazenly offering herself. Inviting him to thrust into her.

His muscles locked. “Condom,” he said distantly.

“It’s okay,” she panted.

Something completely untamed flared in his eyes. He shifted atop her and swept her legs apart with his knees, the move swift and powerful and primal. Then he paused, looked down, caressed her lightly, just enough to make her pick up her hips in lewd hunger. He licked the taste of her off his fingertip and settled his hips between her thighs, probing for entrance.

As the crest of his head pushed into her, she threw back her head and groaned, knees moving reflexively to his rib cage, inviting him to sink deep in one dominant thrust.

As he buried himself to the root, the breadth of him filling her to a degree that tested her limits, he peeled his lips back against his teeth in something too feral to be a smile. It made her blood run with hot pleasure anyway.

His face pulled into such hard angles, he looked almost cruel, but pure sorcery glinted in his eyes. He moved with heavy, steady, intensely satisfying thrusts. The determined, inflaming working of his cock in her pussy was heady, taking her onto another plane where her arousal redoubled. His hips impacted her flesh, slamming greater and greater sensations upon one another, so the whole of her was rocked by the ripples of pleasure he was sending through her.

She tried to withstand it, to hold back and wait for him, but her control shredded under each return of his body. She scrabbled her hands behind his neck, urged him to kiss her. He did, but as she grew taut beneath him, he lifted his head and said, “Let me see.”

She couldn’t hold back, *couldn’t*. A force inside her gathered then released in a roll of shuddering ecstasy. And kept going. She was tossed into wave after wave of shimmering, intense and timeless pleasure. She heard noises at

a distance, guttural and earthy and feminine. Her own voice breaking with joy.

As her climax subsided, he gathered her and rolled onto his back, holding her and caressing her all over. He stroked her neck and the side of her breast. His tickling touch went into the dip of her spine and along the outsides of her thighs and into the cleft of her buttocks and down to where he was still buried deep inside her. Hard and invasive where her tender flesh was taut and wet and still pulsing with orgasm.

She licked his neck and worked her way to his jaw, then found his mouth.

Feeling drugged, she could only moan, already growing ravenous for more. They kissed and made free with each other's bodies. She wasn't like this, not usually, but he made it feel very natural to suck and nip at his nipples so she felt the rock-hard weight of him inside her twitch with pleasure. She bit his earlobe and fingered where he penetrated her and caressed his tight sac. Then she braced her hands on his chest and rode him while boldly—unreservedly—staring him in the eyes.

He lifted his hips to meet her, so the act was energetic and sharp and made her feel as though she was held in the grip of an electric current that charged and burned through her veins. Finally, when she thought she couldn't withstand it any longer, the fire gods threw her into a volcano as it erupted. Her world went dark and hot and airless while the ground shook and her whole body was held in a paroxysm.

The mattress hit her in the back. He was over her, his arms catching behind her knees as he slammed his hips into her. He braced his hands on either side of her, elbows locked, holding her trapped in the vice of his body, face so intense it should have been terrifying, but she was exalted by his ferocity. Drugged with pleasure and wanting him deeper. Wanting all of his strength, all of his passion, every inch of his unfettered need.

She wanted to be everything to him and gripped his roped forearms, bracing herself to receive him. She made crude noises of encouragement as his rapid, near-barbaric thrusts teased her toward another of those earth-shattering culminations he offered. Orgasm hovered, glimmered, broke and exploded as white light.

He roared, dragging her into the vastness of the universe alongside him.



TRIGG DIDN'T KNOW what kind of out-of-body experience his wife had just fucked out of him, but he was wrung dry afterward, barely able to roll off her. He lay on his back, spent, too weak to open his eyes. He was pretty sure his heart had exploded, but he didn't care.

He liked sex. It was a better tension release than a good workout and when he combined a test of endurance with unadulterated—pun not intended—passion, his life was pretty much complete.

He didn't know what he had expected with Wren. Compatibility, maybe. Sweetly satisfying, but some work needed to get her past her tendency to hold back. They had chemistry. He'd known it would be good, but he hadn't known it would be life-threatening. The way she had abandoned herself to him was something he'd never experienced. It had taken his own excitement to levels he'd never felt, turning this into something between an extra-terrestrial mating ritual and nuclear fission. His gut ached from the force of his orgasm, for Christ's sake.

Because they hadn't used a condom? He always used a condom. Learned his lesson early on that one. And he had physicals all the time. He knew there was no issue on his side with going bareback.

If she wasn't using anything, however, he'd just got her pregnant. He ought to be kicking his own ass around the room,

but she wouldn't have risked it and he was not nearly as terrified as he ought to be.

"Pill?" he asked, just to be sure.

"IUD. Cheaper."

A faint smile found its way across his lips at what sounded like an authentically measured and practical Wren response.

But he was still stunned.

"That was wild." Almost beyond control, which was really unnerving. She *had* been with him all the way, right? If he was kidding himself about that, he'd kill himself. He turned his head.

She avoided his gaze and sat up on the edge of the bed, her slender back to him. His shirt was on the end of the bed and she picked it up to hug it to her front.

It was such a defensive gesture, his heart stuttered.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Of course," she murmured, spine flexing as though his sex-roughened voice grated against her nerves.

He slid so he could see the side of her face. Her profile was still pink with the remnants of her twenty-four carat orgasms. Most of her makeup had washed off in the shower, but a hint of smokiness lingered around her eyes. Her lashes blinked as she stared blankly at the wall. Angry? Hurt? He didn't know how to interpret this.

Her arms were crushing his pinstriped shirt across her breasts. She was such a delicate little thing. Her wet hair stuck in snake tails against her pale shoulder.

He brushed at those little points, lifting the damp strands from where they had glued onto her skin, rubbing his thumb against the goose bumps that rose in response.

She sent him a brief, nervous look.

His insides clenched. "Be real. Did I hurt you?"

“No.” She sounded surprised, scoffing at the question. “Well, not... I mean, that was...” She swallowed and shook out the shirt, offering too quick a glimpse at her breasts before she shot her arms into the sleeves and drew it closed across her front. “It was fine. I liked it.”

*Fine.* He didn't think this was the 'fine' that a husband had to be wary of, but it still struck him as a prevarication. A way to hide how she really felt.

Did she need to hear that he had liked it, too? 'Like' was about as tepid a descriptor as 'fine.' To say he 'liked' what they had just done would be to say he enjoyed having himself turned inside out so his heart felt as though it beat outside his chest and his soul no longer belonged to him.

Was that how she felt? If so, he understood why she was looking so disconcerted.

He swept his hand over the cool fabric across her back. “If you're cold—”

“I was just going to find my luggage and get dressed. Do you mind?”

He realized what she was doing because he often did it himself. He retreated so physical intimacy didn't become emotional intimacy. He was a man who pushed all the boundaries he came up against while keeping firm ones around himself. She was trying to erect hers against him.

That should have told him this was a match made in heaven, but he reacted before he even knew what he was going to do. He sat up and swung around, moving to sit behind her, legs dangling off the bed on either side of hers. He folded his arms across her, drawing her into the cup of his chest and stomach.

She tensed in surprise, then warily submitted to his hold.

Heat penetrated the fabric between them. He moved all her hair to the front of her one shoulder so he could tug the collar of his shirt away and kiss the top of her spine, wishing he

knew what to say. All he knew, instinctively, was that if she walked out right now, that would be bad.

She didn't relax, but didn't try to pull away.

"It scared the hell out of me, too," he admitted. "That was off the scale. Incredible."

"The best sex you've ever had?"

He lifted his nose from nuzzling her skin. "That sounds like a trick question. But, yes. It was."

She exhaled in a puff of humorless laughter. "That's what you told my sister, too."

Ah. It was a freight train he should have seen coming, but Rolf was the one who allowed for every contingency. They both understood the value in practice and strength training and muscle memory, but Rolf plotted and prepared and harvested every scrap of information before he finally shot out of the gate at a hundred and thirty miles an hour, nailing what he had wanted for years in a matter of seconds.

Trigg couldn't think about the backside double cork ten-eighty nose grab that was coming while he was still trying to land his eighteen hundred quadruple cork. He broke things down and dealt with them in the moment, as they happened.

"I don't remember saying that," he admitted and felt her flinch. He held her closer, tempted to say something dismissive about Mandy, but she was the one lover he could never claim was unimportant. Not to Wren. Not to himself, either. "It sounds like something I would have said under those circumstances. You know we were both virgins? Did she tell you that?"

"It was in her diary. We never talked about it directly."

Her diary. He had forgotten about that. Oh, hell. "What else did she say?"

"It's not a play-by-play. Don't worry."

He blew out a half-chuckle of relief, making her shiver.



“I wasn’t exactly at the top of my game.” He dropped the weight of his forehead into the crook of her neck, wincing at the boy he’d been. “I was nervous as hell, afraid it would be over before we got to the good part. That had happened once already, with a different girl. That’s why I was still a virgin. I was terrified of humiliating myself again.”

Had he felt as though he had something to prove ever since? Maybe. At least to himself. He wasn’t all about having power over women, but he liked to prove he had power over himself. The way this woman had climaxed with such greed had made him feel like a fucking sex god, bestowing that pleasure upon her.

She turned her head so her cheek touched his hair. “I humiliated myself in the office a week ago.”

“That was hot as hell.” He lifted his head to kiss the corner of her mouth. “Don’t you dare be embarrassed by that.”

“Pretty sure that’s a sexist double standard.”

He shifted so his junk was more comfortable against the cheeks of her ass and snuggled her deeper into the hollow of his chest, liking that she relaxed into him. He nibbled her earlobe, sucked it until she made a little noise in her throat that made his scalp tingle.

She sighed shakily and played her fingers over his forearm. “I know I shouldn’t be sensitive about you and Mandy. It’s not something that can be changed. But it’s not something I can pretend didn’t happen, either. Not with the twelve-year-old gorilla to remind me.”

“What happened with Mandy just happened. Please don’t think I went after her with the intention of getting her into bed. I wasn’t that confident. Seriously,” he protested when he heard her snort. “I thought she was pretty and sweet and yeah, I wanted to kiss her and fool around, but I didn’t expect to have sex with her. After I did, then yes, I became the cocky son of a bitch you know and love today.”

She didn’t laugh.

Had he gone too far with his casual use of the L-word? She had said she only wanted to marry when she fell in love. He wondered if that was the real reason she was sitting on the edge of this bed, trying to bolt.

He tried to read her profile, but it was made of porcelain.

Which made him nervous. He was used to getting what he wanted by hammering at something with all his strength. He couldn't do that with her, though. He would break her. And that would kill him.

He touched the point of her shoulder with his lips, the nape of her neck, almost as if he was healing whatever future hurt he might deliver.

She quivered in response and he knew he would never be able to get enough of that. The word *mine* was beating through him like a pulse.

He wished he could say he loved her, but he barely knew what that was. He'd done his best to avoid it all his life.

"You know, the people I feel strongest about are people who drive me crazy," he tried to explain. "My mom. My brother. They get in my face and tell me what to do. I can already see Sky will give me a run for my money. Even my dog, bless his uncomplicated, furry little ass, rolls in dead things and makes me pick up his shit. I don't resent it, but I don't know how to be comfortable with deep emotions so I push back on them. I get the sense you swim in them, though."

