



Interview

WITH A

**BILLIONAIRE
GRUMP**

A FAKE DATING ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

KEIRA LANDRY

Interview With A Billionaire Grump

A Fake Dating Enemies To Lovers Romance

Keira Landry

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Chapter One

M ichael

I only had a few hours, I was in a rush to get what I needed to get done and grab a bite to eat before heading back to work. I moved through the shopping mall quickly. My mission clear, I headed for the shop I needed to reach, only to be stopped 10 steps from the entrance..

“Mr. Harding, Michael Harding?” A sweet, feminine voice called to me. When I looked in the direction, it annoyed me to see a cheerful looking young, petite brunette headed my way.

Annoyed, I stopped, prepared to be as rude as I needed to, but curious what she wanted. She was beautiful to be sure, not exactly my type of woman, but still lovely.

“Mr. Michael Harding, I’m Ms. Ava Reed, I’ve been trying to get a hold of you to schedule an interview for my business blog. Not sure if you got any of my messages over the last two weeks?”

She smiled, looking like a ray of sunshine on a cloudy day. She held out her hand; I glanced at where I was headed, prepared to do as I must. This woman had been calling me non-stop, begging for an interview, which I never did. A business mentor told me they were “bad for a good business and don’t do them” so I never have.

Now here she was determined to ruin my Friday before the fundraising event I had to attend later tonight.

“I know you’re probably very busy but if you have five minutes, perhaps I could buy you a...”

“I don’t do interviews, Ms. Reed. I think I might have mentioned that on the phone the two times we spoke. I’m not interested, now if you will...” it irritated me, I’d already wasted more time speaking to her than I wanted to.

“It will only take a minute and I assure you that what you have to say is very important to many people...”

My phone buzzed. I silently thanked Hades for whoever was calling and didn’t bother to look to see who it was. My eyes focused on the store where I was headed and not on Ms. Reed either. “Excuse me. Hello.”

“Michael, it’s Therese. I am not feeling too well today. There must be some flu or something and I have to cancel for tonight. I’m sorry about the fundraiser.”

I watched as little miss sunshine turned and walked away while I listened to Therese drone on about how ill she felt. “Feel better Therese, I gotta go. Thanks for letting me know.”

I hung up. “Wait, Ms. Reed.” Despite my frustration with delays, I ran after Ms. Reed, hating every moment until I caught up to her and demanded answers. “Ms. Reed, why did you walk away in the middle of our conversation when I politely stopped when you called out to me?”

I could see anger in her eyes, but she quickly masked it with a smile that lit up her entire face. “Sorry, I thought you were done with me and not going to do the interview. Do you have time for an interview today?”

She was beautiful, to be sure; I knew she would get the job done tonight. “I can’t do it right now, but I might do it later. I’m not sure yet. That depends on you, I guess, since I have a proposition for you if you’re interested?”

She stepped a little closer. My chest tightened a little when I smelled her floral perfume. “What’s your proposition?”

I smiled to myself, knowing I had the right bait. “Well, my date for tonight’s fundraiser just canceled. She’s sick and I want you to pretend to be my girlfriend for the event. Then after that I might do the interview.”

Her eyes widened and I couldn’t help but imagine her as a doe eyed deer in the woods before a kill. “You want me to pretend to be your girlfriend for a fundraiser tonight?” She smiled and looked around the mall as if looking for a microphone to tell everyone, or because she thought I was joking.

When her eyes met mine again, I was all business. “Yes, that’s exactly what I want you to do.”

Her face turned serious, and I could feel my frustration growing. “Ms. Reed, I have no time for games as you can clearly see, it’s one of the many reasons I don’t do interviews. It’s also one reason I don’t sit around and make small talk with

people. I don't have time for it, so if you will excuse me, I have something”

“Will you do my interview, then? I mean, if I go with you to this fundraiser event as your pretend girlfriend, will you do the interview with me then?”

She looked hopeful. I could feel my patience. I had other things to do, and it looked like my target practice at the shooting range was going to have to wait until tomorrow. It was a busy day, and I didn't figure on every interruption known to man.

The mall was getting noisy, people were pouring in as the day wore on and I had a limited amount of time to get what I needed at the store. Agitated, I looked her dead in the eye. “I think I made that clear already. If you do this for me, I will consider doing the interview.”

She said nothing for a moment; I saw in her eyes that the wheels of her mind were working. I hated shopping even if I had a successful retail business. Being swallowed up by droves of shoppers as I tried to tend to my own life was exhausting.

She smiled, looked at me from head to toe as if accessing me, which I didn't like at all and spoke. “Before I answer, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, just make it fast. I can't guarantee that I will answer, but who knows?” I glanced at my phone. She had all of 3 minutes and I was out of there. If she couldn't answer my question, not only did she not need the interview, but she

didn't need a lovely night out at a fundraising event which could help her business blog as well.

I watched the time while she debated asking me whatever insane question she had swirling in her mind.

“Why do you need someone to pretend to be your girlfriend when you probably have women beating down the door to get to you? You're successful, smart, sporty and good looking. What gives?”

She was intrigued, but her compliments didn't go on deaf ears. I gifted her with a rare smile, at the very least she'd earned brownie points even if I couldn't stand the thought of doing an interview for her or anyone else.

“It's a long story, let's just say I don't trust people too easily, man or woman, and I don't let anyone into my personal space too fast. So what do you say? According to my watch, you have exactly 1 minute to answer or we can both forget we ever spoke. I have things to do.”

She frowned, her eyes averted to the people walking around us. I had no time for nonsense; I was not about to let her or anyone else ruin my day, even if I had to miss target practice. It was a daily ritual for me, target practice and hitting the gym, not necessarily in that order, but I rarely missed either.

“Okay, your time is up. For the record, not only will I not be doing your interview now or ever, but you should work a bit more on your people skills. People have their own agenda and they are busy. They don't always have time to stand around and debate life with you. Good day.”

I headed for the store. Enough was enough and I would go to the fundraiser by myself if I had to since I'd now lost even more time getting things done and there was no time left for finding a woman for my arm.

I heard my name called, but kept walking. No one was stopping me from getting things done now. I'd wasted enough time, or more accurately, someone else had wasted enough of my time.

I kept walking, not at all concerned with whoever was trying to get my attention. Once inside the store, I meandered around, stopped for two seconds to wave to Larry, and got down to business. I needed a few things and located them swiftly.

"Mr. Harding, Michael, I will go as your date. I'm sorry it took me so long to answer, it just took me by surprise." Ms. Reed was smiling at me again.

I didn't bother to look, to intent on my agenda now to care. "That's nice, but I think we finished our conversation a few minutes ago. Maybe next time you will just roll with the punches when someone asks you a direct question instead of letting your emotions, whatever they may be, impede your clear thinking."

There was a long silence. I knew I threw her a curve ball, but I was not in the mood. I really needed her help. I hated going to these functions alone. I knew I should be nicer, but I just wasn't feeling it. This woman rubbed me the wrong way

already. To spend a few hours with her at an event might drive me right to the brink of snapping emotionally.

“Fine, then if you don’t need my help, I’ll be on my way. I thought maybe we could work something out and I’m sorry if it took me too long to decide. Admit people don’t go around asking strangers such questions. For all you know, I could be a lunatic.”

She had a point there, and as I turned my head, she turned away to leave. I hated having to grovel or beg and my mind snapped to it. “Your right.”

She stopped, turned to face me, confusion on her face. I could see the slightest hint of frustration mingled with the confusion, momentarily intrigued by her gorgeous eyes. I lost my train of thought.

This frustrated me more than not staying on track in my day. Irritated, I knew I had to put an end to this madness with Ms. Reed before we both went crazy. “Okay, so you will come to the fundraiser as my pretend girlfriend and I STRESS pretend because when it’s over, this...” I pointed my finger back and forth between us for emphasis. “It’s over. Understood?”

She smiled the most dazzling smile I’d ever seen. It caught me off guard. “And you’ll do the interview?”

I grabbed a bunch of stuff, my hands full. “I said I will consider it, think about it, maybe. If you don’t do the fundraiser with me, I won’t do the interview.” I saw her defeat. She’d come with an agenda just like mine and clearly she was not as good a player in the game of life as I was to this day.

It surprised me when Ava smiled, and quickly recovered or changed tactics. It was impossible to determine which one, as I didn't know her that well yet.

“Okay. I have faith in you. You will do the interview even if right now it's just a, maybe. You need my help and I am confident this little gesture and service I provide will not go unnoticed.”

I laughed then. Her down home, wholesome attitude was not what I was used to as an adult man. As a young child, yes, but now at the top of the food chain in the business world, no.

“You should never misplace your confidence in someone until you know who they are and what they are about. Take that as free advice. Anyway, grab that phone of yours and follow me to the counter. I am going to give you my cell number so you can text me and we can talk about tonight.”

I rattled off my phone number as we walked side by side. There was something warm and inviting about walking beside her. Her perfume, the way she walked with a gentle woman's sway, and the way she smiled at me as I gave her my digits.

Chapter Two

Ava

Michael was exactly the man I thought he'd be, rude, self righteous and obnoxiously handsome in a very manly, rough around the edges way. Walking up to him in the mall was a bold move, but I needed this interview.

Once I recovered from all that rudeness and the tingling sensations that ran up and down my spine from being so close to such a good-looking man, he shocked me.

While he wasn't necessarily my type, his question for me caught me completely off guard. Men like Michael Harding didn't need any woman to pretend to be anything to them. All he had to do was stand there and 10 women would notice him in less than the time to order a latte.

I was stunned, not only did it seem odd for him to ask such a thing but even stranger that he used it as a tool to meet both our needs. What frustrated me was he didn't agree with me

right then to do the interview and left it hanging in the air between us as a, maybe.

Another arrow pointing towards his arrogant and selfish nature. Still, I needed the interview. I'd been trying for a few weeks to get him to consider and this was my last ditch effort to sway him.

Michael Harding had a reputation as being very private, and a bit of a loner, while having no time for anyone or anything that didn't align with his life purpose or agenda.

From my line of work I knew successful people like Mr. Harding got to where they were because they were driven and let nothing or anyone stand in their way. That was exactly why I needed to talk to him and do this interview.

I needed him to share his life success, tips and outlook and anything he wanted to share so I could put it out there to help others.

After I recovered from his usual request, I knew it would work but by then he'd already walked away. All I had to do was hang on his arm, smile and be polite, act like a girlfriend and the night would be a success.

I knew I could do this, so I ran after him, slightly agitated he took off on me before I gave him an answer. By the time I reached him again he had everything he needed and was ready to leave.

Unfortunately, his rudeness continued, and it made me very frustrated. I wasn't used to dealing with such obnoxious

people. I thought for sure he would be happy I accepted his offer but he'd already moved on, uncaring either way.

I was prepared to accept defeat, but needed to regroup. Clearly Mr. Harding didn't want to speak with me or give me a chance to help him. He changed tactics and his thought process so fast it could give a girl whiplash.

I felt a headache threatening to ruin my day, but stopped when he again changed his mind. I was thrilled when this time our conversation went smoothly and we came to an agreement.

I hated it, that he was the one in charge, but determination was half the battle and I was nothing, if not determined. "I will text you, I'm just going to say HI, so you know it's me."

He threw me a look as if I was being stupid. "Ms. Reed, I don't need you to tell me that, it's a waste of your breath and both our time, not to mention it makes us both look stupid."

His matter-of-fact statement took me off guard, I smiled. "You're right, I never thought of it that way."

"Most people don't. They spend more time wasting time than anything else. So I have some things to do, so do you. Do you have something appropriate to wear?"

"I do but..."

"Never mind, women love new clothes. Give me a few minutes. I will meet you outside where you so conveniently stopped me before, in about 20 minutes."

I was taken aback by his all business attitude, apparently everything in his life was straightforward and to the point.

“Okay.” I went back to where we met and waited, biting my nails with anticipation.

Like clockwork, he was there right before 20 minutes was up. He looked at me for a moment and then frowned. “I’m good with sporting goods, outdoor stuff and man stuff. I don’t even think I know where to find something suitable for a woman to wear. I’m merely paying for what you will wear, and ensuring it aligns with my style so you don’t look like a lunatic. Lead the way.”

Surprised, I laughed and led the way to my favorite store. It felt strange having a man I didn’t know at all accompany me on a shopping trip for a dress, and I mentally made notes as he walked beside me, scrolling through his phone.

I couldn’t help but wonder why he wasn’t married because in the space of 5 minutes he’d transformed into a husband without even realizing, walking quietly beside his wife as she shopped.

I smiled to myself, but knew not what to say. We were nothing to each other and yet we had to pretend to be something more.

Once again, he was on it like a drill sergeant yelling at his cadets. “So we met about 6 months ago at a party. We’re dating, nothing serious, but we are enjoying each other’s company. If we make it too serious, people will speculate and have a hard time when they don’t see us together at the next fundraiser.”

“You’ve done this before?” I couldn’t help but mock him for how quickly he contrived such an easy and acceptable storyline for our little skit.

“Yes, actually, more than a few times.”

I laughed out loud. “Well geez, perhaps that’s something you need to think about, Mr. Harding. I mean, why no girlfriend? No wife, or at least a really close female friend?” I stopped to look at some shoes, since he was paying.

My mind was working double time as I tried to make mental notes for my interview if we discussed anything useful, and tried to focus on the task at hand.

“I think we already discussed this, besides I have a woman that usually helps me out. We’re not together, but she came down sick, so here I am asking you for help. Don’t pick those, they will make your feet look fat and they’re outrageous. I’m more conservative and understated, so I want you to be the same.”

I dropped the shoes immediately, annoyed he was going to literally help me pick what I wore. I tried to stuff my thoughts away. I preferred to pick my clothing and had a particular style I liked.

It was a deal, and this was my end of the bargain, so I had to play along even if I was dressed like bozo the clown. If I was to secure this interview, I had to do everything right. That’s why when he held up a pair of simple black pumps I nodded my head in agreement.

“What size?” He barely made eye contact with me, but he could easily find a perfect pair of shoes. It was madness.

“Size 10.”

“Wow, you have enormous feet.” He laughed. Little red flags went off in my head as I watched him. It was surprising how such a simple act, laughing could change a person’s face. He smiled, and laughed, it lit up his face and softened all the harsh plans of his features. It also softened the anger I felt when he said that rude comment to me.

He was good looking before, but after that smile; he looked like every woman’s fantasy, rugged, carefree, wild and untamable with a relaxed, radiant smile. My heart skipped a beat before I realized what was happening and stuffed that feeling back down to where it belonged.

“Here, try this on.”

After the shoes, he was off and running like my 12-year-old cousin through a toy store, pulling out dresses and gowns. The sales woman laughed every time he showed up with something.

“Wow, your boyfriend sure enjoys helping you pick out clothing. You must have a wonderful relationship with a man who so easily gets into the spirit of things. I wish my husband did that.”

I looked at Mr. Harding and smiled. “Yes, he is a handful.”

He threw me a look, a mixture of warning to shut my mouth and silliness. He pulled a face when the saleswoman turned

her back, and I had to control my laughter.

After I had 5 outfits to try on, one business suit, 2 dresses and 2 gowns, the saleswoman set me up in a fitting room. “Now you have to model them for your man, it’s the least you can do when he worked so hard to find all this lovely stuff. Good choice on the shoes, by the way, classic, simple and elegant.”

Begrudgingly, I put on the business suit, it had a clean line and simple, classy style but was too boring for my taste. I hated it and felt stupid walking to the platform while he watched like he was a girlfriend helping me pick out my wedding dress.

It was an odd mixture of emotions when I walked out, excitement that I was being watched so closely, and I mean closely. Mr. Harding watched so intently it felt like I was a deer in the woods and he was ready to shoot to kill.

“I don’t like it. It’s too plain. It doesn’t accentuate your beauty.” His eyes were all serious, it made my insides shiver.

I faced the mirror to have a good look at myself. “You know, this might go smoother if I picked my outfit myself. Maybe just tell me what you want or don’t want and you don’t need to sit through all this nonsense, you must be bored to tears.”

He glared at me. “No, I think I’ll help, besides I love looking at a woman’s sexy curves and body. Kind of exciting.” He smiled again. I saw a glimmer of lust in his eyes, tried to ignore it after that, but it was very hard to do.

The way he made me feel with that one look irritated me. I didn't want to feel that way about Michael Harding, even if he was good looking. "Fine." I quickly changed into a dress, a black, elegant, knee-length silk dress with a touch of glitz at the neck and waist. I didn't want to go out and parade in front of Michael again. I felt like a pageant princess walking the catwalk for all to see, competing for the top prize as Miss Whatever.

"Come on, come on, your man needs to see this one. I think he is going to like it. He seems like he knows what he wants and thankfully he has good taste." The slightly aging saleswoman threw back the curtain to the dressing room and smiled.

I gritted my teeth. "Well, I suppose if he wants to see it, I can show him."

"Oh, don't be shy. You have a beautiful shape that will turn any man's eye. This outfit should give him something to think about while you're out and about. Nothing wrong with reminding a man that you could find another."

She chuckled, and I tried not to think about what those images might have meant for her as I walked out.

"Beautiful. I like this one. It shows off all your sexy curves, love." He winked at me.

Confused, I said nothing and did my best to mentally shake off the excitement his words and wink caused in my body. *Focus on the interview, business and getting it done. It's but one night, and it will be over fast. Ignore everything else.*

After I tried on all the outfits, we settled on the black dress. Of course Mr. Harding paid and then I thought we were done as we stood side by side in the middle of the mall, looking around.

“Well, I guess you can text me the time and where I should meet you, Mr. Harding.” I watched him closely. He looked around the mall as if accessing what came next. He was very calculating and thoughtful.

“Call me Michael, Mr. Harding won’t work. You’re supposed to be my girlfriend, remember. It might as well start right now. Besides, it seems so formal, and I don’t do formal things.”

I smiled. There was more than meets the eyes with this successful entrepreneur. Somehow I had to convey that in my interview, so people knew. The more they could relate to the successful people I wrote about, the easier it was for them to see themselves in their own success story. “Okay. Although I can’t guarantee I will get it right all the time.” I wanted to touch him. Something about that smile earlier, and the way he commented on how I looked stayed with me, excited me.

“We will practice while we get you some jewelry. You have the shoes, dress, purse and I’m assuming I don’t need to buy you anything underneath?” His eyes were intent and questioning as he looked at my chest with a grin.

I waved that away. “No, goodness no. I’m good.” Suddenly our agreement was taking an odd turn into a place I didn’t want it to go even if the woman inside me was highly

intrigued. His words hit home and every inch of my body felt it. My mind hung on them as we walked.

“Okay, come on Ava, let’s get you something elegant for that beautiful skin of yours. A nice necklace, perhaps a bracelet too.” His eyes focused on me as he surveyed me from head to toe.

My legs felt weak for a moment and I had the urge to grab him for support, but didn’t dare touch him. There was something alluring about his deep voice when he said my name. It made me forget what I was about for a second or two.

“Mr. Harding, you don’t have to buy me jewelry.”

All serious, he threw me a warning look. “How am I to get you to call me Michael?”

“I don’t know. I guess the more we talk and I address you as Michael instead of Mr. Harding, but I told you this might be difficult and we don’t have a lot of time.”

“You’re right, let’s go.” He took my hand then and tugged me along.

The gesture felt intimate and personal, even though I knew it was only a business agreement. It was one that would benefit us both but I had a hard time adjusting. The feel of his hand in mine, it made me think of wicked things. I was curious to know why his hands were a little calloused.

I felt out of my element as we stood in front of a jewelry case. Fingers shaking, I accepted the two necklaces he handed

me to look at, and had a hard time holding still and breathing when he placed each one around my neck.

“I like this one. What do you think, love?”

That word, every time he called me love, instead of Ms. Reed or Ava, my legs felt like they would buckle beneath me. This time I had to reach out and hold his arm to stay myself as I walked a few steps to the mirror, annoyed how off balance he made me feel.

“It’s lovely Michael.” My hands were instantly drawn to touch the simple diamond necklace. “I can’t accept this, it’s too much.”

My emotions were all over the place. I needed a break and had to get away from him, get some air soon before I did or said something stupid.

He frowned. “Nonsense. We will take this one.” He handed it to the clerk and went back to his phone again.

After we left with my new jewelry, I had so many questions. My mind was working a hundred miles per hour and every time I thought of a question of something I wanted to know for the interview, I lost it because I was so hungry.

“Listen, I have a bunch of....”

“I don’t mean to interrupt Mr. Harding but I have....”

“Michael.” He looked agitated.

“Fine, Michael, I have to eat. I know you have things to do. I will be ready in time. Just give me the bags and I will meet

you wherever you want me. Just text me the time.” He wasn’t smiling now. Something had changed in the space of five minutes and I had no clue what. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, I’m just running severely late and I am wondering if we should do something with your hair.” He focused intently and, even though I was confused, I felt angry.

“What is wrong with my hair! Goodness, you act like you’re completely painting a new canvas. All I know is this interview had better be a good one.” I chuckled and tried to make light of the moment.

He reached a hand out and touched my hair. It was the most awkward moment I’d ever experienced in my life, his hands in my hair all at once. His hands fluffed and picked and basically played with my hair.

I felt annoyed but bit my tongue and let him have his moment, certain at this point Mr. Michael Harding was losing his mind.

After two minutes of this, I could take no more and tapped his hands away. “Stop that!”

He frowned. “I didn’t say I didn’t like it. Your hair is like silk, it’s beautiful I just thought....”

I held up my hand to silence him. I was not going to be belittled or insulted. “Hold that thought Mr. Harding.”

“Michael.” He eyed me suspiciously.

“Michael. I know I agreed to this but at this point I need to know if you will definitely do the interview or not. Also, I

need to know if there is anything else I should know about me pretending to be your girlfriend for the night.”

I was going out on a limb here, felt completely out of my element but blurted my thoughts out, anyway. “Is there anything else required of me as your girlfriend that I need to know? Do we have to kiss? Do we have to show each other affection like embracing and cuddling? And when the night is over, you aren’t expecting me to....”

His eyes changed immediately. They looked almost animalist as if he wanted to eat me alive; I shivered. There was something in those eyes and I sensed business was over. He was all man then, and nothing else, and like the hunted, I felt the slightest pulse of fear run through me as he gave me the once over.

He threw me a wicked smile. “I expect nothing like that unless you’re interested. I am a man after all and you’re a beautiful woman Ava.”

My throat closed for a second. I looked around, felt my body responding to his deep seductive voice and what he said in a way I really liked. When I had my voice again, I turned around.

His eyes were still intent, and serious, I couldn’t tell if it was business or pleasure anymore. I laughed then, my nervousness getting the better of me. “You are so funny, I did not know Mr. Harding.”

“You’re irritating me Ava. Call me Michael. I won’t have you making a fool of me as I would rather go alone if you

can't manage it. Now playtime is over, as much as the idea of us together intrigues me. Take these, I have to go as I've wasted enough time here shopping. Send me your address and I will text you what time to be ready so I can pick you up."

Chapter Three

Michael

I was running a bit late, which I despised. I knew I needed to hurry, but it took way longer than I'd thought. Ava Reed was annoying and yet something about her got under my skin. She was far too young and always so cheerful.

I left her to eat and got to the business of the rest of my day. I barely got everything done in time for the fundraiser. Ava thankfully texted me her address and I text her the time to be ready.

We had a tight schedule to keep; I wanted to get to the fundraiser, make an appearance and do what was necessary, then smoothly slip out the side door when the time was right. I hated social functions, but fundraising was a passion of mine and brought out folks that were as passionate as I was about helping the community.

“I’m here.” The sound of her cheerful voice across the line as I waited outside rubbed me the wrong way like every other time I spoke to her on the phone. Her youthfulness and sparkly personality was a direct polar opposite to mine.

“Okay, I will be right down Michael! See I got it right Michael!” She laughed.

I hung up wondering how the conversations were going to go tonight at the fundraiser and if I was making a tremendous mistake taking a woman so much younger than me to such an event.

Five minutes later she came out the door looking like a princess ready for the ball, her beautiful brown hair swept up atop her head with wispy pieces dancing around her delicate face. She looked exactly like she was youthful, and a dazzling ray of sunshine. For the first time in my life I was struck dumbfounded.

“I’m here Michael.” She sat down beside me in the back of the limo and smiled. “I have to tell you I am so nervous but I’m also excited we struck this deal. I know you probably don’t want to do the interview but it will be fun, this is going to be fun too. I’ve never been to one of these and I just hope I don’t make a fool of you as sometimes when I’m nervous I talk a lot in case you didn’t notice.”

She laughed, and I thought about telling her to be quiet and talk as little as possible. I knew I was going to spend the night watching over Cinderella. The things I did to save face in public sometimes astounded even me.

My muscles were tense, more than a few people at this event knew me pretty well and it would either be a successful night or a disaster. I focused my eyes on Ava. “You will be fine, just take a few deep breaths and remember less is more.”

Her overly enthusiastic personality was clearly an asset to her business blog. I’d looked it over before getting ready for the fundraiser but real life was different.

“Okay. Thank you for that. I’ve been to a lot of parties and other events, but I feel out of my element to dress like this. I feel like something out of a Disney movie.”

I patted her hand, prepared to reassure her as much as I did myself, but I couldn’t stop thinking about her lips. They looked so plump and ripe for kissing. “Don’t focus on that, it’s everyday life here in the city. Own it and others will believe it.”

“Is that something I can quote you on?” She pulled out her phone and hit the record button.

“Don’t do that Ava.” I pulled away and put distance between us. I saw the upset look on her face and forced myself to explain. “I don’t want to talk about the interview tonight. I promise if I do the interview you will know it, now turn that off.”

What had started out as a relaxing evening was going to not turn out well if I didn’t take charge of the situation. Indifferent after that, I turned back to my phone and business. I had to ignore her or I was going to kiss her just to taste her lips and quiet her down.

“I’m sorry Mr. Harding, I just thought...”

