



MUST  
LOVE  
CATS

*A Misty Falls  
Romantic Comedy*



**EDEN BLOOM**

*Must Love Cats*

MISTY FALLS ROMANTIC COMEDY

EDEN BLOOM

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# *Chapter One*

HARPER

My left foot catches underneath my right one as I push open the door at Smooth Smoothies. The bell overhead dings just as I crash onto the cement outside — spilling the four bright orange drinks across the sidewalk in the process. The lids of all four burst off, and the liquid splashes on the shoes of an innocent passerby.

I scramble to my feet, trying to ignore the burn of newly scraped flesh on an elbow and both shins. “Sorry. I—”

“*Smooth* move.” Ron Alderman shakes his foot, spreading the orange smoothie even further around the area.

I take back what I said about him being an innocent passerby. He’s not innocent, and he always deserves it when food gets spilled on him. And no, this isn’t the first time.

“It was an accident, Ron.”

“Not when you’re the clumsiest person on the island.”

“That’s rude,” comes a deep voice from behind me. “And it also isn’t true.”

I turn around.

Drew Garrett looms over me, his brows furrowed as he stares down Ron. “How about instead of making fun of her, we help to clean up this mess?”

“Have at it, pretty boy. I need to clean my shoes before the leather is permanently ruined.” He shoots me a glare. “See you in a couple hours.”

Ron storms off.

Drew gathers the cups, now mostly empty and completely sticky.

I leap toward him. “You don’t have to do that.”

He gives me a kind smile that could melt me into a puddle right along with all the smoothies on the ground. “I don’t

mind. You should go inside and take care of those scratches. It looks like they hurt.”

“They do,” I admit, “but I need to get this mess cleaned up before someone slips.”

“I’ve got it.” He motions for me to go inside.

Carol, one of my coworkers, rushes over with a first aid kit and hands it to me. She sighs dramatically. “I saw the way Drew rushed over and told off Ron.”

My face burns hotter than my scrapes. “I wish he hadn’t seen me being my klutzy self.”

“Everyone drops things once in a while.”

“As often as me?”

She doesn’t respond, except to push me toward the bathroom. “Get cleaned up. I’ve already made new smoothies and will take them over to the spa.”

The spa. With all the commotion, I’d completely forgotten about my delivery. The spa offers some of the smoothie shop’s premium drinks as part of their luxury packages. And this will probably be the last time I’m asked to deliver, which is a bummer considering the high tips that come along with it.

By the time I’m done in the bathroom, I have Band-Aids on my elbow, both shins, and even the side of my chin — a scrape I hadn’t even felt. I look like a mummy with all of these bandages.

When I get outside Drew, who doesn’t even work here, is mopping up my mess.

Carol steps out of the spa, waves at me, and gives me a thumbs-up.

Drew dips the mop into the bucket and turns to me. “I think that’s everything.”

“You really didn’t have to do that.”

“So you already said. And I don’t mind.” He gives me that smile again.



My cheeks heat up, and I reach for the mop and bucket, hoping he doesn't see my face change color. "Thanks for everything."

"Glad to help. How are your scrapes?"

"Fine." I pull the bucket toward the door. "See you around."

"I hope your day gets better." He flashes me another grin before sauntering away.

My breath catches in my throat, and I nearly fall over the bucket.

Carol runs over and takes the mop from me. "Did you see the way he was looking at you?"

"Like I'm a first class klutz?"

"No! That smile." She places a hand over her heart and sighs.

"He was just being nice."

"It was more than that."

I shake my head vehemently in protest. "He was just trying to make me feel better after Ron humiliated me in front of the other people walking around."

And more importantly, people like Drew never take any romantic interest in people like me. He's practically a celebrity because of his modeling career. He literally travels all over the world to advertise luxury brand name items. Rumor has it he was even in a magazine leaning on a million-dollar sports car in Germany.

Fine, it's more than a rumor. I tracked down a copy online and now it's on my bookshelf, where I might happen to look through it on a weekly basis along with some other magazines he's been in. Maybe. Okay, I do. At least I can say I don't have any pictures from the shoot that half the island makes fun of him for — an underwear ad. Something he swears he'll never do again.

After I return the mop and bucket to the utility closet, Carol holds out a folded bill.

“What’s this for?”

“The tip from the spa. Take it.”

I don’t. “You’re the one who delivered it.”

“But you should have.”

“You took it over. It’s yours.”

She shoves it into my palm. “You need it more than I do.”

Great. Now I’m a charity case.

Carol gives me a knowing look, as if she can read my mind. “I’m not the one working three jobs. I want you to have it.”

I thank her and manage to get through the rest of my shift without any more mishaps. But Drew won’t leave my thoughts. His smile keeps forcing its way into my mind, making my face flush with heat each time.

Once my shift is over, I race home to check on my cats. I started with just one, Cupcake, who went into heat before I made an appointment to get her fixed. The information I read online led me astray, and then a stray got her pregnant.

Now I have seven cats. The six kittens are adorable and fun, and almost old enough to find their forever homes. The only problem is, I don’t want to let any of them go. Not that I can afford to have that many — the food alone would take half my income, and that isn’t even considering general upkeep, like shots.

I shouldn’t have let myself fall in love with them, but how was I *not* supposed to? I’ve been watching them grow since they were born.

So here I am, exhausted from working three jobs and with maybe only two or three weeks left with my fuzzy little babies. I manage to give them all cuddles, food, and water without thinking about the day we’ll have to part. Then I warm up some leftovers — I’m pretty sure they’re expired by now,

but I don't have the time to make something else or the money to buy something quick.

On my way out the door, my phone rings. It's Mom. I let her go to voicemail. If I talk to her now, I'm likely to cave and work for the family business. Their company runs most of the outdoor activities on the island — hiking expeditions, whale watching tours, exploring the caves on the cliffs. That type of thing. But I've tried just about everything, even office work, and it all ended up like me on the pavement earlier.

A disaster.

Out of my entire family, I'm the only one who isn't outdoorsy and athletic. Sometimes I wonder if I was adopted or switched at birth. My brother and sister both love working for Mom and Dad. They can have it.

I pull into the parking lot at the Misty Island Breeze building. I'm a photographer, taking pictures for the journalists. If I was the one writing articles, I'd make enough to be able to quit at least one of my other jobs. Maybe both. I'd kind of hate to walk away from my morning work at the Precious Paws Animal Shelter though. I love the cats I work with every morning. At least I don't let myself fall for those pets. My boss Ripple wouldn't let me adopt any given my schedule of three jobs anyway.

But if I went down to one job...

No. I can't let myself think about bringing more cats home. Or of getting my hopes up about lessening my workload. I've asked plenty of times about becoming a writer for the paper or getting a promotion at the shelter. Both are a hard no. Finding work on the island is challenging enough, I should be glad to have three places to work. Enough to pay my bills and keep Cupcake.

When I get inside, the office is loud with the sounds of keyboards being typed on, conversation, and some 80s music in the background.

Ron rounds a corner and eyeballs my covered scrapes. Starts to say something.

I interrupt him. “I look like a mummy, right? Gotta love all these bandages.”

He looks like I took the wind from his sails.

Good.

The editor-in-chief steps out of her office and whistles to get everyone’s attention. “I have an announcement to make.”

My stomach sinks. If it’s layoffs, I’ll be the first to go. If push comes to shove, the writers can take their own photos. Even Ron.

Everyone gathers around.

Melinda clears her throat. “We have an interesting opportunity. Susan Wilson, who runs the annual spring charity auction, would like us to save it. If it continues to drop in earnings, this will be the last year.”

“That thing is still going?” I ask.

“Exactly,” Melinda says.

“She’s going to advertise in the Breeze?” Ron asks.

Melinda nods. “Right, but it’s more than that. We need to run articles that will drum up interest. Susan needs items donated. Not typical things. Something that will bring people in and start a bidding war.”

“Like a whale watching tour?” I ask.

“That would be a start.”

“Or a rental at one of the fancier bed and breakfasts?” Tori asks.

“A puppy?” I ask. “Or a kitten?”

“I’d bid on a spa day.” Alexa sighs dreamily.

We continue throwing out ideas, and Melinda beams. “These are all great ideas. You all see if you can procure the things you named. People donating can fill out the forms on the auction’s website. All you have to do is ask.”

Right. With all of my free time. But at least I have a reason to call my mom back that won’t involve her trying to get me to

work for my parents.

“That’s not all,” Melinda says. “Whoever can bring in the most value for the auction will earn a head writer position.”

I stare at my boss in disbelief. She’s giving us an opportunity to become a head writer? I could quit both my other jobs.

Mumbled whispers fill the room as we all make our way to our desks. Mine is the tiniest, and tucked away behind some old filing cabinets.

While I edit some photos I took over the last few days, my mind races with ideas. I know a lot of people around town, so that would help me talk them into donating big items. And then I could potentially be a full-time writer here.

No more selling smoothies. That would be the first job I quit.

I flash back to my tumble earlier, and Drew’s smiling face takes over my memory. My face warms, and thankfully nobody can see me behind the cabinets. Carol was wrong about him though. He wasn’t flirting. He was just being nice. In fact, he—

He’s a model. Gorgeous and adored.

What if *he* would be willing to be in the auction? If a date with him was up for grabs, women would climb over each other for the winning bid.

That could save the auction. And I could become one of the head writers for the paper.

I only need to see if Susan would be willing to auction off a person. How could she turn down that idea? It’s brilliant.

It would save the auction. And my sanity.

## *Chapter Two*

## *DREW*

**T**he door squeaks behind me as I close it. Water drips into the bucket across the living room from yesterday's rain.

Being that Misty Falls is just off the coast of Washington state, we get a lot of rain. Almost daily for the majority of the year. The bucket is full, so I swap it with an empty one and pour the water down the drain in the sink.

Peeling paint catches my attention as I walk around the house. I really do need to fix this place up. It seems like every day brings a new problem. It won't be long before someone from City Hall condemns the place.

But I can't bear to change anything. Everything is just as it was when my parents lived in it, and this is all I have left of them. I was only nine when Mom died, and then Dad barely survived to take care of me until I graduated high school. He passed away that summer before I left for college. Mom had cancer, and he had a broken heart. They were each other's worlds, and without me around Dad saw nothing left to live for. His heart literally just gave up.

I walk around the house, dusting and gazing at old framed pictures of happier times. Vacations, trips to the park, anniversaries, and birthdays. All before I turned ten, because Dad couldn't bear to put up new photos. It was too much for him to accept that life went on without Mom.

My phone rings. The caller ID shows it's my agent.

I answer right away. "Did I get the shoot in France?"

Lisa's hesitation tells me all I need to know.

"Why not?"

"Someone younger."

"Again?" I tug on my hair. "I'm only thirty. What's the deal?"

"You're aging out for the ones you keep going for."

“Am I supposed to be applying for adult diaper ads?”

“That wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“What?” I exclaim.

“I’m kidding. Mostly. You don’t need to go that extreme, but you do have to be open to other types of shoots if you want to keep getting as many as you’re used to.”

I plop down on the couch, causing a plume of dust to rise around me. My eyes water, and I cough. “Do you have any ideas?”

“There are plenty that would snatch you up in a heartbeat, but you have to get used to the idea of different brands and products.”

I sigh. “Like a retirement community?”

“That’s the spirit.”

“Seriously?”

“No, but you have to be willing to accept other kinds of offers for me to start asking around for them. What do you say?”

I look around the neglected home I grew up in. It needs a lot of work, which will take even more time — something I have in short supply. “Yeah, fine.”

“That wasn’t exactly a yes.”

“Yes. Are you happy?”

“I am. Don’t be disappointed if you don’t get any more underwear gigs.”

“That was *one* time!” And I’m never going to live that down. Not here in Misty Falls, and not with my agent.

“Although we could probably get you something in a swimsuit. You’d have to represent dads, of course.”

“Of course.” I hold back an eye roll. “Do you have any good news? Any offers? Or did you only call to make me feel bad about my geriatric condition?”



That actually gets a laugh from Lisa. “I’ll be in touch soon. Now that you’ve agreed to expand your horizons, the offers should start flowing in again.”

“Great, thanks.”

“Keep your ringer on.”

“Always do.”

The call ends, and I get up. Guilt stings again for not taking better care of the house. If Mom were still alive, she’d have it in pristine condition. I may not remember a lot from when she was around, but I do remember the pride she took in making our home nice. She and Dad would work together, keeping the place up. But all of that stopped once she got sick.

I shove those thoughts aside. Even after all these years, thinking about my parents can still upset me. I want to keep everything as it was when they were here. But the leaks and thick layers of dust are evidence that life goes on whether we want it to or not.

And to get my mind off pain from my past, I need to get out of here. I don’t want to think about death or getting older. I really hope Lisa was kidding about the retirement community.

Once outside, I breathe in the fresh ocean air. One thing about the island I grew up on is how good it smells. Nowhere else I’ve traveled has compared.

I get in my sports car and head to my condo. It’s at the top of the building and I have a view of the Pacific Ocean from every window. The deck stretches on for what feels like forever. I can easily trick myself into thinking I’m on vacation when I’m home.

My place is the complete opposite of my dusty childhood home. It’s bright and airy, always clean. I hire people to keep it tidy. Given how often I spend traveling for work, which granted has been less these days, I just don’t have time for upkeep. I’d hire them for my parents’ place too, but I don’t want anyone touching anything. And now it’s officially dilapidated.

I really need to fix it up.

My phone rings again and I whip it out of my pocket, hoping Lisa has already found me a shoot somewhere tropical. Or at least warmer than here. It's the end of winter, but while spring is nearing it doesn't mean the days will be less dreary for months to come.

It isn't Lisa calling. It's Rake.

My spirits lift immediately. These days it isn't often my best friend and I are in town at the same time.

I accept the call. "How long are you home?"

"A few weeks before I start filming my next movie. You wanna meet somewhere for a drink?"

"That sounds perfect."

We agree to meet at Wish You Were Beer, a local bar, and I head out before having a chance to settle in at home. Not that I mind. It'll be good to see Rake. Feels like it's been forever. The last time he and Josie were home, I was in New York. Or was I in Portugal? It's so hard to keep track of where I was when.

When I step into the bar, I'm greeted by the familiar sound of pool balls clacking and loud music. Rake waves at me from a table near the back with a view of the crashing waves. Two beers and a massive plate of nachos take up the table.

I dig into the food. "You're a man after my own heart."

He laughs. "Don't tell that to Josie. She might get jealous."

"Maybe I'm jealous of her."

Rake snorts.

"What have you been filming this time?"

"A few episodes of some romantic drama I'm sure you've never heard of. I hadn't, before being offered the part."

"Romance, huh? Are you changing genres now?" I throw him a teasing look.

"Hardly, but I do like to keep my options open. Never know what the next big thing will be, and I want in on it."

“Being a main character on TV’s most popular show isn’t enough for you, Mr. Household Name?”

“You know how it goes. Stars rise high and then disappear. I don’t want that happening. It’s why I’m taking every side gig I can get.”

“Tell me about it,” I mutter.

Rake arches a brow.

“It’s nothing.”

“Don’t give me that.”

I sigh, not wanting to admit that I’m aging myself out of a job. No way am I modeling for a retirement community. At least not in the next twenty years.

“Getting beat out by younger guys?” Rake asks.

I start to deny it, but stop. “How’d you know?”

“Because I’m dealing with the same thing. Instead of wild party boy roles, now I’m being offered Dad roles. Can you believe that?”

“At least it isn’t just me.”

“Thirty is still young, but Hollywood wants younger.”

“You seem to be handling it in stride,” I say. “How are you doing it?”

He shrugs. “It’s a bummer, sure, but it also gives me the chance to try some new roles. I’m eager to expand my skills.”

“That’s one benefit to acting. With modeling, it’s all the same.”

“Have you thought about doing something else?” he asks.

“Like what?”

“Something here in Misty Falls. You know, so you can settle down.”

“Settle down?” I ask. “You think I need to get married because you did?”

“It *would* be fun to have some double dates.”

I take a deep breath. “That’s not for me.”

“Why not?”

“Just because you’re happily married doesn’t mean I have to be.”

He frowns.

“Nothing against you, but the traditional family isn’t part of my life dream.”

“Because of your parents?”

“New topic. Have the Mariners started spring training yet?”

“It’s still winter,” he says. “Don’t let your parents stop you from having a family of your own.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I take a swig of my drink and slam the glass down.

“Hey, I know it’s a sore subject but—”

“Then don’t bring it up.” I take the last of the nachos and stuff them in my mouth.

“Don’t you want to experience the love your parents had?”

“Look where it got them.”

“That doesn’t mean you’ll have the same fate. You could grow old with someone who—”

“No. Look, just because *your* parents have the perfect marriage and the perfect life doesn’t mean that everyone else will. I hope you and Josie follow in their footsteps, really I do. But it isn’t for me. I seriously don’t want to talk about it right now. Or ever.”

Rake nods. “Okay. Just think about opening yourself to the idea. You might just be missing out on something amazing.”

“Or maybe I’m living my best life.”

“Have you ever gone on more than two dates with the same person?”

“What is this? Pick on Drew day? I’m done.” I stand and shove the chair against the table harder than necessary.

“Drew—”

“Not now.” I make my way through the bar, which every square inch has turned into a dance floor. When I step outside, the quiet is momentarily deafening. But I welcome it. Nobody to tell me I’m old or wasting my life out here.

I take a few breaths to clear my head and try to remember where I parked my car. Great, I’m already becoming forgetful. No, I’m just flustered. How dare Rake tell me I should get married when he knows how I feel about that?

Love ruins lives. My dad could barely function after Mom passed away. Then he finally died of a broken heart.

Like I want *that* for myself. I’m perfectly happy on my own without having to worry about anyone else.

I remember parking a few blocks away, and I head for my car.

Just before I reach it, a door opens and smacks into my shoulder.

Harper steps out from the building. Her eyes widen. “I’m so sorry! I can’t get anything right today involving doors.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you okay?” She reaches for me.

I step back. “I’m fine.”

She frowns, and I notice the bandage on her chin.

“Are *you* okay from your tumble earlier?”

“That? It was nothing.”

An awkward silence hangs between us. If I wasn’t in a bad mood from arguing with Rake, I’d think of the perfect thing to say and probably even bring a smile to her face. But all I want to do is go home and lose myself in a movie, preferably one involving car chases and a lot of things blowing up.

Harper clears her throat, and her gaze darts all around, everywhere except to me.

This is awesome. Have I now lost my touch with women? I may as well get on a waitlist for a retirement home at this point.

“I have an idea, and it involves you.”

That catches me off guard. And suddenly I’m worried. “What is it?”

She chews on her lower lip for a moment before looking me in the eyes. I never noticed the intensity in her chocolate brown eyes or the sprinkling of freckles over her nose.

I blink a few times and focus on her Band-Aid instead.

“Don’t think I’m crazy,” she says.

“Never.”

Her expression relaxes. “You know the island’s spring auction?”

“That’s still a thing?”

“Yeah, and it needs saving.”

“You want me to donate something? I have a rental property near the beach. Maybe I could donate a week to the highest bidder. Or there’s my—”

“Actually, I have another idea for you. Not that the beach house is a bad idea.”

“What can I give?”

“It’s a little unconventional.” She tugs on her hair and looks all around me again, like she’s hesitant about telling me.

“Just spill it.”

“I want to auction *you*.”

It takes me a minute to find my voice. “Me? I’m not sure I understand.”

“Well, more specifically, a date with you. Ideally at the dance the next night, but I guess we could figure that out later.

If you're up for the idea.”

“You think that a date with me can save the auction?”

“You don't?”

“Usually I pay for the dates I go on, not the other way around.”

“I spoke with the lady who runs the auction, and she likes the idea. She actually wants to find a group of eligible bachelors. It should draw in a lot of interest. Not only from people who want to bid, but also from people who are curious. And the more people there, the more that are likely to bid on something.”

“When is the auction? I need to make sure I'm in town.”

“I can get you all the information.” She pulls out her phone and slides her finger around the screen. “Is this still your number?”

I glance at the screen. “Yep.”

“Great. I'll text you the deets soon.”

“When do I need to let you know by?”

“I'll let you know that too.”

“Perfect. Uh, thanks for thinking of me.”

“No problem.” She gives a little wave and walks away with a spring in her step.

What have I just gotten myself into?

## *Chapter Three*



## *HARPER*

**T**hree kittens are crawling all over me, and a fourth is climbing up my arm. I gently remove his tiny claws from my skin and pull the spotted fluff ball off.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Mew.”

“That makes sense.” I laugh and snuggle him. He puts up with it for a minute before squirming to get away.

The little orange one trips and falls into the food bowl. I pick her up and wipe off the wet food. She squeaks in protest. It’s the most adorable sound.

I really don’t know how I’m going to let go of these kittens. Twelve weeks is a long time to invest in them. Maybe if I get the promotion at the paper I can keep one.

Speaking of the Misty Falls Breeze, I check the time. Only a few more minutes until I have to leave for my third job of the day. At least I’ve managed to get through the day this far without any mishaps like yesterday. And best of all, Susan really likes my idea for the dating portion of the auction.

She even told me that if I can get Drew to agree, she will put it on the docket. Once it’s on there, we can start looking for other guys.

All day I’ve been thinking of ways I can convince him. Any bonuses I can add in to make it even more appealing to him. Something he can’t say no to. Then if the bachelor auction brings in enough donations, the promotion will be a sure thing. I’ll be able to quit my other two jobs and have more free time. More down time with kittens crawling all over me. It doesn’t get any better than this.

I pull myself away from them and hurry to my car, my mind still trying to figure out a way to make the auction as appealing as possible for Drew.

Halfway to the Breeze, I get stuck in traffic. Crane my neck to see what the holdup is.

A parade.

I shouldn't be surprised. This town always has twenty different tourist attractions going on, whether it be parades, the weekly kite festival, fairs, or celebrating an oddball holiday like ninja day.

Today I don't have time to see what's going on, so I turn at the first side street and take a different route to work. I go through a neighborhood near the elementary school. One house sticks out like a sore thumb — and I know about sore thumbs, although right now it's my shins aching. It takes me a moment to realize that it's Drew's old house.

He and I weren't friends in school, obviously. Not only did we have a four-year age gap, but he was Mr. Popularity and I was Miss Klutz.

Some things don't change.

But I do remember that his mom died when he was little. Cancer, I think.

I can't even conceive of such a loss. As much as I complain about my family, I don't know what I'd do if they weren't around. That doesn't mean I want to work with them, but I can't imagine my life without them. And that reminds me that I still need to call my mom back.

After a few more turns, I make it back to the main road and pull into the parking lot at work just in time. Inside, everyone is bustling around as usual. I head for my hidden desk, but before I reach it, someone grabs my arm.

I whip around in surprise.

It's Melinda, the editor-in-chief.

My stomach sinks. What did I do wrong?

She breaks out into a wide grin. "Susan called me with your idea. It's brilliant! You're a real go-getter. I had no idea you had it in you."

“I... thanks?”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“Um, well, I haven’t had time to work out many details. I still have to convince Drew Garrett to say yes before it’s a done deal.”

“It sounds like it already is, based on the way Susan is talking. Great work. A dating auction. Why didn’t anyone else think of it sooner?”

I shrug.

Melinda beams. “I want you focused on this. The writers can take their own pictures for now. Do whatever it takes to get Drew on board, and a head writer position is yours. Someone with that type of creative thinking deserves that position.”

“Okay.”

She squeezes my shoulder and struts off, talking to herself.

I blink a few times, trying to believe that conversation just happened.

Ron walks by. Stops and gives me a funny look. “Did you get lost on your way to your desk?”

“No, I froze in terror when I saw your face. One of your parents is a blobfish, right? That’s where you got your looks.”

“You’re so mature.”

I smirk before hurrying to my desk. Two days in a row I’ve shut him down. But nothing will be better than getting that promotion instead of him. And that means I need to convince Drew to sign on the dotted line.

My mind mulls over ideas while I edit photos I’ve taken that need to get back to the writers. I can’t wait for the day someone else is taking pictures for me. I come to one of a house that needed to be painted years ago.

That reminds me of Drew’s old house. His mom’s illness.

Then it hits me.

There has to be a charity for the type of cancer she had. If the proceeds from the bids for his date went to support that cause, he'd surely be in. Not only that but I'd be helping to bring awareness to an important issue. It would be a win for everyone.

It only takes a few minutes online to find everything I need. Then I call Susan and ask what she thinks about the bachelors choosing the cause their bids go to.

I have no idea how that works or what she'll think of it. For all I know, all the proceeds go to a certain charity already.

And the silence on the other end of the line doesn't give me much hope.

"It's a fantastic idea!" Susan finally says.

"It is? That won't take away from whatever else the money goes to?"

"Not at all. We work with several organizations, and if this dating auction brings in as many new people as I think it will, everyone will benefit. If you keep coming up with these great ideas, I might just have to hire you."

I laugh nervously.

"Just kidding, sweetie. But feel free to keep the ideas coming!"

We end the call, and I lean back in the chair and think of how to word my proposal to Drew. Will he be excited about donating to the cancer cause, or will he have something else in mind?

Once I figure it out, I start typing a text. It's so long I run out of room. This is too much for even two full texts. So I erase it all and ask him if he'll meet me to talk about it instead.

I can hardly believe my eyes when he responds right away.

*Drew: Sure. Want to meet at Phó-nomenal in 30 min?*

He wants to meet right away? I can't say no to that.

*Harper: See you then.*

*Drew: Great.*

Great, indeed. Hopefully I don't mess this up. If there's a way, I'm sure to find it.

When I tell Melinda about my appointment, she actually hugs me. "How is it you're only a photographer? Someone should've promoted you long ago."

"I've wondered that myself."

A funny look crosses her face, then she nudges me toward the door. "Do us proud."

"Okay."

I get stuck in the parade traffic again, having already forgotten about it. This time I can't get around it, but at least I make it to the restaurant within the thirty minutes.

Drew already has a table, and he waves me over. "It sounds like you have a lot to tell me about the auction. I saw the dancing dots going for a long time before I got your text."

He saw that?

Heat creeps into my cheeks. "It was a lot to text. It seemed better to talk rather than having to tap it all out."

"Makes perfect sense."

Mai, the sweet but also sassy owner, comes over. "Two of my favorite customers. What can I get you today?"

We give her our orders, and she takes off.

I fill Drew in on the auction and how I convinced Susan to let the bachelors pick which charity their bid goes to. Then I tell him the one I thought he might like.

He doesn't react, doesn't even blink.

My breath hitches. Maybe bringing up his mom's death was a bad idea.

Then his expression softens dramatically. "You actually remember the type of cancer she had?"

"I had to look it up, but I did remember that it was cancer."

“You went to all that trouble for me?”

“I wouldn’t call it trouble.” Or for him only. I really need the promotion. But I don’t tell him that.

Drew rubs the back of his neck. “I don’t know what to say.”

“That you’ll be in the auction?”

“Do you have a date?”

“For the auction?” Is he asking me to go with him? No, that’s crazy. Guys like him are never interested in me. Ever.

“When is it?”

My face burns. He must think I’m the world’s biggest idiot. I basically am.

I pull out my phone, find the details, and tell him the day.

“I’ll make sure my calendar is open.”

My phone falls onto the table. “You’ll do it?”

“Count me in.”

I squeal. “Thank you!”

He laughs. “It sounds like fun, and I love that the money can go toward research for my mom’s cancer.”

“I’m really sorry that you lost her.”

“Me too.” He sighs. “There are so many things I wish could be different.”

Mai brings our food, and we discuss more details about the auction over the meal. I make a list of his questions and promise to get answers.

It’s hard to believe this is actually happening. If everything goes like I hope, then I could be a one-job woman before long. Probably even get benefits, which is something my parents remind me of every time I talk to them. At least I’ll be able to get them off my back about that much.

Drew pushes his empty bowl away. “The auction idea really is a good one. I’m glad you thought of asking me.”

“How could I not after you helped me out yesterday?”

“I’m just glad I was there to put Ron in his place.”

“That’s a never-ending job.”

He tilts his head. “You have to see him a lot?”

“He works at the Breeze. Sometimes I have to take pictures for his articles. It can be a nightmare.”

“I bet.”

Mai comes by and collects our plates. “Dessert?”

“I couldn’t eat another bite,” I say.

“And I have to get going,” Drew says.

“Good, good. One check or two?” She looks back and forth between us.

Before I can say two, Drew tells her one.

Mai takes off again.

I turn to Drew. “You don’t have to pay for mine.”

“You were thoughtful enough to think of the charity benefit for my mom’s cancer. Definitely my treat.”

I almost can’t take credit for that. If I hadn’t been forced to take a detour because of the parade, I never would’ve made the connection. But I’m also not in the position to turn down a free meal, so I thank him.

After he pays the bill, we head outside and he gives me that smile of his.

My knees turn to rubber. Whoever wins that date with him will be a lucky woman.

We agree to keep in touch about the auction and go our separate ways. When I pull into the parking lot at the Breeze, I recognize a black Suburban that isn’t usually parked there.

My mom steps out of it after I get out of mine.

She lifts a brow, giving me one of her mom-looks.

I smack my forehead. “I forgot to return your call.”

“You might have an easier time remembering things if you only had one job. But at least I know where to find you when I can’t reach you, since all you do is work.”

“That isn’t true. I also sleep and play with the kitties.”

“How often?”

“No comment.” I glance at my phone for the time. “I have to get inside. Can I call you after my shift? Or on a break?”

She gives me a stern look. “You’ll actually remember to call?”

“Yes. I’ve just had a lot on my mind. You’ll be happy to hear this.”

Her eyes widen with interest.

“I have the opportunity to become a head writer here at the Breeze.”

Mom claps. “That’s wonderful news! Can I do anything to help?”

“Let me think about that, and I’ll call you after my shift.”

“Do better than that. Stop by the house and we’ll have some dessert. What time do you get done?”

“Probably another hour or two.”

“Don’t forget.”

“I won’t.”

She squeezes me so hard I can barely breathe before climbing back into her car.

If nothing else, at least my parents shouldn’t bug me about working for them. Not only that, I’ll end the day with a delicious treat. Mom loves baking, and now that she knows I’m coming over, she’s probably already planning something elaborate.

My mind wanders back to the auction. Drew actually agreed!

I hurry inside, eager to share the good news with Melinda.



She finds me before I make it to my desk. “I have great news about the auction competition.”

“So do I. Drew said he’s in.”

“Perfect! That goes along with my news.”

“You have my attention.”

Melinda pulls me into her office. She has a huge window with a view of the ocean. “Ron came up with an idea that’ll really help drum up interest.”

“Ron?” This can’t be good. “What did he come up with?”

She grins so wide it reminds me of a cartoon Cheshire cat. “Everyone who’s working on this will write a story about what they’ve procured — whether it be a bachelor or a big-ticket item.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” I wrote for the high school newspaper, and I’m sure it’ll be like riding a bike. Everything will come right back to me. I start to relax.

Melinda beams. “It’ll be a great way for you to show us your writing skills since you haven’t penned a piece for us yet. Oh, and I haven’t gotten to the best part!”

My stomach twists in knots. If Ron came up with this, it’s going to be a nightmare. Guaranteed.

“It’s going to be a competition! We’ll keep track of page views, comments, likes, and all of those stats. Everything will go on the leaderboard.”

“Leaderboard?” This little contest is turning into something much bigger than I expected. “I thought that whoever brought in the most money—”

“It all goes into play. Have a look at the board, and if you have any questions talk to Ron. He’s working on a system with color-coded Post-Its. We’ll work out all the kinks tomorrow at the staff meeting. You’ll be able to make that, right?”

“Aren’t those in the morning?”

Melinda nods.

“I work at the animal shelter then.”

“Can’t you get someone to fill in for you? This is important. Especially if you want to win this and become one of our head writers.”

“I work two other jobs. I can’t make it unless there’s any way you can change it to the afternoon.”

She just blinks at me.

“I’m sorry, but it isn’t enough notice for me to take the day off at either of my other jobs.”

She looks deep in thought. “I’ll change the meeting time — just this once, since you did come up with that brilliant auction idea.”

“Thank you!” I wave as I leave, but I don’t know how I’ll make any of the future staff meetings.

I’m officially in over my head.

## *Chapter Four*

## *HARPER*

**M**y hands slip as I juggle my coffee while locking my car door. Hot liquid splashes out and spills onto my hand, running down my arm underneath my long sleeve. I drop my paper cup. It hits the ground, the lid pops off, and liquid splashes all over my shoes and pants. My keychain lands in the puddle.

Perfect. What a way to start my day.

I stayed at my parents' house too late, defending my three jobs while stuffing my face with apple pie that melted in my mouth. Then when I got home, the kittens had managed to knock the very full litter box on its side, spilling litter and other goodies all over the floor.

To say that I got very little sleep would be the understatement of the year. And now I won't have my overpriced latte to keep me going unless I want to suck it out of my jeans or shirt. I'm almost desperate enough to try that. Almost.

I throw the cup in the garbage and head inside the Precious Paws Animal Shelter, which is part luxury resort for animals in need of a home and part giant pet store. My responsibility is to take care of the cats and kittens in the mornings. After having been left to their own devices all night, I never know what I'll find. At least none of the litter boxes have been knocked over.

Playing with the cats helps lower my stress levels. Once all the food and litter has been replaced and I've done a quick wellness check on each one, I sit in the middle of the giant cat room which is bigger than my entire apartment.

Several of the kittens start a game of chase, tearing circles around me and running up and down the jungle of cat posts. How none fall or hurt themselves is beyond me. It never fails to amaze me how quick and nimble these little animals are.

A fluffy brown cat with specks of orange lumbers over to me and climbs into my lap, purring loudly. Hershey's older, and someone found her on the side of the road near Seattle. The other shelters were full, so they brought her here. Nobody knows her story, but she's the sweetest little thing.

As I pet her, my mind wanders back to the auction. Not that I've stopped thinking about it — my dreams were plagued with spinning leaderboards and Ron running around laughing maniacally while sticking multi-colored Post-Its all over everything, including me.

I hope this whole auction competition thing isn't getting as out of hand, as I'm clearly worried it will. Nothing would make me happier than to step into the Breeze this afternoon and feel silly about overreacting.

This is going to take a lot of creativity on my part to get into the lead, even though the bachelor auction was my idea. That is likely good enough on its own to save the event, but Ron is probably jealous or feeling threatened, so now it's going to turn into a real struggle.

He will not win. I need this more than he does. The paper is his only job.

I will find a way.

After a few minutes, one of the volunteers comes in and I give her a few tasks before checking some paperwork and changing my clothes — I keep spares on hand because things tend to get messy around here. Then I head toward the parking lot. Just as I'm about to unlock my car, someone calls my name from behind.

It's Luke, a guy who works in the stables with the farm animals. He's waving while balancing two coffees in his other hand. "Harper, wait a minute!"

Curious, I make my way over to him. "What's up?"

He adjusts his glasses and hands me one of the brightly colored paper cups. "This is for you."

"Me?" I ask. "Why?"

“I was on my way to the feed store when I saw your mishap earlier. I thought you could use another coffee. I wasn’t sure what you drink, but I hope you like mochas.”

“Thank you. You didn’t have to do that, but I do appreciate it.” I sip the warm drink, feeling my mood lighten.

“It’s no problem. Someone did something nice for me yesterday and asked me to pay it forward. I hope your day gets better.” Luke fixes his glasses again and turns toward the building.

I call out another thanks.

Too bad he doesn’t work at the Breeze instead of Ron. That would make my life a lot easier. But he doesn’t, and I need to figure out what kind of articles I’m going to write to get people excited about the auction. If I need to get more views, likes, and comments than anyone else I’m going to have to come up with some really good content.

That’s not necessarily a bad thing. I’ll need to refresh all those skills when I’m a head writer, so I may as well brush up on them now. And even if I don’t end up getting that position, maybe I’ll bring in enough views to the paper that Melinda will be impressed and will offer me a different full-time job.

I finish the entire mocha before arriving at the smoothie shop. It’s Carol’s day off, so I spend most of my shift lost in thought.

My best friend Raine shows up right around the time I usually take my break, so we settle in at a quiet table with green drinks.

“What happened to your chin?”

I rub the Band-Aid covering my scrape. “I got into a fight with the sidewalk. But you should see the sidewalk.”

She gives me a sympathetic glance. “Some things never change. We need to spend more time together. I miss you.”

“Same here. I wish I had more time.”

“You’re a hard woman to reach.” Raine gives me a knowing look as she sips from her straw.

“I am?”

“You don’t answer your phone anymore.”

“It hasn’t been ringing lately.” I pull it out and flip it around until I notice the little bar is slid in the wrong direction. “Looks like it’s been on silent.”

“Catch me up on your life.”

“It’s really exciting — three jobs and barely any time for sleep. How about you?”

“Just working remotely for my parents. They’re still trying to talk me into traveling with them, but I want to stay here on the island. Not that I get to see *either* of my best friends very often — even though one of them never leaves Misty Falls.”

“Josie’s in town, right?”

“Not for long, as usual.” She sighs. “But at least she’s having the time of her life with Rake. What about you?”

“The time of my life?” I laugh-snort. I’m a real charmer. At least I haven’t done that around Drew yet. I’d probably scare him away from doing the auction at all.

“You can’t cut back anywhere?”

“Nope.”

“Have you asked any of your bosses about working full-time?”

“Ripple can barely afford to keep me on in the mornings, this place only hires so many managers, and the paper...” I let my voice trail off. “That’s complicated.”

Her eyes light up. “Could that be something promising? Spill everything.”

I tell her about the auction, and her smile grows wider as I fill in the details.

“You’re going to single-handedly save our auction!”

“Did you catch anything I said about Ron?” I ask.

“That guy’s going to dig his own grave. You’re not only a good person, but *so* much smarter than him. He’s the one who

should be worried.”

I sigh. “You didn’t see that leaderboard he made.”

“You’ll still win. I’m sure of it.”

“But my copywriting skills are rusty. I couldn’t come up with a clicky title even if I tried.”

“Give yourself more credit.” Raine gives me a friendly nudge. “And besides, all you really need is a *series* of articles that will keep people coming back.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Don’t leave me hanging. What kind?”

“Something so interesting it’ll leave readers itching for the next one.”

“I’m not that creative.”