"Drown," she murmured. "I think that's what I miss most about Mandy. When I was with her, I could let myself feel. With everyone else, I have to hold all of that back. Pretend I feel nothing. It's tiring."

Her words rattled something loose inside him. His chest ached as though a cold breeze fluttered through it.

"You can tell me what you're feeling. Yell. Swear. I don't want to leave you drowning while I stand on dry land, dumb as my fucking dog, thinking you're fine. Tell me what's going on, okay? Especially if I'm being ignorant. I can take it."

“I’m not good at confronting people who hurt my feelings. The way I’ve always punched back is small and mean.” She turned her head to look at him from the corner of her eye. “I sent a clip about Sky being your daughter to my dentist office, knowing they’d pin it on their bulletin board in the waiting area. Her old principal goes there, the one who implied I was a lousy guardian and she wouldn’t amount to much.”

“And what is this man’s name?” he inquired pleasantly, already packing his shovel and a sack of quicklime.

“Woman.” She leaned in to him. “It’s my fault that I take criticism to heart. I’m terrified of making mistakes.” Her voice faded. “And right now, I fear I’ve made a huge one.”

“Because once isn’t enough.” A twist of agony went through him. He didn’t know how to hold her close enough. “Not for me, either.”

“I’m scared,” she whispered, lifting his hand to her neck so he felt her pulse racing like a terrified bird’s. “More scared than I was as we were going into that meeting today. More than going to the lodge that first time.”

“It’ll be okay.” He wasn’t a *there, there* type of guy. He was more of a blunt truth with a side of sarcasm, but he picked her up and slid her into the bed with him, shuddering with pleasure as her cool, soft curves squashed beneath him. “We’ll be fine. All of us,” he promised.

And hoped like hell he could deliver.

## Chapter Nineteen

WREN THOUGHT SHE was missing Sky, but the sight of the Rocky Mountains from the plane window brought such a rush of emotion to her, she realized she had been homesick, too. Which was silly. They'd been away forty-eight hours, most of them taken up by travel and sleep. She hadn't had *time* to miss this place, let alone develop such an attachment to jagged gray peaks jabbing against stark blue sky. Not in the short time she'd lived here.

Nevertheless, she relaxed as they wound from the airport onto the twisting highway. Trigg opened his window and sweet mountain air swirled around them. She closed her eyes to savor it while her brain second-guessed a decision she had already made.

Maybe if they had hung around Berlin, reinforcing their relationship with more naked contact, she wouldn't feel so bereft, but they had both wanted to get back. They'd been up before dawn, catching a charter he had arranged to return them.

He'd slept some on the flight. She had mostly brooded.

"Have you been into Rolf and Glory's rooms?" Trigg asked, dragging her to awareness that they were coming into Haven.

"Briefly. Glory wanted to give me a book. Why?"

"What did you think of the layout? Nate and Ilke have a center room with a door into the next room for Aiden, but he's only there once a week. The top floor center room has a better view, but if we mirrored Rolf and Glory's setup, we'd have a kitchenette between us and Sky. A little more privacy, is what I'm saying."

Oh, she hated when shit got real.

Thankfully, coming into range made his phone ping with a text. She glanced at it. “Nate is asking when you’ll arrive. He wants to talk soon as you’re available.”

“He’s first on my speed-dial.” He closed his window while she made the connection. The call went through the console and Nate answered.

“Go for Nate.”

“Stop texting me. My wife is getting jealous.”

Wren wanted to shrink into a ball every time he called her that—it made her feel like such a fraud. How was she his wife? The wife of *Trigg Johansson*? She had stupidly glanced online while they’d been in the air and found her own name in headline stories on sports and entertainment sites.

*Another McTwisty as Johansson Ties the Knot*

*Trigg Johansson, America’s adorably unpredictable snowboard champion, pulled off a surprise elopement at a courthouse in Montana days after his brother Rolf’s extravagant wedding on July Fourth. Johansson’s bride, Wren Snow, is the aunt and guardian of his recently discovered daughter, Skylar.*

*While a press release quotes Johansson’s mother as stating, “Our entire family is delighted and warmly welcomes Wren into the fold,” the marriage is rumored to be a strategic move on Johansson’s part to grasp more power within the Wiking empire. Stay tuned for the next episode in this unscripted reality drama.*

She hated drama!

“Hey, Wren,” Nate greeted in his easygoing tone. “I should have said on Friday, *thank you* for helping all of us keep our jobs.”

“Oh, gosh, no,” she insisted. “I didn’t do anything.”

Trigg sent her a look. “Yeah, you did.”

“Heck, yes, you did,” Nate said. “You think anyone else would marry that piece of art? But it worked and we’re thrilled we don’t have to worry about the board dropping the axe

anymore. I'll buy you a coffee when you get back. I'll buy you coffee for the rest of your *life*."

"If you're just going to flirt with her in front of me, I'm going to cut you off," Trigg warned.

"So needy," Nate said. "But don't hang up. I have news you want to hear. I got a call from Mr. Petersen."

"Of Petersen's Gravel?"

"Yeah, he likes that we have Basco under investigation. He's willing to sell, but brace yourself, Bridget." Nate named a figure.

Trigg laughed. "That's some kind of revenge porn deviant act he's trying to perform, isn't it?"

"It's still zoned and approved for pulling gravel. We're going to need a lot of it if we're putting in a road from that side. I'm running the numbers and, on a related note, there's a fire sale at Basco Construction. Apparently, the owner needs cash, fast, as he mounts a defense against unsubstantiated charges that have been leveled against him."

"Charges recently substantiated by Wikinger's former treasurer, but we'll let Kurt work out which one of them is most guilty. You think we might be able to buy some equipment and put in our own road?"

"I do," Nate confirmed.

"This is why I can't keep my hands off you, you sexy son of a bitch. You get me so fucking excited."

"Seriously, Wren," Nate drawled. "I'm putting your name in for a medal of valor. No one else would show the kind of bravery and sacrifice you have demonstrated."

"Just went through town," Trigg warned. "We're going to lose you. See you in an hour."

"Over and out." They ended the call.

"This is a big deal, what you've done," Trigg said. "Take a victory lap."

“For threatening to sue you and Wikinger? I’d rather that wasn’t common knowledge, if you don’t mind.”

He took a beat to absorb that. “Okay, but you still married me, which got us what we wanted out of that meeting.”

“I’m still not convinced—”

He reached across and took her hand. Her voice dried up as the warmth of his touch went up her arm and misfired the beat of her heart.

“The thing about doubt is, you can’t have any. Once it takes hold, it’s like a fungus. Spreads rot over everything.”

“Lovely image.”

“Assume success and you’ll succeed.”

“It’s just that easy.”

“Always has been for me.”

She rolled her eyes at his confidence, but had to admire it. Had to hope that it was strong enough to carry them both since she had so little of it.

She kept thinking of him asking her if she was really going to wait six years to do something for herself. She had lied to him when she had said Sky had been her only focus for ten years. Keeping Sky had been a selfish act. She hadn’t fully recognized it as such then, but she did now and felt guilty as hell. Staying married to him was also selfish. She wasn’t doing it for Sky. She was doing it for herself.

Which filled her with dread for the day he realized he didn’t want her after all.



SKY TIMED MURPHY’S afternoon walk around the pond so she was coming off the path when her dad’s truck came into the staff parking lot. Murphy recognized it and jerked on his leash. She trotted behind him as he bounced and bounded like a lunatic, dragging her up to them as they stepped out.

She let go of the leash and heard her dad say, “What’s up, you little nut sack?”

She hugged Auntie Wren, feeling a lot of feels. “Did you have fun? Did you bring me anything?” she asked, joking to hide that she had genuinely missed her.

Her dad, too. More than she expected. Hanging out with Aunt Lydia had been nice, but they’d had some deep and meaningful about her mom’s childhood that had only made her want to see Auntie Wren more.

“We brought you peace of mind,” her dad said as he squished her in a hug, then reached into the bed of his truck for their luggage. “Maybe some chocolate from the airport.”

“Yes, please.”

“Where’s Mom? She’s going to want a full report. No, I got it,” he said when Auntie Wren tried to take her bag from him. “Let’s put Trouble in my room.” He nodded at the dog.

Sky picked up his leash and they all went up the outside stairs. “He stayed with Nate while you were gone. I was going to keep him, but Aunt Lydia...”

“Allergic,” Auntie Wren said. “Did you have a good visit?”

“Really good.” She punched in the code and they all went into her dad’s room. Sky took off the leash and hung it on the hook.

Her dad put down the luggage and said, “Let me wash my hands.”

“She wanted to stay and see you, but she had to work,” Sky said. “We were both freaking out at your picture. Your haircut looks super cute.” Auntie Wren hardly ever wore it down. Sky couldn’t resist touching it. It made her look... Not older or smarter, but more confident. Like she had her act together.

“Thank you.” Auntie Wren ran her hand over it. “My ponytail is about this long now.” She showed a little space



between her finger and thumb. “And has to be up here.” She pointed to her crown. “Looks dumb so I guess I’m wearing it down for a while.”

“I like it,” her dad said, coming back to set his hand on the back of Auntie Wren’s neck. He kissed the side of her head. “Let’s find Mom and a beer.”

Sky felt like she had walked in on Auntie Wren in the bathroom by accident. They both looked at each other with surprise and embarrassment.

WTF?

“No, you stay,” her dad was saying to Murphy. He was making no effort to pick up Auntie Wren’s bag and take it downstairs with them. He opened the door and looked at them. “Are we going? What’s wrong?”

Auntie Wren was trying to pack all her emotions behind her *Nothing To See Here* face, but she was *blushing*.

Wild thoughts were coming into Sky’s brain at the speed of light. Lasers were being shot into her skull and exploding. She suddenly felt like a grown-up who had just caught her kid playing with matches.

“Are we taking that to our room?” she challenged, waving at her aunt’s suitcase.

“Oh.” Her dad let the door swing shut with a whoosh and a clunk that seemed really loud.

“You told me this was a *formality*,” Sky said to her aunt. “Are you serious right now? He’s *my dad*.” How dare Auntie Wren have sex with *her* dad?

“Skylar,” he warned.

And, *ew*. “How many times have you warned me about letting a player take advantage of me? Huh?” She turned on her father. “What are you even doing? First you make Auntie Wren marry you and now you’re making her have sex with you? That’s gross.”

“Hey.” He sounded genuinely mad. “There’s a line. You’re crossing it.”

“Skylar,” Auntie Wren said. “You and I have talked about consent and slut-shaming. I’m sorry if—”

“No, you’re not sorry,” her dad interrupted. “We’re adults. *Married* adults. We don’t have to apologize for sleeping together.”

“And you’re going to keep doing it? You’re going to be married? Like *married*? Do you love each other? Are you going to have babies?”

“We’ll see how this goes before we talk about children.” Auntie Wren was using her super-polite, don’t be upset tone. She didn’t answer the love question. “I realize this feels like it affects you, but it doesn’t.”

“Yes, it does! You’re going to start ganging up on me.”

“We talk all the time about what we think is best for you. That doesn’t change. Nothing changes except where I sleep.”

This changed *everything*.

“I don’t know which one of you I’m more mad at,” Sky said, looking back and forth from her dad’s dark frown to Auntie Wren’s stiff face.

“Mad? Or disappointed?” Her dad smothered the question in sarcasm.