“That’s the problem in this life. Everyone is always putting their agenda on everyone else instead of handling it themselves. I need you to be fully present tonight and pretend to be my girlfriend, and you saw a way to make it about you. It’s selfish.”

She lifted her chin, and I could see the young rebel in her coming out. “Yeah, well, you’re selfish too. You spend all your time walking around in life thinking the only thing that matters is what you want and need, without considering other people. That’s rude.”

“How so? Because I choose to focus on my own life. That’s what we are supposed to do, take care of the business of living our lives. Unless we find ourselves at functions like this one tonight.”

The limo came to a halt, and I saw the driver waiting outside the door.

“I understand the agenda and business better than you think. You may be older than me but that doesn’t mean I don’t know how to get things done, I just choose to have more feeling, compassion and openness to the world around me while you choose to ignore anyone or anything that doesn’t fit into your perfectly planned day.”

I had to set this aside. I only heard half of what she said as we were at the event and we both needed to shift into our roles. “We can discuss this another time. Right now, I need you to focus on your role as my girlfriend. As you say you are

open to the world around you, we'll use those skills to woo everyone while on my arm tonight. The better you do tonight, the more likely you are to get that interview." I knocked on the window for the driver to open the door.

First, I stepped out and helped Ava out of the vehicle and held her hand rather than let it fall. I was a huge believer in the beginning as you plan to go on and this was a good place to start.

I felt her tension, the way she moved rigidly beside me, and it worried me she might trip in those heels, making a fool of us both. To give support, I wrapped my arm around her waist and smiled at her.

She smiled, but I saw the surprise in her eyes and leaned in to whisper. "Put your arm around me Ava and for God sakes relax." She smelled like a Chinese flower garden, a mixture of Jasmine and something else. It was intoxicating to my senses and made it hard for me to focus.

I felt her gracefully slip her arm around my waist and then she smiled the most dazzling smile I'd ever seen, then whispered back. "I feel like such a fraud. I didn't realize it would be so hard."

She laughed then and shook hands alongside me as we entered the fundraising event. "Marcus, this is my girlfriend, Ava Reed. Ava, this is Marcus Thompson."

"It's such a pleasure to meet you Ava, not sure how Michael got so lucky but if you get bored with all that hunting, fishing

and outdoor nonsense maybe I could steal you away.” Marcus laughed, his eyes surveyed the woman beside me.

Possessive, out of protection for my young accomplice and determined to keep her away from predators had me pull her closer.

She laughed. “Oh, you are too funny. I could never be bored with Michael, he’s charming, smart and good looking. Besides, I love the outdoors. I enjoy spending a great deal of time doing outdoor sports.”

“Well then, he’s finally found his perfect match.”

With her soft body pressed tightly to mine I made it clear to everyone quickly what I thought about my girlfriend, she was mine and off limits. This was no casual affair. That thought stayed with me as we moved around the event.

My friends didn’t miss this either. I kept Ava close to me the entire night. Everyone who speaks to her commented to me on how friendly, personable and fun she was, and how lucky I was to have her.

We were approaching the end of the night. My good friend Peter and his wife Maddy were really enjoying Ava. They commented more than once how we made the perfect couple. Ava was the perfect girlfriend that night. We danced, we ate, we talked, and she wooed everyone.

More than one man commented on her beauty and how lucky I was, and it felt good to have her on my arm. Where Therese was more refined and quiet, a perfect accompaniment

to my personality on a personal level, Ava was my polar opposite, but aligned more with my public image. She added a softness and friendliness to my all business attitude, and it intrigued me despite the contrast.

Still, at the night's end, I was thankful it was over and wondered how I was going to get out of doing the interview. I figured all the things I'd purchased for this night she could keep and should be payment enough for her service.

Not to mention all the connections she could use down the road when we'd had a fake break up. We were just about ready to leave when Peter and Maddy stopped us.

"Ava please tell me you are coming this weekend. We're headed to Lake Placid." Maddy reached out and gave Ava a hug. It was obvious she took a personal liking to my new girlfriend.

"Well, I..." Ava looked confused but smiled at my friends.

"Maddy, I'm not sure she can make it, right, love?" I smiled, secretly hoping she would play along. "You remember I told you I was going to my Lake Placid cabin for a long weekend with Peter and Maddy. You have that baby shower on Sunday, right?"

She laughed. "Oh, yes. I'm sorry Maddy, I won't be able to make it this weekend."

"Oh, boo! Can't you just send a gift? Michael make her send a gift and come along. I really want to get to know her more. We will have so much fun together, besides it will give

you two more time to do guy things. I insist, and you know Michael, what will happen if I don't get my way."

I gave Ava a look. There was no proper way out of this, but I raced through a series of ideas in my head that would do the trick. "She has a baby shower on Sunday."

"She can send a gift." Maddy looked undeterred and people were watching, since she had a way of drawing attention to herself with her overly loud voice.

"Maddy, it's too late. She can't just send a gift. She promised her family."

"Nope. I insist she come, if she does, she can leave early on Sunday and still get back here by then. At least she can come for a little while. I'm not taking no for an answer, Michael."

Maddy was determined, and laced her arm through Ava's. Ava remained quiet and thoughtful as if watching to see what happened next.

"She still needs to buy a gift."

"She can order one online and have it Fed Ex'd seriously Michael, what is the big deal? I merely want to spend time with your girlfriend. It's not every day that you date someone seriously, and not someone as lovely and friendly as Ava."

She pinned me with a look, and in some ways Maddy and I were exactly alike, driven, determined and not willing to take no for an answer or settle for anything less than what she wanted. I had a moment's mental debate about steering Ava towards Maddy for an interview instead.

In my element I knew I could fight but it would be in poor taste for something so stupid and look bad for me. “Fine. Ava love, it looks like you’re coming with me to Lake Placid to enjoy a quick weekend away.”

“Wait, she’s never been there? All the better! She will have so much fun!” Maddy pulled Ava away. I couldn’t tell how she felt. Her eyes averted to the discussion she and Maddy were having.

By the time all was said and done, Maddy had manipulated us both and completed her mission. Ava headed with us to Lake Placid the following day.

We had a lot to discuss on the ride back to her place. “Thank you for tonight. You did a great job, probably a little too good if you ask me. Everyone adored you. I didn’t know that was going to happen.”

“You’re welcome. I should thank you. I had a lot of fun and it was a learning experience for me but what are we going to do about this weekend? You know, it would have been nice if you could have asked me personally, perhaps in private, to make sure I had nothing going on.”

I had to admit to myself my new “girlfriend” was a good choice, but I worried what this weekend would bring. “You’re right about that, but I guess we will make do. We should talk first thing in the morning, but I need to get home. I have some things to do.”

She looked agitated, as if I’d done something wrong. Then it was as if she pushed that away, took a deep breath and

smiled. I thought back to the night, all we'd been through and could find nothing off. I didn't insult her, act rude or talk to her disrespectfully, so I continued. "As much as I'd like to come in or take you to my place so we can talk about all of this, we can do it in the morning, so if you don't mind...."

She didn't immediately move, and I was forced to do the one thing I didn't want to do, hug her. Hugging her would bring me close and personal with her again, which was too tempting. The intoxicating scent of her perfume, all those lovely soft curves I knew she had and felt, would be too hard to resist.

That was the last thing I needed right now but if she wasn't going to move, I would do what I have to do to get the ball rolling so I could get back home and to work. "Good night Ava." I leaned in to hug her and she froze in my arms.

Chapter Four

Ava

The night had been a tremendous success, but I was eager to know when Michael would do the interview. Being roped into a weekend with him at Lake Placid had been an immense surprise but not one entirely out of bounds, since it would give me time to get to know and see him in a different light which I could use to my advantage.

It would help me with our interview and help my reader base get to know this successful man better. I was a bit irritated. He didn't ask me if I had plans and didn't even see that as a problem, yet another act of rudeness towards me on his part.

I was thinking he didn't like me at all, which was a stark contrast from the kindness he showed me at the event even if it was pretend. There was something between us. Every time he

touched me, my insides turned upside down. It made me nervous, the last thing I needed was to be getting sidetracked from my agenda.

Besides, as handsome as he was, Michael was far too old for me, and too stuffy and all work. I had plans with my girlfriends to go to a bridal event. One of them was getting married in a few weeks and with this sudden change in plans I would have to cry off sick or something.

Still, I let that slide, determined to get a powerful and thought-provoking interview from this elusive but successful business man if it killed me. When he gave me the brush off and basically verbally booted me out of his limo, I was stunned.

I couldn't move for all of a minute as I tried to tamp down being upset. The prize at the end of the tunnel was going to dwindle fast if he continued to act so ruthlessly rude towards me and didn't commit to any time frame for this interview.

When he leaned in to hug me, something inside me snapped. He was sending mixed signals like a player with no clue what he was doing. I sat there frozen in place, feeling it was very hard to resist the sexual chemistry between us but needing to be all business. I realized this weekend was going to be very hard for me if I didn't keep a level head and set some boundaries.

He pulled back, confusion in his eyes. "Okay, it's time for you to go, I guess."

I frowned at yet another brush off and wondered if his mother ever taught him any manners and I cleared my throat. “Before I do, we need to talk about this weekend.”

“I said we can do that in the morning.”

“No, give me an idea of when I can expect this interview. I fulfilled my end of the bargain and now I am going above and beyond here, not that I mind. Although I have an engagement that I now have to cancel. And it was rude of you to not pull me aside and ask me. It was even more rude that you didn’t even see how rude you were being, that my weekend is less important than yours. I know now why you don’t have a girlfriend. No one would stick around after dealing with this regularly. Anyway, can you commit to a day or time for this interview?”

He looked temporarily affronted by what I said, so I hurried on to smooth things over. I wasn’t normally like this, but his rudeness, even if he was an extremely busy man, was rubbing me the wrong way.

He cleared his throat and immediately went back to scrolling through his phone, a habit he seemed to have when faced with other people’s emotions and dealing with them. “I can’t do that right now. I will talk to you about it this weekend. We just need to get this done and then we will be done with each other. I will make it worth your while for going with us.”

Frustrated, I grabbed my purse and got out of the limo. Either he was a commit-a-phobic on multiple levels or playing

games. I needed space to think and figure out how best to approach the next few days.

I didn't bother looking back when he called my name. I didn't want to be rude, but he was being very rude to me and I needed to put some distance between us. Perhaps by morning he would be in better spirits and we could talk about everything.

Once inside, I realized how exhausted I was, and wondered if I needed to return the stuff he'd bought for me. Perhaps there was some organization he could donate the items to for someone else to use. I sent him a text.

Michael, I forgot to ask, should I box this stuff back up to give back to you? I don't normally have a use for such extravagant items.

You shouldn't have gotten out of the vehicle like that. I don't like when people just walk away from me when we are in the middle of a discussion. As for the clothing, shoes and jewelry, it's yours to keep. Wear it, give it away, do as you wish.

Stunned, I put everything away and spent some time meditating to clear out all my negative energy and grabbed a snack since the food at the fundraising event was sparse. "All I know is that this interview better be the best interview I've ever done. Putting up with a man like you is making it very hard for me to keep my eyes on the prize and see it like that."

I groaned when both my cats looked at me for another treat. "You two are so helpful."

The bed was uncomfortable, and I was restless. I woke repeatedly, remembering the way it felt to be in Michael's arms as we moved through the event. The hug he gave me, the way his whispers in my ear made me shiver, it was very unsettling.

I tried to remain hopeful with thoughts of spending a pleasant weekend at some elaborate cabin in the woods looking at the deer and birds. I could chat with Maddy and perhaps Peter too and get to know Michael from a different perspective and see the other side of him. The man rather than the business executive.

Come morning I felt nervous and thought to excuse myself from the adventure with his friends by saying I came down sick. When Michael called, I was prepared. "Michael, I don't think this is a good idea. I think I'm coming down sick."

"No, you're not. You just don't want to go. Believe me, I am not thrilled about this either, but Maddy has been on the phone with me all morning asking me all kinds of questions about you. She is so excited that if we don't go together, she will get suspicious. She has a loud mouth and is a bit of a gossip, which could spell trouble for me."

"I don't want to do this Michael, I'm nervous. We haven't talked at all. I know nothing about you and you know nothing about me. We are going to mess this up." I sighed heavily, my face in my hands as my coffee got cold.

He laughed. "Don't be nervous. Come on, we can do this. You did great last night. Besides, I have the interview. I don't

know if I will do it, if you don't come."

His words of motivation didn't go unnoticed, and I was surprised by them since he wasn't the cheerful, positive kind of guy. But he upset me with his words and lack of commitment in the interview.

Upset I ignored my one cat Chow who had her face practically in my coffee cup and cursed the day I decided I should interview Michael Harding. "You are the most irritating and hard-headed man I have ever met in my life."

His laughter didn't surprise me. "So I've been told. Come on. I will be there in an hour and you need to pack a few things. I hope you have proper gear."

Blinking, I realized I had no clue what he was talking about. "Oh, yeah, of course I do. Lots of stuff I can take to Lake Placid." Frantic, I hurried to my bedroom and started whipping things out my drawers and closet.

"Good."

I forgot about him for a moment in my frenzy and accidentally tossed the phone with some clothing on the bed. Quickly I grabbed it hearing his voice.

"Ava, are you okay over there? It sounds like you're caught in the middle of a tornado. What is going on?"

Breathless, I stopped, dropped everything on the floor, and collapsed on my bed. "Oh, nothing. I just need to pack, and I want to make sure I have enough stuff."

“Relax, women are always so concerned about packing everything at home, just bring a few essentials for a few days and you’ll be fine since you’ve done this before.”

I let out the breath I was holding in, scanning the closet while laying on the bed and finding not one super warm sweater so I wouldn’t freeze to death because I hated the cold. “Oh well, I thank you for the vote of confidence in me, but I am a woman and sometimes we overthink things. You men think you know us so well, but you don’t.”

“Oh, I know more than you realize about your gender, but sometimes we all have to do things we don’t like to do.”

I had to interject my two cents at that moment as a little dig. “Oh! You mean like interviews?”

“So you have roughed it before, right?” He ignored my verbal poke. Apparently, he was unaffected by the comment. He was hard as nails, and I hated it. Still, I needed the interview. His question finally registered, and my insides turned upside down.

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I’ve roughed it plenty of times. I love the outdoors and spending time with nature. It’s so peaceful and enjoyable. I’m actually really excited that she invited me.”

He cleared his throat. “I will be there in an hour. Get ready.” He hung up before I said anything else, once again irritating me with his rudeness. If I was lucky, I wouldn’t screw this up and club him with a marshmallow skewer after we were done roasting marshmallows.

I talked to my cats for the next hour as I packed everything I could think of into my enormous suitcase. “This is going to be so much fun, Chow. You and Min are going to have so much quiet and peace all alone here. Mommies going to have fun too, roasting marshmallows, sipping cocoa while watching the birds. Maybe I’ll even see a deer or a bear. Wouldn’t that be exciting?”

Promptly an hour later, Michael showed up right on time, and of course, I wasn’t ready. After rushing and praying I wasn’t forgetting anything, I dragged my suitcase out to the limo. “Hey, sorry. I wanted to make sure I didn’t forget anything.”

“You’re fine.” He wasn’t looking at me, his eyes focused on his phone as I climbed into the limo after the driver put my stuff in the trunk.

I barely registered what he was wearing as I sat. Then all the warning bells in my head went off. He was dressed like a mountain man headed for an expedition into the Alaskan Wilderness. I swallowed hard, running the contents of my suitcase through my mind.

He finally looked at me, I saw the confusion in his eyes as the limo started moving. He smiled. “Oh, I get it you want to leave town looking like a diva, but you have your warmer coat in the suitcase. You’re going to need that warmer coat as it’s freezing in the cabin.”

I laughed. “Oh, yes, I have everything I need for this little adventure, although you do look like one of those mountain

men.”

He tossed his phone aside. “Because I am. I wasn’t originally raised here in the city. I don’t know how much you know about me but I grew up in Oregon. My family was poor, life was tough, but my father was an excellent teacher and I learned a lot, how to hunt, fish, track and trap. I still do much of it in my free time. You can take the man out of the wilderness, but you can’t take the wildness out of the man.”

“Well, that’s exciting and surprising and it all makes sense now why you chose sporting goods. Do you do other outdoor sports like kayaking?”

“I do. You’ll see when we get there that I have every possible toy at my cabin you could imagine. I love the outdoors, and I love indoor sports and fun too, but there is something about being outdoors and in nature. Peter loves the outdoors too. That’s one reason we are such good friends. So have you fished before?”

“Oh sure, I’ve fished many times. I love catching fish, it’s great fun.” I had to play along. I wanted this weekend to be as successful as possible and for us to find common ground so we could connect and I would get my interview done.

“That’s interesting and I have to admit, I am surprised. Then we will have a lot of fun and it makes things much easier and believable to Peter and Maddy. You’ll enjoy hunting too. Have you shot a crossbow, compound bow, or rifle before?”

“Oh sure, I’ve been hunting...” I wasn’t really listening. My insides were turning somersaults as I was putting my foot in

my mouth repeatedly. Mentally berating myself, I panicked, unsure of what I would do.

He smiled. Clearly, the thought of having another outdoor buddy as a female was something that made him happy. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the chair, praying there was a major snow storm blocking all routes to Lake Placid so we couldn't get to the blasted cabin.

No such luck, and my mental rest was short-lived as Michael insisted we get familiar with each other 5 minutes after we left, so everything seemed more believable. "So tell me about your career. What made you want to start your blog?"

I forced myself to focus. At the very least we would get to know each other before I made a fool of myself out in the wild woods. "I love to write, and I'm a business major. A few years ago I was working at a newspaper. I was miserable, hated my work and took up the hobby of interviewing people in short snippets to help others on their career journey. I used social media to get started and my followers started growing. After a while, people were requesting who I should interview and why, while sharing their appreciation and it just took off from there."

"Interesting. Well, after my father died, I was lost, I had to support my mother, so I got a job working for a sporting goods store. It came naturally, and I worked my way up to management but just like you I was miserable, it was a dead-end job. I wanted more, so I quit my job and opened up a

small sporting goods store in Oregon that catered to the true die-hards, not those folks that would call themselves weekend warriors. I teamed up with a friend of mine who offered hunting and fishing expeditions into remote areas and it took off from there. The bulk of our business is still that even though over the years we've learned to cater to mainstream outdoor enthusiasts, not everyone can dive in headlong and some people want the experience but can't live the lifestyle."

I was surprised, and wished I had my phone to record all this, but wouldn't ruin the moment since he hadn't given me permission to record him.

"What about your girlfriends? Tell me some of their names, who is your best friend?"

"My best friend is Eve, we've known each other since elementary school, she's taking care of my kitties Min and Chow, their Siamese. She's a dancer, we used to take classes together."

On and on we talked, grazing over every aspect of our lives. I learned both his parents had passed away, while my father was still alive. He was an only child, while I had a brother.

"Okay before we arrive we have to discuss two things, affection and sleeping arrangements."

"What do you mean?" Suddenly I felt my nerves on edge, my usually relaxed, easygoing nature was gone and I felt anxious and excited.

“Well, we are going to have to kiss, hug, and show some affection. I wanted to prepare you for that. If we don’t, Peter and Maddy will insist on seeing some since they are naturally very affectionate and think they are trying to help bring us closer together.”

Chapter Five

Michael

She was nervous about the change of topic; I saw it in the way she twisted her hands together in her lap. “Okay, I guess if we have to kiss and hug but what about sleeping.”

She was young but not that young, I couldn’t imagine her not having been intimate with anyone. Still, I wanted to reassure her. “We will have to sleep in the same room since we are a couple but I will sleep on the floor or whatever while you take the bed. We will figure it out. But we have to make it look like we are a couple so we will have to appear that way by sleeping in the same room. I should mention that it’s only a two-bedroom cabin so there isn’t anywhere else to sleep, anyway.”

Her hands kept knotting up in her lap, I didn’t have time to deal with her emotional drama so I moved closer to her, prepared to get it over with. “Okay, I think we should kiss for

the first time while we're alone here so we can get more comfortable since we might have to do it a few times.”

I saw her intrigue, excitement and watched the way she licked her lips as if waiting. Every inch of my body felt it, every muscle tightened just a little. I moved a little closer, felt the drum of my beating heart thump heavier.

“What? Why? I don't think....”

I didn't give her a chance to think about it, leaned in and touched my lips softly to hers. That mere touch sent my body in an upheaval, all my muscles twitched, and suddenly I wanted. Wanted like I never wanted before in my life. I wanted to hold her, run my lips across her neck and collarbone.

I wanted to feel her shiver, the goosebumps on her skin and see her eyes fall gently closed in surrender to me. Instantly I pulled back when I heard her sigh of pleasure and sat back on the seat.

Flustered, I scrolled through my phone, and knew she was looking at me, as stunned as I was at that moment. If I wasn't careful, things would continue to another level instantly in the limo.

The silence was deafening, and I found it very hard to gather my thoughts, it had been a while. It was confusing because she was a good deal younger than me, and beautiful but not my type of woman.

I couldn't look at her anymore and glanced sideways, saw how surprised she was, still staring at me, her fingers touching her lips. She shocked me by leaning in and kissing me this time.

She threw me off balance for a moment, and as we kissed it was awkward, both our eyes still open. I let go and caressed the side of her face with my hand and her eyes fell closed. I continued to caress her skin lightly feeling how soft it was against my calloused fingers and sunk into the feel of her lips against mine.

After a moment I pulled back, feeling uncomfortable, it was madness mixing our business with physical pleasure. Our conversations made it a little easier for me to understand her but I had to remain professional and so did she.

I thought the moment was over, that it was done and we'd passed that odd, awkward moment but I wanted more and judging by the look on her face as she sat beside me she did too.

I smiled and tried to make light of the moment now that it was done. "Ava..."

No man would have been ready for what Ava did then and I certainly wasn't when she climbed atop my lap, and put her hands in my hair. "I know this is so wrong on many levels, but I want to do that again." She kissed me deep, setting fire to my soul.

I couldn't deny it, unable to resist, I pulled her to me and tasted the sweetness of her lips. She was wild, potent and

shockingly crazy, her hands everywhere, her body pressed tight to mine. I was hard everywhere, every muscle tense as I tried relentlessly to control myself.

Her soft moans of delight didn't fall on deaf ears, and I gave in to the urge to run my hands up and down her body and feel every curve I'd been longing to touch from that day in the dress shop.

She unbuttoned my shirt, kissed a trail from my lips to my chest and stomach. "Ava, oh God..."

"I know, right! This is insanity but right now it feels so good. You are so sexy for an older man, goodness you must work out a lot!" Her hands were at my belt, she fumbled miserably to undo the belt. "Goodness, why can't I get this thing undone?"

I looked into her eyes then, saw the passion, the need and want that I felt too and knew I had to silence her. I kissed her hard, turned her over, so I was atop her and pressed myself to her. My fingers shook a little as I touched her curves again, I was losing ground, and soon the battle would be over and the caged animal inside me would come out and take over.

"Michael, please..." Her sweet whisper in my ear shot through my reserve and I gave in. I felt the sharp curves of her legs, ran my hands up and down and touched every inch of her body. I lost myself in the feel of her skin against my mouth and tasted the liquid gold of her body.

I was almost ready to give in, to let us both feel the pleasure we so urgently needed when the limo stopped. Half dressed,

her laying beneath me, I lifted my head regrettably and looked at her desire filled eyes. “We have to stop Ava, we are here at Peter and Maddy’s. Unless we want them to see us this way, we have to get up and stop.”

She barely registered what I said, it took a moment. I knew we only had a few minutes and they would be in the limo with us. I sat up and adjusted my clothing and then helped her do the same.

My body was exhausted, defeated from not fulfilling the want it so desperately needed to fill. My heartbeat was hard and fast, I could still taste her on my lips, I wanted her more than ever now.

Looking over at her, I saw the same as she worked to fix her clothing and make sure her hair wasn’t a mess. I saw lust in her eyes and knew I wouldn’t soon forget. I wasn’t sure what happened but whatever it was; we were both different after.

We picked up Peter and Maddy at her family’s home outside of the city and after that I got to rest a bit until we arrived as Ava had Maddy to talk to.

I kept her close and eased her gently into some affection, holding her hand and kissing the side of her forehead for good measure. Her laughter seemed a bit misplaced, reminding me she was anxious and probably still confused about our earlier moment. I tried my best to soothe her by caressing her hand.

“So you two are so cute together Michael, I can’t tell you how I think it is so good that you met Ava.”

“Yeah, she’s the yin to my yang.” Mockingly I meant that literally. If you only knew Maddy! The driver unloaded everyone’s luggage and Ava was off, headed for the cabin, a look of shock in her eyes.

Ava had taken her things into the bedroom and was unloading them into the dresser after going inside. I followed Maddy knowing what Ava discovered about the cabin was probably an utter surprise.

The small cabin harkened back to pioneer times, it was rustic and sparse but beautiful in my eyes. It provided me with what I needed and let me forget about who I was to the rest of the world most of the time.

It was simple, easy, efficient and blended in nicely with nature around it. No fuss, no fluff, not fake, not overly done. When I was at the cabin, I was me, a man, one with nature, capable and strong.

“Well this was probably a bit of a surprise to her when we got here. I have to admit the first time Peter brought me I had visions of a grand log cabin in the woods with a cozy rustic living room and elaborate stone fireplace, bedrooms with warm fuzzy quilts and wood stoves invoking romance.”

Her honesty opened my eyes. “Yeah, I should go check on her to make sure she isn’t too bummed out. Being a guy I often forget that part. I can sleep on the hard ground outside against a tree and feel cozy and happy but you ladies aren’t so easily satisfied.”

I found Ava stuffing things into the drawers. “Hey princess. How’s it going?”

She threw me a look; she was upset, about what I didn’t know. “Great.”