“Sure you are. Remember those articles you wrote in the high school paper? I’m pretty sure nothing before or since has been so popular.”

“Yeah, but that was because it was about the badminton team. It was easy. Everyone is obsessed with them already.”

“Exactly. Find something our town can’t get enough of, and claim it for yourself before Ron thinks of it.”

“No pressure.”

“There isn’t any, because you’ll think of something just as good if not better this time around. You have more life experience, you *are* really creative, and you deserve the job more than he does. There’s no way you don’t have this.”

“Maybe.”

Raine gives me a knowing look. “Where’s the spunky Harper I know and love?”

“Overworked and under-slept.” I glance at the time. “Speaking of which, I need to get back to making smoothies.”

My friend gives me a hug. “I’ll think of ideas for what you can write about. Between the two of us, we’ll come up with something that will blow Ron out of the water.”

“I’d rather shove him in the water,” I mumble.



“Who wouldn’t?”

We get up, gather our cups, and say goodbye.

She stops at the door and whips around. “Wait a minute — I have an idea! Interview my brother, and get a good quote from him about why the auction is important to our island. You’ll get more clicks from an interview with Rake than Ron could get with twenty articles.”

“I don’t know. I’d hate to ask. People always want something from him.”

“He owes me a favor, so I’ll talk to him. Problem solved.”

Raine’s expression is unreadable. I can’t tell if her famous brother actually does owe her, or if she’s making that up for my sake. Either way, it warms my heart and makes me love her all the more. I squeeze her tightly. “You’re the best.”

She returns the embrace. “Of course I am. But so are you. Keep thinking about a series you can write. Maybe you can make it about the badminton team again. They’re still reigning champions. I’m not sure how you could incorporate them into the auction, but if there’s a way I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

“What would I do without you?”

“You’d still win.”

I hug her again and hurry back to my place behind the counter. My mind races even more during the second half of my shift. I can’t think of a mind-blowing idea yet, but at least I have the possibility of an interview with Rake. He hasn’t interviewed with the Breeze in years, so Melinda will be thrilled if I can secure one. Between that and the bachelor auction being my idea, plus getting Drew as the star attraction, those things alone could be enough to win me the job I so desperately want.

Everything is still in my favor.

When I get to the paper, everyone is in even more of a frenzy than usual. Clearly I’m not the only one worked up over this. It’s a big deal for us all. Though I probably have the most at stake.

I barely have time to set my things down at my desk before Melinda calls everyone to the meeting.

My mouth dries as I trudge over to where the staff is gathering. I go over my conversation with Raine, and I quickly text her to find out if Rake agreed to an interview. The thought of it makes me feel like throwing up. He probably hates being asked for favors. He's a world famous actor now, and comes to Misty Falls to get away from everything.

She doesn't respond to my text by the time Melinda calls the meeting to order. I'll have to go on without bringing up Rake. Hopefully I can think of a brilliant idea on the fly.

Melinda and Ron go over the leaderboard like they're lifelong best friends. And the board is even more complicated than it was yesterday.

It's enough to make my head spin. Basically, the competition is fierce. That's the gist of it.

After they're done, Melinda asks who would like to share their ideas for the articles.

Ron's hand shoots up before she's done asking.

She calls on him.

"I'm working on an article that goes over the history of the auction. In its heyday it was the biggest event of the year in Misty Falls. The residents planned for it all year, and the items ranged from the spectacular to the ordinary, giving everyone the chance to bid on something. The earnings benefitted many groups on and even off the island. There's no reason it can't return to its former glory."

Melinda claps. "I love it. Great initiative, Ron!"

I groan under my breath. What a suck-up. Not that I'm surprised. And looking around, neither is anyone else.

"Who's next?" Melinda looks around the room. "Anyone?"

My phone vibrates in my pocket. It's a text from Raine. Two perfectly timed words.

*Raine: He agreed!*

I raise my hand.

Melinda points to me.

“I’ve secured an interview with Rake Fletcher to share his thoughts on the value of the auction in our community and about how much it’s always meant to him.”

My boss looks like she wants to kiss me. Ron looks like he wants to throw me into the ocean.

I can’t stop smiling.

Applause breaks out, and excited conversation mills around the room before others share their ideas for bringing more attention to the cause.

Once everyone goes quiet again, Melinda does one last call for ideas before we go our separate ways.

Ron’s hand shoots into the air. “I have one more.”

Of course he does.

“What is it?” Melinda asks.

“It’s along the lines of Harper’s little celebrity interview.”

I hold back an eye roll. Rake is one of the biggest actors in Hollywood at the moment.

Ron continues, “We should run feature articles on each of the bachelors being auctioned off. We could—”

“I claim Drew Garrett,” I interrupt. “I’m the one who convinced him to join the auction.”

Ron shoots daggers at me with his eyes.

“That’s a great idea,” Melinda says. I’m not sure if she’s talking to Ron or me. “Whoever gets a bachelor to sign up gets first pick at interviewing him. We have so many great ideas that this could be the auction’s best year ever. Let’s get to work! We’ll reconvene this time tomorrow for an update.”

Relief washes through me. I won’t have to rearrange my other work schedules for these meetings.

Everyone makes their way to their desks. For the first time, I don't feel bad about my rickety old desk hidden behind forgotten files. After the auction, I'm probably going to have a better desk than Ron Alderman.

I text Raine back, thanking her profusely.

She replies immediately.

*Raine: Did Ron turn green?*

*Harper: The greenest green that ever greened!*

She sends a bunch of smiling and congratulatory emojis.

Now I just need to get Drew to agree to an interview as well. For some reason the thought of spending time with him makes my heart pound faster than thinking about interviewing Rake, whose face is plastered on probably thousands of magazine covers on any given day, and who many famous journalists can't even get near.

My fingers shake as I tap out a text to Drew asking to meet me after my shift at the Breeze.

He takes so long to reply that I start to think maybe I've asked too much of him. That he's annoyed with me and will decide to back out of the auction.

I set my phone aside and start making notes for questions to ask at my interview with Rake. At least I know that's happening, and that feature alone is likely to be the one that earns me the huge promotion.

My phone buzzes, pulling me from my frantic typing.

It's a text from Drew. He not only agreed to meet me after my shift, but he's inviting me to his place for dinner while I interview him.

It sounds a lot like a date. But it's not. Guys like him don't look at people like me in that way. It's just an interview.

I can't let myself think like that. It isn't a date. Not even close.

But if he gives me that smile of his, I don't know what I'll do.

Not that it matters. I'd only be one of many women falling over Drew Garrett. Misty Falls isn't a big place. I've seen locals and tourists alike throwing themselves at him. He is a model, after all. Big name companies pay him a lot of money to advertise their products.

That's why I need to keep this as professional as possible. I can't do anything that will push him away from being the star bachelor up for auction.

I need this promotion.

## *Chapter Five*

## *DREW*

I pour wine into each of the wine glasses, adjust the volume of the music, and dim the lights to be able to see the sunset all the more clearly from my large picture windows.

*Ding-dong!*

The doorbell. Everything is perfect. I hurry to the door. Rake, Josie, and Raine are all in the hallway holding bags. Delicious aromas waft from them, making my mouth water.

Josie nods to Raine. “Look who we ran into in the lobby. This dinner is turning into quite the party.”

“Just one more guest.” I glance behind them to see if Harper is here yet. She might’ve gotten held up at work. “Come on in.”

They do, and set up the food on the dining room table.

Rake and I do the goofy, complicated handshake we’ve done since we were kids. I had figured we’d have given up the ritual before we turned thirty, but now I think we’ll still be doing it into our seventies or eighties if our popping joints don’t stop us.

“When’s Harper getting here?” Raine asks.

“She said after her shift at the Breeze.”

“I’ll text her,” Josie calls from the other room.

*Ding-dong!*

“She’s here.” I rush to the door and welcome her in.

The poor thing looks exhausted, and she still has a Band-Aid on her chin from the other day. Or was it just yesterday? I can never tell what day it is — a side effect of not having a regular job.

Her eyes widen when she sees the others. “I didn’t know it was a party.”

“When Rake and I realized you were going to interview both of us for the paper, we thought we’d make your life easier by having us both here at the same time.”

Josie appears from around the corner. She and Harper hug, then Raine joins them.

Rake turns to me and extends his arms.

“Don’t even think about it.” I back away from him.

We both laugh.

“I hope everyone is hungry,” Josie says. “Because we brought food. Lots of it.”

“Just don’t throw any on me,” Rake teases.

She shakes her head. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“No.” Rake kisses her forehead. “Our grandkids will be reminding you of it.”

“I’m sure you’ll see to that.” She pokes his side.

He laughs.

When they first met, she walked right into him with her plate of dinner. She made quite the impression, and it’s one Rake won’t soon forget — or let Josie forget, as he teases her about it regularly.

“Look at the sunset!” Raine calls from the dining room.

We all gather around and stare outside. The colors are phenomenal. This time of year is often under cloud cover, so it’s a rare treat to see the bright oranges and pinks stretching across the sky.

I open the sliding glass door and motion for everyone to step onto the balcony. My friends all pull out their phones and snap pictures of the sight.

But something else has my attention. Rather, someone else.

I can’t stop looking at Harper. Her dark eyes, the sprinkling of freckles across her nose, and those full lips that



are often in a smirk. After dealing with so many women who try too hard to impress me, her down-to-earth nature is a breath of fresh air. She's always unapologetically herself and she isn't going to change for anyone.

When I finally pull my attention from her, I find myself wanting to wrap an arm around her.

It doesn't help that Josie and Rake keep kissing each other. They're putting ideas in my head.

Harper shivers, and I reach to put my arm around her shoulders, but I stop myself. She's given me zero indication that she has any feelings for me. Instead, I pull off my sweater and put that around her shoulders. It practically swallows her.

Harper glances over at me, surprise in her eyes.

"You needed it more than me."

"Thanks."

Our gazes lock, and I swear she's staring into my soul. I hope she can't see how intrigued I am by her. A deep thinker like her would find me shallow. Because I basically am. I pose in front of cameras for a living and I spend the rest of my time hanging out with friends in bars. She probably spends her free time discussing life's mysteries and deeply philosophical topics.

She looks away first, and I release my breath.

The sky's bright colors fade away all too soon into a dark canvas sprinkled with stars. But it's just as well because the food will get cold if we stay out here much longer. Plus I'm not sure I can stand being so close to Harper in such a romantic moment for even another minute.

Luckily the mood shifts once we get inside and dig into the food. The lively music in the background helps everything to feel more like a dinner party. We laugh and share stories in between bites. Rake and Josie share some of their experiences traveling to different locations for Rake's latest movies. Harper and Raine dole out embarrassing stories of Rake and me from our childhoods.

Once the food is gone, I bring out dessert and we laugh over old stories some more. It's always nice to have friends remind me of the good times. When I think back to my childhood on my own, I often forget those times. It's all too easy to focus on my losses — how much my mom missed out on. And now, how much both of my parents have missed. Neither lived to see any of my successes.

Josie rises and picks up her plate. “Why don't you all do your interviews, while Raine and I clean up this mess?”

“I can help,” Harper says.

Raine practically pushes her into my living room.

She sits on one side of my sectional couch, and Rake and I take the other side while she pulls out her laptop.

I'm captivated by every move she makes, even though there's nothing inherently special about the way she fires up her computer. She could watch paint dry, and I'd find that fascinating.

What is going on with me?

Rake lifts an eyebrow, obviously noticing my odd behavior.

I force myself to turn away from Harper and face my best friend. “When do you start filming next?”

“In a week,” he says. “Like I told you less than two hours ago.”

“Right.”

His mouth wobbles like he's trying to keep from laughing.

Inviting him while Harper is here was clearly a bad idea. I won't let that happen again. Actually, after this interview I don't think I should see much more of Harper. I'll just have to get ready for the auction on my own, and I'll be in touch with Susan about the details.

I breathe out a slow sigh of relief. I'm not sure why I'm reacting to Harper the way I am, but it'll be good to put some

distance between us. She's a distraction I don't need when I have to focus on what direction to take my career.

Or if I even want to continue modeling. All joking aside, I don't want to be in this business if all I have to offer is ads for retirement communities. Some of the guys I used to look up to now pose with food supplements for aging adults and bottles that cover graying hair.

I'd rather slip away into obscurity than leave my legacy like that. Not that there's anything wrong with those products. I'm sure I'll appreciate them some day. But I don't want to advertise them at thirty.

I'm still young. I don't care what the advertisers try to tell me.

Harper clears her throat and glances back and forth between Rake and me. "Are you guys ready?"

Rake leans back and kicks his feet onto the coffee table. "Shoot."

She starts by asking us questions about our childhoods. Rake goes first, giving me the chance to think about how to word my answers. I should be a pro at evading difficult topics, but just being in the same room as Harper is throwing me off my game.

I manage to keep things light for the most part, but I can't avoid the fact that I've been an orphan for the last twelve years. Everyone on the island knows, so I can't hide from it. Rake helps to steer the conversation to some funny stories. Before long, we're laughing so hard we all have tears streaming down our faces.

So much better. Not only have we moved on from difficult topics, but I'm a lot more relaxed around Harper now. My answers to her questions come easier.

And then before long, the interview is over.

"Thank you both so much," she says, as she closes her laptop. "This is really going to help the auction."

Raine pokes her head in. “And your competition with Ron.”

I glance at Harper. “What competition?”

Harper frowns. “It’s a long story. Don’t worry about it.”

“Why are you competing with him, of all people?”

She slides her laptop into its bag. “The short version is, whoever brings the most attention to the auction will get a big promotion.”

Rake makes a sour face. “I hope you beat him. He’s always been a little weasel.”

“Can we do anything else to help you?” I ask.

Harper snaps her fingers. “I almost forgot! Pictures. Do you mind posing for a few?”

“Whatever you need.”

We stage several scenes in various rooms. She snaps shots of us reading books and magazines, standing on the deck, and even playing video games. I’m not sure how that’ll help the auction, but people do eat up any photo of Rake.

Then everyone heads out, and I’m left with my thoughts in the big empty condo. Right now it feels even more lonely than usual. It’s a lot better with other people here. But I’ve chosen the single life. It’s what I love — or at least what I used to.

No. I do. Nobody to tell me what to do. It’s great. And best of all, if I’m not in love with anyone then I can’t get hurt like my dad did.

I’m definitely living the life. In fact, I’m going to go out and enjoy myself some more.

When I get to Wish You Were Beer, the party is so loud I can’t hear myself think.

Perfect. This is exactly what I was looking for.

I order a drink and meander through the crowd, stopping to watch some of the pool games. Then I dance around the floor, moving from one partner to the next.

When I stop to take a break, one thing stands out to me. I'm clearly older than everyone else here partying. Most of them are college age. I'm easily the only person in my thirties here — though I'm only thirty. Barely out of my twenties.

I'm just being sensitive because of that last conversation with my agent. Lisa has me thinking about being old, so that's what I'm seeing. Plenty of these people are my age.

Someone bumps into me, spilling beer on my shirt. He glares at me. "Watch it, old man."

"Old man?"

The girl hanging on his arm snickers.

"Yeah," he says. "Shouldn't you be home in bed watching the news?"

"No more than you should be home getting tucked in by your mommy."

"Whatever, old man."

They walk away, laughing.

Nobody else seems to have noticed the interaction over the music and pool balls banging together.

Old man?

The words ring through my mind on repeat.

Am I aging out of my favorite activities too? Not only the good jobs, but also the night life? It makes sense that the people stealing my photo shoots wouldn't want to hang out with me.

I look around for someone closer to my age.

Nobody.

This is ridiculous. It must be the bar. It's known for being loud and rowdy. One of the other ones in town must be a place for more mature clients. I wouldn't know, because I rarely step foot in any of them.

I can't believe I'm thinking about any of this. But here I am.

Some eligible bachelor I am. At this rate, I'll get the lowest bid in the auction. An aged-out partier. Who's going to be interested in that?

The cold outside air hits me like a ton of bricks, and the silence makes my ears ring. And it also draws attention to my heavy eyes, which in turn makes me yawn. I am not seriously tired already, am I?

It's probably just the stress of not having as many photo shoots as I'm used to. I'm not getting old, I just need to expand my horizons. Not unlike when I first started modeling. It's the same thing really. I got in a rut and now I need to get out of it. Either that, or I'm going to end up posing with adult diapers soon. No, I need to stop thinking like that.

Maybe the upcoming auction will help. I could get some ideas there. The few times I went in the past, there were always a ton of things up for grabs — everything from books to extravagant vacations and a whole lot in between.

I head for the next closest bar, letting my mind wander. Surely there are vacation spots I can work at. The world is literally my limit. I'm not getting old. My agent is just rude. It might be time to look into getting a new one, someone who would appreciate a client with a little life experience.

Yeah, that's my answer. A new agent, someone a little more forward-thinking. Rake's agent might know some people. That woman knows how to get things done.

When I open the doors to the Skyline bar, it's like a breath of fresh air. The music is upbeat, but doesn't threaten to blow out my eardrums. I even recognize most of the patrons, as many of us were in high school together.

Several people wave to me, and I wave back. After ordering a drink, I wander around checking out some lively poker games. After one round ends, I join in and lose spectacularly.

"Ever played before?" Aiden, a former quarterback, teases.

"I'm a little rusty, that's all."

"Sure." He laughs. "Another round?"

I hold up my hands. “I’m not giving away all my wealth tonight.”

The other players make playful pokes, but I don’t give in. Instead, I make my way around the bar and talk with everyone I recognize before heading out. Other than my poker skills, which I need to brush up on, I still obviously have it. I’m just not twenty anymore, and that’s fine.

By the time I get back to my condo, I have plenty of ideas for potential photo shoots. So many that I need to write them down to make sure I don’t forget. I won’t drop Lisa right away, but I’m going to see if Rake’s agent can point me toward someone.

This is a new decade for me, so it only makes sense things should change. As I slide under the covers, a framed photo of my parents catches my eyes. I pick it up and study them in a new light.

My mom was always beautiful, but this time there’s something more youthful about her that I never noticed. About dad too.

It hits me. I’m older than they were when this was taken.

I’m older than my mom ever was. She never made it to thirty.

I nearly drop the picture. They fell in love in high school and married soon after she graduated. Dad was a couple years older and had already gotten established in his company, so they jumped into the life they knew they both wanted. The only thing that mattered was being together. Mom was barely twenty when she had me, which meant life would only give her nine more years.

How could I have not realized this major milestone when I had my birthday? Because I’m always trying to push those thoughts aside. It helped that I was in London on my birthday. Nothing there to remind me of my painful past.

My parents were so happy together. But what did that get them? They didn’t get to grow old together. Dad had to watch

her waste away in the prime of her life. Then he only endured the rest of his for me.

Tears sting my eyes. After all these years, it still hurts. That's why I'm sticking with my plan to stay single. Can't have my heart broken again if I don't give it away.



## *Chapter Six*

## *HARPER*

**S**aturdays are my favorite day of the week. I don't have to go anywhere. Every other day I have to work, but not today. Not that I get to sleep in with seven cats in the house. Since Cupcake is still nursing her growing kittens, she needs more calories than ever.

Right now she's licking my hair, trying to get me out of bed. I pull the blankets over my head, but Cupcake manages to find a way underneath and continues grooming me. A hungry cat is a force to be reckoned with, and I'm not going to win this battle.

I sit up and stretch. Maybe I can get a nap later. Although my plan for the day mostly includes writing my article about Rake's interview. The sooner that gets published, the faster I'll make my way to the top of the leaderboard.

At least his parents took him and his sisters to the auction numerous times as children, so he had a lot of good memories to share. If that doesn't send people to the ticket office in droves, I don't know what will. Hopefully the bachelors.

Cupcake meows nonstop as I make my way to the kitchen and fill her food bowl. As soon as she digs in, her loud purr fills the room. I pat her head before making myself a cup of coffee and giving the kittens some food. Then I settle on my couch with my laptop.

My mind wanders back to the dinner party last night. When Drew gave me his sweater on the balcony, I nearly fainted. Not only was the gesture so sweet and thoughtful, but having it around me was like being wrapped in his arms. It enveloped me in the scent of his cologne, rugged and woody. Now I want to know what it would be like to actually be in his embrace.

Which is stupid. It makes me nothing more than a fangirl. Drew is gorgeous, and every woman who crosses his path wants a piece of him. He could have anyone he wants —

beautiful, graceful women throw themselves at him every day. Why would he ever give clumsy, awkward me a second thought? It's ridiculous.

I push him from my thoughts and rewrite the introduction paragraph three times, and I'm still not happy with it. But I know how this process goes. I could spend all day on those hundred words and still not make any progress. If I want to finish this article, I'm going to have to move on and come back to the first part later with fresh eyes.

The morning flies by, and the only thing that pulls me away from the screen is my roaring hunger. Coffee can only fuel me for so long. Not only that, but I need to stretch my legs.

I check on the cats, who are all sleeping, before I find something in my fridge to eat. I need to buy groceries, but I don't have a new paycheck coming until Friday. Tomorrow I can fill up on half-price smoothies — maybe tonight I can eat at my parents' house and find a way to avoid them offering me a job with the family business. Again.

All I have to do is hold out until after the auction. Then my promotion will silence them once and for all.

I no sooner sit down to resume working on the article when my phone rings. It's Susan from the auction. Strange that she's calling me directly.

"Hi Susan," I answer.

"I'm glad I caught you. I had a thought about the bachelors. Are you available to come down and discuss it with me here at the office?"

She wants to talk to me? In person? Now? I'm still in my pajamas.

I clear my throat. "What time?"

"As soon as you're available. I know it's short notice, and Saturday, but I think I've thought of a great idea. I'm just not sure if we have time to implement it, and since you were the one to come up with this, I want to brainstorm with you."

This hardly seems real. I stumble over my words before finally agreeing. “I can be there in a little over an hour, if that works for you.”

“Wonderful! I really appreciate you making time on such short notice. I’ll definitely put in a good word with Melinda.”

“It’s no problem. I’m just happy to help.” And to do whatever it takes to get the promotion.

“I’m so glad. See you soon.”

The call ends, and I rush to get in the shower. My mind races as I get ready, trying to figure out what she has in mind. Is she thinking a swim trunk competition? A spelling bee? Or does she want me to come up with something? It could be anything. The only thing that doesn’t make sense is why she wants to talk with me. Sure, the bachelor thing was my idea but I’m the lowest on the totem pole at the paper. The only way my desk could be in a worse place would be if it was in the basement. Not that the building has one. But if it did, surely my desk would be there.

If Susan doesn’t realize that, I’m not going to be the one to tell her.

Misty Falls is hopping today. There’s a small fair just off Main Street, and I can hear the music and smell hot dogs from blocks away. The kite festival is in full swing, as a huge chunk of the sky is covered with kites of every shape, size, and color.

When I get to Susan’s office, she ushers me in and offers me a platter of appetizers. “Take as much as you want. I always order too much.”

She doesn’t have to tell me twice. I dig in, and she encourages me to eat more.

“I can’t thank you enough for coming in on such short notice.”

“Happy to help. What’s your big idea?”

Susan beams. “I think each of the bachelors should do some sort of volunteer work as part of this. That way it isn’t just a bunch of pretty faces parading around the stage. They’ll

need to be well-rounded and show that they're adding to the community. Don't you agree?"

I'm glad I didn't say anything about the swimsuit competition. "That's perfect. It's so fitting with the theme of the charity auction. I think people will love it."

She clasps her hands. "Oh, good! Will you share this with the other writers at the Breeze? I know several of you are writing articles on the bachelors. Hopefully there will be enough time for everyone to make a point of including that in the features."

"I don't think that will be a problem. I'll be sure to bring that up at the next meeting." And best of all, knowing about this a couple days ahead of everyone else will give me a nice advantage over Ron. "Do you have any volunteer work you'd be most interested in seeing the bachelors go after?"

"I'd like to see them take the initiative. The best thing would be that they pick a variety of places to volunteer at, but they don't all have to choose different ones. Then we can feature more organizations that need help. It might even inspire our bidders to donate time or money to those charities after the auction."

"What a great idea."

"I'm glad you're so excited about this. I really do think the auction is going to be revived this year. And to think I was afraid it would fall to the wayside!"

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

Susan grins. "Seriously, if you're ever looking for another job, let me know. I could use someone with your creativity and initiative on my team."

"Wow, thanks. Who else is on your team?"

"Right now?" Her smile fades. "Just me. I used to have five others, but times have been tough. However, I see a full group in the near future. If this year's event goes off like I think it will, next year is going to look completely different."

"I'm so glad I could be a part of that."

“The offer still stands.” She rises and shakes my hand. “Oh, and let me package this food up for you as a thank you.”

“Are you sure? You don’t have to.”

“It’ll go to waste if I take it home.”

I can’t believe she’s offering me a position with her. If I don’t end up getting the promotion at the paper, could working for the auction lessen my load? If I could trade in two of my jobs for one, that would save me the hassle of dealing with three places to work.

She hands me the bag.

“Hypothetically speaking, what would it look like working on your team? In terms of hours and pay.”

“We could negotiate the terms. I definitely have plenty of flexibility at this point. Are you interested?”

“Possibly. Things are in the air with my other employment.”

Her eyes light up. “Really? Let me think about this over the weekend, and we can talk sometime this coming week.”

“I don’t want to get your hopes up, because if I happen to get the promotion at the Breeze, I’m going to be too busy for anything else.”

“It’s always good to have options.”

“True.” I can hardly believe how well things are coming together. Even if I don’t end up working for her, at least I have choices. If she could offer me a full-time position, then I might be able to negotiate with Melinda.

It’s amazing how much has changed since this time last week.

Susan sees me to the door, and I stumble onto the sidewalk lost in thought.

Instead of going to my car, I meander toward the hustle and bustle of the fair. Burgers and cotton candy make my mouth water as I pass by food booths. Kids laugh and run around. Bells ring from games.

I love the atmosphere, and it lifts my already rising mood. Things are really turning around. I even have food for tonight without having to subtly beg my parents, who would no doubt try to talk me into joining them. Despite having raised me, they fail to see how I'm the last person on the island who should be leading expeditions in the woods. I'd be a huge liability. Plus, I don't want to put my life in danger every time I clock in.

Someone bumps into me. "Sorry," he says.

The voice is familiar.

I turn to see Drew. My breath catches. He's wearing simple clothes — a Seahawks jersey, jeans, sneakers, and a backward baseball hat — but heaven help me, I swear he's never looked better.

He gives me a crooked smile. "Harper, hi."

The way he says my name turns my legs into jelly. I struggle to remain standing, to find my voice. But I stand tall and give him a smile full of fake confidence. "Fancy running into you here."

"I came with Rake, but we got separated. Where are you headed?"

Is he asking to hang out with me? No. He's just being friendly. Probably can't wait to get away from me.

"Actually, I just got back from talking with Susan from the auction."

"How'd that go?"

My palms sweat. Now I have to tell him that I agreed to sign him up for volunteer work. I should've asked him about this before telling her what a great idea it was.

Drew tilts his head. "Is everything okay?"

"I hope so," I blurt out. "We were talking about the bachelors doing volunteer work here on the island. That way it would be more than a male version of a beauty pageant. It would tie everything into the charity auction."

His expression is unreadable. He's going to drop out of the auction. I'm going to lose the promotion and Susan will revoke her offer to give me a job.

Nobody ever accused me of not being overly dramatic.

Drew nods. "That makes a lot of sense. What places are looking for volunteers?"

My mouth speaks before my brain has time to think. "The animal shelter. I need more volunteers for my shift, actually."

"Right. Ripple said something about volunteers last time I spoke with her. When's your next shift?"

I stare unblinking. Did he just agree to volunteering his time with me? I take a deep breath and try to act normal. "Tomorrow morning, actually. I go in at seven every morning except Saturdays."

"Perfect. I'll be there every morning that I'm in town. Oh, there's Rake." He waves toward the beach before turning back to me. "It was great running into you. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay."

He turns toward Rake, and I can't help but notice was perfect shape he's in. He must work out for hours every day. Then he turns and gives me that smile of his again.

I melt into a puddle right there on the sidewalk.

How am I going to get through spending a few hours with him every morning?



## *Chapter Seven*

## *DREW*

**T**he music won't stop. It's coming from every side, and no matter what I do it keeps going.

Finally, I pull myself out of my dream and realize it's my alarm. Not only that, but I'd somehow managed to knock my phone off my nightstand. Yawning, I climb onto the floor and look around. The screen's glow comes from underneath my bed.

I have to squeeze myself underneath and squirm until my fingers brush it and I can grab it. Then turn off the noise.

It's been going off for a half an hour? I only have five minutes to get to the shelter, or Harper will think I bailed on her. I'd have given myself more time, but seven is so early to be anywhere. The only reason I ever get up at this ridiculous hour is if I have a shoot, and most are at normal times unless we need an actual sunrise.

I throw on a hoodie over my t-shirt and joggers, scramble to the bathroom, and grab a beanie hat on my way out the door. This will have to do. Hopefully there's coffee at the shelter for the volunteers. I'm going to need it.

When I pull into the parking lot, it's already half full. How many people are actually up at this time on a normal day? I can still see a few lingering stars in the sky, that's how early this is.

Inside, the bed-and-breakfast-turned-pet-shelter is extravagant. Not that I should be surprised, given that Ripple designed everything. My best friend's middle sister has always had an eye for nice things.

A skinny guy with glasses comes in from a hallway and stops. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to volunteer."

"Which department?" He adjusts his name tag. Luke.

“I’m not sure. Do you know where Harper works?”

“She takes care of the cats. I’ll take you there.”

Cats? She didn’t mention that when she said the shelter. I was picturing the bigger animals, like horses or something. But definitely not cats.

Luke disappears into a hall and then pokes his head back out. “You coming?”

“You’re sure she works with the cats?”

“Yeah. That’s her thing. She has seven at home.”

“Seven?”

“Follow me,” he says. “I have to get back to my work.”

I force my feet to move while I try to figure out if I heard him wrong. She has *seven* cats? That can’t even be legal. I heard about someone recently who got in trouble for having too many pets in her home without a license.

She doesn’t have a license to own that many cats, does she?

My skin is growing clammy with each step I take.

Cats. I agreed to work with cats. This cannot be happening. There has to be a way out of this. Another department. Something.

Luke stops, and I nearly walk into him. He gestures toward a door. “Cats are in there. Have fun.”

I try to smile, but fail. “Thanks.”

He takes off in the direction we came.

The doorknob seems to taunt me. Sweat forms around my hairline and it’s hard to breathe, like I’m pushing myself too hard in a workout.

I take a deep breath. They’re just cats — furry little creatures that probably weigh no more than fifteen pounds. But they also have claws and teeth. And that’s where the problems are.

The door flings open, and Harper appears with a black-and-white cat in her arms. It glares at me like I'm the enemy. Harper smiles sweetly, as if she isn't holding a death trap. "Did you get lost?"

I don't take my eyes off the feline who looks ready to attack. "Something like that."

"Come on in."

Easy for her to say.

After she turns around, I reluctantly enter the room. It has cat stuff everywhere. So much that it could be part of a haunted house in the state fair. And it would be the room that would scare everyone the most. Or at least me. I would definitely run screaming.

But I can't do that now. I gave her my word. And I don't want her thinking I'm the scaredy cat.

Harper sets down the cat and picks up another one. This one is blueish gray with eyes yellow like the sun. His ears and tail twitch as he stares me down. It's like he can smell my fear. Probably can.

Great. This is going to be really awesome. And I've been here all of one minute. Why did I agree to this? There has to be another option. Whatever it is, I'll find it. Maybe I'll accidentally find my way to the stables and discover that they're in need of help more than this room full of little killing machines. I'd far rather spend hours scooping horse droppings than having to go near a cat.

Harper looks at me expectantly. She must have asked me something, but my mind is so loud I didn't hear her.

I rub the back of my neck. "Can you repeat that last part?"

She gives me a knowing look. "Did you hear anything I said?"

The last thing I can do is admit to my fear of cats. She obviously loves the little devils. Thinks they're cute.

"I'm a little out of my element here. Never had any cats."

“For real? I can’t even imagine such an existence.”

I nod, eyeing a white cat who is currently sniffing my pants. One wrong move on my part, and that cat could shred my leg to pieces.

“Are you okay?”

“Never better,” I say quickly. That cat is still sniffing me. Probably plotting my death.

Harper picks up the cat and strokes its head while walking toward a wall of carpeted boards that several animals are climbing all over. She points to a section, and upon closer inspection I realize the board is coming loose and some other boards barely have any carpeting left.

“Do you want me to rebuild that?”

She whips her head around. “You’d do that?”

Anything to get out of this nightmare room. I force a smile and probably look like an idiot. “That would be no problem.”

“I was just going to see if you could staple the carpeting back on.”

“I’m here to volunteer, right?”

“Yeah, but that’s more than I expected. I just thought you could play with the cats. They really need more socialization than our current staff load can give them.”

“They clearly need new equipment. Are there boards and carpeting in storage somewhere?”

She looks deep in thought for a moment. “I’m not sure. Let’s go check.”

Relief washes through me. We’re finally leaving this room.

I follow Harper through the building — thankfully she left all of the cats behind in their room — and we check every supply closet in the place. We even make our way outside to the stables. (They don’t need extra volunteers, as it turns out.)

When we return to the main building, Harper frowns. “I thought we’d have at least *some* wood and carpeting. I guess

the kitties will just have to live with what we've got. I can fill out a request for supplies, but I already know we don't have the funds."

"Not a chance," I say.

She lifts a brow. "What do you mean?"

"I said I'd fix the structure, and I will. I'll get what we need and build it as promised."

"From your own pocket?"

"How else would I buy them?"

Harper chews on her lower lip. "But I don't think the shelter would be able to pay you back. Ripple has a five-year plan to make this place profitable, but we're still far away from that goal. If they had the funds, I would do so much more for the cats."

"I don't need anyone to pay me back. Although I might not be able to be in the cat room with you for a while. I'm not sure how long all of this will take."

She blinks a few times before speaking. "You'd seriously purchase everything needed *and* build it all?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"You're the best!" She throws her arms around me. "You don't know how much that helps."

I return the embrace, which ends almost as soon as it begins. And that's a little disappointing.

Harper looks at me like I'm some kind of hero.

If only she knew I was just trying to avoid the fluffy little beasts as long as possible.

"Be sure to log everything," she says. "Every minute and penny spent on this will help you look better for the auction. I don't know what the other bachelors are doing for their volunteer work, but I'm going to make sure everyone knows how generous you're being."

All because I'm a chicken. Scared to death of tiny fluff balls only a fraction of my size that everyone else seems to think are adorable and precious.

I head to the stores. By the time I've collected all the supplies, my stomach is rumbling like a bear robbed of her cubs. It's well past lunchtime.

The lumber and carpeting barely fit into my little car, and I had to buy some rope to close the back since some of the wood sticks out. I take everything to my parents' house so I don't have to carry it through the building up to my condo. Even though I could use the elevator, it's still far more walking than I want to deal with.

I open the garage door, and it resists. Not that I should be surprised. It's been years since I've gone in here. My sneezing fit from all the dust is proof enough of that. I leave the door open to air it out.

I'm too hungry and tired to do any work now. Not that anyone can complain, seeing as I've already put in at least double the volunteer hours for the day.

My stomach rumbles again, and I close the garage and head for town. I'm so exhausted I don't even have the energy to warm up leftovers from the other night. I get in the car and head straight for the Barbecue Shack. They have the best and largest deluxe burgers anywhere. I've looked the world over for a better one and haven't found any that even come close — their secret is in the sauce. While a burger place might seem like a fast food joint, this one is a full-scale restaurant and is always busy from open to close.

After I get a seat, a server arrives to take my order. She gives me a flirty smile and bats her fake lashes at me. "Late night?"

"Early morning."

"Bummer. No bar hopping last night?"

I give her a double-take. "Do I know you?"

"Everyone talks about you and Rake. He's settled down, but that's not the life for you, is it? Drinking and partying is

going to be your thing for a long time.”

Great. Gotta love small towns sometimes. “Can I just order?”

She gives me a funny look. “Sure thing. What do you want?”

I order my usual.

My mouth waters as I wait for my food. My eyelids are heavy despite the double-shot latte I ordered and downed in about five seconds flat. What I need is a nap. I’m going to crave it even more after the double burger I just ordered.

If I’m going to be getting up early every day, I’ll have to get to bed earlier. Unless I can spend all my volunteer hours building things for the shelter. Then I can stay up as late as I want, working whenever I feel like it.

That’s a much better plan. And best of all, I won’t have to be around cats.

I shudder at the thought.

The server brings my food, and I scarf it down so fast I’m still hungry by the time I’m done. As tempting as it is to order more, I don’t want to overstuff myself. The double burger will hit my stomach soon enough.

By the time I reach my condo, I’m so full it feels like my stomach is leading me home. I could easily sleep the rest of the day. Maybe I’ll do just that.

I settle into my bed after a long shower to get the smell of the lumberyard off me. Then as I close my eyes, visions of cats spin around my mind. Beady yellow eyes. Sharp claws. Even sharper teeth. Some of them even have horns. I think all cats secretly do have them — we just can’t see them.

If I’m going to get any rest, I need to get my mind off those little beasts. I focus on the climbers I’m going to build them. Picture the ones at the shelter, and imagine what I can do to improve them. Think of how I can do most of the work at my parents’ garage and avoid the cat room for as long as possible.



Finally I start to drift off to sleep. But not before the face of the cat that caused my fear of the species shows up in my mind's eye.

I bolt upright, gasping for air.

That was years ago. It's gone. Can't hurt me.

One thing is becoming clear. I'm going to have to do something about this irrational fear of mine. I can't avoid cats forever. Especially if I want to spend more time with Harper.

Which I do.

No, I don't. The last thing I need is to let my emotions get involved. If I'm around her too much, that could potentially lead to romantic feelings. And I know what *those* lead to.

Pain. Heartbreak. Ruined lives.

None of that is for me. I just need to get through my volunteer work so I can get the auction over with. Then I need to figure out what kind of modeling I want to do going forward. If I have to stand in as a dad for family vacation ads, then so be it.

Nobody expects more of me anyway.

## *Chapter Eight*

*HARPER*

**M**y stomach drops to the floor and crashes through it as I stare at the leaderboard. I'm in fourth place. Fourth. Ron is in the lead.

