



Last

one look, one touch,  
she became his everything.

Chance

Love

a single parent contemporary romance

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K.L. DONN

*last chance love*

A CONTEMPORARY SINGLE PARENT ROMANCE

KL DONN

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## synopsis

**Get ready to warm up this winter in *USA Today* Bestselling author KL Donn's latest small town holiday romance in the mountains of Alaska.**

*Recluse. Mountain man. Loner.*

It's what everyone has decided I am. I don't mind.

I craft furniture in the winter and chop down trees in the summer.

I live a life of simplicity and until she showed up, I had no idea what I was missing.

EmaLeigh Ruin is about to turn my world upside down and I ain't even mad.

My new mission in life is to make her smile.

To hear her sigh my name as I'm buried deep inside her body.

And if her son comes as part of the packaged deal, so be it.

I was fond of the kid from the start.

All I need to do is convince my sweet Ema to give love one last chance.

Or I might lose her forever.

# *dedication*

*For my Shue family in Alaska, thanks for being amazing!*

*Love you guys.*

prologue



## SEBASTIAN

“Three, two, one!” Jumping into the frigid water for the annual polar plunge in my hometown, Polar Bear, Alaska, the ice anesthetizes my muscles as I remain under for a few more seconds than necessary. As I pop up, hands reach down for me, but I dismiss them as I pull myself out of the freezing cold water.

Paramedics guide me over to one of the heated tents, where I’m handed a plush towel not quite big enough for my six and a half foot, nearly three-hundred-pound frame. My size is a plus in my line of work but can be a deficit in other aspects of life. As a logger during the summer months in Ketchikan, my size aligns perfectly, allowing me to perform the job of two men when needed. In the winters, I come home to rest and relax.

Growing up on Bear Mountain with my grandfather, he taught me all about woodworking and craftsmanship, so in the colder winter months, I’m able to keep up with the trade. Building furniture for the residents of Polar Bear as well as across the state keeps those lonely nights at bay and leaves me satisfied in a constructive way.

“Mr. Cole?” Glancing up, I’m stunned by the beauty smiling down at me. I’ve seen her around before, but I never caught her name. Her blonde hair is nearly white as she shows me the mukluks in her hand. “I made these. Would you like me to put them on you?” My eyes shift to the soft, worn leather adorned with intricate beadwork in blues and whites on the

outside and lush wool inside. Nodding my acceptance, I can't take my eyes off her slight frame as she kneels in front of me.

The heat of her hand on my calf as she lifts first one leg to slip the shoe on, and then the other goes straight to my groin. My dick begins to engorge in a way I haven't felt in years. Thirty years old, and I've never had a committed relationship in my adult life because no woman has ever captured my attention the way this young lady has.

"EmaLeigh, let's go!" an older woman, looking crankier than she has any right to, bellows at the lovely person at my feet, and as she smiles before taking off, regret sours my gut.

Something about her is tempting me to go after her, to claim her as my own.

## CHAPTER 1

emaligh

A FEW WEEKS LATER.

Driving the old Suburban up the side of Bear Mountain with a sleeping toddler and angry mother isn't my idea of fun. A fresh snowfall makes it slightly more challenging because the snowplows haven't been up this way yet, and Mr. Cole obviously hasn't made the effort to come down and plow on his own either. Not that he should have to, but he could.

"You need to hurry up so we can get back to town before nightfall," Mom instructs.

"I will." I don't mention that it's only nine, and we have hours of sunlight left.

Finally seeing the smoke from the house in the distance, I speed up slightly until we're pulling into the driveway. I'm already nervous about coming here but having my disapproving mother along for the ride makes everything worse.

"I'll just be a few minutes," I tell her as I rummage through my purse for the design I had in mind. Checking that my son, Damien, is still sleeping, I quietly open the door, ready to dash into the traditional barn that I see Mr. Cole working in.

"You're not going to leave him here, are you?" Mom questions as she pulls out her knitting bag from between her feet.

Staring at Damien and then the barn, I respond, "I'll only be a minute. He's sleeping; I don't want to wake him."

Damien has night terrors, so when he finally falls asleep, I always let him. Even when my parents gripe about it.

“You chose to have him, EmaLeigh; he’s your responsibility, not mine,” she huffs. “Now hurry up and close that door. It’s cold.”

Grinding my jaw, I get out and shut the door, moving to open Damien’s just as his eyes pop open and he lets out a god-awful howl of fright. “Ssshhh, baby, Mamma’s here.” I can hear birds taking flight as I unbuckle him from his car seat and pull him into my arms as he sobs into my neck, hiding his face.

“Lord, quiet him down,” I hear my mother mumble. Slamming the door shut, I drop to the snow-covered ground and hold Damien to my chest as tight as I can without hurting him because it’s one of the few things that will calm him down enough to realize he’s safe, and hopefully, talk about what’s scaring him.

This is one of the reasons I’ve decided we’re leaving Alaska after Christmas. Something here is terrifying him, and I don’t know what to do anymore. I’m hoping a change of scenery, a new life with just the two of us will help him.

“Everything alright out here?” Looking up, I see Sebastian Cole coming forward, and the air is sucked from my lungs as he gets closer. Mr. Cole is a massive man, probably the largest I’ve ever seen, and right now, he’s shirtless and covered in sweat. Meanwhile, I’m sitting in the snow, soaked from the waist down.

“Fine. He woke up and didn’t recognize where we were and got scared.” I lie through my teeth. Nobody understands Damien’s night terrors and trying to explain them, especially to a virtual stranger, only upsets us both.

“You’ll catch a cold on the ground, EmaLeigh.” My body quivers at the way he says my name. Familiar, like a lover’s kiss.

“So will you without a shirt,” I point out, trying not to stare at his muscular build and wondering what he’d feel like

to cuddle up to with all the thick hair on his chest.

The crooked smirk as he looks down and then back up at us makes my belly flutter. Shaking off the way he continuously makes me feel, I put Damien on his feet and stumble to mine. Damien clings to my legs while wiping his tears away as Sebastian gets closer, stopping only a foot away.

“What brings you up the mountain?” he finally asks after assessing us. His gaze feels like a wispy caress.

“Well, I was hoping you could make something for me.” I point down at Damien’s head to indicate it’s for him. “But I understand if it’s not enough time.”

“He yours?” I bristle at this question because I’ve spent years defending my choices to what feels like everyone we know. It’s difficult to accept it as an innocent question.

“Yes.” Pulling my boy’s hat down a little further to distract myself, I’m surprised by Sebastian’s curiosity.

“How old?”

“Three in March.” I can feel my son’s head turn a little to stare at the stranger now that he’s calmed down a bit.

“Can we hurry this along already?” my mother yells out from her window. Her impatience is showing and wearing me down.

“Maybe this was a mistake. We’ll go. I don’t want to waste your time.” I’m upset because I’d come here to have something made special for Damien so he could take a bit of Alaska with him wherever he goes in life. I should have known I couldn’t succeed with my mom in tow.

“Ema, wait.” Sebastian’s sizable hand grasping my daintier one stops me in my tracks. It’s like that day at the plunge a few weeks ago. I touched him and nearly melted inside. Opening the driver’s door of my SUV, Sebastian looks my mom dead in the eyes and tells her, “If you’re in such a hurry, take off. I’ll drive them home once Ema’s decided on her design and I’ve got her squared away.” Her mouth hangs open, and if not for the fire in her eyes, I’d laugh, but I know I’ll take a verbal lashing for his words later. “Anything you two need from in

here?” Opening the back door, I grab Damien’s comfort bag and my purse and step back.

“Don’t forget about this.” Sebastian quickly grabs Damien’s car seat before stepping out of my mother’s way.

“Fine. Don’t expect me to come back up here to get you,” Mom snaps as she climbs out of her side and around the hood. Slamming the door behind her, she speeds out of the driveway like her ass is on fire.

“Lovely lady,” Sebastian comments, and I bite my lip.

“That’s my mother for you.” It dawns on me that we’re stranded here, and I don’t even know this man. Until this year’s polar plunge, I don’t think I’d ever seen him before. I know his name, of course, given that his artisanship is unmatched in the area, but otherwise, I know nothing about him. “You’re not going to kill me and bury my body behind the barn, are you?”

I can feel him staring at me, but he doesn’t say anything. With a cross between a growl and a huff, he begins walking back to the barn, leaving us to either follow or start hiking down the mountain. “Cold, Mamma.” Damien pulls on my jacket. He’s not the most verbal child, so when he speaks, I listen.

Slipping his bag over my head and my purse on my shoulder, I pick him up and go after Sebastian. Entering the barn, it feels bigger than it looks. With both front doors spread wide open, it’s warmer than I would have imagined too. Several types of wood lean against one wall, crafter furniture covered with clear tarps sits against another, and in the middle is the machinery and instruments he uses to work.

A traditional totem is used as a support pole up to the roof, and I’m immediately awestruck by his talent. “Did you do this?” I nod at the pillar.

“My grandfather and I did it together when I was a teenager. Before he got sick.” A nostalgic look enters his eyes, and I envy him that. To have a fond memory about family.



Mine are all filled with bitterness and hatred. My parents aren't the nicest people, and when I turned up pregnant with Damien at seventeen, they weren't pleased and tried to force me into an abortion three times. Thankfully, the doctors they took me to had morals and refused to do the procedure unless I consented.

When Damien's father explained he wasn't ready to be a parent and wanted to live life first, I was angry and spiteful. I wanted to toss him into the nearest lake. But after some space and time, I understood. At least, he wasn't trying to talk me into doing something I didn't want. He didn't try to tell me that the baby wasn't his. He just wanted me to understand his position in life.

He was the only one who was honest with me, and he stayed through the pregnancy as a support system that I didn't have at home. I left his name off the birth certificate, and he signed over his rights right after the baby was born. He met Damien just that once at the hospital after I gave birth, but otherwise, he's never laid eyes on him.

When Clayton left for college, he promised he'd send money when he could. I told him he didn't have to, but he knew what life was like at home. And like clockwork, every month, he has sent us a little bit of money to help with things that Damien is continually growing out of. We decided that I wouldn't send pictures and he wouldn't ask for them, neither of us wanting the guilt of a forced relationship between the two of them, and for now, it's what's best. I can only hope I'm making the correct choices.

"EmaLeigh?" Startled by my name, my eyes focus on Sebastian as he sits at a drafting table. "You want to tell me what it is you were wanting?"

Nodding, I put Damien on his feet again, but he doesn't let me go and walks with me as I move forward to give the drawing to Sebastian. My lips twitch as his eyes roam over the paper. "This is nice work. You draw this?" I shrug when he looks up. "Why don't you two come sit?" Pulling out stools for us, he waves us over, but Damien refuses to budge, and my

anxiety begins to climb when I fear Sebastien will get annoyed with the only man in my life that's never let me down.



## Sebastian

Someone has done a fucking number on these two. I've not been able to stop thinking about EmaLeigh since she put those ridiculous mukluks on my feet. Her soft hand against my roughened body has kept my dick hard as a rock for weeks. Having her show up today, with a damn kid in tow, was shocking, but not enough to scare me away.