I closed the door for privacy, and figured Peter and Maddy could take that however they wanted. “Are you okay? I should have probably mentioned the cabin, so you weren’t shocked. I thought with your outdoor experience you wouldn’t mind. Hey, at least we have indoor plumbing.”

She said nothing, nodded her head.

“Well, whenever you’re ready to do some fishing we are ready to get going. We can get a catch in before the night is out.”

“Okay.”

I left her alone, unsure what was wrong. Maddy was right she probably had visions of some grand woodland paradise in her mind, she was young and perhaps her experience outdoors did not include sleeping in such a rustic cabin.

As I looked around I smiled, humbled by how easily I could leave that crazy, extravagant world behind and reconnect with my roots and nature.

Ten minutes later when she hopped in my truck that I left at the cabin she was dressed in what looked like five layers of odd clothing with the fashionista coat she’d worn up to the cabin on top. I was confused. “I thought you brought another coat?”

“I thought I did too.”

Frustrated that we were delayed I grabbed another of my spare coats from the closet and tossed it to her. “Here put this on instead. And what may I ask, are you wearing underneath?” I watched as she tore off the jacket and revealed a menagerie of odd clothing layers.

She tossed me a look when Peter and Maddy chuckled. “I might have grabbed the wrong stuff, I felt rushed.”

Her innocence made me smile. “God love you princess, you make me laugh.”

“Aw that is so sweet Michael, you really love her don’t you. It’s okay honey, I can lend you some of my stuff later, I pack for 3 women.”

“She does Ava, I can attest to that. My back hurts just lugging it into the cabin. Crazy woman thinks she’s going off to Russia or something.” Peter laughed, I could hear the intimate interplay between him and Maddy, it made me smile. At least someone had that kind of love in their life even if I didn’t.

And so we were off to the spot on the lake where we fished. The weather was perfect, and I quickly had everything set up for our adventure. “This is perfect, I bet we will catch something. What do you think Peter?”

“You know it. Here Maddy take this, Ava. Michael says you’ve done this before?”

“Oh sure.”

I watched as she moved a respectful distance away from everyone else. I was happy to be back on my lands, at my own private lake enjoying some good times with my friends. It felt like when I was young and I was carefree. “Pick a suitable spot Ava, the entire lake is mine and you can move as far away as possible. I know you’ve fished before but I want you to feel comfortable love. I own hundreds of acres and two lakes are on the property.”

“Yeah, I tried to buy some of the acreage but he wouldn’t do it, no go. He told me to buy some property in Canada so we can visit there.” Peter was casting his line near Maddy who was already hard at work setting up and sitting in her cozy chair.

All was quiet for a few minutes as we sat and talked about nothing in particular. It felt good to be back home. If I could I would never leave the cabin and land. I prided myself as considering it to be my most prized possession.

I watched in fascination as Ava fumbled with her rod. She took quite some time getting things in order. At first she tried to cast it and nothing happened. Something wasn’t right but I let her go. I watched, glancing sideways now and then as I stood and saw the frustration on her face.

She was a respectful distance away from me, on the other side of Maddy and Peter. I kept my cool, but it became obvious pretty quick that whatever fishing she’d done wasn’t much.

She tried again, and again and nothing happened. I could hear her muttering, Peter was smiling and watching her, Maddy was all business and barely paying attention, but I saw it.

Finally Ava figured out how to cast the line on the rod after a few obscene curse words rolled off her lips. Every time she looked at me, she smiled and waved cheerfully as if nothing was wrong, while she had no clue what she was doing.

I grabbed a beer and handed one to everyone. “No thank you Michael, I’m good. I don’t really drink.”

I smiled, stood and watched her. She didn’t know what to do with the rod now that she had the line in the water. I was a little irritated. She lied to me but leaned in to whisper. “Set it down like they are doing, love.” I snuck a kiss on her neck and smiled when she threw me an irritated look.

There we sat talking, a good hour passed and nothing much happened. I was feeling great, content to just be for a while, soak up the quickly waning sunshine and feel the wind against my face. There was nothing like roughing it and being with nature.

Just when I was finally relaxing and ready to decompress from being in the city it happened.

“Oh, my goodness! Michael, Peter, Maddy! I got something.” I looked over to see Ava fighting with the rod, she was pulling and tugging, holding on for dear life. I knew she said she’d done this before but she wasn’t reeling it in.

“Reel it in Ava!” I yelled from my spot, still watching. She was interrupting my solitude, and everyone else’s. It was one thing to get a catch and another to scare all the other fish and disrupt every other fisherman’s relaxation.

“I got this, guys, don’t worry I’ve done this before! She yelled and spun in a circle. “I got it. I don’t want any help, this is so exciting I can’t tell you!” She sounded out of breath, and worried. She was getting awfully close to the edge of the water and near to falling in.

Unfortunately, she was wearing my favorite coat, and a pair of boots that looked fit for a dance floor and not the outdoor wilderness.

“Here let me help you with that Ava.” Peter tried to help, almost had the rod and line and her safe. I got up and moved to her, before I got there she fell in the water, her whole body soaked from head to toe with ice cold, almost freezing water.

“For crying out loud! I thought you’d done this before Ava!” I picked her up, soaking myself in freezing water, only to pull the line in. “Well, you definitely caught something Ava my love.” I held up a tiny fish less than 6 inches long.

She was soaked, but smiled. “See I told you I had something Michael! I did good, didn’t I?”

I took the liberty of cutting and setting it free. “Yeah but it’s a bit too tiny to eat. I just have to wonder with all that wildcat you have in you how come you don’t have more muscle strength. What in the heck happened with the line?”

I should have been angry and felt irritated at her for making a fool out of us in front of my friends but it was too comical to ignore. I smiled and laughed despite myself.

Thankfully, Peter and Maddy looked amused too. “Well, Michael we don’t pick them for their fishing skills right?”

“No, we don’t, my friend.” I smiled. Ava looked like a drowned rat, every inch of her soaked. “Come on princess, let me get you back to the cabin and you can warm up. I’ll be right back, guys.”

Both smiled but neither said anything and we were on our way back to the cabin. “I thought you’d fished before.”

Chapter Six

Ava

I was soaked to the bone; I wanted to cry, I'd humiliated Michael, and myself, lied about my skills and made a fool of myself.

Now he was kind enough to throw it back in my face like he had a stellar personality and always got everything right. I turned my face away to gaze out the window and watch the trees go by as we drove across his property. "So I might have exaggerated a little."

"Yah think!" He was laughing, turned the corner to the driveway and came to a sudden stop then he was serious again. "You made a complete fool of me in front of my friends. I don't like being made a fool of, they are my closest friends but as I told you before Maddy can sometimes be a gossip. First you come unprepared with no warm clothes. You can tell me

you grabbed the wrong stuff or whatever but I know better. You're not talking to an idiot here Ava, then you lie about your fishing skills. Why would you do that?"

He walked me into the house, still carrying on. I wanted to cry as I stood there, felt foolish and wasn't so sure I wanted that interview anymore.

"Now I have some clothing in the bedroom, get yourself a warm shower if you can figure out how to turn on the hot water and put some of my stuff on. It will have to do for now since you thought you were going to Bermuda."

He was mocking me, and I didn't like it. His words were hurtful and mean, even if he was laughing, it was at my expense. When he left I felt miserable, I hadn't intended on lying. I had been fishing once or twice, just not quite the way he thought.

I sunk into the warmth of the shower, the only comfort I had so far on this trip and climbed into bed. I didn't care if he was still laughing or mad when he got back with Peter and Maddy; he was rude and uncaring.

The day was still young and before I blinked Maddy was back, Michael and Peter dropped her off to clean up after no one caught anything.

"Hey Ava, the boys went back out to hunt. We have to cook if they take anything down or it's spaghetti, which I hate. How are you doing?" She poked her head around the corner, smiling.

There I lay in bed, ready to cry because I just wanted to go home at this point. I couldn't cook anything they hunted, I was a vegetarian but couldn't tell anyone that. Michael was going to be furious, and I would not get the interview.

I couldn't believe the pickle I'd gotten myself into at that moment. "I'm okay. Cold and I feel stupid."

She stepped into the room and sat on the bed. "Don't be upset, men are stupid sometimes when they do all this outdoor stuff and make such a mission out of it. I just like to come along and join in because I find it relaxing but who cares if we catch any fish or take down a deer. Seriously their competitiveness and hunter gatherer nonsense is so out of date and overrated. There is a grocery store 15 minutes away for crying out loud. Come on, let's bake some biscuits and listen to some music. Let them figure it out, and when they get here if they have something we will worry about it then."

Maddy made me feel better, and I was thankful to have another woman on the trip with me. She was easy to talk to and get along with, so I made a new friend that day. A woman I believed would be a friend long after Michael and I "broke up".

We baked biscuits and by the time the men returned I felt a lot less upset except for the idea of cooking meat. I prayed they came up empty-handed and nearly threw up when they brought in a deer they'd got.

My stomach turned somersaults as Maddy and I worked on preparing a piece of the meat they gave us. I did the best I

could confessing my dietary choice to Maddy who was sympathetic but found it amusing that Michael and I were together.

When we all finally sat down to eat, I had lost my appetite after spending so much time touching the deer meat. I couldn't eat, my stomach was in turmoil so I nibbled on the side of mashed potatoes I prepared, but could barely get a few spoonfuls down in my stomach.

“What’s the matter princess?” Michael had barely said anything to me since he returned. He’d grabbed a shower and changed into more woodsman finery. I felt like a fool wearing his clothes, a scratchy pair of gray sweatpants and a blue flannel shirt with one of his thermal tops underneath that were way too large.

I refused to look at him, or be nice. Even dating couples had moments where they argued with each other and this was going to be one of them since I had to play nice and couldn't tell him what I really thought of him.

“I don't want to talk about it right now.”

Maddy must have wanted to stir the pot, when she spoke I regretted sharing the personal details of my life with her. “She had some trouble cooking the deer meat since she doesn't eat it.”

“Why is that? It's just like chicken right Peter?” Michael smiled again.

“Everything tastes just like chicken.” Both men laughed.

I looked at Michael and he saw my lack of humor and continued. “What’s the matter with deer meat?”

“I don’t eat meat Michael. I thought I told you.” I threw him a wicked smile, there was no mistaking I was upset and making light of it.

He laughed then. Peter and Maddy had the good grace to remain quiet, playing spectator and prepared to enjoy the dramatic show in front of them. “Wait, you’re vegetarian? No way, you never told me that.”

“I am Michael.”

He laughed, then after a moment of all seriousness the humor died down when he realized I wasn’t joking. “If it’s for some ethical reason, I should tell you that half the things you eat, and wear or use come from animals. That fancy makeup you use, that shampoo, those shoes, that tank top, whatever. You’re being silly, Ava, there is nothing ethical about not eating meat. You’re wasting your breath and hurting your body by not eating what’s good for you. I can’t even imagine how you get enough protein in your body from those soybeans and walnuts.”

The others did not share his laughter, and I refused to sit at the table if he was going to insult me in such a way, interview or not. I tossed my napkin on the table and stood up. “I’m sorry, I can’t sit here while you treat me this way. Sorry everyone if you’ll excuse me, I’ve lost my appetite for being insulted and made fun of by my boyfriend.” I threw that little

tidbit of information out there as a verbal smack, reminding him all I was doing for him.

I locked myself in the bedroom determined to keep him out if he couldn't talk respectfully to me. It would be easy for his friends to see our charade for what it was. I curled up and wondered what my little kitties were doing at home.

I watched a gentle snow fall outside as the light faded away and felt the warmth of the quilts but a coldness in my heart. Michael had hurt me a lot this time, his disrespect and rudeness made it hard for me to envision continuing this charade just so I could get an interview.

I took my eating choices seriously. I didn't care who liked it or didn't, or that other people ate meat, I didn't and wanted to be respected for that.

If his character was this bad, I wasn't so sure my readers would benefit from anything he had to say. I knew he was a smart and determined business owner that probably had a lot to share but I was realizing he had no finesse.

I slept for a time and woke to the sound of knocking on the door. "It's Michael, let me in Ava."

At first I refused to get up, figuring I could pretend I was sleeping but then I heard the lock click, he had a key. Quickly I closed my eyes and lay completely still, hoping he would just go away or lay on the floor and sleep so I could continue to ignore him.

No such luck. "I know you're awake. Don't ignore me."

I cracked open one eye to see him sitting in the chair across from me, a questioning look on his face. “What?” I opened my eyes and did not pretend to like him anymore than I had before. He’d upset me.

“I didn’t know you were vegetarian. I never would have insisted you come on this adventure if I’d known. I didn’t really pay attention at the fundraiser.”

“You don’t really pay attention to anyone other than yourself any time. You’re selfish and rude and couldn’t hold on to a girlfriend if you tried, real or fake.”

His eyebrows came up, all I said surprised him. “Maybe so. It was uncalled for but we need to get past this. Peter and Maddy will understand as they are a couple and argue a lot. I figured I’d come in here so we can pretend to be making up.”

I didn’t bother to stop the eye roll, if he was going to continue with this charade I would suppress none of my baser instincts so I could always be my usual cheerful self to please him. We weren’t in a proper relationship.

“What was that for?”

“If you don’t know, I don’t have to tell you.” Suddenly I felt better than I had in the last two days of dealing with Michael. I got up, tossed the covers aside and grabbed my phone determined to do a bit of reading.

He laughed. “You really were lying about your outdoor experience. Good luck getting any service out here other than the landline I have in the kitchen. We are practically in a

complete dead zone on this property and that's just the way I like it so you'd better get used to it."

I tossed my phone aside and ignored him, determined to sleep. I closed my eyes, hoping he'd take the hint and go away but then he surprised me by climbing into bed with me. Our eyes met when I rolled over and came face to face with him. "I thought you were going to sleep on the floor?"

"I lied, besides it's my bed, and my cabin. You want that interview you can either sleep here or sleep on the floor." He smiled and closed his eyes.

Being this close to him was too hard to resist. His hot breath on my face, his body so intimately close to mine, yet not touching. I remembered the time in the limo and how he'd made me feel, how I'd wanted.

I knew we shouldn't go there; we were in a small cabin, and anything could happen but I wanted him. It was too hard to resist. I reached out to touch his face to run my fingers along his perfectly sculpted jawline.

Before I did, he opened his eyes, and I saw every ounce of desire I felt reflected in those blue eyes. He smiled, when my fingers touched his face, I ran them gently across to his lips; he turned and kissed them.

His hand reached out and pulled me close, his lips pressed to mine, inviting me to play. The giggle that escaped my lips surprised me more than it did him and before long I was wrapping my leg around him to pull him closer.

We were lost in the moment, our bodies touching, his hands roaming under my shirt, setting fire to my skin. “Oh, Michael.”

He rolled over and pinned me to the bed. I wanted more; it wasn't enough as he cupped my backside and pressed to me. Our clothes were becoming a hindrance, so I tugged on his shirt, his pants. “I want everything off, now.”

The passion I saw reflected to me in his eyes was all I needed. All the things he said didn't matter anymore, all the words, every laugh, it was all gone, water under the bridge just like that.

“You're so beautiful, God Ava.” His lips roamed my body after he pulled off my top and by the time I got his shirt off I was wild with passion, kissing and nipping his flesh everywhere.

He wanted it just as much as I did; I saw it in his eyes, felt it in the way he touched me, he was losing control. Just as he removed my pants a knock sounded at the door.

“Michael, sorry to bother you. If you're awake, I need to talk to you, it's urgent.” It was Peter.

Michael looked at me. His eyes were soft and pleading, he was as miserable as I too saw it end. He kissed me once more. “Sorry love, it's probably for the best, anyway.”

I nodded my head, as the reality of our situation intruded yet again. I felt the void as soon as he stood up and put his shirt back on. He looked at me once more before opening the door;

I wanted to beg him to stay, forget whatever was out there, I needed him right now.

I didn't see him again after that. At first I thought he might return, but I heard the truck take off a few minutes later and closed my eyes for sleep.

Morning came quickly as I woke feeling a heavy weight on my face. "What in the world...." I blinked my eyes open, Michael's arm pressed against my forehead, and he was snoring. I gave it a hard shove and crawled out of bed.

It was early, no one was up yet as the first stirrings of sunrise broke through the sky. I had to admit other than the fishing failure and my grumbling stomach from a lack of dinner; it was so peaceful I sat on the living room floor and meditated.

I needed it, needed that time, the quiet and to reconnect with myself if I was going to get through my time with Michael and his friends. I don't know how long I was meditating but when I was done; I opened my eyes to see him sitting across from me on the couch watching.

"I didn't know you meditate."

"I didn't know you knew what that was." I smiled to myself as I prepared for our verbal sparring match. "There are many things you don't know about me, Michael."

"Touche and good morning. I know what meditation is. I spent a few years learning the art of meditation to calm my

mind so I could focus better and be less stressed. I can do yoga too if you want to have a go with me.”

“No, thanks.” Visions of him striking a yoga pose, all those ripped muscles neatly moving from one pose to the next woke my body fast.

He must have sensed my thoughts, or saw it wrote on my face because he smiled. “Anytime you want to have a look, princess, just let me know. I am more than happy to oblige.”

“No thanks, I’m good. As exciting as that would be, you might open up your mouth, insult or embarrass me and ruin the moment.” I blew him a kiss to soften the blow, and he smiled.

Maddy came out of their bedroom then, her hair an utter mess, looking like she’d spent the night as uncomfortable as I’d felt but not likely for the same reason. “Good morning.”

“Morning. I made a pot of coffee.” I hurried to join her in the kitchen interested in forgetting about Michael for a minute.

“Feeling better? Did you guys make up?” Maddy sipped her black coffee. “Sometimes making up is worth the argument. Peter said to Michael as he came out looking like an unsatisfied bear, sorry if we interrupted.” She laughed.

“Yeah we made up, he was utterly rude to me and had no right. I know I never told him about being a vegetarian but still he didn’t have to be so mean.”

“He’s a man honey, most of them eat meat and that hunter, gatherer, warrior thing has them thinking that’s the only way

to be. If you by chance meet a man that doesn't you've found a leprechaun and he's likely to disappear just as quickly as he appeared. I dated one once, he was a great guy, but he still had that hunter mentality just differently. They're all competitive and sink into their original primate DNA."

"Well, I don't want to do any of that hunting and fishing stuff again. Honestly, I hope they just go out and get the whole hunting and fishing thing out of their system so I can relax."

Michael came into the kitchen and grabbed a cup of coffee. I tried to ignore him but then he stole a kiss that blew that plan out of the water. He came out of nowhere, cup in hand and grabbed me with a fierceness I'd never experienced from a man.

His lips pressed to mine passionately, making my skin tingle. His hand gripped my neck and held me in place. Instinctively I wrapped my hands around his waist for support and kissed him back, feeling the electricity between us from my head to my toes.

He pulled back just as quick a smile on his lips and in his eyes. "We savage men know how to kiss like nobody's business." He walked away leaving me to stand there staring at Maddy who was smiling from ear to ear.

She laughed. "Well, he has a point there."

After I recovered and downed the rest of my coffee I grabbed a shower, thrilled to find my robe in the bathroom hung on the door. Before I finished, I heard the door click

open. “Don’t worry, it’s just me. Peter wants to head out and I need to brush my teeth.”

Stunned, I peeked out the curtain. “What! You couldn’t go rogue rambo and brush your teeth with the bark of a tree while tracking some defenseless animal?”

I saw the amusement in his eyes. “What fun would that be, it’s much more exciting to irritate you right now.”

Agitated that he succeeded, I shoved the curtain back into place and continued to enjoy my shower until he ruined it by turning on the water. “Oh, hell sorry princess I forgot.”

Chapter Seven

Michael

Peter and I took ourselves out for some hunting and came back hours later with two deer. It felt good to be successful, accomplish something and hunt. While I wasn't the man that made it a point to hunt all the time and take more than was necessary I enjoyed it. The extra meat we had would go to a local food pantry to feed those in need which made me feel better about doing it.

I felt bad about how I'd treated Ava, but I was confident she would move past it, as I didn't intend on hurting her. It wasn't my fault if she was overly touchy about her lifestyle choices, many people choose to be vegetarian and they didn't take their choices out on anyone.

We were gutting and cleaning the deer outside the cabin when Peter was kind enough to share his thoughts. "You know Michael, you were harsh to Ava last night at dinner. I know

your thoughts on the matter. I shared them as well but I could see she was really upset about it. I hope you made it up to her last night.”

“I did, we got over it. I apologized in more than one way, if you get my drift. She’s okay. She never shared it with me until now, which I think is strange. And somehow I just never noticed it when we’re together.”

“Well, if you want to have a healthy relationship with her you’d better pay attention. Women notice everything and sometimes say nothing and she will know if you don’t do something right.”

I took his words to heart and tucked it into my brain for down the road if I ever had a serious relationship with a woman. Considering Ava and I were nothing but a fraud I didn’t need it. I wasn’t the greatest at relationships, as often my business was the only one I had. It never failed me and never complained if I didn’t get it right.

When we finished, we cleaned up. Maddy and Ava had cooked lunch and had a fire going in the fireplace for comfort as the temperature was quickly dropping. Seeing Ava stirred something inside me and I remembered the spontaneous kiss I gave her earlier in the morning so Maddy would see us.

“Hey, how’s my beautiful princess?”

She smiled. “Good, but don’t think for one minute I forgot about that cold burst of water in the shower after you left. I plan on getting even with you.” She eyed me. “And I haven’t forgiven you after last night. I should make you cook me

dinner when we get back, acorn squash, and make you eat it, being that you're a meat and potatoes guy."

I laughed. I knew if given the chance to be alone with me for a few minutes she would relentlessly remind me of how wicked I was but I was glad she played along with our charade. I still was on the fence about giving her that interview and thankful she'd said nothing about it.

"Michael, I just got some bad news. Maddy and I have to head home, I am thinking of using your truck if you don't mind. We can't stay, business calls. I'm sorry." Peter held his phone in his hand, a look of disappointment in his eyes. "Can we take a raincheck on this weekend since we only just got here yesterday?"

"Sure."

"Oh boo. Not fair and just when I was getting comfortable. Ava and I were going to go ice skating tomorrow. Oh Peter, do we really have to go?"

"I'm afraid so beautiful. But we will do this again. Ava I'm sorry, I was kind of enjoying your company. Michael, I'll get the truck back up here as soon as I can. If not, I will let you know so you can do it if you need to sooner."

I was disappointed but thrilled that our little charade would be over. I saw the look of disappointment on Maddy's face. "You can stay with us and have some fun."

"No, I should go, besides where Peter goes, I go. I can't sleep without him." She smiled, gave me a hug. "Thanks

Michael.” Then hugged Ava. “When you get back to the city, we need to get together. You have my cell number, I want you to call me and we will go to lunch, go shopping, whatever.”

It touched me by how easily Ava and Maddy made friends and wondered why Ava couldn't be that friendly with me if Maddy could do that. Then I remembered she was my best friend's wife which made a difference.

Two hours later they were taking off down the road in my only transportation. It wasn't until they left I realized I had no way to get supplies but decided we could make due until my driver arrived in the morning.

I was confused when Ava moved into the other bedroom immediately. “So are we going home tomorrow morning?”

“No, I thought we could just chill out here since I won't be coming back for a few weeks when I return. If I leave tomorrow, I will not drive back up here, I have too much work to do. So we can just do our own thing and relax, if that works for you.”

“I guess.” She looked disappointed which gave me hope we could continue where we left off. “At least we don't have to pretend anymore about you and I. Thank God that's over.” She took off to the other bedroom, and I was certain that was it. I would have peace at least for our time here and try later to entice her.

I could do whatever I wanted for the next few days and she could hang out at the cabin. If she wanted to eat canned peas

and biscuits, it was fine with me. I would cook my meals outside on the fire and enjoy some alone time.

I disappeared for a while, went fishing, and recalled how horrible she was at it. I thought about asking her to join me but then thought better of it. We'd been spending way too much time together, and I needed to put distance between us.

I was getting a little too used to having her around and seeing her beautiful face. We weren't a couple like Maddy and Peter and soon we would be home and I would explain to everyone that we'd broken up.

I was thankful that Peter and Maddy were gone. Her friendship with Maddy could work to my advantage, if Maddy liked her so much she wouldn't want to say anything bad about her.

When I got back to the cabin, the fire was out. "Sorry I couldn't figure out how to do it. Maddy got it going the other time. I really have no clue how to do any of this survival stuff." She sat curled up on the couch with a blanket wrapped snugly around her.

Not surprised I ignored her and got the fire going. I kicked off my shoes and got comfortable in a nearby chair, and worked on my small wood projects to keep my hands going. I found it soothing to create something; it didn't matter what it was, at the moment I was working on a clock.

"You really are crafty. I can't do anything like that. I have no skills for crafts. My mother was a master crafter; she could

use anything, even a pile of garbage and turn it into something useful or beautiful.”

I ignored her; I figured if I didn't encourage her she would be quiet. I needed peace for a while, that's why I came to the cabin. I kept working the wood until my fingers hurt and then set it down and watched the embers crackle in the fire.

“I love a good fire, it's so cozy and beautiful, it reminds me of those times when I was a kid and I would visit my grandfather. He had a cottage in the woods much like this in Connecticut but I didn't have to do anything. He'd make a big fire, and we'd make smores, it was fun. I loved spending time with him, he was so much fun.”

I could feel my blood pressure going up. When I wasn't all business, I was all relaxation up at the cabin; it was the one place I could find peace and Ava was ruining it. I regretted not sending her with Peter and Maddy. I closed my eyes and tried to rest, hoping that if I slept she'd go to bed or at least to the bedroom and leave me be for the night until I felt in the mood and woke her.

No such luck.

“I've never been able to rest by the fire, my feet would get too hot. It is so weird, my body is always cold but my feet are always hot. It's so strange. I'm not much for outdoor fires, all that work and my grandfather used to crank them up real high like he was going to burn the leaves off the trees above it. He enjoyed hunting and fishing like you. I don't know if he ever

ate them, he said he did but every time I was there we would toss them back.”