How is that possible?

Tori turns to me. "Melinda put the most weight on the articles about the bachelors."

Did I ask my question out loud?

She points to one of the sticky notes. "Ron has gotten five to sign up, and he's already published articles on all of them. The titles are all clickbait, so his views shot up."

I groan. "So the fact that the bachelor auction was my idea means nothing?"

"No. You got your points for that." Tori gestures to my score.

"How did he get so much done already?"

"He has no life." She snickers.

"Who'd have thought that'd be an advantage?"

"Don't focus on him. Start writing your articles. And see if you can get more guys like Drew into the auction."

"Easy peasy."

I wish it was a simple task. Unlike Ron, I do have a life — not to mention three jobs. And I'm not used to writing articles. It's been years. As evidenced by how much trouble I'm having writing about my interview with Rake. Just putting his name in the headline will draw more clicks than any of Ron's articles.

But I need something to publish before that can happen. And at the rate I'm going, I won't have anything before the auction.

I trudge to my pathetic desk and whip out my laptop.

Derek, someone I recently took a bunch of pictures for, comes over. “Are you finished editing my photos? I need to hit publish today.”

“Today?”

“Yeah, it’s been almost a week since the interview.”

“I only have a few touch ups on those.”

“Perfect. Send them over so I can get my article approved and smash that publish button.” Derek jaunts away.

“You’re welcome,” I mumble.

How am I supposed to get my own writing done when I not only have two other jobs, but other people’s photos to edit?

I’ll find a way. I’m the one who came up with the idea for the bachelors to save the auction. Nobody else has an interview with Rake Fletcher, the world famous actor, who shares his love for our town’s auction.

All I need is some time. Unfortunately that’s the one thing I don’t have enough of. Well, that and money. But I don’t need money to write. Just time.

It’s doable. And I don’t have to make Derek’s pictures perfect. They only have to be good enough. I can do that in a few minutes, and then focus on my own writing. Theoretically that shouldn’t be a problem. Rake already gave me all the words I need. Then I can focus on my feature of Drew. He’s still the most well-known of the guys up for auction. That’s still in my favor, unless someone else manages to convince another local celebrity — and we don’t exactly have a lot of those on the island.

Derek isn’t the only one who needs more of my pictures. By the time I get everyone what they need for *their* articles, my shift is over. I’m not only hungry enough to eat an entire fridge full of food but also ready to collapse into bed.

If only I could freeze time and finish everything I need to get done, including eating and sleeping. But I have no such ability, so I’ll have to find another way.

Tears sting my eyes as I make my way to my car. I don't know how much more of this I can take. Three jobs was one thing when I was only taking pictures. Now that I'm working on all these articles, and now need to find more bachelors to write *more* articles on, it's just too much.

I can hear my parents saying 'I told you so' from wherever they are now. Probably relaxing in their living room after having eaten a good meal.

That's exactly why I can't go to them for help. It would be admitting defeat, saying they were right all along. They weren't. At least not if I can get the promotion. That'll change everything.

If I can get there. It'll be a miracle if I can find the energy to drive home and scrounge for whatever scraps I can find. I don't know when I'll have time to work on writing about the interviews.

I lean against my car and blink back the tears that are now about ready to spill out.

My phone buzzes. Probably someone who needs something else from me.

I dig around my purse and check my notification.

It's a text from Raine. She wants me to meet her and Josie for appetizers. That would be great if I had any energy or money. Friday can't get here fast enough.

I must take too long to respond because she sends another text.

*Raine: My treat!*

Her sweet offer both warms my heart and discourages me. I love that she understands and cares without making a big deal of my situation, but at the same time I don't want to be a charity case.

I'm not sure what to do. My stomach begs me to say yes. My pride tells me to decline.

Another message comes in.

*Raine: We'll meet you at the Barbecue Shack in twenty. Reservation under Josie. See you then!*

She follows the message with a string of heart emojis.

I can't say no to our favorite burger place. One meal there is big enough to give me leftovers for two meals.

Once I have my promotion, I'll take them both out to eat. That will make both my pride and my stomach happy. And after I've eaten my fill, I'll have more energy to work on the articles. Maybe even finish one of them.

I send my friend a quick text before starting my car.

*Harper: I love you!*

*Raine: Right back at you.*

A text comes in from Josie on a thread to both of us.

*Josie: And I love you both!*

Raine and I both express our love for her, and by the time I pull out of the parking lot I feel like a new person. My problems seem less impossible.

When I get to the restaurant, the spots are all full so I have to park a block away. The fresh salty air does me good. The bright blue sky even manages to lift my mood. We have so many cloudy days around here, sometimes it's easy to forget we even have a sky in the winter.

And spring is on the horizon. Blossoms on the trees overhead are another reminder of the coming changes.

Hopefully soon my life will have some new vitality breathed into it as well. If I can just push through the rest of this winter season in my work, spring and summer will be right around the corner. I can't wait for the day when I can tell the other writers I won't be taking pictures for them.

By the time I find my friends at a booth overlooking the ocean, I'm actually smiling.

They both give me hugs, which helps my mood all the more.

After we give the server our orders, Josie tells us about a new movie that Rake is going to audition for soon. “I wish I could say more, but they don’t want too much getting out.”

I give her a genuine smile. “That’s so exciting.”

Raine sips her drink. “When I was a kid, if you’d have told me that my brother was going to star in movies and TV shows, I’d have laughed myself silly. It still feels surreal, even though he’s been a household name for a while.”

Josie gives her a playful nudge. “When are you going to figure out what to do with *your* life?”

Raine sighs. “Not you too.”

“Are your parents bugging you about that?” I ask.

“Always. They want me to figure something out. I get it, but I don’t have big aspirations like either of my siblings. I don’t want to be famous like Rake or to open an animal shelter like Ripple. Nothing jumps out at me. For now, I’m happy helping my parents remotely.”

Josie turns to me. “What about you? You want that position at the paper?”

“I’d love nothing more. Writing is my passion, but I haven’t had any time for it in years.”

Raine puts her hand on my arm but looks at Josie. “You should’ve read the pieces she wrote for the high school paper. She’s both a genius and funny. It’s the perfect combination for a reporter.”

“I’d love to read what you wrote,” Josie says. “Did you save any papers?”

Josie didn’t grow up in Misty Falls. She and Raine were college roommates, and then more recently she and Raine switched places. While she was staying here, she met Rake. And as the saying goes, the rest is history.

Raine laughs. “Does she have any of the papers? She saved them all in plastic containers so they wouldn’t get ruined.”

My face burns. “Things get ruined in cardboard boxes. Around here, you never know when the rain will damage something.”

“Why didn’t you go straight to the Breeze after graduation?” Josie asks.

“Because my parents thought it would be more fun if I made a fool of myself leading outdoor expeditions instead. Then after college, I’d all but forgotten about writing. That’s how I ended up with the three jobs I have now.”

“Can I get a sneak peek of the article about Rake?”

I squirm in my seat. “It isn’t ready. I’ve been swamped with other things.”

The server brings our food, and thankfully the subject changes. As I scarf down my double cheeseburger, I start to relax. Everything seems more doable than it did when I was in the parking lot at the paper.

Now that I have a full stomach, I can spend some time focused on writing. I might get more done with Drew’s interview. It’s one of many bachelor articles, whereas the one with Rake is unique. Everyone is eager to read it.

The pressure is on to make that one perfect.

It’s no wonder I can’t get anywhere on it. Especially considering it’s been so long since I’ve written *anything* other than social media posts.

After I get feedback on Drew’s interview, I’ll have the confidence to tackle Rake’s.

I hope.

If I still need more practice first, I can find some new guys to sign up as bachelors and then interview them. Tons of men go to Smoothie Central after working out, so I have more opportunities than the other reporters to find single guys who are in shape and will bring in a lot of bids.

Maybe having multiple jobs isn’t such a bad thing, after all.



Who'd have thought a burger and fries could change my mindset so quickly?

My friends and I wrap up the meal and head our separate ways. I keep thinking about what I'll write for my article about Drew, and by the time I get home my fingers fly across the keyboard. I don't think I've ever written anything so quickly.

I read it over, make a few changes, and add in a few pictures. Drew is so good looking that I don't have to touch anything up. Just have to email everything to Melinda.

One article down, another to go. At least until I find some other bachelors. But that's a task for tomorrow. Now I need some sleep.

As I'm getting ready for bed, my phone rings. It's Drew.

My heart races, and my hand shakes as I accept the call. I almost accidentally send him to voicemail.

"Hi Drew," I answer.

He doesn't say anything. Did I do something wrong?

"Hey Harper," he finally says.

Relief washes through me. I'd be mortified if I *had* accidentally rejected his call.

"I got everything for building the cat climber this morning. It's all in my garage, and I can get to work in the morning. Would it be okay if I worked there for my volunteer hours tomorrow? Or do you need me at the shelter?"

Disappointment replaces my relief. I won't get to see him in the morning. And I didn't realize I was looking forward to it until now. But the cats do need a new climber. And he's building it with supplies he bought. That's far more than I could ask for, even if I wish I could see him tomorrow. Which is dumb, because it isn't like we're a couple. That'll never happen. My growing feelings are ridiculous and nothing more than a distraction.

I just got done writing an article so that other women — people far more beautiful and graceful than me — will bid on a date with him. He'll easily get the most bids, and here I am

gushing over him like he'll ever look at me like anything other than the clod who crashed onto the sidewalk and spilled a bunch of smoothies.

He's way out of my league, and we both know it.

"Are you still there?" he asks.

"Sorry. Yeah, that's great. I can't believe how much you're doing for the shelter and the cats. You're really going above and beyond volunteering some time. I wrote all about it in the article for the Breeze. Everyone will think you're a hero."

He laughs. "A hero? For making cat toys?"

That was way over the top. He has to think I'm an idiot. I need to think of a quick comeback to save face.

My mind goes blank.

"I certainly don't feel like a hero," he says. "But I appreciate the compliment. If there's anything else I can do, I'm happy to help. Do you want me to call you with my progress tomorrow, boss?"

"Sure." I don't say more, because otherwise I'll just dig myself into a deeper hole.

We say goodbye and end the call. Then I cover my face with a throw pillow. Hero? I said people would think he's a hero? No wonder he laughed at me.

At least I'm not crazy enough to think he'd ever return my feelings. Because if I was, I'd be crushed that I had just completely ruined any imaginary chances I had to win him over.

Now I can go to bed and focus on my article about Rake and the auction.

Except there's no way I'll be able to stop thinking about what a fool I just made of myself to the one person whose opinion I actually care about. Even though what I should be doing is finding a way to get rid of my silly crush.

## *Chapter Nine*

## *DREW*

**T**his time when my alarm goes off, I not only figure out what it is but I manage to snooze it without losing my phone. Technically, I could sleep in and build the cat climber later in the day, but knowing that Harper has to get up early to start her day, I'd feel guilty.

I don't know how she does it all — working three jobs. Dealing with Ron must be the hardest part. I don't think I could see him every day and refrain from punching him. In fact, I'm sure I couldn't. Especially not after seeing the way he treated her when she fell outside the smoothie shop.

The alarm goes off again, and I sit up and rub my eyes. Much more of these early mornings and I won't have the stamina to keep staying up late. Even with a midday nap, getting up this early is brutal.

Makes me glad for my line of work, even though the industry would have me think I'm getting old. Granted, most everyone I went to school with is now married. Many of them are having gender reveal parties, showers, and babies.

Maybe I am getting old. No. I'm not. Thirty is young. It just isn't twenty.

After a quick bite to eat, I head out. The amount of traffic at this hour is surprising. Apparently most people have to get to work at this time.

My mind wanders to Harper and her three jobs. How she always has a smile on her face, even when her eyes show how exhausted she is.

I stop at a coffee stand and get two lattes. The animal shelter isn't anywhere near my parents' house, but I want to give her this coffee. She deserves so much more, but this is the least I can do. Especially after she called me a hero. I could hardly believe my ears when she said that.

Me? A hero? Not even close, and everyone in town knows better. I'm just a pretty face who spends too many nights at the bar. I've never even had a serious relationship. Nothing about my life says I'm mature or respectable. Certainly nothing close to a hero. More like a zero. A laughingstock. My gravestone will probably mention me being an underwear model. While it was only one time years ago, nobody will ever let me forget it. And even though I laugh along with everyone, I really wish people would move on.

At least Harper treats me like I'm more than that. With any luck her article in the Breeze will open people's eyes to see me in a different light. Nobody will ever see me as a hero, and that's fine, but I'll take all the help I can get to get a little respect from the town I've always called home.

I brace myself as I pull into the parking lot at Precious Paws. Hopefully I can give the coffee to Harper outside the cat room.

When I open the main door, she isn't in the entry. Nor the hallway. That means she must be with the little monsters.

My pulse drums in my ears as I knock on the door. I will keep my feet planted in the hall. There's no reason I should have to go inside and subject myself to the tiny terrors.

The door cracks open, and Harper pokes her head out. Her eyes open in surprise. "I didn't expect to see you here."

I hold up the latte. "I thought you could use this."

Harper glances back and forth between the paper cup and me. "You bought that for me?"

"If you want it."

She steps into the hallway, closing the door behind her. "That's so thoughtful. Thank you."

I hand her the coffee. "It's no problem. You're doing so much for me."

"I am?"

"Yeah. The auction was a great idea. I'm starting to realize how much I enjoy giving to others. I keep thinking of new

things I can donate. It feels good.”

“I definitely appreciate you building a new cat structure. It’s going to make such a difference in there.” She gestures toward the door and sips the coffee. “And Ripple was thrilled when I told her about it.”

“That’s great. I’m glad it’s going to make a difference. Speaking of which, I’d better get going.”

Harper gives me a warm smile. “If you need anything, let me know.”

“Will do.” I find myself wanting to stay, but all it takes is thinking about the cats to remind me where I really want to be. “Enjoy your latte.”

The short conversation runs through my mind for the entire drive to my family home. Mostly her smile lingers. Harper is so genuine. That’s something I’m not used to. Most women are overly flirty and trying to impress me, even the ones around here who I grew up with.

Harper just seems to enjoy being around me. Not the semi-famous model me. Me. I don’t feel like I have to put on a show or be something I’m not. It’s like she sees something in me that nobody else does. And I kind of like it.

Thinking about her gives me more energy than the caffeine. Even though I don’t want to think about the cats, I do want her to like the carpeted climber. More than that, I want to impress her. Picturing her reacting to the final product pushes me to make it as good as I can.

I’m not the handiest guy around — it’s much easier to hire people to fix things for me — but with this project, I’m eagerly looking up videos to learn how to build this right. By the time I’m done with it, it’ll outlast anything else in that room, no matter how hard the fur balls try to destroy it.

After a few hours, I’m about halfway done. That’s assuming that I don’t add any extras, like little toys or hiding places. I’m leaning toward adding those things and more.

I’ll do anything to see Harper’s smile again. I haven’t been so motivated for anything in a long time.

On my way home, I call Susan with another idea I have for donating to the auction.

“You’re already doing so much,” she says. “Are you sure you want to give more?”

“I am. The thought of the auction not returning really gets to me. It’s such a piece of what Misty Falls stands for, and the money always goes to help such good causes.”

“Wow. If you’re ever looking to be a spokesman for something, I hope you consider the auction.”

“I’m glad to do anything I can to help. Harper interviewed both Rake and me, and we both shared good things.”

“Oh, wonderful! I can’t wait to read the articles when they come out. If you tell your other friends to support us, that will help.”

“I’ll do that.” We say goodbye and I park my car. As I make my way to my condo, I hardly feel the ground beneath my feet. I can’t believe how good it feels to help out with the auction and at the animal shelter.

It’s such a different experience than anything I’ve done in a long time. Modeling has been fun, but it doesn’t help anyone other than the already rich advertisers. And as I get older, I’m easily forgotten. But with helping out here at home, people actually appreciate what I’m doing. I’m making a difference. And if I stop modeling, I want to go out in a bang, not a fizzle. No adult diapers for me.

After I shower off all the dirt and sawdust, I go onto my balcony and watch the ocean waves. Rain and wind have picked up since I got home, which makes the water look angrier than normal. Even the birds are in hiding.

My phone rings, and I grab for it hoping it’s Harper.

It’s only my agent.

“Hi, Lisa,” I answer.

“I have great news.”

“Oh?” I try to sound more interested than I feel. She probably found me a shoot that will take me far from the island. “What is it?”

“Italian motorcycles. You’re flying out tomorrow morning.”

“To Italy?”

“No, to Timbuktu. Yes, to Italy.”

“Okay.”

“You sound like I just invited you to a funeral. What gives? The other day you were begging me for a youthful shoot. Doesn’t get much better than Ducati.”

“No, that’s definitely great. Thanks.”

“It’s not good enough for you?” Her voice is full of exasperation. “They were going to hire a schmuck who’s twenty-five, but I convinced them that you’re their man. And all I get is ‘great’?”

“Don’t take it personally. I’ve been working hard all day and I’m tired. After I get some rest, I’ll be thrilled.”

“Working hard? Did you find someone else to get you jobs? Are you—?”

“It’s volunteer work here in my hometown. I’m not getting rid of you. Text me the flight details, and I’ll be there.”

“Volunteer work, huh? That’ll look good in your portfolio. Send me the details so I can use that in your favor. Maybe we’ll get you a job with Ferrari yet.”

I nearly drop my phone. “Did you say Ferrari?”

“That’s your dream shoot, isn’t it? That hasn’t changed?”

“No. I thought we gave up on that eons ago.”

“I never give up on anything. Tomorrow is Ducati, next week could be Ferrari.”

It hardly seems possible. I’ve done plenty of car and motorcycle shoots, but never came close to Ferrari. Everyone I



work with has a dream company, one they know they'll probably never get, and that's always been mine.

"You still there?" Lisa asks.

"Don't get my hopes up. Do you think that's really possible?"

"I got you Ducati, didn't I? You've never worked for them before."

"That's true, but it still isn't Ferrari."

"It's close enough. Do your best work with the motorcycles, and your dream shoot could be within reach."

I start to thank her, but she ends the call. A text comes in with all the info I need for my trip to Italy. And I'm nowhere near as thrilled as I should be. The shoot tomorrow is a phenomenal one, and even more so that I beat out someone five years younger than me.

But I'd rather spend time with Harper than fly to an exotic location and ride sleek, expensive motorcycles. I also don't want to let her down by making her wait on the cat climbers.

Instead of taking the nap that I was planning on, I get back in my car and return to my parents' garage. The climber takes the rest of the afternoon and at least half a dozen tutorial videos to finish.

I'm impressed with my work and proud of myself for proving that I can be more than a pretty face. If I were to stop modeling, I can find other things I'm good at — things that can benefit others. And I have an advantage that a lot of other people don't. I've earned a lot of money over my years of modeling and investing in real estate, so I have plenty of money and time to give. Resources to draw from that I can use to help those who need it.

It might even be possible to have both. I could spend less time on photo shoots so I can help others. If I did that, Lisa would give me less time and attention but that wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. I'm already aging out of the fun stuff. I could do the occasional modeling job, picking only the ones that I really want. That's an idea I could get behind.

I bring the climber outside, where it's now sunny, and snap pictures from every angle. Even though I don't care to see the cats using it, I'm proud of my work.

More importantly, I can't wait to see Harper's reaction.

## *Chapter Ten*

## HARPER

Carol nudges me. “He’s still there.”

I glance over at Drew, who has been sipping on the same smoothie for over an hour at a table by the window. Right now he’s paying more attention to his phone than his drink.

“He’s waiting for you.”

“Stop.” I turn around and mix a green smoothie for another order going to the spa. At least when I’m standing next to the noisy machine I can’t listen to my co-worker teasing me about Drew.

Even if she *is* right about him waiting to talk to me, it’s only because of the auction. It’s not like he’s waiting for *me*.

I add the smoothie to the others going to the spa and sneak a glance at Drew.

A redhead with a perfect figure is clearly flirting with him.

My heart sinks, but it isn’t like I can expect anything different. He’s always attracted attention from gorgeous women, locals and tourists alike. I’m sure it’s the same wherever he goes, since he travels all over the world for his work.

Sighing, I return to the order and focus on the smoothies instead of Drew. It’s ridiculous how much of my mental space I’ve been giving him lately. He can be with any woman he wants, there’s no way he would choose someone as awkward and clumsy as me. Someone who speaks without thinking and who is currently wearing mismatched socks. At least I’m not sporting any more Band-Aids.

If that’s all I have going for me, I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. Maybe both.

Carol catches my eye as I package up the drinks to walk over to the spa. “Go say hi to him.”

I shake my head no hard enough to give myself whiplash.

“He isn’t here for anyone else.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s waiting for me. I’m sure he’s just enjoying his drink.”

She gives me a dismissive wave. “Someone’s in denial.”

“Have you looked at him? Or met me? There’s no way.”

“You can deny it, but there’s something between you two.”

“It’s called the auction.”

“Whatever.”

I ignore her, grab the smoothies, and head outside.

“Harper!” Drew waves at me from around the redhead.

Carol gives me a look that clearly says ‘I told you so.’

I wave back to Drew and make my way outside, even managing not to spill anything.

Drew leaves the redhead and catches up to me. “I finished the climber.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. I’ve been working on it all day.”

I stop, and he bumps into me. He steadies the tray of drinks. I stare at him. “You didn’t have to spend your entire day on that.”

“I got a last-minute photo shoot out of town, so I wanted to get it done before that so I don’t leave you hanging.”

“It could’ve waited.”

“True, but I didn’t want to do that to you.”

Heat creeps into my cheeks. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. But when would be a good time for me to drop it off today?”

“Today?”

“I’m flying out tomorrow morning.”

Disappointment runs through me. I try desperately not to let it show. “Well, I have a little time after my shift at the smoothie shop before I have to go to the Breeze. I do need to stop at home and check on my cats at some point though. But I don’t have to be there when you drop it off.”

Our gazes lock. “I want you to see it.”

How is it he manages to leave me tongue-tied? Nobody else has ever been able to get me to stop talking before him.

“I can wait at the smoothie shop until you’re done working. Then we can go straight there. I promise not to take up too much of your time.”

“You want to wait for me?”

“Sure. How much longer until you’re done?”

“About an hour.”

Drew snaps his fingers. “I have a better idea.”

“What?”

“I can pick up dinner. Then you won’t have to worry about that. It’ll save you some time since I’m going to be dragging you back to the shelter.”

He wouldn’t have to drag me anywhere. Spending time with him is no sacrifice. “I won’t say no to food.”

“Great!” He gives me that smile of his and touches my arm before running off.

I un-melt my legs and walk the rest of the way to the spa as if I was walking through quicksand instead of on cement.

When I return to the smoothie shop, the redhead makes a point to glare at me before storming out.

Carol rushes over to me. “What did Drew want?”

“He, uh, built a cat climber for the shelter and wanted to know when he can take it over. Like I told you, it’s nothing.”

She lifts a brow. “Nothing, huh? He waited over an hour to tell you. Clearly the man has feelings for you.”

“No. He’s flying out in the morning and wants to drop off the climber before he leaves. That’s it.”

“If all he wanted was to drop it off, he’d have done that. He could’ve handed it off to Ripple or anyone. But he didn’t. He waited for *you*.”

“Because I’m basically his boss. He’s volunteering in the cat room under my supervision.”

She spells out the word denial.

“I am not.”

“What else did he say to you out there?”

“Nothing.” I’m definitely not telling her that he’s out picking up dinner as we speak.

“You’re keeping something from me,” she insists. “What?”

“I need to get back to work.” I turn to the next customer in line. “What can I get you?”

After the line dies down, my co-worker accosts me again. “Do you have a date?” she asks, practically singing.

“No. I told you, he’s taking the cat climber to Precious Paws.”

“With you.”

“Yes.”

“Is food involved?”

“You’re impossible.”

Her mouth falls open. “It *is*. You’re having dinner with him. A date!”

“It isn’t a date.” I try to glare at her, but my stomach tingles at the thought that my dinner with Drew could be one.

But it isn’t. He’s just being nice. Trying to make himself the most attractive bachelor. He’s clearly the best looking and has the most interesting job, so adding in the volunteer work is icing on the already decadent cake.

Carol is talking, but I can't tell what she's saying because my mind is too focused on Drew.

And I'm crazy for allowing her to get to me. Our dinner isn't a date. Not even close. It's exactly like I told her. The redhead who was flirting with him is proof enough of that. There's no way he would think of me romantically when he has women like that throwing themselves at him.

I hate that I'm letting myself entertain the idea of anything developing between the two of us. All I'm doing is laying the foundation for disappointment. And the more I let these thoughts in, the harder I'm going to feel it. Besides that, I don't need the distraction. Not when I'm working so hard to get such a huge promotion at the paper.

Thankfully another rush of customers come in, and they keep us busy until the end of my shift. When I leave, Carol gives me a look but I ignore her and hurry outside.

Someone waves down the street. I don't pay attention to him, assuming he's waving at someone behind me. Then I realize it's Drew. He's holding two paper bags that have no logos, so that leaves me curious about what dinner will be.

Our dinner.

Air catches in my throat. Is Carol right about this being a date?

No. Of course she isn't. It's like I told her. And what I really need to focus on is the fact that I don't need any distractions. In fact, it's probably a good thing that he's going out of town. It'll give me the time I need to write my articles and pass up Ron on the leaderboard.

Drew catches up to me. "Do you want to eat now? Or I can take you to go see the climber and we can eat there."

"Would you mind if we go to my place real quick? My cats are used to eating at this time, and they go a little crazy if I feed them late."

He hesitates. "Yeah, sure. Or I can pick up the climber and meet you after you feed them? That'll save a little time."



This is clearly not a date if he doesn't want to come to my place.

"That works," I say. "Unless you want to eat at my place. That's totally doable."

Because apparently now I'm trying to turn this into a date. Glad to see my mouth is back to doing its thing, saying what it wants without consulting me. Ugh.

A strange look crosses his face. "Maybe. Unless you want to meet at my parents' house where I'm storing the climber."

This is getting complicated. And annoying. Why can't we settle on where to eat? It isn't like this is a difficult decision.

I check the time. "Either way works. Why don't you pick up the climber and I'll feed my cats? Then we can call each other and see what makes the most sense."

"Perfect. See you in a few."

We go our separate ways, and I stop before getting in my car. Why is figuring out where to eat such a difficult decision? It shouldn't be. Am I making it that way by insisting I feed the cats first? I'm on a time crunch, needing to get to my third job. It was nice of him to buy the food. Given how short on funds I am at the moment, I definitely appreciate it.

I should ask him straight out if something is bothering him. He could be flustered from having short notice on traveling tomorrow. I'd probably be difficult to deal with too if someone told me to pack a suitcase for the next day. That has to be it.

My body relaxes. The awkwardness wasn't my fault for once. We're both under pressure and short on time — and that's all the more reason for me to get home. After I feed the cats, we'll still have to eat and take the climber to the shelter. My blood pressure spikes at the thought. Too much to do in too little time.

I hurry home, and thankfully the lights and traffic work in my favor. Several of the cats rub on my legs when I get in my apartment. A few look up at me with half-closed eyes from various places. They all used to sleep snuggled together in

Cupcake's bed, but now they're spreading out and getting more independent.

That thought saddens me, because it's a reminder that they're getting older and moving ever more quickly toward the day they have to leave for their forever homes. I pick up the two nearest ones and hold them close.

One of them starts meowing, which sets off the whole bunch. They know why I'm here and they want to eat. They hardly seem to rely on the milk anymore. I fill their bowls with dry and wet food, and suddenly it makes sense why I don't have enough money for groceries. I'm paying more than double what I usually do to keep the cats fed.

My phone rings, and I answer it without looking at the screen. "Hey Drew. You ready to eat?"

"Drew?" asks my mom. "Are you finally dating Drew Garrett?"

I throw my free hand in the air. Why didn't I check the screen? "Sorry, I thought you were him. No, I'm not dating him."

"You two would make such a cute couple."

"This can't be why you called me. What do you need?"

"Do you still collect magazines that he's in?"

"Mom!" I don't know what's more horrifying — the fact that she knew about that when I lived at home or that she still remembers.

"You two would make me beautiful grandbabies."

"That's it! This call is over."

"You really should consider asking him out. I hear girls do that all the time these days."

"Bye, Mom."

"Wait!"

I groan. "What?"

"Why did you think Drew was calling you?"

“We’re meeting for my job at the paper. Remember that promotion I’m going for?”

“The auction, right? How fun will that be? I wish they’d have had the bachelor auction when I was single. I’d have been all over that.”

“Mom! What about Dad?”

“Obviously I’d have bid on him if he was in it, and clearly he’s my date this year. I’m just saying, my daughter had a brilliant idea. So, are you going to bid on Drew?”

“Mo-om.” It’s clear who I inherited my big mouth from.

“You really should. He’s handsome and respectful. It can be hard to find that combination in a guy. Dad’s a rare gem, and so is your supermodel.”

“Are you for real?”

Another call comes in. This time I check to see who it is.

“Mom, I have to go. Drew’s calling me.”

“You sure it’s him?”

“Yes. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Love you, honey.”

“You too, Mom. Bye.” I switch over to the other call as fast as my phone will let me. “Are you ready?” I ask Drew.

“Almost. I’m going to have to load the climber into my dad’s old truck because it’s far too big to fit in my car. Do you mind coming here? I’ve got the food in the oven to keep it warm.”

I’d do anything for him at this point, after rescuing me from that conversation with my mom. “Sounds great. I’ll be there in a few.”

“Thanks for being so flexible.”

“You’re feeding me and giving the cats a much-needed new climber. I’m in no position to complain. I should be thanking you.”

“It’s nothing,” he says. “Do you know where my parents’ house is?”

“Yep. I went there a few times with Raine and Rake when I was in school.”

We say goodbye and I check on the kittens before I head back out. My mind is still reeling from my conversation with my mom. It might not bother me so much if Carol hadn’t also been giving me a hard time about Drew earlier.

Why is everyone intent on planting these ideas in my mind? I’m only going to end up disappointed if I let myself hope anything can happen between us.

The real problem is, I’m already developing those dangerous feelings on my own. I don’t need others making me think I have a chance.

That’s the last thing I have.

## *Chapter Eleven*

## *DREW*

**T**he engine sputters and grinds, protesting from the years of neglect. A better son would've kept the truck running and not let it waste away in the garage. At least I kept it out of the elements, but clearly that isn't enough.

I might have to find another way to get the cat climber to the shelter. But I can try a few more things first. After cutting the engine, I open the hood and check the fluids. Everything is almost empty. Should've checked that first, but it's not like I'm a mechanic. I've pretended to be one for the camera before, but that's about as close as I've come. I know enough to be dangerous, but not actually fix anything.

Luckily Dad stocked all the fluids in the garage. I only hope they aren't too old to be any good. I empty out and replace the oil and transmission and brake fluids. Then I move onto the engine coolant and differential fluid.

Just as I finish, a car pulls into the driveway. Perfect timing. Not that I'm sure the truck will run. Any number of other things could be wrong with it, and all of those problems are beyond my skill set.

The sun nearly blinds me as I step out of the garage. I wipe an itch near my eye, and end up spreading oil across my cheek. Awesome.

Harper gets out of her car and smiles at me. "Looks like you're working hard."

"I'm trying. Not sure I'm actually accomplishing anything."

She peeks around me. "Trouble with the truck?"

"You could say that. I let it sit too long, and now it doesn't want to start."

"Want me to have a look at it? I'm no expert, but my Dad taught me enough to make sure I could take care of myself."

“Sure, but do you want to see the climber first? That’s why you’re here. Not to bail me out of my trouble.”

“I can’t wait to see what you made.”

“This way.” I lead her around the truck to the shop area that was once my dad’s pride and joy. He doubled the original size of the garage to have a place to build anything he wanted. When Mom was alive, he was always out here making something to improve our lives. After she passed, everything began collecting dust. It’s only gotten worse since his passing. At least until today. I’ve disturbed enough of it to make everyone on the island have a sneezing fit.

Harper gasps. “You made that in just two days?”

“Right. What do you think?”

She examines it closer, patting the carpeting on the different levels. “I’ve never seen anything like it! It’s like luxury pet furniture. Have you spent every spare minute on this?”

I don’t want to admit that I have, so I shrug. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it? I’m blown away! It’s incredible.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” I stuff my hands in my pockets. “We should eat before the food shrivels up in the oven.”

“First let me send Ripple some pictures of this. She won’t believe it.”

“If you want. I’m going inside to check on dinner.”

Harper’s already busy aiming her phone at the climber, so I head inside. The food looks fine, so I wash my face and arms. The mirror shows a grease stain on my shirt that spreads all the way down to my jeans.

I check my old room for extra clothes, but the closet and drawers are empty. This is the only room that isn’t a time capsule. I moved nearly all of my things out as soon as I had enough money. Aside from bedding and posters on the wall, the only things left in here are my old art supplies and my drums.

“Ready to eat?” Harper asks.

I whip around, my pulse pounding in my ears. For a moment I forgot she was here. I never let anyone inside.

She glances around me. “Your old room?”

“Yeah. Just looking for something to change into, but I didn’t leave myself anything.”

“As long as you don’t eat off your clothes, you should be fine.”

I catch a glimpse of my messy self in the mirror. Compared to her in her cute, clean clothes I’m a wreck. I can’t eat with her like this. “Let me check my dad’s clothes real quick.”

“I’ll get the food out of the oven.”

“The mitts are in the second drawer down on the left of the sink.”

“Great.” She flashes me a smile and disappears down the hall. Then she sneezes.

I’m an idiot for bringing her here. This place isn’t fit for anyone to visit. I don’t want to know what she must think of me now.

My parents’ bedroom is as much of a shrine as the rest of the house. Dust covers the hangers and the clothes alike in the closet. Pulling out the drawers sends up a plume of dust.

I really need to do something with this place. Neither one of them would’ve let things go to this degree. But the thought of not having all their possessions and pictures here hurts too much. Getting rid of their things would be like getting rid of their memories.

Dishes clang around in the kitchen, reminding me that I need to step back into reality. I dig through my dad’s clothes and find some jeans and an old Nirvana t-shirt. They’re both a little snug because I’m a bit taller than he was, but they work. I toss my grease-covered clothes into the garbage because I don’t have the patience to figure out how to get those stains out.



Harper's dusting the kitchen table while the food sits steaming on the stove.

Seriously, what was I thinking inviting her over to this mess of a house? Everything would've been easier if I'd just gone to her place, but sometimes it's easier to overlook dysfunction until you bring someone else into it.

But also cats. There's no way I would be able to relax and eat at her place with seven of those things crawling around. It would only be a matter of time until one attacked me.

Sadly, this neglected house is the lesser of two evils, even if she assumes I'm a horrible person for letting my parents' house go like I have. Why I didn't invite her to the condo is beyond me. Or we could've eaten at the restaurant. There were options other than this.

Too late now. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that living in regret is a waste of time.

"Let me help you." I grab an old dish towel and act like this house is completely normal. Like everyone keeps an entire house and garage as a shrine to their long-gone parents.

I'm glad I can't read her mind because I really don't want to know what she's thinking about me now.

She gives me a sweet smile and brings the food to the now dust-free table. I get some dishes from the cabinet — thankfully being inside had kept those mostly clean. Only the top one needs to be set aside.

We sit across from one another. Harper must've dusted off the chairs too, because they look better than I've seen in more than a decade.

"Thanks for picking up dinner," she says before taking her first bite of roasted chicken in sauce and veggies.

I can't believe she's thanking me for anything after not only seeing this mess but cleaning off the table and chairs too. "I hope it's still good after cooling and then heating up in the oven."

“Mmm.” She gives me a thumbs up and swallows. “It’s delicious. Where’d you get the food?”

“Rosaria’s.”

“Would you believe I’ve never eaten there?” Harper asks. “But that’s going to change after this.”

“I can take you there after I get back from my photo shoot.”

Her eyes widen.

Crap. Was that the wrong thing to say? It must sound too much like a date, and of course she wouldn’t be interested in someone who’s known for partying at my age. Especially after seeing this house. I quickly recover. “We can bring Josie and Rake. Raine too, if you’d like.”

“Right. Yeah, that’d be great. Sounds like fun.”

I force a smile. It’s so strange spending time with her because she isn’t like anyone else. While practically every other woman clamors for my attention, she doesn’t seem to care. She’s nice to me, but I’m sure she doesn’t have a mean bone in her body. Somehow she even manages to be kind to Ron Alderman.

Her lack of interest is refreshing. She draws me in, makes me want to learn more about her.

But that’s dangerous. Looking around this dilapidated house that should be full of love and life is the exact reason I can’t let myself think of her romantically. I don’t want to end up hurt, and I don’t want to end up hurting her. Either one or both is inevitable if we go down that path.

What I need is a new goal in life. Something that doesn’t involve modeling or traveling. Something more along the lines of the auction, where I can do good with my time. Or the volunteering aspect. There has to be endless opportunities if I look for them.

“Where are you traveling to?” Harper asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Italy again.”

She chokes, but recovers before I can ask if she's okay.  
"Again? How many times have you been there?"

"I've lost count."

"Must be nice."

Guilt stings. I probably sound like a mammoth jerk flaunting my wealth. The majority of the people on the island stay here most of the time. Many will take a ferry to the mainland for the day or a weekend, or take one vacation a year. But Rake and I are the exceptions, flying out on the regular.

I try to think of something that makes me sound less pompous. "There are a bunch of Italian companies who request me to advertise their products. For some reason they like my look there."

She just blinks.

I'm not helping my cause at all, so I turn my attention back to my food. I'd rather stick that in my mouth than my foot again.

"What company are you working with this time?" she asks.

"Ducati."

"The motorcycles?" Her eyes widen again, but this time the corners of her mouth are curved up. "That's so cool. Have you worked with them before?"

"No, this will be my first time."

"If I had your job, that would be the pinnacle of my career."

"For me, it's Ferrari."

Her eyes light up. "Nice. Have you worked with them yet?"

Yet. I love her optimism. "I wish."

"I can't believe you're going to ride a Ducati. Do you get to ride one? Or just stand near one?"

I lean back, relaxing. “I’m not sure. But when I’ve worked with similar companies, I’ve done both.”

Her smile widens. “If you get to ride one, tell me all about it. I’ve always wanted to ride a Ducati.”

“You ride bikes?”

