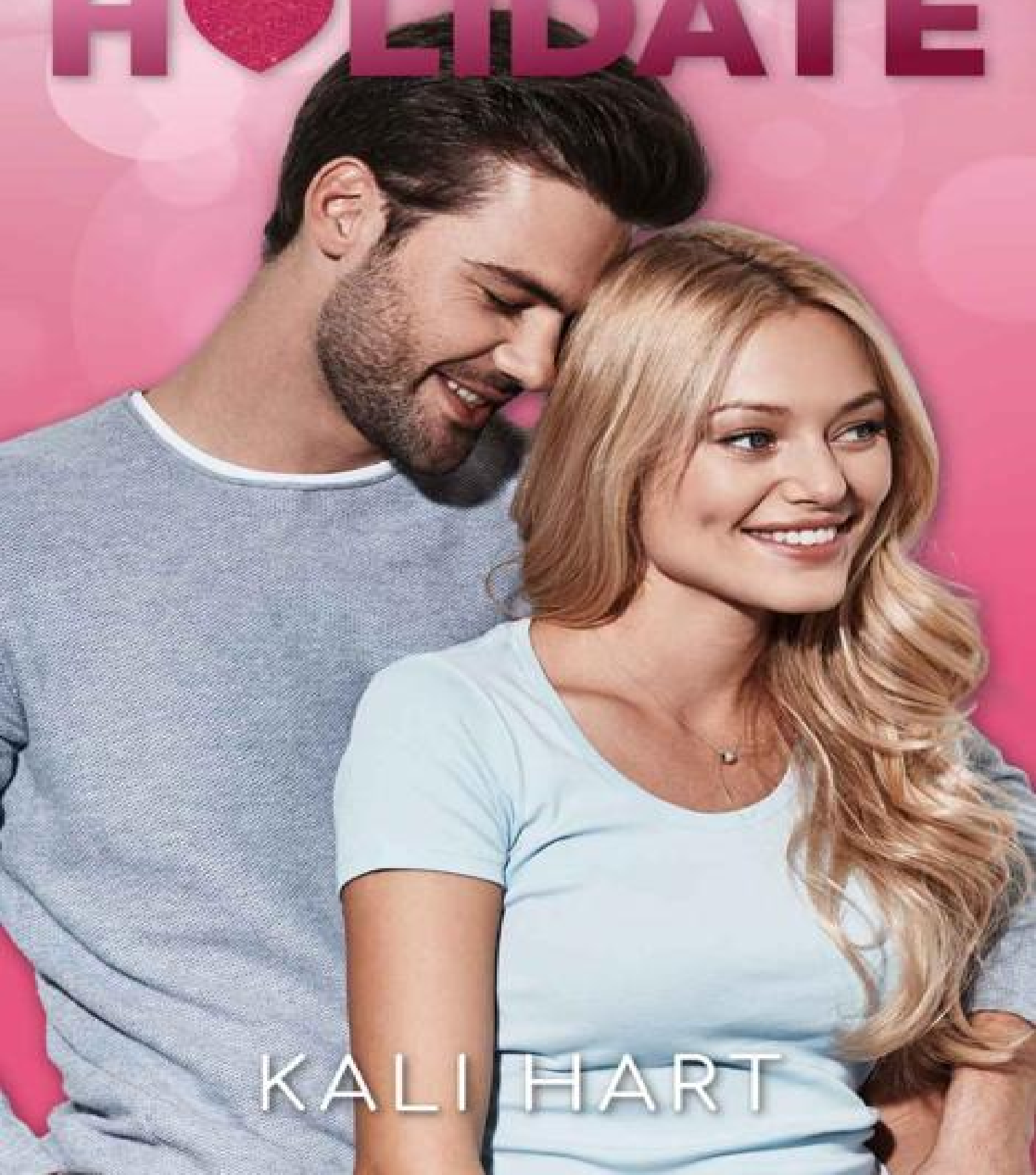


VALENTINES & HOLIDATES

My Sweetart

H  **LIDATE**



KALI HART

MY SWEETART HOLIDATE

VALENTINES & HOLIDATES

KALI HART





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Last Chapter Press LLC

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MY SWEETART HOLIDATE INFO

He's sworn off love. She's determined to change his mind. But will love have a chance when she discovers he's not who she expected?

Charlotte

I've been striking out with love, one bad blind date at time. When I'm chosen for an exclusive Valentine's Day weekend, coordinated by a famous matchmaker, I'm hopeful my luck's finally about to change.

Until I discover I've been matched with the grumpy mountain man I nearly ran over with my car.

He's irritatingly handsome and knows how to get under my skin... and I'm not sure I'm all that upset about it.

But he's the opposite of everything I thought I wanted and has a pessimistic outlook where love is concerned.

Is it safe to risk my heart or will it just end up shattered once again?

Kash

After receiving a Dear John letter overseas four years ago, I swore off love.

I've adjusted to life after the military and enjoy my solitude.

But when my sister ends up one man short for the Valentine's Day event meant to revive her career, I can't turn down her request to fill in.

Even when I end up on a blind date with the woman who almost flattened me with her car.

The curvy beauty is way too cheerful with her dazzling smile and optimistic attitude about love.

If I'm not careful, she just might thaw out my iced-over heart.

The romance and twinkle of Valentine's Day leads twelve passionate women to take a chance on a man who will make their Valentine wish come true. These blind date

holidays are filled with roses and chocolates and are as unique as the valentines hidden in their mailbox. You won't want to miss out on these heartwarming, insta-love stories, perfect for celebrating all the feels this Valentine's Day.

Go on a date with your next book boyfriend!

No cheating. No cliffhangers. Always a happily ever after.

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CHARLOTTE

Bundles of red and pink heart-shaped balloons dance in the unseasonably warmish breeze as I slowly roll my car up the steep driveway toward the Caribou Creek Lodge entrance. Dozens of them bounce against the cedar logs they're tethered to, proclaiming a theme of hopefulness and love. It's a good sign. A sign that love is finally on the horizon for me.

My death grip on the steering wheel for the past hundred and fifty miles has turned my knuckles white. I force my aching fingers to relax, unable to tear my gaze away from the cheerful helium-filled hearts.

This *has* to work.

My history with blind dates is laughable at best. Horrifying at its worst. But this time will be different. This time, the famous Matchmaker Maggie Parsons has stepped into my life like a desperately needed miracle. She's chosen *me* as one of eight lucky women to participate in her Alaskan Valentine's Day event. What are the odds that she'd pick my state this year? *And* that it's within driving distance?

Whoever my blind date is, he's been vetted and chosen based on dozens of unique criteria. No more awkward setups from well-meaning co-workers, or insufferable double dates to appease college friends. No more dodging the nice but clingy men Great-Aunt Doris has been sending my way in droves. Fairbanks is just too small of a town to avoid them after the horrifying meet and greets.

This blind date could truly be *the one*.

It's time. My time.

A flash of green flannel and bright pink manages to catch the corner of my eye, ripping me from daydreams of toe-curling first kisses. I scream, stomping a booted foot down on my brake pedal just as a clearly oblivious man strides past the corner of my bumper. My heavy purse catapults from the passenger seat, dropping to the floor with a thud. Before I can think about retrieving it, a symphony of sugary thumps draws my attention to the hood of the car.

Red frosted cookies drop like hail.

Heart shaped cookies.

Splitting in two.

Not a good sign.

The man glares through my crumb-covered windshield. As if it's all my fault.

"Look buddy," I mutter from the safety of my car. "It was an accident. No need to give me the death glare. I didn't run over kittens."

I shift my car into park, shove my door open, and launch myself out to repeat the words I just rehearsed—*stupid anxiety*—only to be yanked back inside like a yo-yo that unknowingly reached the end of its string. The seat belt strangles my neck, no doubt leaving a mark, and my elbow rudely bumps the horn.

The grumpy man just stands there and stares, gripping a battered pink box against his chest.

I glare back, the heat of my embarrassment fusing with an equal measure of annoyance. *Cut me some slack*—

But something in my body softens as my glare sweeps over him, accusation and apology dying in my throat.

Damn.

His biceps. And those broad shoulders. One good flex and he'd Hulk right out of his flannel shirt.

I swallow, but my mouth is suddenly dry with want, and I'm angry all over again. Where is his coat? Those muscles shouldn't even be on display. It's February. In Alaska.

Dear Lord, he's tall. Almost too tall for me to see the green eyes shooting fire beams at me unless I lean against the steering wheel. Not that it matters. Three of the cookies managed to land, frosting side down, on my windshield. The still-hot glass is melting the red frosting, smearing a perfect outline of his broad shoulders as the cookies slide off.