I was going to lose my mind. I would not sit there and listen to her non-stop babble. “Do you have any idea how annoying your constant blabbering can drive a person mad? I came up here to rest, recharge and relax. Even when I bring people with me, like Peter and Maddy I still find peace and relaxation. Could you just stop talking for 5 minutes?”

She stared at me. “Okay. Sorry.”

I closed my eyes again praying she remained quiet and almost fell asleep. I heard the faint sound of her getting up, and paper being shuffled around.

“So I know what made you want to do what you do now. I understand a bit of the backstory but if you had one tip to give to readers to help them be as successful as you, what would that be?”

I cringed, felt every muscle in my body tighten and flex. I opened my eyes and turned to her, my emotions tightly controlled. “Did you forget what I just told you?”

“No, I thought this would be the perfect time for the interview. You are relaxing, all you have to do is answer some questions while you’re in your element up here and I can get what you promised.” Ava smiled sweetly.

“I didn’t promise I would do it, I said I promised I would consider it and discuss that with you. I’m still on the fence. I

told you I don't like to do interviews with anyone. It's not you, it's anyone."

I flung myself back in the chair and pulled a blanket over top of me and tried to sleep again. She'd been quiet long enough that I felt I'd made my point clear.

"You know it's pretty unfair of you to think that you don't have to do an interview for me after everything I did for you. I went to the fundraiser with you and then I came here because you insisted all because I was under the assumption you were going to do the interview. I suppose it suits you just fine, thinking you can lie to me but it shows how awful your character is and what a horrible person you are Michael."

She stormed off to the bedroom and slammed the door. Thankfully, she was gone. I closed my eyes and got some sleep. When I woke up in the middle of the night, a snowstorm rolled in. With no cell service I couldn't tell how bad it was going to be, but used my emergency radio to listen. I thought about snuggling up beside her but I wasn't feeling it at the moment and knew I probably ruined any chance of that with her.

Familiar with challenging situations living in Oregon and in other places I wasn't worried at the very least it would snow us in for a day or two. The worst that would come off would be that I was stuck with the chatter box queen for a little longer, with any luck if she didn't drive me mad I would do that interview just to amuse myself right before hauling her back to the city.

I had a hard night's sleep; the storm shook the cabin and made it colder than normal. I preferred it rustic, but I did have a backup generator. Only problem being that the gas I had bought for it was in the back of the truck Peter and Maddy had driven home. I preferred the wood stove anyways so I was up every hour putting more wood in it.

Somewhere around 4AM Ava woke and came wandering out of her bedroom. I had to admit to myself begrudgingly that I had slept very little because she wasn't in the bed with me. After one night of sleeping beside her, I already missed having a body next to me at night. I'd never slept better than that night. Not to mention I wanted to touch and taste her again, make her call out my name.

"It's snowing out."

"I know princess. It's just a snowstorm. It will be fine. I have everything under control just go back to bed."

She frowned at me. "If you have so much money and you're so successful why do you keep this cabin like this?" She climbed into a chair and covered herself determined to annoy me throughout the night and the day.

I tried to tamp down my frustration and focus on the task at hand, keeping the fire going so we didn't freeze to death. "I like it this way. It allows me to never take one moment of my life or anything I have for granted. Every time I go home to all I have in the city, I am humbled by how much God has given me and I am thankful. By the same token, this is who I am at

my core, a man who came from nothing and this is a constant reminder of all I can be and what I can do.”

I prayed that was enough for her and she would leave me in peace to work on the fire. Thankfully, she fell asleep again, but it was a restless sleep.

I watched her sleep, her youthful beauty, the peaceful slumber and gentle snoring sounds she made were amusing. I wished she could stay that way forever but knew once her eyes blinked open her non-stop chatter would begin again. All this stressed her, and I made a mental note that if I ever had a woman in my life again, I would change things up here so she could be more comfortable.

Even though I didn't admit it to myself, secretly I liked her nonstop talking, even if it annoyed me. Her presence chased away the darkness, and loneliness even if sometimes it drove me crazy. I watched her, remembered the kiss we shared in the kitchen and how she responded to me when I touched her. The way she wanted me as much as I wanted her. It was crazy.

She'd enjoyed it just as much as I did, which was a surprise, a good one but a surprise. I had to touch her again, leaned down and kissed her lips as she slept, smiled when she murmured my name and kissed me back.

Chapter Eight

Ava

I woke to find a mountain of snow outside. Michael was passed out on the couch, the fire slowly dying down. I did my best to keep it going but after an hour failed miserably.

I wanted to go home at his point. This vacation getaway was the worst I had in years and the only thing I wanted was to be back home in my bed with Min and Chow enjoying some takeout and relaxing with a good movie.

I had so much work to do, and nothing was getting done around the cabin. It became evidently clear to me that Michael had no desire to do as he agreed to do. I realized he hadn't actually agreed to anything other than to think about it.

Irritated, I went to the kitchen and discovered the power was out. There was so much snow outside we couldn't go

anywhere and who knew how long we would be held up in this cabin doing nothing.

I couldn't cook anything unless I wanted to do it over a fire which I had no clue how to do. I woke Michael shortly after by shaking him until he stirred. "Get up Michael. There is a mountain of snow out there and I want to go home. I can't cook anything because there is no electricity for whatever reason and the fire died down. I can't understand how you live this way, like a mountain man with no money. I get it you want to get back to your roots and appreciate all you have, while trying to prove to yourself and everyone else all that you can do but seriously."

He looked mad, but I didn't care. I didn't even have a magazine to read, nothing to do but stare out at the frozen landscape.

He got up and made the fire a priority. "Sorry princess. I didn't realize you were so pampered. I thought you said you loved spending time with nature, outdoors and enjoying the peace. What was all that, a bunch of lies?"

"No, I enjoy it but this is just ridiculous. This is madness, no electricity, no heat, nothing to do, no vehicle to get out of here. Can't you call your driver or something?" I started writing in the notebook I bought, every awful thing I thought and felt about Michael.

I surprised myself that it took less than two minutes to fill a page front and back.

“What are you doing?” He pulled the paper from my hand.
“What is this?”

“I’m venting. Are you going to tell me you’ve never done that, write all your frustration so you don’t flip out on someone?”

“Can’t say I have.” He tossed it back to me and kept the fire going. “I can cook on an open fire. Sadly, it won’t be much for you just potato and some biscuits but if you change your mind about the diet thing I can cook you some deer meat.”

“All the supplies are gone except a few canned goods. Maddy and I were supposed to go get some today. I can’t understand how you don’t even keep food around here. What if you get stranded here?”

“I go hunting.”

“In this weather, you’re crazy.” I was mad now. There was nothing for me to eat, and I was stuck with Michael until the storm passed and we could get back to the city. I locked myself in my bedroom determined to ignore him.

I didn’t want to answer the door when he knocked later. I didn’t want to see his face, deal with him until I could get out of this place and be home back in the city. “Go away.”

“No, Open up.”

“No, I said go away.” I sat on the bed, staring out the window at the snow that had to be close to four feet deep.

The next thing I knew he was opening the door with his key and standing there holding a plate. “I know it’s not the greatest

but I have some fish, at least it's not meat."

I should have been touched by his attempt to give me something other than meat but I wasn't. I was angry and miserable. I just wanted to go home. "No, thank you."

"I really think you should eat, you need strength and now is not the time to debate with me about it." He was angry, I saw it in his eyes but so was I. I stood up, walked to him and took the plate, moved around him and tossed it in the trash.

He was there then. His body behind me, I could feel it, warning bells were going off in my head, my body was ready and my heart knew it. I whirled around ready to do battle with him.

Then he kissed me. He pressed his lips to mine, in a fierce, mind blowing kiss. Fueled by our emotions everything happened so fast. His hands were everywhere, running down my back, his lips trailing kissing across my face and neck.

It startled me by how intensely I wanted him. I ripped his shirt and tore it off. I saw the controlled passion in his eyes when I looked at him. He pressed me to the counter, his hands caressing my skin after he pulled off my shirt. I felt exposed, momentarily frozen by the way he looked at me, his eyes raking over my skin. I felt it like a soft caress.

My legs went weak and Michael didn't waste any time, he picked me up and carried me to his bed and set me down. He was out of his clothing fast, neither of us said a word and I couldn't ignore how much I wanted him.

His body looked better than some men I'd known who were my age, my need for him, my want to be touched by him shocked me. I opened my arms in invitation after he pulled off my pants and looked his fill. "Come to me Michael. I need you."

"You are so beautiful Ava, I don't even know what I am doing but right now I don't care. I want you like I've wanted no one."

His eyes were smoldering with unspent passion, something I knew had been building from the moment we met. Now was as perfect a time as any to share in the pleasures of our desire. I gloried in the way he made me feel when he pressed his body to mine.

His fingers were rough and calloused but his touch gentle, it was an intoxicating contrast as he touched and caressed every inch of my flesh; he worshiped me like a goddess.

My legs parted slightly as he found the secret spot and pressed his fingers there. I couldn't control myself and arched my hips upward begging him for more. I watched as his lips moved from one breast to the other tasting and tempting, I could barely think.

"Oh Michael, please, I..."

His eyes met mine, and he smiled. His hands continued their exploration, and I was certain I would explode, and tried to hold the soft cries of pleasure he was pulling from me. I closed my eyes, uncaring if he was watching me anymore; it felt so intense.

“Open your eyes princess.” I didn’t want to, it was so hard seeing how much he wanted me too. Finally, when his body stilled for a moment I opened my eyes to look and he kissed me again.

The kiss was hard and deep, and he thrust himself into me. My legs wrapped around his waist in invitation and held him to me so he would love me. I ran my hands across his shoulders, his muscular chest and back and felt the moist wetness of his sweat as he unleashed the animal inside.

We were on fire, our passion built to an unbearable level where I thought for sure we would explode. He gripped me tighter to him, sinking deeper into me and changed the rhythm driving me to some insane level I never thought to reach.

Riding that storm with him I held on and welcomed the invasion, the fire he gave and sunk into it when we both reached that cliff and fell off on a wave of intense pleasure and release.

I cried out his name and smiled when I heard him do the same. His body shuddered above mine, every ounce of desire we felt expelled in that moment. Finally, we drifted back to earth on a cloud wrapped in each other’s arms and I held him tight when he collapsed atop me, panting and sighing.

He slept then, a dead sleep I knew came from his exhaustion. Confused by everything we’d just done and how I felt about it and Michael, I caressed his head, let my thoughts fade away for a while, and slept as well.

When I woke he was watching me sleep, his eyes relaxed, clear and intent. “You’re so beautiful Ava.”

“Thank you.” I rolled over, feeling amorous again and kissed the side of his neck. “You’re not too shabby yourself for a mountain man.”

“Hey mountain men are rugged, we make the best lovers.” He pulled me to sit atop him and positioned me to his liking. “I want you again. Is that crazy?”

“No.” I couldn’t suppress my smile or laugh. “I was thinking the same thing. I want you too. It’s crazy all our pent up sexual frustration finally got the better of us.”

“You think that’s all it is?” He moved me so he could thrust himself into me and used my hips to control the movement.

I closed my eyes, still sleepy but very much awake at the moment and let myself feel, just feel every movement, every touch. His hands played and explored my body. His moans of pleasure a backdrop for my wild mental fantasy.

“Look at me Ava. I want to see the pleasure in your eyes. I loved hearing you cry out my name.”

I opened my eyes and saw the same passion and lust reflected in his eyes. “I should be angry with you but right now I don’t care.” I rocked myself back and forth and laughed when he inhaled sharply.

“You’re going to pay for that love.” He flipped us over and pinned me to the bed, my hands stuck above my head as he held them. I wiggled around purposefully.

He smiled at me, leaned down and took a taste of my skin, slowly trailing his tongue up and down my body. I wrapped my legs around his body playfully. “You might pin my arms but you can’t pin my legs.”

He pressed down into me; it felt so good I bit my lip and stared into his eyes so he saw exactly how much I wanted more.

“You want me don’t you?” He laughed, but I could tell his ego loved it.

“I do. Yes, I do.”

I was rewarded with a slow, torturous series of thrusts that made my body crave more, ache for every slow death I felt as he took me up and down ripples of passion. My skin tingled, and chilled everywhere and yet my body was hot to the core as I let him take the lead.

His hands eventually moved, and I was allowed to grip and touch him in the same way he did me. It was hours before either of us moved, the snow outside long since forgotten. When I finally woke again, my body ached from head to toe. It felt good to get up but reality quickly intruded as I still didn’t have my interview and we were still stuck.

It was cold, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t get the fire going again and I worried about food as I was starved. With no electricity the only light was that of the fireplaces and a flashlight I found in a cabinet.

Michael still slept on like the dead. While our time had been amazing it was just sex, and there wasn't enough connection to repair the damage done between us. I had given more than I got. I gave all I had, my time, my energy and my body.

I scoured the kitchen and found a set of matches, used it to relight the fire in the living room and sat down to think of more questions I could ask Michael during our interview. I remained hopeful that he would answer my questions and give me the interview.

Hours passed, and he slept on, I didn't have the heart to wake him. He was exhausted but the more time I spent alone, the more I wanted to go home. I was tired and this mini vacation was over as far as I was concerned.

I lit a few candles I found, gathered more wood and hoped he would wake. Every time I peeked inside the room I felt an odd sense of warmth, I wanted to be beside him and that's exactly why I didn't let myself go to him again and sleep.

We were too different, and he was too harsh of a man for my taste, even if I could figure my way around our age difference. How we'd begun had been all wrong, and even if I had feelings for Michael which I wasn't sure I did, it would never work.

He wasn't looking for love and neither was I. It was a business transaction, nothing more and the sooner we both put an end to it the better.

I was more angry about the interview than anything. If Michael was dead set against not doing it for me or anyone,

then so be it. I would ask him one more time if he would keep his promise and if he didn't, I was done. If I had to hire a helicopter, I was going home.

I closed the door but left it open a crack and fell asleep beside the fire, hoping it wouldn't die down and I would get cold again. I woke many times afraid the fire was gone, hungry and achy from the uncomfortable couch and tried again to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Michael

I woke to find the bed empty; the cabin was cold, so I stumbled half blindly to the living room to find the fire completely out. Ava sat on the couch curled up beneath a few blankets, a fire poker still dangling from her hand.

I smiled at the angel in front of me, who'd gotten cold and tried in vain to get the fire going again. She would never make a good pioneer woman and it was unlikely she could ever move to the wilds of Alaska but I was thankful to have her with me for this time. It wasn't forever; I didn't want it to be forever, a woman like Ava would drive me nuts after a time.

I was still on a passion high, riding that wave repeatedly in my mind. She was stunning, every glorious, youthful inch of her and I didn't even care if she was vegetarian and I had to eat tofu for breakfast.

Never would I have guessed sleeping with a woman like Ava would change things for me. Suddenly all those annoying things that bothered me, like the sun shining in my window in the morning before I am ready to wake up and broken fishing gear didn't bother me.

I scooped up some ash and got the fire going again. I brewed coffee the old-fashioned way and worked on the electricity that went out during the storm. It happened every time we had a major snowstorm, and I had to check fuses and the fuse box.

I wasn't able to fix it; I needed to get to a hardware store but checking outside I saw that there was no way for anyone to get in or out yet. With close to four feet of snow in every direction I knew getting out was going to be hard at least for another day.

Ava stirred in her sleep as I chopped wood. I saw her in the window from the woodshed that I dragged my butt to so we could have enough fire for the day. I checked my snow plow and planned on shoveling the following day to get it out and make a path for my driver so he could come to take us home.

When I walked back to the cabin through a long snow shoveled path Ava had woken and stood in the kitchen looking miserable. "What are we going to do?"

"Nothing just lie low and by tomorrow some of this should be gone and I will get us out of here." I ignored the annoyance in her voice, apparently the honeymoon was over and we were back to normal again.

I felt too good to care and whistled as I stacked the wood by the fire. I found a peace I never knew since I was a kid. Nothing seemed to matter, not the weather outside, the snow, the cold, the lack of food, the challenging heat situation and no hot showers.

I felt like a million bucks, sat down beside Ava after I got the fire going again and took her hand in mine. She smiled and rested her head against mine, and fell back to sleep. The day was long and riddled with many issues for us both as I tried to find something to cook for her and served her the last can of biscuits from my emergency stash and I ate the deer meat I cooked outside.

When night came it got freezing, I felt bad for her. Ava was not the woman who did well under pressure and challenging situations. She spent more than a few minutes expressing her anxiety to me as if I could solve it. She'd been almost ready to cry, yet another reason her and I could never work.

It broke my heart to not be able to immediately fix things and when nighttime came and we lay together in the bed; I held her close and asked nothing of her.

She needed warmth and all the energy she could spare so I held her close. "The only thing I want tonight is to share my energy, my heat and my body with you. Rest Ava, tomorrow is another day and I have the feeling we will get home then."

She gave me a gentle squeeze, snuggled a little closer to my side and slept. Before I blinked she was snoring, and I smiled at how easy it was to be with her despite our differences.

I woke early to start the path to the snowblower, surprised when she joined me wearing my oversized clothing. Shovel in hand she helped make the path to the snowplow in the garage and where I had all my toys.

“Wow this is amazing, you have a lot of stuff in here. I wish the weather was nicer. My grandfather had an ATV and he would take me for rides on it. I always wanted a dirt bike but he would never get me one.”

“We always protect the women Ava, no man wants a woman hurt, hungry, cold, sick or sad. At least not any real man.” I worked my magic and had the old beater truck working quickly. It didn’t take long to get it out and before long the driveway was halfway done.

“I made a call to my driver. He is on his way, but a lot of the roads are still not great. He’s not bringing the limo but got my truck back from Peter. They said they are sorry we got stuck up here without supplies.”

Ava was smiling, sitting beside me bundled up from top to bottom. “That’s okay. It’s been hard, and I was more than mad at you a few times but I’m just happy we’re going home today.”

“Yes, we are. Even if it’s not until late tonight. And my driver is bringing lots of snacks for you. I told him nothing with meat or anything animal so who knows what he’s got. Hey, do you want to give this a try?”

She looked surprised. “Me?”

“Yes you, I can’t take you fishing and teach you how to properly fish, not that you want to know as a vegetarian but I can teach you how to drive a stick, and plow some snow. There is nothing out here but you and I for miles and some creatures. I assure you they will see you coming a mile away and run. Now get over here.”

Like a bunch of crazy teenagers we maneuvered ourselves this way and that to switch sides and before long she was in the driver’s seat. It took a while, but I got her driving a stick shift. “Okay, now that you have it down, we want to plow the path over there. Do you think you can do it?”

“I don’t know, but I want to try.” She started moving the truck, now and then she’d release the clutch too soon or shift gears too fast and mess up but I was thrilled at how well she did.

“See, Michael, look I’m doing it. Oh, my goodness! I’m plowing a driveway! This is crazy!” She laughed and carried on like a schoolgirl. It made me smile.

“Easy now, don’t take out my mailbox as it’s cemented in the ground.” I panicked when she veered towards the left side of the driveway. “Slow down, I don’t want to repair things.” Instinctively my hands grabbed the steering wheel before she crashed into an enormous boulder I had sitting at the edge of the drive and stopped.

She laughed, she had the audacity to laugh at me. Her eyes danced with merriment. “What? I would not hit it, I assure you

Michael, besides this thing is built like a tank you'd be lucky you had a scratch."

When she leaned her head against my shoulder after throwing it in park, the amusement was gone. I couldn't do this anymore. It was becoming too real for me, and I would not let that happen.

"It's time to call it quits, we've had our fun or I should say you have. The driveway is plowed enough for my driver and we should get inside to pack."

Everything felt out of control, my whole life felt like it was being turned upside down and I would not let that happen.

"I don't want to go inside yet. Can't we just sit like this for a while? I have had more fun today than I did any time in the last year. It's been nothing but work all the time for me. I love what I do, but sometimes it's hard to let go and not just focus on work. Just 5 more minutes, it's so peaceful and beautiful, and there is nowhere else I'd rather be than here."

Her words surprised me, tore at my insides and made me feel things I didn't want to feel. I couldn't move my shoulder with her head resting on it, and suddenly all my rude retorts were gone. I could think of nothing to say.

My phone was in the cabin, I felt defenseless and frightened out of my mind by sitting beside one gorgeous looking woman. I held my tongue and my thoughts and prayed to God I could control my feelings and not let them control me.

She had her moment, there was a long silence where we just sat there, and amidst that stillness everything felt frightening and yet perfect, I could barely breathe. In all the years I'd been coming to my lands I never had a moment like that with anyone, let alone with a woman.

“I can understand why you like it here so much Michael. You have some things you need to change in that cabin but sitting here, this place, the beauty, the stillness, everything, it's so perfect.”

“You could say that again love, it's completely and utterly perfect.” I kissed her forehead and closed my eyes to black out the outside world, knowing I wasn't talking about nature.

Chapter Ten

Ava

A few hours later after everything was packed, I was glad to be heading home. Things were pretty quiet between us and I still wondered about my interview with Michael. Considering the last few hours and days I felt content other than that.

When we stopped in front of my place, the driver unloading my suitcase I smiled, took his hand in mine and held it. “Thank you for having me on this trip Michael. I know you needed me for this trip and I was forced to come. There were a few critical moments where we were at each other’s throats but I had a good time.”

He smiled, I could tell he was thinking, deep in the thoughts in his head. He caressed the top of my hand with his thumb and kissed it. “You’re welcome. I will admit I thought it was

going to be a complete tragedy, but it was good. Especially the time we....”

“Yes, I had a wonderful time.”

“You know there was a time when I was a vegetarian too. When I was in college I tried it for a while. I hated the thought of factory farms killing animals for no reason. It started when I was eating a cheeseburger at a fast food place right next door to a slaughterhouse. It was awful and ruined my appetite, but it didn’t last.”

I was speechless. “Oh my goodness, I can’t imagine and I never would have guessed Michael. You’ve shocked me with that one. How long were you a vegetarian?”

“Two years. My grandmother was actually a vegetarian and devout animal lover, she never touched meat a day in her life. She always reminded me to take only what was necessary for survival if I had to do that, which is what the native Americans do.”

I was confused at this point. “But I don’t understand, you got three deer while we were at the cabin.”

“Well, I give the rest of the meat away. It’s a sport princess, and nothing more to me, really. I am a meat and potatoes guy but I can go without that too if you paid attention to the last meal we had. I didn’t have any meat either. I give the meat to local food pantries to help needy families, no one should have to starve ever.”

I could barely believe my ears. “That is something Michael, I can’t even claim to do that.” I leaned in to share one last kiss and felt awful that my mind was still lingering on that interview he had yet to give me.

I felt rude and selfish. I knew I should just trust him and let him come to me when he was ready but I felt like I’d been used and I’d done so much, given so much without getting what he told me I would get.

I didn’t want to leave without mentioning it in case he forgot since Michael reminded me many times he didn’t enjoy doing interviews. On the same note I didn’t want to ruin our friendship and what we shared during our time since meeting in the mall.

It felt like forever since that day and I enjoyed every moment but his driver was standing outside patiently waiting. “I know you have to go and so do I but have you decided about that interview yet?”

He frowned as if I brought up a bad word or said something awful to him. “No, not yet. I’m sorry, I know you came on this trip with that in mind and I didn’t give you anything and refused to even talk about it. I’m sorry, it’s a difficult subject for me. I am a very private person Ava in case you didn’t realize. Giving interviews doesn’t come easy for me for many reasons. I’m not trying to say no, but I need a bit more time to think about it, is that okay?”

What could I say, he’d asked me nicely for a bit more time. I wasn’t unreasonable, and needed to play nice if I was to get

what I wanted in the end even if it killed me. I was disappointed and my emotions about the topic were raw. “I guess it’s the least I can do, but I won’t lie, I’m upset about it Michael.”

“I know, just a few more days Ava.”

“Okay Michael. I have to go.” I gave his hand one more squeeze and felt a tightness in my chest when I got out of the limo. Even though we were like oil and water, I was going to miss Michael and the time we’d spent.

As I walked to the elevator, I tried to tell myself it was because he’d not done what he said he would but my heart knew different. My heart knew what it felt, my mind wasn’t ready to acknowledge it.

Chow and Min were happy to see me when I came through the door. I had a mountain of paperwork and mail waiting and my computer was buzzing with emails and work to be done. I didn’t feel like it so I laid down and slept for a while, both cats snuggled next to me.

It felt good to be home, back where I belonged and yet oddly I missed the cabin, but mostly I just missed Michael.

I slept and slept until the next day, in between noshing on the snacks I found in my apartment. I couldn’t bring myself to do any work, and felt defeated that I didn’t get the interview. The following day I was back to work as usual, sorting through the mess I’d ignored for days.

I was disappointed and tried my hardest to be angry at Michael for not being a better man, being honest with me and just telling me no from the start. I couldn't be angry with him, even if I wanted to and tried to move forward and focus on another interview so my readers didn't get bored or upset waiting for something new to read.

I unpacked, laughed when I found some of Michael's clothing mixed in with mine. Rather than wash them I put them on my bed and smelled his scent mingled with mine. Min and Chow thought they were new beds and got comfortable on them and slept. I found comfort in laying with them too.

Out of the blue my subscribers dwindle, and I have to do something. I debated running an interview on the owner of a world famous winery that agreed to work with me. Unfortunately, after checking my competitor's business blog I sadly discovered she already had an interview with him, and her subscribers are growing every day.

At this point I was caught between a rock and a hard place, and I knew the only interview my readers wanted to see was the one with Michael Harding. I was caught; I didn't know what to do at this point.

I could send him a text message asking him if he decided yet. I could call him and chat about the cabin and our time and gently nudge the topic in there. Or I could just get right to the point, drop by his place and demand he do the interview.