“Both. This is unacceptable.” She was *disgusted*. “I’m telling Rolf.” It was the only threat she could think of that remotely came close to harsh enough.

“Fill your boots,” her dad said.

“You fill your boots,” she shot back. “So now what? You’re going to sleep up here and have sex and—and—and I’m sleeping down there alone?”

“No,” her dad said with a smarmy grin. “You get the dog.”



IT HAD BEEN a short five weeks ago that Wren had sat here in Marvin and Vivien's apartment trying to sip oxygen out of the thick fog of tension that permeated the air. Today's meal was being fetched by Marvin, who didn't know what he was coming back to. Trigg helped himself to a beer and poured her and his mother a wine and a soda for Sky.

"I see," Vivien said when Trigg announced a desire to remodel some third-floor rooms, so Sky could have a room that adjoined theirs. "That will be a fun project for us, picking out paint and furniture for your room," she said to Sky. "I wanted to do that before the wedding, to welcome you, but there simply wasn't time." Vivien was made of Teflon, she really was, not batting an eyelash. Her only opinion was a pleasant: "I think you're right to give this a proper shot."

Sky looked up from her phone to glare darkly at Wren. "Bruno says I should go to his boarding school in Switzerland."

"In what grade?"

"I'll finish grade seven before the end of summer."

"I'm delighted to hear it."

"If I do, you'd better send me to his school."

"Finish. Then we'll talk."

"That's a lie." Sky looked to Trigg. "She's trying to trick me into doing it. Will you promise to send me?"

"No."

"Why not?" she cried.

"I've known you a month. You live with both of us for the next six years."

"I don't want to know either of you. Not anymore."

"Tough." Trigg turned his attention to his mom. "Skylar is upset that we didn't ask her permission to sleep together. I don't remember you asking me if you and Marvin could shack up."

“And I remember your consternation when we told you we had decided to.” Vivien sipped her wine, eyes laughing at him over the rim of her glass. “It’s always difficult for children to realize they’re not the center of the universe, isn’t it?”

“That wasn’t my problem. I thought you’d give ol’ Marv a heart attack and this place would never get finished.”

Marvin came in at that moment carrying some of the food proving most popular in the lounge around this time of day—a heap of loaded nachos, hot wings, and Reuben fritters with mustard sauce.

He set the feast on the table and smiled warmly. “What did I miss?”



WREN SAID SHE wanted a nap. Trigg suspected Sky wanted to follow her and have it out with her so he asked her to drive him down to the base in the ute.

“I’ve had a beer,” he said when Sky curled her lip.

“Fine.”

They got the dog and Murphy trotted beside them as Sky practiced driving angry while still showing care and attention.

“Whatever you need to say,” he invited. “Keep it to yourself.”

“I will. Because I don’t have anything to say. Except that you’re being gross and dishonest. You said one thing and did another. I get in trouble for that.”

“When I asked your aunt to marry me, it *was* to get the vote. That wasn’t a lie. While we were in Germany, we talked —”

“Is that what it was?” So scathing.

“—and decided it would be good for you if we stayed married.”

“Oh, you’re having sex for *me*.” Sky took her hand off the wheel to splay it on her chest. “In that case, *thank you*.”

He was secretly adoring how deeply she drew from her well of sarcasm, but only said, “So we’re good?”

“Pffft.”

He sighed. “Princess, the day will come when you decide to have sex. Think carefully—” he almost said ‘long and hard,’ but caught himself “—about the precedent you’re setting here.”

“How about you think about the precedent you’ve already set? All weekend, people have been coming up to me and saying, ‘*Oh my Gawd*, Trigg *married* her? He’s such a man-whore. How’s *that* going to work?’”

“Who the f—Who said that? To *you*?” His daughter. Who was *twelve*.

“Are they wrong?” She had to pull into the weeds to make room for a flatbed delivery truck to rumble by. She stared at him. “Because I know there’s a whole section in the employee manual about how lodge workers aren’t supposed to have sex with you.”

“It’s a fraternization clause and Glory shouldn’t act like I’m the only person who has ever had slept with people who work at the lodge. *She* was the manager when her and Rolf got together.”

“But you had sex with the other one. You’ve had sex with, like, a lot of people.”

He glanced around, more incredulous than worried anyone was overhearing. He scratched his eyebrow. Thought about telling her this was none of her business, that she was too young and she was out of line.

But this also seemed like a teaching moment. If this was Bruno, he wouldn’t hesitate to be frank.

“Okay, listen. When you say, ‘a lot,’ it sounds like a lot. Do I *date* a lot? Yes. But I’m fine buying a woman a drink and

having a laugh. It doesn't have to end in fireworks." It often had, but that was definitely not her business.

She sniffed and punched the gas, swerving back onto the road and crossing toward the operations building. "Well, you have a reputation as promiscuous. People are laughing and saying you'll cheat on Auntie Wren. Grandma told me to ignore the gossip and that when you got back you would make sure everyone understood it was just so you could vote, but apparently you're not going to straighten them out on that."

"Oh, I'm going to straighten people out. Soon as you give me names."

"How? What are you going to say?"

They got out of the ute and he whistled for the dog, then led her up to his office. Brooding. Nate's office was empty. He went into his own and picked up his safety vest. He threw it down again, too angry to walk around when he was this mad and wasn't sure who his target was.

Sky shrugged into her own, then looked at him expectantly.

"Who said it?" he demanded.

"Are you going to fire them? For telling the truth?"

He looked at her and saw himself. Belligerent. Confrontational. Convinced she was right because she wasn't entirely wrong. He wanted to wring her skinny neck for forcing him to view his adult life in such an unflattering, red light.

"Aunt Lydia said—" She clammed up and suddenly had to adjust all the Velcro straps on her vest with snicks and scratches.

"You talked to her about this?"

"I thought you wanted to walk around and you're so drunk, you need me to hold your arm."

"Tell me," he demanded.

She sighed shortly. “She asked me if I thought you’d be nice to her. I said it wasn’t a real marriage.” She tucked her chin as she glanced at him, checking to see if she was in trouble for revealing that. “I know that was supposed to be a secret but she was my mom’s best friend. She knows, like, all our secrets.” A little frown of consternation chased across her brow.

“Did *she* know I was your father?”

“She always said she didn’t, but this time she admitted she knew your name was Trigg, but not your last name. She sometimes wondered if it was you, when she saw you on TV, but that seemed too far-fetched.” She bent to scratch under Murphy’s collar, making it jangle. “She said when my mom died, her and her mom tried to figure out how to find my dad, but the social workers had already taken me to my grandparents. Nana wanted to keep me and they knew my mom wanted Auntie Wren to have me. All Aunt Lydia and her mom could do...”

Sky knelt and dug in around the dog’s shoulders and chest, making his foot thump.

“What?” he prompted.

“All they could do was make sure the social workers knew that my granddad had to be watched, but he was on medication so Nana said he would be okay. They couldn’t do anything except let me stay there and wait and see.”

“Had to be watched for what?” he said flatly, stomach muscles tensing as though for a blow.

She smoothed all the dog’s fur in long strokes. “To make sure he wasn’t mean to me.”

“Was he?”

“No. I hardly saw him.”

“But he was mean to your aunt.” The blow struck, but landed higher than he expected, into the middle of his chest. It cracked against his heart, stopping it. Then a hard beat

slammed him back to life with a pulse of adrenaline that burned through his arteries, down his limbs to sting the tips of his fingers and toes. Emotions spilled out, anger and helplessness and hurt and sadness and something fierce that wanted to taste an old man's blood.

“Aunt Lydia said that when they were growing up, my mom always kept hoping that my grandparents would go back to being like they were when her little brother was alive. But my granddad was mad that Auntie Wren was there and his son wasn't. He made sure she knew it. Aunt Lydia wanted to know if you loved Auntie Wren and were going to look after her because no one except my mom ever did.”



WREN DIDN'T LET herself sleep long. Just enough to stay up until bedtime so she could adjust back to Montana time, since she had to get up and work tomorrow morning.

When she went in search of coffee, she ran into Ilke who persuaded her onto the patio where she bought her an Irish coffee and ordered a Bloody Mary for herself.

“Busy for a Sunday,” Wren murmured as they found the only empty table. Crossing the small space took longer than it should have. Tradespeople and other staff who worked at the base saluted her and shook her hand. Their drinks arrived as they sat.

“Thank you.” Ilke offered to clink her salted rim against Wren's sugared one.

“I should buy you a drink,” Wren said. “You did my job while I was gone.”

“I answered the phone a couple of times so other people could do your job. And you saved my dream. *Thank you.*”

Wren paused in licking the whipped cream off her knuckle. “Oh, please. Now you're just embarrassing me.” She had left embarrassed miles back. She was squirming with unbearable self-consciousness.



Ilke blinked grave blue eyes, angelic blonde hair wafting around her exquisite face. “If the resort doesn’t open, I lose the only sponsor willing to take a chance on me.”

Wren sat back. “That can’t be true.”

“It was very true until a few months ago.”

Ilke was *gorgeous*. She ought to be doing perfume and swimsuit ads.

“Well, all I did was let Trigg put a ring on my finger and fly me to Berlin.”

“Wren.” Ilke leaned in to say in softly accented English, “I have my sources. I know that’s not all you did.”

Flustered, Wren changed the subject by asking about Ilke’s training schedule. By the time they finished their drinks, the guys were back from the base with Sky and they all had dinner together.

Nate bought, getting all sincere with her as he waited for the check, so Wren wished herself to be that old-fashioned TV signal that shrank into a dot and winked out.

“Why does it bother you that people are grateful?” Trigg asked her as they were getting ready for bed in his room.

“Because I hate calling attention to myself.”

He finished pulling off his shirt and let it dangle from his hand, ridiculously gorgeous with his broad, satiny shoulders and six-pack abs painted with mountains and waterfalls.

When she finished admiring that and got back to his eyes, she saw an odd, arrested expression on his face. She had called *his* attention. Completely. He stared at her as if he read things into her words she hadn’t meant to reveal.

It made her uncomfortable, so she did what she always did. Deflected. “Maybe I should stay with Sky. I wouldn’t put it past her to run away just for the attention.”

“She’s not going anywhere.” He threw his shirt on the chair. “I told her Bruno asked if he can visit again before

school starts. And I told her very firmly, under no circumstances, is she to let the dog sleep with her.”

She had to chuckle at his reverse psychology. “She’ll take him with her if she does run away.”

“She’ll be pinned under the covers. He’s dense in many ways.”

She smiled and plugged in her phone. Felt unexpectedly nervous as he padded toward her. Not that he was menacing, but she smelled danger. She didn’t think he *wanted* to hurt her, but she feared very deeply that he *could*. He already held enormous power over her. Wealth and influence and this infernal sexual chemistry that she couldn’t resist. He could destroy her with the lightest pressure against her true Achilles’ heel, Sky. But all of that was overshadowed by a new specter—her own feelings for him.

Her desire for more than his touch. For a piece of his heart.

She was so terrified of that, of the anguished, screaming *want* inside her, she tried to burn it with the other. She threw herself against him, arms going around his waist to embrace the flash-fire heat that touching him shot through her.

His breath caught and passion flared in his eyes. Against her abdomen, the ripple of his fly became a more insistent pressure.