Offspring isn't a deal-breaker for me, but she's already got one foot out the door. It's going to take convincing her that I want them both to get her to stay. I've always liked a challenge.

"What's his name?" I nod at the boy who won't let her go. Christ, when he let that scream rip, I thought someone was out there slaughtering them. Her excuse about not recognizing his surrounding was a lie I let go of. When she's ready, she'll tell me more. Though, if I had to guess, it had more to do with the wretched mother who was so eager to leave.

"Damien." She rubs a loving hand over her son's head.

Opening a drawer in my drafting table, I pull out a miniature totem I carved before I left in the spring and offer it to him. "Do you like bears, Damien?" His eyes don't leave the stunning woman at his side. Even when she nods, he won't reach out for it or acknowledge my existence.

"I'm sorry, new people make him nervous. Add in unfamiliar surroundings, and it's a domino effect." I can hear the tears in her voice, but I suspect it has nothing to do with her son and everything to do with the way people react to him.

"Nothing to be sorry for." I hand her the item. "When he's interested, you can give it to him. He doesn't know me from

Adam. No reason he should treat me like a long-lost friend.”

“Thank you.” Her voice cracks as she tries to hide her emotions.

Nodding, I let the interaction go because I can see she’s bothered by something. Glancing back over the drawing she gave me, I wasn’t kidding when I told her this was good. She’s got an artistic talent brewing inside of her. “This for him?” I look down to see he’s loosened his hold on her leg some but not completely. She nods. “You want these carved in?” I trace the mountains and trees with a finger as she nods again. The clock will be a talked-about piece, and not because of my handiwork, but because of the details she’s included in it. “How big do you want it?” Small isn’t an option with the moon and stars and small woodland creatures.

“I was sort of hoping you’d advise me on that. I don’t know anything other than drawing. You’re the wood expert.” Quirking a brow at her choice of words, her ruddy blush suggests she knows what she said, and it wasn’t intended.

“I think, in this case, bigger is better. Christmas gift?” Placing the paper down, I give her my full attention.

“Yes. We’re moving in January, and I wanted him to have something to remember home by. The mountains are his favorite place.” The deep-seated sadness hanging on her shoulders can be felt around the room.

“Where you moving to?” The boy has caught my attention as he steps away from Ema a bit, still holding onto her pant leg with an iron fist.

“Washington.” My gaze flies up to meet hers.

She’s leaving after I just found her. I don’t know if I can let that happen. There’s something special about this girl, and I have the distinct feeling that nobody in her life sees it. Not the way I do.

“Kind of far.”

“Yeah.” She doesn’t offer more. And I don’t push. Not yet. There will be time for that later. After I’ve convinced her to confide in me. To trust me.

“Mamma, hungry.” Damien’s soft voice has her dropping to her knees next to him and digging through one of the bags she brought with her. Offering him two different options, he pulls open the bag to look for something else. When he doesn’t see it, tears well in his bright blue eyes as he stares up at the woman he obviously worships. “Nana?”

“I’m sorry, baby, I don’t have one.” Their interaction is so innocent that when I see her eyes gather tears, I feel a clench in my chest to protect these two from everything hurtful in the world.

“I have bananas.” Assuming that’s what he wants.

Her shoulders drop, and I can see she’s struggling to accept my offer. When Damien grasps one of the bags in her hand and slowly walks over to me, he offers the bag of crackers while asking, “Nana?”

It takes me a minute to realize what he’s doing. A huge grin spreads across my face. He wants to trade. “Deal, kid, let’s get you that banana.” Taking the bag he’s offered, he claps and runs back to his mother. Flinging his arms around her neck and climbing onto her body, she stands fluidly, like he weighs nothing, and smiles gratefully towards me.

“Can I take those?” Reaching for the bags strapped on her shoulder, she hesitates before nodding and handing them over.

Placing a hand on her lower back, I feel her spine tense, but I don’t move it. I’m not scared easily. And I won’t let her fear me. Not when what I want to do is worship the ground she walks on.

“You should really put a shirt on. You’ll get sick.” The way she stares up at me—beautiful wide blue eyes with just a hint of concern—has me reaching for the flannel shirt hanging on a hook by the door.

Slipping my arms in, I leave it open. “Better?”

With an eye roll, she turns to me completely, Damien still in her arms, and reaches forward to begin doing up the buttons. I don’t move because I know once she realizes what she’s doing, she’ll drop her hands, and I don’t want that. I

want her fingers roaming across every inch of my skin for as long as she wants. Preferably on a daily basis.

“Better.” Her remark drops off as the realization dawns, and that adorable blush is back. “I’m sorry.” She pulls away, and I let her.

“You need to stop apologizing for shit,” I tell her as we begin walking towards the house, snow crunching under our feet. Leaning down to her ear, I murmur, “You touch me whenever and however you like, anytime, Ema.” Her sharp inhale of breath isn’t missed.



EmaLeigh

True to his word, Sebastian traded Damien his bag of crackers for two bananas and then drove us home. The thoughtfulness in which he grabbed Damien’s car seat, so naturally before my mother took off, still has me off-kilter. Even as I’m putting Damien to bed, I can’t stop thinking about how Sebastian interacted with my son. The way he spoke to me.

I’ve always been the family outcast, so I’m used to being berated, ignored, and insulted. So used to it, in fact, that I expect it from any people around me. In the last year, I haven’t ventured out for anything of need more than once a month, with the exception of the fall bazaars where I sell the mukluks I make and the polar plunge a few weeks ago. Since having Damien, I’ve become more and more isolated, and every day, I wonder if that’s my doing or my parents’.

On the rare occasions I do go out, whether it’s for supplies or to get Damien out of the house and socialize, they always have something to say. A lot of times, they convince me to stay home. I know they’re embarrassed that I had Damien so young and out of wedlock, and they disagree with how I let Clayton off the hook. I’m reminded of it daily, and I feel my failures as a mom just as frequently.

That's why we're moving. Nobody knows. I've done everything to ensure that when we leave, we won't have to take anything but Damien's favorite things, and because he's very particular, it's no more than a backpack full. I know it's sneaky and slightly underhanded since they've allowed us to live here, but it's the only way I know we'll finally be free. We need to start a life away from this house. I need to know if getting away from Polar Bear and my suffocating family is what will help my son.

Switching the light off next to his bed, Damien sleeps with the totem pole Sebastian gave him wrapped tightly in his fist. As soon as we got home, he asked for it. I didn't even realize he'd noticed the small object that was given to him.

Quietly closing his door, I make my way to the kitchen to steep a cup of tea to take to my room with me, where I plan to read a favorite old book of mine. Stopping short as I pass the living room, I cringe.

"What's with the sudden interest in the mountain man?" my dad asks, not turning away from the hunting show on the television.

"Nothing. I just wanted to have something made for Damien." He scoffs at my explanation. My parents are the most loving grandparents to Damien's face, but behind his back and out of earshot, they take every chance they can to denigrate my decision to keep him. I don't know if they even love him or not, and it breaks my heart because he is the sweetest little boy.

"That man's not going to want someone else's sloppy seconds. Nobody wants children that aren't their own either." I know better than to defend myself when he's like this. His bitterness over whatever his problem is can't be reasoned with. As Christians, I know it was hard for my parents to accept that I not only had sex before marriage but conceived a child too, and I didn't even want to marry the boy who got me pregnant. It's been a stain on their reputation as far as they're concerned.

"I'm not looking for a relationship," I respond quietly, fighting back the urge to question his own beliefs.

Turning his head, I finally see that he's not just being mean, but he's drunk as well. "Just looking to get knocked up again." He laughs at what must be a shocked look on my face. My mother snickers from her chair too.

As the youngest of three children, I'm well aware that I'm the disappointment in the family. My oldest sister, Nancy, married our church's pastor several years ago, and they've popped out four children already. None of whom Damien is allowed to play with in private. Only during public functions for the church or family. Our middle sister, Chloe, left just before I discovered I was pregnant. She and I were best friends our entire lives.

As soon as I told her, she begged me to move to the lower forty-eight, where I could be closer to her. But she's a freelance journalist who was globetrotting all the time. I wasn't prepared to be a single mom *and* figure out life alone. But it's because of her that we're moving to Washington now. She works for a press company, and she's found me a job where I can work from home and take care of Damien.

Instead of getting myself that tea, I turn back around and head straight for my room. Tonight, I'm a swirl of emotions that I don't know what to do with. Between my parents criticizing me and the feelings Sebastian has evoked in me, all I want to do is lay in bed and cry for a while. I wish that were possible, but I'm terrified that once I start, I won't be able to stop.

Damien needs me strong, not an emotional basket case on the verge of breaking. And the only way I know how to prevent that from happening is by pushing everything I feel to the back of my mind and ignoring it. Not the healthiest coping mechanism, but for now, it's all I've got.

## CHAPTER 2



## sebastian

**B**lowing the sawdust off the circular piece of wood I just finished sanding for EmaLeigh and Damien, I recheck the time—just after ten. They'd have to be up by now. A kid that age, there's no way he'd sleep in this late. I've been up and working on this piece since just after six, the sun hadn't even begun to rise yet, but I was eager to get this finished for her.

It took nearly an hour to find the perfect piece of spruce from a haul of lumber I brought home this fall, and the last few hours, I've been sanding it into the ideal shape and getting it as smooth as possible. After spraying it with a protective coating, it's ready to set before I begin carving in EmaLeigh's design. Which means, I'm free to head into town and see if they've got plans for the day and, hopefully, bring them back up the mountain with me.

The longer I spent with the two of them yesterday, the more I realized how much I wanted them in my life. I know Ema plans to leave in a few weeks, but I hope to change her mind. After spending the last six years up here by myself, logging in Ketchikan for most of the spring, summer, and fall every year, then coming back to work the winters away, I now know that it's the love of a good woman that I'm missing from my life. The fact she has a boy already doesn't matter to me, so long as she's single. Even if she weren't, I don't know that that would stop me. If she has a man, then he doesn't deserve her. Allowing her to come up into the mountains and be abandoned by her mother tells me all I need to know about his character. If he exists.

I've been a reclusive mountain man for far longer than I should have, and I'm hoping I haven't lost the ability to be around the opposite sex. Heading inside, I take a quick shower and dress in a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and boots. Ignoring the beard growing on my face, I grab my flannel coat and head out to my 4Runner. As I begin driving down the mountain, I can see storm clouds rolling in and turn on the radio for a forecast.

*"A severe winter storm is predicted to hit the Polar Bear region sometime this afternoon with a predicted 10 inches of snow to land before midnight. Meteorologists are warning to have generators on hand and to be ready to be locked in for the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours."* I listen a little longer to more warnings and suggestions, but I'm nothing if not prepared. I've been using solar power for years, and with storms like this, it's always worked in my favor when the town has lost power.

I know it's selfish, but I'm hoping EmaLeigh hasn't heard the forecast yet because I wouldn't be disappointed if I could keep the two of them to myself for the next two days. The rest of my ride is done in silence as the sky darkens from the ominous clouds billowing in.

Pulling into her driveway, I already know that even if she hasn't heard the forecast, she'll realize it from the looks of the sky. Parking, I jump out of my SUV and head up the walkway. Ringing the bell, no one answers, but I can hear a TV playing, so I knock loudly.