I knew the last would make him mad, but the other two would be too easy for him to ignore. I gave myself until the

following morning to decide which was best and take action and spent the night snuggled in his flannel.

Min and Chow were my couch partners as we watched movies and I thought, it was him or me, either I had to press him at this point or not. Then an idea hit me, and I knew I would get what I wanted, at least I hoped.

Chapter Eleven

Michael

I missed Ava if I was honest with myself. Her annoying habits, all the things that made me like and dislike her were interrupting my thoughts. I tried to work, but it was next to impossible.

I knew I was being ruthless and rude to Ava about the interview. She'd infused herself into my life in more than a few ways and it was a love and hate relationship. I knew the next time I went to my cabin it would be different for me, the time we'd spent, the memory of our passion would haunt me.

There was a part of me that would never forget. I found her image creeping into my thoughts at odd moments of the day, and I wondered what she was doing. I knew she and Maddy were probably becoming good friends, which meant I was going to hear about her a lot.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that, Peter and Maddy were my closest friends, and to think that I could run into Ava at their parties didn't make me happy. On a personal level I didn't want to see her with another man, and the thought made me angry.

Still, not doing the interview was going to bite me in the ass at some point. I just knew it, and her friendship with Maddy would be a constant reminder of what I did. If I was truthful with myself, I would feel bad about it.

I knew I had to do something. A few days passed, and I decided I would invite her to dinner. I really wanted to see her again, it would give me a chance to get her out of my system.

I wasn't in the market for love; I had no time for all that a relationship required. However, seeing her again would give me a chance to figure out what was between us. I thought about her way too much which didn't sit well with me.

The thought of a relationship made me a little nervous. My work and career were my relationship. I had no time for another, but I was getting older, and my business was successful. The thought of retiring or cutting back hours and maintaining what I had while enjoying the perks of a relationship intrigued me even if it was only a fantasy.

Ava, I thought about the interview. I want to talk to you so I thought I could take you out to dinner. Are you free Friday night?

Sure, I think I have a few hours. I'm happy you're finally thinking about the interview. We can discuss it then, does 7

work for you?

Sounds good to me, I'll pick you up Friday. Talk soon!

Her little dig about the interview shouldn't have surprised me, she'd played along with everything I threw at her, Ava was a really good sport when it came to dealing with a man like me. Her response made me happy. I was really looking forward to seeing her again; she was younger than me, which could have bothered me, but other than a few annoying habits I liked her.

The rest of the week I felt extra cheerful, which caught me off guard more than a few times. I engaged in conversations more than usual. Until meeting Ava, I knew what I was, and cheerful or talkative was not how I would have described myself. Some of my colleagues and friends commented on how happy I sounded on the phone or that I was smiling during a meeting, it was unnerving.

When I ran into Maddy at the market, a few nights later she was all smiles. "Well, I see someone who looks happy. Should I take it that you and Ava are getting along well? I talked to Ava yesterday, she told me you're going to dinner Friday. You really should snatch her up before she gets away from Michael. She's good for you, I can see it. I know you guys were arguing at the cabin, and she's awful at fishing and a vegetarian, but still."

Maddy eyed some fruit, picking it up and smelling it. "What in the world are you doing?"

“Smelling the fruit, if it smells good I buy it. Sometimes I feel it too, sometimes I give it a good squeeze and put it back if it feels too hard.” She laughed. “Now back to you and Ava, she is having a beneficial influence on you, I can see it, even Peter sees it. Marry her.” Maddy gazed at me.

I held my tongue and changed the topic. “I hear what you’re saying, marriage is not something I am interested in, Maddy. What’s Peter up to? I need to talk to him about a few things and he hasn’t returned my calls yet.”

She waved her hand in the air, the mango in her fingers almost escaped. “Oh, he’s off to France, business as usual, he’ll be back next week, Tuesday I think.”

“Okay.”

She spent the next 10 minutes recommending a few restaurants, even though I already had one picked out. By the time I left I had a migraine headache.

Friday night arrived, and I spent way too much time in front of the mirror, suddenly worried about my appearance. I felt off, like I didn’t know myself anymore, the things that never bothered me suddenly did, and vice versa.

I didn’t fuss or worry about how I dressed and that kind of nonsense; it wasn’t my style and yet I stood there longer than necessary thinking about how I looked. Finally, after much irritation with myself over silly nonsense I settled on what I was wearing and moved along.

When I arrived at Ava's place, I felt anxious, another additional aspect of my personality that I disliked. Irritated with myself for feeling so much, I sent her a text and waited. I wanted to see her, my thoughts were also getting out of hand. The thought of running my hands through her hair, cupping her hips as I pulled her to me, and tasting the sweet nectar of her lips was an enormous distraction affecting my work.

When she came out dressed in a simple blue dress, her sexy legs peeking out the bottom I wickedly wondered if I could convince her to come with me back to my place and order in, instead. The thought of running my hands along her curves, hearing that giddy laugh and spending the night in bed with her was far better than a vegetarian restaurant.

"Hi." She climbed in and sat next to me. I felt that familiar shock of anticipation as her body lightly pressed against mine. It was hard to not just take them, ravage and behave like the savage I knew I could sometimes be when out in the woods.

"Hey. You look absolutely stunning. Forgive me for saying this but the things I want to do to you right now, it's madness" I let my appreciation show, raking my eyes from eyes to toes and back where they started.

I saw the stain of red on her cheeks, and that thrilled twinkle in her eyes as she smiled. She liked what I said even if she didn't admit it, and she probably wanted the same thing I did too or at least I hoped. "Thank you. You're not too bad yourself Michael." She laughed. "So where are we going?"

My driver moved the car, I would not touch her until we were close to being done with dinner but I grabbed her hand, and laced my fingers through hers. “It’s a secret but I think you’re going to like it.”

I’d eaten before I left the penthouse so I wasn’t all that hungry. The thought of food that usually contained me, laden with mushrooms, soy and seitan made my stomach turn. There was no way I was eating any of that, not when I knew I could have the real thing and it would taste SO much better. Still, I wanted to please Ava, she deserved this dinner at the very least for her patience.

I couldn’t resist myself, wrapped my arm around her neck and leaned in to kiss her, in moments if I did not control myself we were going to be in way over our heads and that restaurant would be history. I was curious and wanted to see her reaction. I needed to see if anything had changed with her, if she was still attracted to me physically.

I ignored the warning bells going off in my head, the kind that reminded a man to be very careful what he was doing with a woman for his own peace of mind. I didn’t want to think about what tomorrow would bring, Ava was already taking up too much space in my head, a bit more wouldn’t matter.

She tasted of vanilla and honey as I leaned in for another kiss. Her seductive lips invited me to take another taste so I did. It was madness, one kiss turned to another and before we made it to the restaurant, her hands were in my hair, mine pressing her body tightly to me. My muscles were tense, ready

for the slightest invitation to act and it would be over, she would be beneath me on the seat, calling out my name before either of us could have a thought.

I wanted to pull her onto my lap, run my hands up and down her body and toss the dinner date out the window, I'm a man what can I say. I knew I couldn't do that, at the very least I owed her dinner and an explanation about the interview.

Unfortunately, all that was gone, my body was feeling other things and when my driver finally stopped, I was confused. I leaned back, tried to forget all I was feeling, everything I saw in her eyes too. I cleared my throat and smiled. "I guess we're here." We both refocused our energy on straightening up and composing ourselves.

Ava looked as flushed as I did. Her eyes were full of the same passion I felt, her lips swollen, her hands shaky. When she looked out the window, she smiled. "Oh my goodness, Michael, is this that new vegetarian restaurant? You are so sweet to take me here!" I heard the joy in her voice, it made me smile.

I helped her out of the limo, my hand in hers and I saw her stunned appreciation as she walked beside me. It was hard to focus on anything else, the interview, conversation or the surrounding people.

I'd paid a lot to get a private room so we could talk and she could enjoy herself. It was important for me too. I needed to relax, and the last thing I wanted was to be bothered by

anyone. Thankfully, we were seated in a private room overlooking the street, a lovely view by candlelight.

“This is beautiful Michael! I can’t believe you did this for me! I don’t know what to say.” She was blushing again. “I promise you are going to love the food here, vegetarian food takes people by surprise. They think they are going to hate it because there isn’t any meat, then they try something and fall in love with it.”

Her eyes were so intent as she stared back at me, I knew what was happening, the only question was, what was I going to do about it. I focused my energy elsewhere on the people passing by and hoped I didn’t upset her.

“Yeah well you remember I was a vegetarian for a while, I told you. I remember the food.” I pulled a face, hoping to make her laugh, when she did it made me smile too. “But I ate before I got here prepared to just taste and see what happens.”

It was her turn to pull a face; I bit back a wicked retort, amazed at how easily this woman shifted gears. She was playful and yet all business at the same time. She was positive and determined and yet shy and thoughtful, a complex mixture of everything I’d found alluring. It drove me nuts.

Chapter Twelve

Ava

I couldn't believe what Michael had done, I knew he'd secured a table at the new vegetarian restaurant in the city. The waiting list was weeks long, and he'd got us a private table in a private room on a Friday night.

Whatever he'd done, whatever strings he'd pulled I was impressed and excited. Not only was he going to do the interview tonight, but I would sample some of the most new and exotic vegetarian eats in the city thanks to him.

I was prepared too. I had everything I would need for the interview in my purse and I would sit all night if I had to, to get that interview done. I didn't know what to say, Michael was more than I could have imagined.

He was tilting my world on its axis and I could do nothing but sit back and let it happen in aw. When he'd called the other

day about dinner, I'd been on edge, ready to bust at the seams with excitement to prepare for this interview. I knew without a doubt if he called and invited me to dinner he was going to do the interview.

I'd missed him more than I wanted to. Min and Chow had his scent all over them, thanks to his clothing and I was acting like a lovesick school girl but I couldn't help it. Our time in Lake Placid had been annoying and crazy but also some of the best moments I'd had in a long time. Sure he was older than me, and more than rude but he surprised me too like this night.

I spent way too much time dressing for dinner, trying on a hundred outfits and settling on what I thought Michael would like the best. I wasn't sure why it mattered to me so much but went with it. Even if something were to develop between us, I never usually cared what men thought about me, how I dressed, what I said or did. Oddly Michael's opinion mattered to me.

Men either took me as I was or didn't but Michael's opinion was important to me. The moment I sat down in the limo I could think of nothing but running my hands all over him, kissing his lips and feeling his muscular arms wrapped around me.

When he kissed me, my mind went blank. Suddenly that interview, food and anything else on the agenda didn't matter. Feeling his strength, the way he held me, his firm lips pressed to mine, the taste and feel of him were all that mattered. I felt flushed, and hot, and excited, my legs weak and my stomach

did somersaults when I was close, it was the strangest sensation considering we'd already slept together.

“Goodness, I don't know what to choose.” I scanned the menu over and over, wishing I could try everything. “What about you?”

“Not sure.”

I felt bad for him; he looked lost, like he was in a foreign country and didn't know where to begin. I moved my chair over to sit on his side of the table and we went through the menu together. “A lot has changed since you were a vegetarian, restaurants and chefs create some really amazing dishes that taste just like real meat, well almost real meat anyway.” I laughed, deciding to be honest.

He rolled his eyes. “Alright then I guess I will try this, the vegetarian lasagna, how off can it be since it's pasta right?”

I laughed. “Well, they might use vegan cheese. I don't know but we can ask.”

It took a good while for Michael to settle on his food. I was getting hungrier by the minute and ready to scream. I knew he would have a good time once he got over his annoyance at what he was eating. It was surprising he was once a vegetarian and now back to eating meat, we vegetarians tried hard to maintain our stance for ethical purposes if nothing else but I knew he was different.

We talked about his business, his friends Peter and Maddy, and everything but the interview. I kept my mouth shut and let

him lead the way. He'd invited me, I would play along and see what happened.

I was curious to know more about Michael on a personal level and delved into foreign territory as we sat side by side. We were the only ones in the room so it didn't matter how we sat. I didn't want to move, even after we ordered, the closeness we shared, feeling that connection, was comforting to me so I stayed.

He'd thrown his arm over my chair so it was pressed to my back lightly as he rested it on the seat. It felt casual, comfortable and oddly like we were a couple even though we weren't and more than once I had to remind myself of that.

“So how are we going to do this, the breakup thing? When, how and what should I be doing?”

Michael looked at me, his eyes were unreadable but he said nothing for a moment. His eyes lowered to my lips, I shivered hoping he would kiss me. He leaned in, his breath fanning across my face as he smiled.

I lost all ability to breathe, let alone think or speak. I tried to say something but nothing came out. I closed my eyes in anticipation of the kiss I hoped was going to happen. When nothing did for a moment I opened my eyes and looked into his eyes.

He was staring at me, every ounce of desire and passion he felt for me, was written in his eyes. “I was thinking we'd play that by ear for now. I might need you to join me at another

function and since everyone seemed to like you, maybe I could use that to my advantage.”

The seriousness in his eyes melted every ounce of reserve I had. He could have told me he wanted me to marry him and I would've probably said yes without thinking, it was that alluring. He smiled, when I looked at his lips and back I saw the wickedness in his eyes.

“See something you like?”

He was playing with fire, and I was more than happy to join him. I smiled back, ran my hand along his arm lightly, making myself shiver. “Yes, very much.”

That was all the invitation he needed, his lips were on mine, slowly tempting and teasing me. I melted beneath his touch, wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him close for a kiss and felt every ounce of need and want we both felt in that small touch.

It was hard to control myself, and I felt his tightly leashed control as his hand slipped into my hair and held me in place. He tasted like beer and barbeque sauce, a delightful mix mingled with the musky scent of his cologne as his hot lips were pressed to mine.

I tried to hold back but when a soft cry escaped my lips; I laughed and pulled back to look around and make sure we were alone. Satisfied we were, I looked at him again.

“We have to get through dinner princess, I can only control myself so long so we might want to behave.” He smiled,

pulled me to him again for another passionate kiss. When he pulled back this time, I could barely breathe. My body was on fire inside, my skin tingling from head to toe and every ounce of muscle in my body was liquid and pliant. I had to let that relax, and leaned my head against his shoulder, I felt a contentment I never felt before with any man.

It was the strangest sensation; it took me back to the time at the cabin, how carefree everything had been. Sure it had been annoying too, but it was real and cozy.

I was feeling very much out of my element. I felt daring, excited and ready for a little adventure. I knew I was being naughty but went with what my heart and body wanted to do at the moment.

“Come with me Mr. Harding, we have a bit of time before our food arrives.” I held out my hand, saw his confused but humored look and walked ahead of him.

I led him to the bathroom, tugged him quickly inside the small room when I saw it was empty. I locked the door behind us and turned, leaning against the door. “I was thinking...”

His eyes smoldered with the same passion I felt when he realized what I wanted. He smiled, a lopsided grin, his hand immediately pressing between my legs as he leaned into me. “Well, you surprised me Ava.”

His lips pressed to mine, hot, and wild. I kissed him back just as passionately, holding onto the collar of his shirt. If this was the interview dinner, it could be the last time we were together. It was crazy, but I wanted one more taste of him.

His hand tugged at my wet panties, I pulled his head to my chest as he fought with his other hand to free my breasts from my top. His lips finally covered my nipples one at a time. I stifled my cry of pleasure into his hair. “Oh, God Michael. I don’t know if I can be quiet.”

He smiled, tore his lips from my breasts and kissed me hard and fierce. In seconds he had my skirt up, his pants undone, and he was slipping his shaft deep inside me. I bit my lip, wrapped my legs around his waist and let him fully support me.

His hands grabbed my ass and thrust me forward against the rhythm he created. Arms wrapped around his broad shoulders, I clawed his back to control how passionate it felt. I tore at his shirt holding everything I had in me, lost in the sea of emotions and feelings.

Michael took me to a place I’d been before but never so fierce and intently. It was magical, as I stared into his eyes, he was driven, and intent on bringing us both pleasure. I surrendered to it, let my body sink into it and enjoyed.

He was the master of my body at that moment as I could do nothing but hold on. My legs felt numb, still I rode the storm wildly along with him until we both exploded. My cries quieted by his hand over my mouth.

When we were done and both spent I barely noticed him still holding me. He pressed me against the door, supporting me. I nuzzled his hair and kissed his ear, making a trail to his

lips and pressing my lips to his. “You can put me down Michael. I can support myself.”

He smiled. “Maybe I don’t want to do that.”

I laughed when he set me down on my wobbly legs and numb feet. I cleaned myself up and adjusted my clothing, helped him clean up. “Wow, that was something. I can honestly say I am starving now.”

He laughed. “Well then, we should get back, I bet our food is waiting.”

When we left the bathroom, a server passed by, her eyes lingered, she smiled but kept walking. We were right next to the kitchen which I barely realized before we went into the bathroom. I smiled at Michael as we sat down. “Goodness, I wonder if anyone heard us.”

“Who cares if they did.” He dug into his waiting food.

The dinner was amazing; I savored every morsel, ready to forget my manners and lick the plate. “This is the best vegetarian food I’ve had in a long time. How’s yours Michael?”

“Excellent.” He laughed, pushing his plate away. “I would have never thought they could pull that off. I’m not sure how they did it but the chef is a master. How they took mushrooms and seitan and turned it into this, I’m speechless.”

We talked for a bit more, and I enjoyed the sulfate free wine as he drank his craft beer. The night was wearing on, and while I was enjoying myself very much my mind wandered.

What about the interview? He called me out here for that interview and said nothing about it. Are we going to do it at his house or mine or somewhere else?

My curiosity was getting the better of me and I felt antsy when the server came by. “Can I get you dessert?”

Michael eyed me, smiling. ““What do you say princess? Do you want dessert?””

I laughed, feeling stuffed to the top with good food and smiled. “Well, I guess if we share I could taste something.”

He winked at me; I was surprised how playful and carefree he was behaving, if I wasn’t careful I was going to fall for him, which would be unacceptable. I straightened up and tried to think of other things. The only thing that came to mind was sex and my mind ran with it, making my skin feel flushed. *All good things come to those who are patient!*

“Okay, you pick.”

I studied the separate menu the server handed me. “Can we have the sampler, this way we can try a little of everything?”

“Absolutely.” She took the menu and left. Michael was staring at me, a serious look on his face.

I had to ask; I was tired of waiting. We’d talked about everything and relived some memories from the trip. I wanted him badly, and would have no problem inviting him back to my place or joining him at his place.

That wasn’t usually my style, but the attraction was so intense between us I knew I wasn’t about to deny the

chemistry. Whatever we had wherever this was leading I was willing to share a bit more pleasure with him.

I knew it was nothing serious, we could never be serious no matter what my heart and body were telling me. My rational mind knew otherwise. Still, I needed the interview first.

“So Michael, this has been wonderful. The dinner was excellent, your company is always appreciated and I couldn’t have asked for a better time or place but what are we doing here?”

He looked confused and quickly masked his friendliness and smiled with a frown. “I don’t follow you.” He sipped his beer, and I knew I was losing him. I’d chosen the wrong words, selected the wrong approach or all the above.

It was too late to retrace my steps so after the server brought our dessert and two forks I tried again after sampling the peach pomegranate pie slice. “Oh, this is good! Michael, you promised me you’d consider the interview, think about it and I am still waiting here.”

He was quiet, I should have expected it. He sampled some of the desert and laid his fork down. “I wanted to discuss that, but we got a bit sidetracked. Sorry it took so long to get to this but there is just something....” He tossed his hand back and forth between us. “It confuses me sometimes.”

I laughed. “It’s okay.” I had to maintain a business attitude now as we were getting nowhere fast. “So are we going to do the interview right here?” I looked around, deciding it was a

perfect spot with the quiet, the seclusion, we could easily talk without being interrupted.

He frowned again and picked up his fork to eat some more dessert. “I don’t think we’re going to do it here.”

“Okay, where?”

He laughed. “If we go back to my place or yours I don’t think either of us will think about an interview.”

He had a point. I nibbled on the carrot cake which wasn’t to my liking and set my fork down. “Okay, then where? I don’t need a lot of time, we just need to talk, we could technically do it in your limo if that works too.”

Michael pinned me with his eyes. “There are things I want to do with you in that limo, but an interview isn’t one of them, princess.”

I bit my lip, my mind racing to find an appropriate spot. The only other place I came up with was a neutral location and since we were already here at the restaurant, it would do. “Okay fair enough, so we can work on it here. Let me get my stuff out, and as soon as we are done with dessert we can talk. I am so excited....”

“Ava, I am not ready to do the interview. I don’t think I will ever be ready to do the interview. I know I said I would consider it and invited you here but I mentioned a thousand times I don’t do interviews. My business mentor told me a long time ago that interviews were a bad thing for a successful business man and that I should never do them and that suits

me well as I am a very private person.” He sat back in his chair, his eyes guarded.

My anger erupted. I tossed my fork on the table. “You know Michael I understand you’re a private man and don’t like interviews but I have jumped through every hoop you’ve asked me to and got nothing in return. You called me out to dinner here tonight like we were going to do the interview and now you tell me this. That’s not good enough, you have no integrity. I want to know when we can schedule the interview, I can do it over the phone or whatever but we are doing this interview.”

Chapter Thirteen

Michael

Ava was angry but then again so was I. I would not be told what I was going to do and not do. I knew who I was and what I was about. I would not do it if I wasn't ready and I just wasn't feeling it, maybe it was all the passion between us that kept me from paying attention but there was nothing I could do about that. I know I'd called her out to dinner for that reason; I owed her an explanation and thought maybe seeing her again would change my mind.

How did I help someone understand how I felt about such things when I didn't even understand it myself, still I wanted to say something? "I know everything you've done. You've gone above and beyond what I've asked for, and this dinner was more personal than anything."

I saw how unhappy she was about my decision to not do the interview, still I would not be swayed. Back in professional mode, I realized dinner was over and we were back to being strangers on opposite sides of the fence. I would at least come clean about that. “I wanted to see you again. We needed to talk about what was coming between us. I am hoping to continue our friendship hoping if I need your help pretending for a function you will help me. I like you Ava, sometimes you rub me the wrong way but I think we can make this work. Besides, if I change my mind in the future I will tell you.”

She frowned and looked away, then started rifling around in her purse. “Well then, I guess it’s time to go home. Just so you know, I am very disappointed and upset. You’ve hurt me badly, I feel like I’ve been used but don’t worry about it. I was considering interviewing Trevor Brooks. He has a similar work ethic and is much more engaging. My readers might enjoy what he has to say more than you, anyway.”

Her words were cutting, I could tell she was hurting, I saw the way her eyes clouded over with tears as she fussed and got ready to leave. I didn’t want it to end like this, we’d had a beautiful night. I reached for her hand, surprised when she pulled away.

“I’m good, thanks. This has been a lovely evening, now if you wouldn’t mind taking me home, please. I will leave the tip.” She tossed cash on the table and started scrolling through her phone, shutting me out.

I knew I deserved it but that didn't mean I liked it. I tried to find something to say that would make her feel better, make her understand. As we drove back to her place, the way she ignored me was infuriating. It shouldn't have been that big of a deal but it was to me. I didn't like Trevor; he was a player, the kind of man that would talk circles around her, give her what she wanted and take a few things if she wasn't careful.

"Trevor isn't a good choice. You will want to choose someone else." I had to provide my two cents on the matter, knowing better than she did. I felt the distance between us, the emptiness and lack of connection as she continued to scroll through her phone. She was closed off from me, and whatever we were, was done and she didn't care anymore.

"I don't think you need to be worrying about what I'm doing and who I do interviews with Mr. Harding. Considering you refused to do the interview, it's none of your business. And I think you need to reach out to Therese or someone else to help you in the future. I have no intentions of helping you, by playing in your theater production. It's kind of weird that a man of your success needs to use another person like that."

The driver stopped in front of her place and waited. I turned to her, ignoring my anger at her words for the moment. "Trevor is a snake, he may seem like a straight up entrepreneur that has a lot to say and offer to your readers about his success but he doesn't. Trust me. Pick someone else."

I reached out my hand, needing to touch her, feeling she was still with me. Things were shifting too fast, and I hated it.

I was always in control of everything around me that affected me. The people, places, and things, work and whatever else always bent to my will, I wouldn't have it any other way.

Every muscle in my body felt tense, I was clenching my teeth to control my frustration when she pulled her hand away. Before she could move, I needed to touch her, one last time, and caressed the side of her face with my rough hand.

She turned to me, her eyes clouded with tears, I leaned in and kissed her lips, expecting her to push me away. When she didn't I pulled her onto my lap, prepared to take every ounce of desire she could give me as if it were our last.

Her hands tugged at my hair, I tasted the sweetness of her lips, thrust up and pulled her down to me, and smiled when she moaned into the kiss. Wrapped in my arms she was everything I wanted, and everything that was wrong for me all in one breath, still I took.

My hands explored her body, gripping her hips hard to keep her tightly pressed to me. I ran my mouth along the front of her dress, kissed each nipple through the softness of her dress and felt them peak. "God, you are so beautiful. Stay with me tonight, come home with me, I want to make love to you Ava." I stared up into her eyes.

She smiled, desire sparkling in her eyes. "Give me the interview first, and then I would love to spend the night with you again, make love at your place or mine." I watched, fascinated as she bit her lip and her head fell backwards.

It was madness but I wouldn't be swayed, I never broke a promise to myself and doing the interview would break a promise to myself. "I can't do that Ava. You could ask me anything but that."

The passion was over; she pulled herself together as I tried in vain to hold her tight. Her body shifted, and she sat beside me again, her hair an utter mess, her youthful beauty strained with upset again. I regretted denying her anything.

She glanced away to her phone. "If you will excuse me I have to go now. This has been delightful, I wish you the best Mr. Harding."

Her formal way of addressing me infuriated me but not hardly as much as her refusal of me, that she could turn off her passion just like that. "Don't do that. Don't call me Mr. Harding, we are long past that stage of friendship." I controlled myself so there was no hint of annoyance in my voice and struggled mentally to understand why the interview was so important with Ava.