"There's no cell service here," he grumbles loudly, drawing me back to reality.

I carefully unbuckle and step out of the car, refusing to let this irritable guest ruin my weekend. "I wasn't *on* my phone."

"Bad driving comes naturally to you then?"

"Look, I'm sorry about the cookies." The words come out through gritted teeth. Each time I try to meet his glare head-on, I chicken out and look away. It's unsettling how... *sexy* it is. How one barely connected glance is making me curious about what he's hiding beneath the flannel shirt. I *should* want to throw a cookie—or ten—at him. God, I need to get laid almost as badly as I need a date for my cousin's wedding next month.

That's the reason you're here, Charlie. Get it together.

"I'll pay you for the cookies," I offer, eager to be rid of him.

"Don't bother." Battered bakery box clenched in his grip, the man turns on his heel and stalks toward the lodge. As if all of this is the lodge's fault.

"It was an accident," I holler after him.

He doesn't turn around. Doesn't even check stride. I stupidly watch every deliberate step until he disappears inside the lodge. And no, I was *not* checking out his ass. Besides, even if I was, a fine booty wouldn't make up for his rude behavior.

"At least he's not my blind date," I mutter. I consider myself a cheery, optimistic type of woman. There's no way

I've been matched with a grouchy jerk like that.

Feeling a shred of hope at that, I survey the disaster spread across my hood. A raven lands on the opposite side and steals a cookie.

"Have at it, buddy. They're all yours." My phone pings from my coat pocket. "No cell service my ass."

I pull it free and shiver just a little, bare fingers reminding me that it's February. Though it's warmer in the mountains than at home, twenty above is still too chilly to stand out in the cold indefinitely without gloves or a hat.

I glance at the screen and groan. I don't need to see the whole message to know where this is going. Blind date attempt number thirty-two. "Why did I ever teach Great-Aunt Doris to text?"

The raven squawks at me before stealing another cookie and flying off. It narrowly misses a heart-shaped balloon that's started to sag with the cold temperatures.

"You're out of options, Charlie," I mumble to myself. "This weekend *has* to work."

As long as I can avoid Grumpy Gus, I *might* have a shot at happiness.

KASH

The full moon casts an eerie glow over the Caribou Creek Lodge as I round the final bend and coast up its driveway. I glance at the ominous orb in the clear night sky, centered above the highest gable like a fucking omen from a horror movie, and mutter a string of curses under my breath. I hear Grandma Olive's voice in my head.

The craziest things happen during a full moon. I once saw Bigfoot himself during a full moon. Also got knocked up during one. That's how your mom came to—

I shake my head, desperately needing to shoo away the loveable but crazy voice. I do *not* want to picture Grandma Olive in the back of Gramps' old Ford truck, the pair of them going at it like rabbits.

A sigh presses up under my breastbone, memories so hard they cut. Gramps and me, working on that truck. Grandma Olive won't sell it either, even though it hasn't run since the day Gramps passed away almost a decade ago. Sometimes I catch her sitting in it, staring out the windshield with a faraway smile.

Damn full moon.

If it weren't for the wild blonde who nearly ran me over this afternoon, I wouldn't even be here. Wouldn't know there *was* a full moon. I'd be home with my feet kicked up in front of a roaring fireplace. Cold beer in my hand. Sports highlights

lulling me to sleep right there in the recliner. My reward for working a long string of twelve-hour days.

The sigh groans up my throat with two weeks of exhaustion. Let's be honest. There's no way in hell that heart-shaped cookies from *BAKED BY ANDIE* are going to make or break my sister's big event. Not on its first night. But I've never been able to say no to Maggie when her eyes are all big and shiny with unshed tears. As she went on and on about how special the locally made desserts were, all I could do was hope those damn tears didn't fall. Might as well tighten a vise grip around my heart. It'd hurt less than seeing her on the verge of sobbing.

I glance around the full parking lot, searching for signs of the woman who'd destroyed all but three of the super-special, apparently critical-to-Maggie's-success, frosted sugar cookies. I had to beg Andie to rush this batch today—not a small favor on a busy Valentine's Day weekend when her display cases were nothing more than crumbs.

She's not here.

A momentary pang of what pretends to be disappointment hits me. She might've been oblivious and a bit annoying —*she wasn't on her phone my ass!*— but I secretly enjoyed her feisty attitude. Her curvy figure wasn't hard on the eyes either. *Get your shit together, Kash. Not happening.* If she's staying at the lodge, there's likely only one of two reasons: she's on a romantic getaway with some boyfriend probably hoping for a proposal or she's part of my sister's matchmaking event.

Neither one has anything to do with me.

I hurry inside, irritated to be out in the cold when I could be warmed by a fire.

It causes me physical pain to endure those damn balloons again. They've been moved inside the lobby, mildly revived from their struggle with the cooler winter temperatures earlier this afternoon. A pink polka dotted one dares to sashay its way toward me like some half-tipsy, desperate woman in need of a date for a wedding. Both hands firmly gripped on the cookies

—damned if I’m losing another box— I sidestep the flirty bit of mylar and growl something uncomplimentary.

“You made it!” Maggie sprints up to me, appearing in the deserted lobby like a magic trick.

“Promised I would.” As she takes the box and sets it down on a nearby table, a yawn threatens to escape me. I swallow it back. I’m exhausted, almost dead on my feet, and eager to get back to my cabin. To be tucked away in the woods, far away from this romantic shitshow and the holiday I’ve come to loathe. It’s not Maggie’s event that makes me feel this way, but what it represents.

Love is a sad, sorry joke if you ask me. And I’ve more than earned a few days of peace and quiet.

“You’re the best.” Maggie wraps me in a hug, squeezing for a few seconds longer than is normal, even for her over-affectionate self.

I used to be that way too. Before the damn Dear John letter. But betrayal has a way of hardening a heart into stone.

“So…” Maggie says, hesitation heavy in her tone.

“What is it, Maggs?”

“Don’t hate me.”

“What *is* it?”

Maggie pulls back from the hug, fingers digging into my coat sleeves. Holding on for dear life. Probably to keep me from running— not that it would work. “I need another favor.”

“Andie’s cleaned out of baked goods until tomorrow. She’d chase me out with a big metal spatula if I showed up again.”

Maggie doesn’t laugh. “This favor’s a little bigger than that.”

I scrub a hand over my face, effectively breaking the death grip she has on my coat sleeve. I have a bad feeling about this. Damn full moon. I’d much rather face Bigfoot right now than whatever favor I’m about to get dragged into. I’m too tired for

this shit. My only plan for this weekend was to drink a few beers, pass out in my recliner, and maybe chop some wood if I got bored. Not like I don't have more than enough for this winter—and next. The most important part of this plan, however, was not leaving my cabin. Damn the feisty blonde.

“Spit it out, Maggs. I'm beat.”

“I need you to fill in for somebody.”

My tired brain doesn't want to process what she's saying. “What does that even mean?”

“One of the men didn't show up. I can't get a hold of him. I've called him like twenty times, but it keeps going straight to voicemail. I'm actually getting a little worried. He seemed so nice—”

I cut her off because I already know I won't like this favor one bit. “And that's my problem why?”

“It's *my* problem.” Dammit, Maggie's eyes are shiny again. She looks as though she might burst into tears at any second. Fuck me. “One woman is sitting in the dining room, thinking her date stood her up.”

“He did.”

“Who do you think she's going to blame for that?”

The impact of what she's saying hits me hard enough to rock me in my boots. No. *Fuck no*. I'm not doing this.

“Maggie, you can't ask me to—”

“Please?” she begs in that tiny, scared voice that reminds me of when we were kids. Specifically of a cold February night when our parents were in Anchorage and the power went out. I couldn't get the generator to work and there was a wolf hanging around the wood pile. But this is different. This isn't keeping my little sister from freezing to death. This is a fucking blind date with God only knows who.

“I'm not *anyone's* match. Won't she figure that out in about two seconds?” I can't believe I'm actually considering this. It's those fucking unshed tears. They're my kryptonite. This is a fucking disaster. I haven't been on a date in over

three years. I don't do *dates* anymore. The whole getting-to-know-you bullshit that's all a lie. Just two people trying to impress each other by pretending to be people they're not. Been there, done that. Never going back.

"Just *one* date," Maggie begs. "I'll—I'll figure something out for the rest of the event. With any luck bachelor number seven's on a delayed flight right now. Just one dinner tonight, okay? You don't have to pretend to be her perfect match. Just ... be nice."

"And if bachelor number seven doesn't show up at all?"

"I'll let you off the hook tomorrow. I'll tell her you decided it wasn't a match and bowed out."