A minute later, a grouchy old man answers, scratching his neck. "What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Ema." Peering around the guy, I've got several inches on him and can see her walking back and forth with Damien in her arms. Eyes closed as she whispers to him.

"EmaLeigh!" the man screeches, and her eyes pop open, startled, just as Damien begins to cry. "The mountain man is here for used goods."

"What the fuck," I snap, enraged that he would say that. He laughs and walks away as she rushes over, trying to calm

the boy in her arms. “Who the fuck is that?” I bark, wincing when she does.

“My father.” Her deep inhale shutters her body, and I can see dark circles under her eyes and weariness in her face.

“Get your stuff; I’m taking you two out,” I demand, already knowing that’s not the best way to deal with her.

“I...I can’t. I’m trying to get Damien to sleep. It wasn’t a good night.” Her lips thin as the boy’s hands ball her hair into his tight fists, likely yanking the strands from her head. She doesn’t even flinch.

I’m not taking no for an answer, though. If this is how she’s treated at home, I won’t let her stay when I can help it. “Come on, I’ll help you.” Grasping her shoulder, I turn her body, and with some nudging, she guides me to Damien’s room. The boy watches me the entire time as tears flow down his cheeks. “Pack enough for a day or two,” I say, and she spins around, pinning me with an unreadable look. “There’s a terrible storm coming. You two don’t need to be cooped up here for that.” I get the feeling what I witnessed is only a portion of what she deals with daily.

“We can’t just leave for two days. I don’t have anywhere to go, and even if I did, I couldn’t afford it.” I can see she wants to, though.

Spotting the bag she had with her yesterday, I grab it and begin putting the toys on the boy’s bed in it, assuming they’re some of his favorites. “You’re not just going anywhere. I’ve got a few errands to run in town, then we can get whatever Dam likes to eat, and you’ll both ride out the storm with me. Infinitely more fun than being here, I’m sure.”

She hesitates, even as Damien squirms to get down from her arms. We’re both surprised when he grabs his blanket, holds it up to me, and asks, “Bwing?” Nodding, I take it from his hands and see the totem I gave to him sticking out of his pants pocket. A slow grin spreads across my face. He’s how I get her to give us a chance.

“Pillow too?” I ask him, and he nods, his little legs pushing him up onto the bed to grab it and hand it to me. “Anything else you want?”

Seeing his mom still standing there, his head tilts as he asks, “Mamma?”

Snapping out of her trance, she smiles and says, “Don’t forget your PJs.” Jumping from his bed, the boy dashes to his dresser and rummages around until he’s got what I assume is a favorite pair. It’s only a few minutes until Ema has everything they both need, and we’re back at the front door putting on Damien’s boots, coat, gloves, and hat.

As I’m helping Ema into her own coat, her mother comes out of the kitchen, from the back of the house, with a towel in her hands, wiping them. Dropping her hands on her hips, she looks her daughter up and down with more censure than I’ve seen a parent give their child. “You’re really going to make the same mistake again, aren’t you? Sleep around until you’re knocked up again. Disgrace this family more than you already have.”

“Mom, please, not with Damien here.” The plea in her voice has me stepping in.

“Go get him buckled in.” I hand her the keys, the car seat by the front door from yesterday, and push them out of the house, keeping hold of their bags. Once the pair is out of earshot, I stare at the woman until she squirms. “I don’t know you, don’t care to, but the way you treat EmaLeigh is beyond fucked up. The fact she gets more consideration and care from me, a virtual stranger, is more telling about your character than hers.”

She scoffs. “She’ll be back once she’s got another brat from you. At least you’ve got money to help care for it.”

The audacity from this bitch. “You’re right about one thing. I’ve got money, which means that they won’t be back. Knocked up or not, I have no intention of letting Ema or Damien near either of you again.” Walking out the door, I see Ema wringing her hands together outside the vehicle, and the

stress in her eyes has me smiling to alleviate some of her anxiety.

“I’m sorry you had to see that.” Tossing their bags in the back, I place my hands on her shoulders and lean down, kissing her lips softer than I want to.

“No need to be sorry. Some people don’t deserve their children. They’re those people.” Urging her in the passenger seat, I buckle her in before taking the driver’s side. “What do you guys need to be holed up on the mountain for a couple of days?”



EmaLeigh

The embarrassment and shame of my mother’s accusations haven’t left me since we drove away from the house. Before Clayton, before Damien, I would have told the world she was the best mother in the universe. She baked, she made dinner every night, homemade lunches for school. Was always at my cheer practices and helped me work on the routines. And then, I told her I was pregnant and that I was scared, and I didn’t know what to do, and the first thing out of her mouth was that I was going to hell. That she was ashamed of me, and I needed to pray for forgiveness.

I was so stunned I didn’t leave my room for three days. I couldn’t bear to see the shame she felt for me every time I looked at her. Damien will be three soon, and the look has never faded.

“These ones?” Sebastian asks Damien holding up another box of cereal. Dam shakes his head and points to one higher up on the shelf. With Sebastian’s enormous height, he has no trouble grabbing it. When my son squeals his delight, Seb grins like he’s won the lottery or something.

I have no idea why this guy is interested in us, but I can’t deny how good it feels. And after the soft kiss he gave me in

front of my house, my attraction to him has intensified.  
“Mamma, coco?”

“Hot chocolate?” Sebastian guesses.

“Chocolate milk,” I correct him.

“To the dairy aisle!” Sebastian dashes off with Damien in the nearly filled cart, and my little boy’s laughter as they glide down the store has my heart swelling. Damien has never taken so well to another man before. Not even my own father. Not that I blame him.

As I approach the two of them grabbing a huge jug of chocolate milk, I spot a bottle of cold brew coffee in the cooler and nearly grab it until I see the price tag. Inflation has been an issue here for years and prevents me from getting anything I truly want for myself. Everything is about Damien.

“Grab it,” Sebastian murmurs in my ear. When I turn my head, our lips brush across each other’s, and the heat in his gaze has me biting the corner of my mouth. His eyes drop and stare before he reaches in the cooler and picks it up himself.

“I can’t afford that,” I tell him, and I see a thought flicker in his eyes. He wants to say something.

“I’ll buy it; you get the milk.” I have the feeling that’s not what he was going to comment on, but I let it go because I think he understands why I can’t. And why I would pay the same price for the milk.

*Damien.*

Everything I do, all the decisions I make, they’re all with him in mind and how it will affect his life. I’ve lost friends because of my choice to keep him, forcing me to stay home instead of going to college. I’ve lost my family for the same reasons. Everyone but Chloe.

Walking to the checkout, I’m still surprised at how well Damien has taken to Sebastian. He isn’t talking much, but he watches the older man with such fascination. And Sebastian talks to him as though he’s talking back. It doesn’t seem to matter to him that my son is primarily non-verbal with anyone but me, and even then, it’s only two or three words at a time.

“What kind of movies does he like?” I’m brought out of my head at Seb’s question as he unloads the groceries.

“Anything Marvel. He loves Thor and Iron Man.” Damien has been fascinated with the movies since we watched them when I was sick when he was about six months old. They’re always playing in the background at home in one of our rooms.

“Not Cap, huh?” He looks at Damien, and the way he scrunches up his tiny nose and shakes his head has me laughing. Damien feels all kinds of ways about Captain America because he beat up Iron Man in Civil War. “Alright, alright, I’m partial to the Hulk myself. Big”—he flexes his arms in the middle of the checkout—“Strong.” Turning, I’m shocked when he picks me up and spins me around.

“Oh my gosh.” I can’t hide the blush staining my cheeks.

“Smash!” Damien slaps the handle of the shopping cart.

“He smashes too, but only to save the day.” They share a secret look as I begin putting Damien’s coat and hat back on, and before I know it, Sebastian has paid for everything, and we’re leaving the store.

“I was supposed to help with that,” I whisper as the blistering cold hits us. I can feel the storm in the air. “Are you sure it’s safe for us on the mountain? You’ll have heat?”

“How about you cook dinner instead?” Sebastian counters. He places one hand on my back while pushing the cart with the other, ensuring I walk beside him. It’s oddly endearing. I’m sure my parents love each other, but they aren’t this affectionate at any time. “And yes, we’ll have heat. If the storm knocks out power, I have generators and three fireplaces. It’s not my first rodeo up there.”

“Alright.” It might not be his, but it *is* ours, and I’d die if anything ever happened to Damien.

After getting the groceries and Damien loaded into the vehicle, we’re on our way in minutes. But not before I see one of the partitioners from our church as she glares at the familiar

way Sebastian touches me as we move. I know she's going to report back to Nancy, who will, in turn, tell our parents.

Apprehension has my fingers fidgeting as we drive through town until we reach the road leading up Bear Mountain. Sitting on my hands, I try to calm my racing heart, but I can already hear the insults that will be flung my way when I go back home.

If I go back.

After this morning, I honestly don't know if I can.

For so long, my focus has been on getting Damien and me down to Washington to be near Chloe. To break free of this constant barrage of guilt and shame. I need a change. A chance to be the best mom to my son that I can be, and I know it won't be in Polar Bear, not while living at home.

"You're awfully quiet over there." Sebastian's caring voice has my head turning, and it's not until he reaches up with a hand to wipe away a tear off my cheek that I even realize I've been crying. "What's with this?"

Wiping furiously at my cheeks, I shake my head and give him a false smile. "Nothing that can be helped." I don't know what to say. I never do.



Sebastian

I know I'm pushing her. Maybe even manipulating her a tiny bit, though not on purpose. Paying for the groceries while she was busy with Dam allowed me to take a slight weight off her shoulders. And I would happily do it again anytime. But I didn't think that'd bring her to tears.

Damien was fast asleep within minutes of driving, so paying attention to EmaLeigh without interruption was easy. I recognized she was troubled from the way she was fidgeting, and ultimately, sitting on her hands only proved it. I'm a



simple man with simple needs, and right now, the only thing I want or need is to make her smile.

I know she plans to leave Polar Bear, but the more I'm in her presence, the more I want her to stay. Both of them. I see the way she watches me when I'm interacting with Damien. The worry is written on her face like a bold letter. She silently prays I don't do or say something to insult or upset the boy. I couldn't do that. Not to them. But it tells me that she's had other people who have.

"Whatever it is, I'm not here to judge," I say as we pull into my driveway a short time later.

Without responding, she climbs out of the vehicle and goes for Damien. Rubbing his eyes, he blinks up at her a few times before letting out a scream loud enough to wake the bears across the state. "Sssh, baby, Mamma's right here. I've got you." Cradling him to her chest, I watch while I pull out the bags from the back as she rocks him back and forth, ignoring the biting winds and freezing temperature. Right now, he's the only thing in her world that matters, and I think it's this that cracks me open.

It's humbling seeing the complete adoration and love for someone who means the world to her. I've never seen anything like it. As an only child whose parents weren't responsible enough to care for themselves, let alone an infant, I grew up on this mountain, was raised by my grandfather. He loved me, sure, but he wasn't the kind of man who said, "I love you" before I went to bed every night. Didn't mean I didn't know; I've just never seen it in such a pure form before.

