

A romantic couple in formal attire. The woman has long blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a black dress with gold sequins and a gold bracelet. The man has short brown hair and a beard, wearing a black tuxedo with a white shirt and black tie. They are embracing, with the man's hands on the woman's shoulders. The background is a vibrant purple with sparkling light effects.

*Naughty  
and Nice*

A CLEAR SECURITY HOLIDAY

A gift box wrapped in white paper with a large purple ribbon bow. The box is set against a background of purple and pink bokeh lights.

AINSLEY  
ST CLAIRE

# **Naughty and Nice**

Clear Security Holidays

A Novel

Written by:  
Ainsley St Claire

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## CHAPTER 1

# *Clay*

“Ms. Griffin, nice to meet you. I’m Dr. McGrath. I see you’re having some abdominal pain?” I speak to the patient as I enter her curtain, though I’m too busy studying her chart to make eye contact. Her vitals are fine. Her blood pressure is a tiny bit high, but that happens when people come to the emergency room.

“Yes. It hurts,” she says. “And please call me Kimberly.”

I look up at her for the first time. She’s in her mid-twenties. A bottle blonde and dressed well, but right now that doesn’t matter. My job is to care for her. The notes from the nurse say she was almost unable to stand because she was in such pain. Now she doesn’t seem distressed at all.

“Can you tell me where it hurts?”

“In my stomach.”

“What are you doing when it hurts the most?”

She flips her hair over her shoulder and gives me a demure smile. “It hurts all the time.”

“Do you get menstrual cramps?”

“Sometimes, but this is different.”

“Why don’t you lie back, and let’s take a look?”

I step out into the hallway to signal the nurse, Vanessa Ryan, who comes in not only to assist me but to protect me and those in my care. These days you can never be too careful. I’m a good doctor, and I pride myself on being a professional caregiver, no matter where I’m working. Rather than a traditional practice, I work one week a month in the emergency room and spend the rest of my time as the head of the medical team at Clear Security, a firm my longtime friend Jim Adelson owns.

Kimberly lifts her shirt and unbuttons her pants.

“Let me know if any of this hurts.” With one hand over the other, I apply gentle compression, starting at her stomach, moving to the bladder, and feeling my way toward her ovaries. She’s not flinching or screaming with any pain, and I’m not feeling anything. No masses, and everything seems normal. “Does it hurt when you urinate?”

“No,” she says, her voice a little breathy.

I look over at the nurse, and she smirks.

“It’s down a little farther,” Kimberly says, her eyes closed.

I’m feeling and pushing as I go.

“Farther,” she says softly.

I move down and apply pressure, but I’m not finding anything.

“More...”

I’m at the top of her pubic bone. I’m not going to go any farther.

The nurse gives me an eye, and we both know what’s going on.

“It’s right there in the middle,” the patient breathes.

I sigh. *Unbelievable*. She’s looking for a happy ending, and I don’t play that game. Not at work, anyway. That would

be a quick way to lose my license and ruin everything I've worked for. Nope.

I pull away and pick up the computer to chart her symptoms. "Okay, everything I would look at seems to be normal. I'll have a gynecologist come in to do an internal exam. Someone will be here shortly."

I leave Kimberly lying on the table without a second look. I wish this was the first time something like that has happened. But every once in a while, particularly lately, we get someone who thinks I'll be willing to extend services beyond my duties as a doctor. It's embarrassing, frankly—for the "patients" more than me. What makes that seem like a good idea? But anyway, I never have indulged one of them, and I never will.

A little while later, I'm just finishing my notes on Kimberly's chart when I see her pull the curtain aside to leave—before the gynecologist even arrives. She gives the nurse a dirty look and walks over to me with a flirtatious smile.

She hands me her business card. "I'd love to get together sometime and explore where it hurts." She struts away.

I shake my head and toss her card in the trash.

"She had quite a recovery," Nurse Vanessa says.

The other nurses chortle around me.

"That's what you get for being named the most eligible bachelor in San Francisco," says Georgie Cruz.

I shake my head. "It's a curse, I swear."

"One you enjoy very much," notes Kiley Rose, my favorite nurse, as she walks by.

I suppose it could be flattering, but it's also a little insulting. I'm not an object. I'm a professional, and I've worked hard for what I have. I put myself through undergrad and medical school through Navy ROTC and the Navy's Health Professions Scholarship Program. I spent eight years in



the Navy, five of them in Afghanistan with the Marines FORECON. It wasn't easy.

The rest of the shift's patients have legitimate complaints, so the time goes quickly. At the end of the day, as I'm preparing to leave, Lucy Chu, one of the older nurses, approaches me with mistletoe. She leans in and kisses me on the cheek. "How's your day been, Clay?"

"Mistletoe already? It's not even Thanksgiving."

She shrugs. "With all the time off people take around the holidays, we decorate early. How was the shift?"

"Lucy, today's shift is one for the record book. Besides the crazy woman, I've dealt with kidney stones, a broken arm, and a drug overdose. Thankfully, in twenty minutes, I'm out of here and off to meet some friends before I start this all over again tomorrow."

Lucy stands back and shakes her head. "This is the emergency room in the largest hospital in San Francisco. Crazy comes with the job. What's so unusual?"

"He had somebody ask for an *internal* exam," Kiley tells her.

Lucy winks at me. "I didn't know you were a gynecologist these days."

"I'm sure he knows his way around a vagina," Georgie teases.

"What I can't figure out is how they know when he's here," Vanessa says.

I nod. I work twelve-hour days here for one week a month. It's grueling, but I find it works. "That's what I want to know," I say.

When nothing else comes in before I'm scheduled to be off at seven p.m., I wave goodbye to the nurses, use the locker room to change into jeans, my best Chukka boots, and a cashmere sweater, and I'm off to meet the guys.

I'm the first to arrive at the bar. It's close to my place but also not far from Clear Security, my other job. They're

great guys over there, and I've known most of them since my days in the military, so I often hang out with them, even when I'm not at work.

I take a seat at the bar. The bartender is a fantastic brunette in a black leather bustier and matching mini skirt.

"What can I get you?" she asks in a voice that makes my cock hard.

"I'll take whatever IPA you have on tap."

"Coming right up," she says. She eyes me as she pulls on the beer tap. "Looks like you've had a long day." I smile and nod as she places the beer in front of me. "Eight-fifty."

I pull a twenty out of my pocket and hand it to her before I turn to find an empty booth in the back.

I see a few women checking me out and then someone murmurs, "Most eligible bachelor in San Francisco..."

My stomach turns, and I'm about ready to give up and go home, despite my full beer. But then Nate Lancaster arrives with Jim, and Gage Easton is quickly behind them.

"Nice spread in *San Francisco Monthly*," Nate teases.

I groan. "The hospital convinced me to do it. It was good publicity. Had I known it was going to turn into a fiasco, I would have skipped it, though."

"Oh no, poor Clay," Nate mocks. "So many beautiful women are coming on to you, and they all want to be Mrs. McGrath."

"Hey! It's bringing weirdos into the ER like it's a place to hook up. At the hospital, I'm a professional. And when I'm off, I'm not looking to do anything more than have some fun."

"I don't think you can blame all that on the article," Gage challenges. "Some of that was happening prior to your recent fame."

I roll my eyes. "I guess, but it's definitely gotten worse."

“And you’re sure you’re strictly professional at work?” he asks. “How many of the nurses have you slept with?”

So much for supportive friends... “Not that many,” I protest.

“How do you describe *not that many*—two, six, a dozen?” Gage asks.

“Like you were a virgin when you met Stella?” I push back.

Gage gives me a look. “When did I ever say that?”

Rather than continue to receive no pity from my friends, I shift the conversation to the game next week. The Goldminers are playing the Cowboys on Thanksgiving Day.

“What are you guys doing for Thanksgiving?” I ask, wondering whose place I can crash at for a free meal.

“I’m taking the family to Aruba,” Nate says. “We found a beautiful place on the water, and Katrina is bringing her boyfriend.”

“Is she still dating Jeremy Hamilton?” The guy is a twenty-two-year-old, all-star baseball phenom who broke Nolan Ryan’s fastball record. Nate’s daughter Katrina is a wildcat at nineteen.

“Yeah...” Nate looks down at his drink. “He’s a great guy. I really like him, and he seems to center her a little bit.”

I look at Jim, and he shrugs. “I’ll be working. One of my clients leaves this weekend for Aspen, so the family’s coming with me, and we’ll all be there. I’ll spend Thanksgiving Day with them, and we’ve enrolled the kids in ski lessons.”

I snort. “That must have cost you.”

Jim nods. “With twins, it’s like we hemorrhage money.”

“Stella and I are taking the girls home to Oregon,” Gage tells me. “If you want to come up and see Stella’s mom,

you're welcome to join us. She's looking for her next husband."

I smirk. "No, thank you." Guess I'll have to figure something out on my own. The City is silent during the holidays, and it feels lonely. I suppose I'm invited to either of my parents' houses, but they each have new families, and I always feel like the odd man out. I did enough of that as a kid.

The guys and I spend an hour or so watching a hockey game and finishing our beers. I catch the bartender looking over our way a couple times, and I consider it. After the rough day I've had, I wouldn't mind a quick lay and a good night's sleep.

But in the end, I walk home alone from the bar. It's only about twelve blocks.

I think back to when I met those guys I call my friends for the first time. Their lives have all changed since then, but mine is mostly the same. All three of them were in the FORECON group with me. They were Marines, rather than Navy. Nate was our CO, and he was already married, but the rest of us lived to drink, talk about getting laid, and try to make it another day. I can't believe they've all settled down now.

I open the door to my condo and step into the largely empty living room. I've lived here a while now, but I still haven't invested in furniture. That seems like more of a commitment than I can handle right now. I don't bring anyone here anyway. I have a television and a chair to sit in to watch it. I'm pretty well covered.

My high-rise condo building is located near Oracle Park, and I can see onto the field from my patio. Baseball games are much better in person, but with eighty-one home games, going to all of them is unrealistic. It's fun just to listen to the crack of the bat and the crowd cheering. And even in the off season, they keep it busy over there. Tonight, I hear music coming from some band on the field. I'm guessing it's a private concert because the stands aren't full.

I sit on my patio and drink another beer with my feet up, enjoying the music. It's chilly outside, but I grew up in the mountains of Northern California, so my blood is thick.

My mind returns to my many married friends. They all seem to have ended up with kick-ass women. I wonder if they got the last of the good ones...

My phone pings.

**Nadine: I'm lonely. Are you in the hospital?**

Nope. Not even going to respond. I drain my beer and go inside. My bed is calling me. My phone pings again.

**Margaret: We miss you.**

She's sent a photo of her boobs. Beautiful and fake as they are, I'm not going to respond.

Some of the nurses have always been interested in me, but it's been worse since that stupid article came out last month. Occasionally, I was interested in them, but now, it's not even fun anymore. I kind of wonder if it ever was... I sigh and pull my shirt over my head. I hate to block women I work with, but I'll have to if they don't stop. I can't report them because I've already gone there with both Nadine and Margaret. But my personal credo is that I don't do revisits. Even if it's great, I never do it twice. Things just get complicated that way, especially with someone at work.

Though I'm exhausted, once I'm lying in bed, I find myself looking up at the ceiling. *What's wrong with me?*



“Welcome to Harrah’s Lake Tahoe!” The bellman greets me at the door.

I nod to acknowledge him. “Thank you.” The opportunity just landed in my lap and rather than stay in the City, I’m here to get away, relax, and do some skiing.

I can already hear the music of the slot machines. This will be a great place to spend Thanksgiving week. I just know it. Though I think I’m still trying to convince myself.

“Checking in?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes.”

“Turn the corner here, and the check-in line is on your right.” He looks at his watch. “It shouldn’t be so bad this time of day.”

I follow his directions, but when I spot the parade of people, I stop short. The line is probably twenty deep. *Wow*. I have no choice but to join them. Fortunately, I’m behind a beautiful blonde and an attractive older woman I assume is her mother.

“I can’t believe, given the amount of money we spend to stay here, that we’re stuck in this obnoxious line,” the older woman says.

The blonde looks at me with an apologetic smile. “Mom, the other hotel is full. We’re going to have a nice holiday here.”

“If your father was alive, he’d have made the Ritz Carlton make room for us.”

“I know, but dad isn’t here, and this is the best I could do. We have tickets to the show tonight—”

“It better not be one of those shows where they’re topless.”

“No, Mom, they’ll be wearing clothes. It’s a Bob Mackie showcase, so the outfits will be spectacular. And we also have a spa day tomorrow.”

“This line is going nowhere.”

“We’ll be at the front in moments. I promise.”

I look toward the front, and all the check-in ambassadors are busily working away. But it’s shortly after three, a holiday week, and we’ve all arrived at the same time.

I zone out for a moment, and suddenly, the mother-daughter duo are being helped. Then I’m finally summoned to the check-in desk.

“Clay McGrath checking in for the week.” I hand her my California driver’s license and a credit card.

She clicks on the keyboard and hands me my room key.

I pick up my bag, and as I’m walking to the elevator, I see the blonde and her mother up ahead, meandering through the casino. There’s a loud cheer, and a group of kids in their early twenties—probably barely legal to be in here—celebrates exuberantly at the craps table. Then, as if it’s happening in slow motion, I watch as an elbow goes right into the side of the mother’s head. She collapses to the ground.

The guy who knocked her out takes off running, and the group disperses. No one stops to ask if she’s okay.

I race over as the blonde screams for help.

“I’m a doctor.” I straighten the woman’s crumpled body so she’s lying flat on the floor. I check her vitals, and she’s breathing. Security rushes over, and I ask them to call an ambulance.

“Your mother has sustained a contusion to the head,” I tell the daughter. “I saw it happen. We’re lucky that when she fell, she didn’t hit her head on anything.”

“Mom? Mom?” The blonde reaches for her mother’s hand.

I feel the bones in the woman’s legs and arms. Nothing seems injured, and nothing seems to be blocking her airway. I have my eye on the clock, knowing that the amount of time she’s unconscious is important.

Then her eyes flutter open. “What happened?” She looks at me, and her hands begin to tremble. She’s panicking.

“What’s your mother’s name?” I ask the blonde.

“Felicity Standing.”

“Mrs. Standing? I’m Dr. Clay McGrath. A man accidentally hit you in the side of the head, and you fell to the floor. How are you feeling?”

“How did I get here?”

I reach for her hand and clasp it in mine. “He hit you at just the right spot. The ambulance is on its way, and they’re going to take you to the hospital to do a scan. It won’t hurt. You’re going to be okay.” I lean in close. “I think you’ll even make it to your show tonight.” I try to ease her panic as a crowd forms around us.

She blinks her eyes and looks around the room a little.

“Where do you live?” I ask her.

“In Millbrae. It’s outside of San Francisco.”

“Just down the peninsula, right?”

“Yes.”

“Have you lived there long?”

“My husband and I moved out of the City after our son was born,” she says.

I look at the blonde to confirm, and she nods. These are all incredibly good signs.

The ambulance arrives, and I explain to the EMTs what happened, how long she was out, and the condition of her cognitive functions.

As the EMTs talk to her mother, the blonde stands rigidly at my side.

“It will be okay,” I assure her. “There’s a magic spot the guy just happened to hit that knocked her out cold. They’ll take her to the hospital and give her a CAT scan, just to make



sure there's no bleeding on the brain. But she seems fine. Most likely, she'll be back to her normal self in a few hours."

The blonde nods. "You've been absolutely wonderful. Thank you."

They load her mother on a gurney, and she follows them out, leaving me behind to get to my room. For some reason, I stand a moment and watch her go.

Once I clear my head and get moving, I watch a few games being played along the way. I'll come back and play some blackjack and probably some Texas hold 'em later tonight.

When I finally get to the elevator, a woman with long brown hair and mesmerizing eyes comes to stand next to me.

"That was very impressive what you did for that woman when she collapsed," she says.

I give her a tight smile. "Just luck. I didn't do much."

"You were cool under pressure. I admire that." She extends her hand. "My name's Sheena."

I'd really just like to get to my room, but I clasp her hand anyway. "Nice to meet you. I'm Clay."



## CHAPTER 2

# *Anna*

I rub my temples. This has been the longest day on record. I'd hoped getting out of town to celebrate Thanksgiving might be fun and a good change of pace since this is our first holiday without Dad. His passing over the summer was sudden, and Mom has been struggling. With my brother, Charles, in China for work, it's just the two of us, and it's my job to manage everything.

Even before her accident, Mom had been unhappy about one thing or another all day. She said I was late—I wasn't. The traffic out through San Francisco was bad—as per usual. She didn't like my hair. The weather was too hot. Some lady was driving with a dog on her lap. It went on and on, and I just tried to nod and ignore her. The last few months have been very hard for Mom. Dad did everything for her, and now, I'm exhausted.

The doctor pulls the curtain back and places her computer on the table near the end of the bed. She studies it for a moment. She looks like she's fourteen years old. I'm sure she's perfectly competent, but I know I'll hear about this from Mom when we're alone. "All right, Mrs. Standing. The CAT scan came back, and everything looks great. It looks like that elbow just happened to hit the wrong spot."

"I have a terrible headache," Mom grouses.

“I’ll get you some Tylenol,” the doctor offers.

“And pay twenty-five dollars for it? No thank you.”

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll pull it from pharma samples, and you won’t have to pay anything.”

Mom’s shoulders relax. “Thank you. That is very kind.”

The doctor sets a packet on the table, and for a moment, it looks like a condom. *Where is my brain today?* It’s been a while, I guess. She pours Mom a cup of water.

Mom takes her pills and shuts her eyes. “I hope this helps.”

“Probably some rest would be good for the rest of the day,” the doctor notes.

I cringe. I bought expensive tickets for a show at the hotel tonight. I probably can’t get a refund or sell them to anyone. If I see the kid who hit her, he’s going to get a piece of my mind.

The doctor hands Mom a piece of paper, which she immediately passes to me. It has some directions on how to manage her head injury. “Do I need to worry about a concussion?” I ask.

“I think she’s fine, but if her headache persists, she becomes nauseated, or she’s having balance problems, come back to the emergency room and we’ll admit her.”

“You’re more likely to get sick at a hospital than anywhere else,” Mom snaps.

The doctor smiles. “So true. Just get some rest, and if anything changes, let us know.”

I call a rideshare back to the hotel. During the ride, Mom is surprisingly quiet.

“That doctor sure looked young,” I throw out.

Mom nods. “There’s a time when you look around and everyone is younger than you. But you’re not there yet.”

I sigh. "I'm sorry this trip has gotten off to such a rough start."

She squeezes my hand. "I'm glad we're here together and not at home."

When we get out at the hotel entrance, the doorman welcomes us, and we stop by the front desk. They let us know our luggage has been taken to our rooms. I had my computer in there, and I pray it's still with our things.

As we walk through the casino to the elevators, I find myself hoping to see that handsome doctor again. I owe him for being so quick to step in and help out. He had Mom managed before my worry could get out of control. But I'll probably never see him again.

"The problem with casinos is they can smoke everywhere. Ugh. It stinks so bad," Mom grouches.

"Well, the rooms are supposed to be beautiful. I know they're not as plush as the Ritz Carlton, because they want you to spend time downstairs in the casino, but I think we'll still enjoy ourselves."

She looks over at me, and suddenly I see the frail woman she's become. My heart hurts. "Let's get you upstairs. They have room service, and we can find you a nice dinner."

She nods, and we take a short elevator ride to the fourth floor. Our room is just down from the elevator. "How is your headache doing?" I ask as I wave the key card over the lock.

"It's better. I will feel a lot better after a glass of wine."

"I don't think you're supposed to drink alcohol when you take Tylenol."

"At this point, it's not going to kill me," she snipes back, but then she grins.

I love her with all my heart, even when she's difficult. She and my father had a love to last forever. They met and married quickly, and together they built my father's real estate business. She did the books, and he was always dealing with

the issues. When he died, he was the single largest commercial real estate holder in San Francisco, owning over twenty-five percent of the space, and he was the third largest on the West Coast since they'd expanded up to Seattle and down to San Diego. My mother now owns the company, and soon my brother will take over as CEO.

“We have tickets to a show tonight. Do you want to go?” I ask.

“No. I think I'll stay in.”

“Okay. Do you need me to stay with you, or are you okay if I go by myself? I was looking forward to seeing the costume designs.”

She waves me away. “Go. Have a great time. I'll order some dinner and read my book.”

I look at her, and she seems fully with it, but I know she really fears hospitals. “How about we order room service together, and then I'll go down for the nine o'clock show right before it begins?”

She agrees, and I pull the menu. Then while we wait for our grilled salmon and shrimp creole to arrive, I get Mom set up so she can read in bed. After that, I take a shower. Hotel showers never run out of hot water, and thankfully the water pressure is strong.

My mind goes a thousand directions as the warm water cascades over me. I need to shake everything off from this stressful day. I'm supposed to use this time to relax. Managing my interior design business has been overwhelming lately because I've had to pause at odd hours to spend time helping Mom.

When I finish, I dig into my suitcase and find yoga pants and a T-shirt to put on. Fortunately, my computer is right where it's supposed to be. After I'm dressed, I tuck it under my arm and join Mom to wait for room service. She has a book in front of her, so I skim through my emails on my laptop.

When there's a knock at the door, we tuck away our distractions. The waiter rolls in the cart, and in no time, we're savoring our meals.

"What are you reading?" I ask between bites.

"I'm going back to the classics—Jane Austen."

"Oh." Mom usually reads autobiographies. "That's fun. Which one are you starting with?"

"I have *Sense and Sensibility* on my e-reader."

"You'll have to tell me how it ends." She smiles when I wink at her.

"I have a feeling Edward and Elinor marry, and Marianne marries Colonel Brandon."

I give her a skeptical look. "It sounds like you may have read this before."

"It's been a while, but I thought it would be a nice change of pace."

I nod. "Definitely. What do you want to do tomorrow?"

She shrugs. "I was thinking after the spa visit in the morning, I'd come back here and rest, and you could go skiing."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to spend the entire trip holed up in our room."

"No, that works for me. We have tickets to Thanksgiving dinner at the Ritz Carlton, so that will get me out. I get cold so easily these days." She sighs. "I guess it's a sign of getting older."

When we're done with dinner, I change clothes and finish getting ready. At eight forty-five, I kiss Mom goodnight. "I promise to check on you when I get back. But if you need me before then, call. If you're feeling dizzy or nauseated, call nine-one-one."

"I'll be fine." She waves me away, and I head down to the theater.

I have two tickets, so I won't be stuck with someone random sitting next to me. I find my seat, and then just before the curtain goes up, a man slips into the seat next to mine. I turn to look at him. He's handsome with dark hair, killer blue eyes, and a natural pink in his cheeks. "That's my mother's seat," I tell him.

"Is she coming?" he asks with a dazzling grin.

"Does it matter?"

"I saw you sitting here alone and thought you needed company."

"Why would you come to a showgirl performance by yourself?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

The lights go dark, and snowflakes on the stage light up and pulse to the beat of "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year." The stage lights go bright as the curtain rises to reveal a giant set of stairs, filled with women dressed in white feathers with giant feather fans. They gradually descend to the stage. They have so much poise and confidence. I wonder how they can walk down those stairs without falling.

With vintage Vegas style, they dance in synchronized kick lines, and when they lift their fans, the rhinestones glitter in the light. The costumes are stunning, but the women's breasts are bare. A part of me is grateful Mom isn't here. She would have gotten right up and left.

I stare at the stage, trying hard not to look at the women's breasts. In my mind, I'm chanting, *Look at their eyes, look at their eyes*. But it's so distracting. Heat rises in my cheeks, and the man next to me leans over. "Aren't they beautiful?" he asks.

I nod. "I didn't realize this was a topless show."

"The late show usually is, but it's so tasteful."

Men have now joined the women on stage. All are handsome and dressed in three-piece tuxedos. The feminist in



me has her hackles up. Where are the bare man chests? How about a butt cheek?

A Sinatra impersonator comes out and begins a set of holiday standards. The crowd sings along, and I'm mesmerized by the kicks, the uniformity of the women's bodies, and their grace.

At the intermission, about forty minutes into the show, the man again turns to me. "My name is Reggie Doyle."

"Nice to meet you, Reggie. Do you come to shows by yourself often?"

He smiles. "I'm here alone this week, but I always find someone to hang with." He gives me his bright grin, and I can't help but smile back. Maybe it's not so bad having someone in Mom's seat.

The lights go down, and we're treated to more music, feathers, rhinestones, sequins, and boobs. And while I'm a little uncomfortable witnessing this next to a stranger, the show is spectacular, and after a while, I get lost in the costumes.

When the show ends, I stand and walk back up the aisle with Reggie close behind me. "Would you like to get a drink?" he asks.

I should go back and check on Mom, but I haven't heard anything from her, and a handsome man has asked me to do something, and that doesn't happen very often. I'll send her a quick text to check in. "Sure. Why not?" We walk through the exit and soon find ourselves at one of the many bars in the hotel.

The show has definitely made me feel more festive. Mom isn't sure about putting up the tree this year, but I'm determined to celebrate. If nothing else, I'm going to celebrate that this tough year is over and I have a fresh start ahead.

"What would you like?" he asks as we sit at a small table.

After checking in with Mom, I put my phone away. I'm glad I didn't go up because she's already in bed. "A glass

of champagne, please.”

He nods and steps away. I look around the casino. The sounds of the machines are ever-present, but we’re missing the sound of coins. Everything now is tickets. I’m sure that makes people spend more, but it’s not the same. A cheer rises over the noise, and I smile as I follow the sound to a couple hugging in the distance. Someone is having a good night.

As I look around the bar, I spot the hot doctor who helped my mother earlier today. He’s with a beautiful redhead, and they’re very cozy in a corner booth. After a moment, his eyes meet mine, and he smiles.

I’m contemplating how much to smile back when Reggie returns with our drinks. With mine in hand, we toast to a good show.

“Where are you from?” he asks.

“San Francisco, and you?”

“LA. I like the weather there better, but don’t tell anyone that.” He grins. “I grew up in San Jose, and you Northern Californians are so uppity.”

I laugh because it’s true. “That we can be. What do you do in LA?”

“I’m in real estate,” he says.

“Really? Commercial or residential?”

“Commercial.”

“Who do you work for?”

“Myself mostly.” He takes a sip of his amber drink. “What about you?”

“I have a small interior design company. We do both commercial and residential properties.”

“Nice. We already have so much in common.”

I think if he knew who I was, he would be a little less boastful, but you never know. A shadow crosses the table, and I look up to see the doctor. I smile.

“How is your mother doing?” he asks.

“She’s much better, thanks to you. The emergency room released her, and they don’t even think she has a concussion. But we’re watching for it.”

“That’s great news.” He looks over at Reggie.

“Clay, right?” I ask him.

He nods.

“I’m Anna, and this is Reggie Doyle.” I turn to Reggie. “This is Clay...”

“McGrath. Clay McGrath.”

Reggie nods and turns up the corners of his mouth in a smile that doesn’t meet his eyes.

Clay smirks. “I take it your mother didn’t go to the show with you tonight?”

“No, she was tired. She’s already in bed. But how did you know we had tickets?”

“I heard you tell her about it in line earlier.”

“How do you two know one another?” Reggie interrupts.

Clay looks down at me and smiles. “We don’t, really. Her mother was hit in the head by a jubilant winner this afternoon. I’m a doctor, and I helped her out until the ambulance arrived.”

“Great. So now you know that she’s fine, you can move on.” Reggie takes a slurp of his drink, and I scowl.

Clay’s eyebrows rise as he looks at me.

I glance at the table where he was sitting, and the beautiful redhead is no longer there. “No, no,” I tell him. “Please, have a seat.”

Clay pulls out the chair next to me and sits down.

Reggie stands. “I’m not interested in your fuckery,” he declares before storming off.

What can I do besides laugh? Clay chuckles along with me, shaking his head.

“I didn’t mean to break up your date,” he finally says.

“We weren’t on a date,” I clarify. “He commandeered my mom’s seat and was evidently hoping for more. He was going to be sorely disappointed.”

“Because you’re sharing a room with your mom?” Clay asks.

“No.” I pretend to bristle. “Because he was a player.”

“What makes him a player?”

“He was a little too smooth when it came to sliding into my mom’s seat. And what guy goes to a showgirl show by himself?”

“It was the late show. There were breasts on display.”

I roll my eyes. “There was nothing posted about the show being adult themed.”

“Are you sure? There usually is.”

“Well, he was still a player.”

Clay snorts. “What’s wrong with being a player? Are you looking for a commitment or a night of fun?”

I sit back in my seat. “Says a player. Maybe I’m not looking for either.”

“Why do women need to get a man to commit so badly?”

I shake my head. The arrogance on these men. “Not every woman wants a commitment. But being nice to a guy doesn’t mean I want a night of fun, either. I was just minding my own business, sitting in my seat. And why does a guy think he has to deposit his seed with every woman he meets?”

“I’m hoping those deposits are in condoms,” Clay teases.

“Of course. And maybe *expel* would have been a better word.”

Clay grins and takes a sip of his drink. “You’re hilarious.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you either.”

He holds up his hands. “I’ll manage.”

Now, it’s my turn to laugh. “I’m sure you will.”

We spend the next hour talking about relationships from both perspectives. I like this Dr. McGrath. He’s very easy to talk to, and since we both know it won’t go anywhere, we take all the pretense away and just enjoy ourselves.

When the night ends, he walks me to the elevator and pushes the button to my floor and his own. When the doors open on my floor, he waves goodbye as I step out. Then the doors close behind me, and he’s gone.



## CHAPTER 3

### *Anna*

The next morning, my mind is still lingering on last night, even though I'm lying face down as the masseuse rubs at my muscles. It's relaxing until she gets to my shoulders.

"You need to drink more water," she says.

I'm sure she's right, but *ow*. The knot she's digging into hurts. I'm going to feel that tomorrow. I struggle to relax as much as possible until finally, she moves on.

I fall back into my thoughts. Last night went much later than I'd expected. Clay was funny and fun to talk to, and he laughed at my jokes. Too bad I probably won't see him again. He would be fun to hang out with in San Francisco. I guess I could look him up and call him. But what would I say? *Hey, remember me? You helped my mom and saved me from a strange man and we spent the night talking?*

When we parted, it was natural, like two friends saying goodbye. It wasn't awkward, although, had he kissed me or leaned in for a hug, that would have been fine too. I think about his lips. Damn, he had nice full lips, and they were quick to turn up in a smile. I like that. And they were surrounded by the best scruff—nicely trimmed, but I wonder if it was soft. I'll never know. He also looked like he was in very good shape.

I noticed none of those things about Reggie last night, nor did he make me laugh. I saw him with another blonde at breakfast this morning. He ignored me. Seems about right.

Who was that redhead with Clay when I first arrived? I never asked. Not that it particularly matters...

I think about what Clay said about women always wanting a commitment. I don't think that's me. Honesty and monogamy are what I want. The rest is just too hard to find. Okay, I wouldn't mind having a weekly date on Saturday nights. But Clay would probably think that was a commitment, so maybe that is me.

Still, I'm not looking for a husband. My parents were unicorns. Their marriage set a likely unattainable standard, as I've never met anyone else who had a relationship like they did. But I know it's possible, so I won't settle for any man who doesn't offer me what I know I deserve. Anything else is a waste of time.

I suppose I might scare men a little. I don't need them to fix something inside me. I don't need them to buy me things. And I don't need them to validate me. Dad always made sure I knew it didn't matter whether I was in a relationship or not. I shouldn't need a man to have a life or a career I love, and I don't.

"All righty. How do you feel?" the masseuse asks.

"Very relaxed."

"Excellent. I will step out so you can change, and I'll have a glass of water ready for you when you come out. Take as much time as you need."

She disappears, and when I sit up, I'm a little disoriented. I think I'm massage drunk. I slip my arms into the plush, terrycloth robe and tie it tight before sliding my feet into the slippers they gave me when we checked in.

Swinging the door wide, I find the masseuse standing against the wall, holding a glass of water with a lemon slice and a sprig of mint. She extends it to me.

"Thank you."



“You’ll feel better if you drink a lot of water.”

I nod and take a sip. *Blech!* I hate lemon in my water.  
“Thank you.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

I nod. “So relaxed.”

“Great. Enjoy your afternoon.”

I head out to the spa’s great-room-style lobby to wait for Mom. We agreed we’d meet back here after our massages and continue to relax. I want her to spoil herself. Maybe I can convince her to get a pedicure or a facial.

It’s warm in here, but I still cuddle up to the hearth. I love warmth. I pick up a gossipy entertainment magazine and sit down to wait. Soft spa tones play over the speakers, and the room smells like lavender and eucalyptus.

After a few minutes, Mom appears, her hair a bit disheveled. She sits down and one of the hostesses hands us each a mimosa.

“How was your massage?” I ask.

“I needed it,” she says. “I think I’m going to have a facial while I’m here.”

“You should. I wonder—”

“You don’t have to babysit me,” she interjects. “Go skiing. I saw the way you stared at Paradise Valley as we drove in.”

I smile. I love to ski. We’ve been coming up here since I was three years old, and I love the peacefulness of the snow out on a run. “You caught that?”

“You’re like your father.”

“I won’t complain about that comparison, but I’m okay if I don’t ski this trip.”

She shakes her head. “Go. Have fun. Get a few runs in before they shut down. We have reservations at Edgewood tonight. I promise I can spend a few hours alone.”

“I can come up and ski anytime I want to. I have a season pass. Don’t worry about me.”

“Maybe you should go try to find that doctor again.”

I told Mom over breakfast that I ran into the doctor who helped her out, and her eyes lit up. Seems she’s not going to let that go.

“I’m fine,” she assures me again. “Go have fun. Do something other than hover over me.”

“Okay, as long as you’re sure.” I look over at the clock on the wall. I have less than a half hour before the next shuttle.

“Go!” she directs.

I stand and tighten the belt on my robe. “I’ll have my phone if you need me.” She waves as I sprint back to the room.

I change clothes and pull out my bright pink ski pants and black ski jacket. The valets have my skis and boots down in a storage locker, so I’ll call them on the way downstairs. I should just make the twelve-thirty shuttle to Paradise Valley. I call with my request as I wait for the elevator, and when I get downstairs, my skis are ready and waiting, but no boots. That’s a problem.

The concierge quickly apologizes and sends someone back to find them, but I’m convinced I’ll be drinking a warm drink in the bar while I wait an hour for the next shuttle. Instead, a valet appears with my boots just in time for me to dash to the shuttle. As I step on board, squeezing in behind me is Clay.

“This is good timing,” I say as I take the closest available seat.

“It is,” he agrees as he takes the seat next to mine. “Why are you heading up so late today?”

“Mom and I were in the spa this morning,” I explain. “I thought we’d be there all day, but she encouraged me to go. What about you?”

“I was out with the most amazing woman last night, and I had to sleep in.”

I eye him speculatively as I realize he’s talking about me. “She must have kept you on your toes if you slept till noon.”

He shrugs. “I’m also coming off a week of twelve-hour days.”

I nod, resisting the urge to give him too much of a hard time.

“Do you ski much?” he asks.

I offer a small smile. “A little. What about you?”

“I like the blues and black diamonds.”

“Nice. I’m the same. Sometimes the black diamonds are best because they keep the casual skiers away.”

“Agreed, but I also need to be cautious. I don’t want to break my arm or anything. That could be career limiting.”

I laugh. “That is an important consideration. I should be careful too. I’m self-employed, which means I don’t get paid if I don’t work.”

“That’s pretty much me, too.”

The shuttle pulls into Paradise Valley, and we get off. We both have ski passes, so it’s just a matter of heading for the lift. We’ve missed the rush of the early morning as most people are already up at the top of the mountain. We walk up to the lift together and get right on.

“You up for some company while you ski?” Clay looks at me hopefully.

I shrug. “Sure. That is, if you can keep up with me.” I smile flirtatiously.

My brother and I were always competitive growing up, and even when he’s not around, it sometimes kicks in when I hit the slopes.

Clay grins. “I’ll do my best.”

At Paradise Valley, the intermediate or blue runs are all named for goldmining towns, and the difficult runs are tree types, so it's easy to figure out.

"How about we start with Columbia as a warmup?" I suggest. "That will take us over to the Nevada Express lift, and we can decide if we want to stay with the blue or go black diamond."

"That works. Grass Valley and Truckee are also good. If the weather holds, I'd love to go down Poplar and Maple, and maybe we can get some hot chocolate at the Nevada Lodge."

We arrive at the top of the lift and ski off, pulling our goggles over our eyes as we make our way to the intermediate slope.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

"Lead the way."

Columbia leads to the eastern side of the mountain and is a main run, but it's not too busy this afternoon. The dark skies above may have sent people to après-ski early. We start down the run, and I'm not trying to show off, but the snow is sliding a bit, so I have to be on my toes. That can happen when the base is ice. It's still early in the season, and they had ice two weeks ago, plus dumps of new snow the last three nights.

Clay skis with me, seemingly without effort, and I'm sure I'm not challenging him. I stop when we reach the bottom of the run. "Is this too slow for you?"

"Honestly, this is perfect. If you need to dial back, that's fine. At least for these first few runs, don't go too hard."

I nod. "Sounds good."

We pick up the Sonora trail that leads us to the base of the Nevada Express. This side of the mountain is really quiet. As the lift takes us to the eastern face of the mountain, snow begins to fall, but it's not too bad.

"Isn't this beautiful?" Clay asks.

I nod as my eyes move over the landscape. “Yes.” I turn back to face him. “Where are you from originally?”

“I grew up outside of Redding in the Cascades foothills.”

Redding is about a three-and-a-half-hour drive from San Francisco. “Wow, that’s a beautiful part of the state. Have you always lived in California?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve lived in Washington, South Carolina, Japan, and Afghanistan.”

“You were in the military?” I ask.

He shifts on the lift chair. “I was. I went to undergrad with a Navy ROTC scholarship and then used a Navy program to go to medical school at the University of Washington.”

“I’m impressed.”

He chuckles. “Don’t be. I saw the worst of human nature while I was in the Navy, but I met men who will be my friends until I take my last breath.”

“I suppose war does that.” So many questions run through my head, but thankfully, we’ve reached the top of the lift, and we ski off. I pull to the side. “Do you want to take Spruce down?” Spruce is tree lined and late in the day can be full of moguls.

“Let’s do one more blue run before we do that one. My knees are still stiff from standing on them all week.”

“No problem. Murphys?”

“Perfect.”

He skies behind me, and I keep looking back to make sure he isn’t struggling. We seem to have similar ability, but I’ve been skiing this mountain for years and could ski it in the dark if I had to.

Murphys trail has a few big dips and is a favorite of the trick skiers. To show off, I do one jump and spread my legs for a moment before landing, though not as gracefully as I wanted. I turn to watch Clay follow my moves, and he makes

it look effortless. He skies up next to me and sprays me with snow.

“Hey,” I say, wiping it from my goggles.

“That was fun.” He grins.

“How are your knees?”

“I may pay for it tomorrow. But for now, let’s have fun. I have a feeling you’re holding back.”

Before I can respond, he skis away from me. Now, it’s my turn to keep up.

The view of his backside is as beautiful as his front, and I enjoy keeping up with him as he carves his way through the powder.

When we reach the bottom of the Nevada Express lift, there is no one on it, except for us after we board.

“Okay, now let’s get over to Maple for one last run before the storm comes in,” I tell him.

“Sounds good.” Clay takes a bottle of water from his pocket and takes a healthy swing. “What do you do for work in the City?”

“I’m an interior designer for residential and commercial properties.”

He chuckles.

“What’s so funny?”

“I don’t even have a couch in my living room.” He shakes his head.

“How long have you lived in your place?”

“Almost three years.”

I scrunch up my face. “What do you sit on?”

“I have a chair on the patio. I sit there most of the time to watch Goldminer games and concerts.”

I hold up my hand. “I’m not pitching my services to you, but I can point you to a few places for some furniture.”

He laughs. “My good friend Nate Lancaster always says if I can’t commit to a couch, how will I ever commit to a woman?”

I bump his shoulder. “No comment from the peanut gallery.” I adjust my goggles. “And I actually did Nate’s place on Jackson Street. They worked with an architect friend of mine who redesigned the French consulate.”

“Wow—small world,” Clay says. “He was my commander in Afghanistan. I vowed never to return to California until he landed there. I helped him with some design requirements and his first company.”

“I dealt mostly with his wife, Lilly. She was so easygoing. I joked that I could paint the walls black and she’d agree. She tells me she wouldn’t, but we had twenty-eight rooms to decorate, and she gave me a lot of latitude. She was busy working on her startup.”

“Their house doesn’t have that many bedrooms.” Clay’s brow furrows.

“No, but when I say rooms, I include bathrooms, kitchens, offices, the guest house, and entryways.”

Clay nods as we reach the top of the mountain again. “This is your party,” he says. “Lead the way.”

“How do you feel about going through the trees?” I ask.

“I’ll follow you wherever you go,” he says, and I blush all the way to my toes.

I wonder if that’s actually true. I’d be more likely to believe him if I didn’t know he was San Francisco’s most eligible bachelor.





## CHAPTER 4

# *Clay*

Today is one of the best days of skiing I've had in a long time. Anna is easy to get along with, and she's a great skier. She's confident as fuck, and it's the real deal—not some act. It's impressive as shit.

“Last run,” I say, looking at the sky. The snow and wind have picked up. The light is flat, and it may soon become too dangerous to ski. That kind of light makes it difficult to see the bumps and grooves in the snow. Too many injuries happen in these conditions. Plus, this is more skiing than I had expected to do.

“Sounds good,” Anna agrees. “At the base of the Nevada Express lift, there's a great après-ski at the Sky Lodge. We can go for hot chocolate or hot toddies.”

“You lead the way.”

“You must be an ass man,” she teases.

I am an ass man—and a breast man—but I'm not very good at skiing backward. I smile. “You've got me. Now lead the way so I can watch.”

She giggles, and it makes my heart race. What is it with her? I could spend my life listening to that sound.

Wait. *What?* What confirmed bachelor—or hell, any man—spends a few hours with a woman and starts thinking about spending his life with her? Jeez. I shake my head in dismay. I love women, but once the chase is over, I’m done. I’m very comfortable being alone, so there’s no need to keep women around for long. Maybe I just need a recording of her laugh.

Anna takes off for the trees and looks back at me. “I hope you can keep up.”

Holy shit, she was holding back! She moves around a scrub of trees, and my skis take a beating as I follow, but I’m not about to lose sight of her. Low-hanging tree limbs whip my face, and my pant leg snags on a rock. I shrug it all off. Today is worth a new pair of skis. I chase her around trees, over rocks, and through powder that hasn’t been touched all day. Fantastic.

She bursts onto the actual trail and glides down the mountain, seemingly with no effort at all. She’s flying. There isn’t anyone here, and it’s majestic. The silence is amazing.

We get to the base of the Nevada Express, and the lift has stopped. I don’t see the guy who was here earlier running it. A snowboarder whizzes by.

“Where is everyone?” I ask.

Anna looks around. “Oh crap. They’ve closed already. Because it’s so early in the season, I guess the Sky Lodge may not be open yet. I can’t tell from here.”

I shrug. “Oh well. If not, we can just ski back down to the base and do our après-ski at the main lodge. Then we can grab the shuttle back to the hotel.”

She nods, and we make our way over to the top of California Express. We pause for a moment at the top of the run before we start down, toward the Sonora trail.

I’m just settling in when I feel the snow trembling beneath my feet. It’s an odd sensation, and my mind immediately goes to earthquake, though that seems silly. Then I hear a low rumble and look back at the mountain behind us.

What looks like a cloud of snow is rising—and racing toward us. I look over at Anna, and her eyes have gone wide. She sees it too, and it is very much an avalanche. We need to get out of its way.

Despite how fast we can ski, we can't outrun physics, so there isn't much choice but to find shelter. Fortunately, we're approaching the Sky Lodge. It's a large building, and though it was built ages ago, right now, it's the best we can do. I just hope it's open.

My heart pounds as I veer to the side, pulling Anna off the trail and around behind the building. We pop out of our skis, climb the metal stairs, and crowd into the alcove at the back entrance.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She nods. "Is this going to work?"

I have no idea if this building can stop the snow, but it's the only shelter around. Through the trees, the snow continues its rush forward. I hear glass breaking, and the rumble grows louder as my mind races. The force of debris, broken trees, and snow could knock the lodge off its base when it hits... Some snow is already coming over the rooftop three floors up. Trees and big rocks start falling all around us.

I turn toward the back entrance and rattle the doors. They're locked. *Fuck!* I take a deep breath and try to think clearly. *Break a window.*

With my elbow, I try hitting the pane of glass. It hurts like a motherfucker, and the plexiglass doesn't buckle, shatter, or even move. That's not a way in. The snow is accumulating—over our knees now even under the alcove. We don't have any extra time. With all my strength, I use my ski to hit the door latch repeatedly until the lock breaks off and allows me to push open the door to the basement of the lodge. Anna rushes in behind me, and I turn to shove the door shut as the roof of the alcove collapses.

When the door is closed, Anna sighs, releasing a breath she seems to have been holding. I don't know what we would

have done if we couldn't get in.

“Did you see the snowboarder who came down past us?” she asks.

I nod. “I don't think he could have set off the avalanche.”

“I just hope he's okay.”

I nod and turn to lead the way as we walk upstairs in the empty building. The walls or roof groan, which sets my nerves on fire. There are tables pushed up against the doors in the front, which should offer us more protection, although the floor-to ceiling-glass is shattered all over the floor.

The room is dark. I take off my backpack and pull out the head lamp and avalanche beacon I always carry. I never expected to use it, but with the flick of a switch, it sends a signal once a second. The ski patrol will have a receiver that should help them find us. If I can get the antenna pole above the snow, it will improve the accuracy, but I'm not sure where to try that. I'll leave the beacon at the highest point in the lodge we can get to, once we find it.

Anna's teeth chatter. It's cold in here. “How long do you think we'll be here?” she asks as she looks around.

I shake my head. “Hopefully, not too long, but most likely, they'll go to people who might have been buried first. We have some shelter, at least.” I try a few light switches, just in case. How stupid would I feel if the electricity was working and I just never tried? But no such luck. Not that it's a surprise. “Let's go see what the rest of the building looks like. Maybe we can find something that will generate some warmth for us and maybe some food.” I pull my headlamp from my pocket and aim it into the darkness. The snow has blocked most of the windows.

“I have some protein bars in my knapsack,” Anna offers.