I look down at my appearance. The worn Carhartt coat, four shades lighter than when I bought it three winters ago, the wrinkled flannel shirt beneath it—shit, does it have a mustard stain on the pocket?—the stubborn dirt smudges clinging to my boots. "I'm not dressed for this, Maggs."

"You'll do fine." She assesses me up and down. "Maybe stop by the restroom and tame that hair. Looks like you just got up from a nap."

"I *did*." But Maggie isn't listening as she drags me by the arm toward the restroom and practically shoves me inside. The door closes behind me, leaving me to face myself in the mirror.

To be honest, I'm not looking my best. My overgrown beard needs more than just a trim. I look like one of those rugged mountain men, and not in the good way women are always cooing about. More in the oh shit, he's an axe-murderer and buries the bodies in the back forty kind of way.

Full moon, my ass. This really is a horror movie kind of night.

I crack a smile at that. Maybe my appearance will scare the woman away. I splash some water on my face, mostly to appease my sister. *This date isn't real*. I'm just a fill-in. It's just for tonight. Not like it can get any worse. Right?

CHARLOTTE

I've been stood up.

Each of the eight tables in the hotel's dining room has been positioned for privacy. Though I can't hear the intimate conversations happening over the romantically decorated tabletops, I can definitely see that the other seven tables are filled with couples. Several of them have even glanced my way, extending a pitying glance.

Just my damn luck.

Though Maggie Parsons reassured us repeatedly in our welcome email that we would have no prior knowledge of our blind date until we met at dinner tonight, I can't help but wonder if mine caught a glimpse of me earlier and ran the other way.

I twist a lock of hair around my finger. Does he not like blondes? My gaze drops to my practical but cute ankle boots with skinny jeans tucked into them. Was he hoping for someone who rocked high heels and wore a dress? I dab my lips with a napkin, muting the bold color choice. Did the bright red scare him away?

Just be yourself. That's what the email insisted.

"Should've worn the dress," I mumble, reaching for my nearly empty water goblet. I try to make eye contact with the impeccably dressed server, but he glides by with a domed tray that smells deliciously of roasted mushrooms, garlic and oh-my-God is that filet mignon? My stomach growls audibly,

reminding me the protein bar on my drive down was a lifetime ago.

Dinner for two delivered. I shift in my seat and even try to offer a little wave, but I'm certain the server is actively ignoring me. Not that I can blame him. I wouldn't want to be the one tagged *it*, forced to express his condolences to the only solitary person at an event organized by a professional matchmaker. Still. I could really use a stiff drink. Or a steak. Maybe both.

I give a quick scan of the room to ensure no one's watching then dip my hand beneath my seat, reaching for my purse. We were instructed to leave our phones in our rooms for this dinner, but I just couldn't do it. Ever since I discovered my shred of signal, I've been unable to ignore the influx of emails from clients.

I've worked really hard to become one of Fairbanks' top selling real estate agents. And although I let them all know I'd be out of town, I can't seem to adhere to my out-of-office message. What if someone has a question about their disclosures? Or they need to schedule the stager? Maybe they need to be talked off the ledge from painting their living room black because they saw it on *HGTV* and thought it might be cool and edgy.

“You.”

I immediately recognize the icy tone and freeze. I can't bring myself to look up from the phone tucked in my lap for fear that my worst nightmare will come true. This is worse than being stood up. Much worse.

“Are you lost?” I ask the man I nearly hit with my car this afternoon.

“Wish I was.” He pulls out the chair opposite me and sits.

Well shit. This is really happening.

“Hello, Cookie Monster.”

“Cookie Mon— that's not fair. I didn't run them —or you — over on purpose!”

“Tell that to the dozens of broken hearts you left on the road.”

I stretch my neck around his broad shoulders, searching for Maggie. Surely there’s been a mistake. Out of all the men who applied —the congratulatory email claimed there were over four hundred applicants— how the *hell* am I matched with the one who already hates me? His tardiness doesn’t exactly persuade me to give him a second chance.

“You really applied for this?”

He reaches for the full water goblet and lifts it toward his lips. Lips that have me unexplainably distracted. It would be so much easier if the man was bald. But no. Grumpy Gus has to be *rugged* and *sexy*. Dammit. “Can you believe it?”

“No. Actually, I *can’t*.” I fold my arms over my chest, studying him. How the hell does he seem so nonchalant about this shitty situation? “Did you lose a bet?”

“Funny.”

“Did your grandma apply on your behalf and you couldn’t tell her no?”

The way the corner of his lips lifts in amusement stirs something warm and butterfly-like in my core. I can’t put my finger on what it is, but it feels... dangerous. Because I very much want to trace that lifted corner with my tongue. *Whoa. Down girl. What the hell?*

“You’re here on purpose?” I press.

“Aren’t you?”

“Is that so hard to believe?”

“Yes.” His firm, quick response causes heat to creep up my neck. I comb fingers through my blonde curls, hoping to hide the blush. Hoping like hell the seatbelt band from earlier is still hidden under a solid layer of foundation. We’re the only table without wine. I can’t blame alcohol for this reaction. I’m not embarrassed. I’m... intrigued by his answer.

“Why?” I dare to ask.

“Can I get you two something to drink other than water?”
Damn the interruption by the server. Things were just getting good. *Or am I imagining this chemistry?* We might despise each other, but that doesn’t mean he’s hard on the eyes. Even if I leave Caribou Creek without finding my soulmate, maybe I can still get good and laid. Then I wouldn’t give a shit what my cousin says when I show up dateless to her wedding. I’ll be too sated from wild, hot sex with a stranger. Who am I kidding? I’m here to fall in love. I’ve never been good at those one-night stands.

“Miss?” The server’s tone implies this is not the first time he’s asked. *Oops.*

“Whiskey sour.”

My blind date lifts an eyebrow at that, his gaze locked on me after the server has left to retrieve our drink order.

“What?”

“That’s... not what I expected.”

“Pegged me for a fruity cocktail kind of girl, did you?” I slip my phone into the purse beneath my chair, intrigued enough by the unexpected exchange happening between us to leave the emails until later. It occurs to me that I don’t even know this man’s name. “I’m Charlotte. Charlie.”

“Who calls you Charlotte?”

“My grandma, mostly. My mom used to when I was in trouble.” *Charlotte Marie Long.* I can hear her scolding tone giving each name its own emphasis. As though my name was three distinct sentences. I *almost* miss it. “Everyone else calls me Charlie.”

The server delivers drinks and promises to put in our appetizer order straight away. The grouchy man across the table lifts a beer bottle with a Caribou Creek Brewery label to his mouth and takes a slow swig. What is it about those damn lips that has me so damn curious? My whiskey sour seems boring in comparison to the flavor I might discover if only I could taste those lips for myself.

“I’m not everyone,” the man says, returning the bottle to its coaster. He might look wild and untamed with his gruff beard and slightly wrinkled flannel shirt, but at least he knows his table manners.

“What?” I blink, feeling like I’ve missed part of the conversation.

“You said everyone calls you Charlie. I’m not everyone...” He leans in over the intimately small table, lowering his voice, “*Charlotte.*” The sexy timbre has my lady bits zinging to life. I’ve never heard my name said quite like *that* before. The slight sizzle in the air between us has escalated into a full-blown electrical storm. It’s dangerous but fascinating. Potentially fatal but too captivating to ignore.

The craziest thought flits through my mind: *Maybe the famous Maggie Parsons knows what she’s doing after all.*

KASH

Charlotte.

She's the first thought in my head when I wake the next morning. The *only* thought in my head.

I'm in my own bed and can't decide if I'm relieved or disappointed. Memories of last night's dinner drift lazily through my mind as I stare at the cedar planked ceiling debating how badly I need coffee to pull myself out of this haze. The longer the memory of her flirty smile urges me to stay in bed, the happier I am to be done with this bullshit matchmaking favor.

Maggie owes me *big* time.

I'd have gladly fucked Charlotte last night, good and thoroughly. Kept her awake until the sun came up with orgasm after delicious orgasm in her lush hotel room. I followed her all the way to her door. She pushed it opened, those flirty eyes tempting me to stay. Tempting me to ruin her for all other men.

It's only by some fucking miracle that a giggling couple turned a corner down the hall, yanking me back to reality. I almost did it too. Almost stepped over the threshold. But Charlotte made it crystal clear over our main course: she's here for love.

Something I can't give her.

Which is why I refused the kiss her pouty lips begged for. Because I knew if I caved, I'd be naked in her bed right now.

Giving her false hope about a future I can't offer. And once she figured that out, she'd be a liability for Maggie's matchmaking business. I'd have to move so far into the mountains that not even the moose could find me.