"Come on, you two need to get inside before you catch a cold." Ema barely hears me as I herd them up to the door. Turning the knob, I push it open and wait for them both to enter the house before kicking it shut behind me.

"You don't lock it?" she asks, standing just inside the entry.

Pursing my lips, I look from the door and down at myself. "Who do you think is going to try and steal from me?" Her eyes follow the same path as mine before a sinful smile works

across her luscious lips, making me want to pull her into my arms and kiss her until she sighs for me.

Damien's whimper halts any further thoughts. "Living room is through there. Why don't you two go relax while I put this stuff away." I don't phrase it like a question because I know if I do, she won't. After a minute of nibbling her lip, Ema finally nods before kicking her boots off and pulling off Damien's.

Dropping the bags on the counter, I head back out to get the rest. Snow has begun falling in thick flakes, creating a near whiteout. Spotting movement by the woods, I see Jack, my wolf dog, come barreling through the trees like his ass is on fire. For what should be a wild animal, he hates when it snows. Usually refuses to go outside when it does.

"You're such a fool, Jack." He barks as I'm walking back to the house, nose to the ground because he can smell the new scent of our guests. "Be nice," I instruct as I open the door again. "Sit."

His tail is wagging so hard his body can't remain still as he hears Damien still crying and Ema singing softly to him. I could listen to her sweet voice until the end of time; I just wish the boy didn't have to suffer for her to do it.

"So, I should have told you"—I walk in the room with Jack on my heels—"I have a dog." He grunts and tilts his head up at me. "Fine, a wolf dog." As he walks around the couch, head down as he sniffs, Ema gasps. He's a big beast.

"Is he safe?" she asks as Jack catches Damien's attention. With one hand wrapped tightly around the totem, he reaches for the beast with his other, but Ema won't let him touch Jack just yet.

"Yes. I trained him myself. Loves kids, hates snow or rain or anything that will get him wet." Jack drops to the ground with his snout on her feet as he whines while his tail swishes back and forth across the carpet.

"Mamma, down," Dam requests, and she reluctantly lets him go. As soon as he's on the floor, Jack rolls over,

presenting his belly to Damien.

“He also loves belly rubs.” Kneeling next to the beast, I show Damien how to scratch his belly and sides. “He’s almost five now, but he’s still just a big old puppy. When I’m not around, Jack’ll keep you safe and alert you to anyone or anything coming around.” I’m half hoping she misses the bomb I just dropped.

“A wolf dog?” Ema reaches down and scratches under his chin, making his hind leg kick rapidly with pleasure.

“Yeah, my neighbor’s husky bred with a wolf that had been sniffing around. Jack and one other survived. I took Jack, and they kept his brother.” This oddball dog has gone on every logging trip with me since I got him, but he’s getting up there in years, and having Ema and Damien around means I’d be able to leave him home where he can enjoy retirement. I don’t bring that up yet, though; Ema is nowhere near ready to hear that.

## CHAPTER 3

emaleigh

After a few tears, a lot of whining, and a promise from Seb, I finally let Jack sleep with Damien. Since being introduced, the two haven't left each other's sides longer than it took for me to help Damien go to the bathroom. It's kind of sweet since Jack looks like a horse compared to my son. I have the distinct feeling that if Damien wanted it, Jack would become one for him too.

As soon as they met, Damien calmed down. He wasn't as anxious as usual. I was able to make chicken stew for Sebastian and me and a grilled cheese for Damien without having to carry him on one hip while doing so for the first time in far longer than I remember.

After making a cup of tea, I'm sitting in front of the fireplace watching the flames flicker as Sebastian gathers more wood from outside, wondering what the heck is happening here. There is no doubt that we are attracted to each other. He seems to really like my son, which is a bonus, but we're leaving; I can't start something with him. It would be unfair to all three of us. And yet, that's exactly what it feels like we're doing.

Sipping at the hot drink in my hand, I listen for Damien with one ear while waiting for Sebastian to come back in so we can talk about what *this* is. I don't like to mince words, which means I have to be direct.

Stomping feet alert me to the man's arrival at the back door off the kitchen. Standing, I head that way to grab the tea I

made for him. Staring down at the steaming drink, I wonder if it's too tame for him. Maybe he would have preferred coffee.

With arms stacked full of wood as Seb pushes through the door, kicking it shut behind him, I barely let him off-load the lumber before I blurt out my question. "What are we doing? This, us, me and you...Why are we here?" I watch as he brushes the snow off his hair, still amazed that all he wore out there was a flannel shirt and gloves. I noticed he had a lot of body hair when we were here yesterday, and his remarkable muscles must keep him warm.

"What do you mean? And because I invited you and you said yes." He quirks a brow at me as he toes off his boots and steps into the kitchen, stalking over to me. Less than a foot away, Sebastian towers over my shorter physique, forcing me to tilt my head back to meet his stare.

Swallowing, I hand over the mug. "It's tea. I made myself a cup and thought maybe you'd want one too." A faint grimace flashes across his lips before he hides it. "You don't have to drink it; I wasn't sure. Just wanted to do something nice," I finish lamely.

Taking the offering, Sebastian downs it in one gulp before placing it on the counter behind me and then grabbing my hips in his meaty hands. Lifting me up, he puts me on the same surface and steps in closer. "Oh." That's all I can muster when I feel the bulge in his pants.

"From the first time you touched me at the polar plunge, I've wanted you. Under me, on me, in front of me. However I could have you. Showing up here saved me the time of trying to find you. I wasn't about to let another day pass without you by my side."

Stunned, I don't know what to say. I had no idea he noticed me that day. He sure left an impression on me, though. "We're leaving soon."

He shrugs. "Maybe, maybe not. Maybe I'll give you a reason to stay." I don't get to protest as his lips crash down over mine. Swooping his tongue into my mouth, I'm

speechless. I've never been kissed so deeply, so passionately before. It's addictive and thrilling.

His hands move swiftly to push my sweater up enough so he can slip them up my back, clutching me nearer to him so we're as close as we can be for the moment. I whimper when I feel his impressive manhood straining against me intimately. The arousal that forces its way through my veins is surprising and welcoming. Sebastian is the first man I've been attracted to in years. My heart pounds against my ribs as our tongues tangle, and when I feel his hands in my hair, dragging my head back so he can kiss me more intensely, I moan out his name.

Pulling away from me with great reluctance, a growl releases from his throat as he stares down at me. "I don't want to pressure you. Make no mistake, EmaLeigh, I want to fuck you dirty and raw, but not until you're begging me to. Until you're ready to admit we could be something special." Sucking my lower lip between his teeth, he tugs on my hair again before slowly releasing me and backing up.

It's then I see how truly imposing he is. It's like he has a third leg in his pants. "Where am I sleeping?" I barely get the question out. My body is flushed with arousal and ready to beg him now.

A sexy smirk plays on his lips as he replies, "With me."

"Oh boy."



Sebastian

*Torture.*

Sleeping with Ema is fucking torture of the best kind. Since kissing her in the kitchen, my dick hasn't gone down, and I refuse to relieve myself. I want her to do it for me. I want my cum to release into her body the next time I feel pleasure.

Soft moaning from the beauty next to me quickly woke me up a few minutes ago. I have no idea what time it is, only that it's nearing morning, and I'm relieved there hasn't been any noise from Damien's room. I'm hoping that sleeping with Jack eases the boy's anxieties when he wakes up, and his mom can have a break from the torment of seeing him so upset.

"Mmmm, Sebastian..." My ears perk up at Ema's words, and I turn to see she's shed the blanket slightly to reveal that her shirt is pushed up her belly and exposing the underside of her perky tits. Convincing Ema to sleep in the same bed as I, hadn't been easy, but I promised her nothing would happen, and I'm having a hard time keeping my hands to myself now.

Rolling to my side, I watch her sleep. Her face is relaxed, and even while mumbling and sighing, she's adorable. With how long it took her to get to this state, though, I have to wonder just how much sleep she's been getting. And for how long it's been going on.

I get the feeling that even though she lives with her parents, there isn't much help there. That for nearly three years, she's been doing this all on her own. Every mom needs a break, time to recuperate. And from the bags under her eyes, I can tell she isn't getting that. I don't expect her parents to take over her duties, but to give her some time to herself now and then wouldn't be uncalled for. Frustration eats at me as I think about how lonely Ema's life has been, even being surrounded by people.

Getting up from bed, I head to the kitchen to make coffee. Passing Damien's door, I open it quietly to let Jack out, but he doesn't even acknowledge my presence when I give a gentle whistle. Laying with Damien's legs over his belly, the two snore in unison. Pulling it shut behind me, I carry on to my destination. It only takes a minute to get the strong brew going before opening the kitchen, dining, and living room curtains. It's just after six in the morning, and there's still no sign of the sun. It's mornings like this that I usually sit on the front porch while drinking my coffee, but my desire is to be in the bedroom with EmaLeigh. Soon...soon, I'll get to do that. For now, I collect my coffee in a mug, slip on my boots and a



sweater and head out the back door to the barn, where I plan to carve out the trees on Damien's clock and start burning the grains of wood to the right consistency.

Two feet of snow greet me when I open the back door, with more continuing to fall. Shoving the thermos in my pocket, I grab the shovel from the hook in the coatroom and begin moving the heavy snow until I've made a path out to the barn. Sweating by the time I get there, I drag open the large doors and flick on the light switch. Despite the freezing temperatures, I remove my sweater because my passion for woodworking always gets me perspiring.

Using my smallest chisel, I begin the painstaking task of getting every tree line right, every branch precise, and by the time I get to drawing out Ema and Damien on the surface, the sun is finally starting to rise. I check my watch to see that it's mid-morning and decide to take a break and check on the little family in my house. A family I hope will one day be mine and grow.

Shoveling back through the newly fallen snow, I hear giggling as soon as I open the door. Jack races towards the entrance and jets out before I have a chance to walk through, causing Damien to throw himself back in a fit of laughter.

"Where's your mom?" I ask him, and he stares up at me and blinks a few times from the floor in the dining area as I take off my boots.

"Sweeping," he finally says, clutching the totem to his chest.

"You like that?" I nod at the wood piece, and he gazes down at it before nodding. "Want another?" He stands so quickly, he nearly falls over before toddling over to me.

Crouching down to his level, I wait for what he has to say or plans to do before moving. "More?" His one-word responses worry me a little because, surely, it should be more, but I know it's not my place, so I won't bring it up with Ema unless she does first.

“I’ve got lots. After breakfast, we’ll go pick out another one, okay?” He nods vigorously. “How do cereal and a banana sound?” He picked out some fruity stuff yesterday and grabbed three bunches of bananas, so I assume he eats both enough that it’s a safe option.

“Yes, pwease.” He doesn’t move as he waits for me.

Reaching down for his hand, I guide him around the kitchen to collect what we need before lifting him onto the counter. Letting him pour the cereal puts a dazzling grin on his cherubic face that makes me feel ten feet tall. Who knew pleasing a kid could be so satisfying?

After peeling the banana for him, I grab one for myself, and we eat in silence. Me standing, him sitting on the counter and spilling milk everywhere. I couldn’t imagine a more perfect moment if I tried.