“We may need those. And I have a few things myself.”

We look around and find the main floor is in good shape. It's mostly just a giant room with a fireplace. This is the

hub of activity when the lodge is open. Most of the windows face down the hill, so they haven't broken, but they're covered in snow. There's broken glass and trees coming in along part of the front wall, but the tables chained together there are keeping out most of the snow, debris, and wind.

"Anyone here?" Anna yells.

There's no response. We walk back downstairs and check out a few shops and a ski-repair place, so that's helpful. I locate a few small shovels. "I bet there's a maintenance closet somewhere that would have a full-sized shovel they use for snow removal."

"You think you can shovel your way out?" Anna asks.

"No, but we'd be wise to shovel the snow inside the lodge away from us."

"That's smart." Anna nods.

The gift shop is full of boxes. We open a few of them, and they seem to have mostly kids coats and ski pants, but we find some small Paradise Valley-logoed blankets, so we can do some makeshift bedding if we need it. I think we probably will. It seems doubtful that they'd get to us tonight—not with the storm coming in.

Next, we find the restrooms. The water isn't running, but at least we have facilities, and paper towels will make good kindling for the fireplace back in the main room.

I continue to look and discover a bong. I roll my eyes. That won't help.

"I can't get any bars on my mobile phone," Anna announces.

"Let's get up higher and see if that helps," I tell her. "Chances are the avalanche took down any cell towers that were close by, and now we're in a giant cave." I try to smile, but I can see the panic rising in her eyes. "We're going to be okay. We're not buried out in the snow. We're going to be fine."

I open my arms, and she clings to me. I can tell she's a strong person, but this is a lot. I rub her back and realize her coat is wet. Really wet. Ski gear is water resistant but not waterproof. I need to get her warm before hypothermia starts.

"Come on. Let's go upstairs. We'll see if we can start a fire."

She nods and wipes her eyes with the heel of her hand. "Okay."

I reach for her hand and squeeze it. "We're going to be fine."

We walk back up the stairs to the main level.

"Can you hear that whistling?" I ask.

She nods, with a shiver. "That means the flue to the fireplace is open. That's good news. We can break down some of the wooden chairs and burn them for heat."

On the far wall, next to the kitchen, there's a Ski Patrol office. This may be our treasure chest. I put my shoulder into it and shove, and after a few tries, I'm able to get the door open. Inside, we find a giant first aid kit, two beds, and a radio.

"Do you think we can get this to work?" Anna asks.

I shrug. "We're going to try." We need to get up to the top floor and hope the snow is not too deep. Radio in hand, we take the stairs again and find what I think is the highest corner of the building. When I look out of the broken, snow-covered window, I think I can see a slight bit of light through the snow, or maybe I'm imagining that. Pulling my avalanche pole from my bag, I lengthen and tighten it to its full twenty feet before pushing it through the snow outside. A few times, I run into obstacles, which are probably tree branches or rocks, so it takes some work. It seems to break free at the fifteen-foot marker, and that gives me hope. My avalanche beacon is working. Now, it's time to try the radio.

I sit down in front of it and offer a silent prayer. "Mayday. Mayday. Mayday." Three times is what you do on a boat, but I don't know what to do here. I wait a few seconds

and hear nothing. So I do it again and follow up with, “This is Dr. Clay McGrath. A friend and I were skiing at Paradise Valley when an avalanche hit. We’re inside the Sky Lodge, which is now buried in the snow. Can anyone hear me?”

My heart races. The pole is vibrating pretty steadily, which tells me it’s windy up there. The storm is likely here.

Then the radio crackles, and a voice comes through. “Hello! This is Gemma Lowell. I’m with Ski Patrol at the base of Paradise Valley. Are you okay?”

Anna’s shoulders relax as she smiles and grabs my arm.

“Yes. We were coming down the Sonora trail, and the avalanche started just as we came to the Sky Lodge. We were able to get inside,” I explain. “Most of the windows are broken, but the building is intact. No electricity or running water, but we have wind in the fireplace, so we’re going to start a fire. My ski buddy is close to hypothermia, so that should help.”

“Is it just the two of you?” she asks.

“Yes. We have our avalanche beacon going. It was pretty quiet over here as we skied down. Though there was a snowboarder who whizzed by just before the avalanche.”

“That side of the mountain was closed, so that’s good.”

I look over at Anna, and her eyes are wide.

“We’d just skied down a short time before,” I tell the Ski Patrol agent. “We didn’t know.”

“It probably closed just after you left. Do you have any food?”

“We have some snacks and water, and the ability to melt the snow.”

“Any injuries? Are you safe and able to move around?”

“No injuries, and we’re in the building with plenty of room,” I confirm.

Then another voice comes on the line. “This is Jim Crawley with Fire and Rescue. There’s a huge storm coming in. It looks to dump several feet of snow over the next twenty-four hours. Are you comfortable where you are?”

“We have shelter, water, and food. We’ll be fine,” I assure him.

Anna tears up. I know this is not what she wanted.

“We’ll start a fire for warmth.” I say this more for Anna’s sake than for those on the radio. “Windows are broken throughout the lodge, so it’s a little drafty, but we’re fine.”

Anna leans close to the radio. “This is Anna Standing. Can you please let my mother know I’m fine? Her name is Felicity Standing, and she’s staying at Harrah’s.” She spells her name for him and gives him her room number.

“No problem,” he says. “Should we let anyone else know?”

I really have no one to tell, and that gives me pause. But I don’t have time to think about that now. “No, Felicity is the only one,” I tell them.

“We’ll continue to check in with you and give you updates. We’ll also leave someone at the radio in case you have any problems.”

I thank them, and we sign off for now, as I know they have to be busy.

Anna takes a deep breath and gives me a nod. “I think I saw a pile of wood by the pizza oven downstairs, but I’m not sure.”

“Let’s go look.”

We traipse back downstairs and find about a quarter of a cord of wood in the small pizza restaurant. It won’t last long, and I wonder if we should ration it in case we’re here for a few days. We’re pretty deep in the snow, even up on the third floor of the building, and after the storm, we won’t have much daylight. Only a wall of snow.



While we're downstairs, we check out the kitchen. The pantries are all empty, except for a giant can of peaches. Anna turns it around in her hands. "I don't know if that's good news or not."

I pull out my multi-tool. "We'll be able to get it open."

We walk back up to the third floor, and Anna's jacket is dripping. I'm going to get concerned about frostbite here shortly.

I fill up the fireplace, using wrapping and boxes from the gift shop as kindling, and pull out the matches in my emergency kit. "Cross your fingers," I tell her as I strike the first match. The wood is a little wet, but with some additional cardboard and blowing on it, the fire finally starts.

"You are quite the Eagle Scout," Anna teases.

I step back. "Come on. Let's get you warm." I extend my hand to her, and she steps in. I look around the room. We're in our own little world trapped here. But at least we have the fire.

Once the flames have engulfed the wood, Anna takes off her jacket. Underneath, her turtleneck is wet, and she's soaked to the bone..

"I'll be right back." I leave Anna by the fire and go back to the boutique for some boxes. I haul them upstairs and set them close to the fireplace. "I hope the resort doesn't mind," I say as I unpack the box of blankets and some hideous neon coats.

Anna laughs. "Oh good, they have sunglasses. I'll need those if I'm going to sleep."

I chuckle. "You're hilarious."

She curtseys. "Thank you. I try."

We unpack the boxes and lay everything out, surveying what we have.

"How are we going to get dry?" she asks.

“I was just wondering the same thing.” I scratch my head. We still haven’t found any adult-sized clothes.

“Do you think they’ll come for us tonight?” she asks.

I pull her into a hug. “No, there’s a storm. But we can do this. They’ve let your mom know you’re fine. And we can make warm water to drink to warm you from the inside.” I look around. “Let’s warm these blankets, and you can take off your clothes to get dry.”

“You’re wet too,” Anna points out.

“I know, but my lips aren’t turning blue.”



## CHAPTER 5

### *Anna*

I've never been so cold. Now that the adrenaline is wearing off, I can't seem to get warm. Even my underwear and bra are wet. I stand closer to the fire.

Clay steps out, and I should probably follow him and help with what he's doing, but before I can motivate myself to do anything, he's back with one of the beds from the Ski Patrol offices. He also found some wool blankets. They'll be scratchy, but with layers we'll be fine. He disappears and then returns with the second bed, setting them next to each other.

The Paradise Valley blankets are sitting on the hearth getting toasty. Clay turns to me. "You need to get your clothes off so they can dry and you can get warm."

I look at him like he's crazy. I may be stranded with him underground, but I'm not going to just whip off all my clothes. Still, I know I need to get warm.

He turns away. "You can wrap up in the warmed blankets."

I sigh and strip out of my clothes. It's not like I'm a prude, and I know he's asking this for practical reasons, but it's still strange to be asked to strip down.

My hands shake, and I can't feel the tips of my fingers, but I finally get undressed and wrap myself in the warm

blankets. I move in close to the fire, but I'm still freezing. Clay turns around, and when I succumb to a full-body shudder, he immediately strips down.

“What are you doing?” I shriek.

He smiles. “I'm going to lie with you and try to get your body heat back to normal.”

“I—”

“I'm not going to try to have sex with you,” he patiently explains. “But we're both wet and cold, and skin on skin is the best way to get warm.”

He pulls a silver thermal blanket from a first aid kit in his pack and adds more wood to the fireplace. Together, we crawl into the small beds he's pushed together. He wraps the silver blanket and a wool blanket around us, and after a few minutes, his body heat mixed with mine finally warms me. I can also feel his erection pressing into my ass.

“It's human biology,” he whispers into my hair. “A beautiful woman is cuddled up against me.”

I laugh. “You're too funny.”

“Who's being funny? It's true. If we ignore it, it will go away.”

“Are you in Tahoe with that redhead you were with last night?”

“No. I met her in the elevator, and she asked me out for a drink.” He shifts his position slightly. “She noticed me watching you, so once she saw a friend, she took off.”

“Why did you come to Tahoe alone?”

“San Francisco is pretty quiet during the holidays, and I wasn't working this week. All my friends were going places with their wives and girlfriends. I didn't feel like being set up, so I thought I'd come here. Harrah's had a last-minute cancellation, and I grabbed it. None of them know I'm here, so telling them I'm stranded would only get them worried.”

“Tell me about your friends.” I speak into his shoulder, unwilling to let any cold in.

“I don’t have one particular best friend. I have a group of guys I served with as a medical officer in Afghanistan. We worked hard. We saw loss together, and we saw victories. Through that, you learn to trust one another and lean on each other. So they’re everything to me.”

I nod. “I could see that. This is the closest I’ve ever been to something dangerous. If you weren’t here with me, I don’t know what I would do.”

He kisses my shoulder softly, and it heats me up from the inside. “If we hadn’t been together, we wouldn’t have been on the mountain. We would have probably been at après-ski meeting new people.”

I chuckle. “No, I would have done maybe two runs and gone back to the hotel to help my mom.”

“It’s nice that you’re so close.”

I sigh. “I wish my brother was here. He’s in China working on a new, international arm of my dad’s business, and it’s taking longer to set up than we were promised. He didn’t even come home for my dad’s funeral because he feared he wouldn’t be allowed back in the country and his business partner would take the business from him.”

“Is he planning on living there for the rest of his life?”

“No. He just needs to get over one more legal hurdle before he can rest easy. But it’s taking forever, and they keep having to pay Chinese government officials to move it along.”

“What a pain.”

“What about you? You told me why you’re not with friends for Thanksgiving. Why aren’t you with your family?”

Clay rolls onto his back and urges me to roll with him. I lie in his arms with my head on his shoulder. He has the perfect amount of hair on his chest, and now, I have an excuse to touch his beard. It’s soft.

I brush my lips over his arm. He's still hard, and despite these crazy circumstances—or maybe because of them?—the heat between us has my libido beating a drum that's getting harder to ignore. My hand creeps lower.

“I didn't do this to have sex with you,” he says after a moment.

Of course. How presumptuous of me. I stop. He's not interested. When we were skiing, I felt a little too free. I showed him all the things guys hate about me—talked too much and skied well. I didn't do it to run him off. I didn't think that was going to matter. But I think it's my natural instinct because sometimes when you tell a man you're an interior designer, he thinks you're hunting for someone to ride up on his white horse and save you. I don't need saving. I own my place in a fantastic building in San Francisco. I have money in the bank. My business is not dependent on my family. And I have a great best friend.

“Do you have a lot of good friends in San Francisco?” he asks, returning to our conversation.

“I have a few. My best friend is a lawyer. We met on a project when we finished school and became close.”

“Nice. Does she still live in San Francisco? I find many people stay for a few years and then move on to more affordable places.”

“*He* does still live in San Francisco. He worked with Landon Walsh to build The Adams. He was their lawyer, and I designed the lobby and common areas.”

He makes an appreciative sound. “I've never been in the building. I hear it's pretty spectacular. But your best friend is a guy?”

I nod. “Henry. He's a straight male. We hang out together a lot, but date other people.”

“Why don't you want to date him?”

“Oh, the list is long.”

He lifts his head and looks at me expectantly.

“He likes bubbleheads.”

His brow quirks. “What’s a bubblehead?”

“Superficial. Few convictions. About as opposite of me as you can get.”

“Yet, his best friend is you. Why wouldn’t you want to date him other than that?”

I sigh. “I thought I did when we first met, but he’s too much. He needs his ego stroked a lot. I adore him, but he’s not someone I could be with romantically. After sex, I’d have to tell him he’s the best ever and lie about an orgasm I didn’t have.”

“I bet he wants to sleep with you,” Clay challenges.

“No way.” I shake my head. “Impossible.”

“No guy can be friends with a woman. If they are, they’re looking for the opportunity to fuck.”

“I’ve been single most of the time we’ve known each other,” I counter. This conversation is also making me warm, but not in a good way. Who is this guy to tell me about my friend? “He could have made a move between girlfriends.”

Clay snorts. “He’s a serial monogamist?”

I nod.

“How could he not want to sleep with you?” Clay’s eyes soften, and I realize he’s not messing with me. He truly doesn’t understand why Henry wouldn’t want to be more than friends.

“You’re very kind, but we make good friends and that’s it.”

He laughs. “Sounds like you’ve dated guys like him before.”

“I’m a magnet for them. They think because I’m an interior designer, I’m a bubblehead.”

“No, definitely not. You would intimidate most men.”

“Do I intimidate you?”



He shakes his head, and my heart soars. It doesn't mean this is anything other than being stuck here, but I'm going to enjoy it, regardless.

"Why didn't you go home for Thanksgiving?" I ask again.

"I haven't gone home for the holidays since I left for college."

I prop up on my elbow. "Why not?"

"My parents divorced when I was in second grade. It was tough. My dad quickly married his second wife, and my mom eventually remarried. Both of them started second families. They tried to include me, but I was the odd man out. I've never belonged with either family, and I've found they don't miss me if I'm not there."

"That's awful."

"My parents probably have a different view, and they always tried to be sure I was included, but when you're only there half the time, you miss things. I never understood the jokes and inner workings of their lives."

"So what did you do?"

"When I was applying to college, my mom put a lot of pressure on my dad to pay for my education. But he was strapped. His business wasn't doing great, and he had three ex-wives at that point and three other kids. My mom had worked as a bank teller for years. She had some savings, but nothing that would allow her to afford college tuition. So I applied and got a Navy ROTC scholarship. I wanted to see the world."

"Nice. And did you?"

"Well, not any part of the world I wanted to see. But when I finished undergrad, my recruiter helped me get another ROTC scholarship that would pay for med school."

"Wow, that's a pretty good scholarship."

"I should have read the fine print better, but in the end, I'm grateful. I spent some time in Maryland at Walter Reed Hospital working with veterans, and then I was assigned to a

unit deploying to Afghanistan. In the first three weeks I was there, fifty percent of them were killed or wounded. I was the one tending to them and watching them die or dealing with their amputations. It still gives me nightmares today.”

I shake my head. “I can’t even imagine.”

“Eventually, I made it back to Walter Reed. Nate Lancaster came to visit me with Cecelia, his first wife, before she died, and we had a great lunch. They were looking at ways to build artificial limbs that were better, stronger, lighter, and less debilitating for veterans. Finally, they did it, and that’s how they became such a powerhouse. They even gave me stock in the company.”

I nod, impressed. “Nate’s a major billionaire.”

“Yes. But he’s still good to veterans, and his second wife is doing amazing things, too.”

I nod again, and after a moment, he continues.

“Jim Adelson was also in our unit. By the end of our time, he was falling into a bottle, but Nate pulled him out, and he started a security company. I work for that security company when I’m not working at the hospital.”

“You’re a regular superhero.”

“Hardly.” He kisses my head. “What I meant to say earlier is that I meant it when I said my goal wasn’t to have sex. I didn’t want you to feel like I was putting pressure on you. But I did not mean that was an unappealing option.”

His soft lips brush mine, and my head swoons. Slowly, and feeling very unsure, I return his kiss. His tongue briefly slips into my mouth before he breaks away.

I can feel myself grinning like an idiot.

“What’s so funny?” he asks.

“Absolutely nothing. I’m laughing because we’re here—stranded and naked in front of a fire.”

He rolls me onto my back and brings my hands over my head, nudging the blanket aside. We’re both plenty warm

now. His eyes roam over my body, taking in each curve and every flaw. But I don't care. I watch him as he pulls up to his knees between my thighs. His cock is huge.

He runs his hands up my legs, spreading me wide. "You don't have any hair," he muses.

"I like it that way."

"Me too." He lowers his head and starts a slow journey up my inner thigh. He hasn't touched my center, but it's on fire. I close my eyes and silently will him to lick me.

"What do you want?" he growls.

I moan. "I want you to make me come."

"Tell me how you want to come."

"With your mouth and your fingers." I squirm a bit, and he chuckles.

"Is that all you want?"

"I want you to fuck me. I want to suck you off. I want you to make me forget we're stuck here."

"That's a pretty long list," he says with a smirk.

"What would you like?" I counter.

"Oh, I want everything you described and more."

I open my eyes, and he's stroking himself. I shiver with anticipation.

"You're already so fucking wet." He laps at my nub.

Lightning rushes through me. I close my eyes and try not to explode.

"Look at me," he demands. "I want to see your face."

He licks, bites, and sucks on my center, rolling his tongue around. His soft beard rubs against me, adding another level of excitement. He reaches up to my nipple and rolls it between his fingers. My back arches off the bed. He lights me on fire.

He laughs between my legs, and the vibrations bring me closer to my pinnacle.

He adds one finger, then two, opening me wide as he pivots in and out.

“Fuck,” I breathe, pulling his head down against my wetness. “Don’t stop.”

The room fills with the crackle of the fire and the sounds of our sex as he sucks my nub into his mouth and finds that magic spot deep inside me. I moan and squeeze my breasts. My hips are bucking. I’m so close. I lace my fingers through his hair and push his face harder onto my pussy. He adds another finger because I feel a delicious stretch, and it brings me right to the edge.

Then it hits me all at once, and I scream his name as my body thrashes and shakes. I don’t think I’ve ever climaxed this hard before, and certainly never with a man. He just holds on and keeps sucking and finger fucking as I try to catch my breath.

Finally, I’m in complete bliss. My body hums.

He breaks from working my clit and looks up at me, very satisfied, my juices soaking his chin and dripping down his chest.

My movements slow and then stop. “God, that was... God,” I gasp.

He kisses me, and I can taste myself on him, which gets my motor running again. I find his hard rod and stroke him. “I want you inside me. Do you have any condoms, Boy Scout?”

He chuckles and dives for his bag. “I’m close to coming,” he warns when he returns. “That was so hot watching you fall apart.”

“Please...” I beg.

“Please what?” He stops, having sheathed himself.

“Please...please...fuck me and make me come with your cock,” I say, feeling a little incoherent.

He crawls back onto the beds, and we kiss again—slow, deep, and passionate. My head is swimming, and my heart's still racing. When we break from the kiss, he kneels between my legs. "I may not last long, but I will make it up to you next time," he promises.

"Just shut up and get inside me." I laugh, and he leans down and kisses me again. This time I'm more sure of myself as our lips meet. He strokes the side of my face, and I suck on his tongue as it enters my mouth. He groans and rests one of his hands on my breast. I feel myself tremble.

With one deep stroke, Clay plunges his cock into my already dripping pussy. He's so big I can't take him all at once. He pulls out and pushes in a little farther.

"Oh, that feels so good," I groan.

"You're so fucking tight," he grits.

"You won't hurt me." I wrap my legs around his body and kiss him deeply, sucking and pulling on his tongue. He pivots a few times until I feel him hit my cervix. His breath is coming in gasps, and I know it won't be long before he comes. I clench my pussy around his cock, milking it.

After a moment, he shudders and gasps, then collapses to catch his breath. "This is only the first time," he says. "I've got a half dozen condoms, and we're going to use them all."

I raise my eyebrows. "Six is a lot. You better not make any promises you can't keep."

He just shakes his head as he removes the condom and ties the end off before pulling me in tight.



## CHAPTER 6

# *Clay*

I open my eyes, still feeling a pleasant buzz from last night. Or earlier this morning? Since we're in darkness, it's hard to know what time it is. When I hear some activity on the radio upstairs, I know it's time to get up. Leaving Anna's warm body chills me.

I get out of our makeshift bed and immediately step in a puddle of cold water. The ground is wet everywhere. Gross. But at least it means the snow in the room has melted. I pull on my clothes and throw a few more logs on the fire. Thankfully, they're dry.

"Where are you going?" a sexy-as-fuck voice calls from below the blankets.

"I heard the radio upstairs. I'm hoping they're going to tell us they're on their way."

She throws the covers back and jumps. "I can't believe how cold it is in here."

"The snow melted, so it's a little warmer than it was. Let's see what they have to say upstairs, and then we can decide if we're going to cuddle up again or get ready for an explosion of people."

She looks up at me, her hair all mussed. "Don't take it personally, but I hope it's the latter."

I nod. “I get it. What I wouldn’t do for a good egg-white, spinach, and feta cheese omelet.”

She snorts. “No wonder you have the stamina you do. I’d much prefer a bacon, ham, sausage, and cheese omelet.”

I lean down and kiss her. I love that she’s a bit reckless with her diet. She’s got curves, but she’s very fit.

She dresses quickly, and we stumble upstairs. I look at my watch. It’s just after six. You’d never know in this dark hole we’re stuck in.

I push the button on the radio. “This is Dr. Clay McGrath. Do you have any information for us?”

“Dr. McGrath, this is Gemma Lowell,” a voice responds after a moment. “We’ve had about eighteen inches of snow here at the base, and it’s about twice that at Peak Nine.”

“We’re in between those two, so I guess that means our snow is somewhere in the middle,” I offer.

“Actually, there was another slide with this snow about an hour ago. We figure that added another eight to ten feet of snow on top of the Sky Lodge.”

My heart stops. That means we may have an issue with the chimney. “Okay. What are your plans?”

“We’re expecting another storm this morning, so we’re not sure when we’ll be able to get to you. How are you both doing? Are you getting along okay?”

I look over at Anna, and she turns a brilliant shade of red. “Yes, we’re doing fine. I’m concerned about the chimney, though.”

“The heat of the chimney melted most of the snow around it, and we can see smoke, so we’re not worried,” she reports.

That’s good at least. “We have quite a bit of water on the floor from snow that’s come through the broken windows and melted. And we’re down to about half the wood we started with last night. We’ll move on to chairs and other things we find that are flammable if we need to.”



“What does your food supply look like?”

“There’s not much, but we’re not starving. We can make do with what we have for another twenty-four hours or so.”

“Wonderful.”

“We did find a shovel, and we can look for a maintenance closet that might have a larger one. Is it worth trying to shovel out?”

“We would prefer you don’t,” Gemma says.

I nod. I was afraid she’d say that. But I trust her. I’m not a structural engineer, and we don’t want more snow coming in.

“Can you ask them if they were successful in reaching my mom?” Anna pleads.

I hand her the radio, and she repeats her question.

“Yes,” Gemma reports. “We spoke to her. She’s grateful you’re fine and is eager for your return.”

“Please let her know that I am too.”

“We’ll continue to check in with you throughout the day as the storm comes in.”

“Sounds great,” I tell her as we sign off.

Anna looks defeated. “Don’t you worry about anything,” I tell her. “Everything is going to be fine. Let’s see if we can find that closet and figure out a way to deal with some of this water.”

We find the maintenance closet and inside are several shovels and a few hundred pounds of sand. “This might help with the puddles, at least around the bed.”

We spend the morning securing more wood. I’m able to use my multi tool to cut some sticks from the tree branches that have come inside. We also find a stack of about a hundred wooden chairs. They have a finish on them, but they’ll be better than nothing if we get desperate.

I find a large pot in the kitchen and fill it full of snow before setting it on the hearth. It's not perfect, but it will allow us to warm the water and bathe.

When I suggest this to Anna, she looks at me with her brow furrowed. "Do I smell?"

I shake my head. "Not at all. But I've lived like this before, and sometimes just washing your face with clean water makes a difference."

Her face softens. "Thank you. That actually sounds great."

"Then we can have a delightful lunch of peaches and share a protein bar. Please let me know if you'd like them warmed."

She giggles, and once again, I don't know why, but I love that sound.

Then the radio crackles. "Dr. McGrath?" I hear from upstairs.

"Be right back. Go ahead and get cleaned up," I tell her as I race up the stairs two at a time and head for the corner where I've left the radio with the beacon. "This is Dr. McGrath."

"The weather has had a break, and we have a team onsite at the Sky Lodge," Gemma reports. "They're working their way down to the roof, toward the avalanche pole. They think they're about three hours from getting you out."

"Fantastic. We'll be ready. Should we shovel from this side and try to meet in the middle?"

"Just a moment," Gemma says. After a minute, she continues. "The structural engineer is onsite. He says you can do that, as long as you stay close to the building and don't shift things around too much. The rocks and trees are likely keeping the building stable."

"Okay. There's a large tree that's fallen outside the window in the northwest corner of the building. I'll start above that."

“They are encountering quite a bit of debris. It’s going to take time. They don’t want the roof to collapse. The structural engineer says if you hear any cracking sounds from the roof, get away from the corner—as low as you can and on the opposite side of the building.”

“Okay.”

Just as I’m signing off, Anna appears at my side. Her face is clean, and her hair is in a ponytail. She looks completely refreshed.

“What did they say?” she asks.

“They’re actually here and above the roof, working their way down. They’re concerned about the weight and additional snow. I’m going to start chipping through what I can from this side, and hopefully, we’ll meet in the middle without making anything unstable.”

She nods. “I’ll help too, even if it means hauling snow away.”

We each eat a protein bar and share a significant part of the can of peaches. That should give us energy as we get to work. We develop a system that works pretty well, but often once we make a bit of progress, we come to a place where we can’t go any farther because of debris. It’s two hours of sheer frustration, and we’ve hit two boulders and a tree trunk.

Anna wipes her brow. “Can it be this hard from the other direction as well? What do you think they’re going to do?”

“I don’t know.” While we’re taking a break, I get on the radio and let Gemma know what we found.

“That’s what we’re afraid of,” she confirms. “But not to worry,” she adds after a moment. “They have about eight other options. Do you hear them at all or any noises coming from the roof?”

“I don’t think so.” I look at Anna, and she shakes her head.

Just then, the building groans. I grab the radio, and Anna and I haul ass downstairs to the kitchen on the other side of the building. I figure it's the most structurally sound. I wonder if we wouldn't be safest in the freezer, but I'm not sure if it has any vents.

Without being up in the building's top corner, we don't have any reception on the radio. My pulse quickens. I think about our options, and I don't like the idea of going to the back of the building. We'd be too deep if the building collapses. So we stay in the kitchen. I drag over a large branch that's almost eight feet long and about four inches in diameter. I pull it halfway inside the freezer, so it keeps the door a bit propped open. Thankfully, since the building wasn't yet open for the season, the freezer's not on. But it's still cold as we get inside. I bring in a couple of chairs, and we sit.

"What are you looking forward to when we get back to town?" Anna asks after a moment.

I sigh. "A shower and a big slab of turkey with all the fixings. What about you?"

"The same. Are you a cranberry sauce or cranberry jelly?"

"Sauce all the way."

"You're missing out on the jelly," she teases.

"It looks like a maroon-colored tin can."

"Okay, sweet potatoes with marshmallows or without?"

"With, of course."

"You're welcome to have dinner with my mom and me. We're going over to the Ritz-Carlton. They have a lovely buffet."

"Wait, I have more questions. Green bean casserole?"

"Um, yes! With those crunchy onion things on top."

I close my eyes. "Oh, those sound really good right now."

“Here’s a good one—white meat or dark?” She grins.

I know this is a big question. “White meat.”

“Good, because that saves all the dark meat for me.” She nods approvingly. “Okay, last question. Stuffing—what kind is your favorite, and can it be cooked inside the bird?”

I sit back. “I don’t like fancy stuffings, but Stove Top isn’t Thanksgiving. As for inside or outside the bird, it all comes down to temperature. But most home cooks can’t measure it accurately, and I’ve worked too many Thanksgivings in the ER to take a chance. I know what food poisoning looks like.”

She makes a face, but then smiles. “Okay. The invitation to eat with us still stands.”

“I’m hoping we’ll do more than eat.” I give her a look.

“You’re not thinking about getting together when we get back to San Francisco?” She gives me the side eye. “That feels like a big commitment for someone like you.”

Honestly, it surprises me too. Seems I wouldn’t mind chasing this one a little more. “We can go out for a nice dinner, maybe a walk along the battery, and see where the night takes us.”

“Does that mean more than teasing and sex?”

I have no idea what it means, as this is not my usual MO, so I just match her saucy tone and hope for the best. “We’ve done a lot more than tease one another, and the sex has been fantastic.”

She opens her mouth to respond, but the building shudders, and my heart catches. There’s a big crash, and my heart nearly stops. I stand and hold Anna tight as tears pool in her eyes.

Suddenly, we hear voices and shouting.

“Hello? We’re here!” Anna yells.

The kitchen seems unscathed when we come out of the freezer, so we walk back up to the main room where we slept

last night. It's now filled with snow, rocks, and trees, and there are four people standing on a huge pile of snow where the beds were.

Anna relaxes into me. *We're saved.*



Ski Patrol ended up taking us out via helicopter to a helipad at the base of the mountain. There, we were greeted by several news vans and reporters, and when we finished with them, Ski Patrol asked us to sit for questioning with some resort officials before going back to the hotel.

Anna nods but has a request first. "I need to call my mother. She needs to know I'm okay."

"She's going to be on her way over," Gemma assures her. "My team has gone to the hotel to find her."

"Thank you."

They provide us with warm soup and sandwiches, and we sit at a table and spend the better part of an hour answering questions. The resort staff seems very accommodating, and they aren't upset about us breaking into the gift shop for supplies. They seem more worried that we're going to sue them. But I know the avalanche wasn't their fault. We can only blame Mother Nature.

Anna's mother arrives as we're finishing up, and she gives me a big hug. "You helped me out, and then you saved my daughter. Thank you."

"Mrs. Standing, I'm so glad I was in the right place at the right time in both instances." I smile at Anna, and she smiles back.

Mrs. Standing hugs Anna close and asks if she's ready to go. "We'll see you back at the hotel," she tells me as they exit to a car.

I nod and wave. I've been asked to answer a few more questions, so I stick around.

“Did you see anyone else around the time the avalanche started?” an investigator from the sheriff's office asks.

I look at her as I think for a moment. “We did see a snowboarder come past us, but he was long gone before the avalanche started. I really don't see how he could have started it.”

She nods, but I can't read her expression. “There were eight people trapped, and six of them didn't make it. You not only made it, but you found shelter.”

“We just happened to be almost to the Sky Lodge when we heard the first rumbling. We were hoping it was open for apres-ski, and fortunately, we had time to break in since it was closed.” I feel terrible for the people who lost their lives, but I had nothing to do with it.

Eventually, everyone seems satisfied with the information I've given them, and when I finally make it back to the hotel, I'm grateful to crawl into bed. But not long after I do, my phone rings, and it's someone from the *San Jose Mercury News*. I hang up and call the front desk, asking them to put my phone on *do not disturb*. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving Day, and I'm looking forward to having dinner with Anna and her mom—if I can make that work. I wish I had gotten her mobile number. In all the craziness, we didn't exchange information.

I fall asleep thinking about Anna. I spent one night with her—and two incredibly intense days—but still... That shouldn't make me *miss* her.



When I open my eyes, my back is screaming. It happens when I sleep too long on my back, and sleeping on that weird cot the night before probably didn't help either. It's

just after six a.m., but I pull the covers back. I should go to the gym in the hotel and stretch out my back.

I pull on workout clothes and head down the hallway, hoping I'll spot Anna. I don't know why she'd be up this early or headed to the gym. That doesn't seem to be her thing, especially not after the ordeal we've had and on Thanksgiving Day.

When I get to the gym, I do a little stretching, but I really just need to move. I put my earbuds in and find a sports podcast—*Fantasy Footballers*. I could use some insight, as already my fantasy team is losing in the Clear Security pool. The biggest winner is usually required to buy booze for everyone with the money they get, but that's looking tricky because this year we opened the pool to employees worldwide, and we have three guys in Saudi Arabia.

After thirty minutes on the elliptical, I move to some weights and follow it up with a hundred crunches. I spot a woman looking me over, and before meeting Anna, I might have been tempted. But I'm hoping I have plans today *and* plans tonight, so I don't want to jeopardize anything.

I go back to my room for a quick shower before I call downstairs. Maybe Anna and her mom would be interested in brunch.

“Hi. May I have Anna Standing's room?”

I hear clicking. “I'm sorry, sir. She's checked out of the hotel.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, can you check for Felicity Standing?”

She clicks again. “I don't see a room for Felicity Standing.”

My heat sinks. Anna checked out. She didn't leave me a message. She didn't call my room. I'm disappointed. All the things I wanted to tell her and ask her are moot. I don't even know the name of her business. I do a quick search on my



phone, and there must be hundreds of interior design firms, but none that have Anna's name attached.

I sit down hard on the bed. How am I going to find her again?

There's a knock at the door, and then it flies open.  
"Housekeeping."

I take a deep breath and gather myself as I wave the woman in. I mentally shift back to my plan of having dinner in the sports bar and watching football on TV.



## CHAPTER 7

### *Anna*

“Hey, Mom,” I say in greeting, setting my bag on a chair.

“You’re on time!” she exclaims, giving me a tight hug.

One of our favorite things to do during the holidays is meet for tea at the Palace Hotel. I was going to get us tickets a little closer to Christmas, but then our plans changed. Mom’s been a little clingy since the avalanche, and she couldn’t get out of Tahoe fast enough, so we ended up coming back to San Francisco for a low-key Thanksgiving here—matzo ball soup instead of turkey.

But it’s still a holiday weekend, so I decided we needed some fun. The Palace Hotel is all decked out in red and white, and it feels wonderfully festive. The weather is cool, but that’s okay—just helps us remember it’s about to be Christmas time.

I was disappointed that we didn’t get our Thanksgiving dinner at the Ritz-Carlton, though I understood why Mom was ready to leave. The press was relentless, calling at all hours to talk about the avalanche. I would have liked to see Clay again, maybe have some kind of closure rather than just sending him a message with my contact information. But we did have fun together, and he did say he wanted to get together back in the City. So we’ll see. I haven’t heard anything yet. Still, I couldn’t have asked for a better avalanche partner, and he was

so good with Mom when she got hurt. I can't stop wondering whether there's potential there, though that's so very unlike me.

Maybe I'm just romanticizing my time with Clay because coming home was so *not* fun. I arrived to find that my apartment, in my very secure building, had somehow been broken into and ransacked. I've spent most of the last few days dealing with the police and getting my condo cleaned up. This has been a Thanksgiving for the record books—and not in a good way.

But right now, I just need to be present. I breathe out a big rush of air as the server places a mimosa in front of me. Mom and I order our teas, and when the server walks away, she takes a deep breath and smiles. “I was talking to your brother. Maybe, given everything that happened this week, you should move home for a while.”

I carefully school my features. I know Mom is lonely, and I love her, but there is no way I'd move back into my childhood bedroom and live by her rules. Staying there one night after we returned was enough. “How is Bitsy doing down in Palm Springs?” I ask instead of responding.

Mom nods eagerly. “She loves it. She has a guest room and wants me to come down.”

“Why don't you go for a few weeks? Maybe I can find a hotel room and come for Christmas? I bet the desert would be fun for the holiday.”

“I don't know....” She shifts in her seat, seeming nervous. “There's something to be said about Union Square in December.”

Union Square is San Francisco's shopping mecca. Each winter, there's a giant tree and menorah in the center, surrounded by high-end stores that showcase the fanciest holiday gifts.

“I know what you mean,” I tell her. “After tea, I'm going to do some shopping and then meet Henry for drinks.”

“Why don't you move in with him?” she asks.

I cringe at the thought. “I don’t need to live with anyone, Mom. And anyway, I’d be putting a serious crimp in Henry’s plans. He has a new girl who’s crazy about him.”

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry I ruined Thanksgiving dinner with Dr. McGrath.”

I pat her hand as our first course of sandwiches is placed in front of us. I love them all—cucumber, egg salad, salmon. *Yum*. “I left my number for him,” I assure her. “If he’s interested, he’ll call.”

We dive in on the tower of sandwiches, and Mom catches me up on what’s happening with her friends—women I’ve known my whole life. She seems to relax as she settles into the conversation.

“You’d be okay if I went down to Palm Springs?” she asks after the scones and petits fours. She fidgets with the napkin in her lap.

“Of course, Mom. Don’t worry about me. I’ll go wherever you want to go for Christmas, and if you decide you want to go to China and see Charles, I’ll do that too.”

She wrinkles her nose. “I think being with Bitsy would be good for December, and then I can decide if I want to stay longer.”

“That sounds perfect. Figure out when you might want to go down, and I’ll drive you. We can take Highway One and stop at that great place in Carmel and see Dottie. We’ll spend the night at Mindy’s winery in their bed-and-breakfast and then finish the drive to Palm Springs.”

Mom sits up straighter and nods. “I like that idea. I’ll talk to Bitsy and find out what works for her.”

“Do you want to join me for shopping in Union Square today? I have a few things to find for Henry, and I need to get some things for Charles so I can get them in the mail if I want them to have a halfway decent chance of making it on time.”

“What are you going to send him?” Mom asks.

“A Bourdain sourdough loaf, which will probably be cardboard by the time it arrives, but I’ll wrap it up tight and cross my fingers. I’m also thinking about sending him peanut butter and salsa and corn chips. But I’m looking for something nice, other than food.”

“A tie?” she suggests

“I don’t think he wears ties. Every time I see him, his collar is open.”

Mom nods. “I know you’ll find something.”

“I hope so. I’m buying Henry a new set of cufflinks. And I already know what I’m getting you, too.”

Her eyes light up. “I can’t wait.”

When we’ve finished, I kiss her goodbye and take a cab over to Union Square. I end up finding a lot of good things, and tomorrow, I’ll hit the grocery store before I put my box together for Charles. Next on the agenda—drinks with Henry. But I need to drop this stuff at home first.



Henry rises from his seat as I enter the bar. I wave as I make my way over.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” he says as he kisses my cheek.

“It was fine. We just hid out in the lodge and waited. We were very lucky.” I signal the server and order a glass of red wine.

He shakes his head. “I can’t believe how scary that must have been. You rode up in the chairlift with the guy and ended up holing up all night with him. He was a stranger. What would you have done if he was some kind of crazy?”

“Well... We’d already been skiing together, and we had actually met before.” I tell Henry all about Mom running into the wayward elbow and how Clay went into doctor mode.

His eyes grow wide. “That’s pretty lucky.”

I nod. “I totally agree.” My wine appears, and after a sip, I continue. “I saw him again that night after the Bob Mackie show. I went by myself because Mom wasn’t feeling it. We hung out a bit, and he was great. Then the next day I ran into him boarding the bus to Paradise Valley, and we skied most of the afternoon.”

“Could he keep up with you?” Henry asks with a smirk.

Henry’s a solid skier, but he didn’t learn until he was in middle school. I’ve been skiing since I was a child. Henry can’t keep up with me, and I always end up skiing ahead and waiting for him—and getting cold. I didn’t have that problem with Clay.

I smile, but then immediately feel sad. I really thought he might call me.

“He stayed right with me, and on our last run, I took him over trees and rocks off the trail. He was also quick-thinking enough to get us inside the lodge. I mean, we had *just* gotten inside when a giant boulder and a ton of snow came crashing down where we’d been standing.”

“How did you stay warm?”

I give him a look and a saucy grin. “How do you think? He was hot, there was a fireplace, and he saved my life. What would you have done?”

He snorts. “Probably not what you did, since I’m straight.”

I grin. “It was incredible.”

“I bet anything would have been incredible. It had been ages since you scratched that itch.”

I roll my eyes. “He scratched that itch several times, and he was definitely not selfish.”

“When are you going to see him again?” Henry drains his glass of wine and signals for a second.

I shake my head. “We had plans to eat together on Thanksgiving, but when Mom wanted to leave early, I left him my contact information. I haven’t heard from him, though.” I sigh. “It’s only been a few days, so who knows? He may not even be back from the mountains yet.”

Henry surveys me. “I don’t know. Seems like you two had a good connection. I would think you’d have heard from him by now.”

I nod. “I thought we connected. But if he’s not into me, I won’t force it.”

“You and your one-date wonders.” He shakes his head. “You’re fantastic. Someone will eventually figure it out.”

I smile. “Thank you. I hope so.” I take a sip of my wine and look at Henry. He’s getting some attention from around the bar, as he’s built like a basketball player. I would never tell him this, but he’s really not that athletic. He just looks the part. I like a guy who isn’t always glued to a game on the television.

After a minute, Henry looks at his phone. “Text from Patrice?” I ask.

He nods. “Yes. I’m meeting her later. If Clay doesn’t call, how are you going to find him?”

I shrug. “If he’s not into me, I won’t chase him. He works for a security firm, but I’ve already checked, and there are more than two dozen of those in San Francisco. Anyway, who knows if it’s a real security firm or just a bunch of former military guys who do secret stuff for millionaires in the Bay Area.”

He tilts his head. “Now you don’t sound that into him. Maybe it’s a good thing he didn’t get in touch.”

I bristle. “We talked about you.”

“You did?” Henry leans forward.

“I told him how we met and how close we are.”

“Did he have a problem with you having a guy as a best friend?”



“Not really. But he kept insisting you wanted to sleep with me.”

Henry says nothing at first and my pulse picks up, but then he throws his head back and laughs. I breathe a sigh of relief.

“He’s so not in touch with himself,” Henry says after a moment, though he doesn’t meet my eyes. “Men and women can be friends and not want to sleep together.”

“So true,” I say with a smile. “And maybe he hasn’t thought about me twice since that day.” That would be in line with the player I’m sure he is.

“Now for the tough conversation,” Henry says, clearing his throat. “How bad was the break-in at your place?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I’ve spoken with the police, and unless they rappelled down from the roof, there’s no telling how they got in. You don’t see them on any of the cameras.” I shake my head. “It doesn’t make any sense. Why would they go to all that trouble to take my costume jewelry? Maybe they got the wrong place or something.”

“It’s beautiful costume jewelry,” Henry offers.

“But not valuable enough to rappel down from the roof.” I cover my eyes for a moment. “They pulled everything out of every drawer and destroyed my pillows, and for the life of me, I can’t figure out why.”

“Has anyone threatened you?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m not that controversial.”

“What about someone you were dating?”

“The closest to someone meeting that description is Clay—and we just met. There hasn’t been much of anyone else in a while, as you know, and I rarely let people know where I live anyway.”

“I do love your building,” he says. “I’d marry you for that apartment alone.”

I preen at Henry's compliment. He lives in a lovely Victorian in the Haight that he's refurbished himself. He's not into contemporary with marble and slick furniture, which is my condo. But evidently, he appreciates it anyway. "You're funny. I have my movers taking out the damaged furniture this afternoon and replacing it with other stuff from my warehouse."

"Thank goodness you have all that furniture for staging."

"I didn't know I'd need it for myself, but I'm happy I don't have to drop everything and go shopping. The wait for new furniture is about four months right now."

"Well, I still don't like that it happened, but I'm glad you've landed on your feet. All told, you had a pretty exciting Thanksgiving." Henry stands and kisses me on the cheek. "I need to go meet Patrice." When I nod, he adds, "The guy is an asshole for not calling you. That's on him. Not on you."

I smile and feel warm all over. Henry always knows how to make me feel better. I bid him goodbye and think about Clay as I finish my wine. I've not connected with a guy the way I did him in a long time. But maybe it was silly to think it would become anything. I should go back to my original feeling about him—just a fun guy to talk with for a while. Getting trapped in an avalanche with someone doesn't change incompatible views about relationships.

I take a rideshare home, and once I've settled in on the couch, I do a search for Dr. Clay McGrath. Up pops the article in *San Francisco Magazine*, so I decide to take a closer look. On the cover he's wearing a white doctor's coat, green scrubs, and that amazing smile. It's a great shot, but having spent some time with him, I can tell it doesn't do him justice. However, as I skim through the article, it's clear we're also not looking for the same things. I have no desire to be one of many. Too bad. Henry is right. It's his loss.



## CHAPTER 8

# *Clay*

“Hey! You made it.” Bash pats me on the back as I enter Jim’s apartment. “I heard about your Thanksgiving. We’re so glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks.” I never told anyone I was going to Tahoe or mentioned what happened with the avalanche, but evidently these guys were paying attention to the media coverage after Anna and I were rescued.

Jim leans in for a hug. “Man, you have nine lives.”

I grin. “Thank goodness.”

Gage hands me a beer and clinks it against his. “Thank goodness is right.”

“We want to know what happened, but rather than tell your story forty times, we’ll wait for everyone to get here,” Jim says. “Nate and Lilly will be late.”

I grin. “No surprise there.”

We stand around the kitchen island as Jim’s wife, Kate, deals with their twin boys and all the adults. As she passes by, she gives me a side hug. “You really put a scare into us.”

“Good thing you didn’t know about it until it was over.”

“You know Jim would have left Aspen and started digging himself.”

I chuckle because he is that kind of friend. “I do. And I would do the same for him.”

“Do you want something other than beer?” Jim asks. “I have some fancy bourbon Nate left the last time he was here, and he’s bound to bring another bottle tonight.”

“I’m good right now,” I tell him. “I’ll wait.” He nods and steps away, just as Kate reappears. “Tell me, how was Aspen?” I ask her.