She let her head drop back in invitation, lips parted, and feathered her touch in the base of his spine, signaling she was eager for another wild consummation.

He only gathered her hair, smoothing it into a blunt ponytail in his fist as he scanned her features. Again she was struck by a painful twist of exposure, a terror that the touch of his gaze would do more damage than anything else in this world ever could.

“Don’t you want to...” She swallowed, so uncertain she might as well have been balanced on a tightrope above a canyon full of jagged boulders, rough waters, and sharks. Her

voice thinned to a singed end, making it impossible for her to finish.

“Make love to you?” His voice was a deep rumble in his chest. The way it seemed to reverberate inside her was disturbing. Unnerving. “I do. Very much.”

The oxygen disappeared from her lungs. That wasn't what they did. 'Making love' sounded too big and impactful. They were just enjoying a side benefit of a convenient marriage. She tried to say something to that effect.

But he kissed the side of her neck. It wasn't even a kiss. Just a brush of his lips in a tender gesture that paralyzed her and made her eyes sting. He kept doing it. Tiny little nuzzles down the sensitive cord at the side of her neck that tickled, but sent tingles of warmth through her shoulders and down her chest.

“You're so pretty,” he said, breath hot against her skin. “Sexy and dangerous.” He lifted his head so she could see that he was teasing her a little, but only a little. He was his confident, cocky self, but there was gravity in his expression that made her think he recognized their peril as clearly as she did.

Her heart began to beat outside her body.

He let go of her hair and cradled her cheek, lowered his mouth to kiss her.

She went on her tiptoes. Slid her arm around his neck and mashed her mouth to his and swept her tongue between his lips, seeking the fire that was uncontrollable and terrifying, but somehow not as risky as tenderness.

He didn't let her incite him, though. Not past his control. He cradled her face in his two hands and kissed her slowly. Deliberately. He used his tongue and teeth, but sweetly. Arousing, then easing back to reassure, then heating things up again, before turning chaste and worshipful again. He made noises of enjoyment as he kissed her. As though this was all they would ever do. As if it was enough.

As if she was enough.

Her eyes stung. She was breathless and panting. Moved and shaking with emotion over a damned *kiss*. She followed the waistband of his jeans and found the button, popped it and tried to work his fly down.

“There’s no rush,” he murmured, skimming his lips down her throat again. Peppering soft kisses across her collarbone. “But let’s get rid of this.” His lips curved into a rueful smile as he drew her T-shirt over her head.

Her bra was dispatched as swiftly, then he set his hands on her hips, thumbs on the front pockets of her jeans, two fingers on the bare skin of her waist.

He looked her over and she wished he’d turned out the light. The curtains were closed, the room still stuffy from the late afternoon sun that had set a few hours ago, but she shivered under his gaze. Her breasts prickled and her nipples hardened as if he caressed them with more than his eyes.

She was already hot and edgy and grew more frustrated as he lightly cradled her breasts. Feathered his thumb across her nipple as he watched.

“Trigg—” She ran her hands up his arms, just as he rolled the pad of his thumb over her nipple again. A nerve that ran straight down between her legs thrummed. She dug her fingernails into his shoulders in reaction. “I can’t stand it.”

“No?” His gaze came up, dazzling her with the exalted blue of his irises around liquid black pupils. “Am I hurting you?” He did it again and her knees weakened, making her cling harder to him to stay upright.

“No,” she had to admit. But he was peeling away protective layers inside her with each reverent touch, thinning her skin so she was all the more sensitive to each touch. All the more vulnerable.

At the same time, raw tendrils of desire seduced her into letting him continue his delicate assault.

His arm went around her back and he bent to lick her nipple, toying so tenderly, she surrendered, arching to offer herself as she let him take her weight. Trusting him to hold her.

He blew across her wet nipple, stimulating it to firm attention before he engulfed it with his hot mouth. She released a strangled moan of acute arousal. Carnal *need*. She dug her fingers into his hair, tousling and massaging his scalp, encouraging him to continue his exquisite torture.

He shifted slightly, kept hold of that breast with his big hand while he sucked on the other. Sucked and let her feel the edges of his teeth. It was basic animal bonding, teaching her that he *could* hurt her, but he wouldn't. She was safe with him.

In a sudden move, he swept her feet from under her, turned and set her on the bed.

Now. Finally. She opened her jeans and wriggled them down her hips. He helped her, swept them away onto the floor, then crawled over her like a jungle animal.

“Take off your jeans. I want to feel you,” she said, sweeping her hands over the silky hair on his chest and the hot skin of his waist and cupping the iron-hard shape of him behind his fly.

His lips pulled back in a near-snarl and he rolled her over beneath him. Pinned her with his thigh against the backs of hers. His heat penetrated the rough denim while the scald of his chest against her back made her gasp.

“You drive me insane,” he said, seeming to have a fetish for her neck because he was sweeping the hair away to kiss her there again.

She had a fetish for the feel of his mouth there, quaking in helplessness every time he so much as breathed against her skin.

“I like speed,” he said as he moved his hands over her, gentling her. “But sometimes you have to stop and appreciate

the view. Take a moment to be grateful for where you are and all that you have.”

She caught her breath, telling herself it was the precious kisses across her shoulders and down her spine that sent that searing sensation of joy through her.

“Do you like where you are?” he teased, lips on her lower back as he eased her underwear down. “I do.”

He swept the lace away and squeezed the backs of her thighs, parting them so he could slide his hand higher between. His first touch only lightly grazed. Shivers chased over her in reaction. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“Do I have you, Wren? Sweet, sweet mouse?” His voice was buried between her shoulder blades while his fingertips petted the damp hairs, strumming another, harder shock wave of sensual reaction through her.

He rolled her over so he could see her face.

She was so weak, she couldn't even speak. Could only watch his face as he ran a possessive hand from her shoulder to her breast, down her quivering belly to her damp and aching mound and the trembling thighs that lay open in surrender.

She expected the triumph she read in his gaze when he met her eyes. She didn't expect the awe.

On instinct, her hand lifted and she drew him to kiss her. She opened her mouth and let him taste what was in her. Told him without words how much pleasure he gave her and how small and scared she was and how deeply he affected her and how utterly she belonged to him.

He gathered her in with a ragged growl and kissed her with unfettered passion. It was as wild as anything that had passed between them in Berlin, but tempered now. Not weakened. Strengthened. Made to withstand fire and storm and time.

Now he wrenched open his jeans and kicked them away. He slid into her so deep he pushed a cry of joy from her throat.

“Look at me.” He cupped her head as he slowly withdrew and slowly, slowly surged back.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, tried to urge him to quicken his pace, but he was too strong. He was in control of this. Of her. He was everything. Her entire world.

Her lashes fluttered and her mouth opened beneath his, but they didn't kiss. Their breaths mingled and nothing existed but the superbly protracted movement of his body as he made love to her.

They were slippery with sweat, both shaking with strain and intense arousal. She wanted to beg him to finish, but wanted this endless tide of retreat and return to last forever. It fed something in her soul that had never been reached before.

When the heated tingles of climax began to gather and prickle over her, she moaned with despair. Yet the breadth of beauty and promise that opened before her drew her inexorably.

As if he saw it too, he said, “Yes.” And thrust harder. Hard enough to snap the tension holding her in its grip before he tumbled with her into oblivion.

## Chapter Twenty

WREN WOKE EARLY and slipped out of Trigg's arms into the shower, trying to recover from the intimacy of last night, afraid to name the emotion that had taken root like a vine inside her.

While she held her face in the patter of the water, Trigg poked his head in. "Dog's being an asshole. Meet you at breakfast."

He shut the door before she could say, "Kay."

A minute later, she turned off the water and listened while she dried herself. Sometimes Murphy took off after wildlife or decided someone crossing from the staff house needed a loud greeting. Whatever he'd been doing, Trigg seemed to have him under control.

Was Sky out there? Wren dressed and propped open the door, then stepped onto the walk-around balcony with wet hair, breathing in the clean, morning air as she looked over the pond and the mountain rising above it. Oh, she loved it here!

"...say something like that to my daughter again, I'll fucking kill you," she heard Trigg say below her. "And if my wife hears a remark like that, you'll wish I fucking killed you. Are we clear?"

A minuscule: "Yes, sir."

"My marriage is not a joke. If you want to work here, show some respect."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell your friends. Because I'm not going to repeat myself."

Wren backed into the room and silently eased the door shut. *Holy shit.*



She felt even more a subject of scrutiny when she descended the stairs and headed into the dining room.

Trigg was already there with Sky. He caught her hand as she passed him toward the buffet, letting her wrist slide through his loose grip in a friendly caress.

If people took notice, she didn't know. She kept her gaze on the plates and the food, telling herself she didn't care what people thought.

Trigg did, though. He cared enough to stick up for her. For all of them. It made her throat feel tight.

"Was Murphy being a brat this morning?" she asked Sky as she came back to their table.

Trigg was already on his feet, holding the chair next to his for her. "Dummy hates the wheelbarrow. Thinks it's trying to kill whoever is pushing it. Goes ballistic."

"His leash was in *your* room." Sky pronounced with disdain. "Or I would have put him on it before I took him out. I'm not going to the base with you today," she added to Trigg. "I'm starting my homework."

"Great." He picked up his phone. "I'm going to text Devon to come up when she has time, to discuss options for our rooms. You can go up with her and Wren. Do you think we need a kitchenette like Rolf and Glory's place? Because I think Wren and I should take the middle room on the top floor and connect into the two rooms toward Rolf and Glory's. We can put a living room between our bedroom and yours."

"I'll be in Switzerland. Do whatever you want." Sky sipped her white chocolate mocha—which was essentially a milkshake and supposed to be a treat, not breakfast.

"So you don't care which room is yours?" Trigg finished texting and set down his phone. He set his hand on Wren's thigh.

Sky's mouth tightened as if she could see under the table. "What do you want me to say? That I condone your behavior?"

I don't."

"Okay, that one's not me," Trigg said, squeezing Wren's thigh as he grinned at her. "That sounds like something you would say."

Probably only a thousand times. Wren put down her fork and went to tuck her hands into her lap only to accidentally find one tangled in Trigg's.

"I'm not clear on why you're so angry," Wren said. "You told me you like it here. That you don't want to go back to Utah."

"So *I* could get to know my dad. Not so *you* could! Not after you wouldn't even tell me his name all that time," Sky hissed.

In a few sharp words, Sky perforated the bubble of tentative happiness Wren had let form around her. It popped and left her cold and wretched.

"Skylar," Trigg warned.

"It's okay," Wren said, trying to extricate her fingers from his.

"No, it's not."

"Trigg." She looked him in the eye, letting him know this wasn't the same as a landscaper with a crass sense of humor. "Sky has a right to be angry." She pushed back from the table. "I have to start work." In twenty minutes, but she picked up her half-finished plate, intending to take it into the office to finish it.

"We're staying married," Trigg said as she turned away.

She wasn't sure if he was telling her or Sky.

All Sky said was, "I'm staying mad."



*MOST CHILDREN GET angry because their parents get divorced,* Bruno texted her at one point. He didn't understand. At least if

your parents got divorced, you could complain about them to the other one.

She had to watch Auntie Wren slowly take her stuff out of their room and listen to her dad say things like, *You can spend all day with me. You know where I am.*

She was so mad at both of them. Mad enough to learn algebra out of spite along with plant structures and maps of the ancient world. She wrote a whole opinion essay on why divorce was actually good for children.