"You think this is a friendship, you strung me along for your own personal gain to get what you wanted and you think that's a friendship. That's nothing but using people and shows a lot about your character and who you are on the inside."

I snapped like a twig; I felt jilted which was a new sensation for me. "Enough. It's time for you to go. I am not doing the interview and I won't tolerate you second guessing who I am as a man or my moral compass. I have been nothing but considerate to you. In no way did I use you, besides the same

thing can be said about you, doing everything I asked so you could get what you wanted. Not much of a friend either I imagine.”

It was over; I was done. There was no way I would go out on a limb anymore for Ava. I'd done my best, tried to woo her with a luxurious dinner, bought her clothing and jewelry and took her on a vacation to make up for not giving her what she wanted.

She didn't have to do anything except show up and have a good time, enjoy what I did for her, and I was the bad guy. I buried my feelings, pulled myself together emotionally and pulled back to study my phone, dismissing her.

She said no more, and two minutes later she stepped out of the limo and the door closed. I fought the urge to watch her walk away, take one last look at the woman who took a piece of my heart with her.

I regretted it a few minutes later and felt the ache in my chest from my rash actions. I tried calling her and texting but Ava refused to answer. I felt like a lovesick fool, and after an hour of frustrated waiting I gave up, angry.

My anger stayed with me, and it wasn't until the wee hours of the night that I let that go, and felt the regret and upset beneath it all. I'd been a fool, rude, relentless in my pursuit of my own needs and she'd gone along with it.

I was wrong and knew it but I hated people telling me what to do, least of all people who weren't as successful as I was even if they were right.

As I lay in bed that night I contemplated how I was going to win her back. I knew I'd done her wrong, and no little gesture would do. Since I wasn't about to openly apologize, something I almost never did for anyone I had to think of something else.

The following day I debated sending flowers with a note, candy, jewelry, or something. None of that sat well with me. Ava would feel like I was buying her affection and friendship if thinking about it made me feel that way. I called Maddy for advice, told her I'd decided against the interview and now Ava was mad at me.

"Well, you could just apologize, it is acceptable for a man to do that in a relationship, especially when they are wrong Michael." I heard the mockery and humor in her voice.

"No, I can't do that, I hardly ever apologize for anything I do. She's going to need to accept that about me."

"You are going to have to accept a few things about her too Michael if you want to be with her. For starters you are going to have to accept that Ava is a headstrong woman, with her own mind, thoughts and feelings."

Frustrated, I sighed and cracked my knuckles wondering if I had time to go to the shooting range to blow apart some frustrations. "I don't want to change her, I just want her to work with me instead of against me."

"She could probably say the same."

Maddy had a point. "Fair enough, I get your point. Listen, I have to go. I'll talk to you later. I think I'm headed to the

shooting range.”

I felt an uneasiness I never felt for two days but by the following night I decided. She'd earned every bit of that interview and I was going to do that for her. I cared about her as a person and this slight gesture was going to be very hard for me to do but I would make the sacrifice if I needed to, to keep her friendship.

I wasn't sure what was going on between us yet, but she had my attention and I wanted to find out, this was a good place to start. Satisfied with my decision I felt a sense of relief as the interview had been looming over my head.

Chapter Fourteen

Ava

I was miserable, I'd wanted the interview with Michael Harding, and his methods for manipulating me had worn me down. It wasn't even worth it anymore. When I left that night it was the last time I planned on seeing him.

Penny, my partner, called to check on the status of the interview. "Hey, how's it going with Michael Harding, did he give you a day and time yet? I have to confess I might have done something rash that might make this a rush job for you."

My gut told me this would not be good. "What is it? I am not even going to speculate at this point. I went with Mr. Harding to a fundraiser, a weekend in Lake Placid and then finally dinner the other night. Just give me the bad news, as it can't get much worse than that."

I'd had a horrible night of sleep for the past two nights as I tried to refocus my energy. I was ready to abandon ship on the interview, if Penny wanted to handle it, maybe she would have more luck. Although that didn't sit very well with me.

"Well, how are things with you two? Did he do the interview? He's cute and rich, does he have a sexy voice? Was there any chemistry? It's been forever since you've been with a man Ava, if you're going to date one it might as well be Michael Harding." Penny laughed.

"Get to the point. Yes there was chemistry, a lot of chemistry but he was also rude. He's this odd mix of sexy playboy with a whole lot of brooding older entrepreneur, it's weird. I won't lie, we slept together but I have no intentions of doing that again no matter how much my body aches for his touch."

"Oh la la, so he is sexy." Penny laughed. "I'm so happy for you. You deserve happiness, so what if he gives off those rude bad boy vibes, some guys do that. If you can ignore it, look at what you're getting. So when are you seeing him again? You have answered none of my questions, what's the deal?"

Min and Chow were sitting on the couch next to me, one on each side. My headache from all the questions and thinking, I missed Michael, all I wanted to do was rewind the last few weeks and forget all about Michael Harding.

"He's not doing the interview. He kept playing games with me, putting it off, and not giving me an answer. He took me to dinner a few days ago and mentioned he wanted to talk about

the interview. I thought for sure it would happen that night. He told me he changed his mind, and basically all the things I'd done didn't matter."

"Wait! He's not doing the interview?"

"No. Of course you could call him and try to negotiate with him, but I doubt it's going to do any good. Maybe you'll have better luck though. He refused and finally wore me down so much, my hopes were dashed and I just walked away."

"Oh goodness, that could be....a....bit....of a....problem."

Frustrated with my best friend I closed my eyes and blocked out the sound of her voice for a second. "Tell me now or I am coming over there and you're going to explain to me face to face. Decide which is better, here on the phone or face to face. If it's bad, do it this way so I have time to gather my wits before I explode. I love you but right now things are not too good for me!"

Penny sighed heavily and rushed on with her words. "Well, I might have posted online that you were working on an interview with Michael Harding which would be due out in the next few weeks."

"No! Penny please don't tell me that! This is the worst news of all! What are we going to do now? Retract it, tell our readers it was a mistake!"

I felt the tears coming as soon as it rolled off her lips. The reality of her actions was going to have a negative effect on our business blog. "This is going to ruin us if we don't figure

out a way to make this right Penny. Since you did this, I hope you will figure out what to do. I have to go, I'm going to throw myself under a bus and hope for the worst. Take care of Min and Chow for me.”

I hung up feeling the worst I'd ever felt in my life. I didn't dare look at the blog; I didn't want to see the responses and comments. I didn't want to know if our readers were hyped up and about to be disappointed. Instead, I climbed in bed, turned off my phone and computer and decided I would not acknowledge life.

Chapter Fifteen

Michael

I had to make it right, and decided the next day I was going to make time for the interview, I just needed to talk to Ava. I tried to call her, but she didn't answer. I wasn't sure if she had blocked me but every message and call was ignored. More than a few times my call went straight to voicemail.

After a day of waiting for a call or text back while working, I decided I would call the number on her business blog. I figured her friend or an employee would answer and could help me. I didn't immediately get an answer, frustrated I hung up and felt like I was purposefully being ignored. I disliked it very much when someone ignored me.

Later that night my phone rang. "Hi, is this Mr. Michael Harding?"

I felt relieved and relaxed as much as I could. “Yes, you must be Ava’s partner. I don’t have a lot of time right now but I am ready to do the interview if you can help me. I had hoped to do this interview with Ava but apparently she isn’t talking to me. I owe her this debt and want to pay up before moving on for everything she did.” My last comment was more for myself than anyone else, I always made it a point to pay my debts.

I was tired; I spent the day thinking of Ava, wondering what she was doing, and if she was thinking about me. I was exhausted, more than I’d ever been on a good day tracking and hunting bears in the wild. The couch was comfortable for me so I could easily kick back and answer this woman’s questions. I didn’t enjoy talking about myself, or my success, there was no proper method, most of it was common sense things at least to me. I couldn’t imagine how anyone didn’t already know most of this stuff but if it made Ava happy that was all that mattered to me.

“Oh, yes, this is Stephanie, Ava’s partner.” The woman on the phone sounded young, much younger than Ava.

“Okay, good. If you want to begin I have about 45 minutes so we can talk about whatever you want. If you or Ava had specific questions for me, please ask. If not, I can just discuss the success I’ve had with my business, although I don’t think my knowledge is any different from anyone else’s.”

“Alright, yes I have some questions for you. Just give me a moment, and I will get them. I wasn’t prepared for you to

answer.” The woman sounded just as cheerful as Ava, apparently they were like two peas in a pod.

“Take your time, I’m just waiting for takeout. So tell me, has Ava been asking about me? I’m sure she told you about us, at least a little bit. Oddly enough, I could have sworn she called you Penny.” I scrolled through the blog to see who I was talking to and have a face.

“Yes, she told me briefly about you two. Well, my nickname in college was Penny, it’s a long story but my real name is Stephanie.”

“Interesting. So how did you two meet?”

“In college, we were instant friends and when we wanted a change of careers, this business blog was born. So why don’t you tell me about your success and then we will get to the questions so we don’t run out of time.”

I spent the next half hour discussing my business from its inception to the present. I shared my success stories and failures and what I felt didn’t work for most people. It was hard for me to share, as I didn’t like to be so open and exposed, but I pushed that feeling aside in favor of helping Ava.’

Stephanie didn’t ask the questions I thought she would, and I was shocked when we were done and she hung up without so much as a thank you or some cheerful comment. I shook it off but something felt unfulfilling about our conversation, as if there was no thoughtfulness put into it.

I hoped she and Ava were satisfied with my interview and put it behind me. I had to let Ava go, whatever we were, it was nothing and I should have been thankful as I had no time for love. My career was and always would be my most profound and devoted relationship.

Still, I hoped Ava would be thrilled about the interview and send me a text message or something to thank me. When she didn't, I was a little annoyed, but I knew it had more to do with my personal feelings than business.

The next morning I woke early and pushed through my day, pushing thoughts of her to the back of my mind. As I worked I was plotting a return trip to Lake Placid to bury her memory where it belonged under a pile of snow and in the sounds of my rifle as I hunted.

By lunch I was back to my old self or at least I told myself that. When my phone rang I picked up without thinking, the phone number was unfamiliar. "Yeah, what's up?"

"Hi this is Penny. Is this Mr. Michael Harding?"

"Yes, it is, we talked yesterday, and you said your real name is Stephanie, I don't care what name you call yourself but you have to admit that is kind of confusing." I smiled, apparently Penny was just as nutty as Ava. "What can I do for you? Did you forget a question in our interview last night?"

"Mr. Harding, I didn't talk to you last night. I was sick laying on my couch. I don't know who called you for an interview last night but it wasn't me and it wasn't Ava. What was the name of the person you were talking to?"

I heard the concern and hesitation in her voice. Warning bells went off in my head. Surprised, I stopped what I was doing and listened to her voice, thinking it was some kind of joke. “She said her nickname was Penny in college and it was a long story but her real name was Stephanie.”

“Oh hell. Mr. Harding, you did an interview with her?”

“Yes, I did. She told me she was Ava’s partner, basically admitting she was you.” Reality hit, and my anger erupted, I started yelling. “How was I supposed to know that she was lying? I never called her, she called me.”

Frustrated, I turned the speaker phone on and tossed my phone to the desk and realized my mistake immediately. “I answered the phone wanting to make things right between Ava and I. I don’t enjoy owing people anything.”

“Well, that was the worst thing you could do. Stephanie is our business blog competitor. She is forever competing with us and until now we have always been one step ahead of her. Ava is going to be furious.”

This was a huge mistake on a business and personal level. I started scrolling through my phone for information about Stephanie and her business blog as we spoke. Not only did I do an interview with the wrong woman, but from what I saw, not a woman I wanted to associate with on any level. “Hell, she can’t be over 22, how is she even doing interviews for a business blog? Never mind, I don’t want to know!”

I studied the landscape outside the window, mad at myself for my foolishness. “Damn it!” Her business blog was poorly

written, her reader base, a mixture of individuals that may or may not benefit from my knowledge. It was a complete mess. “I made a huge mistake, Penny. I need to take a few minutes and think. There has to be some way to rectify this mess. Give me an hour, do nothing and for heaven’s sake don’t talk to Ava. I will call you right back.”

I hung up, mad as hell at myself for screwing things up for Ava and Penny and their business blog. Any hope that Ava would forgive me was hopeless now.

I took a quick trip to the gym and consulted with Peter about it. He was just as successful in business as I was and could easily help me see things from a different angle. “What do you think about what I told you Peter? I am way too deep to see things clearly. This is a mess and right now I just want to save face. That’s not even considering how Ava is going to feel.”

We were lifting weights, spotting each other as we worked. I shot my whole day; I was running late for all my appointments and I couldn’t get this mess out of my head. “If I don’t fix this soon and put it behind me, I might lose my mind.”

Peter continued to lift, gritting his teeth as he worked. “Well, I can’t help you on a personal level, that one is on you. But some wine, a few roses, a nice vacation or some jewelry always does the trick for me with Maddy. Let me make a few phone calls and we will see what can be done. I know this woman, she tried to do an interview with me a year ago, she’s not very professional and sneaky if you ask me. I’m going to

see if I can dig up some details about her and we can go from there. We will get that taken down or at the very least she will have to give credit to Ava and her partner Penny, citing that the interview was originally there's. You should call your attorney, he will know what to do."

"Thanks Peter, you're a lifesaver." I groaned heavily. When we finished our workout, I messaged Penny and tried to pick up the pieces of my day.

Do nothing yet, I have someone working on this mess. By the end of the day I hope to have this matter all fixed. If you talk to Ava try to keep from mentioning it yet, I'm sorry to ask you to do that. Just wait for me and it will be fixed one way or another. In the meantime, if she mentions it to you, then tell her it's all my fault but I am handling it.

Okay, I guess I can do that, although you better find some way to make this up to her. If she finds out, she will never forgive either of us.

Understood, talk to you later. From that moment on my day went to the trash can, everything I did went wrong. I reached out to Peter to let him know I was headed out of town if he couldn't reach me. I needed to regroup and get my wits about me; it was so unlike me to let a woman get to me this way.

Chapter Sixteen

Ava

I was doing the best I could, I'd moved on after the whole Michael Harding thing, at least on a professional level but personally I was still a mess. I missed him and just wanted to go back to the time at the cabin when he let me drive the snow plow truck and relive it again and again.

I couldn't focus on saving my life, and work was affected. I secured another interview with David England, a successful business owner and I was scheduled to do the interview first thing Friday morning.

It thrilled me he'd agreed to do an impromptu interview so I had something exciting for our readers and Penny was thrilled too. She'd barely fixed things with our readers, and we both ended up profusely apologizing for the incorrect post.

We got a bunch of negative comments but when I posted that David England's interview would be online in the next 24 hours everything seemed to settle down. I was relieved, almost certain this meant the end of our careers as business bloggers.

While I was monitoring things for our business blog and the readers I wanted to know what our competition was up to so I took a peek. Usually I always avoided it at all costs. Not only was it counterproductive, but it made me feel negative if I saw something I didn't like on Stephanie's blog.

It was early, when I woke from a restless night of sleep, dreaming of Michael's hands all over me, and waking to find my bed empty. It was a miserable way to start the day, but not as miserable as the moment I opened up my laptop and checked Stephanie's blog.

“What the hell! Damn it Michael Harding, how could you do that to me!”

There in big bold letters, the headline, jaw dropping interview with successful business owner Michael Harding. If that wasn't enough there was a picture of him beside it. I wanted to scream, felt the pain of betrayal deep in my bones, and buried my face in my hands and cried.

“You lied to me Michael, you lied! How could you do that to me and then go to my competitor and give her the interview? Why would you do that?” I was a mess, angry and upset all at the same time. I debated calling him on the phone but decided against it. Talking to him would infuriate me even more than I already felt.

I continued to cry and almost forgot what time it was until my phone's alarm buzzed reminding me it was time to interview David. I had five minutes to spare, wiped my face with a napkin and gathered my wits as best I could.

This was the final straw, the final blow that cut deeper than anything else he could have done. It was one thing to refuse an interview, I could even get over being strung along and used a little because he gave me a few things to take with me when we parted ways.

To do an interview with my competitor, behind my back after telling me you didn't do interviews for anyone I felt beyond betrayed. With a still sniffly nose I pulled it together and fixed my hair for the zoom meeting I was set to have with David. He was away in Australia but willing to go above and beyond to do the interview, flattered he would be chosen.

Everything went smoothly, I fumbled my way through it as best I could, ignoring the messages that came through from Penny. David was a kind man, with a warm disposition, quite a contrast to Michael's and when we were done, he thanked me for taking the time to interview him.

I was happy that was out of the way, but crumbled the second I was off the zoom meeting. I wanted to read the interview Michael did for Stephanie; I was curious to see what he had to say, and at the same time I didn't want to read it.

Reading that interview would only make me feel worse, and neither Michael nor Stephanie were worth that anguish. Still, I had to call someone.

“Hello.”

“Penny, you will not believe this! Before I did the interview with David, I was curious to see how Stephanie’s blog was doing. You will not believe what I discovered! Michael did an interview with her instead of us! So much for that *I don’t do interviews with anyone comment*. Apparently he’s a liar too. I’m so mad right now, I wish I knew where he was so I could give him a piece of my mind!”

“I don’t know what to say Ava.”

Penny’s reaction shocked me; she was the woman who always had something to say about everyone, good or bad it didn’t matter. *She must be just as shocked as I am!* “That’s okay, I made friends with his best friend’s wife. I’m going to call her and have a little chat. This type of treatment is not very professional on his part and shouldn’t go unnoticed. We might have to do a bit of writing on that, and our recent experience with the successful Michael Harding after I talk to her. I gotta go, I just wanted to let you know.”

“Okay.”

A new purpose in mind I hung up and immediately called Maddy.

“Ava dear, how are you?”

“Not so good Maddy. I have to be honest with you. Do you have time today to meet with me? I really need to talk to you about Michael.” Fueled by my anger I plotted his destruction, at least professionally. I might not end his successful career

but I was so upset I wasn't thinking clearly and determined to at least make some people take notice of how he behaved as a man.

“Oh goodness. Of course I have time. We can meet for lunch, say 1pm, how about that new cafe on 5th?”

“Sounds perfect. Thank you Maddy, I'll see you in a few hours.”

“Absolutely dear. Looking forward to it.” She sounded happy yet concerned. I didn't want to make my problems her problems, but I needed to talk to someone and Penny wouldn't be much help right now.

I hung up feeling slightly relieved, even though deep down I was still very upset. I was heartbroken if I was honest with myself. I'd given so much to Michael, more than I should have and he took advantage of that. Then he went behind my back and did the interview with Stephanie of all people, and didn't even have the guts to tell me.

Maddy was so good to me, when I got to the cafe she must have sensed how miserable I felt and insisted that we ordered dessert first instead of lunch. “So tell me Ava, what's going on? I know Michael mentioned to me that he told you he didn't want to do the interview after he took you to that new vegetarian restaurant.”

I rested my head on the table in a very unladylike fashion, uncaring of who might walk by the windows and be looking at us. “He did that, and it was wonderful. I had a great time until he got to the part about not doing the interview. I never felt so

betrayed in my life.” I lifted my head as reality hit me. “You know that Michael and I were never a couple, you know that was just an act right?”

Maddy looked confused, then laughed. “No, that’s not possible, two people who acted the way you two did at the cabin couldn’t possibly be pretending. There is no way I am going to believe that.”

I didn’t want to hurt her feelings but realized it was time Michael started being honest with his friends and business partners and followers about who and what he was as a man. If he would not do it, I would be more than happy to help him since he’d been so kind to me.

I knew I was being deceitful at this moment, and secretly hated myself for doing it but I kept going. “Yes, in exchange for my help to pretend to be his girlfriend for a fundraiser, he said he would consider doing the interview. Then you and Peter wanted me to go to the cabin, and I couldn’t refuse, again Michael told me he would make it up to me somehow and still considered doing the interview. Finally, when we came home, I’d basically given up until he called me to dinner. I thought for sure he was going to do the interview but then he declined again. I’ve all but given up, and moved on to replacing his interview with another only to be betrayed yet again.”

Maddy looked horrified, and disbelieving. “Goodness, I can’t believe he would do such a thing. What else happened?”

I had her full attention now, so I continued rolling with it, feeling a sense of relief that all was coming out. I was hurt; it was wrong, and I knew it but the pain I felt deep inside fueled me to keep going even when my mind told me to shut up.

“He did an interview with my business blog competitor! My competitor Stephanie has his interview posted online as of yesterday morning. I am in such shock, Maddy, I can’t even think straight.”

I was done, I’d said it all, and when I realized I felt no better telling his friend about his behavior I cried again, and couldn’t even think about the piece of cheesecake that sat on my plate with only a few bites taken out of it.

I felt her hand resting on my head. “Don’t worry about it love. Men can be mean sometimes but I know Michael. I don’t have an explanation for his behavior as I can’t imagine why he would do such a thing but he told Peter, he was headed to the cabin. It seems like you both have a lot to discuss and maybe heading up there to surprise him with a visit and get this all out is a good idea. But you didn’t hear it from me.” She laughed at the end but when I peeked at her, I could see this news troubled her. It must have been shocking that her friend would go to such lengths to hurt someone.

“I’m sorry Maddy, I don’t want you to think badly about Michael, I know he’s a good man. I just don’t understand any of this. If I didn’t know better, I would think he had a personal vendetta against me and wanted to get even.”

She smiled at me, concerned. “That’s not a vendetta honey, that’s his inability to handle you, and how you’ve affected his life. That’s his inability to handle how he feels about you.”

That made no sense to me so I let it go. Suddenly lunch wasn’t so appealing anymore but Maddy was kind enough to help me gather some things and rent a car so I could head up to Lake Placid to confront him.

I was on a mission; it felt good to be driving; I had a purpose, and I was headed straight for it. My only fear was getting caught in the cabin again with Michael if the weather turned bad. Still, I pressed on.

At the very least he would explain, Michael at least owed me that.

I drove for a good few hours, the GPS on my phone was a bit off as it kept fading in and out due to weather changes. My phone said the weather would be nice, mild but cold in Lake Placid so I could relax as I didn’t do well when it storms.

It felt like forever and more than a few times I got lost as I drove. The GPS would lose the signal, I’d get turned around or confused and end up off course. When I finally got back on track, I couldn’t help but notice the changing sky. I was getting close to the cabin.

I didn’t have time to check the weather again so I kept driving. I was almost there, with not more than an hour to go. Then out of the blue a snowstorm hit, and snow was dropping quickly as I continued to drive.

I didn't realize the GPS went out again, at first I thought things looked familiar, then they didn't and before I knew it, I was lost. With nothing around but a house or two off in the far distance I knew I was in trouble.

When the whiteout hit and I ran into a snowbank, I knew I was done. "I can't be too far away. The cabin has to be somewhere around here." Talking to myself I looked around as best I could to see if I recognized anything.

It was hard to tell at this point; the snow was still falling but then I made out a house, one I remembered on the trip home from the cabin. I was so happy to see it I couldn't stop laughing. "Whew. Thank God for that. Now all I have to do is walk that way and the cabin shouldn't be too far away."

I tossed on my gear, Maddy had been kind enough to lend me a few things she had so I wouldn't freeze to death in case Michael locked me out of the cabin. Ready to go, with my cell phone in my hand but still no service I pulled my hat down further over my eyes and ignored the painfully icy wind blowing in my face.

Chapter Seventeen

Michael

I had to get to the cabin; I needed a break, to clear my head and fix this issue. My attorney helped me, and acted to help however he could to get Stephanie to either retract the interview or at the very least give acknowledgement to Ava and Penny.

Peter and I were set to have a late lunch, to discuss a few things before I left for the cabin. When he showed up, we talked for a bit. I couldn't talk business, which was one reason I was headed out of town. I would have to pay Stephanie a ton of money but she would give notoriety to Ava and Penny for the interview. What a relief that was to me.

Business was so behind I was dropping balls left and right. I had a lot to deal with and Ava and I needed to talk. I was

confused why she had yet to call or text me about the interview; I figured she was probably really mad at me.

Anger I could handle, I could send her flowers, buy her a puppy, somehow I could get past that. I was confident because I knew she felt something else for me too, which gave me a fighting chance.

Still, her silence made me nervous. *What if she feels nothing for or towards me?* I knew when someone didn't react it usually meant they felt nothing and it was harder to win them over to your side.

While I wasn't up for winning brownie points I couldn't get Ava out of my mind. I knew there was something between us, and I had plans for her. I had multiple functions coming up that I needed a partner by my side, someone I could trust to get me through them.

Peter and I ordered our food. "So, where is Maddy?"

"She will be here soon. She had lunch earlier and probably won't eat, but that's okay it's more food for us. I forgot to mention to her you were coming, I told her you were headed to the cabin."

"I'm going right after we're done here. I need to put some space between me and this city, some fresh air, a good rifle, and some fishing and I will be back on my game soon."

Just then Maddy showed up, she looked furious. "Michael, what on earth are you doing here? I spoke with Ava at lunch.

She is miserable about this whole interview thing. I told her you were headed back to the cabin.”

She sat down with an irritated moan and stared at me. “She also told me everything between you and she was fake, that you hired her, so to speak, in exchange for that interview. Please tell me you didn’t do that?”

I felt angry. Ava betrayed me, she’d revealed something very private about my life that no one but she, Therese and I knew. *I guess she owed me that since I betrayed her.*

I had to come clean; I was embarrassed; I didn’t like anyone knowing the personal details of my life or questioning them. Still, I didn’t want to lose my longtime friendship with Peter and Maddy. “She’s right.” I gulped down my beer resolved to honesty. “It was all a fake, at least at first but now I am not so sure. I have been doing it for a while. Therese always helped me, played the part well. I can’t explain it all right now but for the first time in a long time I don’t want this to end. I’m at odds with myself, I feel too out of my element and confused by what’s going on in my head. I can’t deal with any of this right now, but Ava’s telling you about it doesn’t make me feel better. All this nonsense with Ava is one reason I am headed to the cabin tonight.”