EmaLeigh

Slowly opening my eyes to the feeling of warmth from the sun shining through the windows facing Sebastian’s bed, I realize I feel rested. For the first time in more years than I can remember, I feel refreshed, and not like I spent the night tossing and turning, constantly waiting for Damien to wake up screaming.

“Damien!” I gasp, sitting up. Guilt assaults me as I toss the covers off and pull down my nightshirt. Rushing to the room he slept in, I find the door open and the bed empty. “Oh god!” Horror washes over me as I run through the house, only to slide to a stop when I see him sitting on the counter in front of Sebastian, eating his favorite cereal and making a big milky mess.

“Mamma!” Damien grins at me but continues to eat.

“I’m so sorry. You should have woken me.” I’ve never slept through one of Damien’s night terrors, and I can’t believe I did this time. “Did his screaming wake you up?” Biting my bottom lip to try and prevent it from wobbling, I’m shocked by his response.

“Nope. I’ve been up since about six, went to work, came back in, and he was on the floor playing with Jack. Laughing up a storm.” Sebastian frowns when he sees tears forming in my eyes.

“He didn’t have a night terror?” It’s been nearly eighteen months since he’s gone without one.

“Not as far as I know. Figured we’d eat breakfast before we woke you up.” Using a cloth to wipe Damien’s face, Seb helps him off the counter before going to the back door and letting Jack in.

“Mamma!” Damien runs to me, and I drop to my knees to catch his warm embrace. There is nothing in this world more genuine than my son’s hugs. Closing my eyes as he wraps his arms around my neck, I savor the moment, needing to get myself grounded and push my emotions away.

He’s okay.

I’m okay.

We’re all okay.

Pulling back, I don’t want to let him go, but as soon as he sees Jack, they’re running off down the hallway towards the room he slept in and holds the few toys we brought with us.

Sebastian walks over, offering me a hand up. As soon as my fingers touch him, he drags me to my feet, hauling my body into his arms. “Good morning,” he murmurs before bending down to kiss me.

Placing my hand over my mouth, I stop him, and he frowns. “Morning breath,” I utter behind my palm. He rolls his eyes, pulling my hand away and stealing the kiss he wanted anyways.

It's not light or sweet this time. It's passionate and makes my toes curl and my heart rate spike to an uncontrollable beat. Our tongues touch, and it's like my body explodes as I wrap my legs around his waist. His hands move to my ass, and his fingers push beneath my panties, taking a firm hold of my ass cheeks.

"Want to know a secret?" he groans as I feel him treading before sitting down on the sofa.

"Yes," I whisper, dazed.

"It was moaning that woke me up." I feel the bulge between us and sigh. "And my name coming off someone's lips with an incredibly erotic purr."

"No," I hiss, heat crawling up my throat. I've never been so embarrassed.

"Yes," he counters. "I'm dying to hear it again while you're awake and I'm between these sexy thighs." Breathless, speechless, I don't know how to respond. What to say or do.

Even as his lips slowly travel up my neck, kissing lightly, nipping and licking, I lean back a bit and clasp his jaw in both of my hands. The downy hair on his face tickling my palms as I meet his eyes makes me smile.

"You're nothing like any man I've ever met, Sebastian." And I mean that in the best way possible. He makes me believe in happiness.

"That's because you've been spending time with boys, honey. I'm no boy."

I make the first move this time, tilting my head and kissing along his lips before untangling myself from his body. As much as I want to make out with him all day long, I know I can't because of Damien. I have not only my own heart to protect but his as well.

Stepping back, I reiterate once again, "We're leaving soon."

"Why?" Blinking as I stare down at him, I hadn't anticipated that question, though I should have.

“Damien isn’t thriving here. I’m always walking on pins and needles at home, and I think that’s why he has the night terrors. I need a space for my son that is welcoming, loving. He doesn’t have that here.” And I can’t express just how much that breaks my heart.

Sebastian contemplates my explanation for a minute before countering with, “What if he could?”

“I suppose things would be different then. But my parents aren’t about to change, and I don’t make enough money to move out, and the jobs here...well, they aren’t great.” I love my town, but the size doesn’t work for anyone trying to make a life here.

He listens to me. I can see it in the way his jaw grinds together and in the rigidity of his body. I can also tell he wants to say something, but he’s keeping it to himself. For now, at least.

“Mamma, watch!” Damien bursts into the room with Jack hot on his heels. “Sit!” Damien drops to the floor, and Jack follows suit. “Good,” he cheers, clapping his hands. “See, Mamma?”

“I see, sweetheart.” Sitting next to my son, I get a quick glance of Sebastian, and my heart stops in my chest. I don’t know if he meant for me to notice it or not, but the way he watches us, with devotion in his eyes, I wonder, for the first time, if staying is possible. “Let’s see what else Jack can do.” I grin at my son as he wiggles his way into my lap and starts commanding Jack, who does everything asked of him.

Damien has been more enthusiastic and open this morning than I’ve ever seen him, and I think it has a lot to do with the wolf dog, but also enjoying those few minutes he had alone with Sebastian this morning before I woke up. Maybe this is where we’re meant to be, and I’m so ready to get out that I’m not even seeing it properly.

Or maybe I’m too afraid to hand over my heart again.

## CHAPTER 4

## sebastian

Sitting on my workbench, sanding the rounded edges of a bench I've been working on for a few months, my mind keeps wandering to the duo inside my house. After our kiss this morning and unexpected revelation about how Ema is feeling, I picked up on a few things.

Intimacy scares her. Not just physically, either, but emotionally. She's had her heart stomped on.

Damien doesn't just come first; he *is* first for her. I didn't realize there was a difference until now. It's instinctual and happens without forethought. I don't believe she thinks about herself at all beyond her basic needs. Which will help with convincing her a lot easier than I thought. I refuse to manipulate her because if she doesn't want to stay, I won't force her, but I hope that if Damien does, she might too. And Jack is helping with that without even realizing it.

From the minute I saw Ema, I knew she was it for me. It was in her eyes and the way she spoke. Softly but with confidence. Being able to call her mine will be a genuine pleasure. Having her call me hers will be a damn privilege I'll work to earn for the rest of our lives.

"Tell me about you, Sebastian." Looking up at the woman in question, I was so lost in thoughts of our future I didn't hear her come out. Standing, I walk closer and help her take off her heavy coat, simultaneously brushing the snow off her head.

"What do you want to know?" I'm an open book when it comes to her. "Where's Damien?" I ask when I don't see him

shuffling behind her.

“Napping with Jack.” She smiles, obviously enjoying that he has a companion. “And anything, everything, whatever you want to share.” Her wide blue eyes stare up at me, and in them, I see her desire to want to stay, to start something between the two of us that would be everlasting.

“I’m originally from Fairbanks. Moved here when I was a toddler to live with Pops when my parents decided they’d had enough of me. I was homeschooled, and we basically stayed on the mountain.” I watch her with a keen eye as she wanders around my shop, her delicate fingers gliding along different pieces of furniture as she inspects them. “He taught me to do all this.”

“It’s all very beautiful.” Ema looks at me over her shoulder, and while it might not be meant as seduction, it comes off that way, and my dick goes from half to full mast in about point two seconds. “What else?”

“In the summers, I’m a logger in Ketchikan. Jack usually comes with me, but he’s getting a little older now. I suspect he’d like to stay home with a family if he could.” My hint isn’t so subtle.

“How long are you gone for?” Picking up one of the miniature totems from the table, she inspects it a little too closely as she awaits my answer.

Sitting back on my bench, I wait until she looks up at me. “Spring to fall. I normally come home before the plunge.” All of that would change if they stayed. If we became a family. But I don’t say it; I don’t want to scare her.

“Who takes care of your house while you’re gone?” She’s fishing now.

“You know old lady Shue from the hardware store?” She nods. “Her or her husband come up once a week or so to check on things. Turn the heat on when it’s needed so the pipes don’t burst.”

Taking a seat on one of the stools at a workstation I cleared out this afternoon, thinking it’s where she could make her



mukluks, she leans forward. “You’re gone six months of the year.”

“Sometimes more, sometimes less.”

“But you want me, us, to stay.” It’s not a question, so I don’t answer. “How would that work when you’re gone for so long?” She’s not trying to be critical; she wants to know they would be my priority and safe. Living on a mountain, even when it’s so close to town, isn’t easy. The isolation can get to anyone.

“I choose how long I’m gone for and if I even want to go. I’m an independent contractor, Ema. If I don’t want to take the job, I don’t have to. I do it now because, as much as I hate to admit it, it can be lonely up here. Seeing old buddies is nice once in a while.” Waving my arm around the shop, I tell her, “This is my main source of income, though. I don’t need to log.”

“Do you enjoy it? The logging.”

“Yeah, it’s good physical work that keeps me in shape. But it’s not who I am.”

She stands up, and my eyes follow her as she moves towards me. “I’ve never had anything for myself. Damien is all I have. I live for him. But twenty-four hours with you has shown me so much about my son. Things I didn’t know he, or I, were missing.”

Stopping in front of me, she chews on her lip, so I grab her hips and lift her seamlessly into my lap. “Like what?”

“A man,” she whispers. “Someone better than his father. Better than my father.” Her breath stutters as she thinks of the two men who’ve failed her epically. “You’ve shown us both more generosity and compassion since yesterday than the two of them combined in a lifetime.”

“Does that mean you’re staying?” Cupping behind her head, I drag her closer. Our lips are only a breath apart as I wait for her answer.

“I don’t know. But we have enough time to figure it out. If you’re willing to let us learn more about each other, that is.”

“Take all the time you need, baby.” Crushing her lips with mine, I stand and take her against a wall. Holding her hands above her head with one hand and the other gripping her ass, I take the kiss deeper. Rubbing my aching dick between her legs, all I want is to bury myself as far inside her body as I can and never come out.

All in good time, though. I can be as patient as she needs.



EmaLeigh

I get the feeling my body has already decided and is simply waiting for my head to catch up as Sebastian kisses me so passionately, I don't know where he ends, and I begin anymore. He holds me in such a controlling manner, but it's tender, loving. I could grow addicted to the way he touches me, and the idea of not having this for the rest of my life instills such a deep sadness that it makes breathing difficult.

“Sebastian,” I moan when he pulls away and begins nibbling down my neck, his strong jaw bumping my chin as he does. “Sebastian, please.” He pauses somewhat, pulling back to look at me. “Please,” I say again. I've never been forward with my sexuality, and I don't know how to ask for it now. My innate shyness keeps me nearly paralyzed.

“You've gotta say it for me, baby, because your body is begging to be fucked hard, but your eyes, there's a touch of fear in them, and I ain't doing anything to hurt you or upset you.”

Unable to move my hands at the moment, I lean forward and kiss along his jaw, whispering, “I need you.” That's as bold as I get. I'll learn, I'll grow, but for now, that's all I have.

Slowly letting me down to my feet, Sebastian doesn't hesitate to remove my boots and go to work on my jeans. The cold breeze from the open doors doesn't stop my desire, and as

he stands back up, his warm hand slipping between my naked thighs, I don't think it'll stop him either.