She was counting the days, counted down all seven of them, until *Onkel* Rolf got back, which was the middle of the night. Her dad picked them up from the airport and said at breakfast they were probably sleeping in.

“No need to tattle. I confessed all,” he said. Auntie Wren had stopped joining them for breakfast. She had lunch with Sky instead. Or walked around the pond with her and Murphy after work even though Sky was barely talking to her.

Sky went upstairs, planning to sit on the top step until her uncle appeared.

It smelled like sawdust up here. The door to what would be her bedroom had been taken off in preparation for closing in the wall. After a bunch of bashing, the workmen wrestled the tub from what would be a powder room off the living room and took it out the huge space where French doors would open onto the balcony.

When Auntie Wren had brought Devon up here, Devon had said she loved nothing more than working her ass off to finish something perfectly, on time, only to bust it apart a few weeks later. But she'd been joking. She seemed to think it was nice that Auntie Wren and her dad were making like a family.

Sky hated it, but had to admit she liked the view from her new room. The color palette Grandma had insisted she help pick out was pretty, too. Sky had sarcastically said she wanted a princess theme with a canopy bed and Grandma had almost gone through with it, totally taking her seriously. That's when

Sky realized Grandma was genuinely trying to make her happy and that made Sky want to cry. Grandma had sent her a bunch of links to furniture and Sky was afraid to open them, in case she fell in love.

She folded her arms across her knees and buried her head in them. Why was her life such a *mess*? This ought to be a dream come true, but she had been totally, A-plus right about this marriage being something that only looked good on paper.

A door cracked and she jerked her head up. *Finally*.

*Onkel* Rolf looked tanned and sleepy, but he was shaved and showered, wearing jeans and a short-sleeved shirt with buttons and a collar.

“*Guten Morgen*,” he said with mild surprise as she stood and dusted her butt.

“Hi. Can I—” She remembered her manners at the last second. “Did you, um, have a nice trip?”

“*Wunderbar*.”

“Good. Um. Can I talk to you? Like, in private?” She looked back to his door.

“Glory’s still sleeping.” He glanced at the open door into her new room. “Wonder what the new neighbors are like.”

She rolled her eyes at his back and followed him in. He trailed through what would be their living room. The workmen were still wrestling the tub down the outside stairs.

“Talk,” he invited, glancing in the bathroom that had a bunch of broken tiles where the tub had been.

“My dad and Auntie Wren are—” she didn’t know how to say it “—married. Like, for real. They told me it was just so they could vote against the board, but they’re, like, carrying on.” That made her sound older than Grandma. “Having sex.”

Rolf didn’t even blink. “And?”

“I don’t think they should! Do you?”

He folded his arms, looked for a second like he wasn't going to answer. Then he said, "If I had a nickel for every time I told my brother not to have sex with someone, I would have one nickel. Because I've only said it once. About Glory."

"He tried to have sex with Auntie Glory? *Ew!*"

"It was preemptive. He was flirting with her, but he wasn't serious. I was."

"Do you think he's serious *now*? Because they hardly know each other."

"Here's what I know." Rolf held up his thumb. "Sometimes people have sex when they know they shouldn't." He added a finger, so he was making an L as he counted to two. "Telling my brother to stop doing something only works if he wants to stop doing it. He doesn't care if I don't like it."

"Do you like it? I don't!"

"I have reservations. And if he's doing something when he *knows* I don't like it, there really is no stopping him. Finally..." he held up another finger "...your aunt is too smart to let him take advantage of her. Which means she's probably in love with him. Which is another thing people do when they know they shouldn't." One more finger. "And you can't stop that either."

"I asked her if she loved him. She didn't say yes or no." Sky hadn't bugged her for an answer because she didn't know which answer she wanted. "Do you think he loves her?"

"If I had a nickel for every time my brother and I talked about our feelings, I would rather choke to death on a nickel."

Sky wasn't satisfied with that answer and snarled her lip to tell him so.

He came over and set his hand on her head. It was big and heavy, like a helmet that was sliding off, making her tilt her head back to look up at him.

"Here's what else I know. They both care about you very much. They aren't trying to hurt you, so don't take it

personally. And thank you for coming to me.” His hand moved to her shoulder. “Talk to me anytime you feel you can’t talk to them. But right now, I need breakfast or I’ll eat you. Join me.”

He hadn’t solved anything. Grown-ups were such a massive disappointment sometimes. But she let him nudge her out the door and went down to sit with him even though she’d already eaten.



WREN WAS COVERING a break behind the coffee bar when Glory shuffled in just before eleven o’clock. Her hair was partially contained in a hot pink scrunchie. She wore pajamas under a truly schleppy sweater over a T-shirt that was so big, it had to be Rolf’s.

It didn’t matter that she looked so disheveled, though. The lunch crowd hadn’t started showing up yet and the lobby was quiet, too.

Glory sat down on a stool and laid her head down on her outstretched arm. “Tarbender, I need a double shot of espresso and a cup of your finest drip brew to chase.”

“We have an IV option if you’d like me to get the stretcher.”

“So much,” she said, stifling a yawn without picking up her head. “Where’s my dad?”

“He waited and waited, hoping you’d come down before he left, but he and Vivien ran into Kalispell. He said to tell you it’s a check-up, nothing to worry about, but it’s the specialist and hard to get into so he wanted to keep the appointment. How was your trip?”

“Oh, my God. So magical,” Glory said with awe, sitting up, but she might have been expressing gratitude for the coffee. She balanced the tiny cup between two hands. “But forget *my* honeymoon! How was *yours*?” She laughed and set down the cup, holding out a hand. “Wait. I have to tell you this. It’s so funny.”

Glory came to life then, sitting up straight and talking with her hands.

“Trigg sent all his messages to Rolf in German. We didn’t even get anything until you were on your way back here. We were five days into our safari, which was mostly glamping, but we finally arrived at a proper lodge with electricity and Wi-Fi so Rolf decides to check his messages. And it was like an opera of F-sharps.”

Wren winced. “I can only imagine.”

“No, it was hilarious. It went like this.” She glanced around to make sure it was just them. “He starts with an annoyed little, ‘Fuck.’ Then he gets more emphatic. ‘Ah, fuck.’ Then he gets serious, ‘You fucking c-sharp.’ *Mad*. I’m going, ‘What’s wrong, what’s wrong?’ He keeps reading, goes, ‘Holy, fuck,’ all astonished. That was the one where he read you married Trigg. Symbolic, right? Then he read about the meeting and he was like, ‘Fuck, she’s got balls of steel.’ Then he got to the gravel pit and he was like, ‘Fuck, *yeah*.’”

“Oh, my God.” Wren covered her eyes, thinking of the way Rolf had bear-hugged her this morning, mashing her face into his pecs and releasing her before she realized what kind of car-compact she’d been accidentally thrown into. “Do you know he offered me a job?”

“When? To do what?” Glory frowned.

“This morning. He said he wanted me to help cover his assistant’s maternity leave. Someone has been hired in Berlin, but he wants someone here. We’d have to work closely together to coordinate.”

“He got that idea from *me*. I said if you weren’t so busy organizing our wedding, I would hire you to be my assistant and that I was going to ask you once we got back. He’s such a sneaky—” She grumbled something, then wrinkled her nose. “He could pay you more than I could, though. A *lot* more. Are you going to take it?”

“I like this job.” Besides, things were complicated enough without her working down at the base. That was Sky’s territory with her dad.

“Thank you,” Glory said as Wren set a cup of the daily grind before her.

“No, prob.”

“No, I mean *thank you*.”

“Honestly, it’s *fine*. My job was on the line, too.” She wiped counters that were already clean.

“But it’s still—Wren.” Glory folded her arms on the counter, waiting until Wren looked at her. “I love Trigg. On the surface he looks easy, but I know he’s just as bossy and stubborn and unwilling to compromise as Rolf. Rolf and I took a long time to get together and we didn’t have a Sky between us. Are you guys...”

Wren could see Glory struggling with genuine concern and not wanting to pry.

“Sky’s not happy about it.” She couldn’t even say ‘us.’ Wren threw the rag into the sink with a splat. “But if we can make it work, for her sake, we should. Right?”

“Yeah,” Glory agreed, but her voice was faint and concern lingered as tension around her eyes.

Lina came back then and Glory stood to accept her hug of greeting.

Wren went back to the office, not checking on Sky because she’d gone to the base for a change. Rolf had asked her to give him a tour of the progress that had been made while he was away. Sky had given Trigg a haughty look, still punishing him along with Wren.

*I love him.* That’s what Wren wanted to say to Sky, but she didn’t want to speak that incantation aloud.

She loved him deeply. Even though he never picked up his laundry and said off-color things and made her feel terribly



vulnerable with a single compliment. She loved him *because* he didn't sweat a mess and made her laugh at things she was taking too seriously and called her his sexy little sugar mouse. He laughed at her jokes and appreciated her for dumb little things like buying more toothpaste while she was in town.

She loved him and it was killing her that he didn't love her back.



HIS ALARM WENT off and Trigg rolled away from the warmth of Wren's body to silence it.

She made a noise of protest. "It's not even a school day."

"I gotta work," he said, dropping onto his back and drawing her sleepy body into his side.

She snuggled her head onto his shoulder and crooked her thigh across his, sighing and relaxing back into sleep.

She wasn't one for public affection, stiffening if he surprised her with a kiss in the lobby, but under the covers, she was a cuddle monster. He was a tactile person himself and took full advantage here. He stroked her hair and the silky warmth of her arm, enjoying her naked softness against him while his morning wood stretched awake.

He thought about stroking her with more purpose, but what she had said reminded him of something he had meant to talk to her about last night.

"Hey," he said, nudging her with a twitch of his arm and touching his mouth to her forehead. "I'm taking Sky to the base with me today."

"Good luck," she murmured.

*Save that sentiment for Sky.* He was going to have it out with his daughter today. Enough was enough. She was still giving both of them grief for sleeping together and it was hurting Wren. He didn't understand how Sky didn't care, either. She was the one who had brought up what Lydia had

said about Wren's childhood. Then she had looked mighty uncomfortable and said, *Please don't tell Auntie Wren I told you that.*

He'd been feeling off-the-scale protective of Wren ever since. She was forever going an extra ten miles, always brushing away compliments, but one tiny complaint from a guest and he saw her confidence drain away into the polite shield she wore when her tender feelings were being walked on.

He was so infuriated by any guest who dimmed the light in her expression, he had talked to Nate about hiring Wren to work on the projects team. She was so resourceful and quick, had such attention to detail, he thought she'd be a great fit.

"Already tried. She told me to take a number behind your mother's spa, Glory's writing biz, and the big dog." Nate thumbed in the direction of Rolf's office. "She likes working for Marvin."

They were a funny pair to watch if they happened to discuss an issue, taking such care not to criticize the other. It sounded as though Wren could use a decent father figure, so Trigg should probably not interfere there.

But Sky needed to get over herself. Wren kept saying her relationship with Sky was between the two of them. She didn't interfere in Sky's relationship with *him*. Sky would come around when she was ready. Excuses, excuses.

No. Screw it. They were moving into their rooms upstairs tomorrow and Sky was damned well going to like it. He wasn't taking this bad mojo into their new family life.