None of this stops the flood of surprisingly pleasant memories from rushing in uninvited.

My pulse doubles, like it did when I first spotted her at the dinner table and nearly bolted. If it weren't for my sister hovering in the doorway, sending me the most pathetic, pleading expression, I doubt I would've let Charlotte even see me. I was expecting a disastrous date. Not one I actually... enjoyed.

Charlotte. I can't get her name out of my head. I bet it'd taste fucking delicious on my lips as I came.

My dick throbs, raising the bedsheet.

No matter how surprising the conversation or the chemistry was last night, I'll never see her again. It's better this way. My favor is fulfilled.

Fuck it. I wrap my hand around my cock, starting with soft strokes as I picture those dazzling eyes from across the table. The way her heart-shaped necklace kept disappearing into the valley of her tits, making it impossible not to imagine what those bountiful globes look like outside that sweater. The scent of roses surrounding me as we flirt in the open doorway of her hotel room.

I stroke a little faster.

My bicep tingles where Charlotte cupped her hand, her fingers digging in as she tried to tug me inside her room. Desire like molten lava in her sparkling hazel eyes.

I'm close to the edge.

The doorbell goes nuts.

“What the—”

Followed by incessant pounding on the front door.

“Somebody better have fucking died,” I grumble, tossing aside the sheets and searching for a pair of sweats to hide my predicament. Hoping like hell it’s some solicitor I can chase off easily enough. Unless the dumbass got stuck in a snowbank. The trek to my cabin isn’t for the faint of heart or anyone in anything less than a four-wheel drive vehicle.

The doorbell rings repeatedly.

“I’m coming,” I roar, rushing to answer it if only to silence the shrill ring.

The doorbell abuser doesn’t hear me.

I yank the door open, ready to read whoever’s on the other side the riot act. But when I meet Grandma Olive’s kind, innocent eyes head on, my anger dissipates. She smiles up at me sweetly, lifting a covered baking dish in offering. I’m ninety-nine percent certain her homemade cinnamon rolls are hiding beneath the moose patterned dishtowel.

“Grandma Olive, how did you get here?” I peer over the top of her head, spotting a truck almost as big as mine in the snowy drive and a man waiting behind the wheel. “Who is—”

“Can I come in?”

“Um, yeah. Of course.” I step back and pull the door all the way open. “I didn’t expect you.”

“I’m sorry to show up unannounced, but your sister insisted it was urgent.”

“Maggie?” *Shit. Did Charlotte threaten her reputation all because I refused to sleep with her?*

Grandma Olive darts right for the kitchen, leaving me to follow her quick-paced steps. All that competitive power walking has paid off in spades. I watch as she removes the dishtowel and plates a gooey cinnamon roll dripping with icing. These babies are fresh.

“Maggie’s run into a small dilemma, you see. Told her scheduling this event during a full moon was risky. Could go either way, you see.” She retrieves a fork from a drawer,

carries the plated cinnamon roll to the kitchen table, and urges me to sit down.

I don't know *what* is happening, only that something is. Grandma Olive knows I can't resist her homemade cinnamon rolls. As she hands me the fork, I'm doomed. I'm afraid to ask, but my growling stomach demands I man the fuck up and spit out the dreaded question. "What kind of dilemma?"

"There's a journalist in town."

The first bite is pure fucking heaven. Almost worth the blue balls I'll no doubt have for the rest of the day.

"Apparently, she's from some important magazine. She's writing an article about Maggie's event. Isn't that wonderful?" Grandma Olive waits until my mouth is stuffed full to add. "She wants to interview all the couples, you see. And well, bachelor number seven never showed—"

"No." My objection comes out severely muffled by pastry. *That* was Grandma Olive's ulterior motive. Can't turn down the request if I can't fucking speak the words. I shake my head adamantly, but Grandma Olive has turned her back to me to focus on wrapping the remaining rolls with plastic wrap.

"Maggie needs you to shower and be on your best behavior." She glances back, lips pursed as she sizes me up. "Maybe trim that beard?"

My pulse triples at the thought of seeing Charlotte again. Of spending the day with her after so very nearly giving in to temptation last night. How the *fuck* do I keep myself from devouring those pillowy lips the second we have a moment alone? After that Dear John letter, I swore that was it. Any casual hookups I've had since then have happened in Anchorage to ensure minimal entanglements. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't feeling a small thrill that her real match was a no-show.

"I *can't*." The words come out strangled and small.

"Of course you can." Grandma Olive pats my shoulder as if she's asking me to pick up a gallon of milk at the store rather than be in Charlotte's orbit for an entire day. Selfishly,

I'm almost glad for another chance to spend time with the curvy beauty. But I know we're both going to be more fucked for it when the day is over. "Oh, Maggie said to bring your snowshoes."

CHARLOTTE

All romantic notions I had of Kash on his knees, helping strap on my snowshoes, flashing me that rare but heart-stopping smile have been shot to hell. There was no extra care, no tender touches near the roaring fire in the hotel lobby. Nope. I'm the last one waiting. I watched all the other couples smile and flirt as they helped each other. Witnessed a few stolen kisses that left me filled with envy.

Dammit, why does this matchmaking thing seem to have gone so flawlessly for everyone else? The other seven couples have gone on ahead on their romantic, snowy hike. Every one of them was flashing a beaming smile as they left arm-in-arm out the double doors twenty minutes ago. It's as though their matches were so effortless. So perfect.

I had to be matched with the grump.

I *thought* we broke through the ice last night. That I was able to get him thawed out a bit. Except I ate my breakfast in bed *alone*.

"Dammit, I was too eager," I mutter under my breath.

I blame the third whiskey sour for my actions last night. After two drinks, I'm bold but behaved. I still have my wits about me. But the third is always a recipe for disaster. Because that third one is what made me think I could seduce the grouchy mountain man. Lure him into my bed to have hot steamy sex that would inevitably have us falling in love by morning.

In retrospect, I probably shouldn't have rambled on so much about love and weddings and babies over dinner. It would've taken a fourth whiskey sour to erase the embarrassing memories that now make me cringe. No wonder the man is a no-show this morning. I'd stand me up too. We've known each other less than twenty-four hours. Who the hell gushes about a hearts and flowers future with someone she doesn't even really know? It took me halfway through dinner just to get Kash to give up his name.

Debating whether to hide in my room for the rest of the weekend or join the group—it *is* a beautiful, snowy day and I've always wanted to go snowshoeing—I attempt to stand in my poorly attached snowshoes. My body rocks back and forth awkwardly as I search for balance.

"I thought you were from Fairbanks, Cookie Monster." The familiar, gruff voice grabs my attention, stealing my ability to concentrate on staying upright. My attempt to fall into the cushioned lobby chair fails, and I crash unceremoniously to the floor. My forehead narrowly missing the glass corner of the coffee table.

"I am."

"But you don't know how to put on snowshoes?" He hovers over me, offering a hand.

"I know *how*."

Kash tugs me to my feet with such force I end up colliding with his chest. It's covered in a winter coat, but it doesn't tame my wild imagination. The same delicious woodsy scent from last night invades my senses. I was certain he was going to kiss me in the doorway of my hotel room.

"Don't move." His barked order would be more annoying if it didn't send tingles straight to my core. Damn the man. I *want* to hate him, but all my attempts have been futile. He's too sexy for his own good.

This match *has* to be a mistake. A computer glitch or mistyped email.

The force of Kash tightening my snowshoes causes me to rock. I rest a hand on his broad shoulder, trying to steady myself, and nearly curse when he lifts those green eyes to meet my gaze. A jolt of electricity rockets through my entire body when he places a hand on my thigh. The warmth radiates through two layers— I didn't want to be too cold. Jokes on me considering I might burst into flames at his simple touch.

“Sure you want to go snowshoeing?” Kash is still on a knee in front of me, one corner of his mouth tipped up in wicked amusement. With his lips at hip height, it's all too easy to picture his face buried between my legs. His tongue running through my folds as I grip those thick shoulders for dear life. I knew I was horny, but *damn*.

Kash stands, his hand slowly slipping from my thigh. He licks his bottom lip, his gaze dropping to my neck. The rugged man could be a vampire, and I'd be helpless to stop him from turning me. Or bleeding me dry. *What is happening right now?* He reaches a hand toward my jaw, fingers combing back my hair.

“That seatbelt really kicked your ass, didn't it?”

My hand flies to my neck to cover the mark. I want to back away, but I'm cornered in by chairs. Any hasty escape attempt will likely leave me a tangled pile of limbs on the floor. I'm suddenly regretting agreeing to this outing.