She smiles. “The boys, thankfully, have their father’s athleticism and were carving up the intermediate slopes by the end of the weekend.”

“Sounds just like them. What about you? Did you get out?”

“No way.” She makes a face. “I had to man the lodge just in case. Plus, I’m a better reader than skier.”

I laugh. “Did Jim get out at all?”

Kate shakes her head. “Nope. He was working with Carmen Sanchez, and you know what a diva pop star she is. She tried to go into town, and that was chaos. Instead, they ended up at the chateau all weekend, and Jim and his team still dealt with people trying to scale walls. They had to prevent several break-ins.”

I shake my head. “Yuck. He must have been in a great mood when he got home.”

“He’s still not back to normal. He hates those assignments, but you know him...” She shrugs. “He won’t give out crappy work if he won’t do it himself.”

“I bet he missed the billionaires,” I muse.

“They’re no picnic either, but that is a little less pressure. Sure, they come with paparazzi and the occasional stalker, but Carmen’s fans were intense and determined.”

Jim sidles up to Kate, puts his arm around her waist, and kisses her temple. “Are you telling him about Aspen?”

“Sounds like that was not a lot of fun,” I offer.

He shakes his head. “We had a team of twenty-five guys, plus the local sheriff’s office, and that wasn’t nearly enough.”

“Man, Tahoe was better than that, even with the avalanche.”

Jim chuckles as Bash and his wife, Fiona, join us.

“What did you guys do for Thanksgiving?” I take a deep pull on my beer.

“We did some work with Jackson and Corrine in Maui,” Bash explains. “It was really tough. We had the guest house to ourselves for ten whole days.”

Jackson and Corinne Graham own a sizable estate above the cliffs on the western side of the island. I roll my eyes. “That sounds like a rough assignment.”

Fiona nods. “It actually was. My morning sickness is rough right now.”

I look at her, eyes wide. “You’re pregnant?”

She and Bash are all grins as they nod. “We are,” they say in unison.

I give Fiona a big hug. “That’s fantastic. I’m so thrilled for you. Clay is a great name if it’s a boy.”

“We’ll add it to the list,” she says. “But don’t be offended if we go with a good Irish name instead.”

“O’Clay works, too.”

That makes her laugh.

When she’s recovered, I ask, “When is your due date?”

“Middle of July. We’re just beginning to tell people. I had to tell Corrine because I kept getting sick, and I was sure she thought I was drinking too much. The only thing I could

keep down were the pineapple pancakes her house manager makes.”

“I’ve never had them, but they are legendary.” I turn to Jim. “If I’m not on call the next time you go to Hawaii, I hope you’ll consider sending me to Maui. I can be more than a doctor.”

Gage comes over with his wife, Stella. “I bet you’re wishing you’d come with us to Portland for Thanksgiving,” she says, giving me a hug.

I shake my head. “Not a chance. Your mom’s reputation precedes her.”

“She really is a wonderful woman,” Gage offers. “She just falls in love often.”

That gets everyone snickering. I met her at their wedding last year, and she was very flirtatious. She’s sweet but a little too friendly.

We hear about Gage and Stella’s trip home with their four girls—the definition of chaos. But Stella is a great mom and manages the office at Clear Security the same way she does their home—with a firm grip.

Jim’s phone pings. He looks down and then reports, “Nate is downstairs, and they’re coming up.”

Nate and his wife, Lilly, arrive with their kids, and there’s pandemonium. But we wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Hey, it’s the Yeti!” Nate says as he pulls me in tight. “Here I am in Italy, enjoying a pleasant evening without the kids, and I open the US international edition of the *New York Times* to find your mug! What the hell?”

I laugh. “I hope you brought it home so I can see it.”

“I bet the women are swarming around you now.” Lilly gives me a hug.

“I haven’t been back to the hospital yet,” I tell her. “I’m scheduled to go in one night this next week.”

True to form, Nate pulls an expensive bottle of bourbon out of a bag and a tumbler from the cabinet. He knows his way around Jim's place.

I look around at this group. I'm the last one still single. Maybe I could have brought Anna here sometime... But I guess she wasn't interested. That's too bad.

"Earth to Clay..." Stella says.

I look at her and smile. "Yes?"

"I asked you to tell us how it all happened."

So I tell them the story—from meeting Anna when her mother was injured, to finding her on the shuttle, to doing our runs and deciding to take a break for hot chocolate when the mountain came crashing down on us.

"You guys were buried inside that lodge." She shakes her head. "Thank God for miracles."

"Fortunately, the flue was open in the fireplace, so I was able to start a fire. Otherwise, we might have frozen."

I tell them all about Anna and how we managed to make it through together. Well, I don't tell them *everything* about how we managed. That's none of their damn business.

"When are you going to see Anna again?" Kate asks.

I shake my head. "We'd made plans to have dinner on Thanksgiving Day, but when I tried to contact her, they'd checked out of the hotel. We didn't exchange information, so I have no idea where she is."

"Anna Standing?" Lilly asks. "I know that name..." Lilly thinks for a moment, and then I actually remember how she knows her.

"Oh! She mentioned she was the interior—"

Lilly nods. "Yes, she was the interior designer on the house. She's beautiful. Half the contractors and trade workers were chasing her."

"Well, you can add me to that list."



“I’m sure I have her number, but I didn’t bring my phone. He wouldn’t let me.” Lilly jacks her thumb at Nate.

“She’s been on it since before five this morning,” he says with a shrug. “I wanted some of her attention. Sue me.”

Lilly rolls her eyes and pats him on the back. “I’ll give you a lot of attention later tonight.”

That gets plenty of snickers from the crowd.

“Are you going to reach out to her?” Fiona asks.

“I don’t know.” I rub my hand over the back of my neck. “I feel like maybe she stood me up because she didn’t want to see me again. Why would I make her uncomfortable by forcing her to have to tell me to my face, it was real and it was fun but it wasn’t real fun.”

“Man, did a girl ever actually tell you that?” Bash says.

“No. But what we went through was very intense. I don’t know how she’s feeling about it. We were huddled up in a freezer when half the roof of the lodge came crashing down, and they had to helo us out. It brought me right back to our days in Afghanistan.”

“That sounds terrifying,” Stella says.

I nod and then wave my hands in mercy. I can’t think about this anymore right now. “Enough about me. When are we going to eat?”

“Whenever you all are ready,” Kate announces.

Seems like that’s now, so we all line up. Once they’ve filled their plates, the ladies go upstairs to hang out in Jim’s private rooftop park with the kids. The guys sit around the dining room table. We do some more catching up and eventually move to talking about work.

“I got an interesting call this week,” Jim says. “You guys all know Tim Lehman? The Seer of Cincinnati?”

He goes on to weave a tale of a billionaire’s daughter who’s gotten herself mixed up in some sort of cult. She’s made hefty financial donations to them, and now she’s disappeared.

Jim shakes his head. “I want to vet the story they’ve given us before we get involved. I’m going to send Bash and a small team to their location in the desert in Nevada.”

I nod. “Okay. Let me know if you’re going to need me.”

“Great.” Jim drains his glass of bourbon and looks at me. “Speaking of you, I heard through my contact at the FBI that they think the avalanche was purposely triggered.”

My eyes widen. “What? Are you sure?”

Jim nods. “It killed six people and injured dozens.”

“Do they know what set off the avalanche? Someone out of bounds? Explosives?”

Jim shakes his head. “They’re thinking microwave radiation—the same sound that causes Havana Syndrome.”

I sit up straight. Havana Syndrome has been dismissed as a conspiracy theory by some, but the people at the US Embassy in Havana when it was deployed might disagree. It caused significant emotional, physical, and psychological damage.

“But it’s been proven that sounds don’t cause avalanches,” I say aloud. “The base was ice, and then they had a big dump of snow on top, so couldn’t it just have been that conditions were right? Why would they think someone set it off?”

Jim shrugs. “I don’t know the science of it. But the FBI is investigating.”

“They haven’t talked to me,” I grouse. “I could tell them about the conditions and what happened. The resort even closed the lift and the run.”

“But no one knows why Ski Patrol was told to close that part of the mountain,” Jim notes.

My brows hit my hairline. “What?”

He shrugs. “I’ll pass your contact information along so you can talk to them about it and maybe get more

information.”

There’s a pounding of feet, and some of the kids come running in. “We’re making s’mores on the roof,” one of them says.

“I can’t miss that,” I announce, ready for this conversation to be over.

Jim pats me on the back. “I’m sure they’ll figure it out. It’s not like someone is after you, right?”

I blow out a breath of air and hope he’s right.



## *Anna*

“Ms. Standing?” the police officer says.

I barely hear him. I can't focus on anything. I run my hands through my hair and survey my office. It's been completely destroyed. The cardboard swatches are on the floor and torn to shreds, which means I've lost all my samples. That will be thousands of dollars to replace and probably won't happen quickly. The furniture in the small seating area where I meet clients is toast. My keyboard is saturated in something dark brown and sticky, which I assume is Coke. Every paper from every drawer has been strewn around the room.

*Who would do this? Why would they do this?*

There's nothing here to take, nothing of value to grab. Fortunately, they didn't find the safe and try to rip that out of the wall. There's nothing but the computer backup in there, anyway. I need to call my employees. I think a couple of them might have been coming in today. There's certainly no reason to do that now.

“I'm sorry.” I paste a smile on my face and turn to the officer. “This happened at my home last week. I don't know what this city is coming to.”

The officer stops what he's writing and looks at me. “You had someone break in and destroy your home?”

I nod, pushing back tears. This holiday season is for the birds.

He steps away, and I've just finished texting my team with a short update when Henry returns my nine-one-one text with a phone call. "What's going on?"

I sniff. "My office was vandalized."

"What? Are you okay?"

I nod. I know he can't see that, but it's all I can muster without crying. I look around the corner to find my portfolio on the floor with water and something red poured all over it—all my original drawings, destroyed.

Henry sighs. "I told you you needed more security, but you were insistent that you had nothing of value to steal."

I cry into the phone.

"I'm on my way. I'm sorry. I—" Henry clears his throat. "I've called a rideshare, and it'll be downstairs waiting for me. I'm coming."

"Ms. Standing?" the officer says as I hang up. "Do you have the case number for the break-in at your home?"

I shake my head and wrap my arms around myself. "Not with me."

"Where do you live?"

I recite my address, and he gets on his radio to find the case number. Could these things be related? I can't imagine who would target me. I don't even kill spiders or bugs; I scoot them out on pieces of paper. I sigh, not sure what to do. No one could be this upset over me.

I go to sit down, but the officer stops me. "Ma'am, you could destroy evidence."

So instead, I walk to an open space in the hallway outside my office and slide down to the floor.

With my arms resting on my knees, I bow my head and let the tears flow. I thought losing my father was the worst day of my life, but the cumulative effects of the avalanche, not

hearing from Clay, and having my home *and* office broken into and everything destroyed have brought me to a new low. I'm ready to check myself into a hotel far away, crawl under the covers, and never come out.

After a few minutes I see Henry's shoes in the periphery of my vision. He slides down on the floor next to me and puts his arm around me. "Do you want to stay at my place tonight?"

I shake my head. When I look up, my office is swarming with people collecting fingerprints and taking photos of the mayhem. A gentleman in green corduroy pants and a red-and-green plaid shirt underneath his khaki raincoat approaches me. "Ms. Standing?"

I look up at him. "Yes."

"My name is Detective Eric Lenning. I've spoken to the officer who took your statement and filed the reports on the burglary in your home, as well as the officer who took your statement today. Do you mind if I join you on the floor?"

I shake my head and wave to the wall opposite me.

"They both tell me you don't have any past boyfriends who are upset, no clients who are angry, and you have no clue what's going on."

"That's correct."

"What about your family?"

"My father passed away in September, and my brother is in Shanghai working for the family business. They're in commercial real estate—rental office space. I'm hardly associated with the business."

"You were in Tahoe for Thanksgiving?"

I nod.

"She was one of those buried inside the Sky Lodge during the avalanche," Henry offers.

"Ah, that's why you look so familiar." He looks at me with kind eyes. "You're having a tough week."

I nod because if I say anything, I'll start crying again.

“You don't have to stay while they go through the crime scene. You can go home if you wish.”

I nod again. “Thank you.” I don't know where to go or what to do, but I don't want to be here.

“Before you go, can you tell me about the clients you're working for right now?” he asks.

I take a deep breath. “This time of year, we do a lot of decorating. My team and I put up holiday trees, lights, and garland. We keep all of that in a warehouse not too far from here.”

“Really? You do trees for clients? I can't imagine not doing our family tree with my daughter and wife.”

I smile. “We rarely do family trees. We're hired to do trees in offices and often for large homes that do entertaining and may have multiple trees. With us, clients don't have to worry about storing everything, and their decorations can also be trendy.”

“What are the trends this year?” he asks, making a big show of flipping open his notebook again. “Maybe for once we can get ahead.”

I smile. I like this detective. “This year we're going for the feeling of warmth, security, and tranquility, reflected by the color combination of bright crimson and dark fir green. Dark blue and black add a graceful depth to the theme, which is enhanced by gold and white accents. Traditional Christmas motifs will round out the festive mood.”

His brow creases. “Isn't that the case every year?”

I shake my head. “I wouldn't have much of a business if it was. Sometimes, the focus is a plaid, or other times, it can be more red and white. And every now and again, it will be other colors like violets and pinks.”

“Do you decide that?”

I chuckle. “Believe it or not, I don't. We start to see holiday designs about three quarters before. It's that way for



every season. And we begin planning. We have over a hundred different trees my team and I dress for this time of year. So we need to be prepared.”

“I never would have thought.” Detective Lenning shakes his head.

“Her trees and, well, all her designs are amazing,” Henry says.

“Are you the boyfriend?” he asks.

“No, he’s my best friend, so really, I pay him to say nice things about me, and because he came when I sent him a nine-one-one text, I’ll have to give him a bonus.”

Detective Lenning laughs. “I know this isn’t fun stuff, but we’ll look into the break-ins and see what we can find. We’re not seeing a slew of them, so I have to believe this is targeted, which means we need to find the right thread to pull and unravel this mess.”

He stands and offers his hand to help me up. “Who at your family’s company would I speak to about anyone being upset because maybe they lost their lease or were evicted?”

“That would be Morgan Whitmer.”

“I know this is asking a lot, but would you have a number for Morgan?”

I shake my head. “I can give you the main number, and they should be able to connect you with Morgan. She oversees all the leasing agreements with the rentals.”

He writes down the number as I recite it, and then looks up. “And just to confirm, you’ve never met anyone who rents from your family’s business who is upset.”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Thank you. Here’s my card. Please call me if you need anything.”

“I can leave?” I confirm as I pocket the card.

He nods. “I have your contact information. The team will be here for most of the day. We’ll let you know when

we're leaving. And we'll keep a man here tonight to monitor things in case they decide to come back."

"Thank you."

"Are you sure you don't want to come over to my place?" Henry asks.

I shake my head. "No, but it means the world that you came when I called. Go back to work. I'm going to go home, order in some crappy food, and watch terrible daytime television."

Henry gives me a hug. "I'll check on you tonight."

We walk out together, and I get in my car and start the drive home. I want to call Charles, but it's eleven in the morning here, so with the fifteen-hour time difference, that means it's two o'clock tomorrow morning in Shanghai. I can't worry my mom about this, but I do want to hear her voice.

"Hello?" she says when she answers. Her voice sounds shaky and out of breath.

"Hey, Mom, are you okay?"

She clears her throat. "I'm okay. I've been puttering around the house, trying to figure out what I'm going to pack to take with me to Palm Springs."

"Great. Did you talk to Bitsy?"

"I did. Since you mentioned you'd come down to Palm Springs for Christmas, I think I'll go for the last three weeks of the year. She and I can try being together, and if it's not working for us, we'll part ways at the first of the year."

"I think that's a fantastic idea."

"Why aren't you at work?" she asks.

"They're doing some work in my office, so I've made today a pajama day. I can manage my email and phone calls from home."

"You're so lucky. Your dad never had that option. You had to be in the office to get work phone calls and deal with any mail. Life sure is a lot easier for you."

“Oh, I don’t know,” I counter. “Now, people want everything yesterday, and if you don’t return a call within two hours, regardless of when they call, clients will trade you in for someone else, so you’re never able to take a break.”

“Do you get many calls at night?”

“Depends on the job. I have to be available when clients need me, and occasionally, that is late at night.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re working from home.”

“Yes, me too. Now, tell me what you’re going to do while you visit Bitsy.”

We talk for a few more minutes about what her friends are doing in Palm Springs and her wardrobe for the desert before we end our call.

As I park and take the elevator up to my floor, I can’t decide if I want to have Chinese or a big, fat, greasy cheeseburger. I finally talk myself into a burger with the works, which includes chili and onions. I’m not going anywhere, and I can wear my fat pants so I won’t be uncomfortable if I get too full.

I find a show to stream and settle in for the afternoon. When the burger arrives, I eat my fattening lunch, watch all eight episodes, and then doze into the evening. It’s sort of a food coma, I think.

My phone rings, waking me from semi-sleep. It’s my mom.

“Hey, Mom, is everything okay?”

“Honey, I think I need to go to the emergency room. I can’t seem to catch my breath.”

She does this every now and again when she’s lonely. She’s usually just happy to talk to me, or even better, get a visit from me. But I don’t want to chance it. “Do you want to call an ambulance?”

“Can you come and take me?”

“I’m leaving now.”

I pull on my University of Colorado sweatshirt and step into my sneakers, grabbing my purse as I rush out the door. I'm not going to hurry too much, though. If it was an emergency, she'd take an ambulance, right?

Thankfully, the traffic is light on the way to Millbrae, and it takes me a little less than fifteen minutes to get to her. I leave the car running in her driveway and dash up to the house.

She's sitting by the door in her dressing gown, and her lips are a little blue. This is much worse than she said. *Crap!* "Mom, you should have called an ambulance."

She shakes her head. "And let all the neighbors know my business? No thank you."

I take her arm and help her to my car. Once she's settled, I drive with the pedal to the floor down the freeway and through every yellow light, and a few pink lights, before I pull up to the emergency room entrance.

I stop to get her out, and as we go inside, a nurse takes one look at her and gives me a withering look.

"I'll park and be right back," I assure her.

As I return, I prepare myself for a stern talking to. "I just dropped my mother off," I tell the woman at the desk. "Felicity Standing."

She nods. "She was taken back. You can go through the double doors, and she'll be in on the right."

I take off at a run. "Walk, please!" she calls after me.

I wave my hand in apology as I race to where I was directed. As I turn the corner, I stop short. Mom has a hospital gown on now, and she's talking to Clay.

I close my eyes. This is going to be awkward.

Clay looks up from his computer with mirth in his eyes. "Good to see you, Anna."

I shake my head. "We've got to stop meeting like this." My joke sounds a little forced. Probably because it feels that

way.

“I’ve set your mom up for a nebulizer treatment, but I want to get a look at her heart, so I’ve scheduled an EKG and some heart monitoring. She’s wheezing a bit, so we want to rule a few things out.”

“Thank you.”

He nods and then looks at me. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

I glance over at Mom as my skin becomes clammy. She’s shut her eyes to rest, or at least I hope that’s what she’s doing. Is she seriously ill? I nod and follow Clay, who gives directions to a nurse before leading me to an empty room.

“Is she going to be okay?” I ask, terrified of the answer.

He nods. “Most likely. We’ll monitor her. She had that fall last week in Tahoe, and that could play into what’s going on with her. But that’s not why I wanted to talk to you.”

*Oh.* I feel my eyes widen. “Okay.”

“I told you I thought it would be fun to hang out once we got back to the City, and I thought you were interested in that.” His eyes drill into my soul. “So I was bummed when you left Tahoe.”

My brow furrows. “I was interested in that.”

“Then why did you just disappear?” he asks.

I wring my hands. “My mom was very upset about what happened and wanted to get home. I tried reaching you, but you had a do-not-disturb notice on your phone.”

“That was because the press kept calling. You could have left a message.”

*What?* I shake my head. “I did. I left you a note explaining everything, along with my contact information. But you haven’t called or reached out.”

His eyes grow large. “I never got anything like that.” He pauses a moment. “Are you just saying that because I’m

confronting you?”

I stand up straight. “Absolutely not. Why would I lie to you? I was just telling Henry how I couldn’t figure out why you hadn’t called, and you can ask my mother, too. She and I have talked about it. I thought I’d hear from you as soon as you got my note.”

He shakes his head. “Well, I didn’t get anything, and I’ve been kicking myself that we never exchanged information.” He looks away a moment and then drops his voice. “Listen, I have a break shortly. Can you stick around and join me for a snack in the cafeteria? The food is tolerable—better than I got in Afghanistan.”

My heart races. “If you don’t think I need to be with my mom, I would love to.”

“She’ll be going through tests, so you can’t be with her anyway.”

“Oh, okay.”

Clay smiles. “I’m sorry about your mom, but I’m really glad we’ve reconnected.”

I feel myself smiling, despite mom’s situation. “Me, too.”

When I return to Mom’s room, they’re putting in an IV, and they’ve connected her to a heart monitor. She has a mask over her nose and mouth that’s pushing medication into her lungs.

“I was so shocked to see Clay here,” she muses with a smile.

If I didn’t know better, I’d bet she planned this, but she’s not in good shape, so I think it must be fate intervening.

The nurse looks at my mom. “You know Dr. McGrath?”

Mom nods. “We met him up in Tahoe last week. He and my daughter were caught in that awful avalanche.”

She looks at me with her eyes wide. “He was in that avalanche?”

Mom smiles as she looks at me. “He saved my life when I was knocked unconscious in the casino, and then he got stuck with my Anna inside the Sky Lodge. He saved her too.”

The nurse shakes her head. “I had no idea. He hasn’t told any of us about that.” She pokes her head out into the hallway and directs an orderly to take Mom down to radiology.

“It was all over the news and in the newspapers,” Mom explains.

“I’ve been working, so I miss those things,” the nurse says with a shrug. “I’m glad they’re both okay. Now, let’s see how you’re doing.”

Before the orderly can roll her out, I reach for Mom’s hand. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

She smiles and nods. Once she’s off, I race to the restroom and look at my disheveled face. Oh jeez. I have ketchup—or is it chili?—on my cheek. And I’m dressed like a homeless person. My socks don’t match, and my hair is a mess that doesn’t quite qualify as a bun. I quickly try to fix myself and tame the butterflies flying around my stomach. Then I breathe into my hand and take a deep breath. I smell like onions and garlic. Fantastic. Clay will be running away once he gets a good whiff of me. At least I put deodorant on this morning.

When I walk out of the ladies room, Clay is leaning against the opposite wall. A woman walking by doesn’t even see me as she stares at him. I don’t blame her. His scrubs hang low on his hips, and his hair looks like he’s been running his fingers through it.

“Hey,” I say, trying to keep the excitement out of my voice.

“I was told you were in there. I can take a break now. Does that work for you?”

“Of course.” I reach for the bottom of my oversized sweatshirt and pull it down to cover my backside.

He directs me down the hall, and for a few paces, we walk in silence. There is so much to say, yet I don’t know where to begin.

Clay laughs. “I can’t believe you’re here. The other day I was telling my friends I didn’t know how to get a hold of you, and right before my shift, Lilly Lancaster sent me your phone number.”

“She did?” I ask.

He nods. “That group of my friends I told you about got together over the weekend, and we talked about what happened in Tahoe.”





## CHAPTER 10

# *Clay*

Anna and I follow the signs to the cafeteria. Well, she's probably following the signs. I'm just following her. My heart is floating now that I've found her again. And that really makes no sense to me.

I couldn't believe it when Felicity Standing came into the emergency room, and then to see Anna right behind her? Unbelievable. If my pager buzzes, I'll have to race back to the ER, but even a few minutes with Anna will be great. And now that I can contact her, there's the prospect of even more. Which it seems I want.

When we enter the cafeteria, I point toward the grill area. "They make a great burger, or my favorite is the hot ham and cheese."

"I had a chili cheeseburger with garlic fries from Ringo's earlier today," she confesses. "I think I'm good with just a drink and some time to catch up with you."

I have to laugh at that, but I still pick up two brownies, as they are not to be missed. Fernando, the cook, makes them himself with plentiful chocolate chunks. Anna fills up a soda, and after I pay for our food, I guide her over to a booth in the corner. It's not that I'm trying to hide, but I don't want anyone stopping by the table to be nosy. I want as much uninterrupted time with her as I can get.

We sit opposite each other, and almost immediately my phone pings with a message. It's an unknown sender, so I ignore it. I give Anna a smile. "What had your mom so anxious that she had to leave Lake Tahoe?"

Anna sighs. "I don't think she slept well the first night because it was a new place. Then, when we were gone, she didn't sleep at all, so even after I was back, she couldn't calm down. She just wanted to be home. We didn't even have Thanksgiving dinner. We ate matzo ball soup from a Jewish deli in the East Bay on our drive back. And she talked me into spending the first night back in my childhood bedroom."

"Does it still have your furniture from when you were a little girl?" I ask with a tease in my voice.

She laughs for a moment before she answers. "When I was a teenager, I redesigned my room. The furniture is the same as it was when I was little, but when I was about sixteen, I painted it cherry red. Then, before I left for college, I decided that was for little girls, and I painted it black."

"Were you goth?"

She shakes her head. "No. But the trends were pastels and glittery, and I thought it would be more chic if I went with all black. They wouldn't let me paint the walls—although I tried."

"So you're saying your apartment now is full of black furniture?"

She shakes her head. "No. And I don't do a lot of leather anymore, either."

I raise an eyebrow. "You have leather in your childhood bedroom?"

She leans in. "I do. The bed cover is leather, and it is heavy. Leather is the original weighted blanket."

"I don't think I've ever seen a leather blanket before," I marvel.

"Nor should you. It's atrocious."

Now, it's my turn to laugh. "How did you get one?"

“I made it. I bought the leather and used my heavy-duty sewing machine. I also made matching curtains, but they were so heavy, I couldn’t get the rod to stay in the wall. Man, my dad was angry with me. Our house had plaster walls, and I ripped out three huge chunks when the curtains fell down in the middle of the night. Plus, it woke everyone up.”

“I think I would have enjoyed hanging out with you at that age.”

She shakes her head. “No way. I was not really a rebel. I just thought I was too cool for my shoes.”

I have to smile. She is just fantastic. She doesn’t take herself too seriously. She’s not out to impress me, although she does. And even in a big sweatshirt and yoga pants with her hair piled on her head, she’s gorgeous. “Yep, you would have been my type even then.”

We chat a little more about the upcoming holidays and my work, and then while I finish my food, she opens the brownie I got her.

“Oh. My. God! This is so good,” she says as she wipes crumbs from her mouth.

“I know. Everyone on staff here wants the recipe, but Fernando isn’t sharing.”

“I don’t blame him. Look, here’s a giant drop of liquid chocolate.”

Anna has a bit of chocolate on her chin, and I would love to lean over and lick it away. Then my brain goes right to wanting to douse her in chocolate and spend hours licking it off of her. I must have an odd look on my face.

“What’s wrong?” she asks. “I’m sorry, was I too loud?”

I chuckle. “No, I was just dreaming of doing naughty things to you with chocolate.”

She blushes. “I see. You said you’re working for the next five days at the hospital?”

I shake my head. “Tomorrow is day five. I get some time off after that, but it’s mornings, and I’m sure you’ll be

working.”

She barks a sharp laugh. “You won’t believe this week. When I came home from Tahoe, my apartment had been broken into, and then this morning when I arrived at my office, it had been vandalized. So I’m not going in to work for a bit.”

I put my fork down and look at her. “Are you serious?”

“Um, yes. I had to replace my couch because they cut up the cushions and destroyed a bunch of things. And my office was just awful—my portfolio and a bunch of things ruined. I can’t imagine why. There was nothing of real value in either place.”

I sit back in my seat and breathe out. “My friend at the security firm I work for told me the FBI is looking into the avalanche. They think it was set on purpose.”

Anna’s eyes grow wide. “What?”

I nod. “I was going to call and arrange a time to speak with them. Maybe we both should do that.”

“But why would someone set an avalanche?”

“I don’t know. But can you stay at your mother’s tonight?”

Anna shrugs. “She’ll be here for a while, but I guess I can go to her place when she’s released. I live in a secure building, though. I can’t imagine how they got into my apartment.”

That’s not super comforting, but I don’t want to scare her. “Okay, I’ll tell you what. Maybe I can ask someone from Clear to come over and talk to you about what happened. I know you’ve talked to the police, but it’s strange that they hit your office *and* your home. Sometimes, the guys at Clear are quicker to put all the pieces together than the local authorities.”

“They broke into my place while we were in Tahoe.”

“Yeah, that sounds a little suspicious.” I text Jim about what happened to Anna and tell him she’s with me at the hospital.

He immediately responds.

**Jim: I'm on my way.**

“Jim is the head of Clear Security,” I explain. “He’s going to come and meet us here.”

“Here in the cafeteria?” Anna looks around.

“No, he’ll meet you in your mother’s room, and then you can come back here or talk there.”

She nods. “Here is good. I don’t want to worry her if she’s back from her tests. She has enough on her plate right now.”

“I should let you know that I’m probably going to admit her for the night to watch her oxygen levels. They were pretty low. Do you think she’s going to have a problem with that?”

“Of course she will. She hates hospitals because people die here.”

I sigh. “The percentage is small, but some do. I can’t deny that. But she’s presenting as asthmatic, and she tells me she’s never had that before. So the pulmonologist is going to check her out.”

“Could she have become asthmatic later in life?”

“Yes. That happens more often than you think, and her symptoms do seem like asthma—wheezing, cough, shortness of breath, and chest tightness. But those can also be signs of other things, which is why I have them checking out her heart function.”

“What does all of that mean?” she asks.

“Even if it is just asthma, that creates a greater risk for older adults because they’re more likely to develop respiratory failure, even during mild episodes.”

“She’s planning a trip to Palm Springs to live with a friend for a few weeks, possibly for the rest of the winter.”

“That should still be okay. The dry heat would be good,” I assure her.

“This is all so crazy. She was never sick when I was growing up. My dad wasn’t either. Now this.” She smooths the napkin in her lap. “I’ll drive her down, once she’s cleared to go.”

“Will you drive her down by yourself?” I ask.

She nods. “Yes, I told her we’d take the scenic route and then I’d come back down for Christmas.”

“When are you going?”

“I think that’s a better question for you,” Anna says. “You’ll have to tell me when it’s safe for her to go.”

“The doctor who takes over her case can weigh in the best, but I suspect she’ll be out tomorrow, as long as her heart is functioning as it should be. We’re only going to watch that she’s breathing okay. Once she was on the nebulizer, her pulse-ox rate returned to the normal range. But I can go with you on the drive, in case something goes wrong.”

Anna looks at me for a moment. “You’d go with us in case she gets sick or because you don’t want me driving back alone?”

I chuckle. It seems I’m pretty transparent. “I want to spend time with you. But I can also watch your mom. And if needed, I can set her up with the local hospital.”

Anna’s face softens. “You really are fantastic.”

I lean in and put my finger over my lips. “Shhh... Don’t tell anyone. I wouldn’t want to ruin my heartbreaker reputation.”

“Well, that’s going to cost you,” she warns with a devilish smile.

“I’ll be good for it. I promise.” My break is ending, and my phone has pinged with two more messages from

numbers I don't recognize. It's time for a new phone number again. I'm making a mental note to take care of that. "I guess I should get going, but I'm glad tonight has been slow. Things will probably pick up around here after the football game ends. We see a lot of *accidents* after football games."

I walk with her back to the emergency department. "I want to see you again soon," I tell her. "I still don't have all your contact information, and I'd like it before you leave if that's okay."

Her mouth quirks up. "Of course, as long as you're willing to share yours."

As we're exchanging information, Jim arrives with Bash. I wave them over and introduce Anna. While they're chatting, I look in our system and see that Felicity is still in radiology. They must be busy this evening. And after that, she'll still need to get her final EKG.

Jim and Bash direct Anna down the hall, and even as I wave goodbye, I get nervous. I really like her, and I'd hate to see her in danger. But getting her connected with Clear is the best way to keep her safe.





## CHAPTER 11

### *Anna*

We leave Clay in the emergency department, and Jim Adelson leads me back to the cafeteria. I head straight for the same table I sat at before. Jim sits across from me, and Bash sits on my right.

“I’m sure this is overwhelming,” Jim says. “But Clay mentioned in his text that you had a break-in while you were in Lake Tahoe and your office was vandalized last night.”

I nod and tell them about my costume jewelry being stolen and the destruction. “I suppose that’s what they both had in common, although the destruction was much worse at the office.”

“Did they go through your books?” Jim asks.

I shrug. “Everything that had been on a shelf was on the floor. The books and all the decor were all dumped, along with my samples.”

Bash gives me a curious look.

“Fabric samples mostly,” I tell him. “I buy them from the manufacturer and show them to clients so they can choose what they like.”

The men nod. “Tell us about your business,” Jim asks after a moment. “Who are your clients?”

I list the various companies and individuals I've done design work for.

"Any of them upset about your work?" Bash asks.

I shake my head. "Usually, if someone is that upset, I'll return the furniture and discount my time, but that doesn't happen too often. I've gotten smarter as my business has grown. Now, I get buy-in as we go, so there's no question as to whether I'm keeping with their preferences."

"Anyone have bills that are past due by, say, more than one hundred and twenty days?" Jim presses.

"That happens every now and again, but right now, no one comes to mind. People typically give me a credit card, and I charge it as I go."

Jim leans back and shakes his head. "You're certainly not making it easy to pinpoint where this is coming from," he teases.

"I'm telling you, if someone is coming after me, it isn't because of something I did at work."

"Okay, so tell us about your father's company," Jim suggests.

"My father passed away a few months ago, but my family's company is in commercial real estate up and down the West Coast. The detective this morning was going to check with them and chase down any difficult tenants. I'm pretty removed from the day-to-day business."

"Who's the detective on your case?" Jim asks.

I reach into my bag and pull out his business card. "Eric Lenning." I hand the card to him. "Honestly, I'm not even listed on the company website. My brother is in China, and when he returns, he'll take over as CEO of the company."

"Why didn't he do that when your father died?" Jim asks.

"Charles has been working on a huge deal with a business partner, Arnold Woo, in Shanghai. They're buying twenty-two buildings, and Standhold will own fifty percent,

about three percent of the commercial real estate market in Shanghai, which is about twice the size of New York City. Charles has been working on the deal for over a year. He didn't even leave China for Dad's funeral because he feared he wouldn't be allowed back in and his partner would then own the buildings without us."

"Your family owns Standhold Commercial Real Estate?" Bash asks with surprise in his voice.

"Yes. You've heard of it? Most people aren't familiar with it unless they write a rent check to us."

"Finnigan O'Leary, your head of security, has referred us to some clients in your buildings," Bash says. "My wife is Irish, and they're a tight community."

I grin. "Finn is amazing. He's a great guy."

"The FBI has been in touch with Clear Security about the avalanche because Clay is our employee, and I've recommended they speak to him. I think they should speak with you as well. I'll reach out to Eric at SFPD and let him know."

I pull my purse strap higher on my shoulder. "Should I have a lawyer present?"

Jim nods. "I'm always a fan of having your lawyer join you when you're answering questions, particularly when it comes to what your brother may be doing."

"It's nothing illegal," I assure him.

"I'm sure that's true, but something is going on if your brother is worried about leaving the country. I'm going to call a friend of mine. We've dealt with situations in China, and I have a few contacts in the country. Is that okay?"

I shrug. "I suppose so. And what about me? Should I be worried, do you think? Should I avoid my home and office?"

"Well... We already have a team in the penthouse of your building. It's not an easy building to break into or get to the wrong floor."

“I agree,” I tell him. “I think the break-in at my place surprised all of us.”

“Would you be open to having someone with you at your place tonight?” Jim looks at Bash, who nods. “They can just sit on your couch. They won’t be in your way.”

I groan internally. This is all such a huge pain.

When I don’t come right out and agree, Bash turns to me. “I know this seems like a lot, but we just want to be careful. We have a retired FBI agent working for us. I would use her if that would make you more comfortable.”

I take a deep breath. “Thank you. I guess that will work for me, if you feel it’s necessary.”

“When are you heading home?” Jim asks.

“After they tell me I can’t stay here any longer with my mom.”

“Okay, that will give me some time to get everything lined up,” Bash says. “The woman will come here to the hospital and drive you home. Her name is Cora Perry.”

I nod. “I do have my car.”

“That’s fine,” Bash says. “She can drive that back for you.”

“This is really weird, but okay. I guess you need to send me a contract?”

Jim nods. “We’ll get it figured out.”



A little while later, after I’m settled into a chair in Mom’s new room—in the hospital, rather than the ER—I look at my watch. Mom’s fallen asleep, and it’s noon in Shanghai. I need to give Charles an update.

I step out into the hallway and dial. The phone rings with a fast double ring, and then I hear my brother. “Anna-

Banana. How's it hanging?"

"A little to the left," I joke. This is the way most of our calls begin.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"I wanted to let you know Mom is in the hospital. She had an asthma attack—"

"But she's not asthmatic," Charles interrupts.

"I know. This could be a one-time thing because of something viral, or it could be the start of a pattern. Asthma can develop in older people."

Charles blows out a breath of air. "Okay. I'm sorry you have to deal with this, but I'm glad someone is there with her. How was your Thanksgiving?"

"You may be sorry you asked," I say with a sigh. Then I tell him about what happened with Mom when we first arrived in Tahoe.

"Thank God a doctor saw it."

I nod. "You have no idea. He was visiting from the City too, and he also happened to be the doctor in the ER when we came in tonight, so he was really great with her."

"That is some serious voodoo you're whipping around."

"Well, my story with the doctor goes deeper, but I'll tell you all about that another time. What's going on there? Any chance you'll be home for Christmas?"

He sighs. "I wish. I'm so ready to come home. Every day I check on things, and we're mostly just chasing our tails. Not a lot of overall progress."

"Well, if you do make it, we're going to be in Palm Springs. Bitsy is down there for the winter, and Mom is going to join her for a few weeks. I'll visit to spend Christmas with her."

"Is the doctor okay with that?"

“Yes, and Clay is going to drive down with us to keep an eye on her and be sure.”

Charles chuckles. “That sounds good. It’s good to hear your voice,” he adds after a moment. “I’m a little homesick for San Francisco, to tell you the truth.”

I think about telling Charles what’s going on with all these break-ins and that it might have something to do with the business, but he once said he thought the Chinese government was spying on him. I wouldn’t want to tip them off if they’re listening, nor do I want to worry him. I really don’t have all the information yet.

“I miss you, too,” I tell him. “And so does the City. You have a care package coming. It’ll include peanut butter and a few of your other favorites.”

“Chips and salsa?”

“Maybe.”

“Fantastic. I can’t wait.”

“I dropped it at FedEx before work today, so hopefully, it will make it before Christmas.” I sent it overnight, but we’ve learned that boxes sit in customs for days and sometimes weeks before they’re delivered, and usually everything has been gone through when it arrives.

“Thank you. Tell Mom I’m thinking about her,” Charles says. “I’ll call tomorrow and check on her.”

“I’ll let her know.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too.” I hang up the phone. I sure do miss him. He’s eighteen months older than me, and growing up, it helped that we went to different schools and had different friends. These days it helps that I have no interest in running the family business. He can have that headache. It doesn’t feed my creative soul.

I look at the time on my phone and realize visiting hours are about over. Since Clear Security is involved now, I probably shouldn’t push my luck on how long I try to stay. I

walk back into Mom's room. Her eyes are closed, but she's shifted her position, so maybe she's not totally asleep. I kiss her forehead, and her eyes open. "I'll be back in the morning."

She nods. "I'm so glad you found Clay."

"Me too," I tell her. "Just try to rest."

"That's unlikely with all the noise going on here."

I pat her hand. "If you need me, call. See you tomorrow."

I exit the room and nearly run into Clay. "Are you on break again?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No. It's just quiet for a few minutes, so I came to check on you before you left."

"On me?"

He nods. "How did it go with Jim?"

"Oh, fine, I guess. He's sending some retired FBI phenom to babysit me."

A woman leaning against the wall a little ways down the hall steps forward. "I'm not sure I'm a phenom, but there will be no babysitting. I don't change diapers."

I'm mortified, but I like her already.

She extends her hand. "Cora Perry. Former FBI and your current companion."

"Hi. I'm Anna Standing. Nice to meet you. Give me a moment to remove the foot in my mouth."

She waves that away. "Usually, I'm behind a computer, so I'm thrilled to be here with you."

Clay smiles at Cora. "You have the first string with Cora. Don't be fooled, just because she typically works at a desk. She used to head cybercrimes for the western half of the US, and if memory serves from her bio, she has multiple sharpshooter awards."

Cora nods. "We can get better acquainted when we get to the car, but just know that for the time being, I'll be keeping



an eye out for you.”

I nod. “Thanks. I’ll be on my best behavior.” I turn to Clay as we begin walking down the hall toward the exit. “I talked to my brother and let him know about our mom, but I didn’t tell him about anything going on with me.”

“Okay, that makes sense.” Clay reaches over and gives my hand a squeeze. “I’ll check in with you tomorrow morning when I have a break.”

“Okay. You mentioned you thought they’d release Mom tomorrow. Will that be in the morning?”

“Probably, but not until after ten—most likely closer to noon. Bring something to do, and maybe something for your mom, to keep her busy.”

I nod. “Good idea. Maybe I can find a Sudoku puzzle book before I come.”

“I’ve got you covered. I’ll find one that was left behind and leave it for her. Should I be cruel and offer it to her with a pen?”

I grin. “She would be very proud to complete that with a pen and show us all. Go for it.”

Clay’s pager vibrates, and he groans. “The football game is over, and the violence has started.”

“What do you mean?”

“Domestic violence picks up after football games. Men drink during the game, get angry when their team doesn’t win, and take it out on their domestic partners.”

“Really? It happens enough that you can predict it?”

Clay sighs. A chime sounds as we reach the doors to the emergency department. “Unfortunately.”

“I’ll talk to you in the morning,” I call as he takes off in a sprint.

Cora and I change direction and walk out to where I left my car.

“How long have you worked at Clear?” I ask as we go.

“I just joined them a few months ago when I retired from the FBI, but I’ve worked with Clay for a couple of years,” Cora says. “I brought him on to consult for the FBI when we were looking at complex medical fraud. He deciphered the medical jargon for us. How did you two meet?”

I unlock my car, and as she drives us to my condo, I tell her about meeting Clay and then getting stuck in the avalanche.

She laughs a little. “I heard he got stuck, but I didn’t realize he was *literally* stuck. I thought it meant he couldn’t get from point A to point B.”

“Well, you weren’t wrong. He couldn’t do that either.”

Cora laughs again, and I realize I’m grateful for her. I hadn’t felt nervous about what’s happening, but now, I certainly have no reason to.

My phone pings with a text.

**Henry: The offer is still open to come over to my place. I can even come by and pick you up.**

**Me: I’m good. I’m just coming home from being in the emergency room with mom. She’s doing fine, but she had an asthma attack—and no, she’s not asthmatic. Guess who her doctor was?**

**Henry: I’m glad she’s fine. Do I know the doctor?**

**Me: No, but I do. It was Clay McGrath, the doctor Mom and I met in Tahoe. He also works for a security company, so after I told him what happened at my place and my office, I now have a bodyguard.**

**Henry: That seems a little overboard. Are you okay with that? What company is it?**

**Me: It's Clear Security—very reputable. And I wasn't thrilled at first, but she's a retired FBI agent, and I think I really like her.**

**Henry: Do you think Clay did something so your mom would get sick? I mean, she's never had any lung issues before.**

**Me: No, of course not. He thought I ditched him. He never got the message I left.**

**Henry: Really? I don't know. This seems a little too...you know what I mean.**

The hair on the back of my neck stands up.

**Me: No, I don't. You liked him when you thought I'd never see him again, and now you don't? What's with that?**

**Henry: I never liked the guy, but I wasn't going to rub salt in your wounds.**

I sit back in my seat. What is going on with Henry? It seems like he might be jealous, but he's got a girlfriend, and more than that, he's never once been interested in me. When he took me as his date to his first partners dinner, he made it so clear to everyone that I was his friend and not a girlfriend, it was almost awkward. Maybe he's just feeling protective? I don't know....

When we get to my home, Jim is there to greet us in the building lobby. We go upstairs, and I give him and Cora a tour of my place and speculate about how the intruders could have gotten in. There were a lot of things destroyed, so I suppose it could be hard to tell if someone forced their way in, but I didn't notice it. I'm on the fourth floor, facing another building, and it's as if they floated across the alley or came down from the roof.

Jim looks around. "But then how did they get through the door?"

I shake my head. "I usually lock it, and maybe I missed it that day?"

"Was it locked when you got home?"

"Yes."

Jim and Cora look at my front lock and the lock on the patio doors, and Jim shakes his head. "It makes no sense."

"Here are some pictures I took after I walked in, before the police arrived." I offer them my phone.

Cora looks them over and then hands the phone to Jim. He flips through. "Can you email these to me?"

I nod. "Of course."

"Could I use the restroom?" Cora asks.

"Yes." I point her down the hallway.

"Are you comfortable with Cora?" Jim asks once she's disappeared.

"Definitely. She seems very warm and kind, and I'm sure she knows her stuff."

"She does. It's a big deal that after ten years in the FBI, she came to work with us. She's not only great at blending in with our female clients, she's hugely smart. She's a tremendous help to Gage Easton, who runs our cyber unit and all the security cameras for our clients. And I love having a woman on my leadership team."

"How is it even possible to monitor all the cameras?"

“We always have a team onsite, and when they take breaks or things get hinky, they reach out to us and we cover from the office.”

“I’m supposed to drive my mom down to Palm Springs on Saturday—or whenever she’s cleared. She’s thinking of living there with her friend for the winter. Clay was going to go with me. Will Cora come too?”

“I’ll double check with him, but if you have Clay with you, I don’t think you’ll need Cora.”

“Okay, thank you.” I shake my head. “I never imagined how much work went into managing security behind the scenes.”

Jim grins. “That’s a good thing. That means we’re doing our job.”



## CHAPTER 12

# *Clay*

On my drive home from the hospital after my last shift of this round, I call Anna. It's just after seven p.m., and I haven't spoken with her since I saw her briefly this morning, when her mom was released from the hospital. Everything seemed to be going smoothly, and I hope that's still the case.