“Any chance I get. When I was a kid, my parents took us riding on minibikes and one thing led to another. I’m not into much of the outdoor stuff my family is obsessed with, but motorcycles are the best. There’s nothing like the freedom of being on one while flying down the open road.”

I stare at her in a new light. While I already knew she’s different from most other people I’ve met, I now know I have no idea just how much. What else makes her shine brighter than everyone else I spend time with?

“Don’t you think?” she asks. “Or do you only ride for your job?”

“No. I love riding. Rake and I have always talked about getting bikes and going to Eastern Washington for some weekend road trips. But we’ve never made that happen.”

“Why not?”

“It’s one of many ideas we bat back and forth. More don’t happen than do.”

“You guys should go for that one. It’d be so much fun.”

Maybe it never happened because I planned it with the wrong person. Rake’s eyes never lit up like Harper’s when we talked about motorcycle road trips. She and Raine would have a better time together. Or if Josie wanted to go with Rake, then Harper might want to come along. Unless it seems too much like a double date. If she doesn’t even want to go to a restaurant with me, what makes me think she’d consider riding country roads for days with me?

She tells me about her times riding as a kid with her family, and that reminds me of a camping trip with my parents when they rented some dirt bikes. I had the time of my life, but then Mom got her diagnosis soon after.

We finish our food and clean up the dishes — though it almost seems pointless when the rest of the house is falling apart. Harper doesn't say anything about the state of everything as we leave the kitchen. In fact, she goes into the living room rather than heading for the front door and walks around, pausing at each of the pictures.

I take a deep breath. In a way, I feel more exposed now than if she were to walk in on me when I had no clothes on.

She picks up one of my parents and me at the beach. "You all look so happy."

A lump forms in my throat. "We were."

"It must've been so hard to lose them."

"It was." My voice cracks.

Harper replaces the picture and wraps her arms around me. "I'm so sorry. That's a loss I can't even imagine, and you've been through it twice."

And thinking about it brings it back to the surface all over again. It never fails to surprise me how easily the old pain returns. Some losses never leave you.

I don't trust my voice, so I wrap my arms around Harper and accept the comfort.

She steps back after a few moments and looks around. "It's nice that you can keep your memories of them alive."

That's one way to put it. I'm not blind to my own dysfunction. This house either needs to be demolished or severely updated. Thankfully I don't need to respond, because her phone rings.

She steps outside as she answers the call. "Sorry I'm not there yet, Melinda. I'll head over in just a minute. I'm with Drew, who was showing me—" Her head tilts and her eyebrows draw nearer as she listens to the other person. "Really? Thank you so much! That's going to be a huge help to me."

I lock up the house as she continues her conversation.

After she puts her phone away, she turns to me. “Great news! I don’t have to hurry to the Breeze now. My boss gave me a promotion from photographer to official writer. Gone are my days of following everyone else around taking and editing pictures for them.”

“Congratulations! But weren’t you a writer already?”

“Technically, but not officially. Now I can spend my work hours on my articles instead of trying to find the time outside of my three jobs.”

“I don’t know how you do all of that.”

“By barely resting or sleeping. Let’s go to the shelter now. I can’t wait to see the climber in its new home. Wait. You have time, right?”

“If you have time, I definitely do. Just give me a minute to get everything in the back of the truck.”

“I’ll help.” She marches ahead of me.

By the time I get to the garage, she’s already in the bed of the truck sweeping out the dust. She glances at me. “I found a wire that wasn’t plugged in under the hood. The engine should start now.”

“Wow. You’re a real go-getter.”

“Did you take me for a princess?” She laughs, and snorts a little. Her cheeks turn a little pink, but otherwise she doesn’t act embarrassed.

She may not be a princess, but she’s the most confident and adorable person I’ve ever met. “No, I’d never mistake you in that way. In fact, I’m starting to think I want to be like you when I grow up.”

“Like me?” She lifts a brow.

“Yeah. Why not? You know what you want and go after it. You’re unapologetically you.”

“I’m also clumsy, remember? And you never know what crazy thing is going to fly out of my mouth.”

And I'm finding those are the exact things that make it hard to stop thinking about her. But all I say is, "There's nothing wrong with that."

She waves me off and returns to sweeping out my dad's truck. The same one she helped me get running.

My heart swells as I watch her. I need to be careful, or I could break my own vow against falling in love.

## *Chapter Twelve*



## *HARPER*

**R**ipple and I exchange a string of excited texts while I sit next to Drew as he drives the sputtering truck to the shelter. She's thrilled about the new climber. While she's my boss, I think of her more as a friend. Growing up, I spent countless nights over at her house with Raine. Since Ripple was only a couple years older than us, she often joined us when she wasn't off with her own friends.

We always had our love of pets in common. She was constantly finding stray animals and bringing them into their home — something that didn't thrill her parents. But I always loved going over there and being surprised by what she was nursing back to health. She saved everything from squirrels and raccoons to cats and dogs. She even once rescued a pygmy shrew.

By the time Drew pulls into the parking lot, the engine sounds like it's about to give out. I hope it has enough life to get us back to his parents' house where both our cars are parked.

Ripple bursts through the front door after I let her know we're here. The truck makes an odd moaning sound as Drew turns it off. My confidence in it getting us back to my car is waning by the moment.

The three of us work together to get the climber inside the building. After we set it down in the entry, Ripple's eyes light up with excitement and she covers her mouth. "It's perfect! I can't thank you enough."

I point to Drew. "It was all him. He thought of the idea, got the materials, and put it together."

"But you got him to volunteer. Without you, none of this would've happened." Ripple pulls out her phone and snaps pictures from every angle. "I wish I could help you install it, but we have a new donkey that I need to get back to. Let me know when it's done."

“Will do,” I promise.

She gives us more hugs before running off.

Drew turns to me. “Where’d she get a donkey?”

“No idea. The last pony that came here was from clear across the country.”

We carry the climber down the hall to the cat room. I stop at the door to catch my breath. It’s heavier than it looks because Drew made it with quality wood, unlike the climber I ordered for Cupcake online.

“Getting it inside is going to be the tricky part. We don’t want any of the cats escaping.”

“Can you move them somewhere else while we set this up?” he asks, sounding eager for that to happen.

“We don’t really have anywhere to put them. Every square inch of the shelter is being used for something. Let me see if anyone is inside. I’m not sure what the evening staff’s routine is.” I knock quickly to let anyone inside know I’m here, and then I peek in.

Nobody’s in the room, but many of the cats are sleeping. They must’ve had their dinner recently.

I glance back to Drew. “Now’s the perfect time. They’re snoozing.”

He hefts up the climber while I hold the door open.

The noise wakes several cats. Some run and hide while others go back to sleep.

After Drew sets the climber in the middle of the room, most of the animals’ curiosity is piqued. Other than the hiders, most of them stretch and sniff the new toy.

Drew steps around them. “I’ll take this old one outside.”

I hold the door for him again. “There’s a dumpster around back. Want some help?”

“Nah, this one’s a lot lighter than the other.” He disappears down the hall.

I quickly close the door before any of the cats escape, but I don't need to worry because every single one of them is checking out their new toy. Some are sniffing from the ground while others are already all over it. I push it toward the wall, and a few scatter while others insist on continuing to check it out.

By the time Drew returns, I have the climber in place and all we have to do is secure it to the wall. He already has the tools and gets that done quickly.

Now that it's in a new location, the cats have a renewed curiosity for the thing. All except one little calico who's barely bigger than my kittens at home. She sniffs Drew's pant leg, and he leaps back. She skids away, her back arched and fur sticking up.

I laugh and snuggle her, then turn to Drew. "You don't have to worry about hurting them. They're just curious."

He only nods.

"Do you want to hold her?" I extend the kitty toward him.

Drew scurries backward, crashing into the wall. "No, I'm fine."

"You sure about that?" I try to hold back a laugh.

"Yeah. Anything else to do?"

"I think we're done here."

"Phew." He wipes his forehead.

I study him. "Are you okay?"

"Great. Just ready to leave."

"Wait. You aren't allergic, are you?"

"No. I'll meet you at the truck." He leaves before I can say anything else.

I look at that kitty. "Is it just me or is he acting strange?"

She squirms, so I put her back on the floor. Then I pull out my phone and snap pictures of the installed climber. It'll make a great article for me to add to Ron's stupid leaderboard.

At least now I'm an actual writer. Now I can use my time at the Breeze to work on my own work instead of having to prioritize everyone else's.

Outside I find Drew and Ripple laughing in the parking lot.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

She wipes a tear from her eye. "Old times. Drew reminded me of the time I rescued an opossum and it got into Rake's room. I've never seen him so mad! He nearly burned the house down trying to get that poor thing out." She doubles over again.

Drew and I join in.

After I manage to calm down, I wait for them to stop laughing. "Wasn't that during Raine's birthday party?"

Ripple nods. "I think it was. Mom was so mad at me for causing such a commotion."

"I was there too," Drew says. "Rake wanted me to spend the night to protect him from a princess takeover of the house."

"That's so funny." I gasp for air, feeling another fit of laughter coming on. "I'd forgotten all about that."

"Easy to do," Drew says. "It was only one of many similar incidents."

Ripple fixes her ponytail. "So it should have come as no surprise to anyone that I opened an animal shelter."

"We all should've seen it coming," I agree. "Drew got the climber he made set up. Let's show you."

Drew straightens his back. "I'll let you two do that. I need to check the truck's transmission before starting her up."

"Her?"

"That's what dad always said."

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" I ask. "You're the one who put all the work into it. It should be you showing it off."

“Go ahead.” He opens the driver’s side door and pops the hood open.

Ripple and I head inside, and I show her the new climber. Several cats are already asleep on it.

“Look at that,” she gushes. “The cats could explore all the nooks and crannies for days.”

“Right? I’ve never seen anything quite so intricate.”

She gets pictures of her own and then we head back outside. Before we reach the front door, I turn to her. “Do you think Drew is acting weird?”

“How so?”

“I’m not sure. He seems squirrely around the cats. Notice how he didn’t want to come in and show off his handiwork?”

She shrugs. “Some people aren’t showy.”

“He’s a model. Showy is what he does.”

“I’m sure he’s fine. Tell him thanks again for me. I need to get back to that donkey.”

“There’s a sentence you don’t hear every day.”

“Not unless you’re me.”

We share a chuckle before going our separate ways.

Drew is in the truck when I get outside.

I join him. “Everything good with the transmission?”

“I’m no expert, but it looks great to me.” He backs out of the spot. “How did Ripple like the climber?”

“She adores it. You’d know if you’d gone in with us.”

“I’m glad she likes it. Is there anything else I can plan on building when I get back?”

My heart sinks at the reminder that he’s going to fly out. I’ve really been enjoying our time together, but I knew from the get-go that nothing would come of it. Drew and I live in two separate worlds, as evidenced by his upcoming flight to Italy to ride Ducatis.

I should've gone into modeling, other than the fact that I don't have the height or the looks for it. Details.

"Seriously, I'd be happy to work on whatever needs doing," he says.

I pull myself from my thoughts and look out the window. Traffic is at a standstill for what appears to be a clown show up ahead. Just another day in Misty Falls.

"Can you take a side route?" I ask.

Drew taps the steering wheel as he cranes his neck. "There isn't a turnoff for a couple blocks. Given this traffic jam, that could take a half hour."

"May as well listen to some good music." I turn on the radio and flip through the stations, and stop on a Nirvana song. "To match your shirt."

That at least gets a smile, but it fades quickly and he rubs his palms together. "It would be nice if they notified people of road closures. How difficult would it be to get word out? One social media account that we could check would solve all of this."

"You should bring that up to the mayor."

He gives me a bewildered look. "You think she'd listen to me?"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm me."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing." He sighs and glances out the window.

"It's a good idea. You should tell her."

"I'm sure someone else already has."

"Then why hasn't it been done yet?" I counter.

He doesn't reply.

"You're right. There's a lot of unnecessary traffic like this every day. If there was somewhere online where the residents

knew to look whenever they went out, it would make a big difference.”

A commercial comes on for erectile dysfunction. He changes the channel.

“You have a lot of really good ideas. You should bring that up with someone from the city council, if not the mayor directly.”

“Maybe.”

“Just maybe?”

He turns to me. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Do I really need to spell it out for you?”

“Apparently.”

Drew frowns. “Nobody takes me seriously.”

I give him a double-take. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“See? You don’t even believe me.”

“What I don’t believe is that nobody takes you seriously. Why wouldn’t they?”

He turns back to the road. “Because I’m me.”

“People love you. You’re basically a local celebrity.”

“I’m a joke.” He squeezes the steering wheel.

“What makes you think that?”

“After all my years of working with mostly high-end companies, all anyone around here remembers is the one underwear ad I did. That’s all I ever hear about. People will remind me of that until I’m eighty, and I doubt they’ll stop then either.”

“They probably don’t realize it bothers you.”

“Back to my point — it’s because they all think I’m a joke. Everyone thinks I just prance around in my boxers, drinking and partying.”

“Then prove them wrong.”

“How?”

“With the auction. You’ll have the whole town’s attention. Show them what you’re really made of. You already have the work you’ve done for the shelter. If you take action to help improve these daily traffic headaches, then the whole town would see you in a new light.”

He shakes his head.

“You don’t think so?”

“I know so.” Drew rubs the back of his neck.

His response takes me aback. This side of him is so unexpected. Is he having a down day, or is this a part of himself that he doesn’t let others see? And if it’s the latter, what does it mean that he’s letting me in? Am I a friend, and not just an acquaintance now? Does he trust me? Or am I reading too much into this? It’s probably wishful thinking. Like every other woman, I’m pulled into his magnetism. And it’s clear where I stand in that regard. But at least I can be a friend. I can try to encourage him, get him out of this funk.

“Regardless of what other people think — not that their opinions matter — you can still make a difference. Or we could try together.”

He gives me a curious glance. “Meaning?”

“We can both go talk to the mayor. The surprise congestions like this annoy me too. Let’s bring up the issue when you get back from your trip.”

“Maybe.”

“It’d be a good idea. Not only could it help solve a problem, but it would be one more thing to add to your volunteer resumé at the auction.”

The truck jerks and sputters.

I look around. “That can’t be good.”

“No it can’t.”



Luckily the traffic has been inching forward, and we're almost at the nearest turnoff. But Drew doesn't wait. He glances over, turns on the blinker, and darts into the oncoming lane. There aren't any cars coming because of the clown show, and he turns down the side street. The truck sputters again.

"What does that noise mean?" I ask.

"I have no idea." He pulls over, pops the hood, and gets out. A minute later he returns. "Can you press the gas when I give the signal?"

"Sure." I slide over to the driver's side and wait for the signal, whatever it is.

A moment later, his hand appears from around the hood and he gives a thumbs up.

That's the signal. I press the gas pedal, adding pressure until he holds out his palm.

I stop.

Then he gives the thumbs up again, and we repeat the process a few times until he returns and cuts the engine.

"I take it this isn't good news?"

"Nope. I'm going to have to call for a tow. Sorry about this."

"You have nothing to apologize for."

He pulls out his phone and goes back outside.

This isn't how I imagined my evening turning out, but I'm glad that if I'm stuck with anyone it's him. And at least I'm not at the paper forced to be in the same office as Ron. Things could definitely be a lot worse.

Drew returns and slides into the passenger seat. "The tow company has three other cars ahead of me, which means it's going to be hours before they come for the truck. We can either walk about a mile to my parents' house, or we can see if someone can pick us up and drive us over. But that could take as long or longer than walking would. What do you want to do?"

“I could use the exercise.”

And I’m not about to complain about spending more time with Drew.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

*DREW*

**A**bout halfway to my parents' house, Harper stops, leans against a tree, and gasps for air. "I really need a break already. You can see why I didn't cut it as a trail guide."

I glance at her shoes, which look more like they were designed for ballet than hiking. "It isn't like we were prepared for this long walk."

She takes off a shoe and rubs her foot. "I'd have chosen different footwear, that's for sure."

"Sorry for all of this. We can still call someone."

"No. It's fine. I just need a quick break."

"I should've known better than to take the truck after it sat for so long."

"Seriously, it's me. You should've seen me on the trails. It's pretty sad when the guide has to stop and rest more than the tourists who say they can't remember the last time they worked out."

"But the truck is definitely my fault. I should call Rake and see if he can give us a lift. If he's busy, I'm sure Josie can get us."

Harper waves me off. "We don't have much farther to go. I'm fine now. It isn't like we're in the summer heat. I see frost in the shade that didn't melt from this morning."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, let's go. Unless you need more time to rest."

I'm not even short of breath, but I don't let her know that. "Maybe I do."

She breathes a quiet sigh of relief and stays against the tree. Working so much must not leave her any time for taking care of herself, including exercise.

“Will your promotion at the paper give you more free time?” I ask.

“I sure hope so. There’s a lot I have to figure out before I can give my notice at one of the other places. Can you believe I’m sad about leaving either one of them?”

“At least if you have to work three jobs, you enjoy them.”

“That’s true. The smoothie place is a lot of fun and I get to meet some really interesting people, and the shelter is obvious — I get paid to spend time with cats. What could be better than that?”

I could think of about ten million things off the top of my head.

Harper turns to look at me. “What’s your deal with cats?”

“What do you mean?”

She gives me a playful shove. “I’d have to be blind not to notice how squirrely you get around them. What gives?”

“It’s complicated.”

“You don’t like cats?”

“That isn’t it.”

Harper steps a little closer. “What then? Something’s definitely up.”

This is the last thing I want to talk about, but she holds no judgment in her eyes. Just curiosity, maybe some concern.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me. You already know I’m clumsy and have no stamina. Admitting that you aren’t perfect isn’t going to make me think less of you.”

“You think I’m perfect?” I ask.

“You don’t?”

I burst out laughing.

The corners of her mouth twitch. “What’s so funny?”

“After seeing the state of my parents’ house, you can still say I’m perfect?”

“It isn’t like you live there — if that were the case, then I’d have some questions. But you clearly want to keep their memory alive, and that’s sweet.”

She thinks my dysfunction is sweet?

“Back to the cats,” she says. “You said you aren’t allergic, so what’s the deal?”

My heart pounds, threatening to explode from my chest. It’s so loud she has to be able to hear it. I’ve never told anyone about why I’m deathly afraid of cats. Although right now I don’t know which would be worse, having to face a cat or telling her my irrational fear.

She puts a hand on my arm, and I jump.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

I take a deep breath. “I’m afraid of cats.”

“You’re scared of them?” Her eyebrows lift in surprise.

“Deathly.” I look away. But that’s a mistake because taking my attention off her only makes me flash back to the event that caused all of this.

“What happened?” Harper asks, suddenly in front of me.

My breathing grows labored. All I see is fur, teeth, and claws. Hear the growling and hissing.

“Drew?”

I snap my attention back to the present.

Harper’s looking at me with her big, beautiful eyes and somehow her fingers are now threaded through mine. And that relaxes me. Slightly.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

It takes me a moment to find my breath. Then I get lost in her eyes. “I want to tell you.”

She squeezes my hand.

I close my eyes and go back in time as if all these years haven’t passed. Focus on her hand in mine. Try to come back to the present. Open my eyes and gaze into hers. “When I was

little, my parents brought me to a house I'd never been to before. I was playing with blocks when a cat suddenly jumped on me, hissing and growling. Its teeth and claws seemed to tear apart every inch of my flesh. I screamed and cried, and that only made it worse. The attack seemed to go on forever." I gasp for air. "And now I can't see a cat without thinking a giant terror is about to attack me."

Her mouth gapes. "I've never seen a cat act like that. Was something wrong with it?"

"I was told that it got spooked by something and I happened to be in its way as it was running to safety. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but that doesn't erase my fears."

"How badly were you hurt?"

"My arms and back were scratched up, but I was wearing a fleece shirt so it could've been a lot worse. My face didn't get touched, so all in all it wasn't so bad — at least in that regard. But now I can't go near cats without reliving that attack."

Harper wraps her arms around me and squeezes me. "You must've been so frightened. I can't even imagine."

I hold her close and take comfort in her embrace. Breathe in her fruity perfume. "It was so long ago, you'd think I'd be over it by now."

"Did your parents ever take you to talk with a doctor about it?"

"They never knew about my fear, and I did a good job of avoiding cats until now."

She steps back and looks deep in thought. "Do you want to try to overcome your fear?"

My pulse speeds up. "What do you have in mind? Locking me in the cat room?" I try to laugh but end up sounding more like a braying donkey.

"No! That would be cruel. I have some kittens at home. They're tiny and sweet. We could start with them and work you up to grown cats."

I start breathing rapidly. “I, uh—”

“They won’t hurt you. I promise. They’re itty bitty, especially compared to you. They wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“I’ll think about it.”

She grins. “Great. Let’s get going. After we get to the house, you can follow me to my apartment and meet the babies.”

My temperature spikes, and I pull at my collar. “Today?”

“Yeah. Strike while the iron’s hot.”

“I don’t know what that has to do with anything, but I do need to get ready to fly out. I’ve been so busy getting the climber ready.”

“It won’t take long. We’ll start with a quick meet and greet. Next time we can take a little longer.”

“Great.” I don’t even care if she hears the sarcasm dripping from my tone.

Harper pulls out her phone and slides her finger around the screen. “This is a picture of the one we’ll start with. She’s like a ragdoll. You’d be hard pressed to find a more docile kitten.”

I glance at the screen and see a little orange fluff ball curled up in Harper’s arm.

“That selfie is from this morning,” she says. “The kitty is no bigger than that. Imagine how much smaller she’ll look in your arms.”

“I’m not holding her!”

She gives me a funny look. “Okay. But you’ll at least meet her?”

My mouth goes dry. “For a moment. Then I need to go home and pack.”

And take an anti-anxiety pill.

“Deal.” Harper holds out her hand.

I stare at it. “What?”



“You meet the kitty, and we call it good. For now anyway.”

“For now?”

“After you get back, we’ll have you spend some more time with her. Trust me, you’ll love her. She’s the sweetest little thing.”

“I’ll go with you today. I’m not promising anything else.”

“You don’t want to overcome your fear?” she asks.

“I’ve made it this far in life with it.”

“But cats bring so much joy and happiness into the world. You don’t even know what you’re missing out on.”

“Dogs do the same thing. Plus they’re loyal and protective. Can you say the same about cats?”

“They’re every bit as loyal as dogs.”

“Cats?”

“Yes. People are doing more studies on them, and they’re finding proof of what every cat lover has always known — they’re both smart and loyal. Obviously not the same as dogs, but in their own ways.”

“If you say so.”

“It isn’t *me* making these claims. There are actual studies proving the facts.”

“Okay, but studies aren’t going to change my reactions.”

She grabs my arm and drags me down the street.

I don’t know what just happened, but somehow I’ve not only told someone about my fear of cats, but I’ve also agreed to let her try to rid me of it.

The rest of the trek to the house seems to take twice as long as the first half. All I can think about is having to face off with a cat. I don’t care how cute or supposedly safe the kitten is supposed to be, it’s still a cat.

Nothing can change the fact that I was attacked by one who was nearly the same size as I was at the time. The fear has

been there for decades, and the chances of it disappearing is slim. Maybe even impossible.

The rest of the way Harper marches ahead of me, looking back every so often. I don't know how she talked me into divulging my deepest darkest secret. But now I have, and she's determined to fix me.

I'll see the little beast one time, and then I'm done. With any luck, by the time I get back from Italy she'll have forgotten all about this. If I can bring home some good stories about the Ducatis, it might be enough to distract her if she wants to continue with her pseudo therapy.

When we get back to the house, we go inside and down several glasses of water each.

She turns to me after washing her glass and returning it to the cupboard. "You ready to meet the kitty?"

I'll never be ready. But I force a smile. "Let's do this."

"That's the spirit." She practically bounces out of the room.

My heart sinks as I look around the dilapidated house before locking up. It's almost as if I'm trying to push Harper away. Not only have I let her see how much I've let my parents' home go, but now she knows my fear.

Even Rake doesn't know. Sure, he knows I don't like them. It'd be impossible to hide that much from my lifelong best friend, especially when his sister has always been obsessed with animals. But I've never told anyone about the cat attack.

Yet somehow Harper managed to pull it from me. That's what I get for agreeing to volunteer at the shelter. I should've asked more questions first. Could've talked her into letting me work in the stables.

She's leaning against her car by the time I get out there. "You want me to drive?"

"I'll follow you." That way I can leave when I'm ready. She can't force me to stay longer than I can stand. I have no

idea how she lives with seven cats. I'd rather live in a haunted house and take my chances with the undead.

I get in my car and blast my favorite playlist. The songs won't fix anything, but they do boost my confidence. Until I think about the little furry demon.

Why did I agree to this?

Then a thought strikes me. I don't *have* to go to Harper's apartment. There's nothing stopping me from taking a different turn and heading home instead. Or anywhere else. The graveyard sounds fun at this point.

But I don't want Harper thinking less of me than she probably does. She already knows I've let my family home waste away and that I'm scared to death of the very animal she adores.

I don't know why she hasn't run away screaming yet. Anyone else would. But for some reason she not only hasn't, she also wants to help me.

Best to get this over with, then I can focus on getting away to a different country. Won't have to think about claws and sharp teeth until I get back. And even then I can put a stop to this madness. There's no reason I need to spend time getting rid of my fear of cats.

Unless I want to spend more time with Harper.

Which I don't. Given how easily I get lost in her eyes and how nice she feels in my arms, one thing would lead to another and before long I would develop feelings for her. And that's even more dangerous territory than facing off with a cat. The last thing I need is to end up like my parents.

Love destroys dreams. That's all I need to remember. Then I can move on with my life, focus on my career, and not worry about anything holding me back.

But why is it that I'm so much happier when I'm around Harper? Ever since I've been spending time with her, my life as a bachelor seems less appealing.

Because it's a trap. All of it.

I'll humor her by letting her show me the kitten, but that will be it. My focus will be on my career. I'll even talk to Ripple and see if she has anywhere else in the shelter that I can volunteer.

Once the auction is over, I can return to my normal life.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

## *HARPER*

I wake with a jolt, check the time, and cry out. It's an hour past when my alarm should've gone off. I'm late for my shift at the shelter.

Wait. No, I'm not. Today's my first day with only two jobs. Everything from yesterday afternoon floods back into my mind — saying goodbye to everyone at Smooth Smoothie, my friends wishing me well, and my boss sending me off with a Champion smoothie.

Which means I have another hour to sleep, but there's no way my racing heart will allow it. Aside from that, I can hear the cats meowing for their breakfast. That's probably what woke me. It's going to take some time to get them adjusted to my new schedule.

Yawning, I lumber out of bed and make my way to the cats. They swarm my feet, some meowing and others pleading with their eyes. The guilt works, and I feed them before myself.

Since I have extra time, I make myself some bacon and eggs, stopping every so often to stare at the ocean. One thing I love about this apartment building is that there really is no unit with a bad view. Even the cheaper ones like mine have one window with a view of the water.

While I flip the bacon, I check for any new texts from Drew. Since he's been gone, we've texted almost daily. But with the time difference and both of us busy working, the messages have been few and far between. He did send a few pictures of the motorcycles and said he's been riding them on the open road.

Cupcake rubs against my legs, which reminds me of the last time I saw Drew. He came over here after our long walk when the truck broke down. You'd have thought he was entering a lion's den and not just my apartment with a litter of kittens. He hid behind me as we entered, and he made a high-

pitched noise when I tried to hand him a little kitty. I've never heard such a sound from a grown man.

It took some coaxing, but I got him to pet the docile fluff ball. And by pet I mean one quick pat before retreating back into the hallway, eager to get back to his condo to finish packing.

While he's been away, I've sent him a few cat pics and told him some cute things they've done, like grooming each other and batting at toys. Hopefully those smaller steps are warming him up to the feline race slowly.

I'm determined to see the day he confidently walks into a room full of cats and can pick one up without a bit of anxiety. It won't be right away, but it can happen.

It's so strange sitting at my table and eating a meal without the pressure of rushing off. I have plenty of time to get ready for my day. Is this what it's like for most people? Not running around in a frenzy is a pace I've only dreamed about.

After I get showered and dressed, I have a little time to work on one of my articles for the paper. I still haven't finished the interview with Rake. Once that goes out, so many new people will read not only that one but everything else I've written.

Just the thought makes my blood pressure spike. If Drew feels anything like this when he's around cats, I have more sympathy for him. Readers seeing my photos is one thing, but reading my words feels so much more personal.

In the last few days since Drew went out of town, I've managed to rope in a few more bachelors for the auction. Now I have more than enough articles to write. One is a volunteer firefighter, so he already has that for community service. Another guy who is a bodybuilder and fitness instructor has been more work. He thinks he's the hottest catch and doesn't want to give his time because he honestly believes his bulging muscles is all he needs to secure the highest bid. While he hasn't said it in so many words, he's convinced that he alone can save the auction.

At least I don't have to worry about being bored. I have plenty to keep me occupied even without my job at the smoothie shop.

I make the finishing touches on my piece about the volunteer firefighter and email it to the editor. I hold my breath for a moment before hitting send. Then I text the bodybuilding bachelor, again, to find out if he's picked somewhere to volunteer.

He sends a reply telling me that his muscles are enough of a community service for ten bachelors.

I roll my eyes so hard they almost land at the other end of my apartment building.

Then I remind him that I can't feature his biceps in the paper until he's secured volunteer work.

His response is a string of bodybuilding emojis.

I don't respond. My time would be better spent finding more bachelors and forgetting about him.

On the way to Precious Paws, I try to think of other guys to bring into the auction. Nobody comes close to Drew — if anyone could save the auction on his own, it would be him — but there are plenty of single guys who would easily bring in plenty of bids.

My morning at the shelter goes by quickly. I'm overseeing an auction bachelor volunteering in the cat room. He's deep cleaning after having just finished going over inventory. That gives me uninterrupted time to check the cats. I'm no vet, but I've spent enough time with cats to be able to spot a problem quickly.

Which is exactly what happens when I start playing with a little gray and black cat who came in just a few days ago. He keeps licking one spot in particular, and when I push aside the fur it's obvious the skin is irritated.

After I tell Ripple about the problem, she looks the cat over and asks me to take him to the vet's office after my shift. None of the other cats have any concerning issues, so I get a small kennel ready and drop the gray kitty off at the vet clinic.



Now I have time for a leisurely lunch. I grab the paper bag from the cooler in my trunk and find a solitary bench on the beach. Between bites, I work on one of my articles. This season of the year is one of my favorites. While it's still cold, especially by the water, the sun is warm when it beats down. We're past the months when the sun doesn't make a difference.

It makes me even more excited for the coming spring. Little flower buds are appearing all over the island, giving more hints to the impending changes. The cherry blossoms are my favorite, but I also love the tulips and plenty of others. It all points to the coming summer, which is easily the best time of year around here. It's no wonder that's when we get the most tourists. Who doesn't love the green trees and grass that come from our cold rainy seasons?

Before I know it, I need to go to the paper. I'm supposed to arrive early because Melinda is going to review the leaderboard once again. She and Ron both love it. I'm pretty sure everyone else feels the same way as I do — that everything would be better without it. But what can I do? I want the big promotion. Going down to two jobs is better than I hoped for so far, but just one would be a dream.

When I get there, the room is buzzing with excitement. Nearly everyone is gathered around the board. Ron and Melinda are whispering to one another at the front of the room.

Tori turns to me. "Your article on Drew keeps getting more views and comments! I can't wait to see where you place."

I try to smile, but the thought of everyone reading and judging my words sends waves of dread through me. The thought of negative comments has kept me from reading those. I've checked the numbers every so often, but can't bear to scroll down to see what readers are actually saying. Since I'm only getting started with writing articles, I don't want to get frozen in fear, having some snide remark running through my head.

Melinda motions for everyone to turn their attention to her.

Ron takes a seat, and based on his scowl, he would much rather be up front with our boss getting all the attention.

She holds up a manila envelope and digs in, but doesn't pull anything out. "We have new numbers, and we'll have some significant changes on the board. Who's ready to see?"

Ron whistles so loud it makes my ears ring, and everyone else responds with a range from golf claps to hearty hollers. I'm with the golf clappers. Since today is my first day with more time, I have the fewest articles published for the contest.

And it shows as I come in almost dead last. The only person behind me is a guy who hasn't found any bachelors and only wrote one piece about a violin in the auction. He didn't even bring up the fact that it had been used in several Broadway musicals. The auctioneer is going to have his work cut out for him to get a high enough bid to match its actual worth.

After we all make our way to our desks — I'm still behind the file cabinets despite my recent promotion — Ron waltzes over and leans against the wall over me. "People are whispering."

I don't look up from my laptop. "Are they?"

"Yeah. Everyone is starting to think you didn't actually interview Rake Fletcher."

"Maybe I didn't."

From the corner of my eye, I see him flinch. "You didn't?"

"I said *maybe*."

"You're going to get a reputation."

"Hmm." I make a point to tap loudly on my keyboard. Luckily it's clunky so the effect works even better than I was going for.

He sighs. "Do you still only have the one bachelor? He may be a model, but if he's all you have it won't be enough to win the big promotion."

"Thanks for the tip."

Ron grunts. “And once the ladies find out about the philanthropist doctor I secured, nobody’s going to care about your little model anymore.”

I don’t look up. “If you say so.”

He glares at me.

Good. My lack of interest is getting to him. I couldn’t ask for anything more. Except for him to leave me alone.

But he doesn’t. I try to ignore him as I read over my piece about the interview with Rake. I double-check that I’ve added the right pictures and that I’ve linked to the article about Drew in each of the places where I quoted Rake talking about him.

There really isn’t anything else I can add to the article to make it any better. My nerves about the attention are the only thing holding me back. This has the potential to get way more views than anything else about the auction.

And at this point, that’s exactly what I need. I close my eyes and take a deep breath before sending it to the editor. If I keep going at this rate, Melinda is going to have to hire another editor.

Ron makes a harrumphing noise.

“What?” I shoot him an annoyed glance.

“That look you just made.”

“The one that said you can leave now?”

He folds his arms. “The one where you looked so proud of yourself.”

“Go away, Ron. Don’t you have work to do?”

“Maybe you didn’t notice, but I’m at the top of the leaderboard. Nobody’s even close. I can afford a break.”

“Then take it somewhere else.”

“I don’t have to put up with this. I’m leaving.” He spins around.

“Such a shame.”

Ron squares his shoulders and storms away.

Now that he's finally left me alone, the reality of me submitting my interview with Rake hits me. My entire body turns to jelly, and I slink down in my chair. This particular piece has the potential to make or break my aspirations to be the journalist I've never let myself hope I could be.

It's out of my hands. I'm in the ultimate waiting game.

My phone buzzes with a text. I grab it so fast I knock a few things off my desk and they go flying. Nobody's around to see it, so at least that's a benefit to having this spot. I let my pencils and erasers bounce around on the floor while I check the message.

Drew is due back anytime, and clearly I'm eager to hear from him.

But the text is from the bodybuilder. He sent a picture of him lifting weights with a message that I can use that in my article about him.

I sent him a quick reply.

*Harper: I can't until you volunteer.*

*Rocky: You're not going to give up on that, are you?*

*Harper: Nope. Do you like animals?*

*Rocky: I guess.*

I send him some details, and all I get back is an OK. Whether he goes is up to him. I have other things to focus on. Like picking up my mess.

My phone buzzes with another text just as I'm finishing up. I don't bother checking it right away. Rocky probably just has more questions about how he can get out of helping. What I need to do is to find another bachelor, one who won't put up a fuss about everything.

When I do check my messages, I have a new one from Drew.

He's back in town and wants to meet me for dinner.

I'm glad I didn't check it right away. Now he won't know how desperately I want to see him when I respond with the

world's fastest yes. We work out the details, and by the time I leave my shift I can barely feel the ground beneath me. It wouldn't surprise me to find out I'm not actually touching it.

When I pull into the parking lot at the Barbecue Shack, Drew's car isn't there. Either I beat him or he parked on the street somewhere. I take a moment and close my eyes. The whole leaderboard incident plays in my mind. I'm almost in last place. Even with Rake's interview, I'm going to need more. Maybe a lot more.

After dinner, I'm going to have to brainstorm ideas. Not only will I need to recruit more bachelors, but I also need to find some coveted items for the main part of the auction that I can write about to get more views, shares, and comments than Ron.

The idea to turn this into a contest between the reporters was brilliant. Without the pressure of working for the top writer position I wouldn't be putting all this thought into saving the auction. With close to ten of us doing the same thing, this year's auction is likely to be the best ever.

*Tap, tap!*

I glance over to the window.

Drew stands outside, his hair windblown and his skin tanned — probably from all of his time on the bikes on the open roads. How he manages to look even better than before is beyond me, but there he is. I could look at him forever. Actually, I'm already staring.

It takes me a moment to pull myself together and scramble out of the car. I swallow and fumble over my words. Before I can spit out anything that makes sense, he wraps his arms around me.

The embrace surprises me, confuses me. But it feels so right, so warm and comforting. I wrap my arms around him and enjoy the moment, taking in his rugged spicy smell.

I could stay like this forever. That thought both alarms me and gives me hope.

Except for the fact that I'm working so hard for other women to bid on a date with him. My promotion depends on it.

But what if I don't want him going out with anyone else?

## *Chapter Fifteen*

## *DREW*

**I**t's a good thing I know the Barbecue Shack's menu by heart, because I can't focus on it one bit with Harper on the other side of the table. I keep lowering it to sneak peeks at her.

The entire time I was in Italy posing with and riding the motorcycles, she was all I could think about. Sure, I enjoyed the expensive bikes but it would've been so much better to have her there. Not only would she have appreciated the fine craftsmanship as much as I did, but I missed spending time with her.

I should've been over the moon about my age not being an issue for the shoot — the photographers even talked about bringing me back — but all I could think about was returning home and being with her. What occupied my mind the most wasn't the job at hand, but trying to figure out how I could find work that wouldn't require me going out of town constantly.

Over the course of getting ready for the auction, I've really gotten accustomed to frequent visits with Harper. I've been seeing her every day when on the island. And the walk we took after the truck broke down was like a dream. Everything from that day has been playing in my mind on repeat since then — except the part with the cats. I could do without that. But even so, it was so sweet of her to want to help me overcome my fear.