WHEN HER DAD texted her to meet him for breakfast, Sky texted back that she wanted to sleep in and asked if he would take Murphy to the base so she wouldn't have to walk him.

*No. Get up. You're coming with me.*

Seriously?

She rolled over and would have gone back to sleep, but Murphy stood up and jumped off the bed as a knock sounded on the door.

Sky whimpered at the ceiling while Murphy pawed at the door, something he wasn't supposed to do. And her stupid dad knocked again.

"Just a *minute*." She threw off the covers and struggled into her yoga pants that suddenly decided to take her toes prisoner and refuse to go on.

"Skylar."

"Do you want me to answer the door naked?" She shot her arms into her hoodie and dragged it on, then cracked the door.

"Let's go." He held two Whiskey Jack travel mugs by the handles in one hand. A pair of wrapped breakfast burritos were balanced across the tops.

"It's Saturday."

"You haven't come to work with me for two weeks."

"Because I've been doing my schoolwork." She had stayed up until midnight last night trying to find 'x.' It wasn't the pirate treasure cartoons had led her to believe.

"Well, no school today. You're coming to work."

"Give me a break!"

"*You* give it a break. Put your work boots on."

"Why are you being so—" *Argh*. She wanted to scream.

"Because *you're* being so—" He glared pointedly at her. "I've had enough."

"You don't even need me. I don't work there. You don't pay me."

"Skylar." He used his I-mean-business tone. "If I have to put this down and carry you, you're going to be shoeless and hungry all day. Your choice."

“Oh, my *Gawd*.” She sat and pulled on socks, then tied on her hiking boots with the steel toes. She slung her purse over her shoulder as she came to the door.

“Don’t bother.” Her dad used his free hand to slide the purse chain off her shoulder and threw it onto her unmade bed. “This isn’t Beverly Hills. Enough with the cell phone and curling iron and lip gloss. Go.”

“Oh. My. God.” She couldn’t even. She stalked out the back, but if he thought she was *walking* with him this morning... Or even *talking* to him...

He took his truck, eating his burrito as they went. She ignored the one he’d got for her and stared out the side window instead.

“Enough with the attitude, Skylar. The way you’re treating your aunt is unacceptable.”

“She’s the one who moved out, not me.”

“And you’re punishing her for that?”

“I’m *doing* my *homework*.”

“You’re using school to avoid her. And me, which upsets her even more. She doesn’t want to come between us, so you and I are glued at the hip until we clear the air.”

“I am not using school as an excuse. I actually want to finish.”

“Because you think I’ll send you to Switzerland? Give up on that.” He parked and motioned between them. “This is too important. Whether you see it or not.”

“Maybe I would, if you didn’t spend every night doing my aunt.”

“You don’t get to be jealous of the time I spend with her *and* refuse to spend time with me. I offered to take you to a movie last weekend. It doesn’t have to be at work.”

“I was trying to finish an assignment.” Which she had already *told* him.

She threw open her door and slid out, reaching back for her food because she was getting hungry and he wouldn't let her go back. She knew the rules. If he paid any attention at all, he would see she was actually behaving better than she had in a long time. She fed the dog and walked him *and* picked up his poop without anyone reminding her. She only had two of the junkiest coffees a week, not every day, and she had helped Grandma start unpacking inventory for the gift shop without being asked.

But no. She was a bad person for having totally real feelings about what a dumb idea this marriage was.

They went inside and up the stairs. She sat in his office to eat the burrito while he went to stand in Nate's open door.

"We're suiting up and hiking to the top hut. Someone needs a run to work out some snarls."

He had better be talking about the dog, because seriously.

Him and Nate talked about work stuff that she only half understood. Or cared about. Maybe he should realize that she cared about finishing school as much as he cared about finishing this stupid resort. And maybe he could quit treating her like an annoying kid and talk to her like someone he actually cared about.

"Finished? Put the rest of your gear on. Do you want to take pictures or notes?" He brought the camera bag out of the drawer in his desk.

"I don't care." She threw away her wrapper and walked down the hall to the bathroom.

And discovered she had her period. Of *course* she did. If there was a God, he clearly hated her along with everyone else.

She slammed through all the cupboards, but there were no pads or anything. She folded some toilet paper and stuffed it in her underwear, which only made her feel worse.

“Is Chivonne here?” she asked, going back to the door of his office.

“School.”

“Oh, she gets to go to school on weekends, but I don’t? I have to go back to the lodge.”

“Nice try. Put your vest on.”

“Oh, my God. You are not the boss of me.”

“No, I am the dad of you. Suit up, princess.”

Her elbows hurt, she was holding her arms so straight at her sides. And her nails bit into her palms where she clenched her fists. She looked back the way they’d come in.

“Make a run for it and I *will* come after you.”

“Hey, Trigg?” Nate called. “Word of advice—”

“Don’t need it,” he said sharply, giving her a hard-ass grown-up stare. “Sky will do as she’s told.”

“I need to call Auntie Wren.”

“You’ll talk to her when I say you can talk to her.”

Sky snapped. She didn’t even know what it meant to snap, but that’s exactly how it felt, like a rubber band on a slingshot released inside her. It shot her into his office like an arrow.

“Don’t you ever tell me I can’t see or talk to her. *Ever.*”

“You have had ample opportunity in the last—”

“Oh, my *Gawd*. I have my period, okay? If you want to act like my parent and act like you’re going to take care of me, then put some fucking tampons in the cupboard! You didn’t even let me bring my purse! Just because your sperm made me doesn’t make me your property. You don’t get to tell me what to do every second of every day. Maybe I am mad at Auntie Wren, but at least she lets me make my own decisions even if she doesn’t like it. She lets me make mistakes so I can learn. Which *this* was. Telling her I wanted to meet you was a huge

mistake because she's not there for me anymore. She's only there for *y-you*."

She was going to cry.

She ran out. If he came after her, she would kill him. She really would.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

**W**REN HAD COME up to the new apartment with the deliverymen and lingered after they left, peeling the plastic off the sofa and ottoman, throwing it out the open French doors to carry down in a little while.

She loved that Vivien had talked her into getting a thin area rug to personalize the space. Vivien had spent a small fortune on good linens and window treatments, too, insisting it would make it homier. It was. Last weekend, Eden had given Wren a couple of paintings from her cityscape collection. Wren hadn't been to either place, but she loved the colors.

Now the new mattresses were on the new bedframes and she only had to make them up. Their clothes still needed to come up and Trigg would have to mount the television on the wall, but she would see if she could talk Sky into sleeping here tonight.

She was plugging in the table lamps when she heard running feet come up to their door. A fist pounded on it.

She started toward it, but the door beeped four times and hummed as the lock clicked open. Sky burst in, face red, misery streaming from her eyes, ragged breaths shaking her whole body as her bottom lip sucked in and out. Her hair stuck in sweaty patches to her temples and her whole body was shaking.

“Oh, my God! What happened? What's wrong?”

Sky threw herself into Wren's arms. The door slammed and Sky started bawling.

Wren's heart fell to the center of the earth.

“Sky, what? Tell me.” Her brain went in a thousand terrified directions and she hugged Sky hard. Tried to calm



her, tried to reassure her she was safe when she was seriously worried someone had assaulted her. “Baby, tell me.”

“I got my p-p-period.”

Oh, sweet Lord. She didn’t laugh. There were times when it really was the worst thing in the world. Wren strengthened her hug and rubbed Sky’s back. “That sucks.”

“And I didn’t have my purse and there weren’t any tampons at the base. I had a huge fight with Dad about it. I didn’t mean to, but I was so *mad*.”

“Oh, honey.” She held on and held on, sorry that Sky was so miserable, but drinking in that her little girl was holding on to her, needing her for the first time in ages.

“And I just want to finish school, but I don’t understand the English assignment. I’m falling behind and it’s stressing me out. Even if I get into the new school, I have to meet new people. What if they hate me? I told Bruno to come live here, but he wants to stay with his boyfriend. And even if you sent me to Switzerland, I wouldn’t know anyone there either. I don’t have any friends and why should I? I’m *awful*.”

“You’re not awful. That’s the period hormones talking.”

“My life is awful. Grandma says I should get a haircut before school.”

“Get one cut. Win-win.”

“Oh, my God. Don’t make horrible jokes!” She was so tall, she had to droop her head to rest it on Wren’s shoulder. She let her go long enough to wipe at her face, then hugged her arms around Wren’s waist again and snuggled in, sniffing. “Everything is wrong.”

“It sounds that way,” Wren agreed. “It’s definitely a lot for one swallow.”

“And if it’s this bad now, how hard is my life going to be when I’m *your* age?”

“Oh, sweetie.” She did almost laugh then. “It’s easier when you’re old enough to make your own decisions.”

“Remember when we used to go to the flea market and eat ice cream and buy a puzzle and go home and do it? I wish that could be my life, but I’m going to have to get a job and buy a car and pay taxes. I *hate* growing up. You did protect me too much. I didn’t know it was going to be *this* awful.”

Wren sighed through pangs of failure.

“I thought if I knew my dad, I wouldn’t have any problems,” she admitted in a low voice.

“I know.”

“And I’m glad I know him, but it’s been really hard. I don’t mind that you’re married to him. Honestly, I don’t. But I keep thinking you’re probably going to have a baby and then you really won’t want me anymore.”

“I will always want you. Always, always, always.” She squeezed it into her. “No matter what. So will he.”

“Even when I’m awful?”

“We want you right now, don’t we? Sky, you’re amazing. You’re so smart and funny and confident. You have a huge heart. You get what you want. I love that most about you, even though it makes my life a living hell.”

Sky laughed hard and leaned weakly on her, heavy but sweet. “I love you, Auntie Wren. I’m really sorry. I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, sweetie.” She smoothed her hair. “Do you want to have a shower? Start the day over? I’ll run and get you some clean clothes. Maybe some junk food. We can watch a girl movie.”

“Could we?” Sky pulled away and looked to the door of her new bedroom. “Can I shower here? In my new bathroom?”

“Of course. I put some of that organic shampoo from Glory in there.”

“From the swag bags? I love that stuff.”

“That’s why I put it in there.”

“Cool.” She started to pull off her hoodie. Paused. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Do you love my dad?”

Wren swallowed the lump that instantly formed in her throat. She slowly nodded. “I do.”



AFTER THE DOOR slammed at the bottom of the stairs, Nate said, “I grew up with a sister. When a girl is banging cupboards in a bathroom, make like a tree, man.”

Trigg sighed and went back to the lodge on foot, trying to think how he’d fix this. He wound up seeking out the one person he figured could offer real, applicable advice.

“Trigg!” Marvin beamed when Trigg knocked and entered the manager’s office. “If you’re looking for Wren—”

“You, actually. Can you spare a minute?” He closed the door.

“Of course.” Marvin waved at the chair in front of his desk, face wrinkling into a frown of concern. “Is everything all right?”

“You tell me, Marv. Are things all right when your daughter basically tells you to fuck off and that she hates your guts?”

“Did she throw something at you? What was it? Mine was a skillet full of bacon.”

Trigg had an instant vision of Glory losing her shit at twelve and laughed through his cloud of paternal failure. “Are you shitting me?”

“Do *not* tell Glory I told you. We have a pact never to speak of it. I’m telling you in confidence, father to father.”