"Hello?" she says in a sexy voice, and my dick immediately gets hard.

"Hey. How did it go today? Once you got your mom home from the hospital, I mean." I find I'm surprisingly interested in what she has to say.

"Well, Mom went back to her packing, since her doctor said the trip is still a go, and I got my office picked up. Some of my employees came in, and we ordered a dumpster and essentially shoveled out the mess."

I groan. "I'm sorry. That must have really sucked. Do you need wine and a foot rub tonight?"

"I do, but I can't meet you. I need to find a place to stay in Palm Springs after we arrive. My mom's friend doesn't really have room for us too, and I'd like to stay with Mom the first day or so to make sure she's going to do well with Bitsy. Anyway, it's proving difficult. I thought I had something, but with everything going on yesterday, I lost it."

“How many nights do you need a place?”

“Just for the weekend. I want to come to a complete stop when I drop Mom off, not just slow down and have her open the door and roll out.”

I laugh. “I can’t even imagine your mom doing that.”

“I know.” She chuckles. “But it’s something someone once said to my brother, and we use it all the time.”

“My dad has a condo in town. I can check to see if he’s going to be there, and maybe we can stay at his place.” *Why the hell did I volunteer my dad’s place?* I rarely want anything to do with my family, and at the very least, this means I have to talk to him.

“Really? That would be great,” Anna says before I can reverse course. “I’m happy to pay him for the stay.”

“Not necessary—really,” I assure her. “But before we get ahead of ourselves, let me talk to him and find out.”

“Great. I would owe you big,” she says in a sultry voice.

*How can I refuse her now?* “I can think of a few ways you could pay me back.”

“You find us a place in Palm Springs, I’m up for whatever you want.”

“That’s a pretty broad offer,” I warn.

“I’ll try almost anything once, unless it involves additional people, minors, or animals.”

I snort. “We’re good then. I’ll chase my dad down and let you know.”

“Thank you.”

We disconnect the call as I arrive at my building’s garage. I park and head up to my condo. I make a quick call for some pad thai with shrimp and chicken and change into workout clothes before I call my dad. He answers on the first ring.



“Hey, Dad.”

“Clay?”

I roll my eyes. He has three daughters, and I’m his only son. What other male calls him Dad? “Yep. How’s it going?”

“I’m good. Just relaxing on the boat.”

“You’re in Seattle?”

“Work’s been busy, and I’m trying to decide if I want to go up to British Columbia for some salmon fishing. Frank Lloyd has been catching winter chinook salmon, and they’re some real beauts. Twenty-five pounders last week.”

My eyes go wide. “That’s some big fish for December.”

“You want to join me? We could make it a father-son weekend?”

“What’s going on with Geraldine? Are you sleeping on the boat?”

“I didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?” My stomach drops and flips around like a freshly caught fish.

“She served me with divorce papers a few months ago.”

My heart shudders. “Oh, no. What happened?”

“She fell in love with her trainer.”

Geraldine is younger than me, but I won’t point that out to him. She was his fourth wife, and I think they knew each other six weeks before getting married. My dad is a charmer and looks a good twenty years younger than he is. But that doesn’t always serve him well.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Dad,” I manage. “And I appreciate the offer, but actually, I’m seeing a woman, and we’re going to drive her mom out to the desert this weekend. She’s hoping to spend the winter with one of her friends. Do you think we could bunk at the condo on Saturday and Sunday

night? I know it's last minute, but we can't find a place, so it would be really helpful. We're happy to pay you for the rental."

"Just for two days? Does the mom need it longer?"

I know where he's going with this, and I don't want Felicity and my dad to get together. Ever. "She has a place with a friend of hers. We just need to make sure she gets settled."

"Sure. It's no problem. Geraldine redecorated it last year. Say, while I have you, I understand from Misty that you've not returned her calls about her wedding in March. Can I tell her you'll be there?"

Misty is my half-sister. I hate doing family things. I just don't fit in. "Sure. Maybe I'll bring a plus one."

"Great. I'll let her know. And I'll send you the property manager's number at the condo. Once you hit the city limits, call her and she'll meet you with a key."

"Thanks, Dad. What are your plans for Christmas?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm thinking about the desert. I'm not sure yet. Are you heading back to Tahoe? I heard about that big slide up there. Were you there when it happened?"

It's not worth telling him I was in the middle of it, if he didn't catch it on the news. I know my mom didn't, because she would've been burning up my phone lines. If I tell him now, he'll call her, and they'll freak out. No thanks. "That was pretty intense."

"I'd say." He pauses a moment. "So you're serious about this girl? It's about time you settled down and at least got the starter marriage out of the way."

I cringe. "I like her, but I'm not the marrying kind."

"I wish I was like you. But I don't like being alone."

"I get that." My dad is rarely single for long.

"Well, let me know if you have any problems with the condo," he says after I don't volunteer additional information.

“It’ll be just the two of you?”

“No, her mom will stay the weekend so it’s the three of us. Let me know what you charge for two nights, and I’ll get it sent to you.”

“Nah. I don’t charge family, and we decided not to rent it this winter.”

“You think Geraldine is going to ask for it in the divorce?”

He chuckles. “She may. We’ll see.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I really should make more of an effort with him. “Let’s plan a fishing trip for the spring. Canada would be a blast.”

“Yeah, I like that idea. We haven’t done that in a while. Let’s do it.”

We disconnect the call, and I know I could text Anna, but I’d rather talk to her. I really would rather see her, but we’ll be together all weekend, so I won’t beg.

The buzzer to the front door sounds. It’s my dinner. I buzz them in and grab a twenty. I open the door as the elevator arrives.

“Here’s your order,” the young kid says.

“Here you go.” I hand him the cash.

“I don’t have change...” He stares at the money.

*Good grief. First night on the job?* “That’s okay,” I tell him. “Just keep it.”

“Thanks, man,” he says with a big smile. “Have a good night.”

It’s pretty bad that a guy gets excited about a five-dollar tip in this town. But I love this place, and I eat there a few times a week.

After I eat most of my noodles and check the football predictions for the weekend, I call Anna back.

“Are you feeling lucky?” I ask when she answers.

She laughs. “No, I’m feeling lonely.”

“I can fix that.”

“I know you can, but we have an early morning, and experience tells me I would not get much sleep.”

I laugh. “You’re probably right, and I’m already wiped from my week of work.”

“Mmm... yes,” she says, and I can practically hear her eyes rolling. “I can only imagine that working one week a month is really rough.”

“It is,” I insist. “Twelve hours at a stretch is no joke. And these last two days ended up almost a double.” I’m feeling defensive now, so I add, “Also, I do have another job.”

“I believe you.”

“You don’t sound like it.”

She laughs. “What did your dad say?”

“We can have the condo. His fourth wife has served him with divorce papers, and they’re not renting it this winter, so it worked out.”

“Oh, sorry about the divorce, but that’s fantastic. Where is it?”

“It’s a five-bedroom townhouse downtown, so we’ll have plenty of room, and we can walk places. There’s also a nice pool in the backyard.”

“Wow, that’s better than any hotel I could have gotten. I got us three rooms in Santa Maria for the stop on the way down. A friend of mine owns the place, and she put Mom and me in adjoining rooms.”

“Can you have overnight visitors?” I tease.

“Probably not, but I was pretty good at sneaking out when I was growing up.”

“Really? You were a rebel?”

“Not really. My brother caught me once, so he blackmailed me for a while, but then I found his porn

collection, and he let me be.”

I crack a big grin. “What were you doing when you found his porn collection?”

“He was stupid and didn’t clear his browser. He had downloaded it, and I took a screenshot. If he talked, I told him so would I, so it was a guaranteed mutual destruction.”

“You were evil.”

“Did you have anything like that with your half-brothers or sisters?”

“Nah. They were younger. I had no privacy. They’d walk in on me in the shower, try to hang out with me when I brought friends home, or whenever they thought it would bother me, which was all the time.”

“Were you doing naughty things in the shower?”

“Of course. Where else in a full house can a teenage guy get some peace to manage his constant erection?”

She’s laughing, that sound I love. I think my goal will be to make her laugh every day we’re gone.

“Stop!” She sounds out of breath. “Do you think you’d be okay if we left around nine tomorrow morning?”

“That sounds great. Do you want me to meet you at your mom’s?”

“You’re over by Oracle Park, right?”

“I look out on the field from my patio.”

“That’s definitely close. I’ll pick you up, and we can go to her house together. Do you mind sharing the driving?”

“I was planning on driving the entire way, but if you insist.”

“That works for me. I’ve charted the plan.”

She runs through our schedule for tomorrow, hitting the highlights of the people we’re going to meet. I think it’s going to be a fun trip. “That sounds great,” I tell her.

“I’ll see you in the morning then,” she says.

“I’m looking forward to it. Sleep well.”

“I’ll try, but I haven’t slept well since the night we were together at the Sky Lodge.”

Warmth rolls through me as I hang up the phone.



In the morning, Anna picks me up right on time, but her mother is already in the car. I tuck my bag in the trunk of a Mercedes Benz S-Class. This is going to be a nice luxury drive down the coast.

“Mom decided she wanted us to drive her car, so she picked me up this morning,” Anna explains as she exits the vehicle and offers me the driver’s seat.

“Great to see you, Felicity. How are you feeling?” I ask as I settle in.

“I’m ready for some warmer weather,” she says.

Anna slides into the back, and we pull out just as a herd of runners—at least two hundred men and women—run by in red dresses.

“Sometimes this town is strange,” Felicity says.

“I thought the Hashtag Harries did their Red Dress Run on Monday nights,” Anna says.

“The what?” her mother asks.

“It’s an international running game where the pack—that’s the people in the red dresses—try to follow the trail by interpreting marks put down in chalk and flour by the hares, those who set the trail. Around here, I think it’s a bunch of professionals who like to run and drink beer.”

“How do you know so much about them?” Felicity turns and looks at Anna.

I’d kind of like to know that as well. I’ve never heard of this.

“I’ve done it a few times,” she says with a shrug. “You don’t have to be fast, and it’s fun.”

It takes a few minutes for them to pass, and there’s quite a bit of traffic already, so for a while, it feels like we’re inching toward the 101. After a few blocks, we’re disrupted again by a group of people on loud Harleys.

“I told you we should have left earlier,” Felicity says. “How do they have any hearing left after riding around on those things? They’re going to regret that when they’re my age.”

“At least we have a reservation tonight, and we have all day to get there,” I assure her.

“I know, but at this rate, we’re going to miss our lunch reservation in Carmel,” Felicity complains.

“We should be okay, Mom.”

I catch Anna’s eye in the rearview mirror and wink. She smiles back at me. We’ve got this.

It takes almost forty minutes to drive the two miles to the highway entrance and finally get on the freeway. As the City grows, it’s getting more and more difficult to get around, but I do love this town.

The traffic is dense as we drive down and finally make the cut into Santa Cruz to Highway 101. Things smooth out once we’re out of town, and we make it with twenty minutes to spare for the lunch reservation.

“I hope Dottie will still be coming,” Felicity frets.

“I talked to her yesterday and confirmed,” Anna says. “She depends on the bus from her assisted living facility, but she should be here.”

We order drinks, and I see Anna looking at the wine menu. I lean over to her. “Enjoy a glass. I’m good with driving down to Santa Maria today.”

“It’s tempting, but I don’t want to hear it from my mom.”

I understand. Her mom is nervous about the trip and is clearly taking it out on Anna.

My phone pings with messages from an unknown number, and I catch a glimpse of a woman in lingerie. I hope Anna didn't see that one. I sigh. I still need to make time to get to the phone store.

“Yoo-hoo!”

When I look up, an older woman dressed in bright clothes with a fascinator is waving at us. She comes bounding over to Felicity and gives her a giant hug. Anna told me last night that Dottie and her husband were close friends of her parents. Dottie lost her husband about a decade ago, sold her fifteen-million-dollar mansion in Pacific Heights, and moved to a senior living community, where she's very active. She came up for Anna's father's funeral and has been trying to persuade Felicity to come down and check that place out, but Felicity has been resistant.

“You both look fantastic!” Dottie turns to me. “And please tell me who this delicious gentleman is.”

“Dottie,” Anna begins. “This is my friend Clay.”

“And what do you do for work, Clay?”

“Dottie!” Felicity chastises.

“I'm old, and I don't beat around the bush.” She shimmies her shoulders and waits for me to answer.

“I'm a doctor.”

Dottie turns to Anna. “He's hot and smart. He's perfect for you.”

Anna turns a bright shade of magenta and shakes her head.

We have a very enjoyable afternoon. Dottie and Felicity gossip about friends they have in common, and I rest my hand on Anna's lap and see how far she's willing to let me explore. I get farther than I expected—my pinkie grazes her center. But then she casually pushes me back.



As lunch wraps up, I pay the bill, and that gets lots of smiles from Dottie and Felicity.

“Can we drop you back at your place?” I ask.

“If it’s not too much trouble, that would be fantastic,” Dottie exclaims.

“Not a problem at all.”

As we drive, Felicity tells Dottie all about her plans to winter in Palm Springs. “If I end up staying after the first of the year, I hope you’ll come down. I know Bitsy would love to see you.”

Dottie nods. “I wouldn’t mind coming down for a week or so. That might be fun.”

Dottie bounds out of the car when we drop her off, and Felicity looks after her. “She has the perfect personality for this kind of place.”

“You would do great here, and since you already know Dottie, she’d introduce you to everyone,” Anna points out. “If it doesn’t work out with Bitsy, you should think about it.”

Felicity is quiet as we make our way down to Big Sur, where the rough sea splashes angrily against the cliffs.

It’s nearly four o’clock when we pull into the vineyard and bed-and-breakfast in Santa Maria. A short, dark-haired woman comes running out with her hands held high to hug Anna. “You made it! I knew you were having lunch in Carmel, but I still have been watching for you all day.”

A man joins her in jeans, muddy boots, and a red plaid flannel shirt.

“Marco! Look at you!” Anna exclaims.

Anna told me last night that Maria was her roommate in design school. She’s now an influencer on YouTube and teaches drawing and doodling. She met Marco in San Francisco. He worked for a venture capital firm but wanted out, and they came across this opportunity. What was once a dying vineyard is now thriving, and from what I understand, they have some decent pinot noirs.

Anna extricates herself from her friends. “This is my friend, Clay McGrath.”

They turn to me for the first time. “So nice to meet you,” Maria says.

“Thank you for having us.”

We’re shown to our rooms, and I ask if they mind if I go for a run. Marco gives me a five-mile route around some of their vineyards, so I change and head out.

I love how running clears my mind. I think about Felicity and all the changes she’s had this year. I can see why she’s struggling, and why Anna is a little beaten down by it. But she smiles through it all.

*Anna.* Because of her, nothing about today was overwhelming, and I don’t feel the need to hide away tonight. I just wish I knew how all these random women keep getting my contact info.

The vines are dormant as I run through, but come spring, the vineyard will be hopping. It would be great to be out here for the crush next summer. I bet Anna would love that. Then I realize this is the second time I’ve thought about Anna in the future and us doing things together. This is not me.

When I return to the bed-and-breakfast, the sun is setting. I stop to take it in, and Anna walks up next to me. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

I nod as I catch my breath. “The vines are incredible. I bet they’ll have a good crush next summer.”

“They may have a distributor for their wine, which would be a big deal.”

“That’s great.”

“I bought four cases of next summer’s harvest, so I’m really hopeful.”

“They sell them in advance?”

Anna lights up. “Yes, they sell wine futures. You can buy a case, but if the harvest is bad, I could lose out.”

“I’m hoping we get to try some of their wine.”

“Marco told me they have an eight-course flight for us to taste tonight, along with some incredible food to go with it.”

I look down at my sweat-soaked shorts. “I should take a quick shower. When were they looking to start?”

“We’re the only people here, so whenever you’re ready.”

I run upstairs to my room and quickly take a shower. Then I return, ready for my wine.

We have a fantastic cheese course with the pinot noir. It’s peppery, with a hint of apricot, and it lasts on my tongue—well, that’s what Marco tells me. I just think it tastes great.

Then we have a soup and salad course, each with tastings of two different pinot gris.

The tuna tartare on a fried seaweed crispy thing comes with a chardonnay, and the main course is lamb with roasted potatoes and broccolini. They serve a fabulous Chilean red.

“Every course is better than the last,” I tell them.

“You can come any time you want,” Maria offers.

I nod. “I need to tell my boss about this place. He owns a security company that caters to many of the wealthy tech people.”

“Who do you work for?” Marco asks.

“Clear Security.”

Maria and Marco look at each other. “We’ve been trying to get in with Fiona McPhee, so any insight you can give us would be great.”

“I know her husband, Bash Pontius, very well. I’m going to try to talk Anna into coming to the company holiday party next weekend, so maybe we can speak to her together.”

Anna smiles. “I’d love that.”

Shortly after dinner, Felicity excuses herself, and I walk her upstairs to her room. “You are very good for my Anna,” she says. “I feel a lot better going to Palm Springs knowing you’ll be in San Francisco looking out for her. I know she probably presented herself as strong during your ordeal at Thanksgiving, and she does have a hard shell, but inside she’s all heart.”

“I’ve seen that as I get to know her. I promise to look after her.”

Felicity squeezes my arm. “Maybe you can tell me how it’s going at Christmas when you come back with her.”

“I think I’m scheduled to be working, but we’ll see.”

After Felicity’s settled, I head to my room and put on ESPN to watch the scores from the bowl games. I’m always pulling for the underdog.

A little while later, there’s a soft rap at my door. I’ve been lounging in my boxers, so I grab my shorts and pull them on to answer.

I find Anna standing there, and she smiles at my bare chest. “May I come in?”

*How could I ever say no?*



## CHAPTER 13

### *Anna*

I pull my sleep shirt down to cover some of my long legs. Suddenly, I'm self-conscious. Coming by Clay's room seemed like a good idea...

After a moment, he steps aside so I can enter. Then he shuts the door behind us, and his lips devour mine. I close my eyes, and everything in the world seems right, or at least I can imagine it that way. Dad is with Mom decorating the tree; Henry is complaining about the traffic and tourists in Union Square; my home and office are clean, organized, and never broken into; Charles is home; and Clay and I are a new couple, preparing to enjoy our holidays together.

Clay's hand skates up the front of my shirt, and when he pinches my nipple, I arch into him. The sensation sends lightning bolts to my center. He kisses down my neck and suckles at a spot that makes my heart race.

I don't know how he does it, but in one deft move, I find myself without my shirt and lying on his bed. "We don't have the freedom to be loud here." I groan as he spreads my legs wide and his fingers slide along my crease.

"Do you need to be gagged?" He gives me a sexy smile, and at this point, I would do anything he asked.

I shake my head. "Don't stop."

“Do you know how sexy you look when you come?”  
he rasps.

“You’re the only one who’s ever known.”

His fingers falter. “A man has never given you an orgasm?”

I concentrate on what he’s doing as his fingers inside me rub that magic spot while his thumb circles my clit. “Fuuuck,” I groan and grab the sheets as he sends me over the edge.

He adjusts, and now, his head is between my legs, lapping at me and keeping my climax rolling. When I’m finally spent, he jumps out of bed and rummages in his suitcase, returning with a handful of condoms. “I’m better prepared this time,” he explains.

I chuckle and watch him shed his shorts. Damn, is he fucking amazing. There isn’t an ounce of fat on his body. I want to run my tongue over every groove and crevice. His dick stands out straight as he rolls a condom on.

“Where do you want it?” he asks.

I smile and spread my legs wide. I insert my two middle fingers and begin to masturbate. It’s as if another woman has taken over my body. I’m never this confident with a man.

His eyes become hooded as he walks back to the bed to remove my fingers and put them in his mouth. “You taste so good.” He eases me back, and in one plunge, he pushes his dick all the way in. I feel so full, so desired, and so free. Giving my body a moment to adjust, he smooths my hair from my eyes and kisses me softly. I could stay like this forever.

He rocks himself in and out of me, somehow rubbing that magic spot with the crown of his cock. I reach for a pillow and put it over my face because I won’t be able to contain myself. He grasps my clit, and I explode, screaming into the pillow. After a moment, he rolls us over so I’m on top, and with his hands firmly on my hips, he helps me ride him like the bucking bronco he is. I may have some bruises on my hips,

and I know I'm going to feel this for a few days, but I don't care.

A little while later, I collapse onto his body as we both catch our breath.

"You didn't answer my question," he says.

I sit up and look at him. "What question?"

"Has a man never made you come?"

"Not like you."

His eyes want an answer.

"I have had orgasms with men, but usually I do all the work."

"You do all the work for both of you?"

I shrug. "Not with you, but that has been my history. A woman's orgasm is certainly not intuitive, and sometimes, it's just easier to do it yourself."

I think that's more normal than he knows. Not all men are as in tune with a woman's body. In less than an hour, I've had two of the most intense orgasms I've ever had, and that's beating out the last time when we were avalanched in at the lodge.

He shakes his head. "Those guys were selfish, and they're missing out on the best part of having sex. It's like opening a present on Christmas morning to find something you hadn't expected and know you're going to love."

I lean up and kiss him. "We do this very well together."

He snorts as he throws his knotted condom into the trash and pulls me close. Spooning in behind me, he makes me feel warm and safe, and I quickly fall asleep.

The next morning, when the light hits my face, I bolt awake and yank my shirt on before sneaking back into my room across the hall. I didn't mean to sleep here last night, but it seems I did.



I rush into the bathroom to relieve my bladder, and as I walk out, Mom is standing at the door between our rooms.

“There you are,” she says. “I smell coffee, so I’m going to head downstairs. What time are you thinking of getting on the road?”

“I thought if we left about nine or so, we could stop for lunch in Encino as we trek our way through Los Angeles,” I tell her, trying to seem nonchalant. “We should be to Palm Springs by the early afternoon.”

“That sounds fine. I’m going to come back and go to Cabazon with Bitsy later this week.” Cabazon is the best outlet mall on the West Coast, and maybe all of North America, but I can’t see Clay being interested in stopping there. So that’s good news that she’s doing that with her friends.

“That sounds good.” I force myself not to fidget. I’m sure I smell like sex, and I desperately want to get in the shower. “I’ll meet you downstairs after I shower and get ready.”

She returns to her room, and as she opens the door to the hallway, I hear her greet Clay in the hall. “How did you sleep last night?” she asks.

I tiptoe to the door to hear his answer.

“It was the best sleep I’ve had in a long time.” He says something else as they move down the hallway, but his voice fades, and I can’t hear it.

I stroll to the shower with a giant grin on my face. I slept really well too. I jump in and out of the water in record time and race into my clothes. In less than twenty minutes, I’m downstairs looking at a tall stack of pancakes.

“You’re just in time,” Maria says with a knowing wink.

I don’t think Clay and I were loud last night, but who knows? At least Mom doesn’t seem any the wiser.

After we load up the car and say our goodbyes, this time Mom settles into the backseat.

“How late did you and Maria stay up chatting?” she asks me as we get back on the road.

“Later than we should have, but it was great to see her.” I sigh. “Their wine is delicious, and I’m so glad to see how the vineyard is coming along.”

“Clay, do you think you can talk to that woman about the vineyard like they asked?” Mom questions.

He nods. “I think Anna and I both can speak to her if Anna comes with me to my company holiday party. Fiona is very approachable, and she’s an amazing public relations expert.”

“And she’s married to one of the partners at Clear?” Mom asks.

“Yes,” he confirms. “And they’re a great couple. We’re a tight group, so there are lots of partnerships in our ranks. In fact, last Christmas, the other partner, Gage Easton, married his long-time girlfriend, Stella, who’s our office manager.”

As we enter the San Fernando Valley and get closer to Los Angeles, the traffic becomes thicker. I look back at Mom, and she’s staring out the window. “It’s so different from the Bay Area,” I point out.

Mom nods. “I’ve always preferred the weather down here. Your father and I looked at setting up the company here when we first started, but in the end, we decided LA was too big. San Francisco is more compact, and the Bay Area was growing with technology.”

This is news to me. “How did I not know that?”

Mom just shakes her head.

We follow the map app and enjoy a pleasant lunch with another one of my mother’s friends. She’ll be coming to the desert in a few weeks, and they make plans to see one another.

After lunch, we finally begin our approach to Palm Springs. As we exit the interstate, Clay contacts his father’s property management company, and they tell him someone will be there to meet us.

Downtown Palm Springs is lively, and it's easy to forget that every tree—palm or not—and every piece of greenery is here because it was deliberately planted. You'd never guess there was a water shortage. Finally, we pull up in front of Clay's father's townhouse. It's white stucco with a terra cotta tile roof. The minimalist front yard is centered on a saguaro cactus standing as tall as Clay, which is surrounded by beautiful flowering cacti and other native plants. Beyond that there's a seating area under a covered porch.

Clay walks up and rings the bell. The door swings open, and a man grins. "Welcome to Palm Springs!"

"Dad," Clay sputters. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought it would be fun to surprise you. There's plenty of room for all of us, and I can show your guests around."

If I had to guess, based on his face, Clay would prefer to tell us to get back in the car, but instead, he opens his arms to Mom and me, gesturing for us to enter.

"Dad, this is Felicity Standing and her daughter, Anna." He turns to us. "Ladies, this is my father, Hamish McGrath."

I can see a strong resemblance between Clay and his father. Hamish's blond hair is partially gray at the temples, and he has a lot of laugh lines. I'm sure he's enjoyed life to its fullest.

Mom extends her hand. "Thank you so much for welcoming us to your lovely home."

"Come on in and take a load off," Clay's father says. "I had some groceries delivered, so we can have a nice drink and a nibble by the pool out back."

"Thank you. A drink by the pool would be lovely," Felicity says.

Clay looks at me and mouths, "*Sorry.*"

I smile at him. This may be a bit unexpected, but I'm not going to complain.

“Let me take you to your rooms.” Hamish picks up mom’s suitcase and huffs it up the stairs without any struggle.

Clay grabs my bag, and we follow.

Hamish sets down Mom’s suitcase. “This here is the room with the best view. It has its own full bathroom.”

Mom steps into the beautiful room, designed in natural colors and rich wood accents. On the dresser is a lovely succulent garden.

“It still may be a bit warm,” Hamish warns. “I only got here this morning to get the air going.”

Mom smiles. “It’s just fine.”

Hamish waves to us. “How about you two in the guest rooms with the adjoining bath?” He leans in close to me as we walk down the hall. “What you do behind closed doors is up to you.”

“Dad,” Clay warns.

“What? I walked in on you with a girl when you were fourteen and she was practically eighteen. I’m not stupid.” He shrugs. “You’re an adult. You can do what you want.”

Clay shuts his eyes, probably thinking of all the ways he could kill his father without leaving any marks.

“I have a fabulous pinot gris chilling downstairs,” Hamish announces. “I’ll pull us some nibbles. Come on down when you’re ready.” He turns and leaves.

Clay sighs. “I’m so sorry about this. When I spoke to him, he was in Seattle debating whether to go up into Canada for some salmon fishing.”

I wave that aside. “Don’t worry about it. It’s his place, and he’s lonely. It’s only two nights, and then we’ll both be free of our parents.”

“Well, I have to admit, I feared he’d have a mirror on the ceiling in his bedroom and I’d have to explain that to your mom.”

I laugh. “Does he really?”

Clay smirks. “He used to. I didn’t understand it when I was younger. I just thought it was so you could see yourself while lying down.”

I throw my head back and laugh. “That’s so vain.”

“It fit my dad, and I blamed him for breaking up my parents’ marriage.”

Still shaking my head, I put my bag on the bed and walk into the bathroom. It’s big enough for both of us without any problems. After washing my face and running a comb through my hair, I rejoin Clay in his room.

He gives me a deep kiss. “I can’t wait to be alone with you.”

I smile. I don’t have any idea what this is, but I’m determined to just go with it. Things don’t have to be perfect to be fun, right? “That sounds like a lot of fun.”

He takes my hand as we walk downstairs.

Hamish sees us and grins. “I told you,” he whispers to Mom.

She grins too.

He hands Clay a bottle of beer, and I agree to a glass of the pinot gris he mentioned earlier.

There’s a large, kidney-shaped pool beyond the covered patio out back. We sit in oversized wooden chairs with leather seats around a fire pit that takes the edge off the chill. It’s surprising how cool it’s becoming as the sun sets.

“Felicity tells me you were trapped by the avalanche in Tahoe. Why didn’t you say anything?” Hamish asks.

Clay leans forward and grabs a few crackers and some cheese. “We were out soon enough, and there was no use in alarming you.”

Hamish turns to Mom. “This boy has nine lives. You should see him in his Navy uniform with a chest full of medals for valor and good work.”

“You’re the president of my fan club,” Clay says with a good-natured roll of his eyes.

“You’re damn right I am. I’m proud of my boy. And I’m excited that he’s met a nice girl. Anna, what kind of work do you do?”

“I’m an interior designer. I do some commercial work but focus mostly on residential in San Francisco.”

“Now, she’s being shy,” Mom says. “Anna here started designing office space when she was still in high school. She worked with my husband. He was in commercial real estate.”

Hamish nods. “I do some of that myself, mostly in the Seattle market. But I’m getting tired. It may be time to retire. Maybe I’ll kick my feet up here by the pool for a few months.”

“Are you still worried about Geraldine taking the condo?” Clay asks.

“I was. But when you asked about coming here, I figured it might be a good reason to hold my ground on this.” Hamish turns to Mom. “She redesigned the house and then decided she wanted to divorce me. I was going to give it to her and her athletic-trainer boyfriend, but maybe I should keep it.”

Mom giggles. “What is there to do around here? If it’s quiet, maybe you do want to just give it to your soon-to-be ex-wife.”

“Palm Springs always has great things going on. And the best part is, most of it is within walking distance.” Hamish drains his beer and goes on to tell us about the light parade next weekend, as well as a gingerbread house display. “I’ll tell you, there’s a reason the architect in town always wins, but there are many people who give him a run for his money.”

Mom’s phone pings, and she looks down at it. *Since when does she text?*

She looks up at Hamish. “Bitsy and her friends are heading to FARM. What do you think? Should we join them and leave these two to fend for themselves?”

I look at Mom, stunned. I had no idea she'd be so quick to jump in here. Is that a good idea? Her health seems fine, but the whole point was to make sure she did okay during this transition. I'm trying to formulate a thought when the conversation continues without me.

"I think that's a fantastic idea." Hamish looks at Clay. "FARM isn't too far from here, and La Bonita is still in business."

Clay perks up. "Really? Okay, I guess we'll see you all back here."

I'm speechless. Everything is happening so quickly. Mom is just deserting me?

Clay turns to me. "In my opinion, one thing San Francisco really lacks is good Mexican food. La Bonita is a hole in the wall with the best homemade salsa. Does that sound good to you?"

If the doctor is going along with this, I guess I should too. "How are their margaritas?"

"Excellent. Isn't that a requirement of a good Mexican restaurant?"

I'm sold. "Sounds good," I tell him with a nod.

"We can walk."

Mom is standing now and ready to head out. Hamish slaps his knees. "You have fun."

Clay gives his dad a look.

"I'll be on my best behavior," Hamish promises.

"And so will I," Mom pipes up.

They practically run out the door.

"Why do I feel like the parent and they're the teenagers?" Clay asks as they disappear.

"I know!" I agree. "But honestly, I've not seen my mom like this since before my dad died, so I'm happy."

“There’s a fantastic Italian place, some decent sushi, despite being in the desert, or we could always show up and sit on the other side of the restaurant they’re going to and make them uncomfortable.”

I laugh. “No, you sold me on Mexican food and margaritas.”

“Great, let’s go!” Clay practically drags me out the door.

“Wait, I don’t have my purse.”

“Do you think they’re going to card you?”

I laugh. “Hardly. But I should bring some money, just in case.”

“I have money and my phone. This is my treat.”

“You’ve paid for everything since we left.”

He shakes his head. “What’s wrong with that? I can afford it.”

“I’m sure you can, but you’re doing me the favor by coming. So I should be treating.”

He scoffs. “If I was back in San Francisco, I’d be wearing a sweater and watching *SportsCenter*, drinking a beer alone after a day of work at Clear Security. This is a lot more fun.”

He squeezes my hand, and my heart beats triple time. “I agree.”

After a short walk to the restaurant, we sit down and order our meals. I go with the three kinds of enchiladas, and Clay gets some combo platter that comes with so many plates it takes up most of our table.

The margaritas are strong, and the food is outstanding. And Clay was right. This is the best salsa I’ve ever had.

“Will you stay with your Mom at her friend’s house for Christmas?” Clay asks.



“I don’t know. I should probably start looking at hotels now.”

“We could ask my dad. If he’s decided he wants the condo, he’ll probably get to keep it. He has a pretty good divorce lawyer since this will be his fourth time around. He always lands on his feet.”

“That pretty much sucks.”

Clay shrugs. “It seems to be his way of life, but I promise, my dad is harmless. He’s just a ladies’ man.”

I smirk. “Like father, like son.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know about that. I met a woman recently, and since then I haven’t been thinking about anyone but her.”

Such a smooth talker, this one. I suppress an eye roll. “Really? Does she feel the same?”

Clay grins. “Let’s ask her.”

“Where is she?” I look around the restaurant, and Clay laughs.

We eat and eat, and somehow Clay finishes his meal. I don’t know how or where he put it all. There’s no way I can get through mine. I ate too many chips.

“I know we got off to an unorthodox start with our first date,” he says as we head back out to the street.

“Oh, was that a date?” I snort. “So nice of you to arrange an avalanche.”

Clay’s eyes sparkle. “I’m so glad we got stuck together.”

My insides go all gooey, though I will my heart to keep itself in check. I have to think clearly about this. But I also can’t lie. “Me too,” I agree.

“Are you up for a nightcap by the pool?”

I would rather enjoy some naked time with him before our parents return, but that’s probably too risky. Instead, I nod,

and we walk hand in hand to the backyard.

Clay restarts the fire in the fire pit. I hadn't even noticed it was gas, but mostly, he just has to flip a switch. He settles in next to me on a loveseat and pulls me in close, grazing my lips with his. "You're so beautiful."

When men have said that to me before, it always seemed like a way to get in my pants. But the way Clay says it, it feels true. *He's just that good*, I remind myself. But I can't ignore this attraction. We make out like teenagers. Our hands wander, and soon my libido is on high alert.

"Should we go skinny dipping before they come back?"

I grin. "I'm not that brave. But we can change into our suits."

We head inside to change, and when I walk back out, Clay stops in his tracks. "I don't know if I can do this," he says, shaking his head. "Now, I'd much rather take you back to my bed and enjoy you all night long."

I blush. I'm not wearing anything too sexy. It's a bikini, but my lingerie shows more than it does. "Come on," I tell him as I head toward the water.

Testing the water with my painted toes, I decide it feels pretty warm. There must be a heater. Without a second thought, I dive in. Usually, I'd care about my mascara running or that my hair will be a wreck, but I'm just going to be myself with Clay. If I'm ever going to have anything real, guys have to know and see the real me.

I surface, and he's right behind me. I do a lazy breaststroke to the wall and turn around to look at him.

"Did you think you could hide from me?" he rasps.

"Never." My nipples stiffen into hard peaks.

He pushes his hard body against mine. Our tongues do an aggressive dance. I feel his fingers in my hair, and his erection is at my apex as he holds me close.

Suddenly, I'm nervous, but he inches closer and leans in to kiss me hard, overriding my nerves. He moves away to kiss my neck, his two-day growth so soft on my skin. He slips my top over my head and places it behind me on the patio. His rough hands cup my breasts as he sucks my hard nipples. My back arches as I bury my hands in his hair. My body is now screaming for his touch. Then I feel his hands slide beneath my bikini bottom, finding my wetness. I gasp as he slips two fingers in past my folds. I start to ride and squeeze his fingers as I moan. I need to feel him.

I undo the fly to his swim trunks and reach in to find his hard cock. He removes his shorts and my bottoms, and with a wet plop, they're on the pool's edge. So much for *not* skinny dipping.

I wrap my hand around his rock-hard shaft and pull him closer so my tongue can tease his nipples. I groan and raise my legs over his shoulders as he shoves his head between my legs and sucks my swollen clit. I lift my hips and grind into his face. "Fuck me," I breathe. "I want you inside me."

"Not until you come."

His fingers pivot in and out as his tongue strums my clit like a guitar. I pull on my nipples as I go over the edge. Releasing me back into the water, Clay kisses softly down the curve of my neck and over my breastbone as my breath evens out. "I didn't bring any condoms down." His eyes search mine, letting me decide what to do.

"Why don't I take care of you in a different way?" I suggest.

His mouth curls at his edges. "What do you have in mind?"

I pull him over to the stairs and sit him down at the top. His hard rod bobs an introduction. My hand encircles his hardness, and I'm able to stroke him up and down.

He finds my nipple and plays with it.

"You're distracting me," I warn him.

"That's okay."

I run my flat tongue up the bottom side of him, and his dark eyes become hooded with desire. I cup his balls and bob up and down, the tip of my nose skimming the water as I take him to the back of my throat. My cheeks hollow with every pull as I try to push him deeper. His hands lace through my hair.

“If you don’t stop, I’m going to come.” His warning is half groan.

I pull back and keep going. I look up at him just as he grunts, groans, and fills my mouth.

I swallow it all and sit back between his legs, biting my lower lip.

“You are amazing,” he says, sounding completely wasted.

Pulling me in tight, he kisses me as we cool off.

“Let’s take this inside,” he suggests after a moment.

I nod. “Okay.”

We put our swimsuits on and pick up our glasses, and inside, we put everything away in the kitchen. Clay is teasing me about how slow I am to head upstairs when there’s a noise.

I step away from him like a schoolgirl who just got caught with her boyfriend.

“Mom, Hamish, we’re in the kitchen,” I call.

We don’t hear anything, and Clay walks out toward the noise when, suddenly, someone dressed in black with a balaclava seems to charge him. Clay shoves him off, and he runs out the front door with Clay hot on his tail.

In an instant, I’m on the phone to nine-one-one. They take what seems like forever to answer. And when they finally do, I realize I don’t know where I am. “Yes, I’m at—fuck, I don’t know the address. I’m at a townhouse downtown. Someone was inside when we came in.”

Then Clay appears, and I hand him the phone. He gives the operator the address and tells her someone broke in and

attacked him before he ran off.

None of this makes sense. I don't know what to think or do.

Clay finishes the call and holds me tight. Just a moment later, the police come running in with their guns drawn. It's a wild scene. We are asked to stay with the officer in the kitchen and tell him what happened. The other two officers walk through the house, checking for anything amiss. We explain our evening and swimming in the pool, leaving out the sex part.

Hamish and Mom return in the middle of all the commotion. "What happened?" Mom cries.

I explain what happened, just as the two officers who were upstairs arrive back in the kitchen.

"It's pretty messy upstairs," one of them says. "I'm assuming you didn't dump your suitcases and purse on the floor."

I look at my mom, and her eyes are wide. "No, in fact I hung my clothes on a hanger before I came downstairs in my bathing suit."

"What did you have in your purse? A lot of money or anything?" the other one asks.

I look at Clay and shake my head. "We just drove down from San Francisco to bring my mom here."

They take some additional information from us, and when they leave, they seem confident that this was just a thief trying to rob tourists. I'm not so sure, but I'm glad Mom has that story to focus on.



## CHAPTER 14

# *Clay*

Calming Felicity was easier than I thought it would be. Dad has kept his arm around her, and it really seems to help. A few hours ago, if I saw Dad do that, I would have been beyond upset. But I guess things are different now.

“Did you lock the front door?” Dad asks after the police are gone.

I shake my head. “I must not have.” I know I did, but I won’t bring Dad into this—or Felicity. When I get a chance, I need to call Jim and let him know what’s happened. It’s obvious that Anna has something that she isn’t aware of—or at least someone thinks she does—and she’s definitely in danger.

“I know Palm Springs presents as a sleepy desert town of retirees, but you’ve got to remember to watch your surroundings...”

I tune out as Dad waxes on. I look over at Anna. I can tell she’s frightened. Like me, she seems to be putting things together about tonight’s break-in being related to what has happened in her business and home. And maybe even the avalanche?

“I’m so sorry about all this,” I say to Felicity.

She shakes her head. “I’m just glad no one was hurt, and there’s nothing of value missing.”

After a little while, we say our goodnights. Anna sees her mother to her room, and then heads down the hallway. After walking through the adjoining bathroom, she meets me in my room.

“I saw you lock the door when we left earlier,” she whispers to me with her hands on her hips.

I nod. “I didn’t want to get into that with my dad or your mother. She’d drive right back with us and insist on you moving in with her.”

Anna plops down on my bed. “I think you’re right, so thank you. What could be going on? This is related to the break-ins back home, right?”

I sit next to her. “I think it must be. But I didn’t see anyone follow us, so I want to know how they’re tracking us. While you shower, I’m going to step outside and let Jim know what’s going on. He can start looking into it, so when we get back on Monday, they may have something for us.”

Anna stands. “Sounds good.”

I pull her in for a hug. For a moment, I don’t want to let her out of my sight, but I know that’s ridiculous.

When I hear the shower start, I grab my mobile phone, sneak out the front door, and quietly sit in the front seat of the car to call Jim. It’s the perfect place to have a private conversation. You never know who could be listening.

Jim answers after the first ring. “Did you make it to Palm Springs okay?”

“Hey, Jim. We did. We had a leisurely drive down through Carmel, Santa Maria, and the San Fernando Valley. My dad ended up being here when we arrived, but it worked out. He took Anna’s mom out for the evening. But an interesting thing happened.”

I take him through tonight’s events.

“Anna doesn’t know what they are looking for?” Jim asks.

“No idea.”



“Could she have accidentally picked up some stolen antiques or something?”

“I’ll ask, but I think she would have mentioned it.” I look out at the dark street and wish I had my night-vision goggles. I’m convinced there’s someone out there watching. “I feel like all these incidents have to be related, and it bugs me because I don’t know how they found us.”

“When are you heading back?”

“We’ll be here tomorrow and head out on Monday morning,” I tell him. “We’re driving straight back.”

“Okay. I’ll have Cora at Anna’s place Monday night.”

“I can stay with her. Cora can take over on Tuesday.”

Jim is silent a moment. “Are you sure?”

Jim knows me well enough to know I don’t usually do this type of thing with women I date. “Positive,” I tell him.

“Okay, then. I’ll let Cora know.” Jim pauses. “I think Anna needs twenty-four-hour protection.”

I search the darkness around me. “I agree. I’ll take evenings. I don’t want you to bill her for my time, though. That seems sleazy. But she shouldn’t be alone until we get this thing figured out, and I’d like to be spending time with her anyway, so it makes sense.”

“As long as she’s okay with you there in that capacity, I suppose that’s fine with me,” Jim says. “But if it becomes uncomfortable for either of you, we should make a change.”

I think I see someone in the shadows beneath a palm tree, but I can’t be sure. “Okay. I’ll call or text you when we get back.”

“Sounds good,” Jim says. “We’ll have eyes on her place in case she gets another visitor. Be careful tomorrow and as you drive back.”

We hang up, and when I return upstairs, the water is off and Anna is dressed in flannel pajama pants and a long sleeve T-shirt.

She looks up as I enter. “I know it’s not very sexy, but...”

“Seems pretty sexy to me,” I say with a smile. “I need to wash the chlorine off of me, too. I’ll be right back.”

I quickly shower and crawl into bed. “How are you doing?” I ask as I spoon in behind her.

She sighs. “I’m fine. I wish I understood what they’re looking for. What did Jim say?”

“We think you need to have someone with you twenty-four-seven. When we get back, I’ll stay with you at your place the first night, and then Cora will be back with you starting the next day. I’ve volunteered to be the night guard—unpaid, of course. That way you’ll be safe and hopefully more comfortable overnight.”

“Does he think I’m in danger?”

“I don’t have enough information to answer that question. But if all these incidents can be linked, the answer is yes.”

“That’s what I think, too.”

We lie together, and it feels like I’ll never get to sleep, but eventually, I wake, and I’m alone. After visiting the bathroom, I hear Anna downstairs with her mother and my dad.

I pull on shorts and a T-shirt, and when I get downstairs, I glance at the clock on the fireplace mantel. How did it get to almost nine o’clock? I think I was a teenager the last time I slept this late.

“Look who’s finally up,” Dad bellows as he takes a sip from his coffee mug.

I run my hands through my hair. “Sorry about that. I guess the desert air agrees with me. I slept well last night.”

Felicity puts a big plate of scrambled eggs with bacon in front of me, and Dad pours me a mug of coffee. “Thanks,” I tell them.

“I’m going to show Felicity and her friend Bitsy a few of my favorite places for some good eats,” Dad says. “Then the farmer’s market is today, and tonight, we’re all going to Bitsy’s for dinner.”

I look over at Anna. “What are we doing today?”

“It’s up to you. What would you like to do?”

I slept too long to think clearly. “There’s a museum here, or we can go out to Cabazon to the outlet mall.”

Anna perks up. “You want to go shopping?”

Not exactly. I *never* volunteer to go shopping, but I know Anna is a shopper, and for some reason, it seems like it might be fun. “You might find some things for your business there.”

“Great. I’d love to hit the outlets. Maybe I can find some furniture that might work for staging.”

“I don’t know how we’ll get it home.”

She shrugs. “I can find someone to come down and drive it back or maybe just get a U-Haul.”

I laugh. “I guess that’s one way to leave your mom her car.”



We spend the day walking in and out of what seems like hundreds of stores in Cabazon. My phone feels like a stone in my pocket. The calls and texts will never stop. It’s not fun or flattering anymore. It’s disturbing. And evidently ignoring them is not effective. It feels like they’re multiplying.

“Why do you keep looking at your phone?” Anna finally asks.

“In case Jim calls. Sorry.” That’s not entirely a lie. I wish I could just ignore it, but it actually could be something important.

I buy a pair of designer sunglasses and some workout clothes. There's not too much I need. I wear scrubs when I work at the hospital and jeans and T-shirts when I work at Clear. It's pretty low maintenance, with only the occasional suit required.

At the Armani store, I'm on purse duty as Anna tries on a dress for the Clear Security holiday party. When she walks out in a tiny, form-fitting garment, I shake my head. "No way."

Her face falls. "You don't like it?"

"No, I like it a lot. But most of the people at this event are men. I won't let them ogle you all night and then go home and jack off to what they imagine you looking like underneath."

"Don't you think that's a bit of an exaggeration?" Anna's eyes shoot daggers.