"Fuck are you ever ready for me, baby. Soaked to the core." He groans as his finger gently pets across my lower lips, moving sweetly until his thumb grazes across my clit. Light pressured swirls of the digit as his fingers search out my hole have me throwing my head back as my heart races with the need to let go at this man's mercy.

"Yesssss, Seb," I mewl when I feel him enter me with two fingers. Pumping in and out slowly, mimicking what we're about to do while giving me this intense craving for more. "Please don't make me wait," I cry in his ear.

"Christ, I'm really going to love making you beg for this monster cock." Releasing me from his other hand, I feel it moving between us to unbuckle his belt and jeans.

Monster is right. His size is a bit overwhelming, and I shouldn't be surprised, given just how big every other part of him is. But my mouth still dries out when I feel the full length against my bare thigh. Nipping along my neck, he sucks my earlobe between his teeth before murmuring, "I don't have condoms, but I'm clean. You say no, it means no, but I just might die if I don't enter this sweet little pussy of yours soon."

Internally cursing, I know it's irresponsible, even though I'm on the pill. We shouldn't chance it. But I'm lost in this lust haze, and I can't bring myself to deny either of us what we really want. "I'm on birth control."

Sebastian takes a second to look me in the eyes, and I can see the war waging in their dark depths. He knows as well as I do that no birth control is foolproof. Same with condoms. "I'll always take care of you, EmaLeigh." It's more than a promise, it's a vow, and I believe him.

Leaning forward, I bite his lip until he hisses. I stick my tongue in his mouth and suck his into mine, moaning loudly as pleasure pulls down from my stomach to my pelvis. "Then stop making me wait," I bite out, causing him to chuckle. The sound vibrates through his entire body, giving me a shiver.

Picking me up by my ass, my legs wrap around his waist, and the feeling of his dick against my core is almost more than I can handle as he gently slides inside the tightness. It's almost more painful than the first time, the day I conceived Damien.

Tired of waiting, I thrust forward, a scream ripping from my throat as a growl shakes his chest. "Why the fuck did you do that?"

Before I can respond, I feel the blood pumping through the thick veins of his hardness inside me, and almost at once, an orgasm tears through my body. His hand covers my mouth, muffling the scream torn from my soul as pleasure takes over all rational thought. Languid and satisfied in his hold, I blink up at Seb to find him smiling down at me.

"We're going to have to soundproof our room in the future." I know he's playing with me, but my entire body reacts to his reference of a future for us. "Oh fuck," his fist hits the wall a few inches from my head, "You like the sound of that."

Kissing across his jawline, down his throat, and over to his collarbone, I begin nibbling at the flesh as his hips start thrusting. Slowly at first before picking up pace and hammering inside of me. Reaching places I never knew existed.

"Oh, Sebastian," I sigh, closing my eyes as my head falls back. "That feels sooooo good," moaning on the exaggerated word. "More, give me more."

"Tighten that pussy, baby." I feel his head resting on the wood behind me, still several inches taller than me, even holding me up. "Fuck, yes, just like that. Tighter." I follow his every instruction, needing to please him for some reason.

My hands find their way to his chest, fingers brushing through the thick hair, nails scraping along his flesh. When he hisses, I throw my hips forward, meeting him thrust for thrust as he continues to assault my body in the sweetest ways possible.

He holds my hips steady, his frenzied pumping picking up pace, and just when I think he's about to let go, he stops, drops my legs to the ground, and spins me around so fast I can't catch my breath. Kicking my legs apart, he bends his knees and thrusts up into me from behind. A scream is pulled from my throat, and he doesn't attempt to quiet me down this time. Pinning my arms above my head, he buries his face in my neck, biting down on the corded tendon where my neck meets my shoulder to hold me in place.

Sebastian becomes wild, cursing, sucking, fucking into me with wild abandon, and when I feel him get so incredibly deep inside of me that neither of us can move, I begin tightening on him again. Massaging his release out of him with my channel. "Fuck. Fuck, Ema. Fuck." He bites harder on my neck, and one hand slips between my body and the wall, manipulating my clit once again and forcing a second orgasm out of me.

Coming together, we can hardly move or breathe as he holds us upright, muttering words of praise into my ear as he continues to pet my over-sensitized nub. "Please, Seb, please, stop." I can't wiggle away from him as he ignores my request. Secretly I like that he wants to focus all his attention on me.

"I've never been blinded by an orgasm before, baby; you're a fucking marvel." Releasing his hold on me, Sebastian spins me again, laying a hot, possessive kiss on my lips before dropping to his knees and sucking my clit into his mouth. The pain is almost overwhelming until it slowly becomes pleasurable. He doesn't stop until I'm convulsing above him and coming again. This time I drop into his arms, unable to hold my own weight up anymore.

"That was too much," I tease, smiling up at him.

Sebastian's eyes are closed, and a look I can only describe as ecstasy plays on his face, plain as day.

I'm definitely one step closer to saying yes to his offer of us staying for good.



## Sebastian

I feel ten feet tall as Ema and I make dinner together. Sharing secret looks and thrilling touches. I can't keep my hands off her as she stirs the waffle mix in a bowl. Slipping a hand down the front of her pants, she hisses when I brush across her clit. Pleasured so well that it's too sensitive right now, but I want another taste of her.

"I can't get enough of you," I murmur in her ear as she sighs.

Damien and Jack are sitting on the living room floor playing with the blocks Ema brought for him. Dam builds them high, and Jack knocks them over. They've been at it for an hour now.

Placing the items in her hands on the counter, she surprises me by turning and dropping to her knees. Leaning forward without warning, Ema bites my dick. Not hard but enough to get its attention. Blood rushes south, and I have to put my hands on the counter as I lean over her and watch from above as she teases me through the denim of my jeans.

"Fucking minx," I hiss as her hand begins massaging up and down the appendage, squeezing every so often. "You're asking for it," I warn her.

"Oh, good. I didn't want you to confuse my attentions with anything but desire." Her saucy reply has me reaching down and gripping her by her snowy-blonde messy bun and dragging her up to her feet.

"Anyone ever tell you you're mouthy?" I smirk as her eyes narrow.

"Plenty of times," she retorts before turning serious. "But I've never felt safe enough to carry on with it."

Jaw locked and ticking with the impetus to ream her parents out for taking such shit care of her, I pull her into my chest. "You feel safe with me?" She nods, and I cup her

cheeks, tilting her head so I can kiss her tenderly. “You’ll always be safe with me, EmaLeigh Ruin.”

“Eeewwww,” Damien squeals, catching our attention. Gazing over at him on the carpet, he’s holding onto Jack and staring at us.

“One day, kid, you’re going to find an amazing woman and want to kiss her too,” I tell him.

“Nope.” His head shakes as he gets to his feet and runs over to Ema. Reaching out his arms for her. “Mamma, up!”

“You’ll always be my little boy, won’t you?” She nuzzles his cheek, still bracketed in my arms. He giggles, and the heartwarming moment has me craving more of this.

“Bas, nice?” Damien asks Ema, holding her cheeks the same way I was.

A content look crosses her delicate features as she answers. “Sebastian is very nice.”

“Bas, Dada?” The heartbreak on her face at his question cramps my gut.

As much as I want to say yes, I’ll be his dad when they’re ready for it, but I know this is an answer for Ema to give, not me. Snapping my fingers for Jack, the dog trots over, ready to distract Damien as soon as he’s on the floor again.

“Uhm, well, that’s complicated.” Her eyes dart to me with panic. She has no idea how to answer him either. “Go play with Jack, sweetheart.” Putting him on his feet, Damien goes back to the carpet with the dog. “I never intended to avoid a question like that. I suppose I just didn’t expect it yet,” she explains while watching him.

“If the answer were yes, it’d be an honor,” I tell her, turning to check the bacon in the oven so she doesn’t feel pressured.

“His real dad, Clayton, he’s not a bad guy. We were so young. He never asked me to get an abortion, but he made it clear he didn’t want children yet,” she expounds, so I turn and give her my full attention. “I had no idea what I was going to

do. I knew no matter what I chose that I was responsible for him. That my choice was the one that would matter to his future.”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me, Ema. I’m not going to judge you.” There’s nothing she could do to make me berate her.

“No, I know. I want to. I want you to understand the choices I’ve made because if we work out, they could affect you too.” Christ, do I love the sound of that.

“I’m all ears then.”

Continuing to make the waffles, she talks more. “You know my parents are religious, right?” I nod when she looks at me. “They were ready to break their own beliefs and force me to get an abortion. I knew they would, so I didn’t tell them about Damien until it was too late, it helped that the doctors even refused without my consent too. After they found out, they refused to have anything to do with the pregnancy. I became a pariah in my own home, but I couldn’t leave because it would look bad for them. When I told Clayton what was happening, he became my rock. We were no longer together, but we were friends. He was there for all of my appointments and even the birth. After that, though, there was no contact between us.”

“You were all alone and a single mom.” Sniffling, she nods.

“It was for the best, to be honest. I learned to take care of both of us. I started selling the mukluks because it brought in much-needed money. When Clayton went to college, he started sending money, too, even though he signed away his rights at birth. I’ve never sent pictures, and he hasn’t asked for any information, but he’s a good guy, so he sends what he can. And it helps. I just wish he hadn’t abandoned Damien as well.”

I can see the tears streaming down her cheeks as she pours the batter into the waffle maker. “That little boy is the most important person in your life, and everyone around you has



tossed you both aside. You're hurt, Ema, and you're not acknowledging that."

"I know." Kissing the top of her head, I wait for her to say more. "I'm afraid that if I admit it, I won't be able to stop thinking about it. I can't do that to Damien. He's everything to me. The only person on this earth who cares a lick about me aside from Chloe."

"And me," I'm quick to remind her. "Christ, would it ever kill me if something happened to you, baby. Or Dam. I know you're skeptical, have every right to be, but I'm in this for the long haul. There is nothing I want more than to be able to claim the two of you as my own so that the next time Damien asks if I'm his dad, I can damn well answer yes, and say it with pride."

Wiping her face with a towel, she looks up at me with so much emotion on her face. "You make it really easy to fall in love with you, Sebastian Cole."

"Yeah?" I raise a brow with a smirk on my lips. "Good, that means you'll want to stay."

Her face falls. "I wish it were so easy as just staying."

"It could be." I'll make it so.

"My parents are here. Nancy and her husband are here. They would make my life miserable whenever they saw me. I can't imagine what they would do or say to Damien when he's old enough." Stress creases her eyebrows.

"I lived an isolated life up here as a teenager. Pop out a couple more kids, and Damien won't be as isolated as I was." Her laughter is contagious at my suggestion, and for the first time, I think I've got her convinced.

## CHAPTER 5

emaligh

ONE WEEK LATER.

For a week, we've lived in a blissful state without the rest of the world crashing in on us. The storm lasted longer than predicted, and with how deep the snow was, Sebastian couldn't plow the road down the mountain like he normally would, so we had to wait for the plow to come up to us. I didn't mind, neither did Damien.

He and Jack have become the best of friends and are nearly inseparable. Sleeping together at night, playing during the day. Even outside, Damien would throw snow up in the air, and Jack would jump into it, causing my son to break out into laughter so carefree and sweet that my heart lit up. He's never been as open and accepting with anyone else as he is Sebastian. Damien has begun peeking out of his shell, and as his mother, I couldn't be more thrilled. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine we could find any kind of happiness in Polar Bear. Not after the way my own family has treated us.