Trigg leaned back, slouched lower in the chair. “I thought I was being a father, trying to lay down the law for a change, but... She’s mad about me marrying Wren. I thought she was mostly angry with Wren. But she said she regrets asking Wren to find me...” He rubbed his face, but it was his chest that hurt. There was such a blanket of heaviness there, he didn’t know what to do with it. “Maybe I was coming on too strong. Sometimes she’s out of line. I thought we were at a place where I could tell her to smarten up. Aren’t parents supposed to give their kids boundaries?”

Marvin listened with an attentive expression, his bushy brows tilted in empathy.

“This has not been an easy situation for either of you,” Marvin said. “Give yourself credit for how far you have both come, Trigg. This is actually a good sign. Most parents will agree that their children behave worst at home, where they’re comfortable expressing themselves. Which is the way you want it. You don’t want them telling the neighbors to go to hell, do you?”

“Beats me hearing it,” Trigg said facetiously, scratching under his chin.

“And you’re right about boundaries, but those boundaries are ever expanding. Sometimes they go all the way back to Seattle.” He was talking about Glory’s disappearance last year. “Or they involve making room for a man you fear will break her heart. Spoiler alert,” Marvin said with a tuck of his chin. “Someone *will* break her heart.”

Trigg let his head fall against the back of the chair and pinched his nose. “I can’t start thinking about her with boys. I’ll need opiates.”

“Trigg.” Marvin folded his hands on the desk, looking like a doctor about to deliver a rough diagnosis. “This is the outcome every parent is aiming for. You want them to grow up and have the skills to make a life for themselves without leaning on you.”

“It’s really not,” he argued with the ripped-up heart of a helicopter mom complaining to the B-team soccer coach. “I only just got her. I can’t start talking about letting her go.”

“I know. But you have to. Here’s a tip I picked up, though.” He touched his nose. “When they’re throwing a skillet at you, they’re actually crying out for a hug. Grab it while you can.”



THIRD FLOOR WAS the charm when he went looking for his wife and daughter. Trigg tried the door from the manger’s office, then his own room and finally tracked them down in their new apartment.

As he let himself into the living room, he was met with the backs of their heads, side-by-side on the sofa. They were snuggled under a blanket watching Wren’s laptop on the coffee table.

Murphy went around ahead of him and sniffed the bowl of potato chips. Sky put out her hand to pet him and Wren said, “Noooo,” when Murphy tried to put a paw on the new sofa.

“Go to your mat,” Trigg said, pointing out the cushion in the corner. “What are you watching?” He bent to kiss the crown of Wren’s head, needing the grounding of her scent before he took on the greater challenge of making up with his kid. He almost took a shot and kissed the top of Sky’s head, too, but she tilted her head back to look up at him.

*“Love, Actually. It’s almost over.”*

He meandered through the rooms, noting that the beds had been made up and their bar fridge stocked with milk, fruit and yogurt. They had opted for a wet bar with a cupboard for bread, cereal and a few dishes, but didn’t plan to cook anything bigger than would fit in the toaster oven.

When he came back, Sky wiggled closer to Wren, making room for him on the sofa. He sat down beside her. On the

screen, people were waiting at an airport, hugging passengers as they came off planes.

“I’ve never seen this. What’s it about?”

They both turned their heads, jaws hanging open with scandal.

“Love,” Wren said.

“Actually,” Sky said.

They looked back at the screen, both wearing soft smiles as people were hugging.

He thought about what Marvin had said and set his arm across the back of the sofa. Played with Wren’s hair.

Sky shifted to lean in to his side under his arm. “Can we walk the dog after this?”

“For sure.”

The music in the movie had been custom built to provoke all the sentiments a person possessed, but that wasn’t why he felt his own heart swell.

He was pretty sure it was love. Actually.



EVEN THOUGH TRIGG had made a point of getting a solid door put in between their bedroom and the lounge, Wren bit back her gasps and sighs of pleasure, somehow finding a new level of intensity in the quest to climax silently. Sometimes they were still wild, sometimes tender, but the desire between them never seemed to abate.

And the glow afterward was otherworldly. She could lie under his relaxed, sweaty body until she died, thank you very much.

With a groan of reluctance, he withdrew and rolled away, but dragged her along, bringing her hand to his chest so she could feel the still-heavy beat of his heart.

“That was fucking tantric,” he breathed.

“Other way around.”

He snorted. Picked up her hand and nibbled her finger.  
“Thanks either way.”

“You don’t think she heard us, do you?” Wren asked, self-conscious.

“I was going to invite Rolf and Glory to have a go in here, so I could test the sound-proofing, but it seemed wrong to let them have fun in here before we did.”

“*Tsk.*” She nudged into his ribs, then resettled her cheek on his damp shoulder, delirious with pleasure when they were like this. Utterly content. “Did it go okay? Your walk?”

“Really good, actually.” He kept playing lightly with her fingers. “I realized something I should have seen sooner. When she was talking about her schoolwork, I heard my own OCD. She isn’t really behind. She’s behind where she wants to be.”

“I told her to ask Marvin for help with the English assignment.”

“He’ll love that.”

“I thought so.” She wriggled against him, enjoying the sensual pleasure of warmth and nudity, soft bed and soft sheets. In this moment, her life was beyond perfect.

“Wren?” He played with her hair, lulling her.

“Mmm?”

“I know we agreed not to talk about it yet, but I want to talk about it.”

She snapped her eyes open, seeing nothing but darkness.  
“Custody?”

“That, but also more kids.”

Every time she faced the years he had missed, she felt like she owed him, but she couldn’t shake the feeling they weren’t going to last.

“Can we get her into school first? Maybe talk when you have the hill online? That’s only a few months away.”

“All right.” He sounded disgruntled, but kissed her and let it go.



WREN MANAGED TO register Sky for school online before Sky was *technically* finished with grade seven. She was instructed to come in with her on the first day of school with her records of completion and other paperwork.

Sky finished her last exam on a Thursday, one day before her time ran out and five days before she actually had to start at her new school.

Vivien ordered a cake to celebrate. They had a barbecue on the deck outside their apartment, inviting the family and promised her a final water-ski on the lake on Sunday as a reward. All the men were working fifteen-hour days, but agreed to take the day off to say goodbye to summer.

Rather than slowing down for the fall shoulder season, reservations were filling up at the lodge. Wren wasn’t as busy as she had been in the weeks before the wedding, but a smaller wedding had been booked for September and Vivien and Marvin were talking about slipping away for a week before the resort opened so she had plenty to do.

She *loved* her job. Marvin was wonderful, Vivien cracked her up with her efforts to truck in sophistication from afar, and the staff was a lively bunch of awesome. Yes, some guests were high maintenance, but most of them were thrilled with the scenery and the quaint touches in the lodge and the chance of running into a *Johansson*. Wren never introduced herself as one. It felt too presumptive, but Sky wanted to take Trigg’s name so Wren kept things simple and used it on the legal stuff.

“Are you ready?” Sky nagged. She wore a T-shirt and shorts over her bathing suit and an impatient expression.



“Almost.” Wren went through her beach bag, double-checking for sunscreen, water bottle, towel—*There it was*. “I couldn’t find my pho—Oh.” Her heart thumped as she recognized the number. “Just a sec.”



TRIGG OPENED THE tailgate and whistled at the dog, giving him a boost up and in. Nate was taking his own truck. Aiden was already in his booster and Ilke was setting her beach bag on the floor at the boy’s feet. Eden was meeting them there with Zuzu. Rolf and Glory were coming with him and Wren. Sky hadn’t made it clear yet whether she wanted to ride next to Aiden in the back seat of Nat’s king cab or with Glory and Wren in Trigg’s.

Sky finally came down the outside stairs with a look Trigg couldn’t interpret.

“Where’s Wren?”

“She said to go without her.”

“What? No.” Trigg looked up, but their units were on the front side of the lodge.

“Her dad died,” Sky said.

*Oh, fuck.*

“Oh, my God,” Glory said, sliding back out of the seat she’d just taken. “That’s awful. She must be devastated.” She looked upward, too.

“She’s changing and packing. Says she has to go to Utah and will call when she gets there. I said I would go with her, but she says I have to start school on Tuesday and she doesn’t know how long she’ll be. She said you have to take me, so she has to go by herself.”

Trigg tossed his keys at Rolf. “Keep your phone on. She’s not going by herself.”



“THE NEIGHBOR FOUND him with a note pinned to his shirt. It said he knew he was sick, but didn’t see a doctor, that whoever found him should tell me he was gone and to sell the house to pay for his cremation. He hated hospitals. It doesn’t surprise me he refused to see a doctor.”

Wren wore her poker face, the one that made him think all her emotions had been pressurized so deep inside her, they were crystalizing into colorless diamonds. She smoothly folded dark clothes into a suitcase.

Trigg opened the closet and took out his own carry-on suitcase.

“I don’t want you to come,” Wren said, flicking her gaze at it. “We weren’t close. I’m fine. It will just take time to organize things and clean out the house. If I get on the road now—”

“You’re not driving.”

“Flying makes no sense. I would have to rent a car on that end and I don’t know how long I’ll be there. It would cost a fortune. I’ll drive.”

“I happen to possess a fortune. I’ll charter a plane and pay for the rental.”

“There’s no hurry. He’s dead. If it’s just me, I can do the drive in one haul, but I have to sign papers before they can cremate him.” Her hands were shaking as she moved into the bathroom to put shampoo and a toothbrush into a bag. “I have to get the will from the bank, too. They made one when my mother got sick.”

He tried to move in front of her and she went around him, not even looking at him.

“Wren.” He turned her and held her in front of him, wanting to pull her in for a hug, but she was so withdrawn, he simply wasn’t sure. “We’re family now. This is what family does. We don’t let you face this stuff alone.”

“I don’t want Skylar going there,” she said, voice fraying with the first sign of emotion, but it was deep and sharp and hard. “She needs to start school in two days and you need to take her because I can’t.”

He rubbed his hands on her tight arms. “My mother can take her. Marvin will be over the moon. Every kid’s dream, right? Getting dropped off for high school by their doting grandparents?”

Nothing. Just a faint tremble in her mouth that made his own feel unsteady.

“I want you to do it,” she said, staring into the middle of his chest. “You’re her dad before you’re my husband.”

Shit. No hanging on to the edges. They were going all the way past the ropes, into the rough waters.

“I’m both, Wren. You know I am. I love you.”

She closed her eyes and her lashes grew damp. “Please don’t say that.”

“That I love you?” It hurt. It hurt like fucking branding irons on his soul that she didn’t want to hear that. Everything in him wanted to fold and walk away. But he made himself ignore the agony and say, “I’m calling to book a plane, then I’m driving you to the airport. I’m coming with you. Pack my bag if you want something to do.”



TRIGG WOULDN’T BE SWAYED. He didn’t even give her a chance to sway him. He threw his own clothes into his bag as he made his calls.

Wren stood there and watched, pinned as though stuck on a barbed hook, unable to move productively or find words or struggle herself out of this trap.

But maybe this was what they needed. She had known this bliss of theirs was an illusion. That it would come crashing

down around her at some point. The anticipation of pain was as bad as the reality of it.

*Hold out your hand.*

At least when it was over, you could deal with it.

When they got to the airport in Kalispell, their plane had just arrived and only needed to refuel before they took off. Two hours later, they were in a car, heading south out of Salt Lake.