The amusement in those mesmerizing eyes is turned all the way to ten as he leans closer, his lips nearly brushing my ear. “Don't worry. It's only noticeable when you blush, sweetheart.”

I'm half mortified, half turned on. I want to run almost as badly as I want his lips on my neck. Or better yet—his lips on mine. I hate how badly I crave his kiss.

I don't recall gripping the collar of his jacket, or moving closer so our bodies are a feather's width apart. I can't even fathom how it's possible in these damn snowshoes. The only thing I can focus on is how close his mouth is to my jaw. If I turn just a little—

“Aren’t you two just *adorable!*”

KASH

The woman's shrill declaration might as well be someone pouring ice water over the two of us. Did I really almost *kiss* Charlotte, right here in the damn lobby? I put a small but safe distance between us. A cool breeze from the double doors opening carries away the heat of the moment.

Maggie, who's standing beside the woman, lifts a subtle but curious eyebrow at me.

Just playing the part, Maggs. Like you asked. I keep those words to myself for a plethora of reasons. I suspect the woman in her impractical business suit and heels is the magazine writer Grandma Olive mentioned. And we're probably the first couple she's hoping to interview. Maybe if we get this out of the way, I can go home and find some release in private.

Doubtful.

"This is couple number seven," Maggie explains to the woman. "I thought you two would be out snowshoeing with the rest of the group?" That question is directed mostly to me, as if I didn't get here as fast as I fucking could. Grandma Olive decided she needed to follow me into town so I wouldn't get any ideas about detours or turning around.

"Just waiting on Kash to put on his shoes." Charlotte's chipper tone reminds me why this is a bad idea. My palms grow sweaty. The air feels thicker in my lungs. She's looking for a partner. A relationship. A committed man. I can't be any

of those things. Not with her. Not with anyone. But running now would be really bad for my sister's comeback plan.

I reach for the pair I abandoned on a nearby chair earlier and lift them as evidence. "I prefer to put mine on outside. Like a real Alaskan." I turn to Charlotte, suddenly ready to get the hell away from the reporter. If she starts asking questions about a possible future and all that bullshit, I might blow my cover. I take Charlotte's hand in mine. "Ready, *sweetheart*?"

The magazine woman leans closer to my sister and mumbles something about nicknames as I practically yank Charlotte out the door.

"Who was that?" she asks once we're clear of both double doors.

"Beats me."

"An ex-girlfriend?"

I sputter a laugh at the ridiculousness of that idea. "You think—"

"It was a joke." She rolls those pretty hazel eyes. "Reporters make you nervous or something?" She leans closer as an elderly couple approaches. I breathe a sigh of relief when I don't recognize them. If I don't blow my cover, any local might. Perks of small town living. I'm not sure how she would feel, finding out I'm the organizer's brother. Voice lowered, Charlotte asks, "Are you in hiding? Are you in witness protection? Oh wait, don't answer that. You can't, right?"

It takes a few seconds to realize Charlotte is teasing me again, and I finally relax. "I'm not big on chivalry," I lie, securing my snowshoes. "Don't think I won't push you into a snowbank."

"Have to catch me first!" The quick crunch of snow echoes as she hurries toward the trail marker, leaving me behind to stare after her retreating ass. It's a very nice ass. I'd love to get my hands on it. My dick twitches, agreeing.

I take my time tightening my shoes. Living in a remote area with high snowfall has made snowshoes a regular part of my life. It's easy to keep my strides quick and deliberate.

Charlotte, though cute as hell with the way she uses her whole body to move, is wasting a lot of energy. It doesn't take long before I'm on her tail.

She squeals playfully, picking up her pace.

I move faster. Stealthier.

"You wouldn't *really* shove me in a snowbank, would you?" She glances around nervously at the many snowdrifts surrounding the edge of the trailhead, her pace slowing as if surrendering.

I grab her hand, spinning her around. She wobbles, but I catch her around the waist to steady her. "I think you *want* me to."

Those hazel eyes are filled with mischief, the hollow of her throat fluttering with... desire? "*Maybe.*"

"I'm not going to push you—"

She catches me off guard, shoving at my chest until I tumble backwards. My hand still around her waist, I take her down with me. I land on my back with Charlotte on my chest, a cloud of puffy white snow erupting around us. The sound of her laughter does something to me. I feel the layers of ice I've kept around my heart start to thaw.

"Another surprise," I murmur, fully aware how close her glossy lips are to mine. Done with resisting, I reach one gloved hand to her cheek, snowflakes dusting her soft skin, and draw her mouth to mine. I've thought of nothing but this kiss since I watched her sip that first whiskey sour last night. A night of lust-filled dreams played out this scenario in several different ways. But not one of them prepared me for how potent this first kiss would be.

Our mouths move together as if they've always known one another. Our tongues slide in perfect rhythm. She tastes of hot chocolate and cherry lip gloss. Charlotte moans softly as I devour her pretty mouth. My body becomes acutely aware of every place we touch. In about three point two seconds, her upper thigh will discover just how badly I wanted to give in to temptation last night.

It takes incredible effort to break apart the kiss and toss her gently into the snowbank next to me. Her laughter fills the air, thawing another layer of ice inside me. I should be panicked. I should be hopping to my feet, ready to run far away from what's blossoming between us. This was supposed to be a favor. Nothing more. I barely know this woman.

How can she have such a powerful effect on me?

Why am I so fucking calm about it?

Charlotte is the first to get to her feet. She offers her hand, but before I can take it, pulls it back. "You're not going to yank me back down, are you?" Her playful expression is like a dare. The falling snowflakes make her eyes twinkle. A man could fall *hard*.

Why the hell does she need a professional matchmaker? Surely, she has dozens of prospects back at home. The thought causes a surge of jealousy in my chest. The thought of another man touching my Cookie Monster is too much.

"Don't want to miss the grand finale at the end of the trail, do you?" I get to my feet and start down the snow-packed, tree-covered path, desperately in need of some physical exertion to calm certain areas of my body the hell down. I'm not thinking straight. "Heard there's a bunch of heart-shaped crap and some selfie contraption." *Thanks Grandma Olive.* "Real romantic shit."

"Shouldn't you be running the other way?" she calls after me, doing her best to catch up.

"Very funny, Cookie Monster." Except I'm not laughing because a single thought nags at me. Who the hell was *supposed* to be her match?

CHARLOTTE

Today has been nothing short of a real-life fairytale. A snowy adventure in the woods with a romantic lookout point—I can't believe I actually got Kash to take a selfie with me considering the number of heart-shaped decorations that filled the frame—a couples' cooking class that ended up in a flirty food fight, and a private wine tasting in the Caribou Creek Brewery's party room that gave us both a nice little buzz.

The grumpy man is smiling more than he isn't.

The dial on the flirting meter has been cranked all the way up to ten. The dial on the sexual tension meter, however, has flat out busted. All thoughts and worries of client emails have been overtaken by this all-encompassing desire. I *need* this man to ravage me tonight or I'm going to spontaneously combust.

When I first heard about this matchmaking event on the radio two months ago, I laughed out loud so hard I cried. I had to get out of the drive-thru line and go to the back because I couldn't form the words I needed to order. It seemed like the most ridiculous thing a person could do. Agree to spend an entire weekend on a blind date in a small mountainside town?

I thought only desperate people needed professional matchmakers to intervene. Submitting your name didn't even guarantee a spot. In fact, the odds were against ninety-nine percent of applicants. I put my name in the hat as a joke. I was fed up and admittedly a tad tipsy after another cringy blind

date with a *nice boy* Great-Aunt Doris arranged. I answered the three hundred plus questions honestly because what did I have to lose? It couldn't be any worse than super creeper Donnie.

Then two weeks later, I received a congratulatory call.

I thought it was a hoax until Maggie Parsons made a trip to Fairbanks to meet me in person. She reassured me she'd found someone who was a perfect match. It wasn't until that meeting that I truly believed she could help me.

But Kash?

I can't believe how well we work. We're opposite in so many ways but somehow, we complement each other. The banter between us is definitely keeping things interesting and building something more than just the untapped sexual tension between us. Maybe we'll fizzle out after we finally do the deed. But something tells me there's more to this than just *that*.

There's long term potential here.

"You got that hearts and flowers look in your eye again," Kash grumbles as we leave the dining room, hand in hand. My entire body tingles with want. If the man turns me down tonight, I'm yanking him into the room and tackling him onto my bed. We've spent all day flirting and teasing each other through every scheduled event. But until now, we've been surrounded by the other couples and that magazine journalist we've managed to personally dodge for an interview.

"It's been a... nice day."