Maddy smiled, her eyes glittered with happiness, I knew she was plotting. Peter just laughed and shook his head. Then Maddy snapped out of her thoughts as if realizing something suddenly. “Michael, you have to go! There is a storm warning that came up suddenly, a blizzard that’s going to hit in two

hours. Get going! I sent her along with proper clothes and she rented a car but who knows what could happen. Hang on let me call her since she is so mad at you she won't answer your call."

Her words hit home with me, and suddenly all I felt, the anger, the betrayal, and frustration were all gone again. *She might get caught in a storm*, warning bells were going off in my head, I didn't know how I was going to get to her fast enough as I searched the weather app on my phone for up-to-date details. Maddy's phone was on speaker, Ava didn't answer it went straight to voicemail.

"I have to go." I kissed Maddy's head, patted Peter on the back and called my driver. I didn't have time to change clothes or do anything. Thankfully, he was always prepared and had my truck packed with supplies when I was ready to go.

I used my phone to keep watch on the storm and tried to locate Ava via social media. I was normally a controlled person who didn't get easily flustered, but I knew my nerves were on edge as I kept fussing with everything in the vehicle. When I could take no more, I called Penny as a last resort to give me some hope.

"Hello Michael. I didn't get to tell you but Ava called me and she found out about the interview. She is very upset with you. What did you do to fix this issue? Is Stephanie going to take down the interview?"

"I have my attorney working on it. He just about has everything situated. I'll have to pay her an enormous sum of

money but if it helps Ava and you I am happy to do it since this was all my fault. Stephanie won't be retracting the interview but giving you and Ava credit for it. You might want to work on that now. Post the interview on your blog, I will give you my attorney's number so he can coordinate, and then Stephanie will have to link to yours offering full credit."

"Thank God at least that's something. Ava will be happy about that but I pity you, she was so mad on the phone when I talked to her. Where are you anyway? You sound like you're driving."

"I'm on my way to my cabin in Lake Placid. From what I understand Ava is too. Did you talk to her recently because there is a storm brewing, it came out of nowhere and she won't answer my calls."

I spoke to her an hour ago. She'd crashed her car in a snowbank. She told me she thought she was close to the cabin and was going to walk to it because she didn't want to freeze to death. I told her to call for help while she still had phone service but she's still so mad she had one thing on her mind, getting to you."

"Damn it. Okay, while I'm on the phone can you try to call her again. My friend Maddy tried to call her about three and a half hours ago. I still have at least an hour or two before I make it to her so we can talk. I just want to make sure she is okay, please?"

I held the line while Penny tried her. "She's not answering Michael. In fact, her phone goes straight to voicemail as if it's

either dead, or turned off.”

There was a long silence between us, I knew we were both thinking the same thing.

“I’m worried Michael, find her. What if something happened to her when she got out of the car?”

“Don’t worry, I will get to her and make sure she is okay. Let me go, and I will keep in touch. Keep me posted if you hear anything from her or someone else. Are you her emergency contact?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, good. Don’t worry.” I hung up and kept pushing, more determined than ever to get to Ava. I knew better than anyone that sudden blizzards like storms could be unpredictable and anything could happen. If a person wasn’t prepared, properly clothed and found adequate shelter fast they could die.

I had a full tank of gas, my phone was working and I had all the gear I always carried in my truck in case I needed it. If it came to it I would call in some friends who could go out and search for her. I tried to remain hopeful, determined to believe she was okay, but deep down I was worried.

She’d left her car, which was the first rule of being stuck in a blizzard, you always stayed with your car or where you were warmest unless you knew what you were doing. Even seasoned outdoor enthusiasts with experience in cold climates

and frigid weather could get turned around, injured or even lose their life.

I had nothing better to do than stew and my anger turned towards myself. If I hadn't put her in this position from the very beginning, she might still be safe and warm in the city. My frustrations were counterproductive, and I struggled to keep my head in the game almost two hours later as I was right around the corner from my cabin.

I was close, I could feel it, the cabin was less than a half hour away but without knowing her exact location in the crazy snowstorm, there was no way of knowing how far away she was, or where.

I'd been suppressing my fear and anger for a while and soon it was going to get hard to keep myself under control. With nowhere left to turn I stopped for a moment at a gas station to make a phone call or two and gather my thoughts.

"Danny, It's Michael, I need you to do me a favor." I was going out on a limb here but it was worth a shot. "A wonderful friend of mine might be lost in this storm. I'm not sure. Her car crashed into a snow bank but I don't know where. If you or the guys come across a car like that let me know. If you do, she might be on foot because she left the car."

"We're on it Michael, I'll put it out there for the guys. If she's out here, we will find her."

"Thanks Danny."

That out of the way, I knew it was the best I could do at the moment. I called Penny. “Any word from Ava?”

“No, not one call or message was answered. I have been trying to track her location, but I get nothing. We both had a tracking app on our phones for when we went on dating apps but she must have removed it last year when she quit the apps.”

“I have some local snow plow guys I’m friends with looking for her, if she’s close by they will find her for me. I am going to keep looking as well. What kind of car was she driving, do you know?”

“A White Hyundai. She said it would blend in with the snow.”

“Of course. Alright let me go. I will be in touch as soon as I know something.” I hung up, unconcerned with how rude I might sound. My worst fears were coming to life. Years before my mother had gotten stuck in a similar situation but she hadn’t been so lucky.

The storm was bad; the wind was blowing snow everywhere making it hard to see anything. Even if we located her car, that might not be much help since she was heading for the cabin. Her footsteps would be gone in this blizzard making it hard to track her.

I headed for the cabin, determined to keep my mind occupied so I didn’t worry and stress.

Chapter Eighteen

Ava

I could barely see. My feet were frozen and the house I thought looked familiar was not. As I got closer, it was a run down shack with an enormous hole in the roof and broken windows. I thought about staying there but decided against it. “The cabin has to be somewhere around here.”

I kept walking, snow soaking my clothing, I thanked Maddy for insisting I wear lots of layers, at the very least I wouldn’t die from freezing to death. I headed back the way I thought I had come, following what remained of my footsteps until they suddenly stopped, wind and snow erasing the rest.

Out of the blue the wind died down, and the snow slowed. I smiled at the sky and took a quick look around, hoping it would hold off until I found the cabin. I scanned the area, and that’s when I saw the bear totem pole that sat in the front yard of a house near to the cabin.

Relieved, I smiled. “Goodness gracious! I don’t know who thought to build that monstrosity but whoever it was I love you for it right now!”

I ran to it as best I could in the heavy snow and looked around again. I saw it, the cabin, not too far off in the distance and hurried to it.

Until this point I’d forgotten about Michael and all he’d done to upset me. As far as I was concerned it was all ancient history at least until I got warm and out of the snow. My body ached from head to toe as I tried to move faster than the snow would let me. I was exhausted, cold and wet but the cabin got closer and closer so I pushed on.

When I arrived, happy to see the snow plow sitting where we’d left it, I was confused as Michael’s vehicle was nowhere to be found. “He’s not here? Oh hell! Maybe he changed his mind or went home because of the snow.” I tried to open the door frustratedly, then remembered Michael mentioning a spare key that sat under the welcome mat.

Reaching under the mat I found it. I hurried inside, and ran for the bathroom ready to take a shower and realized that the electric wasn’t working which meant no hot water and no shower.

“What am I going to do now?” I was soaked from head to toe, and the inside of the cabin was almost just as cold as the outside, slightly warmer only because there was no wind. I looked at the fireplace and groaned.”

“Well, that will not work, I am not a girl scout!” I looked around and after a moment of hopeless reality hitting, I looked at it again.

“You can do this Ava. Light this fire so you can be warm or you’re going to freeze to death.” I gathered up wood and set it up the way I’d seen Maddy do it. I found a spare pack of matches in a drawer and got busy trying to play girl scout.

Ten minutes later I was defeated when I failed again at starting a fire and bundled up all the blankets I found in both bedrooms on the couch. I had no cell service and the landline was dead so I couldn’t call anyone or do anything until the storm stopped.

I would have cried if I wasn’t afraid my tears would freeze on my face. I lay bundled up in blankets feeling only a modicum of warmth from them and thought. There was nothing to do, no one to call and other than the flashlight I found it was dark in the cabin. “Seriously, whoever said this was a vacation has never been to Bermuda.”

I tried to sleep and listened to the wind howling outside, wondering where Michael had gone, or if he had shown up at all. I thought about my car stuck on the side of the road, wondered what my cats were doing and if the loud noise I heard outside was a bear about to break into the cabin for snacks.

I closed my eyes and hunkered down, deciding I would play dead if someone or something came inside the cabin and

worried. In my little tent of blankets, I tried my best to relax, but it did no good.

I thought of Michael AGAIN, promised myself I wouldn't yell at him or be mad for whatever he'd done wrong if he'd just come and find me. A long time later I was still alone, lonely and scared to sleep, afraid to move and having to pee something miserable.

When I could take no more I got up and ran to the bathroom with the flashlight at the ready if I ran into a bear. I quickly covered myself again after I got back to the couch, a shivering mess from how cold it was in the cabin. I closed my eyes and tried to just focus my breathing so I wouldn't have a panic attack and fell asleep.

I woke to the sound of scratching at the door and pitied whoever or whatever it was outside in such cold weather. I knew Michael had guns in the cabin but I wasn't about to move; I didn't know if it was a bear, a moose or raccoon, whatever it was they weren't coming inside with me.

I sunk lower into the blankets and finally felt a modicum of warmth as I was in my hibernation nest. The only food I had to eat was a granola bar I'd stashed in my purse before leaving the car.

Chapter Nineteen

Michael

My frustration and fear was through the roof at this point. I tried in vain, everyone had been trying to get a hold of Ava. I was furious with her for leaving the vehicle, she should have known better.

I made another call needing to do something productive. “Danny, did you find anything?”

“Not yet, all the guys are looking. We thought we had her but it was a truck stuck on the side of the road, an old man was trapped inside.”

“Well, she was driving a White Hyundai. I know that’s going to be hard to find in this weather but keep looking. I’ll send everyone to Tahiti when this is over, I promise, all expenses paid.”

Danny laughed. “You’re on, including a few lovely ladies, and we won’t stop until we’ve turned over every rock and pebble in this God forsaken storm. Let me get back to it. It’s wicked as a witch out here.”

“I know.” We hung up, and I was left, again to my own thoughts. Maddy called a little while after as I continued to visually comb through the snow covered road.

“Did you find her?”

“No, not yet, everyone is out looking for her but it’s a big landscape, it doesn’t help that her car matches the snow.”

“Oh Michael, I just hope nothing happened to her. You have to find her.”

She wasn’t helping; I heard it in her voice, the worry, the anger and upset. It was making me more nervous and emotional. “I gotta go. I need to have a level head and don’t take this the wrong way but you’re making it hard for me to think straight.”

She was mad, hung up after I said that but I didn’t have time for games, the clock was ticking and soon we wouldn’t be able to find her at all. I kept driving; it felt like I went in circles, passed a few of Dannys’ drivers along the way, and gave a quick wave.

Turning down one last road, determined to grab the snow plow after and look again I saw it. “Holy shit!” I pulled over, her car was half in a snowbank, barely visible to anyone with snow covering the entire roof.

I pulled the door open in case she'd changed her mind and was still in the vehicle. It was empty, so I quickly closed the door and looked around. I saw barely visible foot tracks in the snow headed in the opposite direction of the cabin.

I followed them, until they stopped, looked around and continued when I found them again a respectful distance away. When I reached the abandoned house, a good mile away from the vehicle I found nothing, no sign of Ava. "Too determined for your own good."

Frustrated but feeling hopeful for the first time in hours I headed back and saw another set of tracks that stopped at my neighbors totem pole, then they went in the cabin's direction.

I smiled, relieved I might have found her. I hurried back to the vehicle and headed to the cabin. The storm was taking a hard turn with much of the snow blowing around covering up the roads and driveways.

I pushed past the snow, getting stuck a few times worried she might be lying somewhere. When I made it to the cabin, I found the door locked, and realized I forgot my key. Cursing myself I reached for the key under the mat and found it missing.

I laughed. This was a good sign, so I peeked into the windows and saw a mountain of blankets atop my couch. I knocked, freezing and ready to ring Ava's neck when I got a hold of her. I knocked again and ten minutes later when she didn't move or wake up I worried again.

“I will not sit out here forever.” I ran through the snow to the other side of the cabin and opened the window I always left unlocked. Inside I felt the freezing cold and found Ava’s attempts to start a fire that failed.

I wanted to wake her if she was sleeping under the mountain of blankets but had to take a moment to gather my thoughts. So many emotions were running through me. My mind was racing at the same time and my body was ready to use all that pent up energy to help her stay warm.

I built the fire and then moved to the electric and got the generator going. In less than an hour I had the fire stoked and the lights on. I called everyone so they could rest easy, Maddy was the last person I called.

“I got her. I found her at the cabin, she had no fire going and no electricity but I got it taken care of, she’s safe.”

“Oh, thank god. What did she say?”

“Nothing, she’s been passed out under a mountain of blankets since I got here. She hasn’t woken up or moved once.”

“Go easy on her Michael. Remember what you told us, just take a few minutes to gather your wits before you talk to her. You may have started on the wrong foot, but that doesn’t mean you must continue that way. Be good, don’t screw this up.”

Her lecture didn’t fall on deaf ears but I didn’t have time to say anything in response as she hung up the phone after with a

quick goodbye. I knew she was as relieved as I was, and probably exhausted.

I left her alone. There wasn't much in the house to eat, so I grabbed the few pieces of meat I had and a little flour and canned milk to make some gravy and sat down to eat with some coffee from the hidden stash I had for emergencies.

I got comfortable in front of the fire and thought. Sitting down was the worst thing I could have done because I passed out.

Chapter Twenty

Ava

I couldn't take it anymore. I'd slept as much as I was going to in this freezing cabin. There was no electricity, the water heater wouldn't work, I couldn't get the fire going and in less than 24 hours I was going to starve to death with barely any food.

I tried to move around, generate heat while still wrapped up in the blankets but that didn't work so well. I tripped a few times, landed and hit my head, but kept moving. I looked out the windows, hoping Michael or someone would show up that could get me out of the cabin.

I didn't care at that point if I rehashed things with Michael. I would have my time to do that. Eventually I would confront him but I needed to get out of here before I froze to death or starved, whichever came first.

Moving around the cabin wasn't doing what I thought it was going to do. I tried again to get the fire going and after a half hour of failed attempts, I thought I heard loud scratching at the door again.

Frozen in place I stood there, holding a poker in my hands determined to slash or smash whoever or whatever it was outside to bits of nothing.

The scratching continued for a while; it seemed like forever and then suddenly it stopped. Scared for my life it took forever before I could move again. When I did, I decided it was time to leave.

I knew Michael had guns in the cabin; he was a hunter, and while I didn't want to shoot anyone, I wasn't even sure I could shoot something if I needed to but I had to get out of the cabin. I left a few things in the car and now that I knew my way I could easily get back to the cabin if I needed to do that.

I was so ready to leave; I knew I was close to town. The cabin wasn't far away, and I wanted to get out of there and grab a hotel room or some food at the very least.

Rifle in hand, bundled up like the abominable snowman I left the cabin with my phone and purse in hand and headed back the way I came. I headed for the car determined to get my stuff in case it was towed or buried forever. I knew it was madness at this point but I needed my things.

Warning bells were going off in my head, I didn't really know what I was doing or where I was going, hopeful I would see the lights of the town from a distance and I could follow it.

After I found my car almost completely buried my face was freezing. It felt as if it was freezer burned so I took the big scarf I had in the car and wrapped it tight around my face so only my two eyes peeked out.

With that out of the way I slammed the door, feeling the icy wind I almost fell over, it was that strong. Determined to get somewhere, fueled by my emotions I headed back towards the cabin and was tired as soon as I got there.

Not willing to give up I turned the corner around the cabin and headed in the direction I knew was supposed to be, and walked. I saw the faint lights of the town up ahead and trudged through the snow as best I could.

The snow was deep; I tripped more than a few times and kept at it, certain I would find a lovely bed, hot shower and crackers or chocolate at the end of my journey. I was tired, my energy was lagging with no proper nutrition but I kept at it.

I was dehydrated; I felt it, my lips and skin were dry under my clothing but I had to press on. I looked around, holding tight to the rifle. The reality that I didn't check to see if it was loaded scared me and I said a silent prayer no animal would approach me.

My feet were slowing down, I had a few miles to walk until I reached town, and this pushed me on when I might have given up. I wanted to cry; I missed Michael and for a split second or two I wanted him with me. I would forgive and forget but having him beside me so I knew I was doing okay would have made me feel better.

I thought I had everything under control, the rifle in my hand, my purse tightly clutched to me, bundled up as best as I could with my now somewhat wet clothing, then I tripped. “Oh, ouch!” I barely caught myself and my face only brushed the snow but a ton of snow swallowed me up.

My ankle aches badly, I felt like I couldn't move it and lay there for a moment in the snow, hoping it's cold would ease the pain and swelling I could feel happening already. I tried to move my leg, but my foot refused as I winced in pain.

Excruciating pain ripped through my leg from my ankle. I reached through the snow and put pressure on it, feeling the swelling. I cried, lay back in the snow and stared at the snow flying around in the clear starry night sky.

I couldn't stop the tears, I wanted to give up. I was so close and yet so far, as I couldn't move with my ankle the way it was but I would die out here in this cold, wet snow if I sat there for too long.

My ankle ached, my body was frozen and wet. I wanted to sink into that snow and forget ever meeting Michael. Since meeting him so much in my life had changed, for the worst. My business blog was on the verge of ruin, my ankle was broken, and all my hopes and dreams were ending.

The sooner I eradicated him from my life the better. Determined I rolled over on my side and tried to crawl, which lasted all of five seconds before the pain shot up my leg again and crippled me so I couldn't move.

I screamed, and cried, praying someone was nearby that would hear me. It was still close to a mile to the nearest building, a convenience store and with any luck if I screamed or cried loud enough someone would hear me.

The silence was deafening as I continued to scream and cry. When my throat hurt I kept on until I could do no more screaming and then sunk into whimpering and crying. Finally, after a time I was defeated, gave up and closed my eyes, sunk into myself and thought of my mother. How I missed her. I thought of Michael, how I missed him. I missed everyone as waves of anxiety and fear ripped through me, I didn't know if I would see any of them again.

I tried to sleep, thinking that if I conserved energy, it might be the only chance I had to survive. The snow felt warm against my body, a warm, insulated cocoon of snow to keep me warm when no one else could do that.

Chapter Twenty One

Michael

I woke up with a start, something told me I had to wake her up. She'd been sleeping far too long now, and we needed to talk. I pushed the blankets aside one by one. The cabin was a hot house now, and there was no way she needed all those blankets around her unless she was sick.

With each layer I pulled back, I smiled. It was like I was unraveling the Ava present at Christmas. It was the most adorable thing I'd ever seen. I couldn't help imagining her as a child growing up playing in a tent or fort and having a mountain of blankets to hide under.

As I got closer to the bottom I was shocked to discover she wasn't under that mess of blankets. I looked in each bedroom and found nothing. "What the hell!" She wasn't in the cabin the whole time which meant she was outside somewhere.

Frantic now, I grabbed some things so I wouldn't freeze to death and headed back out. In the military I'd been trained in many skills, and tracking was one of them. I'd survived many challenging situations, least of all extremes in weather.

I had to find Ava and knew the only way to do it out here was on foot. I'd seen worse weather and this snow and cold was no problem for me, I had my frustration to fuel my body but I moved slow, determined to conserve what energy I had.

Since it was obvious she'd been at the cabin, she probably wasn't too far away and I just needed to track her down like I did so many other times with animals and while in the military. It was like my second nature, tracking down people and things.

I circled the cabin, found her tracks headed in the wrong direction, back to her car and followed them for a time. When I reached her car, again she wasn't there, but I lost sight of the tracks yet again as the snow was piling up.

Frustrated and upset I headed back to the cabin the way I'd come hoping to find her tracks going in a different direction. I walked in circles around the car, continually coming back to it, in hopes I would find her with no luck.

I was angry and fear turned to frustration, but I used it to drive me through the blistering cold snow. I worried I wouldn't get to her in time wherever she was at that moment. I could track anyone, do whatever I needed to do to bring her back safely, but if she did something stupid anything could happen, good or bad.

My rifle was missing which wasn't a good sign, Ava had no clue how to use a fishing pole, let alone a gun. I said a silent prayer that she wouldn't do anything stupid and get herself hurt. "Baby where are you?" I spoke to the sky as I looked around and tried to listen to the wind, see if I heard anything at all.

I felt it in my bones; the storm was settling down but it was still so cold. A woman with no previous survival or military skill wouldn't know how to manage this weather. I knew most likely she had no compass, didn't know where she was going and had no resources with her.

It worried me that she might be dressed for ice skating instead of a polar arctic storm. The memory of what she wore on her first trip up to the cabin bothered me, and I prayed she wasn't dressed the same way.

My bones ached, I wasn't getting any younger, and the night wasn't getting any warmer. I turned in a circle, looked through the blustering snow flurries flying this way and that and saw nothing, no sign of life anywhere. "Well, at least the animals are safe, heaven forbid we are too Ava."

Blinking away my worry and fear, I looked down and noticed a faint set of tracks headed in the direction of the town. I moved purposefully, step after step following the tracks she left for me like a squirrel who'd come out of hibernation.

It was miles, but I kept going determined and hopeful, as long as I had her tracks in front of me I would keep moving

and find her. With any luck, she'd made it to the town, and she'd shacked up in a lovely hotel for a good night's rest.

If I came to the end of the line and it seemed like her tracks were in town, I would let it go, and give her the space she needed. She wouldn't be going anywhere tonight and come morning I could find her and apologize for everything.

I was responsible for this situation and for her being out here. I was cold but not as cold as I could have been with my gear, and walked towards the lights of town. When I saw something buried in the snow ahead of me, I knew.

Running as fast as I could I got to her half covered body and started digging the snow away. "Ava! Ava! Wake up, love." She was out cold. Her heart rate was soft and slow. She was freezing to death, I had to get her back to the cabin.

Quick as I could I picked her up and carried her back to the cabin. I ignored the pain I felt in my heart as I struggled to get her to safety fast. It could be moments in a situation like this and I didn't know how long she'd been that way. A few brief moments were all it took for someone to take a turn for the worse and slip from surviving to death.

Her skin felt cold, her body was limp and her ankle was twisted oddly. Either she'd broken her ankle and couldn't go on or something had attacked her. As I reached the cabin, breathless and worried I laid her on the couch and stoked the fire I'd left behind.

Ava was still out cold, so I stripped off her wet clothes and covered her with all the blankets she'd left behind and pulled

out my first aid kit to look at her ankle. “Oh thank God, baby, it’s just a break.” I spoke to no one in particular and held her foot gently in my hand.

It needed to be reset, I could do it now while she was out cold which would be better. If I waited she might suffer more when she was awake.

The last thing I was prepared to do was rebreak her ankle and set it back to where it needed to be. I knew I could do it, I’d done it for myself and Peter once, but there was a tremendous difference between Ava and Peter.

Closing my eyes I took a deep breath, focused my energy on all my military skills and decided I would do it for her now. It would be easier, I blinked my eyes open and looked at her beautiful face, felt all the love I had in my heart for her and reset her ankle. It broke my heart to break her ankle, and I winced in pain.

She stirred, her eyes shot open for a moment and she cried out. Her crying continued as she fell back into sleep. I knew the pain was bad; I had to do something until I could get her to help or the doctor to us.

“Ava, my love I need you to wake up. I need you to take this for the pain. Once you have this in you, it will be better. It’s Michael, you have a broken ankle love so you have to stay off it.” I was talking nonsense, the relief of finding her washed over me.

Her eyes blinked open when I held the pills to her lips. She took them without batting an eye and a few sips of water then

closed her eyes again. I let her go; I knew she was in pain and if nothing else I was the last person she wanted to talk to or see.

I stoked the fire, felt her head for fever and let her sleep. I knew I was in deep by now and prepared myself for whatever that meant for us both. I had no clue how she felt about me, but my heart was true and I was prepared to make a fresh start as soon as I was done groveling.

She slept a long time. I couldn't take my eyes off her, glad she was okay. The only time she stirred was when I put some snow on her ankle and then took it off again, on and off again and again.

I did what I could; I was starving but there wasn't much in the cabin, eventually I would have to leave and hunt for food or drive back to town to get something. Either way, I knew I'd have to leave her which wasn't an option so I would wait as long as I could.

Her ankle was swollen, and I worried about infection. No bone was sticking out of her skin, and with it resetting in place I was confident she would be okay once she saw a doctor. As she slept I gently wrapped her ankle to stop the swelling as I propped it up on more pillows from the bedrooms.

By morning she was stirring and moaning in pain. Again I gave her some medication and water. "Ava, how are you feeling? I need to get you situated, you should wake up because at some point I need to get you to the hospital to have your broken ankle x-rayed."

She blinked her eyes open and frowned at me. “Go away. I thank you for your care but you can go away now. I just want to be left alone.” She turned her back on me, wincing in pain.

“I’m not going anywhere Ava. You can turn away from me but I am not going anywhere. I reset the bone because your foot was not in its proper place. I’ve been here, putting snow on your ankle, giving you meds and watching over you. When you are ready, I will take you to the hospital but I am not going anywhere.”

She didn’t face me; I kissed the top of her head, needing some physical contact and let her go. The internet was out so I couldn’t email anyone about her condition and what was going on. Neither of our cell phones had service either.

It didn’t matter, as long as we were together and she was okay I was happy. Her ankle would heal one way or another if I had to strap her to me and carry her on my back all the way there.

“I’m hungry. I’m starving Michael. I feel sick to my stomach.”