Because of this, Sebastian has me reconsidering my plan to leave. I think he's even started building Damien a custom toddler bed, but he won't admit it yet, and I think it's because he doesn't want to frighten me into running away. I'm not entirely sure that's possible right now. Not with the way he makes us both feel.

Driving up to my house now, I told Sebastian that I needed to do this alone, and he reluctantly agreed. I have butterflies in my stomach because I know this won't end well. There will be name-calling, terrible accusations, and likely more despicable behavior than I can think of or be prepared for. But the last

thing I want is for Sebastian to bear witness to it or for Damien to be exposed to it.

“Well, look who showed up.” I hear my sister Nancy’s voice as I climb out of Seb’s 4Runner.

“Hello, Nancy, John.” Her husband nods but doesn’t say anything on his way inside.

Her eyes wander up and down my body disapprovingly as she stalks towards me. “They’ve been worried sick about you.”

“Who?” She can’t mean my parents. They knew exactly where I was.

“Mom and Dad, who else? You and the brat have been gone a week, and they’ve had no idea where to.” She tries to look inside the SUV, sneering when she doesn’t see what she’s looking for. “Where is Dante, anyways?” She damn well knows my son’s name.

“Damien. And he’s with Sebastian. They’re making snowmen and deciding which tree to cut down for Christmas.” Sebastian even carved Damien a tiny little ax out of wood. They looked adorable when I left them.

“You know I had him first, right? Sebastian was hooked on me for years.” I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Sebastian is two years older than her, and yes, they could have met in town, but she’s been with John since they were sixteen.

“If that’s true, then you cheated on John?” I walk away at her stunned expression. Entering the house, I’m prepared.

Or I thought I was.

“Where the hell have you been?” My father bursts out as soon as the door opens. Which means he was watching from the window.

“With Sebastian Cole. You know that.” I don’t bother taking my shoes off; I don’t plan to stay long.

“For two days!” he shouts, getting closer to me, and when I see the anger in his eyes, a sliver of fear races through me. “You could have called to say you would be longer. Your poor

mother has been busting her butt cooking for everyone without any help.” *There it is.*

My mother loathes cooking. Ordinarily, I’m the one to do it all. “I’m sorry I didn’t call. I honestly didn’t think you guys would care. I figured it best for Damien and me to be where we were comfortable and wouldn’t be an intrusion on anyone.”

“Always thinking about yourself. I can’t believe how selfish you are,” my mother snides, emerging from the kitchen and following me down the hallway. “You always were a disappointment to us. The ruined Ruin girl. I can’t believe you would whore around again! Are you just going to continue to collect children from different men like candy?” Her words hurt. Sting, like an arrow right through my heart. For years, I’ve put up with it because I didn’t think I had a choice, but I can see now that I do. Damien does.

“I’m sorry you guys feel I’m such a failure. I’m not. But we’re leaving. Damien and I are going to Washington to be with Chloe in January, and until we leave, we’ll be staying with Sebastian. I don’t know if or when I’ll see either of you again.” I turn to stare at her. “But I love you. Even though you both hate me, I still love you because you’re my parents. My family. I will always love you, and one day, I hope you can let go of your disappointment with me and forgive my so-called sins. Because, eventually, Damien is going to want to know you. I hope that can happen before it’s too late. Until then, I’m packing the rest of our things, and I’ll be on Bear Mountain with Seb until we fly out next month. Which means we won’t be here for Christmas. Tell the church and your friends whatever you want, but please remember that one day you might have to live with explaining any lies you spout about us.”

Mom’s eyes widen as she stares at me, obviously surprised that I’m standing up to her. With a haggard huff of breath, she turns and stomps away. My tears begin to fall almost immediately after, as I enter Damien’s room first. I pack away everything I’ve ever bought for him and the rest of his favorite toys, but I leave behind so much because I don’t want my

parents to accuse me of stealing something they bought for him.

Going into my room next, I can already see that someone has rummaged through my things, and as I open my jewelry box, I notice the necklace my grandmother gave me when I was eight is missing. A family heirloom with no value other than sentimental. My grandfather was a miner and had a piece of coal made into a heart-shaped pendant on a simple silver chain. It was beautiful. And now it's gone.

I'm in and out in under an hour, and I can hear Nancy in the living room saying terrible things about me, degrading me. "I'm leaving. Chloe will call with our new number and address once we're settled." Nobody even looks at me. Shaking my head, I tell them one last time, "I love you all. Goodbye."

Holding my head high, I take our bags in both hands and shut the door quietly behind me. I cry the entire way up the mountain as I drive slowly. But I don't see the fox in time.



## Sebastian

Staring up at the big spruce tree, I admit, the kid's got taste. "You sure you want this one?" I ask Damien again. I'm going to have to trim at least three feet off the top to get it in the living room.

"Yes," he replies, mimicking my head tilt. "Mamma will love it!" The way he's opened up since they first arrived has been amazing. Ema is constantly in tears because she's so proud of him. Hell, I am too. He may not share my blood, but the bonding we've been doing, he sure feels like mine.

"This one it is then." Dropping my ax next to the trunk, I go back to where Damien is standing with Jack and pick him up. "You two stay right here. Where you'll be safe." Sitting Damien on a log about twenty feet away, Jack sits before him, already knowing the drill.

As I begin chopping at the trunk, I can hear the boy talking to the animal, most of it is unintelligible from this distance, but it's a sound I could get used to hearing more often.

On the third night under my roof, Ema confessed to me that she thought there was something wrong with Damien because he wasn't like other kids. I didn't offer up an opinion for two reasons. I don't know anything about kids, and I think she just needed to tell someone her fears without being judged callously. She needed to put a voice to her thoughts, and I was happy to allow that for her.

Over the last few days, the boy has found his voice. His speech isn't the best, but I figure he's not even three; he has time to work on pronouncing his words and sounds. And if time isn't what he needs, then I know Ema will make the best decision for him, and I hope to hell I'm there to support them both for it.

"Crash!" I hear Damien yell, and I stop my next swing to look back. His attention is behind him as he turns his body on the log. Even Jack's ears perk up.

"Did you hear something?" I ask them both as I place the ax down and walk as quietly as I can to catch if I hear anything else.

"Wowd bang," Damien says, throwing his hands in the air.

Something in my gut is screaming to check it out. "Come on, guys, let's go make sure everything is okay." But I know it isn't. I pick up the kid and run towards the beat-up truck I use for plowing when the snow is not too heavy or deep. I don't have a car seat here for Damien, so I place him in the middle of the backseat with just the lap belt and buckle him in. Jack follows in behind him.

"Nice and easy," I tell them as we carefully pull out onto the road. Driving slow enough not to hit ice and swerve or something worse is brutal, but I'm aware Damien is with me and not in the safest position. However, leaving him home alone wasn't a choice.



It's no more than a few minutes before we're rounding the last curve in the road to my place when I see it. The bumper of a vehicle pointed up from the ditch with smoke billowing out from the engine. Pulling over, I put the truck in park and tell Damien and Jack not to move. As I get closer, I see the license plate and instantly know it's EmaLeigh.

"Ema!" I call her name, wondering what the fuck happened as I slide down the embankment, keeping one hand on the car. "EmaLeigh, baby, you have to answer me!" I don't know what the fuck I'll do if she's not alright.

"I'm here," her voice cracks as I get to the driver's side.

"What hurts?" I don't give two shits what happened to my vehicle, only her. "Do you think anything's broken?" I don't want to move her if there is.

"Just your vehicle," she groans before looking at me. The powder from the airbag is mixed with blood from a cut on her cheek. "I wasn't going very fast, but I still couldn't stop in time."

"In time for what?" I look around but don't see anything.

"A fox, I think. I swerved to miss it. I didn't kill it, did I?" Her chin wobbles adorably.

I shake my head. "I don't see any blood other than yours. Are you sure nothing is broken?" Yanking open the door, I gently check her over.

"Everything wiggles. Though my chest hurts and my face... Where's Damien?" She begins looking for him.

"In the truck with Jack. He heard the crash. We came as quick as we could."

"Can I get out now? This is incredibly uncomfortable." With the car tilted forward, the seatbelt is putting considerable pressure on her chest, stomach, and shoulder.

"Yeah, but you tell me if anything hurts or feels off." At her nod, I cut the seatbelt with the knife I keep sheathed on my side. Cautiously helping her from the vehicle, I check her over again, feeling for swelling and misshapen limbs. I think the

worst of it will be her head and whiplash. “Let’s get you to the clinic in town.”

“Okay.” Picking Ema up in my arms, I carry her back up the embankment to the truck. As soon as I open the door, I know Damien sees her.

“Mamma? You otay?” He tries to lean forward, but the lap belt and Jack stop his movement.

“Hi, baby, I’m fine. Just a little accident.” Her smile is feeble at best as she tries to reassure him.

The drive into town is quiet as Damien pets Jack in the back, Ema keeps an eye on her son, and I drive as slowly as I dare while still getting her there in time to diagnose if anything is wrong. As soon as we arrive at the clinic, she’s taken back to an exam room. X-rays and ultrasound are ordered, and Dam and I are left waiting.

“How much longer until we can see her?” I ask the nurse. I don’t want Ema left alone long.

“Probably thirty minutes. Why don’t you guys go next door and grab something to eat. By the time you get back, she should be ready.” Her kind smile alleviates some of my concerns.

“If she’s ready sooner, let her know what we’re doing?” She agrees, and I pick Damien up. “You hungry, bud?” He nods, but his eyes don’t leave the hallway his mom went down. “Don’t blame you one bit,” I mutter.

Leaving the clinic, we drop in to the café next door, where Damien gets a grilled cheese and apple slices, and I have a coffee. Spotting the drug store on our way out, we go there next for a new car seat. I’m not driving back up that mountain without having one for Damien, now that the other one is unusable in the backseat of my 4Runner after the accident. After getting help from a sales lady who just bought one for her little girl about the same age as Dam, we head back to the clinic with our hands full. I might have purchased the boy a couple of quiet toys to play with while we’re here, too, so he’s distracted, and I got Ema some fresh clothes.

I throw everything we need to in the truck, let Jack out to quickly do his business, and get back inside just as the doctor taking care of Ema comes out to the waiting room.

“Perfect timing.” He grins, and instant relief floods me. “EmaLeigh is fine. Nothing is broken, no concussion. No stitches needed for the cut on her cheek, just a couple bandages. She’ll be sore for a few days from the whiplash and seatbelt, but otherwise, I expect a full recovery.”

“Thank you, doctor, we really appreciate it.” Shaking his hand, a nurse shows us back to Ema’s room where she’s lying in bed, a gown on, and a blanket across her lap. Looking exhausted and ready for a long nap.

“Mamma!” Damien holds out his arms for her as he rushes to the bed.

“Hi, baby.” Tears crowd her eyes as she begins to reach down for him. Waving her off, I pick the kid up and place him on the bed next to her. “Thank you.” Her soft gaze finds mine briefly, and I see a change in her. This morning she was unsettled and thoughtful. Struggling with something. Now, though, there’s a peacefulness in her eyes. Like a weight has been lifted off her shoulders.