"Nice?" He tugs me to a stop, spinning me around and pressing me up against the wall with his hard body. The narrow hallway is deserted, for now. We haven't even made it to the elevator. At any moment another couple might leave the dining room and catch us. But all I care about is the way his body feels up against mine. His hand firmly cups my jaw, tilting my chin up. "I'll show you *nice*, Cookie Monster."

His lips capture mine in a hungry frenzy. Every moment of want and desire that collected throughout the day pours into

this rough, zealous kiss. It's savage yet sweet. Passionate and sensual. I fist his shirt so hard it might rip, needing him closer as every single nerve ending in my body awakens and tingles. I've never been kissed like this. So thoroughly that my brain short circuits. Wetness has been pooling between my legs most of the day. Now it drips down the inside of my thighs.

I want him.

I need him.

I'm done waiting.

Kash's hand slides up and down my side, settling on my hip. "*Nice*, my ass," he murmurs against my mouth.

Before this event, I never would've pegged a man like Kash as my type. His grouchiness alone should've turned me off from the moment I met him. But somehow, it intrigued me. I dare say it even brought me out of my shell a bit. He's rough around the edges. Even his stubble is out of control. I run my fingers through it, imagining how it'll gently scrape the inside of my thighs when he finally goes down on me.

A whimper escapes my throat.

"Is that an invitation, *Charlotte*?" The way he says my name nearly makes me climax right here against this wall. No one has ever made my full name sound like dripping, unadulterated desire.

"If you don't stay tonight," I say, my breath unashamedly coming in ragged pants, "I'm pushing you in another snowbank."

He rests his forehead against mine, closing me in a bubble made from his muscular body. I drink in that woodsy scent, desperate to find out if it's stronger on his skin. "I'd like to see you try, Cookie Monster." He leans in for another kiss. This one tender and filled with promise of things to come. "Now let me take you upstairs so I can shoot that idea of *nice* to hell once and for all."

KASH

The second I kick the hotel room door closed, I spin Charlotte around and press her up against it. Our lips have been fused together since leaving the dining room. I damn near got caught in the elevator with my hand up her sweater in search of her tit. Thankfully the elderly couple decided to wait for the next ride up.

The offending sweater is the first thing to go.

A red lace bra barely contains Charlotte's massive tits. I cup them in my hands, giving them an enthusiastic squeeze. "Damn, these are nice."

She moans as I slip a finger beneath the lace and find her nipple. I relish in the way my soft strokes harden it to a peak in seconds. When they're both taut, I slide my hands to her back and unclip the lace prison, freeing her tits.

My mouth is drawn to her nipples, like it's some magnetic pull I can't resist. I trace my tongue around her pebbles as my hands slide down her sides. I fucking love the way her fingers greedily tousle my hair, her nails lighting scraping my skin as she arches into my touch.

I slip a thumb into the waistband of her leggings, brushing silk. My dick throbs with a desperate need to be inside her tight channel. To claim her pussy for my own. *Soon. But not yet.* I run my tongue down the valley of her breasts, heading south. By the time I've reached her belly button, her leggings and panties are pooled at her ankles.

Her intoxicating womanly scent fills me.

I glance up to find her watching me, eyes hooded and drenched with raw desire. Her back is pressed into the door, hips arched slightly forward in offering. I wrap my hands around her ankles and slowly slide up, kissing the inside of her calves, her knees, her thighs.

Her wetness drips down the inside of her thigh. It tastes fucking divine on my tongue as I lick a path to her center.

She whimpers as the tip of my tongue flickers over her swollen bud.

I lift one of her legs over my shoulder, opening her wider to me. I take my time tasting, licking, devouring. I commit the landscape of her pussy to memory, noting which places are the most sensitive to my touch.

I suckle her bud and she nearly buckles.

“Fuck that feels good,” she pants, tightening the grip she has on my hair. “Don’t stop.” She rocks her hips to the rhythm of my tongue. “Please, don’t *ever* stop.”

I fuse my mouth to her pussy and plunge my tongue into the softness. This time she does collapse. I catch her and skillfully drape her other leg over my shoulder. “Keep your back pressed against the door, *Charlotte*. I’m not done with you.”

I feast on her as if it’s the last thing I’ll ever taste. Her whimpers turn to loud moans and all out cries. We’ll probably get a noise complaint, but fuck it. If we get kicked out, I’ll take her back to my place where no one will be bothered by how loudly she screams my name.

Charlotte cries out one last, long *fuuucckk!* as her body convulses with a fierce orgasm. I hold her in place, my main objective to protect her from any harm as she rides her delicious wave of pleasure to its end. It’ll be the first wave of many she’ll catch tonight.

CHARLOTTE

My wobbly legs barely make it to the bed before I collapse onto my back and watch the sexy, gruff man undress. That was the *best* orgasm of my life. Kash is the first man to take me to that place. Only yours truly has ever accomplished the same. And my efforts have never left me unable to walk a straight line.

In the dim lighting, I see glimpses of tattoos I hope to explore with my lips. But when he drops his jeans and his cock springs free, I forget all about the tattoos. I forget my own name. That's not a penis. That's Thor's fucking Hammer.

I gasp.

Kash crawls onto the bed and up my body. "Don't worry, Charlotte." The way he practically purrs my name in that deep timbre causes my body to shiver with delight. It's enough to erase all my fears. "I'm going to take very good care of you." He kisses my neck, his beard gently scraping my skin. "I'm made for you. You'll see."

I wrap my arms around his neck, drawing him back to my lips. The taste of me lingers on his tongue.

"I have condoms," he murmurs against my lips.

"With an s?"

"You think this is going to be a one-and-done type situation?" He laughs low and deep, the vibration of it causing quivers low in my belly. Is there anything this grumpy

mountain man does that *doesn't* turn me on? “I’m keeping you up all night long. Hope you weren’t counting on sleep.”

He kisses me thoroughly before retreating from the bed in search of his jeans. It feels very intimate to watch him roll the rubber onto his cock. Why have I never felt that way about it before? *Because you’re falling in love, Charlie. That’s why.* I gasp, drawing his attention to me as he climbs back onto the bed.

“It’ll fit, Charlotte. Do you trust me?”

I silence the voice in my head determined to shout the *L*-word from the damn rooftops and focus on the moment. I don’t trust myself and how fast I’m falling. But I do trust Kash. I trust him implicitly.

“Yes.”

“Then let go, Charlotte. Let go of your fears. I’ll keep you safe.”

I cup his stubble-covered cheek and drag his lips to mine. Never in my life have I felt such raw emotion in such a simple thing. But with each meeting of our mouths, I feel an exchange of hope, promise, and *love*. Refusing to overthink things, I simply surrender to Kash.

I lift my legs, crossing my ankles over his lower back and invite him in. Inch by delicious inch. I’m dripping wet with desire and need of him. My tight channel eagerly stretches to invite him in where he belongs. I’ve never felt so close to a man before. I doubt I ever will again. There’s no point in denying how I feel anymore. I love him. I love Kash— *guess I don’t know his last name.*

Before I can utter the question, he reaches between our bodies and fingers my uber sensitive clit. I lose all ability to think or speak. I surrender even further, sinking into the sensation of our lovemaking as he rocks his cock in and out of me in a rhythm just a notch about gentle.

His mouth slides down my jaw, my neck, my collarbone. His lips surround an erect nipple and his teeth scrape the sensitive skin. The combination of sensations is

overwhelmingly pleasurable. A euphoria that shouldn't exist but somehow does.

I rock my hips harder, urging Kash to pick up the pace.

Tingles start in my fingertips and toes as his easy strokes become deliberate thrusts, each one lifting my hips from the bed. Each time our bodies slam together, the urgency grows. The tingles spread into my arms and legs. The bed creaks beneath us. Kash flashes me a wicked grin before rocking into me even harder.

The tingles explode in my core in one sudden burst. I cry out a string of obscenities. I cry out his name. I cry out words I don't recognize.

Kash thrusts faster and faster. Until finally, he stills inside me, groaning as he finds his release. The only thing that could possibly make this moment better is if there wasn't anything between us. If he was emptying his cock into my depths. I've never in my life wanted that— *craved* that.

It's how I know I'm no longer falling. I've fallen completely. I'm in love with the man I met on a blind date hardly twenty-four hours ago. It makes no sense, but I don't need it to. I want to tell him. The words are dying to launch from my throat. But a small, nagging fear keeps them locked behind my lips. At least for tonight.

Kash kisses my neck. "I'm not done with you, Cookie Monster. Not by a long shot."