I look her up and down. Absolutely gorgeous. I point discreetly to the semi in my pants. "Nope."

Her shoulders fall. "Okay, I have another option."

She returns to the dressing room, and I watch people come in and out with loads of clothes to try on.

A man sits down next to me. "This is the longest day of my life," he announces. "I don't care if it's almost the shortest day of the year."

I chuckle. Normally, that's how I feel about shopping. But not today. Today is different.

This time, when Anna steps out, she's wearing a shiny pewter dress, very elegant and classic. It's still a little tighter than I would want, but she looks great. "I like it. What do you think?"

"It's my favorite. I didn't even show you the dress with the tulle skirt. I looked like a ballerina waiting for the music to start."

I laugh. "That bad, huh?"

She nods, and the woman who must be with the man sitting next to me walks out in what must be the same dress. After looking in the mirror, she sighs and turns to Anna. “I think that’s an apt description.”

The women laugh and chat away as they walk back to the dressing rooms. When Anna re-emerges, she makes her purchase, we wander to a high-end furniture store. She peruses the couches, and I find one that I think would work in my living room.

“I don’t have a lot of furniture,” I remind her. “What do you think of this couch?”

She walks all the way around it. “Is it the color or the style that you like?”

I shrug. “Both.”

She nods. “I like it. If you liked it for the color, the couch over there is a better buy. As for the style, there are other options, but not in this particular color.”

“Should I get the one over there?”

“No. You should get this one.”

I know once Jim finds out I bought a couch, he’s going to rib me about my commitment issues. But I smile at Anna and feel okay about that. This is uncharted territory, but so far, chasing her is still a lot of fun.

A salesman approaches.

“Hi. We’d like several items,” Anna begins. As the salesman salivates, she points out four couches, a set of side chairs, and a cabinet thing that sits against the wall and collects dust. At least that’s my interpretation. She also picks out a square, black onyx coffee table that weighs easily two hundred pounds. They discuss shipment options, and in the end, all the pieces will be packed up, and she’ll have someone drive down to take the furniture to her warehouse in San Francisco.

“Wait, one of those is mine,” I protest after the salesman has scurried off with her credit card.

“If I pay for it and transport it, I get the designer discount,” she says with a shrug. “I’ll deliver it to your place sometime this week, and you can pay me for it—at the discounted rate. I take cash, e-transfers, and credit cards.”

I smile. “Okay, that works for me. What are you going to do with the other pieces?”

“I don’t know yet. They’re perfect to use for staging, and I may replace some of the furniture that was destroyed in my apartment.”

“What’s the designer discount?” I ask after we walk out.

“I get forty-percent off, and I don’t pay sales tax.”

My eyes widen. “That’s practically fifty-percent off.”

“You must use math in your job,” she teases.

“I don’t know about that, but I’m getting hungry.”

She looks at her watch. “Where did the day go?”

“I think we’ve been distracted by all the shiny objects you found.”

“I spent a lot more money than I thought I would. We need to be at Bitsy’s in a little over an hour.”

“Good. I’m hoping she has, as my dad calls them, nibbles.”

“Without a doubt. We can pick something up to share on our way over, just in case.”

“Great idea,” I tell her. “What are you thinking?”

“At that cheese store downtown, I noticed they do party trays. Let’s see what they have.”

By the time we knock on Bitsy’s front door an hour later, we have a cheese tray with fruit and two bottles of cold wine—a pinot grigio and a rosé. She lives just a few blocks over from my dad but in a large Spanish bungalow. Her housekeeper walks us back to the pool area.

“Here they are,” Bitsy gushes.

Anna introduces me to several women, and I chuckle at my father, who seems to have them hanging on his every word. He's in his element here.

"You two could be twins," Bitsy tells me, looking over at Dad.

"He was always a better-looking doppelgänger," Dad says.

Even after the stress of yesterday evening, Felicity is smiling and doing well with her friends. I think being here for a few months will be good for her and her health.

Dad and I man the grill as we barbecue several types of marinated meat, and Anna helps Bitsy and her housekeeper prepare the table.

By the end of the night, we've eaten well, had plenty to drink, and enjoyed a good time.

"I'll see you and your suitcase in the morning," Bitsy tells Felicity. "And I expect to see a lot of you, Hamish," she adds.

Dad bows his head. "Thank you. I'm looking forward to spending time with you ladies."

Back at Dad's place, after saying goodnight to our parents, Anna and I stay the night together again in my bed. I sleep much more soundly with her at my side, even though that thought threatens to keep me awake. Nothing about the way she makes me feel makes any sense.



Anna and I get up first thing the next morning. Our plan is to get on the road early and drive a less-scenic route back home, straight up the I-5. We wave goodbye, and Felicity seems excited about staying. She and Dad will be heading over to Bitsy's for brunch, and he'll help move her in. Felicity isn't Dad's typical type, but they seem to get along well. I just hope it's not so well that he'll try to make her wife number five.

The trip takes five hours, and Anna and I spend the time comparing our music preferences. We're pretty compatible. I think my time in combat has my tastes moving more toward heavy metal—it's easier for me than country—but we both enjoy good alternative bands. Fortunately, our direct route means we miss the evening traffic into the City. When we arrive, we stop by my place, and I show it to Anna for the first time.

"You have a lawn chair in your living room?" She is very confused about this.

"It wasn't until I saw the couch at the outlet mall that I found something I liked. I don't mind spending money on a good couch, but I didn't want to buy something that wouldn't wear well or might break. Plus, to be honest, I'm not home for much more than sleeping."

"You managed a seventy-five-inch television, though," she notes.

"I like to watch sports, sports news, and movies. What do you watch?"

She shakes her head. "I watch news and dramas—both television and movies. Mostly cop or medical dramas."

I chuckle at that. "You realize that what happens on those shows is not exactly accurate."

"I've heard the drama with the romances is accurate. How many of the nurses at work have you played with?" She holds up her hands before I can answer. "Scratch that. Have you slept with any of the women you work with? I only want a yes or no. I don't want details, as it's none of my business."

I give her a half smile. "They're the reason I was written up as Most Eligible Bachelor in *San Francisco Magazine*."

"I was going to bring that up, but it seemed a little petty."

I was hoping she'd never see that. I'm a little embarrassed. I don't know how to tell her things feel entirely different for me now. "When did you read it?"



“I looked you up after you helped Mom when she collapsed on the casino floor.”

I look up at the car roof and shake my head. “I’ve slept with women I work with. I don’t sleep with patients. But the nurses thought it would be funny, and then the hospital thought it was good publicity. I didn’t think it would be a big deal, but I’m finding I hate it. And truly, that’s another reason I haven’t been spending any time at home. I’m shocked at the number of women who have tracked down my address, not to mention my phone number. I’m unlisted, for God’s sake!”

Anna laughs. “Don’t worry. I won’t let your secret out. I can see how that would be irritating. But I feel pretty special that we’ve spent so much time together lately.”

“You are special.” I reach for her hand, thinking about all sorts of naughty things I’d like to do to her now that we’re back and don’t have any parents to worry about.

Her fingers rub over my knuckles. “As tempting as it would be to play at your place, I’m a little concerned about all the use your bed has gotten.”

I shake my head. “I don’t bring women home. I either go to their place or a hotel. Sometimes, I’d rather chew my arm off to get away than stay the night.”

She gives me a look. “You’re the one choosing them. It can’t be that bad.”

“It is,” I assure her. “And particularly since the article, I’m *not* always the one choosing.” I tell her about the woman who recently came to the emergency room under false pretenses.

She shakes her head. “You’re lying. No way would someone be that...desperate.”

“I swear it’s true, and I will introduce you to the nurse who was there with me. I always have a nurse present for female patients. It protects everyone. I may only work one week a month in the emergency room, but I want to continue practicing medicine.”

She nods, seeming a little less skeptical.

“Should we return your mom’s car to her house?” I ask.

“No, it’s fine for now. Since we’re at my place, I thought I’d get a few things done tonight, but I’d love to take you to Waterbar for dinner.”

“I’m down with that. But I’m still a gentleman, and I’ll pay. I also owe you money for the couch.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t have it yet. I’ll get Guillermo and Frankie to drop it by once it arrives.”

“I can get a couple of guys from work to help me. You don’t have to pay someone to do that.”

She waves that away. “Trust me, they prefer moving furniture to the other work I have for them. They’d probably pay you.”

“Okay. But I’m still paying for dinner tonight.”

She rolls her eyes as I show her out the door.

We drive back to her place, and as we enter the lobby, Landon Walsh is there with his wife, Tinsley, waiting for the elevator.

“Hey, Anna,” he says. “Wow, Clay McGrath. I haven’t seen you since you were up in my place in Montana. Are you on Anna’s detail?”

“Well, not exactly. Anna and I are seeing each other,” I explain, hoping Anna feels okay about me sharing this. I extend my hand. “Great to see you. Jim mentioned he had clients in the building.”

“Was it your place that was broken into?” Tinsley asks Anna as we step into the elevator.

She nods. “Yes, and we still haven’t figured out how they got in. Maybe from the building across the alley.”

“No way,” Landon says. “I’m so sorry. It has the whole building on alert. I’ve asked Jim to speak at the next homeowner’s association meeting.”

Anna sighs. “I’m really sorry. Chances are I didn’t lock my patio door. I didn’t think it would ever be an issue. I’m on the fourth floor.”

“We leave our patio doors open to get a cross breeze sometimes,” Tinsley sympathizes. “We won’t be doing that again.”

“You still have an unobstructed three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view from your place. It would be hard for them to get to your patio,” Anna reminds her.

Landon nods. “Yeah, I haven’t built the twin tower to our building yet. I’m on the fence. Maybe I’ll do it if we sell and move to Vancouver, like we keep telling my sister we’re going to.”

Landon and his sister are originally from Canada, but they started a communications company here. As they expanded, they bought Tinsley’s business, and she and Landon fell in love. “Why not Montana?” I ask. I know Landon has a place he loves there.

“The snow,” he’s quick to reply. “I don’t like snow that much.”

I shake my head. “Don’t you get snow in Vancouver?”

“Not a lot. And it’s also a great place to raise a family.”

“We’d miss you if you sold your place,” Anna says, moving closer to me.

Landon shrugs.

“We’d keep the apartment,” Tinsley says. “Our business is here, and Claire would kill us if we took the kids away. She’s a very devoted aunt.”

“I guess we’ll be seeing you around,” Landon says as we say our goodbyes at Anna’s floor.

“Thanks for looking out for me,” she tells him.

“After all the work you did on the nursery, of course we would,” Tinsley says.

Anna pulls out her keys as we walk down the hallway, but I open the door and walk in first to make sure it's safe. "Stay here," I tell her. I step in and wander around the apartment. It looks very glamorous and is furnished as if it's going to be photographed for a magazine. As I return to the entry way, Anna pulls her suitcase inside. "I told you to wait until I gave you the all-clear."

She shrugs.

I text Jim to tell him we're back.

**Jim: Why don't you and Anna come over to the house for dinner? We can catch up.**

I relay the message to Anna. "Can we do Waterbar later this week? I know we just got back, but can I talk you into going?"

"Would you rather go by yourself?" she asks.

I shake my head. "And I'm not leaving you alone until Cora arrives again in the morning. So if you don't want to go, we won't go."

"Do you think he has information for us?"

"I'm sure he has something, but I'm not sure he has all the answers we're hoping for."

"Okay, we can go," she agrees. "Can you find out what they'd like us to bring?"

"We don't have to bring anything," I tell her, but I amend that when I see her look. "I'll ask."

**Me: We'll be there. Anna wants to know what we can bring.**

It takes a few minutes before Jim responds.

**Jim: Kate suggests picking up a bottle of wine and dessert. We're grilling.**

I relay the message.

“What time do they want us there?” she asks.

It's getting to be almost five. “I would say pretty soon. Where would we find a dessert?”

Anna picks up her landline and pushes a few buttons. “Hey, Donna. Does Francois have his crème brulés? I need...” She looks at me. “Six maybe?”

“At least six, but if you have eight, that would be great.”

“Make that eight.” She listens a moment. “Great. We'll be down in about fifteen minutes.”

Confused, I watch her retreat to the bedroom and return a few minutes later wearing tight jeans and an off-the-shoulder sweater, her hair in curls. Her outfit has me completely rethinking going to my boss's house for dinner. I should stay here and fuck her senseless instead.

“Ready?” she asks as she reaches for her bag.

“Where are we stopping for wine?”

“I have a great malbec here that I thought would work. Or do you think we should pick up something different?”

“Whatever works for you. Only you and Kate will drink the wine. Jim and I stick to beer and scotch or bourbon.”

She nods. “Great, this is my favorite. I buy it by the case.”

“Where are we getting the desserts?”

“They'll be at the concierge desk downstairs.”

“Do they make them there?”

She giggles. “No, they're from one of the retailers in the building. The concierge will pick them up and have them ready for me.”

“Damn. That’s some kind of service. What would you have done if they wanted a salad or maybe an appetizer?”

“Rossi’s Italian Bistro is downstairs, and I would have ordered from them. Normally, I’d want to make it myself, but in a pinch, this is what I do.”

“It’s like you have room service in your apartment,” I marvel.

“I guess so, but with all the delivery services these days, isn’t that the case for everyone?”

I open my mouth to protest but then close it. I can’t dispute what she’s saying, but it still seems different to me.

When the elevator stops at the lobby, we grab the desserts and are soon back in her mom’s Mercedes, going the few blocks to Jim’s.

“This is a great neighborhood,” Anna says. “There are a lot of cool lofts over here.”

“Jim owns the entire building,” I tell her as we arrive at Clear’s offices. “Parking and security are on the ground floor and down a level, then there are four floors of open workspace, and Jim and Kate live on the top floor. They’ve made the roof into a park for their kids, and it’s full of rabbits. They started with two, and they think they have close to fifty now.”

“Oh wow, and they can’t escape?”

I shake my head. “It’s surrounded by six-foot glass walls, and if they did squeeze out, it’s a six-story drop.”

We walk in, and Bash is at the elevator. “I saw you come in on the security camera,” he says. “I thought I’d join you for a minute before I head out to meet Fiona.”

“I look forward to meeting her one day,” Anna says as we ride upstairs.

“Trust me.” Bash pats my shoulder. “She’s very interested in meeting you. Anyone who can tame this man has her attention.”

Anna snorts. “I don’t think I’ve tamed him. I could be just a passing interest.” She gives me a flirty smile.

I still don’t know what this is, but she’s definitely more than a passing interest.

Bash gives her an I-don’t-think-so look, and she blushes.

When the elevator doors open, Kate and Jim pause their conversation and smile at us.

Jim walks over. “Welcome! This is my beautiful wife, Kate. Somewhere around here, I have two boys running wild. They’ll make themselves known when the food comes out.”

Anna smiles as Kate dries her hands and approaches. “Welcome to our home, Anna. Don’t let these guys intimidate you.”

“Never.” Anna grins. She hands over the boxed desserts and pulls the wine out of her purse.

“Thank you so much. You really didn’t have to bring anything,” Kate says. Then she looks at me and mouths, “*I like her already.*”

I nod. I do too.

Jim hands me and Bash a beer and nudges us upstairs toward the roof and the grill. We let the women know what we’re doing, but they’re too busy chatting to pay much attention.

“How was the drive back?” Jim asks as we step outside.

“Uneventful,” I tell them. “I didn’t see anyone in my rearview, but it’s not like it’s hard to figure out we were going home.”

“Tell us what happened at the house,” Jim says

I walk them through a tasteful, PG-version of our evening, feeling strangely protective of Anna.

Jim takes a draw on his beer. “What do you know about Standhold Commercial Real Estate?”

I shake my head. “I’ve not done any background checks. I like Anna, though. She lives in a great building, and she told me she got a deal because she helped with the interior design. Her mom is a recent widow, and her brother is in China—and you know what I know there.”

Jim nods.

“I’ve reached out to my friend in China,” Bash adds. “Her brother seems to be in bed with a guy on the government’s radar.”

“How so?” I ask.

“Not sure. But MSS, which is a cross between the US FBI and CIA, is involved.”

“Do you have contacts inside the MSS here locally?”

“I’m working my asset,” Bash says. “Jim has one in China. We think if they arrest her brother and or his partner, the partner will make him the fall guy. We don’t have any confirmation, but we believe the avalanche and the break-ins are related, both to each other and to the real estate business. We just can’t determine if it’s coming from the business partner, who maybe fears Charles has something he sent to Anna, or it’s the MSS looking for information.”

“That’s pretty scary. Do we need to get him home?”

Jim turns the meat on the grill. “I’m not sure they’ll let him leave unless he’s moved out through diplomatic means.”

“What are you going to tell Anna?” I ask.

“Really, all we know is supposition, so nothing until I can talk to a few of my contacts,” Jim says.

My phone pings, and I glance at it. More crap.

“When are you going to get that handled?” Bash shakes his head.

I sigh. “I’m going to change my number again as soon as I can find the time. I don’t know what else to do.”

We chat for a little while longer about lighter subjects, and then Jim pulls everything off the grill. “Okay, boys.



Dinner's ready," he calls. "Come on."

From around the corner, the boys come tearing across the lawn and beat us down the stairs.



## CHAPTER 15

### *Anna*

Kate pours me a second glass of wine and asks the question I've been expecting. "How did you and Clay meet?"

I tell her about my mom and our trip to Tahoe at Thanksgiving.

"He's a great guy," she says.

I smile. "I agree, but he's also the City's Most Eligible Bachelor, you know? We're just having some fun together, I think."

She shakes her head. "He brought a girl to Gage and Stella's wedding last year, but he didn't introduce her to me. I haven't seen her since. Most of the time, he comes to work events alone."

I grin. "I think you're confirming my concerns."

She smiles. "He introduced you to us."

"Jim invited us over because of the break-ins, and Clay is my bodyguard until Cora arrives tomorrow," I counter.

She twirls her glass of wine. "You can make all the excuses you want, but he insisted he stay with you tonight, not Cora, and he didn't have to do that." When I don't respond, she changes the subject. "What do you do for a living?"

I tell her about my business, and we fall into discussing the world of design. “These security guys are the opposite of the men in my industry,” I say, shaking my head. “There are some straight men, but it’s mostly women and gay men.”

Kate nods. “The testosterone is overwhelming at times. And to make matters worse, my two boys are mini versions of their father. Their energy and ability to get into trouble is nonstop around here. And by the way, Jim was a major player when I met him, so the zebra’s stripes can change.”

I snort a laugh. I like that analogy, but I still caution myself. No need to throw out my entire playbook. I’m always careful about relationships, and there’s no reason for that to change. I get along just fine by myself. Though I can imagine what little mini-mes of Clay would look like. I’ve met his dad, and my heart quickens at the thought of three generations of McGraths together. How much trouble would that be?

After a thunder of feet on the stairs, the little boys appear, followed by the men with the meat from the grill. As Jim settles everything on the table, Bash waves goodbye, and then we all sit down.

Over dinner, we talk about the trip Clay and I took to Palm Springs and my mom’s plans to winter there.

“You know,” Kate says. “There are plenty of winters that I think about doing something other than San Francisco.”

Jim looks at her, seeming surprised. “Like what?”

“Someplace with a beach.”

“I’ll remember that,” he says.

“Anna, will you be coming to the holiday party?” Kate asks, looking at Clay.

“Yes,” I tell her. “I found a cute dress at the Armani outlet in Cabazon.”

She turns her smile my way. “Oh, I can’t wait to see it. We’re going to have so much fun. The stadium is going to be a blast. It took two years for us to get it, and that’s *with* knowing Nate Lancaster, who’s an owner of the Prospectors.”

“That will be really nice.” I nod. “I’m excited.”

“Next year, I’m determined to have it at Pier Seventy,” Kate adds, her eyes dreamy. “Stella is on it, and I think she’s going to make it happen. We’ve become too big for most venues, so it gets a little tricky. But anyway, dinner is going to be catered by the chef at Luna. She makes the best crab cakes. I can’t wait!”

I look over at Jim. “That’s pretty impressive.”

“It seems more intimidating, when she puts it like that,” he says with a chuckle. “I’d be lost without my team, and that includes Clay.”

“How do you work around his schedule at the hospital?” I ask.

“Well, he’s head of the medical team, so he comes in on the weeks he’s not at the hospital, and if there’s something big happening in the field, we plan around him.”

“Clay is very important to us,” Kate adds as she looks at Jim. They smile.

I can tell they are truly in love, maybe even the kind of love my parents had and what I want some day.

After dinner, we sit around and enjoy our dessert, complete with decaffeinated cappuccinos. I need to get some sleep tonight.

When Kate announces that she needs to get the boys in bed, Clay and I stand. “We should let you go,” he says.

After saying goodbye, we walk out hand in hand and take the elevator to the parking garage and my mother’s car.

This was a lovely evening that felt very friendly—no business. But I know Clay thought there was an official reason for our invitation. So as we drive the few blocks back to my place, I ask, “What did Jim say about the break-ins?”

“He thinks they’re related, and possibly because of your family’s business, but he hasn’t found the thread that connects them.”

“Does he think Charles is in trouble?”

Clay glances over. “They’re concerned about his business partner, Arnold Woo, but they don’t really know anything concrete. They’re tracking down a contact to validate what they’re hearing.”

I take a breath. “It would break my mother beyond repair—and me right along with it—if something were to happen to Charles.”

Clay nods and puts his hand over mine. “Our plan is to make sure that doesn’t happen.”



When I open my eyes in the morning, I stretch and move around. I’m alone in bed, but I sure am sore from last night. Clay and I used muscles I didn’t know I had, and I think I’m going to have permanent whisker burn between my legs. I guess there are worst things to suffer from.

It seems Clay is already out the door. He’s on at Clear this week. But when I checked my calendar, I didn’t have any meetings in the office today. I’m going to work from here, if nothing comes up, but for sure, I’m taking the morning slowly.

A little while later, once I’ve gotten myself up and put together, Cora follows me into the restaurant where I’m meeting Henry for lunch. She’s going to sit at a different table close by. It seems silly having her go wherever I go, but I do feel better knowing that if anything goes sideways, she’ll be here. And Clay is coming back tonight. He’s told me he’ll be with me every night until this is over. I’m not sure how I feel about that. I love having him around, but sometimes, I wonder whether he’s with me so much because he wants to be or because it’s a job. I’m determined to be smart about this.

As I approach the table where I already see Henry, he stands and kisses me on the cheek. “How are you?”

“I’m good.”

He studies me as he sits down. “How was dropping your mom off?”

“She stayed there, so I guess that means it went well. We got back late yesterday afternoon, and I feel like all I’ve done is run since then.”

“Wait, what? Your mom came back with you?”

“Oh, no. Dr. McGrath drove Mom’s car down and back with me.”

Henry raises his eyebrows. “So are you seeing him?”

I shrug. “It seems so. We’ve been spending a lot of time together. He works for that security company, so it makes me feel safe to have him around. Oh, and now I have a constant bodyguard, so he’s helping with that detail.”

“What?”

I point over to Cora. “She’s my bodyguard.”

“She’s keeping tabs on you?”

“No. She’s making sure I’m not assaulted or kidnapped.”

Henry cocks his head to the side. “I’m not sure we’re seeing the same thing. Has it ever occurred to you that maybe Clay set up the break-ins to get close to you?”

“Why? To get in my pants?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you have something he wants.”

“A couch? I don’t think so. The police are involved. The security company is top-notch.”

“What do you know about security companies?”

I sigh. “I know you don’t like Clay very much. Clear Security is a big deal. I’ve met the owner, and you know I worked for Nate Lancaster, who uses them. The break-ins are real, and they’re scaring me.”

“So you’re positive Clay isn’t behind this?”

I nod. “Without a doubt.”

The server comes and takes our order, and I choose a salad. I'm not a huge fan of lettuce, but with all the fattening food I've been eating, I need to cut somewhere.

After she leaves, it feels a little awkward at the table.

Henry smooths the napkin on his lap before he looks at me. "I'm worried about you. You've had a tough year. You've inherited half of a multi-million-dollar company. You're ripe to be targeted by some guy who's looking for fast money."

I can't argue with Henry about that, but I also feel certain that's not what's happening. *Why is he so anti-Clay?* I reach for his arm. "I appreciate you looking out for me. That means more than I can say. But right now, the police and possibly other authorities are getting involved in what's going on, so I feel like this is for real."

"Other authorities?"

I shrug. "There's a possibility that these break-ins have something to do with Charles." I'm not about to tell him what they think about the avalanche. His head might explode. I don't even know what I think about that.

He shakes his head. "I only want you to be careful. Be cautious about trusting Clay McGrath."

I give him a strained smile. "What did you end up doing this weekend?"

"Patrice spent a good part of it at the house with me. She was very patient since I worked most of the day on Saturday and half the day Sunday from my home office."

"Are you getting ready for a case?"

He shrugs. "I'm always preparing a case, but mostly, I'm just overwhelmed with needing to get so much done. The courts will close the last two weeks of the year, so we push to get a month's worth of work done in two weeks."

The server delivers our lunch, and I pick up my fork to dig in. At least there's some cheese on there. "Are you taking time off for the holiday?"



“Patrice and I are headed to Paris after Christmas for the new year. Hey, do you want to go with me to my firm’s party Friday night? Patrice has something going on with her family. I know it’s last minute, but it might be fun. We have a private room at Quince.”

I grin because he knows I love Quince, but I hate going there. They have three Michelin stars, but three hundred dollars a person for one night of food isn’t something I want to do too often. I’d much rather buy cute shoes for that money or maybe put it toward a nice handbag. “I can’t,” I tell him. “I’m going to Clear Security’s holiday party.”

Henry looks shocked. “It sounds like you’re dating him for sure.”

I shrug. “We’ll see what happens. We’re having fun.”

“What are you doing for Christmas?”

I take a sip of my water. “If Mom’s still down there, I’ll go be with her in Palm Springs.”

“You’re not taking Clay, are you?”

This time I do roll my eyes. “I don’t know. We haven’t talked about it.”

“You know, Phillip in my office is recently divorced. I could introduce you so you have someone to spend New Year’s with.”

I shake my head. “I’m not thinking that far ahead. And isn’t Phillip like twenty years older than we are?”

“Yes. So what?”

I sigh. “Thank you for thinking of me, but I don’t think I’m looking for someone who’s already done the family thing.”

Henry nods. “Does Clay want a family?”

Henry is beginning to piss me off. “We haven’t talked about it. Things are pretty new, and I’m not in any hurry.” I look at my watch. “I found several pieces when I was down in

Cabazon that are being delivered today. I'm going to have to run shortly."

"Okay. When can we meet up for drinks with Clay and Patrice?" Henry asks. "And if you're going to be gone for Christmas, we need to plan something special to celebrate."

Right now, I'm not sure doing anything with Henry is a good idea. He needs to cool his jets and get used to the idea of Clay being around. But I force a smile. "You're the one with the crazy schedule, so you'll have to let me know when you can make it work."

"I will."

I reach for my purse, and Henry stops me. "Let me get your lunch for once."

We always go Dutch or I pay for lunch, so this is surprising. "Why?"

He gives me a one-shoulder shrug. "Because I'd like to."

I nod and thank him with a goodbye kiss on the cheek before I leave him at the table.

As I walk out, Cora comes up next to me. "I called the car," she says. "I wasn't sure where you were going."

I chuckle. I don't know either, but I was tired of Henry's criticism. I can see why he might have questions about Clay, but he needs to trust me. I am completely in control of this, and I won't let Henry make me second guess myself.

"Let's go back to my place," I tell Cora as we get in the car. "I'll work from the house this afternoon, too."

When we arrive at my place, I shut myself into my office and push aside all the negativity from Henry. I've always been supportive of the women he's dated, even when I wasn't their biggest fan. Lisa was pretty bad. She was always telling me how important she was and who she knew. And Patti was politically the polar opposite of me and kept trying to tell me why I was wrong. Patrice isn't exactly the brightest

crayon in the box. But if she makes Henry happy, that's good enough for me.

I call Mom to check in, and she's with Hamish and Bitsy at Hamish's pool, so she doesn't have much time to talk. "Okay, I'll check in with you later," I tell her.

I sit back and look through the spreadsheet to see how my team is doing with the holiday decorating. Few people need us now until after Christmas, so it's nice and quiet. And we only have two New Year's Eve parties to decorate.

My phone pings.

**Charles: Call me on my mobile when you have some time today. I'm interested to hear how things went with taking Mom to Palm Springs.**

I pick up the phone and call him.

"Hey. That was fast," he says.

"You caught me at a good moment," I say with a laugh. "The drive down was good. We saw Marco and Maria's vineyard in Santa Maria, and we had lunch with Dottie. I tried calling Mom not even an hour ago, and she was too busy having a great time with her friends to talk. I'm really glad she went."

"That's great. So you're going to Palm Springs for Christmas?"

"That's my plan right now. And if you decide to come back, you know you're welcome to join me."

"I'll keep that in mind." He sighs. "I really wish I could."

I curl up on the couch in my office. "I'm sorry. Is all of this worth it?"

"I hope so," he tells me. "Things right now are a little off, but I can't put my finger on why yet."

My pulse quickens. We've talked about the possibility that our communications are monitored, so he'd never say anything specific or against the Chinese government, but him saying things seem off feels like a red flag. I'll have to tell Clay about that when he gets back tonight.

"I love you, Charles, and as your not-so-silent business partner, I just want to say that the only thing important to me is you. If you need to come home, I don't care if we lose our investment. You're more important than money."

"I love you too. I think my melancholy is really about being away. I'm coming up on a year here, and I miss you and Mom."

"You can fly into LA, and I can pick you up on my way down to Palm Springs if you'd like. Just let me know. I haven't figured out my plan, but if Mom continues to have a great time in Palm Springs, she's going to want her car down there."

"I'm glad she's having some fun. She deserves it. And so do you. Anyone special in your life?"

"Are you asking me if I'm dating?"

"Of course. I've got to size up any guy you're going out with, because if he does you wrong, I'll take him out."

"I am seeing someone, but it's very new. We're having fun. No plans beyond that. And you?"

"No one serious, but I'm having fun, too," he says. There's a lot of noise in the background. "I'm just getting into the office, so I should go. But I'll talk to you soon."

"Okay. Sounds good." When I hang up, I'm more than sure something is going on, and Charles has just let me know. I look over at the clock. Clay said he'd be home in about an hour.

I wander out to the living room to find Cora busy on her computer at my dining room table. "I hope you don't mind that I'm doing some other work while I'm here," she says.

“Not in the least. I feel bad that you have to be here at all.”

She shakes her head. “It’s nice to get out of the office. Working here or at my home is a luxury. I’m thrilled.”

“Will you stay for dinner tonight?”

“I can’t, but thank you,” she says. “Clay is going to be here shortly to take over, and I’m going to meet with Jim, Bash, and Gage over dinner tonight.”

We hear a key in the lock and the door opening. “Speak of the devil,” I say.

Clay greets me with a kiss, which surprises me a little, but I’m not sure why. It’s not like we’re hiding from Cora. “I missed you today,” he says.

“I missed you too. After spending four days together, it wasn’t the same without you.”

“I’m not as fun as you are,” Cora teases.

I blush. “Sorry.”

“No problem.” She stands and hikes her bag across her body. “What time do you need to be at the office tomorrow?”

“Eight is fine,” I tell her.

“Okay, I’ll be here by seven thirty.”

Then Cora is out the door, and Clay pulls me in for an embrace. “What do you want to do for dinner?”

I stroke his cock through his jeans. “I can think of something.”

He nuzzles my neck. “I like the way you think.”



A little while later, lying together in post-coital bliss, we catch our breath. Clay’s stamina is like an eighteen-year-old boy. He is amazing.

“How was your lunch with Henry?” he asks.

I run my finger up and down his happy trail. “It was okay.”

“Only okay?”

“He thinks you’re behind all the break-ins.”

Clay pulls away. “Do you think I’m behind them?” He searches my eyes.

“Not at all. But I’m having a hard time understanding his behavior. It’s so out of character for him.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Probably because I told him you said he wanted to sleep with me, and now, I look at everything he does through that lens.”

“I’m sorry. Maybe he and I just need to meet each other.”

I nod. “He talked about us all getting together.”

“I’m happy to do that. Does he like sports?”

“Well, he likes to watch them. But he’s an attorney, and his whole life is mostly about his work.”

“Okay, what does he like to do?”

“He’s into electronics, and on his last vacation he went bike riding in Thailand.”

Clay nods. “I’ve been to Thailand, and I can ride a bike. We’ll find something to talk about. Set it up.”

I lean in and kiss his jawline. “Thank you for being so wonderful.”

He shakes his head. “I’m jealous as hell of Henry. Don’t be fooled. I want to size up my competition.”

I roll on my back, laughing.

“What else did you do today?”

“I checked in with Mom—our parents are still hanging out and having a great time—and I spoke to my brother.” I

lean up on my elbow. “Charles said something strange. I should preface this by saying that he’s told he believes the Chinese monitor all his phone calls and communications, so he never says anything that could put him in jeopardy. But today he told me ‘things were a little off’ and he couldn’t put his finger on why.”

“And that’s different from your typical conversation?”

“Yes, very, and it alarmed me.”

Clay sits up and pulls on a pair of shorts. “How about you order dinner? I’ll call Jim.”

I pull on my clothes. “Any requests?”

“We should be carb loading if we’re going to keep up this pace.”

“I’m going to need some sleep tonight,” I warn him.

He chuckles. “Me too. I need to go in and cover for someone tomorrow at the hospital because her partner is having a baby.”

“Okay. How does roasted chicken sound? I can get that downstairs.”

“Perfect.” He kisses me on the forehead and starts dialing the phone.

I call downstairs for our dinner, and just as I hang up, Clay walks back in, still with his phone to his ear. “She just got off the phone,” he says. “Hold on a minute.”

“May I put you on speaker to tell Jim, Bash, Gage, and Cora what your brother said?” he asks.

I nod. “Sure.”

After explaining my uneasiness, a weight on my shoulders seems to evaporate. They see what I’m seeing, and it feels good to know I have help. Maybe Clear’s input will help get Charles home safely.

I run down to pick up dinner with the concierge, and while I continue to think through what feels like every conversation I’ve had with Charles, Clay sets the table, pours

us each a glass of my favorite malbec, and gets the food ready to eat.

When he gently calls me to the table, it's like waking from a dream. I feel terrible that I didn't help, but he just smiles and pulls out my chair. His phone buzzes on the counter, and though he ignores it, it reminds me that I'm not the only one competing for his attention. For now, though, I put it out of my mind. He's taking care of me, and despite my vow to be cautious, that's definitely something I could get used to.





## CHAPTER 16

# *Clay*

“What are you going to do today?” I ask. Anna and I have spent every night together this week, and Cora comes to spend the days while I go in to Clear.

Anna is still in bed, with the sheets pooled around her waist. She yawns. “I’m dealing with your couch this morning, and I have a manicure and pedicure appointment just before lunch, followed by a hair appointment, so I’m ready for tonight’s party.”

I smirk. “You could go in a potato sack without makeup, and you’d still be the most beautiful woman there.”

She blushes. “You’ve already gotten lucky this morning. Are you trying for a second round?”

“Always.” Honestly, after twice last night and again this morning, I couldn’t go again if I tried, but I’d be happy to make sure she got another orgasm if she wanted it. Nothing is more life affirming than having her groan my name.

She peels the sheets away and kisses me softly on the lips on her way to the bathroom.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“I’m getting in the shower and dressed because once Cora arrives, we’re going to meet the delivery guys at your

place.”

I’m grateful she’s managing that for me. There’s already a lot on my plate today.

While she showers, I grab a cup of coffee for both of us, leaving hers on the bathroom counter. Then I trim my beard. I want to make extra sure I don’t look like a member of ZZ Top tonight.

As she steps outside the shower and dries off, she’s like a siren calling me. I wrap my arms around her to kiss her neck. “Do you need any help?”

“If you help me, we’ll both be late. What time will you be back tonight?”

I kiss her again as she wiggles away. “I think Jim is closing the office after lunch, so it sounds like I may beat you here.”

“Oh no. Maybe I should send Cora home after I get my mani-pedi?”

“We’ve talked about it. I’ll come as soon as I’m done to relieve her.”

“That works.”

I’ll probably go by and check out my new couch before I meet her. A voice in the back of my head is telling me I shouldn’t have bought it. Once again, I’m not sure I need it. I enjoy staying here with Anna, and I’m stunned to find myself thinking about how to make that arrangement more permanent. I’ve never lived with anyone before, but it seems like it would be very easy with Anna. While that should scare me, it doesn’t.

My mobile pings.

**Janet: Hey, handsome. We miss you.**

She’s included a photo of her very large breasts. Nope. Not interested. Not even remotely. I quickly delete the text.

“Lots of messages this morning?” Anna asks.

I tuck my phone away. “Nope. Just a friend looking for me.”

She gives me a raised brow. “Don’t let me hold you back,” she says. I can see hurt behind her eyes.

I pull her to me. “You are the only woman I want.” My pants feel a little tighter. “See? You only have to be in the room, and I get a semi.”

She smiles and shakes her head.

*Ugh. What am I going to do about this woman?* I will not fall into the trap my father does—get all wrapped up in my dick and throw out common sense. I take a deep breath and try to suppress the nagging fact that despite changing my number, I’ve received easily two hundred photos of women in various states of undress. That would not make Anna happy at all. I didn’t ask for any of them, and I’ve responded to very few—and not in a long time. These days I delete them and try to move on.

Dressed in her bra and panties, Anna is now drying her hair. I force myself into the shower and try to get on with my day. Under the water, I go through all the things I need to get done. I have four calls to make. I need to track down my team at Clear and get their action reports from last week.

By the time I’m out of the shower, Anna is styling her hair. Kissing her on the cheek, I dress quickly and head out to see Cora, who should have arrived at least ten minutes ago.

I find her in the dining room at her computer. She smiles up at me. “Anything?”

I sling my bag over my shoulder. I don’t know why I bother bringing work here. I’m never going to get it done. “Nothing. We had a slow night. She said you two are heading to my place for a couch delivery before she does the day of beauty.”

Cora nods. “Don’t feel the need to rush over this afternoon. I have my dress here just in case.”

I nod. “Good to know. It’s like Murphy’s Law or something, because any time I try to get out of the office early, something seems to go sideways.”

Cora chuckles. “I agree. So I’m prepared.”

“I’ll call and find out where you are when I’m done.”

She nods, and my phone pings as I walk out the door.

**Nicole: What do you have going on tomorrow night? My company has their holiday party at the Fairmont, and I have a room. I could use some company.**

Ugh. I text back a polite *no thank you* and hope she’ll let it go at that. It seems like a lifetime ago that I hung out with Nicole.

When I arrive at Clear, it’s chaos. Evidently, I’m not the only one with a lot to get done today. I duck into my office and close the door.

The internal messaging system comes up as soon as I log in.

**Stella: I saw you sneak in. You can’t hide from me if I need your help.**

**Me: I’m here at your disposal. But I need to hunt my team down for action reports or Jim and Bash are going to crawl up my you know what.**

**Stella: Understand. I’ll hold off if I can. Can’t wait to meet Anna tonight.**

**Me: She’s excited to meet you too.**

**Stella: How sweet. Gotta jet. I've got plenty to keep me busy.**

I work uninterrupted until lunch time, and I'm feeling pretty good about everything when my mobile phone rings.

"Hey, Jim."

"Hi. I thought you were coming in this morning."

"I'm down the hall in my office. I'm just hiding from Stella."

Jim laughs. "Smart man. Can you spare a few minutes?"

"I'll be right there." I pick up the action reports, a pad of paper, and a pen before heading down to his office.

"Close the door behind you," he says.

"Sure." He rarely requests that, so my radar is on high alert. I sit across from him, eager to hear what he has to say.

"Every year the party becomes more and more ornate," he says, rubbing his hand over his face. "I'm feeling overwhelmed. I don't have anything specific to talk to you about, I'm just trying to stay out of everyone's way and let someone else make decisions for a while. I don't care if there are tablecloths on tables or what color they are."

I shake my head and laugh. "Man, that's why I was in my office with the door closed."

He sighs. "This is Kate's busiest time of year with her work with Bullseye, so I'm getting it from both directions."

Kate runs a national nonprofit to help keep kids in school, which has become the pet project for a large national retailer. They do a giant holiday party, which was last weekend, but no doubt there are still loose ends to tie up.

"Any word from the contact in China?" I ask him.

"Just the basics. He's confirmed where Charles is living, who his business partner is, and that he's on MSS's

radar. I should have more next week. He doesn't want to be too obvious."

"Okay, I'll let Anna know."

"Sorry not to have more. Tensions are high right now between countries, so getting information in and out is a challenge." His phone pings, and he looks at it a moment. "How are things with Cora and Anna?"

I nod. "Great. Cora's very easy to work with. I'm supposed to relieve her this afternoon, but she brought her dress and is prepared to get ready at Anna's place, just in case."

"That's smart. How are you feeling staying so much with Anna? And I mean that personally and professionally. Are you ready to bolt? Do you need a break?"

"Not in the slightest. It's very easy with her."

Jim's brows rise.

"I'm not planning to marry her, so push that through your thick head and make sure your wife knows. But we get along well, and she's fun."

Jim holds up his hands. "I didn't say anything. You're just sounding like a different man than usual."

I take a deep breath. "With her, it is different."

"Does she light your fire?"

I chuckle. I know right now I'm talking to my good friend and not my boss, but I still know better than to tell him too much. I wouldn't do that to Anna. "Definitely."

"Good. Kate really liked her when she met her."

"Me too." I stand to leave. "I'll see you guys tonight."

"See you then."

I leave the action reports behind and walk back to my office. I've accomplished enough that I feel ready to grab my wallet and keys and sneak out before Stella sees me.

As I step into the elevator, I hear her call, “Clay, I can’t wait to meet your girlfriend.”

I shake my head and smile as the doors close.

I drive over to my condo and pick up my mail, which is mostly junk and a few bills, before I head up to my place.

When I open the front door, the space looks completely different. Not only do I have a couch, I have a dining room table. And the skinny table Anna bought when I was with her now sits below my TV with the electronics nicely inside. She’s added a bookshelf for my medical periodicals next to the couch and a glass coffee table. On that table is a note. “Thank you for protecting me and my mom. This isn’t nearly enough, but I hope it’s a start.”

I walk down the hall and poke my head in the guest rooms. They all look the same, so she didn’t do a complete makeover, but I like what she did. I don’t care that she gets these things at cost, though. She spent good money on this, and that’s too much.

I sit down on my bed and send her a text.

**Me: My living room looks like a magazine spread.**

**Anna: Was it too much? I didn’t touch the other rooms.**

**Me: It looks wonderful, and I will happily pay you for everything. You don’t owe me anything. I am always happy to help, and I’m enjoying the time we spend together.**

**Anna: So am I. But now that you have places to sit and eat, we can sometimes stay at your place.**



**Me: We can start tonight. I'll even put clean sheets on the bed.**

**Anna: You're hilarious. See you soon.**

**Me: See you soon.**

I move out to my new couch and flip on the television. I hate to admit, but I really do like this. I'm just going to shut my eyes for a minute.

A little while later, something startles me awake. I look around, unsure of where I am. I shake my head and finally recognize my new living room and kitchen furniture. Glancing at the time, my heart races. *I'm late.*

Grabbing my keys, I turn the TV off and race out the door. It's after four. When I get in the car, I call Anna.

"Hey, you!" she says brightly.

"I'm sorry. My new couch is so comfortable that I shut my eyes for a minute and just woke up. I'm so sorry."

She laughs. "We've not exactly been getting a lot of sleep."

I relax. "No, we haven't. But I'm not complaining."

"Neither am I. We're good here. If you want to meet me at the party, we can do that."

"No, I'm on my way. My suit is already there, and Cora needs a break to get ready."

"She's getting ready as we speak. We'll have to do something special for her."

"Agreed. I'm not that far away, so I should be there in a few."

"All good."

We disconnect and despite hitting every red light in the eight blocks to her building, it doesn't take me long to get there.

"Cora, I'm so sorry," I say as I enter.

She shakes her head. She's wearing a beautiful red dress. "Don't worry about it. Honestly, I'm glad because it saved me from driving across town to change and then back again."

"Where do you live?"

"I'm in Presidio Heights, just off Cherry and Jackson."

My brows shoot up. "Nice area."

She smiles. "My grandmother left me some money, and the bungalow was in foreclosure. It's taken some time, but I've slowly fixed it up. Most of it is sweat equity."

"What a great investment, though."

"When I lost the electricity last fall, I would have sold it to you for pennies on the dollar. Moving over to Clear Security meant I could pay to rewire the house."

"You had knob-and-tube electric?"

She nods. "I bought it as a foreclosure, so you get what you get."

"How bad was it?"

"The previous owners had ripped everything down practically to the studs, so it could have been a much harder job."

"Wow. I hope to get to see it one day."

"I'll have the management team over." She smiles.

"Sounds good," I tell her as I walk back to find Anna.

I throw my jacket on the bed and start undressing as I make my way to the bathroom. I need to shower. But I take a quick look at Anna and stop in my tracks. "You look fucking amazing. And the first guy who hits on you, I'm going to deck."

Anna wraps her arms around me. “All that matters is I’m going home with you.”

I manage the world’s quickest shower and order a car to drive us the few blocks over to Oracle Park. I’ve listened to private parties from my patio, but this will be the first time I’m on the field and enjoying the amenities.

“Welcome!” Stella says with a giant grin as we approach the welcome table.

I’m nervous, and for a moment, I don’t know why. Not because I’m here with Anna... But then it hits me. Deep down, I want Anna to like these people and them to like her. This is as close to a family as I have, and even if we’re not serious, Anna has become important to me.

I take a deep breath. “Stella, this is my date, Anna Standing.”

Anna looks at me, her brows raised. “Date?” she murmurs just loud enough for me to hear.

I smile and give her a little shrug.

“I can’t tell you how happy I am to meet you. My name is Stella Easton.” She comes around the table and gives Cora, Anna, and me each a hug. “Jim and his senior managers may think they run this place, but I’m the one who keeps everyone paid, the lights on, and their phones working.”

Anna is all smiles. “Behind every man is a woman holding him up.”

“Oh, I like you!” Stella beams. She picks up our badges and a sheet with timetables and options. “Duran Duran will be on stage just after dinner, which starts in a little over an hour. Cora, don’t forget, you agreed to be the emcee tonight.”

Cora turns to me. “That’s real? I thought they were hazing me.”

“You all will be at Jim’s table,” Stella tells us. “Nate and Lilly will be here, too.”