I smiled, she needed me; I was trained for situations like this and sprung into action. I had a new purpose and got to work cooking what I could, a few scraps of meat, and a can of beans and gave it to her with some black coffee. “I know you don’t want the meat but that’s all I have right now. I promise I will change things around here, make sure there are a few things on hand at all times so no one ever goes hungry. You’re right about a lot of things regarding this cabin Ava.”

She eyed me unhappily but took the food I offered her on the plate. “Thank you.” She ate, I saw the worry and pain written all over her face but she said nothing else.

I kept quiet, determined to let her have whatever peace she needed to feel better. When she handed me the plate, she smiled a little. “Thank you. I still hate you just so you know.”

Chapter Twenty Two

Ava

I was angry and relieved all at the same time. My ankle was killing me even with the medication Michael gave me, but I was grateful too. Michael found me and saved me like I hoped he would. I was thankful for all he'd done. That he'd watched over me, took care of me so I didn't die and made me food.

The pain in my ankle made it hard for me to feel anything else, but somewhere beneath the pain I wanted him to hold me, to be in his arms and feel the strength and comfort of him close to me.

I couldn't tell him that, but I couldn't deny all the feelings I felt for him, the love, the passion and the anger. It was all too much for me and I had to block some of it out since we were stuck together until he could get me away from the cabin. I never wanted to come back to this place. I was certain I would have died in that mountain of snow as it drifted over and

around me. I shivered, remembering the fear I felt deep in my heart that the beautiful sky above would be the last thing I ever saw.

An hour later he went to the neighbors, they had a landline and could call a doctor. I spent that hour worrying, believing he was never coming back, until he did. “I thought you were dead out there. You should never have left, what if you died and I was alone?”

He smiled. “Were you worried about me princess? The doctor is coming by the way, he should be here any minute.”

“No I wasn’t worried about you, I was worried about myself, how I was going to get home.”

He laughed behind my back; it annoyed me but I ignored it, and tried to make myself look like less of a mess for the doctor who showed up ten minutes later in his truck.

“Well, you definitely have a broken ankle. I will not ask how it got that way, but I brought along some pain medicine that should make you feel better but it might make you sleepy. I would take a half a dose first in case you don’t need it all and see what happens.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Not a problem at all.” The doctor turned to Michael who was standing behind him. “Make sure she gets some rest and keeps off that ankle. When you get her back to the city, make sure she gets an x-ray and have her see her regular doctor.”

“Will do and thank you for coming out in this awful mess.”
Michael showed him to the door.

I didn't pay too much attention when he closed the door after the doctor left. I closed my eyes and tried to rest but I heard him coming towards me, grunting and groaning. I blinked my eyes open.

It surprised me at first, but then it was hard to resist and when he came to me with a sponge bath, I didn't know what to do. “I don't need a bath, I mean I do, but I am not doing that now. Take it away.” I leveled him with a look and hoped it conveyed everything I felt.

Michael said little, he set down the water and wrapped his hand around my neck, leaned in for a kiss. I fought the urge to sink into the feel of his lips pressed to mine. There was nowhere else on earth I wanted to be but I couldn't relax and pulled away. “Don't.”

“I just want to make you feel good. I know you're mad, I know why and you have every right to be mad at me but right now I want you to relax, and help you as much as I can.”

His hands came up and caressed my face, I closed my eyes and allowed myself this one brief touch. I needed it so much, I'd been through so much in the last few days, the thought of his hands on my body, his lips pressed to mine were what I wanted right now.

I felt embarrassed at first as he started removing my clothing. It was really hot, and he took my clothing off one by one, using the warm, wet and soapy cloth against my skin to

wash me. “You’re so beautiful, so perfect love. I can’t tell you how much pleasure it brings me to just look at you and touch you.”

I was fascinated as I watched him run the cloth up and down slight shivers of pleasure and coolness sent goose bumps across my skin. I bit my lip as I watched him work his magic, refusing to say anything. I wanted to enjoy this moment he was giving me, let him do it for me.

“Lay back for me, love.” I complied and lay back against the couch and let him continue helping me freshen up.

He called me love; I knew it was a simple, endearing gesture he was using to soothe me, still it made me feel so much it hurt in my chest. I felt my throat clench a few times, emotion building up inside me with nowhere for it to go.

When his hands moved over my body, the cloth was gone . I closed my eyes to block out all I was feeling, so he didn’t see it either. His lips covered mine in the faintest of kisses, and his naked body pressed against mine. I felt his breath fan across my skin and arched my back instinctively as he ran a trail of kisses down my body and then back up again.

“Open your eyes for me, love.” That sweet endearing statement was all I needed to hear to ignore the fear and frustration still swirling in my mind. I opened my eyes, soaked up the emotion I saw in his eyes as he smiled. “Relax, I won’t hurt your ankle love. I want to love you, touch you, take all your pain away.”

The moment was bliss, sweet and tempting, slow and luxurious as he caressed and kissed me until I was begging him for more. He thrust into me with a smile, his eyes falling closed in pleasure.

I was stunned by how much he felt, how slow he kept the rhythm, it was like a slow death for us both as we climbed that mountain together, up and down each slope until we reached that final peak and fell over the edge wildly crying out each other's names.

He collapsed and stopped me afterwards. I couldn't resist the urge to cover his head with my hands and cradle him there for a while. I thanked the heavens above for this one last moment we would share, I would forever hold it in my heart.

When I could take no more, I spoke up. "I need to use the bathroom Michael, I'm not even sure how I am going to get there." I felt awkward in such a vulnerable state at the moment.

The words barely rolled off my tongue, and he was up and lifting me in his arms. "I got you love, you just hold on and I will take you to the bathroom and back again." He carried me like a princess, and patiently waited for me to finish and carried me back to the couch with a smile on his face.

I felt the warmth on my cheeks, being so vulnerable was difficult for me. My life being out of control and feeling exposed was hard for me to deal with at the moment. I looked for my phone, feeling my frustrations coming back to the surface now that we were done making love.

“Thank you for everything Michael. I’ve had a blast here but I want to go home now. As soon as we can, I want to get home so I can see my doctor about my ankle and I need space from you.”

I saw a flash of anger and pain in his eyes when we looked at each other. I didn’t know what to say, so I kept quiet. “I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes and I have a lot to repent for but you don’t have to go. I don’t want you to go. We have a lot to talk about, I have a lot to say to you.”

“I just want to go home. I don’t want to do any of this right now. I want to go.” I tore my eyes away from him and kept them buried in my phone, playing a mindless game and praying I didn’t have to deal with tough conversations right now as my ankle was hurting again even with the pain meds the doctor gave me. I knew we were completely different people even if I could forgive him. There was no way any type of relationship could ever work between us.

He was silent; it stretched on like that for a few minutes, and then he spoke. “Fair enough. I understand. I will take you home come morning. In the meantime, rest and I will take care of everything else.”

He patted my arm, got up and left the room. I felt bad for a moment, a piece of my heart went with him. I knew what I felt for Michael, but feelings weren’t the only thing that mattered in a relationship. There had to be trust, honesty, openness, and respect. Two people had to be devoted to making things work,

I wasn't sure either of us were devoted to each other and what we could have.

I fell asleep again at some point, the memories of making love still fresh in my mind. When I woke I was surprised it was time to go.

“I have everything packed up. I just have to get you to the vehicle when you are ready and we can head home.”

Still waking up I nodded my head. He helped me, carried me to the bathroom and back. Michael was kind enough to help me dress in warm clothing and fed me breakfast, even if it was meat and beans.

I was grateful for all he'd done, but I couldn't talk as we headed home. There were so many emotions locked up inside me, pleasure, pain, regret, confusion, happiness, sadness. It was so much to process.

Deep down I knew it didn't matter, we were two different people and there was no chance of us being together. Eventually one of us would do or say something to hurt the other. “I know that you're sorry, I believe you and I don't want to discuss this right now but I know, no matter what you say I can't forgive some things. No amount of passion, lust, tenderness or explanation can change that.”

The trip home was hard for us both, he played the radio but more than a few times I felt like I needed to say something to him, to attempt to tell him how I felt. Instead, I closed my eyes and slept as much as possible hoping the ride would be quick.

Chapter Twenty Three

Michael

I struggled to find something to say. I wanted to explain; I had to tell her the truth, at least she could forgive some of it, even if I'd made a lot of mistakes I hadn't intended on giving the interview to someone else.

I believed in being straightforward and focused on what really mattered. I wanted to tell her how I felt about her. "Can we talk about the interview, please?"

I gave her a few moments to wake up but when she did, she said nothing and just looked at me. "For what it's worth, I didn't intend on giving the interview to someone else. After you got out of my car that night I felt awful, I tried calling you and texting but you never answered."

She looked at me; I saw pain in her beautiful eyes. "So you thought if I didn't answer your phone call you should just get

even with me and give the interview to my enemy and ruin my business forever?”

Frustrated, I turned down the radio so I could focus my thoughts before it gave me a headache. “No, not at all. I had no intention of doing that. I thought I was talking to Penny. I called and left a message at the phone number on your website. No one answered, so I waited. A few hours later I got a call. When I answered I was so consumed with frustration over this.” I pointed to Ava and myself. “I automatically assumed she was your partner, Penny. When I mentioned it, she said to me her name was really Stephanie and Penny was a nickname from school but it was a long story. She said you were best friends, that you met in college and she was ready to do the interview.”

I was close to yelling, feeling every bit as angry and disgusted by this woman’s actions now as I did the night I found out. Ava was staring at me, no emotion on her face. “I proceeded with the interview and it wasn’t until the next morning when Penny called and we discovered the mistake but at that point it was already too late. Thankfully, since my lawyer is working on it, she will give you and Penny full credit for the interview on her blog post and is apologizing for any confusion.”

“I don’t want to discuss this Michael.” I was surprised she turned me and our discussion off just like that.

I said nothing else, if she was determined to ignore me, eventually she would see reason and know the truth. I would

make sure of it. Right now I knew she was in pain and I didn't want to ruin whatever time we had left together.

When I pulled up to her place, I helped her inside and set her on the couch. "If you need anything, just give me a buzz. I have things to do and it's clear that you don't really want me around right now. I should thank you, since knowing you, I've changed a lot in some wonderful ways. So I guess this is thank you and goodbye." I felt numb inside, nothing at all. It was the worst I'd ever felt in my life.

I got out of there, headed home and sunk myself back into my work. I buried myself in all the things I'd been letting slide for a while and tried to bury the feeling of misery deep in my gut. I ignored myself for a few days, focusing only on work. I couldn't eat or drink anything other than whiskey to make me feel numb enough to sleep.

I ignored most of my calls, I'd done my best, my attorney was handling the situation with Stephanie. Eventually I pulled it together because my work was the only thing I had left, the only thing I could rely on and a place where I could bury my thoughts and feelings.

Thoughts of retiring and disappearing up at my cabin for the rest of my life was very appealing to me, but I knew that would be the worst place I could go. Memories of the time I spent with Ava would forever haunt me every time I set foot in that cabin. I knew my peaceful place wouldn't be the same anymore.

Chapter Twenty Four

Ava

I visited the doctor once I got home, and it was confirmed that I had a broken ankle. The break had been bad but thanks to Michael setting it back into place immediately it was going to heal perfectly provided I rested and stayed off it as much as possible.

Penny and her boyfriend were helping me and it took some doing to get around with my boot and crutches but I was thankful it wasn't worse.

“You know you really should thank Michael, he did a lot to rectify that mistake he made last week. His attorney made Stephanie give us credit, and you saw that on the blog yesterday but did you notice the public apology she gave in her blog? I don't mind saying that must have been embarrassing for her to do.”

I swallowed hard, hearing the truth of his actions from my best friend's lips. "He told me but I didn't believe it. He told me he thought she was you, since he'd called and left a message on your voicemail and she called first and lied about who she really was then."

I pulled out my phone to see her blog, stunned by what I read. Stephanie offered a public apology to me and Penny, for using the interview we'd collected without our consent. I knew this was a lie, since Michael had interviewed her, but I couldn't stop him from putting his error in shadow at the very least so he didn't look like a fool.

"He called and left a message and she did what he said. As soon as Michael realized what happened he did everything he could to rectify the matter straight away. He was very upset that he'd made the mistake and wanted to make sure that it all turned out okay for us."

I wanted to cry, what an awful person I was to him. I covered my eyes so Penny wouldn't see how upset I felt. "I pushed him away when he was trying to tell me the truth. On the ride home he wanted to talk, and I wouldn't even listen. I'm such an awful person."

"You really love him don't you?"

I blinked, registering what she said. Her words hit a nerve and my tears turned to laughter. Suddenly I felt an uncontrollable sense of giddiness I'd never felt before in me. "Yeah, I really do Penny." Our eyes met. The tears rolled

down my cheeks, as laughter turned to an awful reality I didn't want. "What am I going to do now?"

"Call him, apologize for being stupid, tell him how you feel. I don't know, maybe he feels the same." She patted my hand and headed for the door. "I will call you later, see if you need anything. Stay off that foot and rest, you can work right from that couch and if you need anything just call me. I'll send this one over to get it for you, he loves being up at night and running errands, right, honey?"

"Yeah sure Ava, just call. I'll come get you whatever you need."

I smiled. "Thank you. Don't worry I think I'm good until tomorrow but Bob across the hall can also help me if I need."

"Or you could call Michael and snuggle up with him on the bed and call it done." Penny winked at me, closed the door and all was quiet.

I was left to my own thoughts, reading Stephanie's apology and the interview repeatedly. *You really did care, you were telling me the truth the whole time, and I was so stupid and selfish I refused to listen.*

I couldn't sleep that night, I tossed and turned, my pain meds weren't enough for the ache in my ankle. I thought about calling Penny and her boyfriend but decided it was too late to do that. I didn't want to call Bob, so I messaged the one person I really wanted to see.

Michael, it's Ava. I'm sorry to bother you. I know it's late; I need more pain meds and everyone is asleep. I'm hoping you're awake and in town so I could bother you to get me some, please.

It sounded pathetic, so I wrote it again.

Michael, it's Ava. I don't mean to bother you; I need pain meds for my ankle and we need to talk, can you please stop by if you're awake?

I read it again and decided to erase, but my fingers got carried away with me and I accidentally hit send. "Damn."

Less than ten minutes later someone was knocking on my door. I knew who it was, and fumbled to the door, almost hitting the floor when Min and Chow danced around my crutches.

When I opened it Michael was there, looking as miserable as I felt. "Here you go." He held out a bag to me.

I took it, at a loss for what to say. He turned to leave, so I blurted out my gratitude. "Thank you. Can you come in, please? I would like to talk to you for a minute if you're not too tired?"

I didn't want to cry, seeing him again, knowing what I now knew humbled me. This man standing in front of me was everything I wanted for the rest of my life and I didn't want him to leave now or ever.

He said nothing; I saw how tired he was, and how he walked as if from the set of the walking dead. "Sure. I will

come in for a minute.” He sat down on the couch and held Min when she sat on his lap.

I fussed to get comfortable next to him; I wanted very much to feel his arms around me, his hand in mine, his lips in a passionate kiss but it was my turn to grovel and beg now.

The tears I wanted to cry were held in check as I tried to get my apology out. “I’m sorry Michael. I know I should have told you that a while ago. I believe you. I know now what you did was a simple mistake and I’m sorry I didn’t believe you when you told me. I was too wrapped up in my emotional drama about you purposefully trying to hurt me. It wasn’t fair, and I was wrong. You’ve done so much for me, the blog interview, the apology from Stephanie, my ankle, everything. Please forgive me.”

His eyes were unreadable as he looked at me. “I forgive you, I realize we are just different people Ava. Everything we’ve been through is proof of that. I need a break from the city, life here and work so I am semi-retiring and moving to the cabin full time in a few weeks. If you need anything between now and then call me. I will help you. I have to go, I have a lot to do.”

He turned to me standing at the door. My heart was breaking as I watched him go, but what could I say. I saw the pain in his eyes. “Thank you for the apology.”

“You’re welcome Michael, thank you for everything.”

He nodded his head and walked out the door, leaving me with my broken heart. I’d tried, so very hard to let him know

how sorry I was, and how much I appreciated him. Apparently it wasn't enough, and he was right, we were both just too different and that would forever keep a wall between us.

I cried myself to sleep, forgetting all about the pain in my ankle because the pain in my heart was so much greater.

Weeks passed, I did the best I could to work and get around with Penny's help. I focused my energy on my blog, and healing, but nothing took away the ache in my heart. I missed Michael terribly, and nothing I did changed that.

I clung to the few pieces of clothing I had that were his and stayed inside my apartment; I didn't want to face the world. Maddy called me every day, she was sad knowing things didn't work out for me and Michael.

"I think you should keep trying. Send him a text message. Call him on the phone, do something. Hell, I'd carry on every day, I'd run out of this, or need help with this, whatever. He'd be at my place every single day, sometimes two or three times. I would find nothing but excuses."

I laughed. "I could see you doing that. I can't do that to him. He has a life and a business, successful men like Michael don't enjoy being bothered all the time."

Maddy groaned. "Yes he does, he wants to be bothered by you. He's in love with you, I am almost certain of it Ava. You just have to go about it the right way. I see him at least once a week and every time I do he looks like hell. If Peter notices it, it's true. He left the other night, and Peter said someone needs

to lock you and Michael in a room together. He says you two have to work it out so he can have his friend back again.”

Her words gave me hope but not enough to do anything drastic until she told me about the party.

“Next week Peter and I are having one last party for Michael, a going away party if you will. You are coming right? I’m not taking no for an answer and if you refuse, I am going to send Peter to carry you over there.”

I rolled my eyes, happy I would at least be able to see Michael one last time before he left. “Fine, I will come to the party. I want to see him again and wish him good luck.”

“Good luck. How can you even talk like that? My goodness you two really deserve each other. Where is your sense of romance, love and adventure? Fight for your man Ava. We are going to make a plan, we will get it done Ava. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

I hung up hoping Maddy would help me with Michael before he left, at the very least I would tell him how I felt before he went away so my conscience was clear and he knew what was in my heart.

Maddy called me the next day. “Forget the party, we are going to do something before then and Peter has the perfect idea.”

“Peter?”

“Yes, don’t ask questions, from time to time my husband has been a hopeless romantic and inventor of exciting ideas.”

Chapter Twenty Five

Michael

My last week in town was feeling like a nightmare. Everything I tried to do went wrong. I would still run my business from Lake Placid at a slower pace but everything was delayed. I had a lot of work to do to make it happen but it would be the next adventure in my life. I was excited. I still thought of Ava, but not as much, and I kept busy making sure I didn't.

My penthouse in the city was still fully packed as the moving company I'd hired was delayed and the storage company I was using sold the last large storage unit and I needed to rent 3 smaller ones for all my stuff until I finished the renovations and updates.

The dog I wanted to adopt had been accidentally adopted to another hunter, and my limo driver couldn't move to Lake

Placid so I needed to find another one as quickly as possible.

Peter's invitation to go shooting at the archery range couldn't have come at a better time. I needed a break and wanted to reconnect with my best friend. It was important that we continue to spend as much time as possible; I was going to miss seeing Peter and his wife Maddy all the time.

My body was aching, I wasn't sleeping well and working nonstop. I was determined to keep pushing until I buried Ava somewhere deep in that hole I called my gut and forgot her forever.

When I arrived I was happy to see Sam, the owner of the archery range. I was going to miss him, and so many other people I worked with and called friends. I knew I would see them again, just not as often. "Sam, how's life treating you?"

"Good. It's nice to see you here Michael. It's quiet today. I heard you're leaving soon. You're finally moving up to that cabin permanently. I wish I could do the same, but maybe in Montana instead of here." Sam laughed.

"Well, maybe one of these days I will send you a one-way plane ticket to Billings."

"That would be one flight I would take, and you know I hate to fly. What can I do for you today?"

I smiled. "Peter invited me to come shoot. I have to admit moving is quite the chore while taking care of business, I have a lot to do and this seemed like a perfect afternoon. Is he here yet?"

Sam shook his head. “He’s not here, he was here, but the only one here now is some woman over there in the other room.”

I walked to the other room, confused why Peter had left. Phone in hand I called Peter, he didn’t answer. When I turned the corner I understood why. There was Ava standing there looking at me, a big smile on her face, her hands clutched to her crutches as she struggled to balance herself.

“Hey, Peter isn’t here. I have always wanted to learn how to shoot a crossbow and he told me there was no one better than you to help me learn. I figured if I ever found myself alone in the woods it would be a handy skill to learn. And with these crutches it’s not like I can go roller skating, bowling or anything.”

She looked adorable. I had to blink just to make sure I wasn’t dreaming, and she was an illusion. I glanced around to make sure we were alone, then stepped forward, feeling a sense of happiness like I never felt before in my life.

“I suppose I could try it. I don’t have a lot of time, as you know I’m moving to the cabin soon. I am planning on a complete rehaul of the cabin if I am going to live there. I need dependable internet and electricity for my business and I thought it was time to update the cabin, make it more modern.”

“Really? That is wonderful to hear. You won’t be sorry you did it, trust me. As much as I really like to tell you I liked it the way it was, outdated, but I didn’t.”

Ava stuck out her tongue playfully. “So Mountain Man, show me the ropes here. I really want to learn.”

I spent the next hour showing her how to shoot a crossbow and a compound bow. She could barely hold either of them up, and it took some doing to get her situated with her crutches but being that close to her, feeling her body against mine and smelling her alluring perfume was enough to make me smile.

We could have done that all day and I wouldn't have minded, she was so beautiful; I had a hard time focusing on the task. Every time she shot an arrow she missed the target.

A few times I caught Sam shaking his head. “She needs a lot more than lessons from Michael. But then again, if anyone is up for the task it's you.” He laughed.

“Give it one more try Ava, you can do it.” I helped her position her body and arms, then leaned back while still supporting her a little because she was only using one foot.

I felt her release the arrow and heard it hit the target, my head turned away in case she did something stupid so I didn't get hit in the face. “Sounds like you hit something.”

“I did it Michael, I did it! I hit the bullseye!”

I turned my head and saw it. “Holy shit, you did it Ava!” I swept her up in my arms, caught up in the moment and kissed her lips. Realizing what I'd done I pulled back and saw the happiness in her eyes, it was just how I felt. “You did it.”

“Yes, I did!” She kissed me back this time. Surprised and remembering where we were I stopped, set her on her feet and

held her, looking down into her eyes.

“Alright you two, this isn’t the love chapel. Get a room or something.” Sam chuckled.

I let her go once she had her bearing and handed her the crutches all serious again. “So, how long until you are off the crutches?” My calculations had it being three more weeks but who was counting.

“I think I have about 3-4 weeks more and then I will be off the crutches and can put weight on it. If you ask me it can’t come soon enough Michael. I’ve never imagined a broken bone would be so inconvenient. The only other bone I broke so far in life was my pinky finger.”

We walked side by side to the exit, and Peter showed up. “Hey, I see you helped Ava. I knew you could do it. She really needed help. When I got here, I tried to help, but she was a lost cause, I had no patience for it. Thank goodness you did. Are you ready to go?”

“I guess. Peter is taking me shopping and then home. Thank you, Michael, for teaching me how to shoot a bow. I had a lot of fun, maybe one of these days you can take me to shoot clays.”

Chapter Twenty Six

Ava

Peter walked up then, I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay with Michael, everything was feeling so perfect. I'd done everything Maddy and Peter told me to do, and yet nothing was going to change. He was still going to go to Lake Placid and not come back for a while.

I bit my tongue and held back all the things I wanted to say. Maddy told me I shouldn't tell Michael how I feel before he goes, that I should show him. I couldn't bring myself to do that, I felt foolish and it would feel so misplaced.

Here we were at an archery range, Peter and Sam a few feet away from us, and me standing on crutches. "Well, I guess I should get going."

Michael took my arm. "Hold on a minute. Peter, if you have things to do, I could take her shopping. I have some shopping

to do myself?” He looked at me, a question in his eyes.

I jumped at the chance. “Sure, that would be great. Is that okay with you, Peter?”

“Yup!” Peter smiled and was already stepping back. “That means I can pick up Maddy and have a pleasant lunch with her. I have been so busy the last few days.” He winked at us and practically ran back to his car.

I looked at Michael, who still held onto me. “Thank you.”

He smiled, the most dazzling smile I’d ever seen. “No need. I wanted to spend a bit more time with you.”

He helped me to his truck and inside. “Before we go shopping, I thought I’d kidnap you and take you to Lake Placid with me. We can get or do whatever you need along the way.”

I laughed. “You are so funny, Michael. Honestly, some of the best moments of my life were spent at the cabin.” I wanted to lean in, kiss him, do something daring, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

When he pulled over and parked, I looked around, confused by the sudden stop. “What are we doing? I thought you were kidnapping me?” I smiled, amused and feeling nervous.

“Would you go with me if I wanted you to come to the cabin?” He was dead serious.

I laughed, that giddy feeling bubbling up inside me. “Yes, I would Michael. I would go with you anywhere.” Looking at

him I couldn't breathe, my heart was racing, my palms feel sweaty, if this was insanity, I was forever lost.

He smiled, ran his hand along my jaw and leaned in for a kiss, it wasn't erotic or passionate; it was a kiss filled with hope, love and longing. "Good, because I love you and I can't imagine my life without you. It's been killing me for weeks being away from you. Not hearing your voice, seeing that beautiful smile of yours and looking into those gorgeous eyes. I love you."

Time stood still, I'd never understood what that meant until I felt it, and time literally stood still. It was as if nothing else mattered but the two of us. "I love you too Michael, with every ounce of my soul, I love you now and always!"

I saw a tear slide down his cheek and couldn't resist running my thumb over it to feel it. His eyes crinkled as he smiled and then he was driving again. "Good, because you might regret that one day princess."

I laced my fingers through his and kissed the hand I held knowing nothing ever felt so right in all my life as loving this man beside me!

THE END