KASH

Waking up with Charlotte in my arms has thawed the rest of my icy heart. *This* is why things didn't work out with my ex. If it hadn't been for the Dear John letter I received overseas, I might've ended up with the wrong woman. I might've missed out on what was really meant for me. Who knew I was simply waiting for a ray of sunshine to soften my hardened heart?

"Is it morning already?" Charlotte murmurs, her eyes still asleep. Her hair is a wild mess from all the sex. I underestimated the number of condoms we'd need.

"It is, Cookie Monster." I kiss her shoulder, giving the soft skin a gentle nibble. "Want to shower with me?"

Her eyes flutter open, those hazel orbs locked on me. I could get used to this. I could wake up to those beautiful eyes every day for the rest of my life. Which is why as soon as we head downstairs for the sweetheart breakfast, I'm finding my sister. I don't want to be a fill-in anymore. I don't want to risk losing Charlotte should her real match show up. I also have to figure out how to tell Charlotte that the matchmaker is also my little sister. I hope she'll find it amusing.

There's no denying it any longer.

I'm in love.

And I'm going to tell Charlotte as soon as everything is sorted with my sister. Hell, maybe it'll even make the magazine feature and help Maggie's career even more.

In the shower, I take my time lathering Charlotte's soft skin with soap. Memorizing every inch of her curvaceous body. When she wraps her hand around my cock, I'm forced to lean a hand against the tile.

"I'm out of condoms," I say remorsefully.

I watch as she strokes my suds-covered shaft. "We can work around that."

I lift one of her legs onto the tiled ledge, opening her up to me, and reach a hand between her thighs. I stroke my fingers through her folds, applying just the right amount of pressure on her swollen button to elicit that delicious whimper of hers. Then I slide my hand back, my fingers searching for her entrance.

We lock gazes as the hot water falls around us and our hands bring one another to the brink of pleasure. The words *I love you* try to slip through my lips, so I steal a kiss to keep them at bay. *Just a little bit longer.*

We're almost late to breakfast.

It's only because Charlotte shoos me out of the bathroom to get ready that we arrive, hand in hand, with two minutes to spare. I scan the room in search of my sister. It's my number one priority to talk to her. The biscuits and gravy that are calling my name can wait a few minutes longer.

"You looking for someone?" Charlotte asks, that teasing tone I've come to love so much pulling me away from my mission.

"Yeah, my—" We turn a corner toward the buffet and I nearly plow into Maggie. She's talking to a man I don't recognize from the event. He's dressed casually in jeans and a nice flannel —*not wrinkled*— but I've never seen him before. Maggie hasn't dated anyone since her marriage went south almost two years ago. It's why her business fell off the map. Because *she* fell off the map. But the last conversation we had was about her rebuilding her career first and searching for love second.

“Kash, you’re here.” Her eyebrows are drawn together in confusion. Her gaze drops to my hand interlaced with Charlotte’s. “I didn’t expect you to be here.”

“What’s going on?” Charlotte asks.

“Who are *you*?” I ask the mystery man.

He lifts one corner of his mouth in a smug smirk. “I’m bachelor number seven.” He turns to Charlotte and adds, “Sorry I’m late.”

CHARLOTTE

“Excuse me, *what?*” I say to the strange man standing beside Maggie Parsons.

“I’m bachelor number seven. Dustin. You must be bachelorette number seven.” It’s as if this man doesn’t even register that Kash is standing beside me, holding my hand. He reaches out a hand, as if he’s happy to meet me, but I don’t take it.

“Maggie, what’s going on?” I search the famous matchmaker’s expression, hoping that I can catch a playful twinkle in her eye or a smile she’s fighting. Because this has to be a joke. One big practical joke. Kash is my match. Not this stranger who materialized out of nowhere and claims to be part of the event two days late.

“There was a slight... mix up,” Maggie admits.

“Maggie’s my sister,” Kash explains.

I recoil, as if I’ve been slapped. I drop his hand and narrow my gaze to the same laser focus he turned on me the very first time we met. “Your *sister?*”

The magazine journalist hovers a few feet behind us. I don’t know where the hell she came from. Probably some superpower to sniff out a good story.

I couldn’t care less in this moment. “Isn’t that a conflict of interest?” I ask.

“Ordinarily, yes,” Maggie interjects. “But he didn’t apply. Dustin went MIA—”

“Sorry, I was out of the country. Caught in a big storm.” Dustin’s casual smile doesn’t fit the tension of the conversation. “Couldn’t call to tell anyone I was running behind.”

“How did—” I gulp a swallow. Shit. Is my throat closing? Why can’t I breathe? Am I allergic to the truth? A dull roar is filling my ears, anger filling my chest and replacing the unrestrained joy of exactly two minutes ago.

“I asked Kash to fill in,” Maggie explains in a rush, glancing at her brother and then back to me. “It’s all my fault. I basically begged him to—”

I can’t listen to any more of this conversation. Each new confession is rattling me more than the last.

I storm out of the dining room, feeling Kash on my heels. I turn and glare at him hard. “*Don’t follow me.*”

He stops as if he’s hit an invisible barrier. I catch a glimpse of his remorseful expression before I spin and march toward the elevator.

God I’m such an idiot!

How the hell did I think Kash was my match? My soulmate? We are *nothing* alike. He’s the grumpiest, grouchiest man I’ve ever met. He thinks love is a made-up fantasy that gets exploited on Valentine’s Day more than any other holiday. The man doesn’t even like whiskey for crying out loud. All the signs were there from the moment I nearly ran him over with my car.

Maggie’s brother.

I shake my head in disbelief, but it doesn’t stop the tears from coming. She had to *beg* him to spend time with me. Probably had to beg him to tolerate and entertain me. Was any of this real? I’ve never felt so embarrassed and betrayed. This is so much worse than all the horrible blind dates I’ve endured.

Why couldn't she just tell me my match was a no-show? It would've sucked, but I wouldn't be utterly heartbroken. I'd have gone back to Fairbanks with my tail quietly tucked between my legs and gotten back to my career.

I yank my phone off the nightstand. One I haven't had the urge to check since we went snowshoeing. There's fifty unread work emails and a string of texts from my cousin about her stupid wedding and my RSVP. I laugh out loud when she offers to set me up with a date.

No. Fucking. Thank you.

I plop on the bed, trying to get my head on straight. But all the thoughts are coming too fast. It's worse than being drunk.

Kash was late twice. Did his sister have to beg him to come back after that dinner? A dinner I thought went really well. So well, in fact, that I invited him into my room. He must've thought I was a real sucker.

And who the hell is the real bachelor number seven? Not that it matters. Kash *Parsons* —I should've known it was suspicious that he never offered up his last name— has ruined me for any other man. Maybe I was just a good time in bed for him. But my stupid feelings are real. I can't just turn them off now that my actual match has shown up.

With blurry eyes, I stuff clothes into my suitcase. To add insult to injury, I find my red lace bra dangling from a lamp and my matching panties draped on the corner of the headboard. The whole fucking room smells like sex.

I grip the offending, once beloved, red bra and give it an accusatory shake. "I'm burning you," I promise, anger dissolving into a swallowed sob. I bite my lip. What the fuck am I supposed to do? How do I erase the memory of what we shared?

All this time I was falling in love with a lie.

And Kash was simply playing a part.

KASH

It takes all my restraint not to chase after Charlotte as I watch her hurry to the elevator. I want to explain everything, but I also want to respect the space she's asked for. She's rightfully upset and hurt. And hell, why shouldn't she be? Nothing Maggie said was a lie. I had to be begged —at first.

I'll give her space. But hell if I'm letting her leave this hotel without saying goodbye.

When I return to the dining room, I find Maggie at the bar nursing a mimosa. Bachelor number seven, along with the nosy reporter, are nowhere to be seen. Several couples sit at intimate tables, some feeding each other breakfast. All of them of in a lovey haze and fucking oblivious to my world breaking apart.

“Maggs?”

“I'm sorry, Kash.” She's on the verge of tears. Dammit all. I draw her into my arms and squeeze her tight. I give her the time she needs, silently cringing when she sniffles against my shirt. “I'm okay,” she finally says, pulling away. “I'm just overwhelmed.”

“Where's bachelor number seven?” The question is laced with ice. I *dare* the man to get within ten feet of Charlotte again. I don't care what some statistics have spit out of whatever computer system Maggie uses to create her matches. He is not the one for Charlotte. *I* am.

“He’s checking into his room.” She lets out a heavy sigh, reaching for her mimosa. “He’s upset that I gave his perfect match away to my brother. So, I have to some damage control to do there.”

“Then why is he staying?”

Maggie shrugs. “Guess I’ll find out.”

“What about your reporter?”