“That’s great,” I tell her. Nate and Lilly know Anna, but I’d like to introduce her to them again.

Anna and I step aside so the next in line can get checked in. I hear Cora ask, “Has my date arrived?”

I see Jim and Kate, and we head their way. Jim gives off such an intimidating vibe that besides a few of our team coming up and shaking his hand, he’s just standing stiffly to the side.

Kate’s eyes light up. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you,” I say.

She gives me a dirty look. “I was talking to Anna.”

“I know, but I couldn’t help myself.”

Anna and Kate wander away to get a drink and leave me to talk with Jim.

“How’s it going?” I ask.

“You snuck off today.”

“I did. I stopped by my place and fell asleep on my new couch.”

Jim smirks. “There’s a lot wrapped up in that sentence. First, you have a place to sit in your condo now?”

I grin. “Yes, while Anna and I were in Palm Springs, I found something I actually liked. And when it was delivered Anna did her magic, so now, I not only have a couch, but a coffee table, bookshelf, and some side tables. It looks very professional. Feel free to come by.”

“I’ll do that.”

I feel Nate’s hand on my shoulder before I see him. “Hey, guys!”

Jim and I give him half hugs and lots of back slaps.

“Where’s Lilly?”

“Stella and she are off with your wife,” Nate says to Jim. “And I met your girlfriend,” he tells me. “That’s new.”

Jim gives me yet another questioning look.

“She’s just my date,” I tell him. “It’s new.”

Bash and Fiona appear, and Fiona kisses me on both cheeks. “Where is the woman everyone is talking about?” she asks.

I point over to Kate, Stella, and a few other women huddled together talking. “She’s in that circle of ladies, and she has a friend who’s been trying to reach you about some work,” I tell her. “If you aren’t interested, let me know, and I’ll break it to her.”

“If she has someone she’d like me to talk to, I don’t mind.” Fiona smiles. “I’ll go find out.”

The guys and I fall into conversation about several things going on with some of Clear’s more challenging clients. Nate is probably the wealthiest client we have, but here, he’s one of us.

Then Stella gets on the speakers and calls everyone to dinner. We sit in a tent on the field that has easily fifty tables for ten people each, and beyond that, there’s a stage in the outfield. Cora welcomes everyone, and dinner is served. We begin with a fancy salad with shaved asparagus and dried cranberries. Then there’s butternut squash soup, a rack of lamb with squashed potatoes and roasted winter vegetables, and dessert is a nice cheesecake.

When most of us have finished, Cora’s voice comes back over the mic. “The bowling alley is ready, there are dugout tours, and the bar is open. Duran Duran will be on in...” She looks at her wrist. “...less than twenty minutes, and before you leave at the end of the night, you need to see Jenna. She has your holiday gift bags.”

There are a few squeals for Duran Duran, but I think most of the guys are going to be more thrilled with their holiday gift. Jim told me the bags have Submariner watches linked to the office, new iPhones, and some holiday candy, but the biggest treat is a check. Each employee will get a bonus worth at least a month’s salary.

“I like the people you work with,” Anna says as she pushes her dessert plate away and snuggles into me.

“They’re pretty great.”

People keep dropping by the table, and I catch a few of the guys checking out Anna, but a dirty look keeps them away. I’m feeling very territorial.

Duran Duran opens with “Girls on Film,” and Stella told me earlier they’re going to play for two hours. I like their music, but I like it more when Anna leans over and whispers in my ear. “I’d love to see your new place.”

I grin. “The designer did an impressive job.”

We say our goodbyes to everyone at the table, and as instructed, we stop at Jenna’s booth on the way out.

“This is for you,” she says as she hands over my bag. “Thank you for all the work you did for Clear this year, on top of your work at the hospital.”

“I’m happy to do it.”

I lace my fingers with Anna’s, and we walk out the front gates and right down the block to my condo.

“You have a great group of friends and coworkers,” she tells me.

“They really liked you.”

Anna smiles. “Fiona is going to call Maria, and some of the women invited me to join them for lunch after the new year.”

“Did you agree to go?”

“Of course. Why would I miss that?”

As we ride the elevator up to my floor, I step in and kiss her. She tastes like cheesecake, and suddenly, I have a desire to smear it all over her and lick it off. I’ll have to plan for that another time.

We collapse in my bed. “I really love what you did with my place,” I tell her. “It seems to capture my personality. And all this time, I thought the lawn chair was perfect.”

She giggles, her fingers tracing a trail down my chest.  
“The couch is the statement piece, which is always the hardest.  
Once you have that nailed down, the rest comes together.”

I hold her until her breathing evens out and she falls  
asleep, and somehow everything seems right.





## CHAPTER 17

# *Anna*

Clay sighs. “I know I said I’d do this, but now, I’m getting worried. If Henry doesn’t like me, are you sure introducing us is a good idea?”

“It’s going to be fine. It was *his* idea.” I fix my hair with a sparkly barrette and turn to look at him. “Just like you wanted your friends to like me, I want my friend to like you.”

He smiles. “Okay. I will do my best. Where are we headed for dinner?”

“I told you already.”

“I know. I was just hoping the location had changed.”

“Why?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. A Chinese restaurant on Waverly? We live in a city with phenomenal hole-in-the-wall Chinese food.”

I kiss the tip of his nose. “Mister Jiu’s has a Michelin star, but you’ll still be okay. And Moongate upstairs has some fun drinks.”

“I’m giving you a hard time.” He smirks. “We can compare it to Jade Palace in Chinatown.”

I shake my head. “Nothing compares to Jade Palace and their Szechuan green beans.”

His eyes grow big. “Those are so good there.”

“This is one of Henry’s favorite places,” I explain.  
“We’ll go to Jade Palace later this week.”

I know he’s going to enjoy Mister Jiu’s, but he’s trying to prepare himself for not getting along with Henry. I’ve warned Henry he can’t pick a fight. He will lose if he does. Henry is a bit of a wimp, if I’m being honest, but our friendship will also be over. And that would be a loss for both of us.

“It’s a good thing I like you so much,” Clay says, nibbling on my neck.

I roll my eyes. “Let’s go before you talk me into getting naked with you.”

“You’re going to owe me.”

I tuck holiday gifts for Henry and Patrice under my arm. “That was your plan all along, wasn’t it?”

He smirks. “I’ll never tell.”

We head downstairs, and after a short drive, our driver drops us off at the top of Waverly Avenue, a little alley that’s closed to traffic and filled with nice restaurants and high-end boutiques.

We walk to our destination and up the elegant stairs to Moongate, where we’re meeting for drinks to start. “They have six cocktails that rotate with the lunar calendar, six standard cocktails that are always on the menu, and a wine selection.”

“But they have whiskey, too?”

“I’m pretty sure. You can ask.”

He rolls his eyes.

I lace my fingers with his. “I will give you one of those BJs you’re so fond of if you can be a good sport about this.”

He looks at me, his face serious. “You don’t have to do that. I’m here to meet your best friend and make sure he likes me.”

I squeeze his hand and turn to wave to Henry and Patrice. “Hello,” I say as we approach.

Henry stands and hugs me, and Patrice purses her lips as if she just took a bite of a lemon.

“You didn’t tell me we were meeting Anna and a friend,” she chastises. When she looks over at Clay, the hair on the back of my neck stands up. “How do I know you?” she asks. She’s suddenly friendlier than I’ve ever seen her, and I’m not sure what to make of that.

“I work at San Francisco General and for Clear Security,” Clay offers.

Henry extends his hand to Clay, and they shake. “It’s great to finally meet you. I owe you a debt of gratitude for taking care of Anna during that avalanche.”

“It was my pleasure,” Clay says with a smile.

We sit down, and the server appears to set cocktails in front of Henry and Patrice. Both have paper umbrellas. I’m in so much trouble. I’m a sucker for those.

“What would you like?” the server asks Clay and me.

“What are you having?” Clay asks Henry.

“It’s one of the seasonal drinks,” Henry says as he tosses the paper umbrella aside. “It has tequila, amaro, which is an Italian bitter liquor like Campari, and blood orange.”

“My drink is like a strawberry daiquiri with a bite.” Patrice smiles at Clay.

I’m about ready to throw down with her. She’s never been remotely that pleasant to me.

“I’ll have the same thing he’s having,” Clay says.

The server turns to me. “I’ll have the Crouching Tiger,” I tell him.

“What’s in that?” Clay asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I made a quick decision. You can try it when it arrives.” I lean back and admire the lotus

flower accents and bright décor.

“So what do you do at the hospital?” Henry asks.

I’m a bit irritated, because I’ve told Henry this already, but I suppose it’s a way to ease into conversation.

“I’m an emergency room physician.”

“That sounds stressful,” Patrice coos.

My eyes leap to Henry. Why isn’t he reacting to her? She’s ridiculous. Then Clay’s hand finds my thigh, and I feel calm enveloping me.

“It can be,” Clay says. “But before that I was in the Navy and assigned to a group of Marine Corps Raiders in the field, so everything is calm in comparison.”

“Is it a regular job?” Henry asks.

Clay tilts his head, as if trying to figure out what he’s asking.

“I mean, do you have a set schedule you follow?”

“Sort of. We have a schedule that comes out quarterly. I work five, twelve-hour days a month, and I pick up the additional shifts when someone isn’t feeling well or needs time off.”

The server returns with our drinks, and we thank him as he disappears again. I take a sip and it’s perfect—a nice blend of rum and passionfruit. I should order by name alone more often...

“Wow, you can live in San Francisco on that income?” Patrice challenges.

“I do okay,” Clay says, and to me, his smile seems a little forced. “As I mentioned, I also have a second job with a security company.”

Patrice sets her glass down and nearly jumps out of her chair. “I know where I know you from! You were *San Francisco Magazine’s* most eligible bachelor. And you dated my friend Terese for a minute.”

Clay closes his eyes a moment. “They did do an article about me. It came out in September, and it’s sent a lot more attention my way than I expected. The hospital convinced me it was good publicity.”

Patrice laughs. She picks up her phone and begins texting. After a moment, Henry leans over. I know he hates phones at the table. She puts it away and gives us a closed-mouth smile.

“Anna tells me you’re an attorney,” Clay says to Henry. “What kind of law do you practice?”

“Employment law mostly.”

“Do a lot of people sue their employer?”

Henry nods and proceeds to tell several stories that have us all laughing. When it gets close to eight o’clock, the server reappears to let us know our table is ready downstairs. Clay picks up the tab, and we’re escorted to Mister Jiu’s.

The meal is served family style, and Henry and Clay settle into a discussion about golf and the different courses they’ve played. By the end of the night, they seem to be getting along fine, and Patrice and I have caught up some, though she’s still not nearly as excited about me as she is Clay.

Henry pays for dinner, and as we’re saying goodbye, he and Clay agree to meet for a golf game after the holidays.

I hand over their gifts, and Henry and Patrice disappear down the sidewalk. Clay and I hop in a rideshare to return to my place. “What did you think?” I ask him as the car pulls away.

“He still wants to sleep with you, but he’s a decent enough guy.”

I laugh. “You’re kind. I’m glad you were able to find things to talk about.”

“Why is he with Patrice?” Clay asks.

I shrug. “Seems like she’s the perfect partner for someone who works the way he does, though I think she’d like

to be his wife. She's thin, cultured, and comes from money, so she fits in nicely at the law firm events."

His brow furrows. "She's not thin, she's anorexic."

"Whatever. Semantics. But she's devoted to him. Henry prefers a woman who's giving him a hundred percent of her attention."

"I don't even know why I care," Clay says with a sigh. "I have you, and that's all that matters."

I'm processing what exactly he means by that when my phone pings with a text.

**Henry: It was great to see you with Clay tonight. I was wrong. I can tell he really cares for you. The next few weeks will be crazy, but let's try to catch up after Patrice and I return from Paris.**

**Me: It was fun tonight. And thanks for saying that. I really like him, and it's a little scary. You let me know when you have time to get together.**

**Henry: Thanks for the small batch bourbon. Tell Clay he'll have to drink it with me. And Patrice loves the porcelain elephant. It will look great in her collection.**

**Me: I love the bracelet. It's perfect. Thank you.**

"Who are you talking to?" Clay asks.

"Henry. He was telling me he's happy for me." I show him the text exchange so it's clear I have nothing to hide.

Clay smiles. "Tonight was better than I thought it would be."

"It was fun. But I have to admit, Patrice was the most animated I'd ever seen her. She definitely likes you more than

she likes me, especially once she figured out who you were.”

Clay leans his head all the way back. “I swear, that article is going to be the end of me. It’s ridiculous the amount of attention I’ve gotten—and not the good kind of attention.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.” I raise an eyebrow. “The constant pinging of your phone makes me nuts.”

“Well, I do receive legitimate calls and messages, you know,” he fires back, shoving his fingers through his hair.

That’s not what I’m talking about, and he knows it. Evidently, I’ve hit a sore spot. *Good*. He’s always so sneaky when he gets those random messages. Maybe he’s embarrassed? Or hiding something? Ugh. See? Nuts.

“I’ve changed my number, and I delete the messages,” he continues before I have a chance to respond.

He’s definitely defensive now. “I know that’s not why you did the article.” I force myself to chuckle and try to relax. I don’t want to pick a fight. “You’re very cute when you get worked up.”

He huffs and crosses his arms as we arrive at my place. He follows me upstairs without making a scene, but once the door is shut, he leans over and kisses me fiercely. “I’ll show you worked up.”

I reach for his hand and pull him back to my room. “I think I promised to suck your cock for going tonight.”

“I think we can make that reciprocal, a little sixty-nine action.”

“You’re so naughty.”

“I haven’t even begun to corrupt you.”

A shiver goes through me. “What are you waiting for?”

Before I know it, Clay has flipped me around and whipped off my clothes. Two orgasms later, he snuggles up close, spooning me until he snores softly in my ear. But my mind has other plans for me.

I trace my fingers over his bicep as I think. Clay is different from the men I usually date. I've always fallen for guys who are confident and have some sort of domineering career plans. But they seem to want someone like Patrice—a woman who needs them. I wanted them to be part of my life, but in a more abstract way, not financially or to give my life meaning.

Clay has confidence in spades, but he seems to embrace my independence. And that makes spending time with him feel effortless—at least mostly. Then his phone starts pinging, and my mind starts spinning. There are so many good things about him, but maybe not enough. I don't deserve to have to deal with that.

I suppose it's not really his fault that these messages keep coming. But then why is he so secretive about them? Does he really delete them all? Do I have any right to ask?

For that matter, why do I even care? Why do they bother me so much? I should just ignore them, like he does. I do just fine on my own, so there's no reason I need to know everything about Clay's life.

Maybe everything going on lately just has me rattled, and that's why I can't think straight. I'm not sure what it is or what it means, but I haven't felt this way about a man in a very long time.





## CHAPTER 18

### *Anna*

The next morning, I stretch and find myself alone in bed. I'm not sure where Clay could have needed to be on a Sunday morning, so I walk out of my room to look for him. I spot someone in my living room, but it's definitely not Clay. Another look tells me I met this guy briefly at the Clear Security holiday party, and I race back to my room to put more clothes on.

"Sorry about that, ma'am," he says when I reappear, his hands clasped in front of him. "Dr. McGrath stepped out to get a run in and asked me to be here. He should be back shortly. He asked me to tell you he thought you might enjoy a trip to the farmer's market and some breakfast once he returns."

"Oh. Okay. Thank you." I walk toward the kitchen. "I'm sorry. I know we met, but I don't remember your name."

"Stuart Rhodes."

"Thanks, Stuart. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks. I've had my maximum already."

"You have a maximum allotment of caffeine?"

"Yes, ma'am. No more than sixteen ounces a day."

My eyes pop wide. “Okay then. There’s water, Italian soda, and fruit juice in the fridge. Help yourself.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Stuart goes back to where he was when I first walked out of the bedroom. I know I’m not supposed to be alone, but I wish Clay would have warned me.

After my *first* sixteen ounces of coffee, I head for the shower. I guess if we’re going to the farmer’s market, I need to be ready and dressed. The shower is probably not a requirement, but I know I’ll feel better.

Still no sign of Clay after I’ve gotten ready, so I use the time to call my mom and check in.

“Hi,” she says, sounding chipper.

“Hello! Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Oh no. I’m just getting ready to meet up with Hamish. We’re going out to Indio to see the date farms. He’s promised me date nut ice cream.”

“Wow. Okay. I didn’t know there were a lot of dates in the high desert, but I guess it makes sense.” I pause a moment. “Speaking of dates, are you and Hamish dating?”

She snorts a laugh, but doesn’t speak, and for a moment, I’m afraid she’s not going to answer me. “No,” she finally says. “Neither of us is interested in dating, but we enjoy hanging out together, so it works.”

I sit down in a chair in my bedroom and look at the sliver of the Bay I can see. “I think it’s nice you have someone to spend time with.”

“When are you and Clay coming down for Christmas?”

“It’ll be just me,” I tell her. “Clay is working on Christmas Day.”

“Maybe Hamish and I should come there. He was hoping to spend Christmas with Clay. Have you booked a flight?”

“No, I was planning on driving down and maybe delivering your car.”

“Hmmm... I think it might be nice to be home for Christmas,” she tells me. “I love Union Square and the tree and the fun things to do. I’m getting along well with Bitsy, though, and I do want to stay here. But I may try to find my own place to rent.”

“You can do whatever you’d like,” I assure her. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

She’s quiet a moment, and I know she’d be even happier if Charles was home for Christmas. I want to tell her about my conversation with him, but it would just worry her.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you what happened the other day,” she says.

She then regales me with almost forty minutes of stories about all the things she’s been doing with her friends and Hamish. This move has definitely been good for her. She hasn’t been this happy since before Dad passed.

Finally, I’m able to wind the conversation down. “I’ll talk to you in a few days,” I assure her. “Let me know if you need me to drive down and pick you up.”

“Don’t count on it,” she says. “But I will.”

I hang up just as Clay walks in. He’s dressed in jeans and a Henley, not workout clothes, and he looks at me as he speaks into his phone. “I’ll have to call you back,” he says before disconnecting the call.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“Yes, everything is fine. It’s good to see you up.”

“You wore me out last night.”

Clay is still standing on the other side of the room. He doesn’t approach me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“Is it Charles? Have you learned something?”

“No, really, it’s nothing.”

“Stuart mentioned you were working out this morning.”

“Oh, yeah, that was the plan, but instead, I just ran home and showered and changed.”

I wait for him to elaborate, but he doesn’t. I don’t know what that means. “If today is too much for you and you need a break, I will promise to stay in and not go anywhere. You don’t have to worry about me.”

He shakes his head. “No, that’s why Stuart is here. I’m going in to the hospital today, covering for someone who’s leaving early. But I don’t have to go until two. I thought we could walk the farmer’s market and grab some breakfast.”

I look at him a moment, trying to decide how to feel about this. “Okay, let’s do it,” I finally say.

He nods. “I’m trying to find someone to come in this evening to be with you. Stuart is only available for the day.”

He does want a break. My heart plummets. “You don’t think you’ll be back? Is it a full twelve-hour shift?”

“Well, no. I only work until eight. I just thought I’d go home afterward. Let us both get some sleep.” He looks away.

“Oh... Well, that makes sense, I guess.” I stand up and grab my bag, though I don’t feel much like going anymore. I can’t pout, though. We don’t live together. He keeps me safe, and that’s work. I should keep my eyes clear about our situation.

We take the elevator down, leaving Stuart at my place, and walk along the waterfront. Clay laces his fingers with mine. “I’m going to miss you today.”

*Okay, what now?* I feel like I have whiplash. I suppose all I can do is be honest. “You know you can always come back after your shift. I like having you around.”

“Thank you, but it hardly seems fair to just show up and sleep in your bed every night.”

“Okay...” If that’s how he feels about it, maybe a little space would do us good. I take a slow breath and change the subject. “I spoke with my mom while you were gone.”

“And how is she doing? Feeling a little homesick?”

“No... I think it’s mostly quite the opposite. She seems to be having a great time there, though she did say she wanted to come back for Christmas. When I told her you were working, she said your dad had really wanted to spend Christmas with you. So her new plan is that she’ll come up here with your dad.”

Clay stops and turns to look at me. “Are they dating now?”

“I asked that same question, but you’re safe. She said neither one of them was interested in dating, so they’re just enjoying each other’s company. I think they’re developing a nice friendship.”

Clay nods, but he still looks skeptical. “My dad doesn’t do friendships. I’ll have a talk with him. This holiday plan sounds a little shady.”

I can feel my eyes widen. “Oh, okay. Well, if he isn’t going to drive her back, I can go down and get her. That’s not a problem.” Clay is putting up walls as fast as he can, it seems. Have I done something to make him wary? At this point, I can’t tell how much of this is work for him, what’s genuine interest in me, and what’s a convenient way to get laid. There’s been so much drama in such a short time. Maybe this has all moved way too fast for us.

We wander through the various stalls of the farmer’s market, and I try to just be present and enjoy the moment for what it is. The winter pickings aren’t as nice as the summer, but I buy some bread and a delicious-looking cheese. When I check my watch, it’s almost one o’clock. “Where did the morning go?” I wonder aloud. “I don’t think you have time for brunch or lunch.”

Clay's shoulders fall. "No, I really don't." We turn and begin the walk back to my building. "I might get a dinner break tonight," he says after a few minutes. "Do you want to risk it? I'll know by five what the evening is going to look like, if you're interested. I can text you."

I try to school my face so my utter confusion is not so apparent. He pushed me away earlier, and now he's pulling me back? But again, I try to be honest about what I want. "Okay. That might work. You can text me if it's okay to come. I'll assume you're too busy if I don't hear from you."

He nods. "That's great."

Maybe he's struggling as much as I am. Maybe this feels different for both of us. He just doesn't seem ready to talk about it, so I don't know exactly how to proceed. But I'm going to be clear about what I want. If he's free for dinner, I'd love to join him. I'm not interested in playing games.

Clay drops me back at home, and I spend the afternoon finishing my decorating for the holidays and working on my tree. Clay had mentioned wanting to help, but if he's going to be busy like this, it makes sense just to do it myself. It's only a couple weeks until Christmas.

At quarter to five I still haven't heard from Clay, so I pull out the takeout menus and ask Stuart if he's hungry, but he says he's not. I suppose that's just as well because nothing looks good. Then I remember a frozen container of lobster bisque. Toasting the bread and brie I got today could work with the soup for a decadent dinner. As I pull out all my ingredients, my phone pings.

**Clay: I know I'm late, but if you're still up for coming to the hospital, we can escape to the cafeteria and have a Mitchel-starred dinner.**

**Me: Mitchel starred? I'm there. Let me check with Stuart and find out the changing of the guard plan.**

**Clay: They work around you. Not the other way around.**

“Stuart?” I call as I put everything away.

He comes to the doorway of my kitchen. “Yes, ma’am?”

“I’m going over to the hospital to meet Clay for dinner. What is the change in shifts looking like?”

“Cora is meeting me at six. But she can meet us at the hospital or anywhere else.”

“Okay, let’s get our stuff together, and we can get going.”

**Me: We’re leaving shortly.**

Clay doesn’t respond, but I’m okay with that. I grab my e-reader just in case I need to wait for him.

When I arrive at the hospital, Clay introduces me around. “Kiley, this is my girlfriend, Anna. Anna, this is Kiley, my favorite nurse.”

Her eyebrows arch as she looks at Clay and then turns to me with a giant grin. “Great to meet you.”

“I know, I don’t use the term *girlfriend* often,” Clay says.

“Or ever.” Kiley snickers. “I’m so happy to witness this.”

“Wait,” says a woman in scrubs with a stethoscope around her neck. “Did Dr. McGrath just introduce someone as his girlfriend?”

I blush. “I didn’t realize this was such a big deal.”

“Yes,” Clay says with a smile. “I want to introduce you to my girlfriend, Anna Standing. Anna, this is Sheri Thompson. She’s the other physician on this evening.”



I smile, but the woman gets a strange look on her face. “Standing?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Any relation to Charlie Standing?”

I nod. “He’s my older brother, although he came home from Princeton for Christmas his freshman year and informed us we were to call him Charles. My dad immediately started calling him Chucky.”

Sheri laughs. “I love it. That’s perfect.”

“How do you know him?”

“We went to school together. I had the biggest crush on him in high school. What is he doing these days?”

“He’s doing some work in Shanghai for our family business. But I hope he’ll be coming home sometime soon.”

Her eyes light up. “Is he single?”

I nod. “I think so. At least there isn’t anyone serious enough that he’d bring her back.”

She laughs. “He always had a long trail of girls behind him when we were in school.”

“My mom called him the pied piper.” I jack my finger toward Clay. “I bet he was the same.”

“Jeez, he still has a trail of them chasing after him.” She shakes her head. “I got a patient today who came in with abdominal pain and was disappointed she got me.”

I roll my eyes. “He told me that happens, but I thought he was exaggerating.”

“Oh, Anna, we need to have lunch after the new year,” she tells me. “And I’ve got to hear more about Charlie.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll get your information from Clay.”

Clay squeezes my hand as we continue down the hall. I get a few dirty looks, and if I had to guess, these are women he’s slept with. Despite wanting to quiz Kiley about that, I try

to caution myself. He's been acting off all day. Before, he couldn't get away from me fast enough, and now, he's all possessive. This isn't what I want long term, and I need to remember that, not get carried away. I take a deep breath.

We finally find ourselves in front of the elevators and take them to the basement of the building. "That's a small world," he notes.

I nod. "For the most part, kids who grew up here in the City either know each other or there's less than three degrees of separation."

"I like learning these things about you." He brings our clasped hands to his mouth and kisses my knuckles as we get in the cafeteria line to order.

This is too much. I shake my head and resist the urge to pull away. "Why did you call me your girlfriend?"

He shrugs. "It seemed right. Did that bother you?"

"Just seems like something we would have talked about first. I'm not always sure where we stand."

"I'm—I'm sorry," he stutters.

We get to the front of the line, which stops our conversation. I can't decide if I'm being a bitch or just have a bit of whiplash from the way he's been today.

After we order, we take our trays to a table in the corner. Clay looks up at me and smiles as we settle in, and I see no trace of the uneasiness I felt from him earlier today. But I have to ask. "What was going on this morning?"

His fork pauses on the way to his mouth. "I'm sorry. I, uh, talked to my mom, and she was bothered by something I did."

"Which was?"

He looks away, and a stunning woman walks over. "Clay. So great to see you again."

"Hello."

“I was hoping to run into you. The hospital holiday party is tomorrow. Are you going?”

His eyes shift. “I’m working, but I will probably stop by.”

“Great, I’ll save you a seat at the administration table. I was telling Tim Banks all about you, and he’s very anxious to meet you.”

“I’ve met the CEO before.” Clay’s voice is cold and even.

“Come on.” She arches her back, pushing her breasts against her sweater. “He can’t remember everyone. There are over two thousand employees in the hospital. This could mean advancement for you. Don’t you want to be the head of emergency medicine one day?”

Clay shifts in his seat. “Let me introduce you to my girlfriend, Anna Standing.”

She seems to notice me sitting here for the first time but hardly pays any attention. After a cursory smile, she turns back to Clay. “Well, I’ll save you a seat so you can talk to him. I know he’ll love you as much as I do.”

Clay shakes his head. “If I come, it will be just to drop by. I won’t be able to stay.” His phone pings. “In fact, I need to get back now.” Clay looks at me. “I’m sorry. Stop by before you leave, and I’ll say goodbye.” He grabs his tray and jets.

The woman remains standing at our table, watching him go. She turns to me. “Isn’t he an amazing lover?”

I don’t know how to respond to that, but I can feel my eyes widen. She gives me a pointed look and flips her hair over her shoulder before she walks out of the cafeteria. As my eyes follow, they land on Cora, sitting a few tables away. I wonder how long she’s been here. I wave her over. “Do you mind sitting with me while I finish my dinner?”

“No problem.” She sits down. “That woman was a piece of work.”

I nod.

“You know, I noticed Clay introduced you to several people tonight, including her, but he didn’t call her by name. I don’t think he could remember it.”

That makes me smile. She’s right. “Thank you. Just what I needed to hear.”



## CHAPTER 19

# *Clay*

I hate that Anna came all the way to the hospital to have dinner with me, and we didn't even get to have a meaningful conversation. I'm glad I got to introduce her around, but it was more of a spectacle than anything else. I was planning on going back to my place after work tonight to get some rest, since that's not what happens when I sleep with Anna, but now, I need to make sure she's okay.

When I arrive at her condo, it's just after ten. Cora is there, but the house is quiet and mostly dark.

"How is she doing?" I ask.

"As soon as we got home, she shut herself in her room," Cora says softly.

"I had an emergency. I had to go." I try to think of how I could have done things differently. I hate having an audience in those moments. "I could tell she was upset, but everyone she met loved her. Did that nitwit from the hospital public relations team say something to her?"

Cora gives me a half-smile, and I know she did.

"Let me know when you need me," Cora says as she walks out the door.

I pour myself some liquid courage in the form of a glass of whiskey and prepare for what may be a tough conversation.

I can see a little light under the door, so after knocking softly, I enter Anna's bedroom. She's in bed with her side table lamp on and her tablet in her lap. My guess, or really my hope, is that she's reading. She wasn't expecting me, but she doesn't seem especially pleased by the surprise.

"Hey. Thanks for coming to the hospital tonight," I tell her. "I know we didn't get to talk much, but it was great to see you, and I enjoyed introducing you to my coworkers."

She gives me a tight smile. "I know I sound jealous, but I could tell which of them you've slept with."

My pulse spikes. "What?"

"The ones who weren't so excited to meet your *girlfriend*."

*Is that true?* "Well, I don't care. I was proud to show them I'm crazy about you. I didn't want to hide you or pretend we were just friends with benefits."

She's quiet a moment. "As I mentioned earlier, I'm having trouble reading your mood lately, so it's hard to tell where I stand. I know part of the time you spend with me is for work. Sometimes, it's hard to tell how much." She looks up at me, and when I don't immediately respond, she fires off another question. "What was the name of the woman in the cafeteria? You didn't introduce her."

I shake my head. How have I made such a mess of this? "She's in the PR department. I can never remember her name. She and some of the nurses were the ones who sold the hospital on the bachelor-article thing."

"You slept with her and don't know her name?"

My eyes pop wide. "We went out for drinks once and had a make-out session, but I didn't sleep with her."

Anna sighs. "It doesn't matter. I'm sounding all possessive and jealous, and I don't mean to be. You don't owe

me an explanation.”

I don't like hearing her say that, but I also don't know how to respond. I think about the level of comfort Anna and I have with one another. I've always thought that was mutual, but she thinks I'm just here because I'm working? Is that why I've found this so easy? I have an excuse to be with her?

Deep down, I know that's not the case. I feel differently about her because *she's* different than any other woman I've known.

I take a deep breath and look up at her. “Anna, I'm spending time with you because I want to. I know we came together under crazy circumstances, and my work is part of that, but it's not the reason I'm here. I want to keep you safe, but for reasons that have nothing to do with Clear Security. I keep doing this all wrong, but I want you to be my girlfriend. This is more than just fun for me, and I hope it is for you too. I want you to know you matter to me, even if I'm still trying to understand that myself. I don't have any good examples when it comes to relationships. Before my parents separated, every day my mom exploded about something. Looking back, I know it's because my dad had not been faithful to her. They couldn't get along. And then they moved on to new relationships, and I often felt like the ugly reminder of a mistake they made. They loved me, but even in their new relationships, they're broken. My mom keeps her husband on a tight leash. She doesn't want him to do what my dad did to her. And my dad moves from one woman to the next, always looking for the next shiny object. That's what I was doing until I met you.”

She sighs. “Thank you for saying that. I'm sorry my insecurities are making things difficult. I'm trying to be honest with you, but I can't always see things clearly.”

“Well, when a woman I've *not* slept with tells you otherwise, I think it's fair to feel confused.”

She nods, and we're both quiet for a few minutes, lost in our thoughts. I want to be the kind of man she deserves, to have a relationship like her parents had. I've never been sure I



was made that way. But with her, I feel different. I don't miss having someone new to chase. I like having someone know me. I hope my past hasn't ruined that chance, because I don't see an end with Anna. I think I want this to be just the beginning.



The smell of coffee invades my senses long before I'm willing to open my eyes. I roll over and find the bed next to me cold and empty. With one eye, I look at the clock on her nightstand. It's after ten. I hate doing one-off shifts like I did yesterday. I can never find a rhythm like I do when I have a week of work at the hospital, and I lose a chunk of the next day to recovery. I roll back over, but eventually the smell of bacon joins the coffee and pulls me out into the kitchen.

"I was hoping something would wrestle you from your sleep," Anna says with a smile.

"Sorry." I yawn and scratch my head. "I'm off kilter after yesterday's shift."

Anna looks at me, apologetic. "Oh, I'm sorry. I guess I was playing dirty with the bacon and coffee, then."

I pull her to me. "Never. It'll be good for me to get up and enjoy the day with you."

"How would you like your eggs this morning? I have that bread from the farmer's market yesterday that should make nice toast."

"Whatever is easiest. Scrambled is fine."

Anna goes about breaking the eggs, and just looking at her puts a smile on my face. She seems very determined.

"What do you have going on today?" I ask. "Are you done with your Christmas shopping?"

She looks over her shoulder. "I'm almost done. I already sent some things to Charles, but I still wish, somehow, he could be home."

“I can’t believe Sheri knew your brother from high school.”

She nods. “I know! I’ll need to get him over to see her. She’s single it seemed like.”

Her matchmaking might be a little ahead of itself here. “As you know, the crazy hours of emergency medicine aren’t exactly the best for relationships. Sheri works three twelves every week.”

“Three twelves?”

“Three twelve-hour days.”

Anna pours the eggs onto a plate just as the toast pops up. After placing the plate in front of me, she butters the toast.

“You’re not having any?” I ask as she sits down with a cup of coffee.

“I ate at seven thirty.”

“I’m sorry. That wasn’t being a very good bodyguard.”

She waves that away. “I spoke with Cora this morning, and she told me if I wanted to go out, she’d come back over or Clear could send someone down from upstairs. Tinsley has two guys, and she’s home wrapping gifts today.”

I nod. “That’s good. I’m glad you didn’t feel trapped because I’m a lazy bum.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re about as far away from lazy as you can get. You work at the hospital and in Clear’s office, and now, you’re working with me on top of that. I’m sure that’s exhausting. If you would prefer to go home and rest after you’ve been at the hospital, you should do that. It’s like you’re working all the time if you’re with me.”

“I don’t feel that way at all. Even if you didn’t need someone here, I’d want to be with you. There’s no place I’d rather be than with my girlfriend.” I take a few bites of my breakfast. “This is really good. Thank you. I’m feeling spoiled.”

She nods but doesn’t otherwise respond.

“So what are your plans today?” I ask after a moment.

“I have a few things I could do, but nothing urgent. I suppose my schedule is fairly open.”

“How about a hike over in Muir Woods?” I offer. Muir Woods is just across the Golden Gate Bridge and is known for its towering old-growth redwood trees and trails that wind among them. “We can climb the hillside for views of the Pacific Ocean and Mount Tamalpais.”

She seems to think about it a moment and then shrugs. “Sure. Why not?”

“How about we order a picnic lunch from the Muir Woods Trading Company? I can be ready in twenty minutes, and we can pick up lunch on our way into the park.”

“All I have are sneakers,” Anna warns. “I don’t have any hiking boots.”

“That’s all I have, too.”

She raises a brow.

“I have combat boots, but I’m wearing running shoes for this.”

I shower and dress in a Henley and jeans. I pull on a fleece and return to find Anna has on an Irish wool sweater and has pulled her hair off her face. She looks beautiful. “Shall we go?”

She nods, and I direct her to my truck. Once we’re in, I let Clear know where we’re going, and we head out across the Golden Gate. The sun is shining, and the weather is cool but not cold. After a quick stop at the Muir Woods Trading Company just inside the park, we have our lunch, and the day is ours.

Parking is fairly empty, so I find a spot up close. I fill a backpack with water and our lunch—plus a few other supplies—and we start off on a meandering walk through the forest. I reach for Anna’s hand, and my phone buzzes in my pocket, but I ignore it.

“It’s unbelievable how close we are to San Francisco, yet it feels like a different world,” Anna says as she looks up into the giant trees.

“I love this park. It reminds me of where I grew up. My mom’s house backed up to a wooded area, and I spent a lot of time hiking and playing in the woods.”

“Is that why you were part of the Raiders group with Jim and Nate?”

I step around a tree root. “Nope, that was pure luck. I told you about why I was in the Navy, but getting assigned to their group was a chance opportunity, and a rare one at that. But it cemented relationships I’ll have for the rest of my life.”

Anna shakes her head. “I’ve never had anything like that. My best friend from high school moved to Colorado, and we rarely talk. She’s a school librarian and married to a guy who goes everywhere with her and even orders for her in restaurants. I want nothing like that. My closest friends from college are all married, and those who studied interior design looked at the work as a way to snag a wealthy husband. I didn’t want that either.”

“What do you want?” I ask.

She looks away. “I think I gave up wanting something a long time ago. I’m just enjoying my life as best I can.”

I don’t know quite what to make of that. But something tells me not to push her. Maybe I need to give this some time to unfold. That’s a new one for me for sure.

When we get to the crest of the hill, I break out a blanket and we eat our lunch. Rather than force her to talk, we just banter a little about our favorite hole-in-the-wall spots in the City.

“Everyone talks about all these fancy restaurants, but maybe because I grew up here, I love the clam chowder in the bread bowls you get on Fisherman’s Wharf,” Anna says.

“Those are good. But that’s canned clam chowder. I love Pier Market Seafood’s cioppino, with crispy bread for the broth,” I reply.

“I usually go to Sotto Mare in North Beach.” Anna takes a big bite of her chicken salad sandwich. “This meal is pretty good though.”

I nod.

Once we’ve finished, we pack everything back up and walk a little ways in silence.

“What do you read?” she asks.

“Mostly medical journals. I haven’t read fiction in a long time. I read the biographies of the presidents a few years ago.”

“No wonder you read so little. None of that is interesting.” She knocks her hip against mine.

“What do you read?”

“I love reading fiction. I can go for steamy, sweet, or middle-of-the-road romance. And I like a good mystery. Nancy Drew was my favorite growing up—that and the Babysitters Club.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a couple I’ve seen a few different times today. They were behind us as we hiked to the lookout, and now they’re back. I have a gun in my backpack, but it won’t do me any good now. I also have a knife strapped to my ankle.

“Tell me about your favorite story,” I encourage her.

Anna talks while I continue to assess what those two are doing. They’re not looking at the scenery or talking to one another. I don’t think they’re a couple. I need to get to my gun. We enter a clearing where there’s a bench. I motion for Anna to sit down.

“You haven’t heard a word I said,” she tells me.

I put my arm around her and nuzzle close so I can whisper in her ear. “We’re being followed.”

Anna looks around, but I reach for her and begin kissing her. She’s hesitant at first, but eventually gives in. I break the kiss and stare into her eyes. “You trust me?”

She nods.

I reach into the backpack and quickly move the Glock to my coat pocket. “Ready?”

“Sure,” Anna squeaks.

We continue our walk back to my truck and get in. As we’re pulling out of the parking lot, I see them get in a black Cadillac Escalade. As we drive the winding roads back to the interstate, I keep one eye on my rearview mirror and another on the road ahead, with glances at Anna in between. “We’re going to be okay.” I assure her.

She takes a deep breath.

We’re coming to the most harrowing part of the drive—steep cliffs above the water. The Escalade appears behind us and increases its speed. I push my car as fast as it can go. Anna holds on tight, and when I glance over, I can see the terror on her face.

But I’ve got this. “Anna, tell me again about your favorite book.”

“You didn’t listen the last time.”

“I’m sorry about that, but—” The back window of my truck shatters. “Get down!”

I push hard on the accelerator and try to reach someone at Clear, but because of the size of the trees, my mobile phone doesn’t have good enough reception. The Escalade gains on me, and I realize what they’re trying to do. If they can nudge my back bumper, they could send us spinning out of control—off the edge of the cliff.

“Anna, don’t look so worried. We’re going to be fine. I’m good at being under pressure.”

As we crest the big hill, I move to the center of the two-lane road. The trees whiz by in a blur. I zig and then zag. They bump us from behind, and Anna gasps. Her beautiful blonde hair flutters around her face.

I reach for her hand. “We’re going to be fine.”

“What if we pull over and stop?”

I shake my head. “They could push the car over the cliff, and we know they have guns.”

Gunfire pops again, and I’m sure they’re aiming for the tires. I push on, moving erratically over the two-lane road, trying to get us past the park and into civilization.

We take a hard knock from behind. As the forest thins, I put in another emergency call into Jim with the phone on speaker. This time it goes through, and when he answers, I rattle off the license plate number of the Escalade and roughly where we are. “They’ve bumped us twice, but I’m making it hard for them to edge me off the road.”

His reply seems faster than humanly possible. “Bash is on with the Forest Service, and they’re headed in your direction.”

Anna exhales a big sigh. It could take them fifteen minutes or more to get to us, but I’d rather her relax than be worried.

“Anna, tell me what has happened so far,” Jim says.

She recounts everything. “I didn’t even notice them, but thankfully, Clay did,” she adds at the end.

We make it out of the most dangerous section of road. They could still send us spinning into a tree, though. A man leans out the window of the Escalade behind us, and I slam on the brakes. “Hold on!” I yell.

They careen into the back of us with a jolt. In the rearview mirror, I can see that the guy who was leaning out is no longer there. The Escalade’s engine is smoking and crumpled. Part of my truck bed is now rubbing against the rear tires, but I don’t care. I drive forward as fast as I can.

“Is everyone okay?” Jim asks through the phone.

“We’re fine and still going,” I report. “It looks like they may be stopped. I see a lot of smoke coming out of their car.”

They’re stranded. They’ve faded out of sight when we finally see the flashing red and blue lights of the Forest

Service police.

We pull over, and a park ranger is quickly at the car. “Are you okay? Do I need to call an ambulance?”

I look over at Anna. “Are you okay?”

She nods. “I’m fine. I’m lucky I didn’t pee my pants.”

I laugh at that as the park ranger steps around to inspect the car. “You were fucking amazing.”

I pull her in close, and she holds on tight. “Why are they doing this?” She breaks down in my arms.

“I don’t know,” I tell her. “But I’m going to do everything I can to find out.”





## CHAPTER 20

### *Anna*

We talk into the evening with the Forest Service. The Escalade was abandoned when the officers arrived. They suspect there was a second car with them, and they likely went out through the park toward the Pacific Ocean.

At some point, Jim arrives. He reports that the plates on the Escalade had been stolen off a Prius. While Clay makes arrangements for his truck to be towed, Jim pulls me aside. “I’ll drive you home,” he says. “Are you okay with Clay staying with you tonight?”

I nod.

“I can have someone else come and stay if you prefer, or if you need a break.”

I shake my head. Clay saved my life. There’s no one I’d rather have with me—for lots of reasons. “I’m fine if he stays. But if he wants a break, I understand that too.”

Clay hangs up with the tow company and scrolls through his phone. Maybe looking through his email. His phone has been blowing up all day. He ignored the buzzing all afternoon, but I found I really couldn’t, even though I want to. I hate thinking about all those messages from other women. Will that ever stop?

When Jim steps away for a moment, Clay comes toward me. “How about we order something for dinner tonight?”

“I’m not really hungry,” I tell him.

“You need to eat.”

I sigh. “How about we have the gnocchi with lamb ragu from the Italian place in my building? It will be there when we arrive.”

“That works.”

“Jim, will you be staying for dinner?” I ask.

“I can if you’d like me to, but my plan was to head home to the boys.”

I nod. “You keep with your plan. My plan is to drink an enormous glass of wine tonight.”

“After the day you’ve had, have two.”

When we arrive back at my building, Jim drops us in the garage, where we’re met by one of the guys on Tinsley’s team. “I just put your dinner in your condo,” he tells us. “I checked the place, and all the windows remain secure. The front desk has let no one in.”

I cringe, hoping I put my dirty clothes in the hamper. I know it’s silly, but I don’t like strangers looking at my laundry. I manage a smile and nod. “Great. Thank you.”

He holds the elevator door while we step out. Clay opens the door to my place and allows me to pass first. The smell of the food hits me, and instantly, I relax.

After a moment, Clay sets a bottle of Motrin in front of me on the kitchen counter with a glass of cold water. “You’ll be happier if you take this now, before all the adrenaline wears off and you get sore.”

“Why would I be sore?”

“We were hit pretty hard when they came up behind us,” he reminds me.

Okay, he has a point. I blocked that out. When I nod, he tips two pills into my palm and kisses my temple before handing me the water.

We eat in silence, his phone buzzing on the countertop.

“Aren’t you going to get that?”

“I’m with the only person I want to be with.”

“Why do they keep messaging you?” I ask. Even I can hear the frustration in my voice.

“I don’t ask them to. I’ve not given anyone my number.”

Getting a new number seems like an easy solution, and I know he’s done that before, but I’m too tired to argue. I suppose they’ll just find him again. “What do you want to do tonight?”

“I’m going to have someone from Tinsley’s team come down for a bit while I run out.”

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end. “Where are you going? If it’s about today, I should go with you.”

“No, it’s not that. I’ll be back as soon as I can, and you just need to relax.”

I clean up, and Clay kisses me as he steps away, changing places with one of Tinsley’s guys at my front door. He gives me a wave as he settles on my couch.

I finish wiping the counter and then go to my bedroom. Clay was right. I can feel the adrenaline wearing off, and I’m a little shaky. I run back through the day’s events, and somehow, I end up feeling worse, instead of better. I wipe away tears. How did a day in the woods turn into that? And after all that, Clay thought it was okay to leave? What could be so important, and why wouldn’t he just explain?

I climb into bed and watch the Lifetime channel’s marathon of holiday movies. Maybe I’m just being silly. I fall asleep but wake up for a moment in the dark as Clay crawls into bed with me. It’s after two in the morning. He smells like

cigars and perfume. I roll over and pretend to be asleep as his breathing quickly becomes rhythmic.

In the morning, I wake naturally and get up quietly to avoid disturbing Clay. I go directly into my spare bedroom with the elliptical. Most of the time, it's used to air-dry my delicate laundry, but today, I'm going to get out some of my frustration. I have no idea what to think about anything in my life right now, and no idea who I can trust to talk to about it. With my earbuds in, I set up one of my workout playlists and push hard.