I don't have to become unafraid of cats to be with her. Right now we're having loads of fun, and there are no cats in sight. We could go out like this all the time, and my apprehension toward the animals she loves so much wouldn't make a difference. We have a good thing going now. Hanging out, talking, laughing.

Nothing needs to change. Except that I want more. Being away for nearly a week and only texting her made it clear how



much I've grown to like our time together. More than like it, if I'm being honest with myself.

"Drew?"

I shake my head and pull myself from my thoughts.

Both Harper and the server are looking at me expectantly.

"Jet lag," I say, even though the time change has nothing to do with my distraction. "I'll have the daily special. Does that come with an appetizer?"

"Not today." The server gives me a flirty smile.

I turn to Harper. "Do you want jojos or onion rings? I could go for either."

"Both sound good." She gives me that sweet smile, the one that can bring me to my knees.

"You heard her," I say to the server but I keep my attention on the beauty in front of me. "We'll have both the jojos and the onion rings."

Harper's mouth falls open. "That isn't what I meant."

I grin. "That's what you *said*."

We order drinks, and the server leaves.

Harper's nose wrinkles in the most adorable way. "I really didn't expect you to order both appetizers. All I meant was that either one would be fine." She leans closer. "I don't want to take advantage of your offer to buy me dinner."

"Trust me, if I didn't want to order all that I wouldn't have."

She blinks a few times, like she doesn't know what to make of me.

I drink her in. Everything about her is intoxicating. I love the sprinkling of freckles across her nose, the spark in her gorgeous eyes, the shape of her lips. She's a little quirky — something that would put off a conceited jerk like Ron, but all I see is her spunk. Harper owns her uniqueness and doesn't apologize for it. She is who she is, and that's that. Take it or

leave it. I'll take it. As much as she'll give me. I want to spend every moment with her that I can and get to know everything about her.

This is something I've never felt before for anyone. I've also never socialized with anyone long enough to allow myself to get to this point. With every woman before her, I gave them one date and moved on. Nobody else has ever left such an impression, made me crave to know more.

Harper laughs nervously and plays with the straw in her water glass. "You must be tired. You're hardly saying anything."

"I'm just enjoying the company."

She tilts her head. "So am I. This is nice."

Before I can agree, the server arrives with our appetizers. She winks at me. "Do you want your wine now or with the meal, big guy?"

I turn to Harper. "What do you think? And don't say both. Actually, go ahead."

She cracks a smile. "Now sounds good."

"You heard the lady," I say to the server, again not looking at her.

"Wonderful." She huffs and walks away.

Harper giggles. "I don't think she likes me very much."

"What's not to like?"

Pink creeps into her cheeks, and she looks away.

I want to lean over the table full of appetizers and kiss away whatever insecurity or shyness is plaguing her. This woman is the closest to perfection I've ever seen in anyone. Being in her presence is overwhelming, in the best way possible.

The server returns with wine and glasses. She pours, giving Harper significantly less than me. "Anything else?"

I gesture toward the glass. “It looks like you accidentally gave my date too little.”

Harper’s eyes widen.

The server’s brows draw together, and she adds another inch to Harper’s wine. “Anything else?”

“No.”

She leaves again, mumbling under her breath.

“I’m your date?” Harper asks.

“Only if you want to be.” I reach around the food and put my hand on hers. “I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable, but I also needed to make a point to that rude server.”

She chews on her lower lip.

What is she trying to do to me? I pull my hand away and pile appetizers on my plate. If I keep looking into Harper’s eyes, I won’t be able to stop myself from going around the table and placing my mouth on hers right here in front of everyone.

I dig into the food, glancing over at her every so often. She glances at me half the time. After a while, I laugh. This whole thing is ridiculous. It’s like we’re middle schoolers, afraid to admit how we’re feeling. But ridiculous as it may be, it’s also very refreshing. I’m so tired of the brazen flirts like the server. Going back to something genuine and simple like this makes my heart soar. I can see it in her eyes, the same conflict that’s bouncing around in my heart.

I’m not sure what her reservations are, but my resolve to avoid all relationships is faltering. Quickly. If she keeps making me feel this way, soon I’m going to give in and risk what I’ve always feared.

This is all happening so fast, I’m glad we aren’t jumping into anything. We need to take our time. I do, at least. If this moves forward, it’s going to be the biggest risk of my life. I don’t want to end up like my dad, but at the same time, I’m starting to see that I’m not necessarily doomed to his fate.

There are plenty of people who manage to have a lifetime of love. Rake's parents are the perfect example. They've been married for decades and still look at each other like they're just starting to fall in love. Rake and Josie have the same type of relationship. I never thought my best friend would settle down — he had his own reasons for not wanting a serious relationship — but I've never seen him happier than he is now.

Could that life be a possibility for me? I never thought so until the auction opened this connection between us that has only grown stronger with each passing day. And I wouldn't change a thing. The time I've spent with her has made me feel more alive than anything else I've experienced. She doesn't judge me, and she even wants to see me better myself.

What she doesn't realize is that she has the potential to help me overcome two of my most debilitating fears. Cats are one thing, but risking love is something else entirely. Before meeting her, I'd rather have been locked in a room full of cats rather than give my heart to a woman. The risk of it being smashed and destroyed is far scarier than claws and teeth.

The server returns with our burgers. "Will that be all?"

"I could use some ranch for my fries," I tell her.

She sighs dramatically. "Okay. Is that everything?"

"Yes," Harper says.

The server storms away.

Harper glances at her. "Why do I feel like she's probably spit in our food?"

"No way, not here. I know the owner, and he'd never let that happen. He has cameras all over the kitchen, and if he caught someone doing that he would see to it that they never worked in this town again."

She visibly relaxes.

"Dig in." I motion toward her burger.

She does, and the server places a small dish of ranch in front of me without a word before taking off again.

Other than the service, everything about this date is perfect. Harper didn't even object to me calling her my date. I really couldn't ask for anything else.

We get through the rest of the meal without any more encounters with the server. She only swings by to give me the check, and doesn't offer us dessert. Not that either of us could eat another bite after the two appetizers and full meals. I have to hunt down a to-go box for Harper's remaining half burger.

On our way out, I rest my hand on the small of her back. What I want is to take her hand or rake my fingers through her hair, but that would all be too forward. Once we reach the parking lot, I turn to her. "Do you need to get going? Any work to do?"

She hesitates before putting her leftovers in her car. "No. I do have some articles I need to write, but nothing that can't wait."

"How's the contest at the Breeze going?"

"Not as great as I'd hoped. I think Ron's working on it every waking moment, and I don't have that kind of time. Although now that I'm not working at the smoothie shop, I do have more than before."

"You're done there?" I hold my hand for a high-five.

She slaps it. "I'm one step closer to only working one job. But I do have to improve my rank on the leaderboard."

"Anything I can do? Another interview? Track down something rare for the auction that you can feature?"

Harper gives me a grateful smile. "I don't want to ask more than you're already doing."

"Would it help?"

"Definitely."

I snap my fingers. "That settles it. Your wish is my command."

"You're my genie now?"

"Maybe."

She laughs. “What do you have in mind?”

“As far as items for the auction, nothing yet. I’ll have to think on it. In the meantime, do you want to see the pictures of the Ducatis I got?”

Her eyes light up. “Did you get to see any unreleased models?”

“See them? I got to ride some.”

“No way!”

“Yes way.” I motion toward the beach, and we start walking.

“You really got to *ride* one?”

“A couple. I’m not sure when they’re going to announce them, so it could be a while before any of those ads see the light of day. But I also got pictures on some of their more popular ones too.”

“You’re so lucky.”

I feel luckier spending time with her, but I keep that thought to myself. Last thing I need is to scare her off.

We find an empty bench overlooking the waves lapping up on the shore, and I pull out my phone, quickly finding the photos of the motorcycles. I purposefully start with the bikes that are already out.

She oohs and ahhs, then turns to me. “I thought you got pictures of some unreleased models?”

“You really do know your motorcycles.”

“Were you testing me?”

“Possibly.”

Harper shoves me. She’s stronger than she looks. “Let me see them!”

Laughing, I scroll to the album I put them into.

She grabs the phone from me, looks through the pictures, zooming in on each one. “These are incredible.”

“You should see them in person.”

“Maybe next time you work with them, I will.”

“Maybe I’d like that.”

Did I really just say that out loud?

Time stops. Our eyes lock and neither of us speaks.

Harper tucks some loose hair behind her ears. “Maybe I’d like that too.”

I don’t take the time to think. I lean close and press my lips on hers. They’re so soft, and this quick kiss is sweeter and more romantic than any other I’ve experienced. I pull back and study her eyes for a reaction.

She closes the gap between us. My pulse pounds as our mouths meet again. She tastes of minty gum and smells sweet like pears and citrus. I run my fingers through her hair, and it’s even softer than it looks. Kissing her is like nothing else. I’ve never spent so much time thinking about this ahead of time — she was on my mind for the entire trip.

Given that I’ve been strict about my personal ban on relationships, the fact that she’s making me reconsider my decision has turned everything upside down. Even a simple kiss is explosive like fireworks, setting my skin on fire and igniting a deeper desire.

I pull away. Can’t treat this like any other date I’ve had in the past. This is special. *She* is special. I care about her, and the depths of that scary emotion dig deeper every moment I spend with her.

She fidgets with her jacket zipper. “Uh, well...”

“Was that okay?” The last thing I want is for her to regret that, to think I’m going to push myself on her.

“It was better than okay.”

Relief washes through me, and I pull her close. Holding her feels so right, like we fit together.

But I have to make sure I’m ready for this leap. I’ve never had a serious relationship before. Nobody else has ever made

it to date number two. I haven't spent nearly a week dreaming about someone while I was off on a photo shoot at any point in my entire career.

And most importantly, I don't want either one of us getting hurt. The problem is, I have no idea how to have a relationship. I barely remember my parents' relationship. It's hard enough just remembering my mom since I was so young when she died.

"What are you thinking?" Harper asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I cup her chin and look deep into her eyes. "You're the most amazing woman I've ever met."



## *Chapter Sixteen*

## HARPER

Drew's words are still ringing through my ears. I haven't stopped thinking about our date last night, even after dreaming about the kiss all night long. It doesn't seem real.

He kissed me and said I'm the most amazing woman he's ever met. I keep telling myself that it was the wine talking.

But this morning he sent me a text saying he can't wait to see me today and that he's working on an idea for an article I can write. If he didn't mean any of that, he'd be texting me excuses instead — reasons why he couldn't go into the shelter today. He wouldn't be offering help so I can get the promotion to head writer.

I don't know what to think about any of this. What I need is to focus on my articles. There's no way I can let Ron win, and at this point he is. Hopefully whatever idea Drew is cooking up is a good one. I'm going to need it, because all of my ideas are duds. The best one I have is Rocky the bodybuilder who thinks he's above volunteering his time.

I'm doomed unless I come up with something brilliant.

My phone rings. It's Raine.

"Hey there," I answer, and plop on my couch.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"Your article about Rake is blowing up!" she says.

"Come again?"

"That interview you did. It has like a million shares!" She's so loud, I have to hold the phone away from my ear.

"It was already published?" I ask.

"You didn't know?"

"No. I just submitted it yesterday."

“Girl,” Raine says. “Your promotion is in the bag! We need to celebrate. What time do you get off work tonight? Josie and I are taking you out. You name the place.”

“I... uh... Let me get back to you.”

“You’d better. If not, we’ll pick. I can’t guarantee you’ll like what we come up with.”

I groan. “I’ll think of something. It’s too early to expect an immediate answer from me.”

“Let me know. We’ll be waiting!”

She ends the call before I can respond. What I wouldn’t give to have her energy. It’s boundless from the moment she wakes up until she goes to bed. I should ask her what supplements she takes.

But first the article. Obviously she’s exaggerating about how many shares it’s had. No way is it a million. But if I’m lucky it has enough to shoot me up the leaderboard, possibly even to pass up Ron. That’s wishful thinking, but I did publish an interview with one of the most popular actors around, who everyone is always talking about. Even fans from other places might be interested in reading the piece from our little town’s tiny newspaper. At least until a bigger publication posts something featuring him.

I can’t let my hopes get too high. Sure, this is big but it isn’t likely to last. Even if it does help me rise in the ranks, I can’t bank on it *keeping* me there. Not when I’m in competition against Ron Alderman.

The page loads slowly — I can only afford the cheapest internet plan. Hopefully that will change soon.

My breath hitches as I wait. The post has a lot of pictures, which is why it’s loading so slowly. I skim through the page, making sure everything is right. As far as I can tell, the only changes Melinda and the editor made were grammatical. The photos are huge and take up far more space than in any other feature I’ve seen in the publication.

When I finally scroll to the end of the piece, I can hardly believe my eyes. It has over two hundred thousand likes,

thousands of shares, and just as many comments.

That's far more than all of Ron's combined. I should've started with this one, but better late than never. I skim through the article again and notice a link to my piece about Drew. I click over to that, and its shares, likes, and comments have all shot up too. Not like Rake's interview, but more than quadruple what it had last night when I checked.

I send Raine a quick text.

*Harper: Thank you!!*

*Raine: For what?*

*Harper: Helping me get the interview with Rake!*

*Raine: It was nothing.*

*Harper: Nothing? You weren't kidding about the social proof!*

*Raine: Happy to help. Plus I'll always take the opportunity to stick it to Ron.*

We share a bunch of laughing emojis back and forth.

*Raine: Did you pick a place to celebrate yet?*

*Harper: For something this big, we need to go to the Grand Falls Resort. Unless they're booked out?*

*Raine: Probably, but I'll get Rake to make the reservation. They always make room for him.*

*Harper: He should be there to celebrate anyway. I couldn't have done this without him.*

*Raine: Perfect. I'll invite Drew and someone else. What time does your shift end tonight?*

*Harper: After this? I'm sure Melinda will give me whatever I want.*

More laughing emojis.

*Raine: I'll text you the details when I have them.*

We exchange celebration emojis, and then I realize how late it is and scramble out the door, barely having time to say

goodbye to the cats.

When I get to the shelter, Ripple gives me a hug. “Congrats on the article!”

“Raine told you?”

“She can’t keep good news to herself.” Ripple smiles. “I hope this doesn’t mean you’ll be leaving the shelter anytime soon, but if it does I’ll be beyond excited for you. You’ve always dreamed of being a journalist.”

“It’s only one article, but if I get the promotion to head writer it will be a full-time job.”

“That’s exactly what you deserve.” She gives me another hug. “Oh, and your bodybuilder is already in the cat room.”

I lift a brow. “He actually showed up? And he’s not *mine*.”

Ripple laughs. “After you make it big, keep sending volunteers my way.”

“Gladly.”

When I get to the cat room, Rocky is sitting in the middle of the floor with three cats on his lap. He looks up at me. “I wasn’t sure what you wanted me to do, and they wanted attention.”

“That’s great, actually. They need all the socialization they can get before finding their forever homes. I’m going to check inventory and do some paperwork.”

He gives me a thumbs up and picks up yet another cat and whispers baby talk to her. Maybe he isn’t as bad as I first thought.

After checking the inventory, I head to the main supply closet to grab a few needed items. On my way back, someone clears his throat and asks if I need help.

I turn to see Drew. “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be recovering from an international flight.”

“Exactly why I can’t sleep. Jet lag.”

“I’ll take the help.” I hand him half my load.

“Do you still need my help finding a unique item for the auction?” he asks.

“You heard about Rake’s interview.”

“That’s all anyone is talking about. I stopped off at a store, and there were three separate conversations about it in the line.”

“Dang.”

“Hopefully that’ll put Ron in his place.”

“I’ll have to let you know. I’m sure he isn’t happy about it.”

Drew laughs. “Good.” Then he hesitates when we reach the door to the cat room.

“You want to stay out here?” I tease.

He shrugs. “I can wait for you.”

“You don’t even want to see the cats playing on the climber you made?”

“It looked like everything fit into place. What do I do with this stuff?”

“Stay right there.” I head inside and start to put away my supplies before asking Rocky to get the rest from the hallway. Then I find the smallest, cutest kitten and bring him out to Drew.

His eyes widen so far they could fall out of the sockets. “What are you doing with that guy?”

“He’s coming to say hi.”

Drew looks around. “To who?”

“You.” I hold the kitty out. “Do you want to hold him or just give him a little pat?”

“Do I have to pick one?” His voice raises an octave or five.

“Or I can choose.”

“I’ll give him a little pat.” Drew doesn’t move.

I inch toward him. “I call this kitten Bruce, and he wouldn’t—”

“Hurt a fly.”

“Exactly.”

Drew twitches. “What if I was allergic? Would you still force me to like cats?”

“An allergy and a fear are two different things. Yours can be overcome.”

“Great,” he mumbles.

“Just give Bruce a little pat.”

The kitten gives a high-pitched mew in agreement.

“See? He *wants* to meet you.”

Drew lets out a sigh, sounding defeated. “And then you’ll put him back?”

“Sure.” I hold the kitty out closer to him.

He stares at the defenseless fluff ball like he’s waiting for him to attack.

“You can do it,” I say. “Just one little pat.”

“Just to get you to put him back.” Drew reaches slowly toward Bruce.

I’ve seen sloths move faster than this. It feels like an eternity passes, so I grab Drew’s arm and force him to pet the kitten.

Actual sweat beads around his forehead, but then his expression softens. “He’s really soft.”

“He is, and he won’t hurt you. Do you want to pet him on your own this time?”

Drew takes a deep breath and looks conflicted.

“I’m giving you my word,” I reassure him. “Nothing bad will happen.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Because I spend so much time with cats. Most are harmless.”

“I have scars that prove otherwise.”

“You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you were at a formative age. Nobody could fault you for this fear. But I’m telling you, if you give this little guy a chance you’ll love him.”

“That’s a little extreme.”

“Hurry up. I have to get back to work.”

He blinks a few times before reaching out so fast I almost don’t see the movement, and he pets the kitty all on his own.

I maneuver Bruce and clap. “You did it!”

Drew steps back.

“And it wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“It was.”

I give him a playful shove. “You did great, and he’s even purring.”

“He is?”

“Listen.” I hold Bruce up.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“You have to come closer.”

He groans. “I’ll take your word for it.”

I inch the kitten closer to him. “Do you hear it?”

Drew frowns and then turns his ear toward Bruce.

“Wow, they really do sound like motors.” He almost smiles. Almost.

“It’s cute, isn’t it?”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll take that as a win. Do you want to come in and see your handiwork?”



He starts to say something, but then Ripple rounds the corner.

Her eyes light up when she sees him. “Can I get your help in the stables? We need to move some equipment.”

“I’m on it,” he says quickly, and follows her down the hall.

Even though we’re parting ways, I still consider his progress a victory. One day I’ll see him hold a cat of his own volition.

The rest of the morning goes quickly, and unlike Drew, Rocky has really taken to the cats. He sticks around even after I tell him his shift is over.

At lunchtime, I look for Drew but he’s hard at work in the stables so I leave him be. I warm up my leftovers in the employee break room and work on one of my articles for the paper. I’m tempted to sneak a peek at how my interview with Rake is doing, but it’s likely to distract me so I focus on my task at hand — talking up a whale-watching tour with my parents. It’s part of a bigger package my mom came up with for the auction also involving a hike and cliff diving. The last part sounds dangerous and crazy, but I know plenty of adventurous types who would love it so I pretend that I’m writing to them.

A few others come in as I’m halfway through my meal. Luke, the guy who brought me a mocha after I spilled my coffee all over myself, comes over. “Everyone’s talking about how your article about Rake is going to save the auction. Congratulations!”

“People are saying that?”

“Yeah. I heard that one of the news stations in Seattle talked about it on their noon broadcast.”

“The auction or my article?” My mind spins, hardly able to grasp it.

“Both. And a lot of people here in town are now looking for things to donate. I’ve heard people say that tickets are almost sold out. All thanks to you.”

I nearly choke on my food. “Not me. It’s Rake who brought all the attention. I just wrote down what he said and took some pictures of him.”

“And now the auction will be bigger than ever.” He gives me a high-five before grabbing a sack lunch from the fridge.

The others also congratulate me on the article’s success, though I hardly feel like I can take any credit for it. Raine’s the one who secured the interview, and it’s Rake’s name bringing in all the views and attention to the auction.

Although I will gladly take the credit if I’ve managed to pass Ron up on the leaderboard. The thought of it is enough to make me want to get to the Breeze early today. Just to get a peek at the scores before everyone gathers.

I clean up my lunch and head out to the stables to see if Drew is still out there. His shift ended a while ago, but he’s busy carrying something that looks really heavy with two other guys. I don’t want to distract him, so I head for my car and go to the paper.

The office is buzzing louder than usual. Someone whispers my name, then everyone turns my way. Applause breaks out and several people cheer.

My face burns, and I try to get a look at the board. After I move around some people, it comes into view. And my name is at the top.

I start shaking. I’m actually in first place even after being woefully behind everyone else. If I can keep my place, the promotion will be mine.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

## *DREW*

**B**y the time I'm done in the stables, I can feel the jet lag in every inch of my body and my eyelids can barely stay open. But I feel more accomplished than I have in a long time. No, that isn't true. Making the cat climber gave me a similar sense of satisfaction. I spent time and energy making something that will actually help someone.

While modeling is fun and sometimes exciting — like when I can ride expensive motorcycles in a foreign country — it just isn't the same as this. I'm actually making a difference with the work I'm doing for the shelter.

I look around for Harper, but someone tells me she already left for the day. I'd wanted to have lunch with her, but maybe we can have dinner instead. After I have a nap. Definitely need to catch some z's.

On my way home, a crowd gathered in a park catches my attention. Curious, I stop and have a look. Must be the lack of sleep. There are always groups of people slowing traffic around here, whether it be for a parade or some kind of festival or the beloved badminton team practicing, so I don't know why I'm so interested now. Especially with how exhausted I am. Maybe I'm delirious. That must be it. But I go with it, because why not?

It's most likely the all-star high school badminton team. Year after year, they win the national championships. Some towns get excited about their football teams. Not Misty Falls. We lose our minds over badminton.

But there are no racquets or nets here. The mayor is standing on a platform speaking into a microphone. She has several people on either side of her, and elaborate flower displays decorate the stage. What's more interesting is how everyone is captivated by what she has to say. It's quite the production, and now I'm even more curious than before.

“Our traffic jams have gotten worse to the point of daily congestion from our events. Something must be done, and it can’t wait.”

Some people call out their agreement. A few more join in until it seems the whole crowd is hollering.

The mayor holds up her hand. “I have some ideas to help with the issue, such as changing some of the zoning to help with the flow of traffic. My team has discussed other possibilities, such as widening some of the roads, but that could temporarily cause more problems.”

“No more traffic jams!” someone yells.

A few more call their agreement.

“I hear you,” the mayor says. “And keep in mind that the traffic is only one issue of many I’m discussing with my board and also the city council. We want to hear from you, so we’ve set up a website where you’re all welcome to leave feedback. You can do so anonymously, or you can leave your name so we can contact you with follow-up questions.”

She goes on about wanting to make our town a better place, and her vision excites most everyone gathered. When she wraps up, several of the people around her hold up signs with her name and she tells them to be sure to vote on election day.

That explains it. Traffic has been getting worse for the last two years with no solutions given but now that an election is on the horizon the mayor has motive for change.

If I want to get my name out there as a concerned citizen, I need to act now. I find the website the mayor mentioned and share my idea about having a central spot online where the people of Misty Falls can check and see where that day’s traffic slowdowns will be.

I hurry back to my car before everyone else, but find myself ironically stuck in traffic to leave the rally. As I cruise toward my condo I notice election signs posted in the ground with someone else’s name on them.

No wonder the mayor is so eager to win over the people of our island. She has actual competition. I'm almost certain she ran uncontested the last two times — not that I've ever paid that much attention.

Maybe it's time I start. I want to make a difference, and keeping up on the small town's government could be a good beginning. Not that I would run for mayor, but maybe there are other avenues I *could* pursue. She brought up the city council. It sounds like they discuss ways to improve Misty Falls. That's something I can get behind, and it would allow me to keep doing modeling from time to time.

It's worth looking into. And if nothing else, I'll probably learn about other ways I can help improve my hometown. Even if I don't take an official position, there has to be something I can do.

Crazy as it sounds, the idea excites me. And what I like more is the option to stay here more often and so I can see Harper as much as possible. I always thought politics were boring, but I also didn't think I was going to age out of so much of my work and even my favorite bar when I'm still young. Not that I'd have considered thirty young even five years ago. Apparently perspective is another thing that comes with getting older.

On my way home I run into... a parade. What timing, just after the mayor made that speech getting everyone excited about improving traffic. For all the places I've traveled, I've never been anywhere that has so many events that regularly block main roads.

It lights even more of a fire underneath me to look into what I can do. Obviously I can't become mayor, at least not any time soon. The city council is probably the place to start, and then possibly when I've *really* aged out of my profession I might be ready for something like that. Or if I haven't stopped modeling because of getting older but have found a new groove — who doesn't dream about adult diapers? — then I might be interested in just traveling less.

That idea seems to make a lot of sense, without having even looked into anything yet. It meets the newly burgeoning desire to make a difference plus it gives me options and a way to ease into a completely different lifestyle.

And I can't deny that the more time I spend with Harper, the more appealing it is to stick around town. Speaking of her, if I get a quick nap then I might have just enough time to meet her for dinner after her shift at the paper.

I don't want to assume she'll have time for me, so I send her a quick text congratulating her again on the success of the interview and ask her about tonight.

My phone rings almost immediately. This is either really good or really bad if she didn't text me back.

"Hey," I answer, trying to keep my tone light even though part of me expects her to say we've been seeing too much of each other, or something along those lines. For all I know, I'm pushing her away. I don't know how to do relationships. This is all new territory.

"Didn't Rake or Raine talk to you?"

"No." What is my best friend planning, and why don't I know about it?

"Maybe he doesn't know yet. Raine cooked up the idea for all of us to go to Grand Falls tonight to celebrate the article."

I relax a little. "That's a great idea. In fact, I wish I'd thought of it. What time?"

"She hasn't gotten back to me, which probably explains why you haven't heard from Rake. But it'll be sometime after my shift. Speaking of work, I have to get back to my job."

"I'll talk to Rake and find out what's going on. Do you want me to pick you up tonight?"

"That'd be great!"

A smile spreads across my face. She sounds excited about seeing me, and here I was worrying that I'd pushed her away.

“When you get to my place, you can come in and see the kittens,” she says.

I picture them as big as me but with red eyes and razor-sharp teeth. “Uh, yeah.”

“We need to get you spending more time with cats. You won’t have any other choice but to fall in love with the little fuzzies.”

“I’d have to see that to believe it.” I may be falling for someone, but it sure isn’t a feline.

“Challenge accepted.”

“Great. Didn’t you say you have to get back to work?”

She laughs. “I do. Melinda’s waiting on me to finish a few articles. I can’t believe how much she’s trusting me with now that I’m at the top of the leaderboard.”

“Wait, what? You beat Ron? You should’ve started the conversation with that! Now *that’s* worth celebrating.”

“It is, and you should see his face. You’d think he swallowed an entire box of sour candies.”

“I wish I could see that. You’ll have to get a picture for me.”

“He’s holed up in his cubicle, typing a million words a minute.”

“I’m so glad it’s you who showed him up. Maybe next time he won’t kick someone when they’re down.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

“Only until I see you again.” My heart thunders once I realize I said that out loud. I end the call before she can reply, which might be a bad move. I really am like a clueless teenager trying to figure this whole relationship thing out.

I call Rake on my way home and get the details for tonight. He secured a reservation at the resort’s restaurant for two hours after Harper’s shift ends. Only him — the rest of us mortals have to book that place months in advance.



Before I climb into bed for a much needed nap, I text the details to Harper.

She sends me a bunch of smiling emojis. Guess that means I didn't mess anything up by ending the call too soon.

Just before closing my eyes, I see a framed photo of my parents on their wedding day. Dad looks as excited about Mom as I feel about Harper.

“Is that why you jumped in without hesitation?” I ask him. “But the real question is, was it worth it? All the pain and heartache that came later?”

The love on his face in this particular moment seems to say yes, but the hardened man he turned into after Mom's passing tells a completely different story.

One thing is clear now that never was before — I'm going to have to navigate my own story on my terms. There's no reason to think that what I'm building with Harper will end so tragically. She's healthy, and the medical advances in the last twenty years are beyond my comprehension. If my mom had gotten sick now instead of back then, maybe things would've worked out in her favor.

My heavy eyelids close, and I dream of my parents, newspaper articles, larger than life cats, and kissing Harper. By the time my alarm wakes me, I'm refreshed physically but worn out emotionally. While I get dressed for the fanciest restaurant in town, all I can think about is having to see the cats. I breathe heavily the entire time.

This really is ridiculous. I'm a grown man, and here I am afraid of a tiny animal that little kids gush over. I really do need this exposure therapy. If I didn't want more time with Harper, I could continue to ignore my fear. But growing closer to her is the one thing I definitely do want.

By the time I'm ringing her doorbell, my antiperspirant is working overtime. My mouth is dry and my palms are sweating. I can barely suck in short, shallow breaths.

Harper opens the door, and she's wearing a turquoise dress that hugs her every curve and brings out some green in her

eyes I hadn't noticed before. She's even more gorgeous and captivating than before — if that's even possible.

It takes me a moment to find my voice. "You look beautiful."

I should've brought her flowers. What was I thinking? If there's a manual on dating, I need it. And quick.

She beams. "Thank you. You look really great too."

We stare at each other like awestruck adolescents. Either that, or she's waiting for me to say something. Usually I don't have a problem finding the right thing to say. However, around her my brain seems to fly out the window and to another country.

"Didn't you say something about the kittens?"

Her eyes widen. "Oh, right. I was going to show them to you." She disappears inside and returns with a fluffy brown and black cat who presses itself to her when it looks at me.

Maybe the little thing is more frightened of me than I am of it. Unlikely, but it's possible.

I hesitate before reaching out to pet the little creature. It buries its face into Harper's elbow. I pat its head, and when it doesn't attack me, I stroke all the way down its back. The cat barely moves.

Harper grins. "See? Not scary at all."

"That's up for debate." But I stroke the kitten a few more times, finding my pulse settling down. Slightly.

"I'm really impressed," she says. "Want to hold her?"

I jump back. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"That's a bit of a leap."

"Not as much as you might think." She snuggles the cowering little cat before heading back inside.

On the way down to my car, Harper tells me more about how upset Ron was over losing his spot on the leaderboard.

“I’m so happy for you. You have this contest in the bag.”

“That’s what I hope, but I don’t want to get overconfident. Knowing him, he’s already got a master plan to displace me.”

“How can he beat an interview with Rake?”

“Leave it to him to come up with something.”

“You have to think positive,” I say.

She lifts a brow. “You mean like how you need to think positively about cats?”

I sigh.

We both laugh and get in the car. Thankfully there are no parades or festivals causing traffic congestion. We arrive at the resort at the same time as Rake and Josie — it’s impossible to miss his car. He’s obsessed with foreign imports and his vehicles always stand out in a crowd.

The valets take both cars, and we all head for the entrance. Rake holds Josie’s hand, and I take the cue.

Harper smiles at me when I thread my fingers through hers.

Raine and her date Rocky don’t take each other’s hands. In fact they both take a step away from each other. It’s probably a first date for them, which has to be awkward considering the two other couples with them are already established. Or at least I think Harper and I are. It isn’t like we’re exclusive, but things are going great. At least they seem to be.

Why am I over-analyzing everything? If only I hadn’t spent my life avoiding relationships, then I might have half a clue as to what’s going on. Maybe I need to talk with Rake and get his opinion. But that’ll have to wait.

We walk through the resort to get to the restaurant. I’m sure they designed it that way specifically, so everyone would have to see some of the many exciting main attractions and want to come for a longer stay.

Once we arrive, mouthwatering aromas make my stomach growl like an animal about to attack. Thankfully the music is

so loud nobody hears it.

A man in a fancy suit leads us through the restaurant directly to our table overlooking the ocean. Unlike everyone else, we don't have to wait for our seats.

We barely have time to sit before a waiter arrives and fills our glasses with champagne. "I hear congratulations are in order."

Harper's face turns beet-red.

Raine offers a toast to the successful newspaper article, and we all clink glasses before sipping the perfect bubbly drinks. Everyone gives words of encouragement to Harper and disses on Ron, who has, over the course of his lifetime, managed to treat all of us badly in one way or another.

Rocky sets his empty glass down. "For such a twerp, he's awfully full of himself."

We all tap our glasses again, but then turn our attention to the menus after the waiter reappears asking what we'd like to order. The entire meal goes off without a hitch. I love watching Harper soak in the attention. Nobody deserves the praise more.

After filling ourselves with some of the most delicious food I've tasted, we return to our cars. It's pitch-black outside and nearly ten o'clock. I want to continue the date with Harper, but at the same time I don't want her to be tired all day tomorrow.

As we near her apartment building, I ask a burning question. "Are Rocky and Raine a thing now? Or was he the only one she could find who was free tonight?"

Harper chuckles. "She didn't have time to set anything up, so she asked me to find someone to go with her. Since he was at the shelter, I asked him if he wanted to eat at the resort. Who's going to say no to that?"

"Only a crazy person."

We make our way up to her apartment and stop at her door. She looks at me expectantly, like she's hoping I'll kiss her

again. Or is that wishful thinking on my part? Or a little of both?

My heart nearly leaps into my throat as I lean forward and press my lips on hers. She tastes of chocolate and champagne.

“Thank you for inviting me,” I say.

“I wouldn’t have wanted anyone else as my date.” She gives me that sweet smile, and it turns my knees to rubber.

I kiss her one more time before she sees herself in.

Once the door closes, I turn around and head back to the parking lot.

There isn’t anything else I want more than to spend time with her every day. And it looks like she feels the same way.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

## *HARPER*

**T**he whole day has gone by in a delightful blur. I dreamed of Drew's kisses all last night, and when I got to the shelter in the morning he offered to come inside the cat room with me. They sniffed his feet and legs, and while I thought he might bolt, he didn't. He even patted a few kittens I held out for him.

He's come so far, and I can't help but think he's doing it for me. The ironic thing is that I want him to overcome his fear for himself. Cats bring so much joy to my life, and I want him to experience that too.

We even ate a picnic lunch on the beach that he put together — I don't know when he had time, considering he stayed out as late as I did and got to Precious Paws just as early. Maybe he's still dealing with jet lag and was awake for part of last night. It's the only thing that makes any sense.

Now I'm about to go to the Breeze, where I'm sure to be at the head of the leaderboard still. Everywhere I go people have been talking to me about the auction and the interview. I've reminded all those people that I have other pieces they can read. Hopefully they do, because every view helps.

Just as I pull into the parking lot, my phone rings. Is it Drew, even though we just saw each other?

I whip out my phone as soon as I cut the engine. It's only my mom calling. Maybe she and Dad saw the interview and will finally stop bugging me about working for them.

"Hi Mom," I answer. "I'm just about to go into the Breeze."

"This won't take long."

I'll believe that when I see it.

"We're having another family dinner tonight," she says. "And we'd all love to see you. It's been a while."

Guilt trip.

“Your nieces and nephews have been asking about you,” she adds.

“Tonight would be great,” I tell her. “I can come over after my shift at the paper. Can I bring someone with me?”

“Someone?” Her tone takes on an interested tone. “As in a male someone?”

Why did I bring it up? I should’ve just come alone and not said anything additional. “I don’t even know if he can make it. I’ll have to ask him when I get a chance.”

“It *is* a him. Are you dating someone?”

“Kind of. I’m not sure that it’s exclusive.” Then I remember that I’m trying to promote other women to bid on a date with him the night after the auction. Suddenly I despise myself. “Actually, it isn’t exclusive at all. We’re just getting to know each other, so I’d appreciate it if you guys don’t bombard him with questions. If he can even come.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” She sounds positively giddy. “Who is it?”

“Mom, I have to go or I’ll be late to work. Love you.”

“You too. Can’t wait to meet your new boyfriend.”

“He isn’t my boyfriend.” I end the call before she can drag it out longer. If only I hadn’t brought up the idea of bringing Drew. I thought he might make a nice buffer or distraction, but it wasn’t well thought out. Now I’m going to have to be a buffer for him before he goes running.

If he even comes to the dinner. He might have plans.

Please already have plans.

I send him a quick text as I walk across the parking lot, and I’m sure to let him know there isn’t any pressure, that he can say no especially with it being so last minute. Maybe I could add in some more qualifiers.

But I don’t need them. He responds right away.



*Drew: I'd love to.*

I'm glad for the extra time with him, but I hope I don't end up regretting it. My family can be a little overwhelming, and considering that Drew doesn't have family, they're likely to be over the top for him. On the other hand, he can manage himself. Even if my parents and siblings do give him a hard time, he'll flip everything around and have them wrapped around his fingertips.

When I enter the office, the room is buzzing, but this time it feels different. The energy isn't as excited as normal. There's something off about it.

My stomach fills with acid even before the door closes shut behind me.

People turn and stare at me. No smiles, no congratulations. A few whisper to each other.

I don't know what's going on, but I don't like it. Keeping my attention in front of me, I make my way to the leaderboard. I'm still at the top, but Ron has made a significant stride toward first place.

Melinda comes out of her office and stares at me. She waves me over to her, her eyebrows drawing closer together.

My thoughts race as I trudge over. Did I do something wrong? Nothing comes to mind, but something obviously happened. Something I'm clueless about.

"Come in." My boss's voice is stiff as a board.

I have no idea what's going on, and I'm sure I don't want to know. "Is everything okay?"

That wins the 'stupidest question of the year' award.

"Sit." She motions to the seat on the other side of her desk.

I feel the urge to blurt out an apology, but I don't know what for, so I do as I'm told.

Melinda's expression tightens even further as she moves at the pace of frozen molasses before she finally sits opposite me. Her chair is higher than mine, so she stares down at me like

I'm a kid in the principal's office. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

I clear my throat. "I'm not sure what's going on."

"Seriously?"

"Everything was great until I walked in here. My interview with Rake is still gaining views and shares. People from all over the world have sent in donations for the auction."

My boss taps her desk with her long blood-red fingernails. That's not intimidating at all. "What about our star bachelor?"