“I think it’s safe to say she sprinted to her room to edit the article. Can’t blame her for eating up the scandal, can I?” Maggie lets out a pitiful laugh. “Maybe it was stupid to think I could revive my matchmaking career. I mean, I didn’t see the implosion of my own marriage coming. What makes me think I can help others find their soulmates?”

“Are you kidding, Maggs? Look around this room. The only couples who aren’t hand feeding each other strawberries and sneaking cans of whipped cream in their purses are in their rooms, too lost in each other to care about breakfast. There’s so much love and happiness in the air it’s making me fucking sick to my stomach.” I feel the slightest bit of relief when she cracks a smile. “*You* brought them together. You did this.”

“Yeah?”

“And I know it was a fluke, but you brought Charlotte and me together too. Not all matches can be made on some computer program. Some are just...”

“Instinctual?” she offers.

“Yeah.”

“You love her, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.” The admission slips out so easily, without a second of hesitation. “I didn’t think I’d ever let anyone in again after—”

“She-who-shall-not-be-named,” Maggie says.

“I thought my heart was turned to stone. Permanently.” I shrug, remembering how much I’d just wanted to go home on that first night, after I’d brought the second round of cookies.

“And I was okay with that. But now, I can’t imagine going a day without seeing Charlotte’s smiling face. I don’t know what magic you worked, but you did. And now I might lose her.”

“Then you have to tell her, Kash. You have to tell her how you feel.”

“You both talking about bachelorette number seven?” Dustin asks, inviting himself into the conversation. It takes considerable restraint to keep my hands at my sides. I never considered myself a jealous man, but I’m sure as hell a territorial one. “She just checked out.”

“What?” Maggie and I say at the same time.

“She’s leaving,” Dustin clarifies.

“Go!” Maggie shoves at me until I nearly trip over my own feet. “Run!”

CHARLOTTE

A raven stands in the middle of the road, picking apart what appears to be a red frosted cookie. The enormous bird doesn't seem at all bothered by my car as he effectively blocks my exit. I resist the urge to honk my horn only because I don't want to draw any attention to my escape attempt.

I suspect Kash will try to come after me if he discovers I'm on the run.

I'm too fragile to face him right. Too emotional. I'll cave for sure if he comes running after me. I know deep down that he felt something too. Maybe not love, considering his grumpy ass is allergic to it. But I know I wasn't alone when he looked in my eyes. Some kind of emotion stirred in him.

I just can't handle the lie that began all of this. I can hear my cousin's cackling laugh now as she announces, in front of her entire wedding party, *You mean he had to be begged to have dinner with you? And begged again to spend more time with you the next day? Suppose that makes sense since your actual match decided not to show. How funny!*

Except it's not fucking funny at all. It's my life.

The raven caws at me, as if I'm interrupting his snack time.

I lean my head out the window. "Can't you eat that stale cookie somewhere else?" I swear he's mocking me. It's the only reason that stupid broken heart-shaped cookie survived this long.

“Go on, go!” Kash calls out, stamping a booted foot towards the bird. The raven throws him a dirty look but grabs the rest of his cookie and flies off.

My path is clear.

Kash stands off to the side, giving me the chance to escape. The chance to choose.

Tapping the gas pedal, I start to drive away. But I only make it a few feet before the image of the grouchy man staring after me in my rearview mirror promises to haunt me.

“Well shit,” I mutter under my breath, and throw my car in park. The decision *is* mine to make and I decide to give him one last chance to explain himself. This time, I remember to unbuckle the damn seat belt *before* exiting the car.

“I love you.”

The unexpected words catch me off guard before I even get all the way out from behind the wheel. I stumble and slip on a patch of ice, bracing for an impact that doesn't come. At least, not one with the concrete. I land on my muscular, woody scented man. Kash, in his attempts to save me, broke my fall. He kept me safe, just like he promised.

“Are you okay?” I gasp, horrified that I've broken him.

His quiet, deep laughter puts me instantly at ease. “I don't break that easily, Cookie Monster.” He reaches for my cheek, brushing locks away from my skin. Already, I feel myself caving. Either I'm in deep trouble or this is quite possibly what real love is like. Forgiveness coming effortlessly. But I'm still going to make the man work for it.

“What the hell, Kash? You weren't going to tell me that your *sister* was running the event?”

“I—”

“Or that you were filling in for a no-show? I don't know what's more humiliating. My match standing me up or the image of your sister begging you to feel sorry for me.”

“You know he didn't stand you up,” Kash corrects, muttering a string of obscenities afterward. “Not that it

fucking matters. He's not your match. *I* am. And Maggie never asked me to feel sorry for you. I didn't even know who was at that table until I pulled out my chair."

"Then why agree?"

"Because my sister asked me to. This event was really important to her and she didn't want anything to go wrong." He strokes his thumb along my jaw.

I can't feel my calves—the only body parts not on top of Kash—that are pressed against the snowy pavement, but I don't want to move. I don't want to blink and have this moment disappear. Because this is one of those romantic, sappy moments from movies. They don't exist in real life with grumpy men who think love is a myth.

"You really mean what you said?"

"What?"

"That you love me?"

His green eyes sparkle as his lips tug upward into a full-blown smile. "Of course I do, Cookie Monster."

I raise an eyebrow, playing skeptical. "You might have to prove it to me."

Kash draws my lips to his, kissing me deep enough to ward off the chill of the pavement beneath us. He tugs on my bottom lip with his teeth before pulling back. "I plan to spend all day proving it to you."

"But I already checked out of the lodge."

"I'm not taking you back there where *bachelor number seven* can stir up shit. I'm taking you home where no one will bother us. I'll put up a damn snow berm if I have to." He draws me in for another kiss that causes a quiver low in my belly. I should be exhausted, considering how little we slept last night. But I'm high on orgasm energy, eager to spend all day naked with the man who, against all odds, has stolen my heart.

"Kash?"

“Hmm?”

“I love you, too.”

EPILOGUE

ONE VALENTINE'S DAY WEEKEND LATER...

KASH

Charlotte leads the way along a familiar snow-covered trail, mostly so I can enjoy the view from behind. I love watching her cute ass shimmy from side to side as her snowshoes crunch against the powder. We've spent a lot of time exploring the twenty-two acres I own when we're not ripping each other's clothes off in our cabin.

"Which way, slow poke?" she teases, turning her head over her shoulder. Those hazel eyes sparkle at me, daring me to tackle her into a snowbank. But I have other plans today, and they include reaching the end of this trail before we give in and start fooling around. Even in the elements, the heat between us sizzles nice and hot.

"Go left."

"Are you sure?"

My heart hammers in my chest as I watch her look right.
"Yes, left. Trust me."

Her flirty gaze meets mine again. "Race you."

Charlotte takes off, much quicker this time than the first snowshoeing adventure we had together. She's a natural.

I pretend to hurry after her, keeping just far enough back to make sure she wins. Because at the end of the trail is a big

surprise. This woman that I've fallen madly in love with has given up a lot to build a life with me. She left her real estate career behind in Fairbanks and found a new one in Caribou Creek. She left behind her friends, though visits them when she goes to see her great aunt. I'm so grateful she's also forged new local friendships. Grandma Olive loves her and never lets me forget the magic of the full moon.

It's time I make things official. Time Charlotte knows how deep my commitment to her runs.

"Is that a—balloon?" As she approaches the small clearing up ahead, the wisps of pink and red become more apparent. I had Maggie and Dustin sneak out here on a snow machine a short while earlier to set everything up, but I was worried about the cold and the balloons.

Most of them, thankfully, are still floating.

"What is all this, Kash?" Charlotte spins in a slow circle surrounded by heart-shaped balloons.

"I wanted this to look like the time we first met. Minus the destroyed cookies."

"Ha, ha."

I close the distance between us, reach into my pocket for the most important gift I will ever give Charlotte, and drop to one knee. She covers her mouth with mittened hands. Her hazel eyes go wide, then shiny.

"I fell in love with you the moment I met you. It just took me a couple days to realize what it was. I have loved waking up next to you every morning. I even love the way you make my grumpy ass smile when I don't want to."

She lets out a choked laugh, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

I open the ring box and hold it up to her. "Charlotte — Cookie Monster— will you make me the happiest man alive and marry me?"

She tackles me and we both go down. Her lips plant wet, smacking kisses all over my face. "Of. Course. I'll. Marry."

You.” She says each word between zealous kisses until they all of a sudden stop. “Oh no! The ring!”

“Relax, Cookie Monster.” I hold up the closed ring box as evidence. “I saw you coming a mile away.”

Up next in the Valentines & Holidates series is [My Billionaire Holidate](#) by Fern Fraser.



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