I'm soaked in sweat when I'm done, and Clay is still sleeping. I shower and slip back out of the bedroom. It's almost time for the stores to open. There's still nothing much I need to do for work, but I need something to keep me busy. I don't want to sit around and wait for Clay. The last thing I want to do is call Clear Security, but after yesterday, it would be foolish to be without someone. So I call, and within a few minutes, I have a woman at my door who looks like she could be my friend. Her name is Pam Weber, and we're going shopping together.

I don't leave a note. I know that's immature, but Clay didn't tell me where he was going last night, so why should I tell him? I have someone with me.

Pam and I head to Union Square and go into Macy's. The store covers an entire city block and has four floors. I start at the top and work my way down. I don't know what I'm looking for, but I know I need to keep myself moving. Every once in a while, I see someone and worry I'm being followed. But that's ridiculous. Just because someone is Asian, doesn't mean they're MSS. I think I've been on edge ever since Clay told me MSS was active here in San Francisco, and yesterday certainly didn't help. Ugh. I don't know what to think. But I can't just hide at home.

We walk through all four floors of the store, but nothing jumps out at me. So I walk across Union Square with Pam in tow and join the line to gain entrance to the Apple Store. You know they're busy when the fire marshal makes them limit the number of people inside at a time.

Pam's not a talker, so I stare at social media on my phone. Once we're admitted, twenty minutes later, I head over to the watch display. "Okay, Pam. I need your help. I notice Clay is always wearing a big chunky watch. Do you think he'd wear an Apple Watch?"

She nods thoughtfully. "He might. I love mine. I can do so many things with tracking my workouts and activities."

I let the salesperson know I need two of them and decide I'll give one to Charles, too. His birthday is in January, and I can send this after Christmas.

As I'm checking out, Clay appears. "Hey." He greets Pam and wraps his arm around me, kissing my temple. "You could have woken me, and I would have joined you."

I shake my head. "You got in so late last night, and after all the excitement yesterday, I figured you needed the rest."

"What did you find?"

"I got my brother an Apple Watch."

"Those are really cool. He should like that."

I nod. "I think so. If he already has one, he can exchange it for a supply of ear buds. I lose one about every three months. I hate them."

Clay nods. "I gave up on mine. I have some nice Bose ones that are attached to a wire, and I can clip it to my shirt. Makes a difference."

"I'll have to look into those."

I wait for him to say something about last night, but he doesn't. Clay tells Pam she can head out, and after I receive my purchases, we all leave the store together. "Are you up for a coffee or cappuccino?" I ask Clay after Pam has gone.

"Sure," he says. "Whatever you'd like."

We walk around the block to a European café and sit down with our fancy coffees and pain au chocolat.

"Is everything okay?" Clay asks.

I shrug. “What happened last night?”

“Nothing. I was chasing down something that didn’t work out.”

*Vague.* That doesn’t tell me much. “Does it have something to do with my brother or other work for Clear?”

Clay is watching out the window, and his brow furrows. “Sorry, I thought I saw the guy from yesterday.”

“How could you ever tell? You saw him in the rearview mirror.”

He shrugs. “I guess that was what I did in Afghanistan, so I’m used to it.”

I smell bullshit. I smooth the paper napkin on my lap. There’s no way to manage this but head on. “I know you get a lot of text messages and calls from women, and you always tell me they’re nothing. Then last night you left, indicating that you’d be back shortly. When you returned, it was quite a while later, and you smelled like cigarettes and perfume. What’s going on?”

He takes a sip of his cappuccino and avoids looking me in the eye. “Nothing.”

I take a deep breath. “You call me your girlfriend, and we’ve been spending time together for several weeks now. And on top of that, you’re often in a position where you’re safeguarding my life. All of these things indicate a level of trust between us that your current behavior and answers are not respecting. I realize I don’t have a right to know everything about your life, and there may be things about your work I can’t know. But I would appreciate you being as honest with me as possible. Saying nothing about where you’ve been or what you’ve done is not respectful, and I can’t be in a situation where I feel that way. Maybe this has gone on too long.”

Clay looks out the window as he collects his thoughts. “I’m sorry. Last night I was trying to get answers about why the MSS here in San Francisco seems to be targeting you. Bash’s contact likes to hang out in strip clubs. I did look, but I

didn't touch. I've not been with anyone but you since Thanksgiving when we were together in Tahoe."

My eyes widen, though part of me is relieved. But I wish I didn't have to threaten him to get him to talk to me. "What did you learn from this guy?" I sit forward.

"Not a lot, but I hope he will be able to get more. He isn't part of this particular operation... And I'm not sure he's being honest with me. But anyway, I can see why you thought it was something else."

I will myself not to cry. "I think I'm just all over the place, emotionally. My life is stressing me out right now, and I'm having trouble thinking clearly about anything because of that. This isn't who I am, but I don't know how to fix it. And I know you've explained it, and it doesn't seem anything more than a nuisance to you, but all the text messages and calls from women are hard for me. I know rationally that they shouldn't be, but I hate that they're always in the background."

He nods. "All of this is a lot. I'm so grateful to be helping to keep you safe, but I know having all this tangled together must be difficult. And I'm trying to deal with the fallout from the article. I don't know if I can keep changing my number..." He rubs a hand through his hair, and as if on cue, his mobile pings. He looks down at it and then back up at me. "Excuse me for just a moment," he says as he steps outside to take a call.

No explanation other than that... It's like he hasn't heard a word I said. I need a break from this merry go round. I text Henry.

**Me: Any chance you can get away from work before dark and meet me for a drink?**

**Henry: Sure. Regular place about 6?**

**Me: See you then. Thanks!**



I look up just as Pam walks back in with Clay.

“The lead Jim has may have something,” Clay says. “I’m going to go find out. Pam is going to stay with you.” He leans down and kisses my temple, turning to go before I can even formulate a thought.

“Can I come with you?” I call.

“No. Sorry. I need you to stay safe, and honestly, this guy is barely interested in talking to me. Just cross your fingers that we get something.”

I hook a stray curl behind my ear. “Should we plan on dinner?”

“I’ll text you. Pam will be with you until I return.”

“Okay, good luck.” I force myself to smile, even though there’s fear in my heart. “I’ll see you later.”

With a wave, he’s off, and I slump in my seat to finish my drink and pastry. When I’m done, Pam and I return to the sidewalk, but soon, it just feels too crowded and busy. I’ve never had a panic attack, and I don’t want to start. I think I’ve just had enough of this. Everything makes me anxious right now, and I need a break if I’m going to be able to go meet Henry.

I turn to Pam. “I’m ready to go back to my condo.”



## CHAPTER 21

### *Anna*

Henry is already at the bar when I arrive. “Hey,” I say as I sit down across from him.

The server arrives with two red wine glasses and pours a taste for Henry. After he approves, the server pours a glass for me and tops off Henry’s glass.

“What kind of wine is this?” The dark wine has brown and orange undertones, and knowing Henry’s love of cabernets, that’s my guess.

“It’s a ten-year-old cabernet from Washington state that I’ve recently discovered. I think it’s fantastic.”

I roll it over my tongue. The tannins are strong, and the taste lingers after I swallow. “I like it a lot.” I sit back and roll my head toward the ceiling.

“Where’s Clay?” Henry asks.

“He’s off doing something. I can’t be sure what.”

Henry twirls his glass. “Are there problems in paradise?”

I sigh. “I’m a mess. I feel like everything is falling apart around me.”

“What’s going on?”

“Well, since I’ve met him, it’s been crazy. We got stuck in an avalanche, my house and my business were broken into, and yesterday he and I were almost run off the road and shot at.”

“What?”

I explain what happened during our picnic in Muir Woods. Henry shakes his head, but his eyes are sympathetic. And when I finish, he doesn’t complain about Clay again, like I expect.

“No wonder you’re feeling overwhelmed,” he says. “How are you not hiding at home under a blanket with forty security guards?”

I give him a half-hearted laugh. “If I keep going, I don’t have to think about my life falling to shit.”

He shakes his head. “I’m serious. I can’t imagine how scary that must have been. Don’t expect to just push past it immediately.” He looks at me a moment. “Not that what you’ve told me isn’t plenty, but is something else bothering you?”

Henry knows me. And he really is my friend. I look out the window as I formulate how honest I want to be. “I really like Clay.”

“I know that. And I think it’s great. I’m so glad he was with you yesterday. I can’t even imagine what might have happened otherwise.”

I look down at my drink. “I know. He was wonderful, and he made me feel so safe. But then...” I force myself to look up. “I want to believe he’s more than just my bodyguard, that he’s a different kind of guy, that I can trust him. But he gets texts and calls from random women. They send photos of themselves in lingerie or naked.”

“What does he say to them?”

Henry does not seem as fazed as I’d expect. “I don’t ever see him respond, but he wouldn’t do that in front of me anyway. He says he deletes them and wants them to stop. But somehow, it just nags at me, like maybe my head is so

scrambled by everything going on that I can't see what's really happening."

"I like Clay," Henry says after a moment. "Don't put too much pressure on yourself. You and Clay are still new at this, and there has been a ton going on. But you're strong. You're not at home under that blanket like I would be. If it's bothering you, just talk to him about the messages from other women."

I sit back in my chair. "Maybe you're right. But then he's also started acting funny. Last night he came back to my place at two o'clock in the morning."

"What did he say he'd been doing?"

"Well, Clear seems to think what happened in Muir Woods is related to something with my brother and the deal he's working on for our family company. So Clay said—"

Henry stops me, shaking his head. "He's trying to track down who's behind what happened to you, right?" When I nod, he says, "You're just being paranoid, and I'm not saying that doesn't make sense. But that man is crazy about you. I saw it with my own eyes."

Henry makes it all seem so simple. Why can't I be sure? "But what if he's seeing someone else? We never made ourselves exclusive."

"He's spending most nights with you, so that seems unlikely. Why haven't you talked about it? It's not like you to be shy about that sort of thing."

I sigh. "It seemed understood, but then part of me wonders if we're just together all the time because he's part of my security detail."

Henry nods, looking thoughtful. "When Patrice and I became exclusive, it happened sort of organically. Then when an ex-boyfriend called, I asked her to tell him she wasn't available. Maybe you need to be clearer about that."

"Usually, I would be. Typically, I don't have any tolerance for this kind of thing. If it's not working, I move on." I shake my head. "But I don't want to let this go, even though

it's complicated. Why do I want it if it isn't right?" I say, barely above a whisper.

Henry gives me a sad smile. "Just because it's difficult doesn't mean it isn't right. You've always been good at knowing what you deserve. But you can't expect it to be perfect from the very beginning." He looks at me a moment. "Still, if this is going to work, you need to know the rules."

I nod.

Henry reaches for me. "You're an amazing catch. Clay would be stupid if he let you go. And if he does, he's not the man I think he is."

"Thank you."

Henry pours us more wine and tells me about his partners' holiday party—a booze fest followed by outlandish gifts. They were given electric scooters, a virtual reality headset and gear, and a fancy pen that can write on tablets and on paper.

I nod appreciatively. "Sounds like you got some serious stuff."

He leans in. "I'm going to re-gift it all."

Grinning, I sip my wine. "Your little brother will love motoring around Dartmouth with the scooter."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Who are you giving the VR stuff to?"

"Patrice has a younger brother, and I thought that could be from us."

I nod. "And the pen?"

He pulls it from his pocket and pushes it across the table to me. "Merry Christmas from Kleiner, Dobbins, Howard, and Peterson."

I laugh. "Well, at least you're honest."

"I don't think I was the only one disappointed. But next month, when we receive our year-end bonuses, I'll feel

better. I'm converting that into a vacation."

"Where will you go?"

"We're looking at a three-week trip across Italy in the spring—Lake Como and Tuscany. Patrice has already found the place she wants to stay."

"After the new year in Paris? That's fantastic. You deserve the break. I'm glad she's getting you away." I can't skip calling him on this. "Are you going to propose to her on the trip?"

"Oh, we're not there yet."

I tilt my head. "What do you mean? Where do you need to be to propose?"

He shifts in his seat. "I don't know. It's not time."

I catch his eyes. "You're always honest with me, so I'm going to be honest with you. She's going to become impatient."

He nods. "She's already dropping hints. She said after our dinner together that if you get engaged before we do, she's out the door."

"Henry! I don't think you have to worry about that, but if you don't want to marry her, you need to let her know and cut her loose."

"I'm not sure my work-life balance is good for marriage."

"That's between you and Patrice, but I think she understands how many hours you work. She seems to be okay with it."

He makes a noncommittal sound and looks at his watch. "I need to run. I have a filing in the morning that I need to review before we can send it out. I can't wait for the courts to shut down. Then I'll be able to relax a minute." He kisses me on the cheek and drops cash on the table for our bill.

I stand up and search the room for Pam. She also stands, ready to go. But as I sweep the room, my eyes land on

Clay—with another woman. My heart drops. What. The. Hell?

I stride over to their table as Clay looks beyond me to the door. “Funny meeting you here,” I tell him.

“Hi,” he says, turning to look at me. “I saw you were having drinks with Henry and didn’t want to intrude.”

“Oh. I see.”

The woman with him is a petite blonde dressed in a dark-green pantsuit. I know designers well enough to know it’s a high-end look. *Is this a date?*

His brows rise, and he doesn’t introduce me.

The woman gives me a dirty look, and I feel all the air leaving my lungs. “Okay.” I shake my head, feeling embarrassment and rage wash through me. “See you around.”

I turn on my heel, but he follows me out the door. “I’ll be at your place in an hour or so,” he promises.

*Because Clear has assigned you, or because you want to be?* I don’t trust myself to keep it together if I ask, so I take a deep breath and fight the urge to scream. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll get coverage. Enjoy your date.”

I turn and sit down in the waiting Range Rover, and Pam slides in beside me. I can’t believe what a mess things have become. This is all too much. I can’t think clearly enough to make sense of any of this. But if Clay won’t communicate honestly, there’s no reason to continue.

As we drive back to my place, I get a call from Charles. My heart races. “Hey! I’ve been thinking about you today,” I tell him in greeting. “Are you calling to tell me you’re coming home for Christmas?”

I can hear traffic in the background as he speaks. “No. I wish. I hope I didn’t get your hopes up. I still need to stay. Christmas is not really a holiday here. My business partner is a bigwig with the Nationalist party, so he’ll probably take some time off, but I’ll definitely be working that day.”

My heart breaks for Charles. He loved Christmas when we were growing up. I can’t imagine how it feels not to be



able to leave the country for so long. “I’m sorry. How is it going with the purchase?”

“Arnold Woo is very important. He assures me it will be finalized soon.”

*What does that mean?* “What still needs to be done?”

“It needs approval by the ministry.”

I sigh. “I guess that makes sense. Oh, I almost forgot. I ran into a woman who had a giant crush on you in high school. Do you remember Sheri Thompson?”

“I do. She’s very important.”

Something is strange. Why does he keep saying that? It still sounds loud where he is. Maybe he’s not following what I said or he’s not alone.

“Yes, yes,” he says after a moment, though I haven’t asked a question.

My heart pounds as the noise around him increases. “Charles, if you can hear me, I love you.”

“It’s the same here. I’ll follow up with you in a few days.”

“Be safe, Charles.”

“I promise.”

Adrenaline races through me. *What can I do?* When we pull up in front of my building, I turn to Pam. “That was my brother on the phone. Something is off. Do you think we can go see Jim Adelson?”

She pushes a button on her phone. “Hey, boss. Are you at the office?” She’s quiet as she listens and nods. “Great. Do you think you can make time for Anna Standing? She just had a strange call from her brother.” She looks at me and nods as she listens.

She leans forward to the driver. “Can you please take us to the Clear Security office?”

The driver nods as he pulls away from the curb. I look out the window and replay the call in my head. Something definitely feels wrong. Charles seemed okay and then not okay during the call. And he was speaking strangely. What could that mean?

I see Clay on the sidewalk outside Clear's building as we approach. When the car stops, he opens the door. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"I'm coming to meet with Jim. I just had a strange call with Charles." Everything else I have to discuss with Clay can wait.

He nods. "Let's go upstairs."

It's almost eight o'clock at night now, and when we enter the building, I'm stunned at how busy Clear Security's offices are. I've been to Jim's apartment on the top floors, but I had no idea the workspace was this grand. It's also deceptive. From the street, you'd never know how many people actually work here.

Clay leads me to a large, open space that has offices and meeting rooms on the periphery, probably fifty different spaces. Large windows overlook the Bay Bridge, and I realize the room has at least another fifty workstations on the other side of a floor-to-ceiling wall of monitors. It seems right out of a science-fiction movie.

Jim appears with Bash right behind him.

"Thank you for making time for me," I tell him. "Does everyone always work this late?"

He shrugs. "This is not exactly a nine-to-five business. I'm usually upstairs by now, but Kate's doing the bedtime routine tonight, so your timing was perfect. What's going on?" He directs me toward an all-glass conference room off the big area. Pam has gone elsewhere, so Clay, Jim, Bash, and I sit down around a large table. Jim nods. "Before we get to this phone call, how are you feeling after your run-in yesterday?"

I ignore Clay's look. "I'm feeling fine." No need to go into the general mess my mind and emotions have become.

“No pain?” Jim asks.

I shake my head. He waits a moment for me to elaborate, but when I don't, he tilts his head to the side. “Okay, then. Can you tell us about the call with your brother?”

I nod. “Earlier tonight, I was coming home from having drinks with my friend, Henry Wilcox...” I look over at Clay, and he looks down at his hands on the table. I could out him to his co-workers, but that would be petty. I clear my throat instead. “It was not a normal call. It was very loud in the background, like he was standing on a street corner. And the way he was speaking was strange.” I recount the conversation, trying hard to remember all the details of what he said. When I'm finished, everyone is quiet for a moment.

“Why do you think he called?” Jim asks.

I shake my head. “I don't know. Some of what he said didn't make much sense.”

“And what did he say about his business partner?”  
Bash asks.

“He kept telling me he was very important. I know he has connections in the Communist party. Charles used to think he was pretty easygoing, but lately, he's been more and more frustrating.”

“Why did your brother decide to do business in China?” Jim asks.

“He had a friend from school who grew up there and opened the line of communication about a possible deal. I forget his name, but the friend is the one who found us a business partner. They're buying real estate from several companies. It's been a five-year process. We've sunk millions of dollars into this deal.”

“What would it mean if your brother walked away?”  
Clay asks.

“We'd lose all the money and time he's spent there. It would be a heavy hit to our bottom line, but we're not responsible to stockholders or anything. It would affect mostly my mom, but also Charles and me.”

Every eye is on Jim as he rests his elbows on the arms of the chair and steepled his fingers against his lips. “I think your brother was trying to send you a message. Has he ever mentioned thinking he’s being followed or in any danger?”

“Well, we’ve always been careful when we’re talking on the phone, and he says all the packages we’ve sent him have been gone through before he gets them. Occasionally, he doesn’t get everything we send. But I don’t think he thought that was personal, just the way things work there.”

“What hasn’t he gotten?” Bash asks.

“The last box I sent was in September. It had Belgian chocolate and some underwear he wanted.”

“Underwear?”

I nod. “Yep. My brother is taller than most of the men in China and was struggling to find underwear that fit. So I sent him ten pairs of Calvin Klein boxer briefs. They were not in the box when it got to his office.”

“Could someone at the office have taken them?” Bash asks.

“I mean, maybe. But I don’t know why they would have. We all thought it was pretty strange.”

“To say the least!” Clay snorts.

“Another time, some photos of our dad we sent him were missing when the package arrived.”

“Were they professional photos or candid shots?” Bash asks.

“Candid. Many of them also had Charles in the picture. I have copies of them, thank God. Would you like to see them?”

Jim nods. “Yes, please.”

I pull my phone from my purse, and it takes me a minute to find the pictures. I hand over the phone, and Jim and Bash scroll through. They’re not very exciting shots, but I thought Charles would like them, now that Dad is gone.

Jim hands me back my phone. “What else do you think we should know?”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head. “I just got a bad feeling. It was a strange call. I don’t know why he’d call me from a busy corner and to stress to me that his partner was big in the—wait a minute. He said he was big in the Nationalist party. That’s not the same as the Communist party that runs the government, is it?”

Jim sits forward. “Are you sure he said Nationalist? Because they are very different than the Communist party.”

My hand flies to my mouth. I missed the most obvious clue. “Holy crap! What does that mean for Charles if his business partner is moving against the Communist Party of China?”

Jim shakes his head. “I’ll work on finding out.” He stands, and the rest of us follow.

As we return to the hallway, I stop to talk to him. I need to do something to start sorting out this mess with Clay. “I think I need someone else to take over evenings when Cora isn’t with me.”

Jim doesn’t react or hesitate. He just nods. “I’ll get someone over to your place within the hour.”

“Thank you.”



## CHAPTER 22

# *Clay*

I watch Anna leave the building with Pam. She doesn't even really say goodbye. I fucking knew when I got the text message to meet Nancy Crawford that it was going to be a mistake. But she was threatening to go to the Board of Registered Nursing about an issue she supposedly has with Vanessa Ryan, who's a fantastic nurse, so I had to do something. I've never had any romantic or physical relationship with Nancy, but she seems determined to change that. I'm not interested, but I can't let her destroy the career of one of my colleagues.

And it wasn't that I didn't want Anna to know who she was; I just didn't want Nancy to know how important Anna is to me. Because if she does, Nancy will be a problem for her. And what are the odds that Anna would be at the same bar? Maybe I should have been honest with her, but it didn't seem like the time to put more on her plate. She's barely keeping it together with the load she has. But that scene had to look awful, and now she's asked Jim to replace me.

"What did you do?" Jim asks as I walk back over to him and Bash. "You saved her life yesterday. Is she just totally freaked out?"

I sigh. "I think that's part of it, but I've also made a mess of things." I pour out the story of my meeting with

Nancy and running into Anna at the same bar. “Things have been tense between Anna and me lately. She has to be stressed by the people trying to chase her down, and I’ve been trying to do some research without having her involved too much, and it’s just gotten difficult. She hates when I’m not open and honest, but I don’t know how to do that where all this is concerned. I’m not used to having someone who matters to me.”

“So you didn’t tell her you were meeting this woman?”  
Bash asks.

I shake my head. “It just seemed like I’d be adding fuel to her fire. She already hates all the random calls and texts I get. Plus, in a city that has over a thousand liquor licenses, I didn’t expect that we’d end up in the same place.”

“That’s not really the point, though, is it? Apologize,” Bash advises. “Tell her everything. Trust that she can handle it. Grovel. Do whatever you need to do to get her to forgive you. You two are good together.”

“She just asked that he not come back to her place,” Jim reminds him.

“Man, you’re in deep kimchee.” Bash shakes his head. “But that’s work. It doesn’t mean he can’t fix the personal stuff.”

I hope he’s right. *How did I fuck this up?* I rub my forehead. “I know I’ve got to fix this. And I’m also still committed to keeping her safe. What do you guys think about the call from her brother today?”

“He’s nervous and probably has a reason to be,” Jim says. “I’ve got to make some calls.” He turns toward his office. “Don’t go over there tonight.”

I nod miserably and go back to sit in my office. *What was I thinking? Why is my first impulse to hide things? What makes me think she can’t handle the truth?* I have a photo of Anna and me, taken at the holiday party, on my desk. Stella gave it to me in a frame. Anna’s fucking gorgeous. But that



isn't even a fraction of why I want to make things right. She's become my everything. I've got to figure this out.

Stella knocks on the doorjamb. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

I shake my head. "I'm in the doghouse."

Stella looks concerned. "What did you do?"

"What if she did something?" I retort.

She raises an eyebrow. "You just said you're the one in the doghouse."

I start telling her about what's happened the last few days, and after a few minutes, she holds up her hand. When I stop talking, she picks up the phone on my desk and makes a call. I guess whatever I had to say wasn't that important.

"Clay and I are heading up," she says into the phone. "He fucked up, and we need to help him get this turned around." She's quiet for a moment. "Yeah, I know I win the bet. But I didn't want to. We're on our way." She hangs up and motions for me to follow her.

"Are we going to see Gage?" I ask.

"No, he's dealing with my mom, who's at our place. I'm staying here as long as I can."

"Then where are we going?"

"Up to see Kate."

"I've already talked to Jim. There's no need to burden Kate with all this."

She urges me forward. "After we met Anna at the holiday party, several of us bet on when you'd fuck it up, and I seem to be the winner."

I stop walking to look at her. "You bet that I'd mess this up?"

"Hell yes. You don't have the first clue about relationships."

When we arrive upstairs, Kate has a bottle of bourbon and three glasses. “Let’s go up to the park. Jim is in with the boys for a minute, and then he needs to call someone overseas.”

We walk up to the roof, and with a flick of a switch, the propane heater sparks to life. We circle our chairs beneath it and look up at the stars. It’s a cool night, but at least it’s not raining. Kate takes a few blankets from a cabinet and hands them to us. Stella pours our drinks.

“Okay, start all over,” Kate tells me. “What happened?”

I walk them through what’s been happening with Anna and me, and I try not to leave anything out, which means it’s a lot—the secret research I’ve been trying to do, my tendency to want to hide things, the contact from random women I’m trying to shield her from, people shooting at us, the strange phone call from her brother, and then what seems to have been the nail in the coffin...running into her at the bar with Nancy.

“Why didn’t you just out the Nancy woman to her?” Kate asks.

“Nancy’s vicious, and I didn’t want to give her someone else to go after.”

“Okay, but there must be some sort of distrust going on if Anna went to assuming it was a date immediately,” Stella says.

“Well, things between us have gotten complicated. I’m trying to protect her both personally and professionally, and there are a lot of stressful things happening to her. She said she’s not herself right now.”

“What has she mentioned that she’s not happy about?” Kate asks.

“Well, she doesn’t like the random attention I get from women, but she knows I hate it too. It’s all thanks to that stupid *San Francisco Magazine* article. And I—”

“Stop right there,” Stella says with her hand up. “What kind of attention are you talking about? Strange women

approaching you while you're out and about? Or women calling you at all hours of the day and night?"

"I get phone calls and messages, which I ignore! I delete them all. She should know they're not important to me. I brought *her* to the ER the other night and introduced her to everyone." *Okay, it didn't go entirely smoothly, but she knows how important she is to me.*

"But not Nancy?" Stella says, her eyebrow raised.

"She wasn't there."

"What has Anna said about the phone calls and texts?"

"Well, I know they're annoying to her, but they're annoying to me too. She said she doesn't *want* them to bother her, but I think they make her nervous. She told me she's had men cheat on her in the past, which I have to tell you is their loss. Man, she's amazing in every way."

"Wait a minute. You just glossed over something important." Stella shakes her head like she can't believe my incompetence. "Her trust issues come from men getting secret emails and texts and running off with other women."

My eyes widen. I feel like a deer in the headlights. *How could I be so stupid?* "Oh, shit. I'm handling this all wrong."

"You need to fix it. Don't wait," Kate advises.

I stand immediately. "I need to go."

They wave me off, and I hightail it to my place. Anna asked that I not show up tonight, and so did Jim. Do I show up anyway? Or do I respect her wishes? And my boss's orders.

When I get home, I go inside and pace through all the furniture Anna got for me. *Ugh*. Then I notice a message on my landline. I dial in my password.

"Sweetheart, it's Mom. It's getting close to Christmas, and I haven't heard from you in a while. I miss you. When am I going to see you? I want to meet this Anna your dad has talked about. Call me soon. I love you."

She called over a week ago. I'm terrible about checking messages. I call her back.

"Hey, Mom." I glance at the clock and grimace. It's after ten. "Sorry it's so late. I can call in the morning if you're in bed."

"Hey, sweetie. It's no problem. It's good to hear your voice. Where have you been? I was getting worried the hospital was working you too hard."

"I can't blame it on them," I tell her. "I've mostly been working for Clear Security. Anna has someone harassing her, and we can't quite figure out why, so I've been staying with her."

"Are you with her now?"

"No, she's at her place and I'm at mine tonight. What are you and Graham doing for Christmas?"

"We're going up to Portland to see your sister."

I want to correct her and remind her Emily is *not* my sister, but that will only upset her. Emily and I are like oil and water. She has no direction and is fine living with a dozen people in a dirty house, working in a hipster coffee shop. But we all make our own decisions.

"You'll enjoy that," I tell her, trying to be agreeable.

"Maybe. We'd rather everyone come home."

"I'm working Christmas Day."

"I know you like doing that because you're single, but maybe next year you'll think about taking some time off."

"I'll have to see the schedule. I feel bad keeping people from their families when I have no place to be."

"Clay, you'll always have a place at my table, no matter where I am. You may be my firstborn, but you'll always be my baby."

"Great. You can put that on my tombstone."

“Are you sick?” Mom asks, her voice suddenly very serious.

I’ve always left out the danger in the work I do with Clear when I’m talking to Mom, and I’m certainly not sick. “No, Mom. I was teasing. That seemed like a good epitaph.”

She laughs. “I suppose it would be. Though it sounds like a weird kink—being the baby.”

I laugh hard. “Mom! I don’t want to hear about your sex life.”

She clears her throat. “Good, because I don’t want to hear about yours.”

We’re silent a moment.

“So tell me, why aren’t you with Anna tonight? You haven’t been spending time with her just because it’s a job, right?”

“No. And I wish I was there, but I messed up.”

Mom chuckles. “You are your father’s son.”

“I’ll try not to be too insulted by that.”

“Your dad is a good man. We were young.”

“But he cheated on you.”

She’s quiet a moment. “Did you cheat on Anna?”

I vomit out the entire story—the personal aspect of it, at least—telling her how I was blind and violated Anna’s trust because I couldn’t see things from her perspective. “She doesn’t want to see me right now, and part of me feels like I should just push my way in and make her.”

“If she told you she didn’t want to see you, you need to acknowledge her wishes,” Mom says. “But you could text her.”

“And say what?”

“What you just said to me.”

“Mom, I really like her. I mean, *really*. I don’t think I’ve ever felt like this. In fact, I’ve avoided this.” I think for a

moment as something becomes clear. “I’m still not sure it’s a good idea for me. I mean, look what happened with you and Dad.”

She sighs. “I’m sorry we warped your sense of healthy relationships. That was our mistake, but hopefully, Graham and I have shown you something good.”

I suppress a scoff. I never paid any attention to them. I always felt like an outsider. But I’m not going to rub that in her face. “I suppose.”

“Honey, send her a message. See if you can talk her into coming home with you and meeting your mom.”

“I’ll keep you posted.”

“I love you. Love is not always easy. Sometimes it’s hard, and you have to decide if you want to do the work or do what you usually do—cut bait and move on.”

“You sure are full of clichés,” I tell her.

“I try. But you know I’m right.”

She is. “Thanks, Mom. I hope to see you soon.”

“I hope so too.”

We disconnect, and I pick up my mobile phone to text Anna.

**Me: I miss you.**

I erase it before I hit send. I pace around my living room. I still don’t know what to say, other than I’m sorry. So I decide to start there.

**Me: I’m sorry. I know showing up at the bar with a woman without telling you violated your trust. But I promise there was nothing hinky going on. She’s a nurse who wants to report someone I work with, and I’m trying**

**to talk her out of it. But I should have told you that up front. Can we have breakfast tomorrow?**

Anna doesn't respond, but after a few minutes, I can tell she's read the message.

I need to talk to her. I have to laugh at myself a little, because all of this could have been avoided if I'd been talking to her honestly all along. Now, I hope it's not too late because I need her like a man in the desert needs water. I lie in bed, thinking about her and what I need to do.





## CHAPTER 23

### *Anna*

I stared at Clay's text for hours last night. I don't know what to do. I need to think—think about what he's saying. He can't control the calls, so asking for them to stop is not realistic. He's changed his number, and they still somehow find him.

I lie back in bed and look out at the gray morning. It's after nine, and that means Cora has probably arrived. But I'm not in a mood to face anyone. My landline rings, and the caller ID tells me it's Clear Security. "Hello?"

"Hi, this is Kate." She sounds bright and chipper.

"Hi, Kate. What's up?" I sit up, hoping she has some news she's relaying for Jim.

"Fiona, Stella, and I were wondering if you might be interested in joining us for lunch today," she says instead.

I fall back against the pillows. That means a shower, blow-dry, makeup, and reasonable clothes. None of those things sounds appealing.

"We were thinking about Café Luna in your building," she continues. "You and Cora wouldn't have to go far, and you don't have to get dressed up."

They're making it very easy for me. I do love Café Luna. "How can I say no to that? I'll meet you. What time?"

"I can get a reservation for noon. Does that work?"

"It does. See you then."

I lean back in bed and feel a headache starting. It's probably my brain pounding for caffeine. I pull myself up and out to the kitchen.

As I enter, Cora looks up at me and smiles. "Good morning."

"Good morning. Would you like some coffee?"

She holds up a thermos. "I'm good."

"I just agreed to meet Kate, Fiona, and Stella at Café Luna downstairs at noon."

She nods. "I'm ready to go when you are. And I'm fine if you want to stay here all day too."

"That was my plan, but then I started thinking about their lobster ravioli." I sit down at the table with Cora. "Bet you didn't think you'd be stuck with me this long, eh?"

She shrugs. "It's my job, and trust me, you're much better than some of the creeps I had to hang out with at the FBI."

That makes me laugh. As I get some caffeine into my body, we talk and get to know one another a bit. Turns out Cora lives in one of my favorite neighborhoods, and she enjoys a lot of the same restaurants I do. She's very private, and she keeps things professional, but somehow, I can't stop myself from asking, "Are you married?" I just want to know how people make these things work.

"I was engaged a long time ago," she tells me. "But never married. Being female in law enforcement doesn't exactly attract a normal guy."

I laugh. "Being single in San Francisco doesn't attract many normal guys period."

She rolls her eyes. “I do think there’s something about the men here. They far outnumber the women, but they can’t seem to get it together.”

“They always think I’m dumb because I’m an interior designer,” I lament. “No one has any respect for what I do.”

“I’m not the greatest at design, and I know it takes some serious skill.”

“Right? Thank you. I’m not just a decorator or a furniture salesperson.” I sigh. “But I don’t want to bash on men. They have their good points.”

Cora hesitates a moment. “What are some of Clay’s good points?”

This feels different than the conversations we’ve had before. I look down at the table. “There are too many to list. He’s a great guy. Honestly, that’s part of the problem. Every woman in San Francisco sees he’s a good guy, and they want that. He tells me he’s not interested, and I do believe him. It’s my own insecurities that make it hard. I mean, he’s changed his number and still they track him down.”

Cora’s brow furrows. “Even if he changes his number?”

I nod. “Even if he’s ignoring them, it’s like a needle constantly poking at us.”

Cora nods. “That seems extreme. I understand how it would be exhausting. I’ll reach out to him and see if I can help figure out how his number is getting out. He shouldn’t have to deal with that, particularly if he’s changed it.”

“Thanks. That would be great.” I sigh. “The alternative is that maybe it doesn’t bother him as much as he tells me it does.”

She shrugs. “I haven’t known Clay for a long time, but I can tell you he doesn’t bring a lot of women around the office.”

I stand to pour myself another cup of coffee. “Thanks, Cora. I appreciate it.”

“Also,” she says. “Give yourself some grace. I know you weren’t injured the other day, but that had to be scary. You’ve had your home and office broken into and vandalized, survived an avalanche, and your brother is in another country in a situation we don’t entirely understand. That’s a lot of stress for anyone to manage, and you’re trying to navigate a new relationship on top of that?” She shakes her head, her eyes kind. “You’re allowed to struggle through it a little.”

A lump forms in my throat as I turn toward my bedroom. “Thank you,” I whisper with a nod. “I’ll be ready to go downstairs just before noon.”

“No problem.”

I take some deep breaths as I head down the hall, and after a moment, I feel better. I should be a little more patient with all of this, I suppose. Still, I would love it if Cora could figure out how women keep finding Clay’s contact info. But honestly, if I’m going to move forward with him, I need to stop obsessing about it. I can’t spend all my time waiting for a shoe to drop because inevitably that makes the shoe drop. Positivity is what I need. Confidence. It’s not usually this difficult for me to find, but Cora made some good points about why that might be. Grace. That’s what I need.

I take a long shower and slick myself down with my favorite lotion. The smell of plumerias will likely greet people long before I arrive. I take the time to blow out my hair and put on jeans, a nice sweater, and a pair of boots. It’s twenty minutes to noon when I’m ready to go, so I look through my social media. I’m not particularly thrilled with what I find. My best friend from elementary school got engaged—another one of my friends off the market. I’m going to be the only single woman left on the planet at this rate.

I stuff my mobile in my pocket and walk out to the living room.

Cora stands. “Are you ready?”

“It’s a few minutes early, but I suppose so.”

We take the elevator downstairs, and I stop and check in at the front desk. They don't have any mail or packages for me, so we continue on to Café Luna.

"Hello, Helene." I greet the hostess as we arrive.

"Bonjour! Are you ordering for takeout?"

I shake my head. "I'm meeting some friends. I don't know what name the reservation is under. Kate Adelson, maybe?"

Helene nods. "Yes, she is already here."

She shows us to the table, and Kate stands to greet me with a hug. "You look amazing!"

"You gave me plenty of time to get ready," I tease. "You look ready for the holidays in your party red." Her sweater is a great color for her.

She chuckles. "I'm glad I have you fooled. I work on a project that begins in the summer and ended just before the company holiday party, so I've not bought one gift yet. After lunch, Stella and I are headed down the peninsula to do some serious shopping." She shakes her head. "The boys desperately need clothes, and I have so many lists, but I'm fully expecting things to be sold out."

"Did I just hear my name said in vain?" Stella calls from behind me.

I turn and greet her. "Quite the opposite. It sounds like you'll be saving Kate's kids from complete ruin on Christmas morning."

Stella raises an eyebrow. "If she's desperate, they'll get a dog."

"Really?" I turn back to look at Kate.

She nods. "Yes, but it can't be too big. Otherwise, it might hunt the rabbits on the roof, and that's not a lesson I'm ready for the kids to learn."

"You better find some good rabbit recipes," Fiona teases as she puts her bag down and hugs each of us. "I love

that this year we have two new guests.” She hugs Cora last. “You look fantastic.”

She blushes. “Thank you, but I’m just here with Anna.”

She waves that away. “You’re part of this club whether you want to be or not. Most women don’t understand the lives these guys live, and you’re deep inside it too.”

We all take our seats, and Helene brings over mimosas and tells us the specials.

“What’s your favorite thing here?” Kate asks me.

“Hands down, it’s the lobster ravioli. But I order roasted chicken the most because it’s also outstanding and healthy.”

“Don’t you just hate the middle-age creep?” Fiona says. In her Irish lilt, it doesn’t sound nearly as ugly as it actually is.

“What middle-age creep?” Stella asks her. “You never gain weight, and I watch you eat tons of junk.”

“I work out and...” She leans in to the table. “I choose clothes that make me look thinner. But at my size, five pounds means a whole new clothing size.”

I shake my head. “It takes almost twenty pounds at my size, but that’s not as much of a blessing as it seems. Suddenly, you can’t fit in your pants anymore, and it takes a lot of work to get back into them.”

“That’s why we all have skinny, just right, and bloated clothes,” Kate snarks.

The table breaks into laughter. I really like these women. It feels good to relax a little.

Helene comes back to take our order herself, and she grins when Stella, Fiona, and I order lobster ravioli, and Cora and Kate order roasted chicken.

Once she’s gone, Stella raises her glass. “A toast. To the men we love. They may often be idiots, but they’re our

idiots.”

I smile and drink to that. Cora toasts with her water. She’s sitting with her back in the corner and has an eye on what’s going on in the restaurant, all to keep me safe. She’s both part of the group and separate from it. I wonder if that’s how Clay feels sometimes. This situation has to be hard for him too.

Everyone drinks, and we sit back. “So, tell us what’s going on with Clay?” Stella says.

*Ugh.* So much for relaxing, but maybe it’s good to talk it through. “I’m not sure, actually,” I tell them, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. “We met under extreme conditions, and it’s been nonstop drama. I’m feeling a little frazzled and not myself. I don’t know if we’re going to make it.”

“That’s a load of crap,” Fiona says, and my eyes pop wide.

“Clay is crazy about you,” Kate adds. “I’ve seen you together.” She tilts her head to look at me. “Unless it’s not something you want anymore...”

I shake my head. “I’m just trying to protect myself and make sure I’m being smart about things.” I’m not going to drag our personal life through the mud. These women are close to Clay’s work life. That’s not fair of me.

“Have you ever noticed how often Clay changes his phone number?” Cora asks.

Stella rolls her eyes. “It seems like every other week. I’m constantly printing out a new list for my quick dials.”

“Whenever I need to call him,” Fiona says, “I have to have Bash look up the number because invariably I have the wrong one.”

Kate nods. “It happened occasionally in the past. Some woman he wasn’t interested in or had even blocked kept getting his new numbers and harassing him. But since that article came out last fall, it’s been much more often.” She smooths the napkin on her lap. “When Jim found out you guys

had been stranded up in Tahoe, he was irate that he didn't have a number for Clay, and no one was around to get it for him."

Cora puts her glass down and looks around the table. "Anna has mentioned that lately he gets as many as four calls or texts an hour. Do you notice it at work?"

Stella shakes her head. "He doesn't always carry his phone with him around the office, which is frustrating. Sometimes, when I need him, I can't locate him."

Cora nods. "Something isn't right. Statistically, it should take at least six months for his number to be spread widely enough that it would require him to get a new one."

"Is that what's bothering you?" Kate asks, looking at me.

I move my eyes to the table. "I—this isn't really something I'm comfortable talking about."

"Well, we adore you, and if you want to be with him, you shouldn't give up. He might just need another chance," Stella says.

I smile. "I'll keep that in mind, but it takes two."

"He's just like our men," Kate laments. "The strong and silent type. They don't like to open up about anything important, but they'll go on and on about how many ribs they can eat in one sitting."

I have to laugh at that.

"Except for Gage," Stella notes. "The idea of working out makes him physically ill. How that man made it through the Marine Corps is beyond me. But he will brag about ribs and chasing down a computer hacker and making their life miserable."

That gets the whole table laughing as Helene places our meals in front of us. Once she has us all set, Kate takes a sip of water. "I know you've been dealing with a lot, but we all love Clay, and we adore you and we want to see you happy together."



I can't quite figure out what to say to that. "Clay and I need to get through the holidays, and maybe then, we can figure things out," I finally say. "I just feel like maybe I'm not thinking straight right now."

"I totally understand." Kate nods. "So often things don't happen the way we think they should or when we feel like we're ready. Jim came into my life by accident. I didn't want to teach anymore and had transitioned to creating a program that would encourage kids to stay in school. Once we got started, it was much more successful than I'd anticipated, and I needed more mentors for the students. Somehow, that request got to Jim, and he unleashed all his billionaire clients on me. Then our offices were vandalized by a local gang, and he saved both me and my program. I couldn't help but fall in love with that softy who scares the crap out of people."

"He has perfected the silent-but-deadly look." Stella chuckles, and we all join her. "Gage and I met in the back of a friend's van up in Portland. He'd dated all of my friends but never me. My mom had fallen for a guy who didn't want me around, so I needed a place to stay, and Gage offered a spare bedroom. We worked well together as roommates, but then one day he told me he was moving to San Francisco and asked me to come with him. He saved me from being homeless, and then that silly man got me pregnant four times, despite a condom and birth control!"

The entire table laughs.

"He was so sweet and an amazing father," Stella continues. "He must have asked me a dozen times to marry him, and I just finally gave in."

"Bash and I met at a sex club," Fiona pipes up, just as we're all sighing at the sheer sweetness of Stella's story.

My eyes pop wide.

"We were both doing security of sorts," she adds with a shrug. "I was their fixer, and the owner of the club was having problems. Then my dad, who was head of the Irish mob, got sick in jail. His friends expected me to step in when he died, but instead, Bash was right there, extracting me from that

world. Many of those people are still my family, but that life wasn't for me. Thanks to Bash, I don't have to deal with it."

"The point is, these guys have all managed wonderful things and created great relationships, but they fucked up a time or two as they did it," Kate says. "It looked messy along the way. We know Clay was an idiot. We knew he would be, because he's a guy. But we hope you'll find a way to forgive him because you bring out the best in him."

"Clay has often been the man on the outside looking in," Stella adds, not giving me a moment to respond. "He comes to holiday functions without a date, and he shows up at our homes for random meals. I always thought that was because he was working himself to death between Clear and the hospital, but after Thanksgiving, he was different. You've made him different, and in a good way."

Fiona nods. "You help him make real connections, get involved in a genuine way, and he's so much happier."

Kate picks up her glass of iced tea. "I can see how those random calls from women would give you pause, but if he's not responding, it seems like he's wishing they would go away too, right? There must be a way to figure it out."

I take a sip of my drink and nod noncommittally. The women exchange looks, and Stella shifts the conversation to holiday shopping as we polish off the rest of our food.

When everyone is finished, Stella pulls out her credit card. "It's the least Clear Security can do after all we have to deal with."

As we're preparing to go, Fiona brings me into a tight hug. "Every single one of us has a story or four about how our husbands did something dumb. Try not to focus on these women contacting Clay, as that's not even something he's in control of, you know? He's never been one to date a woman more than once, and Bash tells me he's gotten very protective of you."

Cora nods. "I'll say he's protective. He still checks in on you, despite not being my relief. This isn't just about work

for him.”

Kate and Stella invite me to join them for shopping, but I kindly pass and wave goodbye before Cora and I head back up to my condo. I still feel overwhelmed. I need to find my way back to thinking clearly. And I guess that may take some time. After listening to them at lunch, I understand why those women have formed the group they have. It’s nice to be around women who understand living with imperfect men and some level of constant crazy. It makes me feel better about the tangle of emotions I’ve had lately. Maybe it’s possible for me to navigate all this and come out with something real, something great like each of these women seems to have.

I’m lost in my thoughts as Cora and I walk toward my apartment. “I’m not expecting to go anywhere this afternoon,” I tell her.

She nods. “I’ll be here until Patrick Monroe arrives at six. Let me know if you change your mind. We can keep you safe, so don’t feel trapped here. He can always meet us out.”

“Thanks, Cora—not only for being here, but also for being so gracious at lunch.”

She opens my front door and checks my apartment before giving me the okay to enter. “Those women are part of a very unique club.”

I nod. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“I think there are spouses of FBI agents who get together, but their conversation would never be that honest. The agency is too political. There’s something to be said about that family at Clear.”