"Drew? He's doing great. Wait until you see the write up I'm working on about how much he's been doing at the animal shelter. He—"

"None of that matters if he isn't available, now does it?" Melinda stares me down.

I swallow. "Why wouldn't he be?"

"You tell me."

I try to figure out what she means. The only thing that makes any sense is that people have seen him and me around town, and people are questioning if we're a couple.

"This!" Melinda slaps down a copy of the *Misty Falls Breeze* on the table. The headline on the page reads: *Misty Falls' Auction Most Eligible Bachelor No Longer Eligible*.

But that isn't the worst part.

It has a picture of Drew and I kissing at the beach. And it isn't just a friendly peck. It's a deep and passionate kiss without a doubt.

Beneath that, it shows the article was written by none other than Ron Alderman. I'm not surprised, although I don't know how he managed that picture. Sure, Drew and I were on public property but how did he know we'd be there? Was he following us?

"Say something!" Melinda's nostrils flare, and her face flushes. I've never seen her so furious.

I'm nearly as angry myself. I have plenty to say to Ron. "Why didn't you talk to me before you published this?"

"I didn't *see* it before it went live! One of the editors approved it, as they have the right to do. The real question is, why are you making out with our star bachelor? The one *you're* promoting?"

"It just happened."

"The kiss?"

"Yes. We were spending time together for the articles, and then we ended up kissing. It wasn't supposed to end up in the Breeze! Nobody asked my permission to print this."

Melinda taps her nails even more rapidly. "You need to find a way to spin this so that it works out for the benefit of the auction. I don't care how you do it, but you will — or you'll be done here."

I gasp.

"You expected anything else when you kissed the most eligible bachelor?"

"Is he not allowed to date other women because he's in the auction? That's ridiculous. He's a famous model, and he's always had women tripping over themselves to get his attention."

Her eyes narrow. "*You* have professional responsibilities. What *you* have done has put the entire auction on the line."

"That's a little dramatic."

"Is it?" Melinda presses her palms on the desk.

"Yes! There are more items donated than ever before. People from all over are taking interest. Did you forget that a news station in Seattle covered the story after *my* interview with Rake Fletcher? And even if Drew is out dating people outside the auction, don't you think that shows how desirable he is? That will make women all the more eager to bid on him!"

She leans back in her chair and looks deep in thought for a moment. “Go with that angle. You’d better hope it works.”

“It’s the truth.”

Melinda stares me down again. “If people don’t bid on him, you can rest assured the promotion to head writer will *not* be yours.”

“What? It isn’t like he’s the only bachelor. We have Brady the volunteer firefighter, Rocky the bodybuilder—”

“Enough! The star of the show is the one whose mouth your lips have been all over. As a promoter of the auction and a writer for this paper, you are not allowed to see him romantically.”

My mouth falls open, and I can’t find words.

“Once the formal dance is over, you can do what you want. But for now, think of him as the auction’s property.”

“Property? He isn’t a piece of meat to be sold.”

She lifts a brow. “Isn’t he?”

“No! Drew isn’t up for bid, a *date* with him is. One evening at a fancy ball. That’s it. I shouldn’t have to explain this to you.”

“And I shouldn’t have to be dealing with one of my writers stuffing her tongue down our most eligible bachelor’s throat.”

“That’s crude.”

“You didn’t seem to think so when you were doing it.”

I leap to my feet, nearly knocking over the chair. “I’ll fix this, okay?”

“You’d better if you want that promotion.”

“What about Ron? Is he still in the running?”

“Of course.”

It takes me a moment to find my voice. “Even though he went behind your back with this article?”

“He didn’t break protocol.”

I throw my hands in the air. “Fine. Consider it fixed.”

“Not until it actually is.”

“It will be.” I spin around and fling open the door.

“Oh, and Harper?”

I glance back at her, fighting hard not to give her a death stare. “Yes?”

“You might want to call Susan and reassure her this won’t ruin the auction.”

“Seriously?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” She scowls at me.

“Whatever.” I hurry out before she can throw more at me.

Ron looks up at me as I pass his desk and smirks. “Did you see all the views on my article about the philanthropist doctor? I told you he’d be a hit with the ladies.”

I stop and put my hands on my hips. “I don’t care about that. Why did you write the piece about Drew and me?”

He straightens his back. “Just keeping the people informed.”

“Melinda thinks the auction is on the line now.”

“Is it?” He glowers at me. “Maybe you should’ve thought about that before swapping spit with the star of the show.”

“What are you, twelve?”

“Maybe you aren’t cut out for this business. Time to consider a different career? I hear you’re *fabulous* at cleaning out the litter boxes at the shelter.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t meant as one.”

He shrugs. “I’m a creative genius. Your articles only got attention because you had pictures of good-looking men that women already drool over.”

“Is that why your photo is never in any of your pieces?”

Ron’s mouth falls open.

“You walked right into that one.” I storm off to my desk, once again glad that it’s hidden away from everyone else. Although it’s only a matter of time before Ron hurries over with a quip to outdo my burn on him.

I pull out my laptop and start typing to finish an article I’m nearly done with — I’ll get to work on the one Melinda wants soon enough. My anger helps me to write faster, and after a quick proofread I send it to the editing staff.

Now time to figure out how I’m going to try and fix the damage Ron has done. But first I have to read his entire article. I barely made it past the headline in Melinda’s office. And now I can hardly force myself to get through his lying drivel. If anyone actually believes what he wrote, they’ll think I’m purposefully trying to destroy the auction. It’s clear he wrote the piece only to make me look incompetent and greedy for attention.

It’s a smear campaign, pure and simple. How Melinda doesn’t see that is beyond me.

Unless she actually does. Nothing sells like gossip, and this steaming pile of cow dung is exactly that. It belongs in the tabloids, not a serious publication like the Misty Falls Breeze.

But Ron is getting everything he wants from it. I look bad, Drew looks bad, and people are talking about the auction even more. Bad press is still press, and Ron looks like the good guy calling out poor behavior.

Not that there’s anything wrong with me spending time with Drew. There isn’t any rule against us seeing each other. In fact, we’re *supposed* to be working together. I’m helping him become the most eligible bachelor at the auction. I didn’t *mean* to develop feelings for him. In fact, I set out not to. He wasn’t supposed to return those feelings either. And like I told Melinda, just because we’ve been seen kissing doesn’t mean he can’t go to the dance with someone else.

Although with every passing moment I hate that idea more and more. Not that it matters. It's just one date, and him being in the auction helps my career. It isn't like we're exclusively seeing each other. There's no problem.

Footsteps sound, and no surprise, Ron is headed my way.

Anger burns in my chest. The last thing I need is to deal with him anymore today. I quickly put my things away and rise before he reaches me.

"Going somewhere?" he asks.

"Yeah, I have an article to work on. One I wasn't planning on. I have to do damage control because *someone* wrote a smear piece about me and the most eligible bachelor. Who did that again?" I scratch my chin, pretending like I have to think long and hard about this.

"Can't blame me for the fact that you kissed your prized bachelor. That's all on you."

"I didn't take the picture or write about it."

He shrugs.

"How do you sleep at night?" I snap.

"Very soundly."

I'm tempted to say something I'll probably regret later, so I hurry past him and out the door.

How did everything become such a mess in such a short period of time? All because my interview with Rake outdid all of Ron's combined, and he's an angry, vindictive jerk who has always had it out for me.

I can't wait to turn this around and use it to my advantage. Spin it around to boost my stats and keep me at the top of the leaderboard. And more importantly, to get the promotion that we both want.

Before I start writing my next article I need to let Drew know what's going on. If he hasn't heard about the drama already. But first, our date. Hopefully nobody will get pictures of us going into my parents' house together.

## *Chapter Nineteen*



## *DREW*

I have never wanted to inflict bodily harm on anyone as badly as I want to right now. If Ron was here in front of me, I'm not sure I could control my fist. I don't care that he has potentially ruined my chances at being in the auction. He put Harper's job on the line, and that's completely unacceptable.

"Are you okay?" Harper asks.

I take a few deep breaths. It barely calms me. "The question is, are you?"

She fidgets with her hair. "I'm sure I will be, but I feel bad about this. I probably should've seen it coming after I took first place on the leaderboard. There's no way he would take that well."

"He should. There's no reason to play dirty when you've done everything by the rules."

"Regardless, now I have the mess to clean up if I still want my chance at the promotion."

"You'll get it. I promise you that."

"How?"

"Because he's a weasel, and I'm going to make sure he gets what he deserves. This whole thing is a reflection on him, not you."

"Not that it matters. My boss is on his side."

I squeeze the steering wheel. "It isn't even your fault. I'm the one who kissed you! Let me talk to your boss."

She shakes her head. "Thanks, but I need to handle this myself."

"What can I do?"

"Help me think of what I can say in my next article to make all of this better."

“Consider it done.” I glance at the large house in front of us. “We should go inside before your parents start to wonder what we’re doing out here.”

I groan. “If they’ve seen Ron’s tabloid piece, my parents probably think we’re making out.”

This is awesome. I’m about to meet Harper’s parents, and they’ve probably seen that picture of us that looks worse than it actually was. I swear Ron used photo-manipulation on it. “How upset do you think they’ll be over it?”

She rubs her temples. “I have no idea. It isn’t like I’ve had many boyfriends, so this is kind of new territory for me.” Her eyes widen. “I can’t believe I just said that to you!”

“It’s fine. I’ve never had a girlfriend.”

“What?” Harper gives me a double-take. “That can’t be right.”

“I haven’t. Not once have I been serious about a girl. You’re the first person to make it past the first date.”

“Why?”

“Nobody else held my interest like you do.”

She stares at me like she’s trying to figure out if I’m toying with her. After her day, I can’t blame her.

I hold up three fingers. “Scouts’ honor.”

“Why me?”

“You’re real and you’re fun. I’ve never met anyone as interesting as you before.”

Harper shakes her head.

I start to tell her that I’m serious, but then the front door of the house opens. Her mom steps outside and looks at my car.

“We’d better go say hi.” I open my door, get out, and open her door.

She doesn’t budge. “There’s still time to turn around and leave.”

“Except that you already told her we’re coming for dinner. And we’re here.”

“I can’t face them.”

“Because you kissed me?”

“Right.”

“I guarantee you that your parents have kissed. They’ll understand.”

She buries her face in her hands. “Now you have me thinking about my parents making out. Ew.”

Her mom waves us over. “Are you going to stay in the car all night?” she calls.

“We’re coming.” I wave back, then help Harper out of the car.

“I wish I’d just stayed in bed today. That would’ve made everything better.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Oh, but I do. I really do.”

I give her a quick squeeze before we head over to the house.

Her mom gives me a sly look, making me think she’s not only seen the article but likes what it implies.

Harper stiffens. “Mom, this is Drew. Drew, my mom, Joy.”

We shake hands, and she says how nice it is to meet me. She emphasizes the word nice.

Harper whispers something to her that I can’t hear, and her mom rolls her eyes. Inside is complete chaos. Five kids run around the living room hollering and kicking a ball around. Music plays from speakers somewhere and the aroma of spices makes my mouth water.

Harper pulls me into the kitchen, which is only slightly quieter. There I meet her dad, who looks me over with far less approval than his wife.

I shake his hand and introduce myself.

“Travis. We’ve met before.” His tone is flat.

Obviously he and his wife aren’t on the same page about their daughter and me making headlines the way we did. I almost wish he’d bring it up, but at the same time I’m kind of relieved he doesn’t.

This is going to be a long night.

Something shatters in the other room, and all the hollering stops.

We all rush into the living room. All the kids are gathered around a pile of broken glass. One looks near tears and the rest have wide eyes. They all point to the one about to cry.

“You’re all involved,” Harper’s mom says. “Olivia, grab me a broom.”

The oldest runs from the room and returns with a broom and pan. She helps her grandma clean the mess, and before long the kids are all back to swinging from the chandeliers.

Harper grins at me. “Never a dull moment around here.”

“I guess not. Kind of reminds me of Rake’s house when we were kids.”

“It was never as crazy as it gets around here, trust me.”

Harper introduces me to her siblings, their spouses, and kids. I recognize most of the adults from around town, but I can’t keep the kids straight.

“Dinner’s ready!” Joy motions for everyone to hurry to the dining room.

I follow the crowd and take a seat next to Harper. Everyone speaks over each other, laughing and passing dishes. It really does remind me of going to Rake’s house growing up. There were the three Fletcher kids and their parents, plus whatever friends were over — it always felt like a full house, just like this. And the food was always this good too.

Travis glances my way every so often, staring at me. He really doesn’t like me. Can’t blame him. I’d probably feel the

same way if it was my daughter plastered over every newspaper in town kissing a guy like me, the eternal partier.

*Clash!*

“Uh-oh!” One of the boys covers his mouth and looks at the ground. He looks like he can’t tell whether to laugh or cry.

Harper’s sister groans. “Milo, you’ve *got* to learn to keep your plate on the table!”

“I’ll get it.” Joy leaps up from her chair and picks up the plate from the floor. She tousles the boy’s hair and goes to the kitchen.

The oldest girl turns to me just as I take a big bite of lasagna. “You’re Rake Fletcher’s best friend?”

I nod, unable to speak.

“What’s that like?” Her eyes light up.

It takes me a moment to chew and swallow my food. “Pretty much just normal life. We’ve always known each other, so I don’t see him like everyone else does. He’s just my friend.”

“But he’s so *cool*.” She sighs dreamily.

“You’re too young for a crush,” her dad says.

“No, I’m not. Next year I’ll be a teenager. I’m not little anymore.”

“Trust me, baby. Twelve is too young to worry about those things.”

She turns her head so he can’t see her roll her eyes.

Joy returns with a new plate of food for her grandson.

“Mom,” her daughter says. “He’ll never learn if you just give him more.”

“He can’t starve.”

“He just ate! If he was hungry, he wouldn’t have purposefully dropped it on the floor.”

“It was an accident.” Joy kisses the top of the boy’s head.  
“Right, Milo?”

The little guy nods emphatically.

At least Travis’s attention is off me for the time being. Hopefully I can find a way to win him over, especially if things continue moving in the right direction with Harper. I don’t want her dad disliking me.

Almost as soon as the meal started, it’s over. The older kids run off with their plates and the younger ones just bolt, laughing and yelling. I scarf down the rest of my food as everyone else clears the table.

When I try to help with the dishes, Harper pushes me toward the living room. “You’re a guest. Why don’t you get to know everyone?”

“Sure, since I’m so popular.”

She lifts a brow. “What do you mean? They all like you.”

“Your dad doesn’t.”

“Nonsense. He loves everyone.”

“Not after Ron’s article.”

“I’m sure it isn’t that. He just isn’t used to me having a boyfr—” She stops herself. “I’m his baby. This is new territory, me bringing someone to the family dinner. It’s been a while since anyone has joined us.”

“Even you.” Joy nudges her daughter as she breezes past us with dirty plates.

“Mo-om. You know how busy I am with my three jobs.”

“You’re turning down a free meal every day. Do you know how much money that works out to be over time?”

Harper drags me into the living room. “Go talk to Olivia about Rake. It’ll be much more pleasant than dealing with my parents.”

She disappears before I can say anything. And I can’t argue her point. Washing off dishes next to her dad would be

more awkwardness than I care to deal with at the moment.

I sit next to Olivia, who is on the couch staring at her phone. “You like Rake’s movies?”

Her eyes light up with excitement. “Oh, definitely!”

“Which is your favorite?”

“That’s not a fair question.” She laughs. “But if I *had* to pick one, I’d probably say *My Sweet Zombie Romance*.”

“Not a bad choice.”

“What’s yours?” she asks.

I try to think of something he was in that she would’ve seen. Not all of the things he acts in are for kids. “I guess I’d go with *Texas Jailbreak*.”

She frowns. “There was like zero romance in the whole thing.”

“But it was exciting.”

“True. Have you seen—?”

“Olivia,” her dad says. “Did you do your math homework?”

“Dad I’m talking to someone who spends a ton of time with *Rake Fletcher*.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

“I hate fractions.” She crosses her arms.

“You still have homework. Get on it, since you didn’t do that before we left.” He turns to one of the other kids and tells him a glass figurine isn’t a toy.

“Homework is stupid,” Olivia mutters.

“Did you say fractions?” I ask.

She nods, making a harrumphing noise.

“Can I have a look?”

“You want to help me?”

“Sure. I love fractions.”

Olivia looks at me like I'm crazy.

"Want to know why?"

"Okay."

"Because you can't cook without them. Have you ever tried to bake a cake or cookies? You need to know the difference between three-quarters of a cup and half a teaspoon."

"Those aren't even the same thing."

"Exactly. You wouldn't know that without fractions. So my trick was always to think about baking chocolate chip cookies. Got me through math every time."

She doesn't look convinced, but she pulls a textbook out of a backpack and drops it on the coffee table. After she flips to the page with a piece of notebook paper stuffed in it, she leans back on the couch. "No way you'll convince me this is fun."

I glance over the page and explain the concept to her, talking about sugar and eggs instead of just plain numbers. She seems vaguely interested, and soon she's helping me, then finally doing the problems on her own.

Her dad comes over and looks over the page. "I've never seen her get through math so quickly."

She beams. "He made it make sense."

"Do you happen to do tutoring?" he asks.

"No, but I could. For the right kid." I wink at her.

"What would you charge?" her dad asks.

I put up my palm. "Nothing. Happy to help when I'm here in town."

"You travel too?" Olivia exclaims.

"Sure. My job isn't as glamorous as Rake's, but I get in front of cameras too."

Her mouth drops open.

"You'd really tutor her for free?" her dad asks, obviously not interested in my modeling career.



“Yeah. I struggled through some of my subjects as a kid, so I know what it’s like. And I’m more than happy to help someone close to Harper.”

Her dad and I exchange numbers, then he tells her to pack up so they can go home and get ready for bed.

Harper comes over to me. “That was the sweetest thing.”

“Offering to tutor her?”

“Yeah. Olivia’s been struggling with math forever, and somehow you made it so she figured it out.”

“Just glad to help.”

Harper pulls me off the couch and drags me to the kitchen. She tells her dad about me helping Olivia.

Travis turns to me, his expression stiff. “Is that right?”

“Yes, sir.” I can’t believe I just called him sir.

“Well done.” He turns back to the sink.

“That’s all?” Harper asks.

“What do you want from me?”

“Drew basically performed a miracle with Olivia, and you’re not impressed?”

Travis spins around. “I’m not impressed with the picture of you two on the front page. It’s all I can do to be civil at this point.”

Harper’s brows furrow. “The person you should be mad at is Ron Alderman. He’s the one who followed us around, took the picture, and wrote up that horrible tabloid piece that doesn’t belong in the Breeze.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to change the way I feel.”

She steps closer to him. “Dad, I’m an adult. You have to get used to the idea of me having a relationship.”

“I’d have rather met him first. Seeing that was the first I’d heard anything about the two of you.”

“Believe me, if I’d known the article was going to be published, I’d have done a *lot* differently. But here we are. Drew is a great guy. You’d realize that if you’d give him a chance.”

“We can talk later.” He returns to the sink.

I don’t know if he means he’ll talk to me or Harper later.

This was *not* how I wanted this meeting to go. The first time I actually care about a girl, and her dad thinks I’m trying to take advantage of her. Not that I can blame him, given that he didn’t even know we were seeing each other.

“Sorry about him,” Harper says loud enough for Travis to hear. “Come with me.”

She leads me through the dining room to a deck facing the woods. The silence rings in my ears, and I can faintly hear a waterfall amid a choir of chirping birds. Immediately I start to relax.

“He’ll get over it,” she says. “It was just bad timing with Ron’s article getting published today. He’ll appreciate you helping Olivia. We’ve all tried — and failed.”

“It wasn’t much. I just used what helped me.”

“It’s still something none of us have been able to accomplish.” She leans over and plants a quick kiss on my lips.

“Now your dad is going to hate me all the more.”

She snickers. “I’m telling you he’ll forget all about it once he gets to know you.”

“It’s nearly impossible to break past a bad first impression.”

“Technically it isn’t a first impression. You’ve done most of the outdoor activities their company offers.”

I study her. “You noticed that?”

“How could I not?”

A warmth spreads through my chest. “So you paid attention to me before we started spending time together?”

Pink creeps into her cheeks. “Always, but I never expected you to notice me.”

“I did.”

She jolts. “Really?”

“How could I not?” I cup her chin and hold her gaze. “You’re a force to be reckoned with who doesn’t care what anyone thinks in a world where nearly everyone else is obsessed with putting on a good face.”

“Yeah, well that quality tends to get me into a lot of trouble. Just look at the mess I’ve gotten us into now with Ron’s article. If I’d been content to play without trying so hard to win—”

“Stop. Don’t blame yourself because an idiot is jealous of you.”

“Jealous?”

“He’s *so* green with envy.”

“Of me?” She looks around, like she expects me to be talking to someone else.

I laugh. “Obviously. Why does that surprise you?”

“I’m no threat to anyone.”

“Are you joking? You’re smart and savvy, and you won’t let anything get in the way of what you want. How many people would survive those three jobs as long as you have without giving into the offer your parents have been tossing you? Not many. You want to be independent, and you’ve succeeded.”

She blinks a few times. “But I’m barely scraping by. You’ve seen my tiny apartment. It’s nothing like your condo — or your parents’ house, or your beach house.”

I shrug. “I only have a lot of money because I followed my best friend into the entertainment industry. Posing for cameras isn’t anywhere near as impressive as what *you* do.”

“You mean spilling smoothies, scooping cat litter, and writing articles from the worst desk in the entire building?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I mean. You’re a powerhouse, and you don’t even realize it.”

Her mouth forms an O shape, but that isn’t what catches my attention the most.

Behind her, Travis leans against the doorway.

He gives me a small nod of approval before going back inside.

## Chapter Twenty

**H**arper

My heart plummets when I check the leaderboard. Ron has surpassed me, taking first place again, with his trashy article smearing me and Drew.

Ron sees me looking, and he smirks.

Melinda calls us all together and lectures us on how important it is to keep the integrity of the auction as our first priority. She glowers at Ron and the editor who approved the tabloid piece.

That wipes the smirk off Ron's face.

But then our boss turns her attention to me, and we're on level playing ground. If only Drew wasn't the only one who saw the situation for what it is — Ron being a jerk to me. Again.

Melinda isn't done with us. "I'm going to dock points for bad behavior." She makes a big production of removing points from both of our scores, knocking us into second and third place, with me in third of course. She gives another tongue lashing before dismisses us to get back to work.

Ron and I exchange glares. He follows me to my desk.

"Haven't you done enough damage?" I ask.

"Me? This is all your fault."

"How?" I demand.

"You had to make everything about beating me, rather than just focusing on doing what's best for the auction."

“Are you actually that delusional?”

“I’m just pointing out the facts.”

“The *contest* was your idea! The whole point is to win.”

He tugs on his hair. “So that the auction will be saved. How is that not clear?”

“Says the person who followed me around and wrote a gossip column about my personal life. My parents and nieces and nephews saw that!”

“You did it to yourself when you were making out with the auction’s most eligible bachelor!”

I take a deep breath. “This conversation is done. I have articles I need to write.”

“That should’ve been your focus all along.”

“Whatever.” I bite back a comment that he definitely has coming, but that would also make this argument continue. And I’m done with it.

He doesn’t move.

“Are you going to watch me type?”

“You need to grow up and stop blaming other people for your problems.”

I stare at him, hardly able to believe his accusation.

“Maybe you should stop being a narcissist.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“I am not a narcissist.”

“If you say so.” I pull my laptop out of my bag and set it on my little table.

“I’m *not*.”

“Great. Then prove it by walking away and leaving me alone so I can get my work done.”

“Don’t think for a moment that the promotion will be yours. I’ve been working here longer than you, and I’ve had superiority over you since you got here.”

“I think you mean seniority. Freudian slip?”

His face reddens slightly. “You won’t pass me up. I won’t let it happen!”

“Be careful what you say. I could be in the position to let you go at some point.”

“Fat chance.”

Nobody makes my blood boil like he does. If given the opportunity, I’ll jump at the chance of kicking him out of the Breeze. Either that, or I’ll require him to be civil. But I doubt he can, which will lead to him getting himself fired.

I have to win this contest that he dreamed up. He thought it would bring him all kinds of praise and adoration, but it’s going to put him in his place if I have anything to say about it. And I’m going to keep working as hard as I can.

He finally storms off, but not without having the last word. I don’t give him the satisfaction of paying it any attention.

Instead, I focus on the piece I started last night after I got home. It’s all about Drew and the good he’s been doing in town, helping nonstop at Precious Paws and now with mentoring Olivia. It still seems like it’s missing something. Probably because I haven’t addressed the elephant in the room — Ron’s article.

I’m too embarrassed by it and don’t want to give it any credit by acknowledging it. But I might have to. It isn’t like everyone doesn’t already know about the pictures of Drew and I kissing. It might even get more views if I talk about it.

Ugh, now I’m starting to think like Ron. I don’t want to exploit any situation, but the fact is it can’t be ignored. Not if I want the position as head writer, not if I want Drew to remain the star bachelor for the auction.

But do I really want either of those? If I’m going to have to keep dealing with this cutthroat monkey business then maybe

this isn't the career for me. I don't want to have to experience all this stress of confronting people and have to start thinking like a backstabber.

Maybe working for my parents is actually the right thing for me. I'll just have to go to the gym and learn to be more athletic. And Josie could help me when she and Rake are in town. People all over pay her top dollar for her yoga instruction.

It isn't like I'm without options. I might be chasing after the wrong job. While going back to three jobs is definitely a last resort, I'll have to figure something out. And I can't get my attention on what I'm writing here. Neither my mind nor my pulse will stop racing.

What I need is to go home and just think. Spend some time with my cats. The kittens are getting older every day, and soon they'll go off to their forever homes. That settles it. I pack up my laptop and head to my car without so much as making eye contact with anyone else.

The sun is shining and actually warming me, which means spring is really almost here, and the fresh ocean air helps me to take much-needed deep breaths. It's so much easier to start to think clearly out here.

I open my windows and enjoy the fresh air as I drive home, and things finally look a little better when I arrive. Promising, at least. I don't know how anything is going to turn out, but I can face my problems. But first, cats. I hear the thundering footsteps before I see any of them.

The kittens all race to the door, probably sounding like a herd of elephants to anyone downstairs. Several of them roll around playing with each other, and the others paw at me for attention. I scoop one up just as Cupcake meanders in, yawning and giving me a look that clearly asks where I've been.

I sit next to her and scratch behind her ears. "Have you been working hard, mama? You look tired."



She yawns again. I'm sure the kittens and all their energy is getting to her. Several of the kittens lumber over and crawl all over me, eager for petting. Their sweetness is just what I need, and with every stroke of their soft fur, my frustration from the day melts off.

Then my phone rings. Of course it does. Why wouldn't it?

I almost don't check it, but I do. I'm still technically on the clock at the Breeze, and if Melinda wants to know where I am I have to give account.

What I wouldn't give to be my own boss. Maybe someday I'll have her job. A girl can dream.

The caller is Drew, so I answer it immediately.

"Where are you?" he asks. "I went to the paper, but your car wasn't there."

"I couldn't deal with Ron, so I came home to write here. But I'm not actually doing that yet."

"Can I come over? I have great news!"

"Really? I could use a big helping of that. What is it?"

"I want to tell you in person."

"Sure, but I have cats. Remember?"

"I'll deal with it. This is huge."

"Stop teasing me," I say. "Hurry up and come over."

"Be there in five."

As soon as I end the call, my blood pressure spikes again. My apartment is a disaster, and I have five minutes to make it presentable.

I wiggle out from under the kittens and run around like my pants are on fire, picking up stray clothes strewn around, piles of mail everywhere, and random other things. It never fails to amaze me how easy it is to create a mess.

*Ding-dong!*

He's here already? I look around for anything I've missed, mostly worried about embarrassing laundry sticking out from

under the couch or something. With seven cats, they drag the weirdest things to the strangest places.

*Ding-dong!*

“Coming!” I call, then I settle the cats in my room and close them in.

When I answer the door, Drew stands in front of me, relaxed and chill as ever. Meanwhile, I’m the complete opposite, a total mess. My hair is probably sticking out in every possible direction.

“Sorry about making you wait. I put the cats in another room. Thought you might prefer that.”

He gives me that smile that turns me into a puddle every time. “I appreciate it. Can I come in?”

“Right. Yeah.” I move out of the doorway and motion for him to come in, then visually sweep the apartment again. Everything appears in place.

“Thanks.” He gives me a teasing glance as he saunters in. “Anywhere I can put my jacket?”

“My kitchen chairs double as a coat rack. I’m super fancy like that.”

“Nice.” He puts a laptop bag on the table, then pulls off his coat and rests it on the back of a chair.

The laptop bag piques my curiosity even more.

“What’s your good news?”

“It’s great to see you too.”

“Sorry. I really am happy to see you, but that should go without saying after having to deal with Ron.”

Drew crosses his arms. “How bad was he today?”

“Bad enough that I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m sorry.” He pulls me into his embrace, and I allow him to comfort me. Being in his arms feels like I’m protected from the cruel world by a strong and warm fortress that will fight for my honor.

Did I really just think that? I'm so lame. As long as I didn't say that out loud, I'm fine with it. I am a writer, after all. If my mind didn't think up odd thoughts, I wouldn't have anything interesting to publish.

When Drew pulls away, I feel even more able to stand against the world. Especially if he stays at my side.

"Do you want to hear the news?" He moves his weight from side to side, like he's bursting to tell me.

"Obviously. What is it?"

"You should sit."

I arch an eyebrow. "Now I'm even more curious."

"This is big."

"Bigger than an interview with Rake?"

"Potentially."

"You're killing me! Tell me."

He laughs, then guides me over to the couch. "Have a seat."

"Fine." I throw him an exasperated look and flop onto the nearest cushion. "Now will you tell me?"

"Yes." He sits, wrapping an arm around me. "After we found out about Ron's article, I started trying to think of something you could write articles on that would make everyone forget about what he wrote."

"Good luck with that," I mutter. "But I take it you came up with an idea?"

He nods. "It was a big ask, and I knew my chances were slim to none, but I also knew that not asking was a bigger risk."

"You are seriously killing me. What. Is. It?"

Drew hesitates. His dramatics are going to send me to an early grave. He clears his throat. "You have permission to write a piece about an unreleased, unannounced Ducati."

I stare at him until my eyes dry. I blink rapidly. “Did you say I can write a Ducati feature?”

“There are some parameters, but yes.”

“Wait. How does that tie into the auction?”

He looks like he’s trying to hold back a grin. “They’ve agreed to donate something for the auction — which means you get the credit for it. You’re going to shoot up the ranks past Ron!”

Suddenly I’m glad I sat. “What are they donating? A keychain? Surely they aren’t donating a motorcycle.”

“No, not a bike. A full set of riding leathers. They promised it would be worth well over a grand. Maybe double that when all is said and done.”

My mouth falls open. Can’t find words.

“They almost didn’t agree to any of it, but I explained the situation — that you’re trying to save the town auction and that it goes to help so many good causes. It was a slam dunk. They were thrilled to have a part in it, especially after they saw your piece saying that Rake Fletcher supports it.”

This is unreal. The backroads of Misty Falls are perfect for motorcycles, and we have a whole group of residents who ride on a regular basis. This will draw them in, and we don’t have anything else for them as of yet. If they try to outbid each other for the leathers, it could go high.

“Tell me you aren’t joking,” I say. “Please.”

“I wouldn’t joke about your favorite brand.”

“You’re the best.” I throw my arms around him. “How much can I say about the unreleased bikes?”

“They’ve emailed me a detailed explanation of what you can say and what you can show. Basically, you tease some of the features and you can show parts of the pictures I took. No full pictures, but some sneak peeks. The lady I talked to loved the idea of the first reveals being for this. I don’t want to get your hopes up, but I have a feeling she might decide to donate more than she promised.”

“This is unreal.”

“It’s happening.”

“When can I post the article?”

“As soon as you can read their terms and make the writeup. I already have some ideas for the pictures. I’d love to do the photo edits if you don’t mind.”

“Mind?” I laugh. “You can do whatever you want at this point! I can’t thank you enough for this.”

“I’m just happy to help you out.” He pulls out his phone. “Let me forward you the email, so you can read through what they’ve agreed to.”

Ten minutes later, we both have our computers out. I’m reading through all the parameters of what I can write about — and in doing so, I have more insider information on the new bikes than I ever dreamed of ahead of time. The only thing that could be better would be to actually sit on one like Drew has.

Next to me, he’s hard at work editing a gorgeous picture of a motorcycle with a bright blue sky in the background. It’s breathtaking as it is. I wish I could include it in the article like that, but I’m lucky to have what they’ve given me.

This is definitely bigger than Drew and I kissing. And the full set of leathers is better than any of the items Ron procured.

My heart races at the thought of pulling ahead of him again. And best of all, I’m able to do it without being sneaky and a backstabber like him. I only hope Melinda will be able to see it for what it is. At the rate Ron is going, he’s going to prevent either one of us from getting the promotion. And if that happens, I’m going to look into working remotely after the auction. If I have to continue to deal with him every day, I’m not sure I can manage. Some things are too much, and that guy is pure toxicity.

Time speeds by as my fingers fly across the keyboard. I have a solid first draft of the article. It’ll need some editing of course, but at least this is more than I thought I’d have before Drew called.

After a few minutes, he sets his laptop on the coffee table and stretches. “You want to take a dinner break?”

“Sounds great. But first, do you want to help me feed the cats?”

His smile fades. “Uh, sure.”

At least he agreed to it. That’s progress, and I’ll take it.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

**D**rew

My breathing grows more labored with every step I take down the hall toward the cats. It isn't a long hallway, but it feels a million miles long.

Harper stops, and I nearly crash into her. She puts her hand on a doorknob and turns to me. "Ready for me to release the little angels?"

I wouldn't call them that, but I don't argue the point. Just nod. Not that I'll ever be ready. I try to focus on the last time I patted one. It wasn't so bad. The purring was actually kind of cute. If monsters could be cute. Though Harper's starting to convince me that maybe they are. But it's doubtful.

She opens the door, and the tiny beasts race out and run past us into the living room.

"Not so scary, are they?" Harper asks.

"Considering they're out of sight, no."

"They're sweet, and I think you're starting to see that with each new interaction you have with one."

"You said we need to feed them?" I ask. The sooner we finish the task, the sooner we can get going and I won't have to think about the cats.

"Yep. Let me show you."

I try to pay attention as she shows me the food and gives directions. But I keep looking back to make sure one or all of them aren't about to leap on me with claws extended and teeth

bared. After what I experienced, they can't be trusted. Not with my back turned.

After we fill the numerous dishes with wet and crunchy food, Harper cups her hands and calls out, "Time to eat!"

It sounds like an avalanche as they all tear down the hallway. The cats barrel past us and gather around the bowls, scarfing down their food like it's the last they'll ever get.

When I pull my attention from them, I notice Harper smiling at me.

"What?"

"You're making progress."

"Because I haven't run screaming from the apartment?"

She brushes her fingers along my hairline. "You aren't sweating."

I chuckle nervously. "Do I usually?"

"Yes."

Great. I look away. "We should get going. Where do you want to get dinner?"

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. You've come a long way."

"I'm scared of *kittens*."

"For good reason."

I shrug.

"Now'd be a good time to pet them."

"While they're eating?" I exclaim. "Why? So one of them can bite off my hand?"

Harper laughs. "They won't even notice because they're so busy eating. It's the perfect time to build your tolerance."

"Or it's the perfect time to walk away since they won't see us leaving."

She gives me a slight nudge. "I'll show you."



“Go for it.”

Harper kneels and pets one of the kittens. It doesn't pay her any attention. Then she pats another, getting the same lack of a reaction. “Try it.”

I imagine myself patting one, and it turning around, eyes red, and leaping for my face.

“Come on,” Harper urges.

“Fine.” I shove the images out of my mind and squat next to her, hesitating before I reach for the smallest cat. I give it one quick pet. With a single finger. At least it doesn't react.

Harper takes my arm and forces me to stroke one of the kittens from head to tail. “Now try it on your own.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

She motions toward the cats. “They're almost done eating.”

“Already?” Groaning, I pat one of the kittens on its head. After it continues to ignore me, I give it a full pet down. “Happy?”

Harper looks deep in thought. “I suppose. Next time I want you to pet one when it isn't eating. Think you'll be ready to try that tomorrow at the shelter?”

“Not a chance.”

“I guarantee you won't get hurt.”

“That's not a promise you can keep.”

“Sure it is.” She gives me a look daring me to press the issue. When I don't, she continues. “What's the worst that can happen? A little scratch?”

“Or a ripped-up back.”

“They're small and you're not. The tide has turned from when you were a kid.”

“Maybe.”

“You don’t think so?”

“It has, but that doesn’t change what I’ve been through.”

She frowns. “It doesn’t, but we also both know how strong you are. You’re not that little boy anymore. If a cat gives you grief, you have the upper hand.”

It’s hard to argue with her when she makes such valid points. “I’ll pet one tomorrow. Can we get something to eat now?”

“Yes, definitely. I’ll be right out.”

With that, I leap into the hall and hurry back to the living room, breathing a little easier with each step. I pack my laptop back into its carrying bag while I wait for Harper.

She returns, balancing a pile of cat food dishes in her arms.

“Do you want help with that?”

“Nope. I’ve got it.” She dumps them into the sink and runs the water.

I look around the living room. She has photos of her family on the wall and shelves of books and magazines. I stop in front of one shelf and glance at the titles, slowing as I get to the magazines. I’m not sure what I was expecting, but it wasn’t what I see.

They’re all different publications, and they seem a little random. I’m not surprised to see some motorcycle issues, but the car magazines and random luxury vacation ones throw me off.

Each one is a company I’ve worked with over the years.

She comes over and her eyes widen when she sees me. Color drains from her face when she sees where I’m looking.

I pull out a few magazines. “Are these the ones I was in?”

“No,” she says quickly.

“Because it seems like they might be.”

“I thought you were eager to get dinner.” She gestures to the door. “Let’s get going.”

“Not so fast.”

She turns, doesn’t say anything.

“Are these my magazines?” I ask.

“No.”

“Sure about that?”

“What about dinner? And the cats are going to come out soon now that they’re done eating.”

“I think these are the ones.”

Harper covers her face.