Setting the bags down in one of the chairs in the room, I sit on the other side of her bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired, sore, like I’ve been hit by a truck.” Her laugh is self-deprecating.

“We should be able to head home in the next couple of hours or so. Dam’s already eaten, but can I get you anything?” Picking up her hand, I kiss the inside of her wrist, feeling the rapidness of her pulse. Glancing up, I see her cheeks heat as she watches me. “Later,” I murmur.

“I have everything I need right here.” Kissing the top of her son’s head, who has laid down on her chest and closed his eyes, she looks up at me. “I’d really like to talk more about the future when we get back home.”

A huge grin pulls the corners of my lips; I love hearing her say home. Because that’s what it is, precisely. Our home.



## EmaLeigh

I knew it was coming. Something terrible always happens when a positive light presents itself to me. It's been that way my entire life. I decide to tell my parents Damien and I are leaving Alaska, and I get into a car accident. I decide that I want this thing with Sebastian to work and in *they* pop. Just as we're about to head home.

"Who called you?" I snap before either of my parents can say a word to me. They burst into my room as Sebastian is helping me put on the sweater he bought earlier.

"We're your emergency contacts. Why wouldn't they call us?" Mom rolls her eyes like it's obvious.

Dragging my shirt down my stomach, I step out from behind Sebastian just as Damien takes my place back there, and a cold chill runs up my spine as a rather horrifying thought presents itself. "No, you're not. You haven't been my emergency anything since I became pregnant. Chloe is, so she was called, and she would never have contacted you."

They aren't used to me challenging them. "It doesn't matter." Mom swats her hand like the discussion has been dismissed. "We're here to take Damien home." His whimper has me staring down at him as he clings to Sebastian, who keeps a steady hand on my son's head.

"No, you're not. You'll never be going near him again until you can explain why he has this sudden fear of you." Damien has been a completely different child around Sebastian and Jack. He's grown in ways I didn't think I'd ever see while we were on that mountain, and now, it's all starting to make sense, and I feel like the worst mother in the world for it.

"I know you've never hit him because I don't leave him alone with either of you, but you say things all the time. What

have you been saying to him that I don't hear?" It could be any number of things. It could even be his own observations. He's two, not dumb. And children pick up on so many things that we don't even realize. "You know what, it doesn't matter. We are going home with Sebastian, where Damien will grow up knowing he's loved, with two parents who adore him, and you will never see him or me again."

Feeling Sebastian's hands on my shoulders gives me the strength to keep myself from breaking down. I had always been hopeful that they would come around. Grow to love Damien as much as I do. I should have known better.

"You can't do that. We raised that boy, too," my father protests while my mother glares at me.

"No! I did. I raised myself while raising my son, and now he'll never experience your disdain again. Not while there's breath in my body." Reaching for my coat, I have it on in the same amount of time it takes Sebastian to pick up Damien and the bags they brought in with them. Walking away from my parents for the second time in a single day brings a relief I hadn't realized I needed.

I was so afraid to acknowledge the truth about my parents that I did everything I could to keep them from being alone with my child, and still, they've impacted him in ways I don't know if I'll ever truly understand.

"Bas my dada?" Damien asks as we leave the clinic, snow swirling around us as he holds the older man's face between his little fingers.

Both of them look down at me for the answer as Sebastian intertwines our fingers while we shuffle to his truck. "Yeah, baby, Bas is Dada." I see tears enter Sebastian's eyes as he places Damien in the back seat, buckling him into his new car seat. Closing the door, he crowds me into my side of the vehicle.

"Christ, I love you," he mutters before lowering his head and stealing a kiss that warms me all the way to my toes. Heating my core in a way that fills me with promises for the future.

“I love you, too,” I whisper as he pulls back and opens my door, buckling me in before kissing me again.

“When we get home, we’re working on that second baby.” His heated promise has anticipation flowing through my veins, and I know that no matter how chaotic this day turned out to be, it’s given me the surprise of a lifetime.

epilogue

*Four Years Later.*

Watching our son with my arm around Ema's shoulder as he and the wolf dog take part in this year's polar plunge makes me so fucking proud. "Come on, Jack!" Damien calls right before they jump.

"I can't watch!" Ema hides her face in my chest as the pair jump into the icy water.

For the last two years, they have been doing the plunge together. It freaks my wife out to see it too. I think it's because she doesn't like seeing Damien grow up. She says she's worried he'll get sick. It could be both.

"Daddy!" Our three-year-old daughter CJ (Chloe, Jr., after her aunt, who moved here when she found out Ema was pregnant with her) screams as JJ (Jack, Jr.) chases after her. The wolf pup adores my daughter, and honestly, who can blame him? She's the spitting image of her mother.

Picking her up before she plows into her very pregnant mother—with twins this time—I place the girl on my shoulders out of the pup's reach. "JJ just loves you." I laugh as she sticks her tongue out at him. He drops to the ground and begins whining, which I know will have her asking me to put her down in a minute.

"That is so cold!" Damien yells as he and Jack rush over after getting warmed up and into something comfy again.



“Can we go now?” Ema gazes up at me. We saw her parents not too long ago, and despite the kids knowing who they are, we still don’t have anything to do with them. Ema can’t find it in her heart to forgive them for the way they spoke to and about her when Damien was in earshot.

The day of the accident opened Ema’s eyes in a way I don’t think she was prepared for. For as much as she shielded and protected Damien from their censure, he still heard a lot of it and understood far too much. Damien has mostly forgotten that part of his life because he was so young; Ema, on the other hand, is still healing from the garbage they said to her. In so many ways, she’s still the teenage girl looking for approval from the people who should have loved her most.

“EmaLeigh, look...at...this!” Chloe’s dramatic voice carries across the event and has almost everyone staring between the two girls as she waves her hand at Ema’s empty mukluk table.

“Oh my gosh!” Ema shouts. The sisters spent the majority of the summer creating almost five hundred pairs specifically for this event with the hopes of selling at least half before going to the bazaars to sell the rest afterwards.

“Told you so,” I mutter in Ema’s ear before she waddles over to her sister.

When shopping for the supplies, they had run into their mother and the other sister Nancy, who Chloe also has nothing to do with, and the two made snide remarks about how they wouldn’t sell.

The people of Polar Bear did not disappoint.

And from the look in my wife’s eyes as she donates every penny to the charity box, followed by the crowd cheering, they didn’t disappoint for her either.

For so long, she never felt like she was part of the Polar Bear community, and in the last few years, they have shown her time and again that she is treasured. Exactly as she should be.

The End!

Happy holidays!

XOXO

Krystal.

Thank you for reading Lumberjacks Surprise. Want more sexy holiday fun? Check out [Holly's Knight](#) ! You can find a complete list of my books, along with series lists and reading orders on my [website](#). Please consider signing up for [KL's Confessions](#) for a free story as well as first chance at cover reveals, releases, contests and more.

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### ***Chapter One***

#### ***Megan***

“Megan Renee Dolan, you will do this! You will not disgrace this family by having that baby out of wedlock.” Tears pool in my eyes as my mother screams at me, again.

I made a mistake; I fell for the wrong boy. And he screwed me. Literally and figuratively. Now, I’m paying the price while he backpacks across Europe before starting his fancy new job.

“Put the dress on, Megan, or I won’t hesitate to have it put on you.” The door slams behind the older woman as I slide down the wall, head on my knees.

The worst part about all of this is I’m being used. Forced to marry a man I don’t know, in name or on paper, and *not* because I’m pregnant. That’s all really just a front for my selfish, uptight parents. The truth is, Dad’s in debt, and he’s selling me to get out of it.

I don’t know if my groom-to-be is young, old, fat, fit, evil, shy. Nothing. I don’t know his name or his profession. What I do know is that he needs a wife because he wants a legitimate heir. I doubt the poor man even knows I’m already pregnant. Which gives me a rather devious idea as I pick myself up off the floor.

Grabbing the dress my mother has chosen, that, in my opinion, shows off far too much skin, I wiggle my tiny baby bump into it and smile for the first time.

If he doesn't already know I'm pregnant, he's about to. Before the preacher gets a word in edgewise. This sham of a marriage will be over before my parents can protest otherwise.

Hearing the organ begin my new theme song, I take a fortifying breath before I sashay down the short aisle of the small church. The man I see is not what I was prepared for. He's tall, looks muscular. Dark brown hair and matching chocolate eyes. When he reaches for me, and we make contact for the first time, my body lights up in a way I've never felt.

For a split second, I feel regret as I'm about to burst his bubble.



## Jordan

I don't know what the fuck I was thinking. Basically, marrying a woman sold to me, so I can have a damn heir, and her parents can pay off their debts. My only excuse is desperation. At thirty years old, I am supposed to be taking over my father's company as CEO.

For as long as I can remember, it's always been passed down from father to son. For generations, my family has manufactured and sold defense equipment to the U.S. Military. I was never a partier, not some spoiled playboy. I've worked my ass off to get where I am, and three weeks ago, my father tells me to find a wife and work on giving him an heir, or he is going to sell the company. I don't understand what the fuck the hurry is, but he's dead set on me settling down into married life.

So here I stand at the altar in a tiny, little church prepared to vow my life to a woman whose name I don't even know.

In my head, I've been calling her anonymous bride. If she's anything like the other women I've known, she'll likely

skin my balls for that.

My parents are sitting front and center, and I see hers on the opposite side of mine. All of them look smug as fuck.

I'd be lying if I said I haven't wondered what the girl looks like. If I'll regret my rash decision to do this.

When I hear the organ start playing the wedding march, my attention is drawn to the back of the room. Unknowingly, I hold my breath as a woman barely the size of my thigh slowly walks down the aisle. Her white dress, short in length and low-cut in the front, doesn't leave much to my imagination. A veil covers her face, but I see her light curly hair peeking out the sides in soft waves down her back.

As she stops in front of me, I'm dumbstruck after she lifts the veil over her head. Large green eyes meet mine, full of trepidation, mischief, and sorrow? I wonder about that last one. It's her lips that draw me in, though. A shy smile plays across the plump pink stain. Holding my hand out for her to take, her delicate fingers touch mine and a zap of electricity shoots straight to my already hardening dick.

When her soft voice says, "I'm pregnant," I'm stunned by the husky quality until the words register in my brain.

Found that regret...

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## about the author

Hey, I'm Krystal. I write as USA Today Bestselling Author KL Donn. I'm stoked you've grabbed one of my books and I really hope you enjoyed the story!

A little about me:

Perpetual romantic.

Coffee addict.

I speak sarcasm more often than not.

Gimme an action flick over a romance. But a romance book over action. I'm weird like that.

Did I mention coffee addict?

Closet shopaholic.

Beach lover.

Coffee addict, it bears repeating. Again.

Husband obsessed. Mine that is, you can keep yours.

Mom of 6, well 7 if you count the husband. Oh and 2 of those are a cat & dog.

I love to connect with my readers so feel free to find me on any and all social media platforms you use! I can't promise to be sane, or not swear a lot, but I'll be extra happy to hear from you!

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