Wren numbly gave him the directions onto the freeway then onto a lightly traveled single-lane highway and eventually into the sort of small town that politicians loved to refer to as Main Street USA.

She asked him to first stop at the funeral home where they said the body wasn't ready for viewing yet, thank God. She signed the papers and they left, starting down a road she knew far too well. Past the church. Past a chicken farm and a junkyard to the end of a dirt road.

*Keep going. Go forever. Never make me face this.*

“Pull up here,” she said as ice tracked through her. “That was it back there.”

“What? Where?” Startled, he pulled into the bus stop, which was a bench with peeling paint standing in a worn patch of dirt against the side of the road.

When he started to U-turn, she touched his arm.

“Stop. Just stop.” The feel of him was such a draw, such a temptation to let him hold her and hide her from all of this, that she had to tuck her hands into her lap and bite her lip to keep from crying. Crying wasn't allowed.

He jerked the car into park and twisted to face her, elbow on the steering wheel. “Sweetheart—”

“Don't, Trigg. Don't. I love you so much and now you're going to hate me. I can't bear it. I can't.” She threw herself from the car.

There was nowhere to go, of course. She'd sat on this very bench a thousand times, in the rain and snow and the same blistering sunshine as today, wishing herself anywhere but in this spot.

She slumped onto the bench with her face in her hands, doubled over with the pain of facing her past. Worse. Facing her lack of future. She didn't have one. Not with the man she loved. Not with the child she wished was her own. Agony engulfed her.

The car door slammed and Trigg's footsteps came toward her. "I'm never going to hate you. How could I?"

"Because I kept her here," she cried, dropping her hands and looking across the field to the dumpy house in the distance with the cluttered workshop behind it. "I was selfish. No one loved me. Only Mandy. She wanted me to have Sky and I thought that was enough to justify keeping her with me. But she needed *you*. I should have told you. I should have let her have that time with you." Guilt and shame and sorrow choked into her voice. "She should have had all those things you're giving her now. Not just me and m-my good intentions. My pathetic need. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She covered her wet face again, hiding from her poor decisions. Hiding from his rejection and the utter defeat of losing the tentative happiness she'd found.

"Stop," he said, kneeling in the dirt in front of her. "Stop, Wren. Don't do this to yourself." His arms went around her and his hands stroked over her hair, down her back, across her shoulders. "You were a kid."

"I knew. I knew it was wrong and I kept her from you anyway."

"Because you wanted someone to love you."

"Yes! And she hates me for it."

"No, she doesn't. Neither do I. Look." He forced her hands away, making her lift her face and meet his gaze with her

watery one. “Someone does love you. He’s right here. So stop hating yourself. I won’t allow it.”

She shook her head, fingers clawing at him in despair, unable to stop crying as she tried not to hope. Even though he was squeezing her, pulling her off the bench into his lap as he knelt in the dirt.

“I’m not g-good.”

“Shh. You are.” He held her so tight, not letting her fall apart as he rocked her. “You’re smart. Brave and resourceful and funny. Maybe funnier than me, which chokes me because that’s the area I usually shine. And even though you have hurt every single day of your life, you know how to love. You taught *me* how to love. Do you think I knew before you came along? I wouldn’t have given Sky what you did, Wren.”

“That was Mandy,” she said on a sniff. “She taught me.”

“Christ, take some credit, would you? Open your eyes and see that everyone around you loves the shit out of you. They know you’re better than me. I’m terrified daily that you’re going to realize it, realize I’m marrying up, and look for someone better. The thing that scares me most is what you’ll do for my kid. What you’ll endure and sacrifice for *her*. At least let me love you for that.”

She scooped one arm under his, across his back. The other was around his neck. She buried her face in his neck, drinking deep his scent, absorbing his strength as he held on to her. Still afraid to believe, but hanging on to this moment.

“Wren,” he said, making her name sound like a benediction. “I don’t want you to go into that house. Let me hire someone to clean it and put it up for sale. Let me take you away from here. Let me take you home.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking.” He drew back to kiss her wet cheek. “I’m offering. I’m insisting,” he said with gentle forcefulness.

“I should do it,” she murmured, drying her face against his shirt, rejecting the offer reflexively.

“Why?” he demanded. “Why would you want to do that when you don’t have to?”

“I don’t *want* to...” She spared a moment to absorb what a relief it would be to not have to face that horrible task. “How much do you think it would cost to hire someone? I might have enough in savings.”

“Done.” He shifted and pushed his arm under her legs, then rose with a grunt. “Let’s go.”

She looked into his face, handsome as a prince, fierce as a barbarian, lit with purpose and tenderness and something so precious, it humbled her to look on it. Was he really going to carry her away like some kind of superhero who’d untied her from the railway tracks?

“You’re not going to let me pay for it myself, are you?” she realized with a strange lack of guilt. In fact, she found it endearing.

“I’m not,” he admitted. His mouth relaxed. The suffocating storm of emotions calmed and receded.

“I love you. Very much.” She twined her arms around his neck.

“I love you, too.” He kissed her, gentle and sweet. “Let’s go home.”

“Can we stop one more place first?”



TRIGG CAME WITH her as she led him through the gate of the cemetery. She knew where she was going and found the spot unerringly. She knelt in the grass and brushed the clippings off the three small headstones.

It hurt to be here, but it was the hurt of a boil being lanced, releasing a deep, agonizing pressure. For the first time ever, she felt as though she could breathe.

“Neil,” she said, letting Trigg listen to what was in her heart. “You know how sorry I am that I never met you. I hope you’re happy with Mama and Mandy.” She traced his name, then her mother’s. “Mama, I know how sad you were. I can’t imagine how painful it was to lose one child, let alone two. I know that’s why you were scared to love me.”

She had forgiven her for that a long time ago, but seeing Trigg in her periphery and feeling his hand come to her shoulder and rub her back eased some of the lingering agony. She reached to cover his hand when it came back to rest on her shoulder.

“Mandy.” Her voice caught. She drew a shaky breath to cleanse all the guilt. “I know that all you ever wanted was for us to be the family you remembered. I tried really hard to make that happen, but this family was broken when I came into it. There was never a place for me here. That wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t Neil’s fault. It just was.”

She squeezed Trigg’s hand and kissed it, then held it against her wet cheek.

“I don’t know if I stole him from you, or you led me to him, but I can’t imagine anyone else making me this happy. I love you all so much. I won’t forget you, but I won’t be back. I’m not a Snow anymore. I’m a Johansson.”

She set her hands into the grass to push to her feet. Trigg helped her and drew her into his side. He pressed his lips to her temple and bent his head against the side of hers. Wren slid her arm around his waist and took a moment to let the shift complete. The release and the acceptance. To let his love fill up the cracks and holes in her heart so it swelled big and warm and soft in her chest.

Then she looked into her husband’s eyes and saw the pride and love and had to say it. “And Johanssons are pretty fucking awesome.”



## Epilogue

TO VIVIEN'S CHAGRIN, the grand opening celebration for Whiskey Jack Ski Resort was more about getting people up the lift and onto the hill than popping champagne and cutting cake. The plan was to distribute coupons for free hot chocolate and burgers, which Wren offered to hand out with Glory. They were on the same page with regard to winter sports in that they both enjoyed watching more than participating.

Everyone jumped out of bed like it was Christmas Day, before it was light. Old Man Winter cooperated, giving them a smattering of fresh powder right on top of the firm base he'd been building for the last few weeks.

The boys, which included Nate—he was a brother from another mother to the Johanssons—were grinning ear-to-ear, high-fiving people all over the place. Wren finally met Nate's ex-wife along with her partner and a bunch of other townies, all bringing their kids up for what would hopefully be the first of many days on the hill.

It would have been an utterly perfect day if she hadn't walked into Trigg's office in time to hear him fighting with his daughter.

"Do you know how many kids are begging their parents for a snowboard? *I* did. I'm giving you one of these new ones. They're different from the other kind. I think you'll like it. *Try* it."

"I want to try the skis from *Onkel* Rolf."

"You're just being obstinate."

"No, you are."

"Sky, tell him you'll try the board after lunch," Wren said. "Cara is down at the ticket windows, looking for you."

“Okay, thanks.” She brightened at the name of her friend from school, another new girl whose father had been hired as maintenance manager here at the resort. Turning back to Trigg, Sky said, “I’ll try the board after lunch.”

“With me.”

“Oh, you’re so spoiled,” Sky said with exasperation. “Fine. Can I go now?”

“Have fun.”

“Thank you.” She kissed his cheek and left, closing the door behind her.

“She’s the one who’s spoiled. Doesn’t even see it,” he muttered, peeling off his jeans so he was in his thermal underwear. He reached for his insulated boarding pants.

“Says the guy who owns his own snow park,” she teased, tangling arms with him as he tried to shrug on his suspenders.

He dropped his head to kiss her, let go a suspender and glanced at the door. “Did you lock it?”

“On opening day? I think you have better things to do.”

“Never, not once, have I had something better to do.” He backed her toward his desk.

The door flung open and Rolf pulled himself up short, taking in the mood with one flat-lidded glance. “How many times have you given me shit for not locking a door? Take five, but I want to get out there.” He walked out and snapped the door closed behind him.

Trigg looked at the ceiling. “I hate him so much.”

She kissed the underside of his chin, grinning. “Go have fun. We’ll have our kind of fun later.”

“Promise?”

“If you’re not too tired.”

“Quit being mean.” He kissed her. Said, “That tastes like another,” and kissed her again.

They toyed with letting it get away from them, but his radio crackled with someone on snow patrol asking for snow fence somewhere.

“Later,” he promised, drawing his suspender up his shoulder again.

“Oh. But I wanted to show you this.” She dug the folded paper from her back pocket.

Dear Auntie Wren,

I know I said I wanted Bruno to come for Christmas, but I’ve been thinking and I also want you to get pregnant. I know it’s a big decision. Murphy is a total pain and we can put him outside if his farts are too repulsive, but we all love him like crazy and I think we would love a baby even more. Please, please, pretty please?

Your favorite niece/stepdaughter,

Skylar Wren Johansson

“You’re probably having second thoughts after she was being such a brat a few minutes ago, but my IUD is gone, so \_\_\_”

“Since when?” His pupils dilated.

“Since I went to the doctor yesterday. I was going to tell you last night, but you worked late.”

“Well, we have to get started on that.” He pushed his suspender off again.

“It’s a reproductive emergency?”

“Hell, yes, it is. *You* saw what a brat she was being. *You* might change your mind.” He cupped her face. The light in his eyes was positively incandescent and so tender, it made her throat close up with emotion. “You really want to do this? Because you know how happy you make me, right? I want a baby, but you have to want it, too.”

“I do.” She smiled and shrugged shyly. “I love you. I want more family.”

“Me, too. I love you, too. So much I don’t know what to do with it all.” His tone was thick with sincerity, bringing a sting of joy to her eyes.

“You could start with locking the door,” she teased.

He did.

The End

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After twenty-five years of writing and submitting, **Dani Collins** won the 2013 Reviewer's Choice Award for Best First In Series from Romantic Times Book Reviews. Known mostly for her emotional, passionate Harlequin Presents, she has also published a hilarious romantic comedy, an epic medieval fantasy romance, and a pair of extremely erotic romances. Dani writes anything, so long as it's romance.

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