I walk over to her and gently place my hand on her arm. “Have you been collecting my pictures?”

“Can we just go?” she mumbles from behind her palms.

“Why are you embarrassed?”

She looks up at me. “Why? Isn’t it obvious?”

“If that magazine collection is what it looks like, that’s beyond sweet.”

“Doesn’t it only make me look like one of your groupies?”

“My groupies? I wasn’t aware I had those.”

“You know what I mean — all those girls and women who have always fallen over themselves to get a single date with you.”

“None of them have a collection of my magazines going back that far. If someone is really trying to impress me, she might have one or two recent ones. Nothing like that. Definitely not a collection spanning that long.”

She runs past me and down the hall.

Did I say something wrong?

“Harper!” I call.

“I’m staying in tonight!” A door slams.

I go down the hallway and knock on the first closed door.

No response.

“Are you in there?” I ask, and knock again. “Can we talk?”

“I told you,” she calls from behind the door. “I’m not going out tonight!”

“Can I come in?”

The door opens, and she appears in the doorway. “You can’t take a hint, can you?”

“I’m confused about what just happened.”

“I decided to stay in for the evening. It isn’t complicated.”

“But why?”

Her face flushes. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“No.” I cup her face and get lost in her eyes, heat spreading out from my heart. “That magazine collection is really the sweetest thing. Nobody ever cares about me long-term. People spend a few hours with me and then move on. I’ve never had anyone hold an interest in me more than a day. You’re different from everyone else — not only have we been getting to know each other but you’ve had an interest in my work for some time. I’m having trouble finding words to express how much that means to me.”

Her eyes widen. “Really?”

“Yeah. I’m not some big star like Rake. Nobody collects my pictures. Not until you.”

She blinks a few times.

“How long have you been following my career?”

“I’m not sure.” She shrugs.

I pull her into my arms and hold her tight. “I’ve never had anyone stick around in my life other than Rake. He’s it.”

“I’m sure if your parents were here, they’d have everything you were in.”

“My dad wasn’t sentimental like that.”

“You sure about that? Look at all the photos around their house.”

“That was my mom’s work.”

Harper runs her fingers along my jawline. “But he kept them up. I have a hard time believing he wouldn’t have followed and supported your work. And I know if your mom was still here, she’d have every single picture of you. That’s what moms do.”

A lump starts to form in my throat. I don’t often imagine how my parents would react to my line of work. For one, I hardly remember my mom so I don’t have a clue what it would be like having her around. But I can’t help but feel that Harper’s right. Mom would’ve been my biggest cheerleader.

I take a deep breath and clear my throat. “It really means a lot that you cared enough to not only buy those, but save them.”

Her expression softens. “I’ve always been proud of you, even though we’ve never been close.”

“It wasn’t like we were total strangers. We did spend time together growing up because we were both at the Fletcher’s house so often. It was the only place I really ever got to experience family.”

“I can relate.”

“But your family’s great.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never measured up. I’m the awkward goofball in a group of adventurous explorers. They don’t get me — they never will. I don’t doubt they love me, but I’m a mystery to them to this day. I don’t think it would surprise any of us to find out I was switched at birth. It was never that way at Raine’s house.”

“I feel you, but you weren’t switched. There’s a strong family resemblance.”

“Crush my dream, why don’t you?” She gives me a teasing smile.

“Oh good, there’s a smile.” I trace her lower lip with my thumb. “Are you willing to go out for dinner now? Or we could order in and flip through your magazine collection.”

“No! I mean, let’s just go out like we planned.”

“You don’t have to be embarrassed. I really am very touched that you saved all those magazines.”

“Like I’m family?”

“Better than family.” I press my lips on hers and kiss her with a passion I’ve never experienced before. This woman, who is beautiful inside and out, has been invested in me for so long. She’s been proud of my work — something most people make fun of me about. Forgotten memories from long ago at our best friends’ home push to the surface. Water fights in the summer, movie nights, joking over meals, pranks, and so many other fun times spent together. Even a few shared vacations over the years, as the Fletchers have always believed the more the merrier and they loved giving to their kids’ best friends.

Harper looks almost as dizzy as I feel when we finally pull away. I have no idea how long we kissed, but it feels like a lifetime after that swirl of memories. Four years felt like a huge difference back then, but now it’s nothing. And I don’t want anything getting in between us again. Not age, not any other hindrance.

How is it that I never saw how amazing she is until only recently? Was I too distracted? Too full of myself? Did I, like her family, see her as a klutz? Or simply too young to think of as anything romantic?

It hits me. I’ve always seen her as too good for me. Stable, kindhearted, sweet, adorable. Everything I always desired, but never thought I deserved.

She tilts her head. “What’s that look on your face?”

I press a quick kiss on her lips. “I’m starting to realize how much I’ve always adored you from a distance.”

“You have?”

“Yes. I’ve always tried to impress everyone, but you’re always proud to be you and couldn’t care less what people think. I’ve always wanted to be that way.”

“But everyone already loves you. They always have.”

“Because I was always good-looking and popular. Not because I’m *me*. You’re the only one who’s had any real interest in getting to know me.”

“Everyone else is missing out.”

I give her another quick kiss before threading my fingers between hers and leading her to the door. The mama cat walks by, and without thinking I lean over and pat her head.

Harper and I exchange a wide-eyed glance.

She points at me. “You willingly pet a cat!”

“I didn’t even think about it.”

“I’m so proud of you!” She wraps her arms around me and squeezes.

“If only I could take credit for it. I didn’t think about it — it just seemed to happen.”

“That’s what we’ve been waiting for! You’ve moved past your fear, and you’re comfortable with them now.” She beams at me.

“But I can’t guarantee it’ll happen again.”

“It will.” She kisses my cheek. “I know it.”

The look she’s giving me makes me feel like I’m on top of the world. Everyone else could be against me, and at times it feels like many are, but it doesn’t matter as long as Harper Astley keeps looking at me like that.

As we make our way to the parking lot, I barely feel the ground beneath my feet.

Right before I’m about to start the engine, my phone notifies me of a text. I ignore it, not wanting to think about anything other than Harper. It goes off twice more after I start the car.

“Are you going to check that?” she asks.

“It can wait.”

“You sure? It sounds important.”

“Not more than spending time with you.”

She squeezes my hand. “Maybe you should check.”

“I suppose.”

My notification screen shows several texts from my agent. They all say she has big news and for me to call her right away.

“What is it?” Harper asks.

“I’m not sure. My agent is freaking out about something.”

“Oh, sounds interesting! Call her.”

Lisa answers before the first ring ends. “You don’t answer my calls anymore?”

“I only heard the texts. What’s going on?”

“You won’t believe it.”

Harper gives me a curious look, and I shrug in response.

“Then tell me,” I say to Lisa.

“Do you want to guess?”

“Not really.”

She sighs like I’m putting her out in the biggest way. “Fine. What’s the one company you’ve always wanted to work with? Your dream shoot?”

I can barely speak. Can’t let myself even hope that she’s gotten me something with Ferrari. If so, this is certainly the best day of my life.

“You there?” Lisa asks.

Harper gives me another curious look.

“I’m here. Would you just tell me?”

“You’ve been whining about this forever and now you—”



“I have not!”

“Whatever. Ferrari wants you for a shoot.”

“Really?” I nearly drop the phone, but catch it and bring it back to my ear.

“Yes! They have a shoot coming up, and they think you’re the perfect fit.”

I can hardly believe my ears. This is actually happening.  
“When?”

She tells me the date. It’s soon.

“You want me to tell them yes, correct?”

I start to agree, but then I realize something horrible.

They want me there the same day as the spring auction.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

**H**arper

Drew's excitement melts into a look of horror in an instant.

My heart sinks. "What's wrong?"

He just shakes his head.

I so do not understand what just transpired. Whatever was happening sounded great until just now. It was like he went from planning his dream vacation to planning a funeral. I can't make out anything the person on the other end is saying although I can hear her excitable voice from the phone's speakers, so I'm lost. He's barely said anything, and nothing that gives me a clue as to what's going on.

"I'll have to get back to you." He ends the call and puts his phone down.

"What's wrong?"

He stares past me, looking lost in thought and horribly conflicted.

"Can I help?"

Drew shakes his head, his attention still somewhere else.

"Maybe I can. What's going on?"

He takes a deep breath before turning his attention to me, his eyes glazed over. "Ferrari wants me to do a photo shoot."

"That's amazing!" I throw my arms around him. "Why aren't you dancing in the street? This is the best news! You've

always wanted this.”

“The shoot is the same day as the auction.”

It takes me a few seconds to register his words.

“I can’t do both, and I don’t want to let you down.”

“You’re worried about me? When the chance of a lifetime is staring you in the face?”

“I promised you I’d be there. *Your* career depends on me being in the auction.”

“But you can’t turn this down.”

“I’m not going to do that to you.” He shakes his head.

“And I won’t let you say no to this incredible opportunity. You’ve told me how much you’ve always dreamed about this.”

“I have, but you mean more to me than a car.”

“It isn’t just the car — this is something you’ve been working toward for years.”

He rubs his temples. “I know, but I already committed to \_\_\_”

“The auction will go on without you. I’m not letting you say no to the photo shoot.”

“You did that whole writeup on me. Everyone is expecting me to be there, and it’ll make you look bad if I’m not. And like I said, I don’t want to put your promotion on the line.”

“I still have the Ducati reveal to publish. Which is going to be huge. And it isn’t like you haven’t also donated your beach house for a week, and all those other things — the designer clothes and jewelry, the gift cards, and even a gaming system! You’ve easily given more than anyone else.”

“They were gifts I never used. It isn’t like I went out and bought them to donate. Really, it’s no big deal.”

“My point is, you’ve already done *plenty* for the auction. People are going to bid a lot of money for your items.”

“It means too much to you for me to back out.”

“And I don’t want to be the reason you pass up the chance to do something you’ve looked forward to your entire career. There are other bachelors.”

He frowns.

“Call your agent and tell her yes.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“What’s there to think about?” I exclaim.

“I’ve finally found someone who’s more important to me than my career. I don’t want to stand in the way of you getting what you deserve.”

I try to protest, but the words catch in my throat.

“Now that they’ve offered me a photo shoot, I could get another one. I’ll just wait for that.”

“After turning them down? No way. You’re taking it.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not.”

His phone rings.

I scoop it up and accept the call. “He’ll take the job.”

Drew reaches for it, but I leap out of the car.

“Who’s this?” asks the woman at the other end of the line.

“It doesn’t matter. He’s going to do the photo shoot he’s always dreamed about.”

“I need to hear it from him. Who are you?”

Drew comes around the car. “Give that to me!”

I run from him.

“Hello?” says the woman.

“I’m his girlfriend, and I’m telling you he’ll be there.”

“Drew Garrett has a girlfriend?”

“Yes, as I just told you.”

He closes the gap between us and nearly manages to grab his phone from my grasp.

I dart around a tree. “Do whatever you have to and make sure this happens.”

“Where’s Drew?”

“Occupied at the moment.”

He finally catches up to me and snatches his phone back. “Lisa?” He pauses. “I still need to think about this... Yes, I have a girlfriend, and I already promised her I’d be here in town that day... I understand, but I’m still not saying yes.”

I grab the phone again. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about!”

He takes it back. “Yes I do. I’m not breaking my word to her!”

I shove my way closer to speak to his agent. “You know Drew has always wanted this, has been pushing for it for years. No is not an option!”

People are now staring at us.

“Don’t listen to her.” Drew steps away from me.

“I’m accepting on his behalf!” I call, hoping she’ll be able to hear me. “It’s a yes!”

“I have to go.” Drew ends the call and turns to me. “Are you crazy? This is about a promise I made to you!”

“It’s more about you getting your dream job.”

“But that isn’t the only thing to consider. I gave you my word.”

“Which was before you knew this opportunity would come up. The auction will go on. Just the fact that you were the first person to sign up as a bachelor made it so others joined. You’ve done more than anyone could’ve asked.”

He starts to disagree, but I interrupt him. “Ferrari is what you’ve always wanted, a wish come true. You have to take this.”

“My priorities have shifted.”

I squeeze his hand. “That doesn’t mean you can’t go and do the photo shoot. The auction will still happen, and it’ll still do great. I have a feeling the bachelor part of it is here to stay.”

“It isn’t the auction I’m worried about.”

All of a sudden the temperature spikes ten degrees. “You —”

He engulfs both my hands in his. “Harper, you’ve changed everything. My life, my priorities, everything. I don’t want to let you down. You’re relying on this auction, on me being there.”

Once again, he leaves me struggling to find words. I should be telling him that I don’t want him in the auction, having women bid on him. I’d much rather see him fly off and do a photo shoot. All the better that it’s the one he’s always dreamed about. The words are swirling in my mind but won’t make their way to my mouth.

“I don’t want to hold you back from getting the job you want. You need this so much more than I do. I would kick myself if you had to return to working three jobs.”

“You don’t have to worry about me taking on a third job again. Now that I’m writing articles at the Breeze, I don’t have to think about going back to the smoothie shop.”

He frowns.

“I really want you to have this. You, more than anyone, deserve happiness. Go and do your thing. We can figure out everything else when you get back.”

Silence settles between us. I can tell by the conflict in his eyes that his mind is racing every bit as much as mine. Neither of us wants to back down.

He flips over one of my hands and rubs circles on it. “What will happen with your job if I do take the photo shoot? Hypothetically speaking?”

“I’ll keep writing up articles on the auction and hopefully gain more points to keep me high up on the leaderboard.”

“Will you lose the points from my article if I back out?”

“I really don’t know, but there are plenty of other things I can write about — starting with the Ducati article you got me. That’s definitely going to bring in a lot of attention, and that wouldn’t be possible without you.”

“The last thing I want is to let you down.”

“And I’m telling you it’ll be fine. Even if Melinda decides not to count my writeup on you, I’m still high up on the leaderboard. There are plenty of other things for me to post about, even beyond the motorcycles.”

He tugs on his jacket. “How about we get something to eat and think about this. I don’t need to decide right this second.”

I want him to call and accept the offer, but if he won’t then hopefully I can convince him over the meal. “Okay. Let’s get something to eat.”

The second discussion starts out no more productive than our first. Drew still doesn’t want to fulfill his highest aspiration because of me.

The fact that Drew cares enough about me that he would be willing to sacrifice something so important to him, just so I can have what I want, is mind-blowing, really.

His phone rings twice during the meal, but he refuses to look at it.

“I wish you’d take the call,” I say.

“She’s going to want an answer, and I don’t have one.”

“Tell her yes!”

“We both know it isn’t that easy.”

“Sure it is. You’ve always wanted this.”

He reaches across the table and takes my hand. “What I’ve always wanted is *this*. I just didn’t know it until I got to know you. Traveling all the time is getting old, and I’d rather be here on the island with you. That’s what would make me happy.”

“But you’ll always regret not saying yes to this. Go and enjoy it, then if you want to come back and find a new line of work here in Misty Falls you can figure that out later. I’m sure

there will be plenty of opportunities to get in front of the camera here. It won't be as glamorous, but it'll be something."

"I don't care about fame or recognition. I should be around the people I care about and I want to make a difference. Did I tell you how well the first mentoring session with your niece went today?"

"My sister mentioned it."

His eyes light up. "I'm actually helping her. And you know what? I love that far more than any modeling I've done. Making a difference in someone's life is..." He looks like he's struggling to find the words. "I've never felt anything like it. That's what I'd rather do with my life."

My heart swells so big it feels like it could burst. I go around the table and give him a big kiss. He returns it enthusiastically.

"Now do you see where I'm coming from?" he asks.

"Yes, but I still want you to take the Ferrari shoot. If after that you decide not to do any more modeling, then great. But your whole career has been working toward this moment. Don't give it up. Go, and make it everything you've ever envisioned."

"But the auction—"

"Will be fine. I promise."

He frowns. "You're not going to drop this, are you?"

"No. I want your dream to become reality. What better way to go out, if that's what you decide? End on the highest peak. There are so many stories of people's careers fizzling out, and when they finally quit it's kind of sad. If you achieve your biggest role and then stop there, that's what everyone will remember. I'd hate for you to miss this opportunity."

"You don't give up when you believe in something, do you?" He gives me a sheepish grin.

"Never. Does that mean you'll call your agent and say yes?"



Drew taps the table. “You’re sure I’m not going to disappoint you?”

“Are you really asking me that?”

“The only way I’ll agree is if there’s no way me not being in the auction will come back to hurt you.”

“It won’t. I need to focus more attention on my other articles anyway. You’ll be helping me.”

He gives me a disbelieving look. “If you say so.”

“I do. Nothing could be truer. Now, are you going to call her?”

“After we leave.”

I return to my seat, and we finish our meal. He doesn’t pull out his phone in the parking lot or in the car.

“Forgetting something?” I ask.

“Nope. I’ll call her after I drop you off.”

“If you wait too long, you’re going to change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

“You better not.”

He gives me a knowing smile. When we reach my building, he walks me to the door.

“Call me and tell me after you’ve accepted your dream photo shoot.”

“Will do.” He gives me a mind-melting kiss.

I don’t want to let him go, but if he doesn’t call his agent soon he could lose his chance. “Do you know when you fly out?”

“Not yet. But like I said, I’ll call you.”

“You’d better.”

“Yes ma’am.” He snickers as he salutes me and then walks away.

I laugh as I head inside. The cats are all sleeping, still in a post-food coma. After I put my leftovers in the fridge, I grab my laptop and work on my Ducati article. There are a lot of ways I can write the piece, especially given that it's not a full reveal of the upcoming motorcycles.

But before I get too far in, my curiosity gets the best of me, and I open my browser and check on my live articles.

I can hardly believe my eyes. The dislikes have skyrocketed.

A quick read of the comments shows that readers are unhappy with me. People have all kinds of names for me, and each one feels like a punch to the gut.

What happened? Why the sudden vitriol?

I click over to the Breeze's main page and don't see anything alarming. Clicking on other articles doesn't reveal anything either. Not even any of Ron's articles have anything negative about me.

Where is this coming from? Did everyone all at once decide they don't like me anymore? It doesn't make any sense.

I call Raine. She might know something — she always seems to have her pulse on what's going on in our community.

"Hey," she answers. "I hear you and Drew have been spending a lot of time together! Tell me everything. Don't leave out a single detail."

"Later."

"What? You can't leave me hanging."

"Have you heard anything about Ron spreading rumors about me? Or anyone else?"

"No," she says. "Why? What's going on?"

It turns out she hardly knew anything because I've been spilling everything to Drew lately instead of her, so by the time I've caught her up on everything she's calling Ron every name under the sun so loudly I have to hold the phone away from my ear until she's done.

Once she stops, I resume talking. “In other words, you haven’t heard anything.”

“Nothing, but by the time I’m done with him he’s going to be breathing from a completely different orifice.”

“I’m not sure that’s necessary.”

“Oh, it is. He’s always been insufferable, but now he is out of control!”

“We don’t know that he’s behind all the negativity on my articles.”

“It’s obviously him. Let me do some digging. I’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“I appreciate it. I’ve got other articles I need to write, and I don’t need more downvotes or mean comments.”

“That’s what friends are for,” she says.

I’m not sure if she’ll actually find any answers, but at least now I can focus on my writing. Despite everything else, the motorcycle article is really exciting. People are going to love it, and like the interview with Rake, it’s sure to bring in a lot of outside views. Random donations from around the world are still coming in from Rake’s article.

But will it be enough for me to overcome all of Ron’s efforts to take me down?

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

**D**rew

My agent still hasn't returned my call. I probably waited too long to get back to her, and now Ferrari has offered the shoot to someone else.

But is that really such a bad thing? If I can't go, I'll still be able to support Harper by being in the auction. Not that I want to parade myself around so that the highest bidder wins a date with me. The only woman I want to spend my time with is Harper. But thankfully the auction ball will only last a few hours, and after that I can give her my full attention again. She'll get the promotion she wants, and she can work just one job. I would gladly suffer through an evening of one unwanted date so she could have that.

Then we can plan what we want to do, together. I'll figure out a way to make a difference here in our community, whether offering tutoring for more kids or looking into joining the city council. One way or another, I'll turn everything around in my life. And I don't need my old dream to do that.

Missing out on this opportunity is probably the best thing I could ask for, despite Harper's insistence that I go for it. She doesn't understand that the things I once cared so much about don't matter anymore. Aging out of my career was the best thing that could've happened. It helped open my eyes to the amazing things right in front of me here on the island. Starting with her.

My phone rings. It's Lisa.

“Did I lose my chance?” I ask, my voice filled with a little too much hope.

“No, by some miracle. The offer still stands. I just got off the phone with them. How could you not have jumped at the chance? You’ve been pleading for this since you started having any success.”

“Because I have a prior engagement that same day.”

“You’ve canceled it, I assume.”

“Not exactly.”

She makes a throaty noise. “What do you mean?”

“I want to do the photo shoot a day earlier.”

Lisa laughs. And laughs. And laughs some more.

When she finally stops, I continue. “I’m serious.”

“You finally have this chance you’ve been begging for all these years, and now you’re making demands on the company?”

“I’m requesting to go a day early. It’s hardly unreasonable.”

“You’re something else.”

“I want you to ask.”

“And if they say no?” she asks.

I take a deep breath. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“So, you’re not saying no?”

“I’m making a request. I’ll go from there.”

“Are you trying to ruin your career?”

“Does it matter if I am? I’m already aging out.”

“For certain jobs,” she says. “There are plenty of opportunities. Good ones, even. This one and the last one should prove that much.”

“We’ll see.”

“You’re frustrating, you know that?”

“Just find out if they’re willing to work with me. I wouldn’t respect myself if I dropped something I committed to because something better came along. Don’t you think they would appreciate that?”

“What they’d appreciate would be you getting with the program and not making crazy demands.”

“This is neither a demand nor crazy. Just ask. That’s all.”

“Fine, but don’t be surprised if they want nothing to do with you after this.”

“I’m pretty sure they would appreciate integrity.”

Lisa snorts. “If you say so. Stay by your phone and prepare yourself for disappointment.”

“The only thing that would disappoint me would be if I let someone down after promising something.”

“Whatever. Answer on the first ring.” She ends the call.

I could definitely do without these types of stressors in my life. The more I think about finding something local to do, the better it sounds.

But I would also be lying if I tried telling myself that I’m not excited about the idea of potentially working with Ferrari. I’ve dreamed about this since I first began modeling. It might even be enough to get people to forget about the whole underwear gig.

What I wouldn’t give to never have to hear about that again. And I can’t tell you what a relief it was to see that Harper didn’t have a copy of *that* in her magazine collection. If I could go back in time and change one thing, it would be not accepting that job.

Actually, I’d keep my parents from dying, but I don’t think there’s anything anyone could have done about their deaths. Turning down an embarrassing photo shoot would be something under my control. If time travel was on the table. Which clearly it isn’t.

My phone rings, and I answer it without looking. No doubt Lisa would hang up on the third ring just to put me in my place.

“What happened?” I answer.

“You have to help me,” Raine says.

It takes me a moment to register that it’s my best friend’s sister on the other end. “What’s going on?”

She talks so fast I can barely keep up, but the gist is that Ron did something to Harper.

“Can you slow down?” I ask.

Raine sighs, but speaks at a normal human pace. “Ron created a blog for the sole purpose of badmouthing Harper.”

“What?” Everything in my condo takes on a red hue. “Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately.”

“How did you find out?” I demand.

“She told me that all her articles — every last one of them — had a rash of negative comments and downvotes. It was too much to be coincidence, so I went looking for the source. Not surprisingly, it was Ron. He can’t stand anyone outshining him. Especially not a woman.”

I struggle to breathe.

“You still there?” she asks.

“Yes. What are you thinking? You said you need my help.”

“We need to do something about this. I don’t want to tell Harper. She’s busy working on some new pieces. Ron has to be stopped. I want to bury him in the ocean, but that isn’t realistic. He isn’t worth going to jail over.”

I pace, hardly able to think straight. “Text me the link, and I’ll figure out a possible solution after seeing it for myself.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“And why not?”

“You’ll just get more upset. Reading what he said won’t do us any good.”

“Then why tell me?”

“Because we have to help somehow. Hopefully before Harper ever finds out.”

I punch the air. “Why does he have it out for her? I don’t get it!”

“He’s jealous. Not to mention insecure and a sniveling dirtbag.”

“Can’t argue that. What should we do?”

“That’s why I called you. You always have good ideas.”

“I’m so furious, I can hardly think. The last thing I want is to do something rash that we would later regret.”

“We could start our own blog,” she says. “Fight fire with fire.”

“That’s just stooping to his level. I think maybe I should reach out to him. See if I can’t talk some sense into him.”

“Into Ron?” She laughs. “Good luck with that.”

“I’m not saying it’ll be easy, but it’s a first step.”

“Then we throw him into the ocean?”

“If only. Send me the link and I can figure something out.”

“Seriously, it’s only going to make you mad.”

“I’m already seething. And I need to see this for myself. The—”

My phone rings. Of course it does. Lisa has the best timing.

“Sorry, Raine. I have a call I need to take.” I don’t wait for a response before answering the call. “Lisa?”

“That wasn’t the first ring.”

“I’m here aren’t I? Did you talk to them?”

“Yes.”



“What’d they say?”

“By some miracle, they’re willing to work with your timeline.”

I nearly drop the phone. “They are?”

“Surprisingly, yes. But there is a catch.”

“Enough with the dramatics. Just tell me.”

“You need to fly out immediately, and the shoot will be late the night before. They’re a busy company with a tight schedule. Why they’re willing to be so generous is beyond me. It’s your lucky day, so pack your things and head for the airport. I’m working out flight details as we speak. I’ll text you the information as soon as it’s squared away.”

“Immediately?”

“Am I not speaking English? That’s what I said. Get on it.” She ends the call.

I won’t miss these pep talks if I do decide to stop modeling altogether.

As I start packing my things, I call Harper and put it on speaker.

“Hi there,” she answers, sounding happy to hear from me. “What’s up?”

“I’m about to fly out and wanted to hear your voice before I do.”

“You’re at the airport already?” she exclaims.

“Packing to leave. My agent says I have to leave *immediately*.”

“That’s so exciting! Can you believe you’re going to work with Ferrari?”

“I’d still drop it in a heartbeat for you.”

“Never. I’ve been working hard on more articles. Numbers-wise, this will put me ahead of Ron.”

She sounds so happy I don’t want to burst her bubble by telling her about the blog. Raine will let her know, and I can

console her when I come back — after putting Ron in his place if it comes down to that.

“When will you be home?” she asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I don’t want to get her hopes up about the auction, especially if something falls through. Things don’t always go as planned and I don’t want to put her through that. “I’ll let you know as soon as I have the details.”

“Maybe we can go to the ball together. I can tell you all about the auction, and you can tell me all about the shoot. Did I mention I’m so excited for you?”

“You might’ve.” I grin, almost not knowing what to do with someone who’s more excited about my life than I am. This is what I’ve always hoped for, and now that it’s here, Harper is more thrilled about it.

We make some small talk as I finish gathering my things into the luggage. I could do this in my sleep as often as I’ve packed to travel out of town for one photo or another. She tells me about the articles she has ready to go, and she’s convinced they’ll more than make up for me letting her down — not that she would ever put it that way. But that’s what I’m doing, especially considering Ron and his new blog against her.

I keep talking to her as I make my way to the car and start driving. “Last chance. Want me to stay here for you and the auction?”

“You know my answer. I won’t let anything come between you and Ferrari.”

“As long as you know I’d choose you over them if you asked.”

“I appreciate that, but no. Although I won’t be opposed to you making it up to me with a really fancy date after you get back.”

“Consider it done.” When I get in line at the ferry, I notice a familiar car not far away across the street. “You aren’t here waiting for me, are you?”

“Maybe.”

The other car door flings open, and Harper runs out waving to me.

Since I know the line won't move for at least ten minutes, I cut my engine and throw my arms around her. We spin in a circle, making a spectacle of ourselves but I don't care. The entire island already knows how we feel about each other, thanks to Ron.

After I stop and set her on the ground, she smiles. “I couldn't let you leave without saying goodbye in person.”

I just stare at her. Nobody has ever cared about me as much as she has. I've never had anyone make a special trip to see me off.

“What?” She tilts her head.

“I can't get over how lucky I am.” I give her a kiss.

“You're lucky? Because of me?” She looks around.

“Who else?”

“It still seems unreal that we're together. We are, right? A couple, I mean.”

“Of course.” I press my lips on hers again. “Even if I were to do the auction and be forced to go on a date with someone else, I would have my eyes on you the entire time.”

She beams.

The ferry horn blares, and a rush of cars departs the vessel.

My cue to say goodbye.

I turn to Harper. “I'm going to be thinking of you every moment I'm away.”

“Every moment?” She arches a brow. “Even when you're driving a super-expensive foreign car?”

“Even then.” We share another kiss before returning to our respective vehicles. Then we wave until I can't see her anymore. It's silly, but I love it. I never knew having a

relationship could be so much fun. It reminds me of what little I can remember of what my parents shared.

After Harper slips out of sight, one thing is clear.

I'm far more excited about coming back to see her than I am about posing with the cars that were my ultimate goal in life before meeting her. Now I care about her more than anything.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

**H**arper

Two of my articles for the Breeze have gone live overnight, and they're both doing better than expected. I knew the motorcycle preview would draw interest, but the views, votes, and comments have been phenomenal. People are thrilled about the sneak peek and curious what the company is going to donate for the auction. I also published an article with brief overviews of each of my bachelors which links to the fuller pieces I wrote about them individually. I included Drew in there, even though he isn't likely to make it back in time. But he *did* leave early for his photo shoot, so it's a possibility. At least that's what I'm telling myself.

I walk into the office with a bounce to my step. If I'm not in the lead, I have to be close to the top spot. The other articles I've just sent to the editors have to be enough to push me over the edge after they go live.

Everyone is buzzing with excitement, as has been the norm since the whole auction competition began. Now it's winding down, as the dress rehearsal is tonight. Drew won't be there, but I'll either stand in for him or record the whole thing for him to watch later so his absence won't disqualify him.

Melinda calls everyone to the leaderboard.

Ron is in first place and I'm in second, but I can't see the tallies. I can't be that far behind. If only I could tell for sure.

"Attention!" Melinda waves her hands and whistles. "We're coming down to the wire. Tonight is the rehearsal! If you have any last minute articles then get them in ASAP."

Anything sent in after tonight will be too late. Tomorrow evening is the big event!”

I tense up at the thought. All of my work and effort has come down to this. I’ve managed to secure second place as a part-time writer against a bunch of people whose only job is at the Breeze. No matter what happens, I should be proud of my work. Especially considering I had three jobs at the beginning of all this drama.

After pulling myself from my thoughts, I realize Melinda has been going on and I don’t know what she’s saying. It sounds pretty rah-rah, so probably nothing earth-shattering. She just wants us to do what we can to make the auction the best it can be. She says my name, and I snap to attention.

All eyes are on me.

I sit up straight. “Yes?”

“Have you gotten the Ducati donation? The comments have been blowing up about that.” She looks like she’s going to burst.

“I believe they’re sending their mystery item directly to Susan.”

“Great. I’ll call her after our meeting.” Then she goes over all the details for tonight’s rehearsal. “Double-check with all your bachelors that they’re going to be there. If they aren’t…” She makes a slicing motion against her neck.

“You’re going to kill them?” someone exclaims.

Melinda rolls her eyes. “No. They’re out of the auction. Without exception.”

Hopefully Drew will be an exception, since he’s the one everyone is most excited about. His article still has more votes and comments than any other of the bachelors. I checked just before coming here.

The boss concludes the meeting, and everyone returns to work. I settle in at my desk behind the file cabinets and check my live articles before returning to the pieces I need to finalize tonight.

I stop cold when I check the first one. An unrealistic amount of downvotes have come in. Same with my other new ones. This is bad enough to knock me out of second place. If my other articles have been hit as well, I could be farther down the leaderboard when it gets updated.

They all have many more. Not one has been left alone, not even the interview with Rake.

What is going on?

I text Raine.

*Harper: Did you ever find out what's going on with my articles?*

The text shows as read, but she doesn't reply. No dancing dots to indicate she's even trying.

*Harper: Did you find something?*

Read. No dots.

*Harper: You're my best friend. Don't hold out on me!*

*Raine: I was hoping to fix this before having to tell you.*

*Harper: What?*

My mind races, but I can't even begin to imagine what's going on.

*Raine: It might be better if you don't know.*

*Harper: Tell me. Now!*

*Raine: Ron made a blog about you.*

The room spins around me. It all makes sense now. The downvotes, the ugly comments. Everything.

*Raine: Are you OK?*

*Harper: No.*

My hands shake as I hold the phone.

*Raine: I should've told you sooner. I'm sorry.*

*Harper: It's for the best. I never would have been able to focus on my articles.*

*Raine: What do you want me to do?*

*Harper: I don't know.*

Red tints my vision as I crane my neck around the files to look at Ron.

The jerk is laughing uproariously. Probably about my failing articles.

*Raine: There has to be something we can do.*

*Harper: Can we pull your brother in? If Rake makes a statement, it would help. His interview is the biggest thing keeping me afloat.*

*Raine: I wish. He's on set, and I've been given strict orders not to disturb him. Want me to dig a hole for Ron? You can push him in.*

*Harper: Tempting, but no. Give me some time to think about it.*

*Raine: OK. I'll do the same.*

I glare at Ron, not that he's paying any attention. He's still laughing with someone else. They probably think I'm a huge joke.

I'm tempted to ask Raine for the link to his blog, but that won't do me any good. I'll just get even madder, and I won't be able to focus on the pieces I need to write. If I want a chance to even come close to winning, I need to put my all into it.

That's the only real way to fight fire with fire. I don't want to stoop to his level. If I get the promotion, I want it to be fair and square. Not because I got dirty in the process. If nothing else, I'm at least a writer now. Before all of this, I only took pictures for the real writers. There's nothing stopping me from rising in the ranks on my own merit without a contest.

I'll work on my own career and let Ron dig himself deeper on his own. That's not to say I won't hand him a shovel if he wants. But for the time being, I'm going to keep focused on my thing. I've made enough progress that I should be able to get two more submitted to the editors before I go to bed



tonight. Maybe even before leaving the Breeze. That would be ideal since the rehearsal is right after the office closes for the night.

My fire to beat Ron keeps me focused on my writing. It catches me off guard when Melinda announces it's time to leave. I save my work, which only needs a proofread before sending it to the editors. I've gotten more done than I could've hoped for in the time given.

I wanted to check my live articles before hurrying over to the rehearsal, but that will have to wait. It might be better that way, given Ron's blog. It's hard to believe I'm so big a threat to him that he'd go so far as to create that just to hurt me. In a twisted sort of way, it's almost a compliment. If he wasn't threatened by me, he wouldn't bother.

When I get to the Misty Falls Community Center, I can hardly believe my eyes. It's been transformed into something otherworldly, with decorations to put the Titanic to shame.

Susan instructs all the bachelors onto the stage while simultaneously instructing us reporters to sit in the audience. There is barely any walking room because the seats fill the massive room. Has she really sold that many tickets?

This will definitely be the biggest auction in the town's history.

Susan turns to me. "Are we missing someone?"

"Drew had to fly out of town for work tonight."

"Did he know this was mandatory?" Her face scrunches up. "I made that clear."

"Yes, but if he didn't travel for work we wouldn't have the Ducati donation."

"I can't make exceptions."

"It was unavoidable." I sit up taller. "I plan to record the whole thing for him to watch. It'll be like he was here."

"Except that he isn't here."

"If you need someone to stand in for him, I can do that."

She looks at me like I'm crazy. "If he's not here, he's out."

"Won't you reconsider?"

Melinda shoots me a death glare.

I never should have brought this up. Drew didn't give me any indication that he could be back in time. I'm grasping at straws trying to keep him in. I lower myself in my seat and start recording on my phone.

The guys all line up, and Susan gives them instructions. Susan leaves a space between two of the bachelors. Whether that's intentional or not, I don't know. She doesn't mention it either way.

It gives me hope. At the rate I'm going, I need all the hope I can get.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

**D**rew

The ferry jerks my car as it bumps against the dock. I blink a few times and start my engine. Must've fallen asleep on the ride over. I've only gotten a little sleep between all the flights and the photo shoot. I did enjoy myself while there. I'd be crazy not to while getting to spend time with and in one of my favorite cars. Driving it was unreal — it was definitely the experience of a lifetime. I could quit my career happy at this point. And the way things are going with Harper, the idea of moving on with my life seems all the more appealing.

I check the time. Surprisingly, I haven't had any delays, so now I should have enough time before the auction is set to start to run home, shower, and change first. Even if Ron's blog posts have brought down Harper's points in the contest, having me in the auction should help. Not only do they get points for what they publish, but there's some kind of point system for how well the bachelors and items the journalists procured do.

Then once I get past having to go to the ball with someone else tomorrow, I'll be able to solely focus on Harper and figure out what I want to do with my life here on Misty Falls. Maybe I'll take the odd photo shoot, but my life will be here.

The ferry horn blasts, bringing me back to the present. I follow the line of cars off the boat and rush home, my exhausted mind racing with everything I need to do. Hopefully showing up will be good enough for the woman running the auction. I called her at some point and explained to her that

even though I missed the practice, I would make it for the real deal.

She didn't sound impressed. Now it's up to me to prove that I mean business. If it weren't for Harper, I wouldn't care about any of this. But I want her to get that promotion. Nobody deserves it more. I'll do anything to help her get that.

I give Susan another call as I'm getting dressed, but she doesn't answer. Probably busy with everything. It's all for the best. Talking to her in person will likely be more effective anyway.

Once I'm ready, I double-check that I have all the paperwork filled out and I head over. Traffic is busy through town, and the streets are filled with pedestrians near the community center. I have to park several blocks away, and I hurry on foot to the building, trying not to mess up my hair or step in any puddles. But while stepping aside to avoid a family with a large poodle, my foot lands right in a deep hole filled with muddy water. It soaks my leather shoe and water sloshes around inside around my sock.

This is going to make for a fun evening. As long as the water doesn't make my two shoes look different, it should be fine. If it does, hopefully the onstage lighting won't be focusing on my feet.

I weave around people, trying to ignore my wet foot, and make my way to the building. A security guard blocks the door. "Nobody gets in until five o'clock."

"I'm one of the bachelors."

He checks his list. "I'm showing that they're all here."

"Look again. My name's Drew Garrett."

The guard scans his list again. "Nope."

"I need to speak with Susan."

"No can do." He stands in place and looks away from me.

"It's for the cancer foundation!"

He continues to ignore me.

“You’d deny the patients the donations that could come from my auction?”

Nothing.

There has to be another way inside.

I call Susan. She still doesn’t answer, so I try another door. Another security guard, but he’s at least blocking an open door. I can hear bustling conversation and things moving around inside.

“I’m here as one of the bachelors,” I say.

“Name?”

I go back and forth with him just like with the other guy, getting the same result.

“Look. I missed the rehearsal because I was out of town. If I’d have been in town, I’d have been at the rehearsal. I’m all set to be part of this.”

He shakes his head. “Can’t do anything to help you.”

“Just let me talk with Susan.”

“Can’t move from my spot.”

“Look at this.” I pull out my phone, trying to hide my desperation, and find the article Harper wrote about me. “Do you see? That’s an article about how I’m supposed to be here, and look at all the votes and comments about how excited people are to bid. Do you really want to be responsible for losing money for the auction? My name being off the list is clearly a mistake.”

He frowns.

I scroll through the comments farther down, showing even more. “You can think I’m full of baloney, but this article on the Misty Falls Breeze tells the real story.”

The guy sighs and glances back and forth between me and the screen. He gets on his phone and tells someone my story. Then he puts it away and shakes his head. “You missed the rehearsal, end of story.”

“I was out of town!”

“Not my concern.”

“I volunteered for the animal shelter and tutored a girl in math. I’m serious about making our island a better place.”

He shrugs, looking behind me.

I’ve got to find a way inside. But it won’t be with any of these jokers. They seem to think they’re protecting national treasure.

The water in my shoe sloshes loudly as I walk away. It’s disgustingly warm now.

He gives me a look like I’ve just proven that he’s right to turn me away.

“I stepped in a puddle!” After turn a corner around the building, I stop and empty my shoe. Both it and my sock are soaked. There’s no other choice but to put it back on. Then I pace, trying to figure out how to get inside.

After again not getting any answer from Susan, I realize what an idiot I am — Harper must be inside! She’ll get me in, and then I can fix everything. I call her, but it also goes to voicemail. She’s probably too busy to answer as well.

Looks like I’ll have to find another way in the building.

My phone rings.

Harper.

“Hey there.” Her voice is almost overpowered by all the background noise. “Did you do your photo shoot already?”

Clearly we haven’t spoken yet today.

“Everything’s done, and now I’m outside the community center.”

“The Misty Falls Community Center?” she exclaims.

“The one and only. Can you get me in?”

“Where are you?”

“Near the entrance by the card shop that offers scented paper.”

“All the way over there?” she asks. “Give me a minute.”

While I wait, I take off my wet shoe and wring out my sock. It smells like soil. I have a feeling I’m going to put both the socks and shoes in the garbage when I get home. As long as they get me through the evening, I’ll be happy.

The door behind the security guard opens and he turns around, looking confused. Harper appears, and she gestures wildly as she speaks.

I struggle to get the now-cold, soaking-wet sock back onto my foot and then fight to slide it back into the shoe. I really should keep extras in my car. Once I get my footwear squared away, I hurry over to the door.

The security guard is on the phone.

Harper grabs my arm and yanks me inside. “Come on.”

“Hey!” The guard waves frantically but doesn’t leave his post.

I follow Harper through a maze of hallways and rooms, darting around people and donations.

She stops in front of a closed door. “I can’t believe you’re already back.”

“I wanted to be here for you.”

“Hopefully you’ll have more luck talking with Susan than I did.”

“She told you no?” I ask.

“Because you missed the rehearsal. I did record it, so you can see what you missed.” She holds up a fist to knock on the door, which I assume Susan is behind.

“Wait!” I hold up my palm.

She freezes in place. “What?”

“Let me see the video before I plead my case.”

“Okay.” Harper whips out her phone and slides her fingers around the screen before handing it to me. As the video plays, she explains what I missed.

After only two minutes, I have all the information I need. “Let’s do this.”

She puts away her phone and knocks. Then again.

Susan answers the door looking frazzled. She zones in on me. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m in the bachelor auction.”

“You missed the rehearsal.”

“But I saw the video. I know exactly what’s required of me.”

She frowns.

“Watch out!”

Two guys carrying a large box are headed our way.

Harper and I scramble into the room with Susan to let them pass.

“What do you say?” Harper asks, closing the door behind us. “Drew’s here after rearranging his international schedule *and* he’s up to date on his role.”

“He wasn’t here, so he lost his spot.” A phone rings, and she pulls hers out. “I hope it isn’t someone else calling to return their ticket.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I’ve been getting a rash of calls from bidders who aren’t coming after all.”

“Why’s that?” Harper asks.

“Heck if I know.”

“If that’s what this person is doing, ask them,” Harper says.

Susan lets out a frustrated sigh before answering. She pauses before asking the caller, “May I ask why?”



Her eyes widen and she stares right at me.

What did I do?

She covers the mic on her phone. “You’re still willing to be in the auction?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

Harper and I exchange a curious glance.

Susan speaks into the phone. “I don’t know where you got your information, but Drew Garrett is right here in front of me, and he’s in the auction.” She pauses and nods like the other person can see her. “Yes, if you could help get the word out, that would be great. Thank you.”

“What’s going on?” Harper asks.

“There’s some blog that put out the word that you” — she glowers at me — “aren’t in the auction. It would appear that’s why I’ve been inundated with cancels. I need to call back everyone who requested refunds.” She turns to Harper. “Take him back to where the other bachelors are and get him caught up.”

“Yes, of course.” Harper and I head into the hallway, and she gives me a thumbs up. “Wow, can you believe that? You’re back in.”

I should be excited, but acid churns in my gut.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“I’m assuming you had nothing to do with the blog post Susan was talking about.”

“No, I didn’t. Are you—?” She stops abruptly. “Ron.”

“That’s what I’m getting at. He’s behind it.”

“Is he trying to destroy the auction?”

“It would appear so.”

She grabs my hand. “Let me take you to where the bachelors are getting ready. Then I’m going to see if I can help her run damage control. This is crazy.”

“It’s devious, that’s what it is. Every move he’s made has been only to benefit himself.” Anger burns in my chest, but I have to let it go if I’m going to give the performance of my lifetime. I have to be suave and relaxed to bring in the highest bid so Harper can earn as many points as possible, and I can’t do that if I’m focused on my anger with Ron.

It’s going to take every ounce of my self-control to pull this off.

## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

**H**arper

Every seat is filled, which means that Susan and I were able to undo the damage Ron attempted with his blog. She said nearly two dozen women had requested refunds due to Drew not being in the auction.

“I didn’t realize he was so popular,” she said.

“The article I wrote about him got a lot of votes and comments. People are excited to see him on the stage.”

“I’m glad he’s still willing to be in the program despite my efforts to keep him out. I can’t imagine what would’ve happened if I didn’t ask why the lady wanted a refund. He’s the star of the show. Just think of the bidding war that will bring in so much money for the cancer foundation.”

“Right.” My stomach knots thinking about all the single women of Misty Falls fighting it out for a date with him.

I want to be the only one going anywhere with Drew Garrett. But I can’t be upset over this. Not when I’m the one who asked him to participate in the auction in the first place. Not when I’m the one who wrote up the article showcasing what a great guy he is. This is all on me. And like he said earlier, it’s just one date. After tomorrow’s ball, he won’t have to go on any more dates with other people. It can be just the two of us.

Then why do I want to rip his name off the agenda no matter how much it will hurt the auction and my chances at the promotion I want so much?

Hot, angry tears threaten but I manage to blink them away. I can't even be mad at myself over this. When the auction idea first occurred to me, I didn't think I had a fighting chance with Drew. There was no reason to think my distant crush would ever become more than that.

Now he has eyes only for me and doesn't even want to go to the ball with someone else.

I take a deep breath. It's just one night. I repeat the thought in my mind, but it won't stick. As hard as I try to convince myself, I don't believe it. More than that, I don't want to. But what can I do? The auction is going to start soon.

The guests are already meandering around the silent auction area, writing down bids on the smaller items and enjoying drinks and appetizers. The bachelors are all getting ready back in their room.

I have to fight myself to keep from bursting in and dragging Drew out. I'd lose my chance at the promotion I want, and the various charities would lose money from all the people who wouldn't even be here except for the chance of spending a few hours with Drew tomorrow night at the ball. Many of those people are writing down bids for the silent auction at this moment.

It's only one date. It's only one evening. And it'll be pure torture.

Luke from the shelter — the sweet guy who gave me a coffee after I spilled mine — offered to go with me tomorrow. I thanked him but haven't given him a response yet. Part of me doesn't want to go and have to watch Drew dancing the night away with some woman who's probably far more beautiful and graceful than I am. On the other hand, not going will make me crazy. I'll likely imagine things far worse than they really are. If I go with Luke, then at least he'll be able to distract me from staring at Drew all night.

The whole thing is a mess, and the infuriating part is that if I hadn't invited Drew to take part in the auction we never would have started spending time together. We never would've had the chance to develop real feelings for each other.

What a situation I've created for myself. I can't wait for tomorrow to be over. But it feels like a vast desert stands between now and then.

Melinda appears, puts an arm around my shoulder and smiles, pulling me from my thoughts. "Look at all this! Can you believe it? We did it. The Misty Falls auction has never been more alive. And have you seen some of the numbers on those sheets? It's unreal."

I force a smile. "That's really great."

If she notices my lack of enthusiasm, my boss doesn't acknowledge it. She just hurries off to speak with someone else.

In order to get my mind off Drew and his date tomorrow, I meander around and check out the items and their sheets. Melinda wasn't kidding. Many of the items have bids far more than the worth of the item, and the ones that don't are all close to it. Some quick mental math tells me that based on the figures Susan shared the auction is already doing way better than the past few years, and we still have the big items and the bachelors to go. The projections we had now appear to have been a lot lower than what the event will actually bring in.

I make small talk with a few people and start to relax. Until someone brings up the bachelor auction. I really don't know how I'm going to get through the night. I can't ask Drew to back out now. The people who are here just for him could still request refunds and take away their bids on the silent items.

All my hard work would be for nothing, and so many others would suffer the loss. Especially all the charities that will benefit from the proceeds. I'm just going to have to hike up my big girl briefs and deal with it. Drew doesn't want to go on the date tomorrow any more than I want him to, but he's doing it for me.

What a mind trip.

The auctioneer calls out the five-minute warning before the silent bidding ends. People scramble around and check

their favorite items. The final minutes fly by before the bell sounds. All pens hit the tables, then the auctioneer herds everyone like cattle to the main room to take their seats.

I take a seat in the back row with the other reporters and non-paying guests. Someone hands out sticks with numbers to use for bidding. It takes a few minutes for everyone to get theirs.

My heart nearly leaps into my throat, despite knowing it isn't yet time for the bachelor part of the program. That's the grand finale. The live auction begins with the smaller items chosen for this section of the event. The bids are lively, and laughs and jokes abound. Nicely dressed people are having fun spending their money.

About halfway through, Drew's beach house comes up and it goes for well over the projected amount. The Ducati riding leathers and helmet also go for an impressive number. It's hard to remember who procured what, but if my math is correct then I'm in the lead. I'm not sure if it'll be enough to push me past Ron after his smear campaign though.

All too soon the auctioneer announces the bachelors. Cheering and whistles break out from the crowd. Several women leap to their feet, then a bunch of others follow suit.

My stomach lurches. It's a good thing I didn't eat any appetizers or drink the beverages, because there's no way I will be able to keep anything down. I'm going to be lucky to get through this without having to make a bathroom run.

The bachelors strut onto the stage one by one, with the crowd growing louder by the minute. My ears ring from all the noise. Drew is the last one to enter the stage, and the shouting doubles.

Melinda looks over at me and gives me a wide smile.

I try to return the gesture, but whatever I ate hours ago is threatening to make a reappearance. Part of me wants to put a stop to this madness I've started. Nix that. *All* of me wants to. But it's too late. I had my opportunity. It's gone now. He's going on a date with someone else tomorrow, and I have to

live with it. All future dates will be with me. I can get through one night. For the charities.

I hope.

My stomach twists itself in tighter knots as the bidding commences on the first bachelor, a cute but slightly geeky tech guy who builds computers and donates them to kids who can't afford them. He gets a solid ten bids and gets his date for tomorrow at just over two hundred dollars. Next up is a handyman who built an orphanage in Mexico. He gets twice as many bids and nearly double the price.

Each guy on stage steps up in order of their desirability based on the responses to the newspaper articles. And given the incremental increase of bids and dollars, the stats predicting interest were correct. Since Drew is last in line, I'm having an even harder time keeping my food down. Why did I eat anything at all today? If I projectile vomit over everyone in front of me, my chances at the promotion are as good as gone.

I lean back in my chair and take measured breaths. The room spins around me as I try not to think about Drew and how many women are chomping at the bit to bid on a date with him.

It's only one evening. It's only one date. I can go with Luke and feel better about it.

I won't feel better about it. But what can I do? The choice is between the job I need and the man I love.

Love? Is that true? Do I actually *love* him? That's a word that hasn't come up in conversation. Or ever for me. The few doofuses I've dated have all fled at the first sign of commitment. Now look at me: I'm 26 and about to have a breakdown as I watch my boyfriend get a zillion bids just for one date.

My phone buzzes in my purse. I slide it out and check the screen. A text from Josie.

*Josie: Tonight's the auction right? Thinking of you!*

She followed the message with a string of heart emojis.

*Harper: Hanging in there. Barely.*

*Josie: He's doing it all for you. You're going to get the promotion!*

*Harper: Thanks.*

*Josie: You OK?*

*Harper: Barely.*

*Josie: Want me to fly in and bid for him? I'll do it for you.*

*Harper: You're married.*

*Josie: Obviously I wouldn't actually go on the date. But I have already been on one purely platonic date with him before. What's one more for a friend?*

She sends a bunch of laughing emojis.

*Harper: You couldn't get here in time anyway. He's almost up.*

Right now there's a bidding war over Rocky, who's flexing in obnoxious poses like this is a talent show and blowing kisses at the ladies who bid on him. The guy after him is one of Ron's who is not only a gorgeous doctor at a big hospital on the mainland but who also gave a year of his time and money to provide medical care for orphans in Africa.

Ron and I are most definitely going to be neck and neck on the leaderboard when the final scores are tallied. Drew is still the most eligible bachelor even with the philanthropist doctor in the running.

At the last minute Ron published a post about Drew's underwear ad thinking it would make him look bad, but it backfired on him and my article on Drew got a rash of upvotes. I was glad Drew was out of town and missed all that drama since he regrets that ad so much.

The auctioneer announces a winner for Rocky, who blows a ridiculous amount of kisses at a beautiful redhead who is jumping up and down calling out her love for him.

If Drew's winner does that, I won't be able to keep myself quiet.



There has to be something I can do. Then something from Josie's texts gives me an idea.

I know what I'm going to do.

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

**D**rew

The bids on the bachelors before me have been increasing by hundreds of dollars each, and now the Seattle doctor who spent his summers here at Misty Falls as a child has risen over fifteen hundred dollars. For one date. And another bid just came in.

This is insane. I've been trying to make eye contact with Harper ever since I got on this stage, but she's all the way in the back with the other journalists. She's probably busy taking notes to do a write up on this whole charade.

I hope she knows the only reason I'm up here is for her. There's no way I'd be on display like this otherwise. I'm not doing any fancy poses like the bodybuilder nor am I going to pull the whole humble routine like the doctor — and it's clearly a routine. I can see it in his eyes. The man loves the attention.

All I want is to get past this and tomorrow's date. It'll all be worth it as long as Harper gets her promotion. And I'm even happier to help her stick it to Ron. That guy needs to be knocked down a notch or fifty.

The auctioneer calls out a winner for the smug doctor, who actually bows. At least he doesn't blow kisses like the bodybuilder. I'm surrounded by drama queens.

After Dr. Smug exits the stage, the auctioneer calls me up like I'm a bull at the county fair. Women whistle and catcall. This is so humiliating. All I want is to snuggle up with Harper on my couch in front of the fire and watch a movie.

The auctioneer gives a little introduction to me once the room quiets, then he invites me to the microphone to give my whole story. As I stare at all the faces, my mind goes blank. It feels like an hour passes. But the digital clock in the back shows only a few seconds. Time is crazy like that.

I clear my throat and picture the speech I prepared on my laptop. The words come into my mind, and I start by sharing about my mom's early death followed by my dad's and how that led me down the path of modeling. I tell them about the various service projects I've done over the years and include how great it felt to help Harper's niece recently. Then I finish by telling everyone about the things I've done at Precious Paws.

The auctioneer all but pushes me away from the mic as he calls out for the first bid.

Three hundred dollars.

That's more than double any of the other beginning bids.

Someone else calls out four hundred.

Five. Then seven.

"One thousand dollars!" a familiar voice calls out.

I turn in the direction of Harper, who's waving her hands around without a number.

"Two thousand!" someone else calls, holding up a number.

"Three!" yells another person.

"*Five* thousand!" Harper yells.

I stare in disbelief. There's no way she can afford that. What is she doing?

Gasps fill the crowd like a mighty ocean wave.

Someone calls out one hundred higher than Harper.

Her hand bolts up.

I have to put a stop to this before she has to sell all her belongings just to win one date with me. A date that I'd happily give her, and pay for.

“Ten thousand dollars!” I step forward and hold up both my hands.

The conversation running through the crowd is deafening.

As soon as it settles, Ron leaps to his feet.

If he bids on me, I’ll punch him in front of everyone. The police can cart me off to jail for all I care.

Ron waves his hands. “He can’t bid on himself!”

The auctioneer looks around. “I don’t know if he can or not.”

Susan runs on stage, and the two of them whisper together. She flips through a bunch of paperwork, and they huddle up again before she takes the mic. “There isn’t anything in the rules against someone bidding on themselves. However, there’s also nothing in here about people being up for bid.”

“Then make a rule!” Ron says. “This is turning into a circus!”

“It’ll go to the committee for next year. However, for the moment Drew’s bid stands.”

“I object!”

“You can’t object. This isn’t a courtroom.”

“No, it’s a mockery of the good old-fashioned Misty Falls auction we’ve always had.”

“A mockery?”

“Yes!” Ron puts his hands on his hips.

Susan steps even closer to the mic. “And you’re making it worse. One more word from you, and I’ll have security escort you out.”

His mouth falls open.

She turns to me. “Are you really going to donate ten thousand dollars as a bid on yourself?”

“Yes and no.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Yes, I’m going to donate the money. No question. But I’m not bidding on myself. I’m bidding on a date with the beautiful and talented Harper Astley. She has a heart of gold and gives more of herself than all of us up here on stage could ever aspire to. The last person she ever thinks about is herself. I don’t want to go to tomorrow’s ball with anyone else. Nobody comes close to her. She should be the star of the show, not me. This auction wouldn’t be anywhere near as big if it weren’t for her and all her efforts. Harper wouldn’t let anything get in her way of saving the auction, not even when Ron Alderman started a smear campaign against her with his personal blog. She—”

“What?” Melinda exclaims.

“Harper didn’t stop thinking about the organizations the proceeds from this event will go to for one moment. She kept fighting for the auction even though Ron did everything in his power to take her down. She deserves accolades and praise. Whether she gets those is out of my hands, but what I do have control over is how her night at the ball goes tomorrow. I’m going to treat her like the queen she is and make sure she feels like royalty.”

I finally turn my attention to Harper, whose face is visibly red from this distance, and I blow her a single kiss. “I love you. You’re the best thing to ever happen to me, and I never want to be without you.”

She covers her mouth.

“Come up here!” I wave her to the stage.

People call out for her to do it.

Harper makes her way over. A few people clap, then more join in until it’s a full round of applause.

When she reaches me, I spin her around and give her a kiss that makes me weak at the knees. I have to set her down before I risk both of us falling off the stage.

The audience is still cheering, and most everyone is on their feet now.

She whispers in my ear, “I love you too. Thank you for bidding. I couldn’t stand thinking about any of those people going to the ball with you.”

“Neither could I. You’re the only one I want to spend any of my time with. And hopefully that amount will give you enough points to push Ron out of the running for the promotion.”

“I hope so too, but I’m not going to hold my breath.”

The room finally quiets, and the auctioneer returns to the microphone. He waves us off the stage before turning to the audience and commenting on how unexpected that was.

Harper and I go to the back of the room where she was sitting before. She turns to me. “Are you sure you want to donate that much money?”

“Without a doubt.”

“That’s a lot of money for one date with me.”

“You’re worth every penny.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

## *HARPER*

**J**osie adds more spray to my hair, which is already harder than a helmet and could withstand hurricane force winds. Some of it gets in my nose, and I cough.

“Hold still.” Raine adds more blush to my already rosy cheeks.

“Don’t you two need to get ready?” I ask, pushing away from them.

“Not until the queen of the ball is set to go.” Josie smiles approvingly as she looks me over. “Now to get you in your dress.”

Raine holds up the shimmery red gown that is far too elegant and sophisticated for me. It’s gorgeous, and not something I’d have ever picked out for myself in a million years. As soon as Josie heard about what happened at the auction, she flew back to town. This morning she and Raine dragged me to the fanciest clothing store on the island and picked it out for me. I looked ridiculous in it at the store with my frizzy hair and no makeup.

Hopefully my helmet hair and the ten pounds of cosmetics help tie in the look. Although it’s still me, so I doubt I’ll be any less awkward.

Josie turns the mirror away from me as they help me back into the gown for the second time today. Then Raine nudges me to slip into the high heels that match the dress perfectly.

If I don’t kill myself in the shoes tonight it’ll be nothing short of a miracle.

I manage to stay balanced in them as I stand. Walking is going to be a problem. My ankles are already starting to wobble.

Josie reaches for the mirror. “You ready?”

“No.”



“You’re beautiful!” Raine gushes. “Wait until you see.”

“I may be in formal wear, but I’m still me.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Josie says. “You’re perfect as you are.”

“Yeah, right.”

“If you don’t believe me, then hopefully you’ll believe Drew. He adores you, and rightly so.”

I sigh. “I’m sure I’ll change his mind after I trip over my shoes and send us both flying into a water fountain. Or worse, the ocean.”

“You won’t be anywhere near the beach.” Raine turns to Josie. “Swivel that mirror around.”

Josie grins at me. “Are you ready now?”

“Let’s get this over with.”

Raine shakes her head. “Some things never change. When will you ever see yourself as the beauty you are?”

“Just turn the mirror.”

Josie makes a production of spinning it around slowly before stopping it when I can see myself in the reflection.

I can hardly believe what I see. The person staring back at me can’t be me. It has to be an optical illusion. I pat my helmet, I mean my hair. The woman in the reflection does the same. I adjust the fabric clinging to my hips, and so does the mirror image.

That’s really me. Unrecognizable, but me.

“See?” Raine gives me a knowing look. “I’ve always told you that you don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“Yeah, but look at how much effort it took two people to make me look like this.”

“Stop.” Josie nudges me. “Are you ready? Drew should be here any moment.”

I jolt at the thought. What’s he going to think of me? I’m a fraud all gussied up like this. I can barely put on mascara

without getting it all over my eyelids, and I really will take us both down in these heels. I've only ever worn flats or low heels before — nothing like these death traps connected to my feet.

*Ding-dong!*

I gasp.

My friends share an excited grin before Raine rushes toward my front door.

“How am I going to walk in these shoes? Will my sneakers ruin the look?”

“Yes.” Josie shakes her head at me. “You’ll be fine.”

“Apparently you’ve never met me before.” I extend my hand. “I’m Harper, and I’m a professional klutz.”

“I can be too, and I manage in heels.”

“This is the first time I’ve worn any this high.”

“Let’s practice.” She holds out an arm, and I lean my weight on her as I try to walk. Both my ankles wobble. “This is a bad idea.”

“Just give yourself a minute. Keep going.”

“You’re giving my eulogy if I don’t make it through the night, and you’re going to take full responsibility for my demise.”

Josie laughs. “Dramatic much?”

Raine pokes her head in my bedroom. “Are you ready?”

“I need about a month to get used to these shoes.”

She glances at my feet. “You’re doing great. And you’ve got to see Drew. He looks amazing. You two are definitely going to be the stars of the ball!”

“Maybe him. Not me.”

Raine marches over. “What happened to my confident bestie?”

“She’s in a restrictive dress and learning to walk on stilts.”

“At least you haven’t lost your sense of humor.”

“I wasn’t trying to be funny.”

“Hurry up before *I* go to the ball with him.”

I try to glare at Raine, but all three of us burst out laughing.

“What’s going on in there?” Drew calls from the other side of the door.

I’m about to call off the whole thing, but my voice catches in my throat. Hearing him gives me a boost of energy. I pull away from my friends and march toward the door. My right ankle nearly gives out, but I catch myself with the wall.

Tonight is going to be a disaster. But at least I can lean on Drew the whole night. Things could actually be a lot worse, now that I think about it.

I stand up straight, fling open the door, and step into the living room.

Drew is breathtaking in a tux, but that isn’t what catches my attention. He’s holding my orange kitten. All on his own.

“Do my eyes deceive me? You’re petting — *holding* — a cat.”

“She’s sweet.” He turns to look at me. “I actually—” He looks me over. “Whoa.”

“Don’t get used to this look. This whole getup is the most uncomfortable thing I’ve ever worn.”

“You’re perfect no matter what you’re wearing. You could be covered in smoothies, and you’d still be the most stunning woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.” He gives me a gentle kiss, probably to keep from messing up my makeup. Little does he know that it’s on so well I’ll probably have to use paint thinner to get any of it off. And yes, I’m kidding. I’d never put that stuff on my skin.

“Picture time!” Josie and Raine appear with their phones in front of their faces.

“Smile!”

Drew wraps an arm around me, and I give my best smile. It comes naturally because I'm so happy to be with him, and especially thrilled that we'll be going to the ball together.

I still can't believe he paid such a ridiculous amount of money for the date, but he swears he has plenty more and that it makes up for all the years he should've been donating to charity in the first place.

My friends wave us away, telling us to enjoy ourselves at dinner.

When we get to the restaurant at the Grand Falls Resort, everyone stares at us. And not because I can barely walk in these torture devices that my friends call pumps. Someone mentions last night's spectacle at the auction. A few people snap pictures of us.

I glance at Drew. "I feel like a celebrity."

He cups my chin and gazes into my eyes. "You should."

A lady calls his name then she leads us to a table for two in a corner with windows overlooking the ocean on both sides. Despite the view, I can't take my eyes off Drew.

He reaches across the table and threads his fingers through mine. "Have I told you that I love you?"

I squeeze his hand. "Once or twice."

"Then I need to tell you again. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. If you'll let me, I'll tell you every day."

"I won't stop you, because I love you more."

"More?" He cocks a brow. "Is that a challenge to prove my devotion to you?"

"Maybe."

"Challenge accepted."

I laugh.

The server arrives. "Can I start you two off with anything?"

“Champagne.” Drew glances at me. “The lady has a huge victory to celebrate.”

“Oh?” She glances at me and gives me a friendly smile. “What’s that?”

“I got a promotion today.”

“Congratulations! I’ll be right back with those drinks.” She disappears.

Drew beams. “I’m so proud of you, head writer.”

“It feels more like a fluke than anything else.”

“What? No way. You worked harder than anyone, and you deserve the position *and* the office that comes with it.”

It’s hard to believe that not only will I be moving from behind the file cabinets, I’m getting an actual office, with a door I can close to keep people out. But with Ron gone, I’ll likely keep the door wide open.

Once Melinda found out about his blog, she flipped her lid and fired him for it and the smear campaign against me. Everyone there heard her chew him out, so now he’s going to be lucky to find any work here in town ever again.

When the champagne arrives, Drew raises his glass and offers me congratulations. We toast to that, and feast on four courses of delicious food until I’m sure the seams on my gown will pop. Somehow none do.

We make it to the community center, which is even more magical tonight than it was last night. It looks like a castle in a sparkling winter wonderland, and I feel like Cinderella. Although I’m sure she was steadier in her shoes than I am. However, I don’t plan on losing either of mine. Or my date. I’m never letting him go if I have anything to say about it.

Susan waves us over to a line where couples are getting their pictures taken.

Drew wraps an arm around me. “I’m going to frame this picture and put it up in my living room.”

“No pressure.”

“Of course not. We’re here together. I don’t know about you, but I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

I stare at him in disbelief. A few weeks ago, I never would have believed that any of this could ever be possible — especially not everything that happened last night at the auction. If someone had asked me to predict a hundred possible outcomes for the night, I never would have guessed what would actually transpire.

Not that I’d change a thing. Except maybe getting dance lessons ahead of time. I’m sure to make a disaster of tonight somehow.

“Next!” A lady waves Drew and me to the backdrop for the pictures. It looks like a magical garden poking out of a light snow cover. Tiny lights twinkle all around.

The woman poses us so that I’m crushed against him, and all the pressure is on my unstable ankles. But she gushes that we’re picture perfect and instructs us to smile. Three blinding lights go off in rapid succession. It feels more like an eye assault than getting a photo taken.

She looks at the camera. “Oh, you’re going to love it!”

Time will tell. I probably look like a deer in headlights, if my eyes are even open after the bright flashes, which I can still see.

Before Drew or I can thank her, she calls the next couple for their picture.

We head for the crowd, and I hesitate at the edge of the dance floor.

Drew holds my hand. “You ready to dance the night away?”

“I’m pretty sure you’re going to want a change of plans once you realize how lacking my dance skills are.”

“Just follow my lead.”

“You’re going to regret this.”

He kisses the back of my hand. “Never.”

I walk slowly, holding him back until we reach an open space. He turns to me and holds my hands, leading me in a dance. He looks like an instructor teaching a first time student who speaks another language. If I'd have known sooner that I'd be his date to the ball, I'd have insisted we practice together.

This is going to be such a disaster. He's going to regret paying so much money to bring me.

He gives me a warm smile. "Relax. You're doing great."

"I look like a jackalope on a tightrope."

"No you don't. Jackalopes don't even exist." He winks. "Stop worrying. Even if you *were* a bad dancer, I'd still be proud to be here with you."

I'm not sure I believe him, but I try to stop thinking all my catastrophic thoughts. Being so close to him does help. A lot. He keeps giving me these looks like he believes in me and thinks I'm amazing.

The dancing does get easier as I relax and just enjoy the moment. My ankles wobble every so often, but other than that we seem to have gotten into a groove. The way he keeps smiling makes it seem like he's actually enjoying himself.

Before long, I realize I'm having the time of my life. Funny how when I don't focus on how I'm clumsy or awkward, I fall into step with Drew. We move along the dance floor like we belong together, like this was always meant to be.

And I think it was. It really was. Now the timing is right and now we're both ready for whatever comes our way.

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*



*HARPER*

A FEW MONTHS LATER

**K** *nock, knock!*

I pull myself from my thoughts — getting lost in them is a luxury I've allowed myself since the day I moved my things into this office with its ocean view. As a creative, it helps my writing process.

“Come in!”

As the door opens, I expect either Melinda or Sophia, who takes pictures for me now. Although I prefer to take my own when possible.

When Drew pokes his head in, I leap up and greet him with a big hug. “You got back early!”

He spins me around, because my office is big enough for that. “I did, and I wanted to surprise you.”

“You succeeded. How was your flight?”

“I ended up next to a talker.” He chuckles. “So I didn't get the rest I'd hoped for, but the guy had some interesting stories to share. Are you able to leave a little early?”

“Definitely!” I gather my things and pull him into the hallway. On our way out, I wave to Melinda who smiles at both Drew and me.

When we get to the parking lot, he remote unlocks his car and turns to me. “I have some good news.”

“What's that?”

“I won't be traveling for a while.”

“Did you find your way onto one of the city council seats?” I ask. One of the members had been talking about stepping down due to family issues.

“Not yet, but I told my agent I’m on vacation.”

“Nice.” I wrap my arms around him and give him a kiss.

“In fact, I told Melinda you’re taking a long weekend.”

I lift a brow. “You did? Now I’m even more curious. Tell me more.”

“Soon enough.”

“You’re going to make me wait?”

He laughs. “Not long. I promise.”

I ask questions as soon as he starts driving.

But he won’t answer any of them. In fact, he changes the subject entirely. “I actually got back earlier this morning and got the last of the things from my parents’ house.”

“All of it?”

“I had some help. Rake and Josie came over for a little while. The construction crew is going to tear it down on Monday.”

I reach over and squeeze his hand. “Are you going to be okay?”

He nods. “It needs to be done.”

“And you still don’t know what you’re going to build there?”

“I have an idea.” There’s something in his tone that drives my curiosity.

“You’re a man of many mysteries today. First, the long weekend and now this.”

He shrugs with a playful smirk. “What can I say? I’m a deep well.”

“Just don’t keep me in the dark too long.”

“I won’t.” He turns down the street heading toward his parents’ house.

“We’re not going for dinner?” I ask.

“Later.”

“How many mysteries are you hiding?”

Drew winks at me. “Everything will make sense in a few minutes.”

“I hope so.”

“It will.”

He pulls into the driveway at his parents’ house. “There’s something I want to show you.”

“Other than an empty house?”

“You’ll see.”

“If you say so.”

Drew cuts the engine and gives me a quick kiss. “I do say so.”

I step out into the warm summer sun, which is a stark contrast to the cold AC that Drew had blasting.

He walks toward the garage.

“Is that where you’re taking me?”

His only response is to wave me over.

“Give me a hint!”

He shakes his head.

I stick my tongue out at him.

He laughs, pulls me close, and kisses me deeply. “Come on. You aren’t going to believe your eyes.”

“What’d you do? Convert the garage into a cat rescue?”

“Not quite.” He pulls open the wide door, and the garage isn’t completely empty. Mostly it is.

Except for two Ducatis standing next to each other in the middle.

My mouth falls open. “What...?”

“Surprise!” He beams.

I blink a few times. “Are those... did you buy them for us?”

He nods, grinning widely. “That’s why we’re taking a long weekend. We’re going on a road trip!”

“For real?” I glance back and forth between him and the bikes.

“Yes, for *real*.” He takes my hand and nudges me toward them. “Have a closer look.”

My heart thunders in my chest. “You bought these? As in, they’re ours to keep?”

“Right. And we’re going to ride them all weekend, stopping only to eat and rest.”

“This is insane. You realize that, right?”

“It’s something we’ve both wanted. Now we can take off anytime we want. Starting now.” He gives me a kiss and walks over to one of the motorcycles, resting his hands on the helmet. “Here, try this on.”

I go over to him and reach for it, but he lifts it first.

Underneath the helmet is a little black velvet box. Just the right size to hold a ring.

My mouth goes dry. I don’t dare ask what that is. It’s obvious. But it can’t be that.

Drew picks up the box, gets down on one knee, and takes out a huge, sparkling diamond ring. “Every moment I get to be with you, I’m more convinced you’re the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. I’d planned on living alone my entire life, but you showed me how much better everything is when you have someone to share every moment with — little and big. You’re the one for me, the person I want to be with forever. Harper, will you marry me?”

Tears blur my vision. I blink them away and nod vehemently. “Yes! Nothing would make me happier.”

Grinning, he slides the ring on my finger. It’s a perfect fit. He stands and gives me a kiss that melts me on the spot.

Clapping and cheers sound from outside the garage. I spin around to see Raine, Rake, Ripple, their parents, Josie, my entire family, and a handful of others. Rake has a video camera and several people are snapping pictures with their phones.

Everyone offers us congratulations and hugs, and I'm completely overwhelmed trying to make sense of everything that just happened. Raine brings out a cake while my parents and hers set up a folding table and other needed items.

Our friends and family share words of encouragement and offer more heartfelt congratulations. Before too long, the cake and everything else had been packed away, and now only Rake, Raine, and Josie are still here.

“Ready for the road trip?” Raine asks.

“Are you going too?” I ask.

“We all are,” Rake says. “Hopefully that’s okay with you.”

“It’s better than okay! Spending our engagement weekend on the road with our best friends is perfect.” I turn to Drew. “I don’t know how you managed to pull all this off. I didn’t suspect a thing!”

“Our friends are good at keeping secrets.”

“Only good ones.” Raine nudges me. “I wouldn’t keep anything else from you.”

Drew pulls on his helmet. “Who’s ready to hit the road?”

“Wait,” I say. “I have to pack and figure out what to do with the cats.”

He gives me a kiss. It’s a little awkward with the helmet, but I don’t mind. “It’s all taken care of. Raine and Josie already packed your backpack, and Ripple’s going to take care of Cupcake and Muffin. She should be feeding them as we speak.”

When I was finding forever homes for Cupcake’s kittens, Drew convinced me to keep the little orange one. He even came up with the name Muffin. Now it looks like we’ll have two humans and two cats in the family.

I can't wait.

“You've thought of everything, haven't you?”

“Only for the weekend. We'll plan the rest together.”

“We'll meet you at the ferry,” Rake says. “We have to go home and get our bikes first.”

We say goodbye, and then Drew pulls me close. “I'm so glad you said yes. That would've been really awkward otherwise.”

“Like I'd have said no.”

“There's always the possibility.”

I study him. “You really thought so?”

He grins. “I was mostly certain, but I think every guy has that little bit of doubt. It keeps things exciting.”

“You're the only one I want to spend the rest of my life with. Well, you and the cats. But you're the only person.”

“The feeling's mutual.” We share another kiss before I get my helmet on and climb onto the motorcycle. My Ducati. I'm not sure I'll ever get used to that. Not that it matters. I'm now engaged to Drew, and that's the most important thing I need to adjust to.

I can't wait to see what our future holds.

**Read a free bonus scene featuring Harper & Drew: [Grab it today!](#)**

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## *About the Author*

Eden has always lived in the Pacific Northwest, and it's her favorite place to write about. She loves hiking in the great outdoors, sitting by lakes, watching waterfalls, and of course reading romantic comedies. There's nothing like love and laughter to lift a person's spirits, and that's a gift she hopes to share with all of her readers every time they open one of her books.

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**Must Love Cats**  
**A Misty Falls Romantic Comedy #3**  
by Eden Bloom

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