I nod as I walk back to my room to think. I agree with what Cora said, and the fact that those women at lunch clearly respect Clay and want good things for him—and for me—means a lot. I want to believe they’re right about him, so why is that so hard? Maybe it’s everything else going on in my life, but unfortunately, there’s no separating that from Clay.



## CHAPTER 24

# *Clay*

It's been more than twenty-four hours, and I still haven't heard from Anna after I texted. I'm not on her detail anymore, so I have no excuse to see her, and I can't figure out what to do. I'm not sleeping; that's for certain. I never thought of my building as having thin walls, but last night, it felt like my ears were bionic and I could hear anything and everything at my neighbors' and on the street below. It didn't help that one of my neighbors was a screamer.

In short, caffeine is calling me. I walk into the break room at Clear to find Gage and several people from his team hanging out. I nod my greeting as I head for the coffee machine. We're ten days away from Christmas, and certain parts of the office are quiet while others are crazy. The team that chases hackers and computer-based crime just had a big win and is now slowing down, but the personal security teams are getting busier with all the holiday parties and travel going on.

The machine spits out a double espresso, hopefully enough caffeine to push the cobwebs in my brain to the corner.

Gage comes over as I'm taking a sip. "How's it going?"

I nod. "Okay. How about you? Looks like you're celebrating something."

Gage pours himself a coffee that looks like it's fifty-percent milk. "We took down a hacker den we've been working on. My team had an idea for a trojan horse, and it worked."

I'm impressed, but Gage's projects are almost always impressive. His team gets called in by all sorts of government agencies and major companies. "Congratulations. That's huge. Do you have a minute?" I motion for him to follow me to my office.

He nods, and we continue down the hall. "What are you doing for Christmas?"

"Working at the hospital. I had Thanksgiving off, and I'm off for New Year's, so I work Christmas."

Gage sits in the chair opposite my desk. "What's going on?"

I take a deep breath and tell him I need to take action about all the calls and text messages because they're a bigger problem than I've been willing to admit. "I need them to stop." I shake my head. "I can't keep changing my number, and that's not really helping anyway."

Gage nods thoughtfully. "I think Cora is here. Let's see if she can join us."

We call her office, and she agrees to come down. I explain what I just told Gage.

"So you don't know how all the women keep getting your number?" Cora asks.

I sigh. "I really don't, but I've been thinking about it a lot. I've changed it several times, so I'm starting to think they must be having some help. I have to provide it to the hospital each time, so maybe someone there thinks they're being funny."

"I agree that we should get to the bottom of this," Gage says. "I can appreciate that it's making your life difficult." He gives me a look. "And it's also not safe."

Cora nods. “I agree. You can’t be without your phone, and it’s a distraction. And I suppose there could be a larger agenda.”

I hadn’t considered that. *They’re just women looking for a good time, aren’t they?*

“May I see your phone?” Cora holds out her hand.

I pull it from my pocket and hand it to her. Like magic she’s on a black screen with all sorts of code.

“What did you just do?” I ask.

“I’m in the operating system.” She scans through the lines of code. “I think I found it. Looks like you may have someone tracking you. So as long as you keep importing all of your contacts, you keep bringing the virus to your new phone.”

My heart stops. “What does that mean?”

“I need your phone for a bit. This is going to take some time.”

I nod. “Of course. Whatever you need.”

She walks out of my office, and Gage looks at me. “She’s the smartest woman I’ve ever met.”

I shake my head. “She’s wasted doing bodyguard work.”

“Well, that’s a Jim thing. He thinks we all need to see how the sausage is made.”

I scrunch up my face. “I’ve never done it.”

“Your job is medical. You’re not directing teams.”

“I have a team of five EMTs,” I counter.

“I know, but you’re all specialists. You’re good.” He pauses a moment. “So it seems you have feelings for Anna?”

“Of course I do. That’s why I’m trying to sort out this phone mess. But I…”

Gage looks at me, waiting for me to finish. “But what?”

I blow out a breath of air. “I don’t do relationships very well.”

“Who does? You think Stella and I do it well?”

I shrug. “You sure make it look easy. You have four great daughters, you work together, and we never see you fight.”

Gage snorts and looks away. “We’ve been together a long time, but that doesn’t mean we don’t fight. We both know how to go for the jugular. And the same is true of Jim and Kate and Bash and Fiona.” He leans forward. “Sometimes the fun of fighting can be the making up. Why do you think I have four daughters?”

“I heard it was because you don’t understand birth control.”

Gage laughs. “Maybe. Or maybe I have super swimmers who are determined motherfuckers, despite any obstacles in their path.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh, but he waits for me to look him in the eye again. “Look, Anna and I went into this to have fun,” I explain. “And then it’s been one batch of drama after another. I like her. In fact, I like her a lot, but I think she’s stressed and worried about her brother and, hell, her own safety. Her emotions are all over the place, and I don’t know if what was developing between us is real for her or not. And then I made a mess of things. She took me off her detail, and I’m trying to respect her desire for space.” I scrub my hands over my face, not sure if that’s true or not. “Honestly, I don’t know what to do.”

He shakes his head. “You’re right that there’s a lot going on for her, but all the more reason she needs you to depend on, whether she realizes that or not. I saw the way you looked at each other, and I’ve also seen how other guys look at her. If you don’t lock that shit down, there’s a line of guys behind you who will. These other women who send you messages and photos may indeed be lonely and looking for fun, so if that’s all you want, move on from Anna. She’s amazing. I’ll fix her up with Hayden Carmichael. He was



gobsmacked by her at the holiday party. He's looking for a nice woman to settle down with."

There is no fucking way Hayden Carmichael, over-muscled meathead, is going out with my Anna. But... "I just don't know how to do this. I didn't have good examples growing up."

Gage laughs. "You've met Stella's mom. Stella was worried about the same thing. Her mom is a hot mess, but damn if Stella isn't the most caring, thoughtful person there is, and she loves me even on the days I haven't showered, when I'm angry about some shit here, and when I stink up the bathroom, not just my good days."

I chuckle. "Your diet sucks. I can only imagine how bad you must stink."

Gage grins. "Listen, I think Anna is going to get through all this, and you're going to help her do it. But you need to show her you can. And fixing this phone situation is a good start. A woman who cares about you needs more than constant interruptions from other women. Now, if you're scared to move forward with her, let's talk about that. But we can all tell that you like Anna, and she brings out the best in you. Don't let your days of being a player ruin the potential for a healthy relationship." He looks at me a moment. "And don't wait too long, or I'm giving Hayden her number."

"Do that, and I'll make sure you have jock itch for the next year."

Gage stands, reaches for his milk with a dash of coffee, and winks at me. "If you don't mind four little girls crawling all over you, you're welcome to come to our place for breakfast or dinner on Christmas, whichever your schedule allows."

"Thanks," I say to his back as he disappears. Hayden Carmichael is not the guy for Anna. He was too friendly at the holiday party. Fuck that. No way.

Fuck, I really like Anna, and it gnaws at me that she wouldn't meet me for breakfast so we could talk this out. But I

need to do more than beg her. I need to show her she's a priority. Because I know that's what I want.

So what the fuck does that mean?

Shit.

I'm hopelessly over the cliff for this woman, and it's time I do something about it rather than sit here on my ass.



It takes two days for Cora to come back to me with my cleaned-up phone. “We not only reinstalled your operating system, we figured out how you got the virus in the first place. Your phone was automatically opening attachments so they're easier to read. That's not a great idea. You don't open any attachments unless you know the sender.”

I nod. I'm good with that.

“We also found that each time you changed your number, a post would go up in GregsList under Men Looking for Women.”

I sit back in my chair stunned. “Are you joking?”

She shakes her head. “Do you know a Nancy Crawford?”

My stomach drops. “She's one of the nurses at the hospital. She's been pursuing me for a while, but I've never gone there. She recently talked me into having a drink with her by threatening one of the nurses I work with.”

Cora hands me a piece of paper. “You need to take this to the hospital's human resources and to the police. Jim and I think Eric Lenning is your man for this.”

“Why? What am I not getting?”

“Cyberstalking is illegal. What she's done is against state and federal law. Even if she never talks to you again, we don't want her to do this to someone else.”

“Well, no time like the present.” I reach for my desk phone, and Cora and I call Detective Lenning. After we’ve both been interviewed, I feel ready to text Anna again. She may not want to hear from me, but I have something important to say.

**Me: Hey. SFPD just left. I’ve figured out what was going on with all those messages. Any chance we can meet and talk about it?**



## CHAPTER 25

# *Clay*

It's been almost two days since I texted Anna asking to meet and four since we've actually spoken. It feels like four years. Anna texted me back, but she hasn't agreed to meet with me. I wish she'd tell me what she's thinking. I hope I didn't take action on solving this problem too late.

I close my eyes and look up at the ceiling of my apartment. I've kept myself busy, though. I met with the head of human resources at the hospital, and I talked with Detective Lenning again. They've arrested Nancy, and the hospital fired her for violation of confidentiality rules. I hope I never hear from her—or any other random woman—ever again.

My phone rings, and my heart beats triple time. It's Anna. "Hello?"

"I'm sorry to bother you." She sniffs. "My mom just went to the emergency room in Palm Springs. I was hoping you could call and see what you can find out."

I sit up straight. "Of course. Is she there alone? Do we need to go to her?"

"I can't get past the nurse, and Mom's not answering her phone."

I can hear the anxiety in her voice. "Don't worry. I'll call right now and call you back as soon as I know

something.”

“Thank you.”

I immediately call Palm Springs Memorial and introduce myself as one of Felicity Standing’s physicians. It isn’t too big a lie. I’ve treated her in the past...sort of. “I’m just looking for some information,” I explain. “Her daughter is upset, and I’d like to relay what I can to her.”

“Just a moment.”

I’m put on what I think is going to be permahold, but then I hear, “Is this the Clay McGrath who went into the Navy after medical school?”

My eyes narrow. “Yes. Who’s this?”

“Monique Cheeseman.”

“Holy shit! Monique! How are you?”

“I’m great. I’m doing emergency med here in the desert. Seems you’re out of the Navy, eh? San Francisco General, they said?”

“Yep, no longer in a uniform.” I clear my throat. “It’s great to talk to you, but listen, you have a patient, Felicity Standing, in your ER? Her daughter is a friend, and I’ve treated Felicity a few times. I need to know if I’m driving her daughter down today.”

“Let me look at the EKG on her chart.” There’s a pause, with papers shuffling in the background. “She came in with chest pain and elevated blood pressure. I don’t think it’s much, but with women presenting differently than men with heart issues, I’m running a full diagnostic. Her bloodwork isn’t back yet, but her EKG is looking good.”

I relax a little. “That’s great news. She presented a few weeks ago with asthma. Is she wheezing?”

“No, thankfully. But her friend insisted on bringing her in when she wasn’t feeling well today.”

“Is she at a station with a phone?”

“She is. Would you like to speak with her?”

“I’d love that.”

“The next time you come to town, you should catch up with Wendy and me,” Dr. Cheeseman says. “Thomas Rundle is here, too. It could be a med school reunion.”

I laugh. “My dad is living in Palm Springs, too, so chances are good. If you give me your mobile, I’ll text you next time I come to town.”

She rattles off her number, and I put it on the corkboard in my office. I’d love to see those guys again. When Monique transfers me to Felicity’s extension, the phone rings about twenty times before anyone answers. Then, rather than a hello, I hear a distant, “Yes, the call is for you. It’s okay if you talk on it.”

“Hello?” Felicity finally says.

“Felicity? It’s Clay McGrath. How are you feeling?”

She sighs. “Oh, I think it’s heartburn, but you know Bitsy. She didn’t want to take any chances. I had too much rich food with your father last night at a French place he wanted to go to.”

“Was it at least good?”

“It was incredible,” she says. “How did you know I was here?”

“Bitsy called Anna, but Anna couldn’t get through, so she asked me to try. Do I need to drive her down? I’ll leave right now if you say so.”

“Oh, honey, aren’t you sweet? No. I’m just fine. I’ll get some rest. Hamish and I just booked our flights back for Christmas. I’m going to pick up my car while I’m there and drive back. I’ll stay here until it gets hot—maybe March or April.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” I tell her.

“I’m considering renting a room at your dad’s place. Would that bother you?”

“Are you dating?”

“Oh, goodness no. We’re friends, and we like doing things together, so it makes sense. We’ll be roommates. He can stay at my place in San Francisco when the desert gets too hot, and when we’re back in Palm Springs, I’ll stay with him here.”

“You’re an adult. You don’t have to worry about me.” I take a deep breath. “It’s just that my dad doesn’t really know how to be friends with women. Are you sure you want to try to be roommates?”

She laughs. “He went out on a date the other night. I have him dating women his own age,” she adds proudly.

My eyes widen. “That’s an achievement. I think the last woman his age was my mom.”

“It was, but he loves hanging out with me and my friends, so it’s good that he’s seeing someone more mature.”

“Well, thank you for being a positive influence,” I tell her.

“Now, this fellow my Anna has been seeing is a hot mess,” she continues.

My heart lurches. “Oh really? How so?”

“Well, it seems he might be one of those who always thinks the grass is greener on the other side.”

I resist the urge to pout. It’s my fault Anna feels that way, even if it isn’t true. “I don’t know about that,” I say, choosing my words carefully. “But perhaps he could have handled things better.” I sigh. “I’m not sure it matters, though, as it seems Anna has kicked that idiot to the curb.”

“My girl is usually a smart one, but sometimes, she needs to let her defenses down.” She pauses a moment. “Her last putz of a boyfriend screwed her over. I kept my mouth shut, but I knew it was only a matter of time.”

“Until what?”

“Until he stepped out on her and she caught him. And I was right, unfortunately. She’s always had high standards, as she should, but I fear now she also has trouble trusting. I’ve pointed this out to her, gently, but she may need some



additional encouragement. If you can get her over that, you two will be fantastic together. Your father and I both think so.”

I hear what sounds like her mobile phone ringing. “Are you ignoring her calls?”

“No, I was getting a bunch of tests done, and I didn’t want to speak with her until I knew something.”

“Okay, but she’s concerned,” I counter. “I’ll let her know that once you have your test results, you’ll be calling. Don’t leave her hanging for too long.”

“I won’t. And I hope we’ll see you at Christmas.”

“I work on Christmas,” I remind her.

“You don’t work the whole day.”

“Well, I don’t have the schedule yet, but it will likely be seven to seven. It’s a matter of whether that’s day or night.”

“Great,” she says, undeterred. “That’s twelve hours we can spend with you either before or after. I’ll let your dad know.”

My eyes go wide. “You two really are quite the pair these days.”

“No. I had my one true love. John was my everything, and he’s not replaceable,” her voice softens.

“Who said anything about replacement? Dad’s just someone to travel and hang out with.”

“Hamish needs someone to take care of him.” Her voice drops, “And I’m done with taking care of everyone. I want to take care of me!”

“That makes sense to me,” I tell her. “I’ll call Anna now.”

“Thank you, Clay. See you soon,” she singsongs.

I hang up, take a deep breath, and call Anna, who answers halfway through the first ring.

“The doctor thinks she’s fine, but they’re running tests to make sure. Either way, this is her third hospital visit in two

months, so I'm going to get her to the cardiologist when she's home for Christmas."

"Thank you. Do you know why she isn't answering her phone?"

"She wants to have test results before she talks to you."

Anna groans, and my pants become tighter. "Does she realize how upset I am?"

"I told her, but she's not worried, so she doesn't see why you should be. Mostly, she just took the opportunity to give me a hard time."

"Is that so?"

"Can we meet? I'll take any meal or even coffee. I miss you, and I'd like to talk."

Anna is quiet for a moment. "The problem is, I'm not sure I can do this—"

"Sweetheart, I'm not very good at relationships. I've screwed up, but I don't want to give up on this. Please, can we meet? I'd like to see if we can't figure things out."

"There isn't much to figure out," she whispers.

"Yes, there is. Please meet me. It's the weekend, and I'm not working. We can meet for lunch in your building if you prefer."

"No. If we're going to meet, why don't I come to your place, and we can find a place to eat close to the ballpark?"

"I can be ready in five minutes," I tell her.

"Slow your roll, McGrath. I've not fully committed."

My shoulders fall. "I really would love to see you. Who's on your detail today?"

"Um...I just met him. I think his name is Lincoln."

I nod. "Lincoln Tanner—he's a giant teddy bear. And I stress the word *giant*. He can either escort you over and drop you off, or if you want the flexibility to leave when you want, you can bring him with you."

“I’ll think about it.”

“Anna, I screwed up. I’m sorry.”

The line disconnects, and my heart stops. *Shit.*

I pace around my living room, trying to come up with a plan to get her to talk to me. Then the buzzer sounds. It’s Anna. My heart leaps for joy. “Please come on up,” I say into the speaker as I unlock the door.

I’m in jeans and a T-shirt that has seen better days. I race to my room, shuck off the shirt and grab one that looks a little better. I can worry about my shoes after she arrives.

She knocks, and when I open the door, Anna is standing by herself. “Where’s Tanner?” I ask.

“He walked me over and saw me to the elevator before he left.”

Anger surges through me. He knows there’s someone stalking her, and she should never be alone.

“Relax. I was on my own for the elevator ride and knocking on your door.”

I shake my head as I step aside for her to enter. “He shouldn’t have left you until he knew you were in my care.”

“If anyone gets in trouble, it should be me. I made him go. I didn’t feel comfortable with the two of you together.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like everyone seeing how insecure and stupid I am.”

I shake my head. “You’re not insecure and certainly not stupid.”

“I don’t know. Isn’t the definition of stupid doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome?”

I smile at her. “I get that trusting is hard, but it’s not stupid. Maybe the people you’ve chosen are stupid. Your mom certainly thinks so.”

Anna's face twists up. "How bad did she embarrass me?"

"She did nothing to embarrass you. She just pointed out what I already should have known."

Anna takes a deep breath. I can see a slight tremble in her hands. "How about we head out for lunch?"

She seems uncomfortable standing in front of me. I hope that's a good thing. She radiates sexual energy, and I want to jump on that—literally and figuratively—but I need to get through to her first, so we can have more than today together.

"Let me grab my boots." I dash back to my room to pull on my Chukkas and a light blue cashmere sweater. I also grab a water-resistant jacket from the closet. I know if I don't, it will rain.

I walk her back out to the elevator. "Any word from Jim about your brother?"

She shakes her head. "No. I'm thinking his MSS friend isn't responding."

"Contacts can get super paranoid, so that's hard to say. He could be waiting for a clean phone or a chance when he won't be overheard."

She nods. "When I was in China as a tourist, I didn't feel like it was a police state, but my experience wasn't normal. Now, I see it for what it is."

I nod. "I'm sorry this is all so stressful. I know they're working on it, but I know that doesn't make it any better for you."

We make our way out to the sidewalk and walk over toward Public House. It has almost a hundred different draft beers and a nice menu of high-end bar food. "Would this work?" I ask as we approach.

She nods. "Perfect."

We walk in, and it's busy but not game-day busy. They seat us at a booth in the corner, and I'm grateful for the

privacy. Anna sits about as far from me as she can, but I scoot over so our knees are touching.

We order burgers, and I order a beer flight, and Anna chooses a hard cider. Once the server leaves, I hand Anna my phone. “The passcode is seven, five, two, six. Those are the last four of my Social Security number.”

She looks at me, puzzled.

“I don’t want you to doubt me or my intentions. Please, go ahead,” I urge.

She unlocks my phone and looks at me.

“Open the texts.”

She pushes the button.

“I want you to see that I’ve deleted everything—yet again—but more importantly, I’ve solved the problem for good. Cora analyzed my phone and discovered a virus. A woman I worked with at the hospital had sent it, and it allowed her to cyberstalk me. She was posting my number on GregsList every time I changed it.”

Anna’s eyes widen slightly. “What?”

“Nancy Crawford—she’s the woman I was with at the bar. It was *not* a date. I only agreed to meet her because she was threatening to get one of the nurses I work with fired. She’s been interested in me for a while, and I guess she got tired of me rejecting her advances. But now she’s been arrested and fired from the hospital, so I hope I’ll never see her again. And this is all over.” I scribble on one of my cards and slide it to Anna. “Here’s my latest new number it just transferred over. I hope it will be the last.”

The server brings our drinks. Anna sets my phone on the table.

“Now check out the contacts.”

She taps that icon.

“Monique Cheeseman is your mother’s doctor in Palm Springs, and I went to medical school with her and her partner,

Wendy Chen.”

Anna looks at me, her brow furrowed. “I didn’t ask you to do any of this. I’m not trying to cut you off from other people in your life.”

I shake my head. “You’re not cutting me off from anything of value. I haven’t been as proactive about this as I should have been because I didn’t take your feelings into consideration. I’m sorry about that, and I want to do better. I watched my parents’ dysfunctional relationship. Ultimately, they lost the ability to trust one another. That’s not what I want for us.”

I pause and think about how to say this next bit. “I wasn’t sure that having what your parents had was in my DNA, and I know that’s what you want, what you deserve. But I know now that I have to try because I’m crazy about you. You make me a better man, and I love being with you. But most importantly, I need you to understand that I want you and only you. You should never be worried about that.”

She blushes as the server places burgers in front of us. After he leaves, she just looks at me for a moment, but finally she smiles. “Trust is not easy for me.”

“I would like to start over,” I tell her. “Can you give me a chance to do some things differently?”

Anna takes a big bite of her burger and looks out the window at the gate to Oracle Park.

My stomach churns as I wait for her to answer. I’m not sure how I’ll react if she tells me it’s not possible. Beg? Cry? Maybe demand?

She scrutinizes me as she swallows. “Thank you for being so open. I appreciate that you’ve done so much to eliminate all the random women contacting you, but I recognize that my insecurities have been a big part of putting us here. I realize you’re not one of my past boyfriends, and I know that relationships take work. I’ve missed you, but I wasn’t sure how much of what we have is real and how much

has been created by all the drama in my life and your job protecting me. I didn't want to look like a fool."

"I spend time with you because I want to, not because of Clear. I would have found other reasons to be with you if I didn't have your safety to look after."

She nods. "I'm going to choose to believe that. I had a long conversation with my mom, and she told me a thing or two about how she and my dad built a life together. And the ladies from Clear had a lot to say when I met them for lunch the other day. What I see as perfect relationships aren't always that way, but they can be perfect for the people involved...if both of them are working at it."

I give her a look. "I like the work we do together."

She blushes again. "I like *that* work too."

"Look, we're not always going to get this exactly right, but if we can forgive each other when it's needed, we can do anything." I take her hand. "As long as we're doing it together."

She nods. "I'd like that."





## CHAPTER 26

# *Clay*

I roll over in my bed, and there's my morning wood. Amazing, since Anna and I were up half the night enjoying ourselves. I'm like a fifteen-year-old boy when I'm around her. I get the biggest hard-ons. Over the last few days, we've more than made up for the time we were apart, and I know that going forward, things will be even better, especially once we get this situation with Anna's brother and the MSS resolved.

Anna is lying on her side with her back nestled against my chest. I run my hand over her smooth skin. Kissing her shoulder softly, I wrap my arm around her and roll her to her back. I graze the diamond tips of her nipples, and it only makes me harder. My dick is heavy and ready for more. I reach for a condom.

"I want to feel you bare," she murmurs.

I freeze. "Are you sure?"

"I'm on birth control, and I'm clean."

"I'm clean, too," I say, praying I don't sound too eager.

"I trust you," she says, taking my length and stroking me.

Damn, she's good at this. My fingers slide through her slit, and she's so wet. She's always ready for me. I find her

button and circle it. “I’m going to make love to you this morning.”

Her eyes close, and her hips undulate. “Take me,” she breathes.

I bend down and suck her nipple. “Come for me first.” I draw it deep into my mouth and slowly pull back with my teeth, holding it as my fingers strum her center.

Her fingers dig into my scalp as I work her sensitive nub harder and move to the other breast. Anna’s head tilts back, and as she hits her crescendo, she holds her breath and freezes. I watch the look on her face that moves from tortured to pure bliss. Without stopping, I kneel between her knees and push in slowly.

“Oh fuuuuuuck,” she breathes.

I rock in and out of her, and being bare is incredible. I’ve never had sex without a condom, and I never want to wear one again. This feels amazing.

Anna’s lips meet mine as our bodies work in tandem. “You feel so good,” she moans.

If I’m not careful, I’m going to blow my load. In and out, I concentrate on what Anna means to me. She is my moon, stars, and the sun combined. I want this, what we have, forever. I stroke her nub, and her breathing grows heavy again. I know she’s close. “Come for me, baby.”

She groans, and I feel her orgasm swallow me. It pushes me right over the cliff behind her.

I rest on my elbows as we both catch our breath. “You are fucking amazing.”

“I was just thinking the same about you.” She bites her lower lip.

If we don’t get out of this bed, I’m going to take her again. “I’m going to need sustenance.”

“I think you have the makings for omelets, or we can go to Momo’s for breakfast.”

It's after eleven. "How about brunch?" I ask.

"Sounds perfect. I need to take a quick shower, though."

"Nonsense, you can borrow one of my baseball caps."

She laughs. "No way."

Her phone rings, and she looks at the screen. "It's Jim."

"Put it on speaker."

"Hi, Jim. Clay is here with me."

"Perfect. I heard from my contact in China."

She gasps, her eyes wide.

"Charles' business partner is indeed a Nationalist," Jim continues.

"So what does that mean for Charles?" Anna asks.

"Based on the way things are escalating, we need to get him out, and soon. Arnold Woo is under investigation, and they seem to suspect Charles as well, so he's likely going to be included in the round-up. They think he's stolen secrets from the Chinese government, and they see him as the instigator in his partner's move away from the Communist party. Arnold Woo has used the money your family invested with him for things other than commercial real estate, which is why the deal has been stalled for so long."

Tears pool in Anna's eyes, and I wrap my arms around her.

"Anyway," Jim concludes. "I'm pulling together a team to—"

"I want in," I say before he's even finished his thought.

"We're going to base out of Guam, and we'll go in and extract Charles. But if we get caught, the US State Department isn't going to bail us out."

"When do we leave?" I press.

"We'll leave as soon as we gear up."

“I’m coming too,” Anna announces.

My head whips to her. “What? You’re a civilian, Anna. I don’t think that’s a good idea. You’re not trained for this.”

Her face hardens. “He’s my brother, and you can’t convince me otherwise.”

Jim clears his throat. “We’re not going in with visas or through legal means. I’m happy to take you as far as Guam, but I can’t bring you into China. We’ll already stick out.”

She closes her eyes. “I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to him.”

“I won’t let anything happen,” I promise her.

“If Charles knows you’re in Guam, he might be much more cooperative about leaving with us,” Jim says.

“Okay, I can do that.”

I take a deep breath, feeling relieved. “What should I bring with me?”

“A change of clothes,” Jim says. “Meet us at the private terminal in two hours. We’ll brief this on the plane.”

We disconnect the call, and Anna looks at me. “What will I do if both of you are captured?”

I take her by her shoulders and look her in the eye. “You can’t think that way. There is no one better at this than Jim. We’re going to be fine.”

She reaches out and holds me tight. “I hope you’re right.”

I throw some things in a bag and grab one of my nicer suits. My guess is that we’ll blend in better if we look like businessmen. But Jim didn’t say, so I also take jeans, sneakers, and T-shirts. I take a quick shower, because I’m not sure when I’ll be able to do that again. I’d love to have Anna join me, but I know that’s a bad idea.

After I’m done, we run over to Anna’s, where she showers and packs a bag. She’s strangely calm and thoughtful as she organizes her things. “Do you think we can stop by

Charles' home? I can pick up some clothes and toiletries for him.”

“Good idea.”

We drive over to his house, and Anna stops as soon as she pushes the door open. “Oh my God!”

I look beyond her, and Charles' home is a wreck. There isn't one thing that hasn't been destroyed or thrown on the floor.

“I didn't even think to look here to see if they'd hit his home too.”

I pull my phone out and begin taking photos. “Given the size of this mess, they didn't find what they were looking for.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because they tore *everything* apart. They usually stop when they find what they're looking for.”

“I need to call the police.”

I reach for her and shake my head. “I've taken photos, and I'll do a quick video. Let's talk to Jim.”

Anna looks around frantically. “I can have my people get it cleaned and replace the furniture before he gets home. But does this mean he'll still be in danger when we return?”

I shake my head. “I don't know.”

Anna goes upstairs and confirms that Charles' clothes are also strewn all over the floor and shredded. Tears fill her eyes.

Once we're back in the car, I call Jim and tell him what we found.

“Okay, I want to see the video,” he says. “Anna, you said you can get this cleaned up?”

“Yes, I think so. My team can come in, and I have furniture in storage we can put here until he can buy what he

wants.” She turns to me. “Did you see what they did to his bed?”

I nod. “It was completely destroyed, Jim. They cut the cover off the mattress and removed all the coils.”

“Why would they do that?” Anna asks.

I shake my head. “I don’t know. My only guess is that they were looking for something.”

“Let me talk to Detective Lenning about this before you send your team over,” Jim requests.

Anna agrees, and I hang up with Jim and forward him the photos and video. When we pull up at the airport, Jim is waiting, and Bash arrives shortly thereafter. In no time, the four of us board the plane for the fifteen-hour flight.

“Glad to see you pulled your head out of your ass,” Bash says to me.

Jim smiles. I can tell he agrees.

The four of us sit down in the plane and immediately begin planning. “Charles’ girlfriend is MSS, so we need to approach him somewhere outside his home or office,” Jim notes. “We also have to believe his phone is bugged, so we need to take a jammer with us.”

“He has a girlfriend?” Anna asks, her mouth open in surprise.

“They’ve been living together since shortly after he arrived,” Jim says.

“He’s never told us about her.” Anna shakes her head.

I shrug. “She’s probably not important to him. It may be a situation he feels trapped in.”

“Have you told your family about me?” she asks.

I smile like a Cheshire cat. “You met my father, and yes, I’ve told my mother about you, as did my dad. Mom is eager to meet you.”

“Oh.”

We spend the first few hours of the flight coming up with the approach that will raise the least suspicion, as well as get us in and out quickly. I feel good about the mission, and I won't just hope that everything goes as planned. I know better. It *will* go as planned. Jim already has someone keeping an eye on Charles.

As the sky around the plane darkens, I can tell Anna's eyes are getting heavy. "This is the time to sleep if you can," I tell her. "It will be very busy once we hit the ground."

She returns to her seat and pushes her chair back to a reclining position.

"How is she doing?" Jim asks once I've turned back to him.

"I think pretty good, all things considered. Her mom was in the emergency room yesterday, but it seems to have been just indigestion and a paranoid friend."

"Those are the best to have as our parents age," Bash says.

I nod. "So true."

"Her mom has also been hanging out with my dad."

Bash and Jim look at me, eyes wide. "Wow, that will make for an awkward Christmas dinner." Bash snickers.

The lights in the cabin dim, and I think we're about nine hours from Guam. I try to follow my own advice and shut my eyes as well. I need to be rested so I can be at the top of my game when we land.

Sometime later, when I wake and stretch, I see Anna playing cards with the flight attendant in the back. When I sit up, the flight attendant jumps to attention. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Coffee sounds great," I tell her. "How much longer?"

She looks at her wrist. "Another two hours, maybe a little less."

I nod. "I'm going to the head."

Anna's brow creases.

"The bathroom."

"Oh."

I lean down and kiss her temple. "We can join the mile-high club if you want."

She blushes. "Maybe on the return flight."

I smirk. Oh, we're going to do it. She just gave me the green light. But for now, it will have to wait.

Once I'm done emptying my bladder, I return to my coffee and find an egg sandwich as well. I eat it in two bites. It hits the spot.

"I have another or some fruit if you'd like," the flight attendant offers.

"A banana or an orange would be great."

She offers me both, so I take them.

"You eat way too healthy," Anna says.

"What did you have for breakfast?"

"I had an egg sandwich, but not with a fruit chaser."

I chuckle. "What were you guys playing?"

"Gin rummy. I'd been up for a while, and none of the movies appealed to me."

"You're a woman of many talents." I raise my eyebrows.

"I told you *maybe* on the way back."

"Oh, it's happening. You can bet on it."

Anna rolls her eyes.

Jim stands and stretches, and the flight attendant hands him a printout.

"How about I get you off right here without touching you?" I whisper, my eyes still on Anna.



She shakes her head. “I know you could do that, but I’d like to keep my dignity.”

“And I want to keep my balls. I’m sure Charles will cut them right off if I’m too obvious on the return flight.”

She smiles. “What’s life without a little risk?”

“You know what your teasing does to me.”

“Hey, Clay,” Jim calls, interrupting our moment. “I’ve got some news.”

Anna and I move back to where he’s sitting. “After we land in Guam, we have a flight into a small, regional airport less than an hour outside Shanghai. The local police can be bought off. There will be someone from the US embassy there to meet us, and he’ll drive us into town.”

“Are you sure?” Anna asks.

Jim nods. “We’ll be fine.”

We ran an operation similar to this last year with the CIA to get someone out of Shanghai, so I feel confident. I know Clear has done this before.

“All right, folks,” the pilot says over the loudspeaker. “We’re approaching Guam and are in the flight pattern to land. We’re going to begin our descent, and we should be on the ground in forty minutes.”

Anna takes a deep breath. “We’re going to be fine,” I tell her.

She holds my hand. “Thank you for being here and for helping me.”

“We’re a team. Just like when we were in Tahoe, when we do things together, we master them quickly.” I’m not sure where that came from, but that is how we managed things, so I know we can do it again. I take comfort in that.

Soon, we’re slowing down on the runway. It was a smooth landing after a smooth flight. We pull up to a terminal, and a young man comes running out to open the plane door.

“John,” Bash says, and they do an intricate handshake.

“Good to see you,” he gushes. Then he turns to Jim. “Mr. Adelson. Welcome to my little island.” He turns to Anna. “You’re going to be my companion for the day. I have big plans for us.”

I step out and extend my hand. “Dr. Clay McGrath, her boyfriend,” I tell him.

Anna chuckles. *Fuck yes, I’m territorial.*

Bash leans over. “If you need to stay to make sure John doesn’t steal your girl’s heart, we’ve got this.”

I give him a death stare, and he raises his hands in surrender as he laughs.

“Follow me.” John waves us along to another plane. It’s a large cargo plane, full of crates and goods, nowhere near as luxurious as the plane we used to get here.

I turn to Anna. “We’ll be back by the end of the day. Do some sightseeing and enjoy yourself.”

She holds her breath. “I’ll try.”

I kiss her quickly, and we board the next plane, taking seats in a cargo container behind several crates. This is where it could get hairy. We have a connection, but the transfer could go sideways at any time.

We sit in silence. The pilot has a short-wave radio that allows him to talk to us, and periodically, he gives us an update. “We’re taking off,” he announces after a few minutes.

We buckle into seats that are bolted to the wall inside the container and hold on as the plane increases speed to take off. The lack of windows makes it nerve-wracking. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, but Bash is reading on his tablet, as if this is something he does every day.

The next time we hear from the pilot, he says, “We’ve just entered Chinese airspace. We’ve come up over Taiwan, so it looks like we’re arriving from there.”

The two-hour flight seems to take forever. I must look at my watch every five minutes. Jim sits with his eyes closed, seeming deep in thought. Bash keeps reading, and I think

about Anna—the curve of her hip, her delicious soft skin, her beautiful smile. She’s helped me see something in myself I never knew was there. I can’t wait to see what lies ahead, now that I know we’ll be together.

“We’re approved for landing,” the pilot squawks over the radio.

A few minutes later, I feel the plane touch the ground. Unlike our first landing, we hit the runway hard and bounce. I’m going to feel that tomorrow.

“Shit. Looks like we’re going to be boarded by customs,” the pilot reports.

I look to Jim for instructions. He and Bash just nod, and we make our way into a two-foot-wide smugglers box, hidden behind a false wall at the back of the plane. My heart pounds.

We can hear the pilot speaking in Mandarin to someone, probably the customs agent. They sound like they’re bickering, but I can’t be sure.

Nails whine as they pry open some crates, and at one point, I could swear they were standing directly in front of me on the other side of the fake wall. My heart is beating so fast I worry I’m going to pass out.

It seems to take hours, but I know it’s only minutes before we hear a diesel engine in the belly of the cargo plane. I don’t know what’s happening, and it’s so dark in here that we can’t really see one another. We remain silent despite the noise. The captain will get us when he’s ready.

Suddenly, the fake wall is pulled open, and I hold my breath. The light is blinding until my eyes adjust. It’s the captain. “You need to hurry,” he says. “The driver is here, and I can only stay here without attracting attention for about four hours. I’ll pay these guys to work slowly as they unload.”

Jim nods. “We’ll be back.”

We grab our bags and race out to the car.

“Welcome to China,” the driver says without any accent as we slide into the backseat. He doesn’t introduce himself, and I know better than to ask. “I’ll drive you into Shanghai. My men have eyes on Charles Standing. We think you’re best to approach him on the street.”

As he lays out his plan, I quickly put together that this guy is CIA, and he’s got a large team ready to help us out. Jim has some serious fucking contacts, and I’m grateful for that.

We stop outside of Shanghai at a safe house and change into suits, so we look like businessmen and won’t stand out. Charles has a pair of MSS agents on him, but the CIA team is going to keep them occupied for a few minutes, so everything needs to line up perfectly for this plan to work.

“Okay,” Jim says as he straightens his tie. “You’ve got the map?”

“I do,” I confirm.

“I’ve got zip ties if we need them.” Bash pulls a handful from his coat pocket.

We’ve left all identifying objects behind, and I watch as Jim rubs his empty ring finger. “It’s strange to not wear it.”

“I bet,” I reply. “We’ll be back in no time.”

Bash runs some gel through his hair and combs it back. I take a deep breath and hold it a few seconds to ground myself. Then, I nod to the guys. We’re ready.

Mr. CIA leads us to a dark-windowed Suburban. Four just like it follow us as we pull back onto the road. “Charles is preparing to go to lunch,” he informs us.

As we ride into Shanghai, the air is thick with crap. It resembles the fog in San Francisco, but instead, it’s straight-up ugly pollution. The traffic increases as the city gets closer. Mr. CIA keeps inching forward, but I’m nervous that we’re not going to get to Charles in time.

“He’s approaching from the south,” the driver says after a moment. “He’s the only Anglo man in the crowd. You won’t miss him.”

We pile out of the car. Bash pulls a map of San Francisco from his pocket, and we collect ourselves on the sidewalk just as we spot Charles approaching.

“Excuse me,” Jim says as he passes. “Do you speak English?”

Charles stops and smiles. “An American accent. Yes, I speak English. What can I help you with?”

Bash shows him the map. “Do you know where this is?”

Charles looks at the map, and then at him, seeming confused.

“I know it’s crazy,” I say. “But my girlfriend, Anna, is there waiting for me, and I’m all turned around.”

Charles’ eyes change. He looks back at the map again. “Yes, I know where that is. I can show you.”

We walk back toward the Suburban, and as we pass, I push Charles into the rear, climbing in after him as we peel out. The streets are crowded with cars, people on bicycles, rickshaws, and pure chaos, so it’s hard to build up much speed. But the four other Suburbans fall in around us for a moment before heading off in all different directions.

“What’s going on?” Charles asks, looking around anxiously.

“We’ve come to take you home,” Jim says. “Anna is waiting for us, and we’ve got to go now. Unfortunately, you can’t go back to your apartment.”

“Oh thank God,” Charles says.

The Suburban comes to a screeching halt at an intersection with a police officer directing traffic. My heart also comes to a complete stop. If we’re caught, we have no identification. We just have to play dumb, and they’ll throw us in some gruesome prison cell. We’ll probably end up doing hard labor.

But the policeman waves us through, and we speed out of the city. In no time, we’re racing back to the tiny airfield.

“My team has released Charles’ MSS tails,” our driver reports. “They have no idea where he’s gone, and so far, they haven’t reported it to their bosses. Most likely they’re trying to find him before they get themselves in trouble.”

We come speeding up to the side of the plane, and with a quick word of thanks, we’re out and boarding in the back.

“Good to see you,” the captain says. “I’ll need you in the smugglers hold until after we take off.”

The four of us squeeze in, shoulder to shoulder in the tiny, cramped area. Charles’ breathing is fast. We’re silent until the sensation of taking off rolls through my stomach.

“The guy who said Anna was his girlfriend, was that true?” Charles asks in the darkness.

I smile. “Yes. She’s my girlfriend.”

“How did you meet and why hasn’t she mentioned you?”

“I suspect you’ve been front and center in her mind when you talk.”

“We told her about *your* girlfriend,” Bash says. “Anna didn’t know about her either.”

Charles chuckles. “I suppose we’re even then. But Ming and I weren’t serious. There was something about her that made me not quite trust her.”

“That was smart,” Jim notes. “She’s an MSS agent who was assigned to you.”

Charles is quiet a moment. “I guess that makes sense. She was always asking questions, and I was sure she was searching my things.”

“We’re out of Chinese airspace,” calls the captain. “You can come out now. I haven’t seen any sign of a tail, and our sources back in China say they haven’t scrambled any jets.”

I nod as we shove our way out of the hidden compartment. “I’ll feel better once we’re out of Guam.”



## CHAPTER 27

### *Anna*

As the afternoon progresses, I'm beginning to get nervous that we haven't heard from the guys.

"—did you hear what I said?" John asks.

"I'm sorry." I shake my head. "I was just thinking that we haven't heard from them, and I thought we would have by now."

John looks at his phone. "If they're on schedule, they should be in the air coming back about now, and we might hear from them within the next two hours or so."

"Okay. Good to know." I relax a little, but I still keep one eye on the time, counting down the moments until they're on the ground. We're wandering around a high-end mall, which seems rather out of place here, and I end up buying a silk scarf I think Mom will like and an Armani casual shirt my brother would wear. As we stroll in and out of the stores during burning time, I find a pair of Ferragamo velvet slippers on clearance. I'm pretty sure they're Clay's size, so as a joke, I decide to buy them. Maybe I can find a silk smoking jacket to go with them. It's not even remotely something he'd ever wear, which makes it hilarious. I hope.

John's phone rings as we return to the sidewalk. He answers. "Outstanding," he says after a moment. "We'll see



you in a little less than an hour then.” He looks over at me. “They’ve just cleared Taiwan airspace, and they have your brother.”

My shoulders relax for the first time all day. Feeling buoyant, I pick up a velvet Gucci track suit for Charles. It’s not exactly his taste, but he may want to change into something other than what he’s wearing. Then John and I head back to the Dededo-Dededo outdoor market to pick up more of the delicious Filipino barbecue we had for lunch earlier. John calls ahead, so they’ve prepared it and wrapped it up by the time we arrive.

We make it back to the airport with enough time that I can freshen up a bit before the plane comes rumbling in. Tears spring to my eyes long before they open the hatch, and a sob rips from my throat when Charles appears at the rear of the airplane before the door is fully open.

When he reaches the ground, I run into his arms and hug him as tightly as I can. “I’m so happy to see you!” I exclaim.

“Thank you. Thank you so much for sending these guys to get me. I was getting scared. I’m so glad you understood my code.”

“We figured it out together,” I say as Clay arrives. I wrap my arms around him and give him a big, wet kiss. Charles shakes his head and looks away. “Did Clay tell you we were dating?” I ask when we come up for air.

Charles nods. “He might have said something.”

When Jim appears, I throw my arms around him and Bash. “Thank you for rescuing my brother.”

“Not a problem,” Jim assures me. “But before they can figure out where we’ve landed, I’d like us to get back in the air.”

I nod. “Of course. I’m good with whatever you want to do.”

Jim shakes John’s hand and hands him a thick envelope of cash. “Thanks for all your help today. We couldn’t have

done this without you.”

“Let me know if you need anything else.” John turns and passes me the bags of food. “My friend will take good care of you with that table you ordered, but if you have problems or you want to come back and do a big buying trip, let me know, and I’ll set it up for you.”

“I will,” I promise. “Thanks for making today as enjoyable as possible.”

We all get into the plane, and as they sit down, I hand each of them a plate of food. “That’s also a gift from John.”

They dig into their barbecue as the plane speeds down the runway and catapults into the air over the Pacific Ocean. Once he’s done eating, I offer Charles the track suit. He laughs. “I don’t usually do velour, but I’m grateful. Seventeen hours in this suit would probably ruin it.”

“I want to hear about what happened today,” I tell him.

Charles stands. “As soon as I’m out of the bathroom and have a glass of scotch, we can talk about my part.”

Jim is studying his email. “I just received a message from my contact at the State Department. The Chinese ambassador has asked for time with the President.”

That can’t be good. “What does that mean?”

“That they’re pissed, but we’re not State Department or active-duty military. We’re private security, and there isn’t much they can do. They can’t force Charles to return. They’ll work with the State Department to figure something out to ease their grief over losing him—some sort of State Dinner or something.”

I feel myself smiling all over again. “Mom is going to be so excited to see you for Christmas. Man, she may even forget about me.”

“In your wildest dreams,” Charles says through a yawn.

I pat his arm. “Get some rest. You’re safe now.”

“Thanks to my little sister.” He gives me a hug before reclining his seat and disappearing under a blanket.

I return to my seat across the aisle and closer to the front of the plane, and Clay pulls me into his lap. “You know you promised me we could join the mile-high club,” he whispers. “And everyone seems to be sleeping.”

I lean down and kiss him. “What are you waiting for?”

“You know, the bathroom here is much bigger than on a typical plane,” he says in his best conversational tone.

“I think I noticed that.” I stand. “Shall we check it out together?”

“I think we should.” Clay takes my hand and pulls me to the rear of the plane. I look back toward Jim, Bash, and my brother, and they all appear sound asleep. “Shouldn’t you be tired too?”

Clay shakes his head. “I’m never too tired for you.” He opens the door and pulls me in behind him. In an instant, my back is against the door, and Clay’s mouth is everywhere at once. He pushes against me, and his hardness rubs my hip.

I want him. All the tension I’ve been carrying with me has drained away, leaving an almost giddy euphoria in its place. So many of the good things in my life are because of Clay. I need to never lose sight of that. I fumble with the belt and button on his slacks.

Clay chuckles into my mouth. “Do you need help with that?”

I should be better at this, but I’m too impatient. I drop to my knees, and I’m able to concentrate enough to unbuckle his pants. I let them drop to the floor and slip his boxer briefs down his hips, staring at the one-eyed monster. It’s weeping.

Leaning in, I lick away the moisture and hold him at the base, rubbing my finger along the underside. Clay pushes his hips for friction against my hand. His hands lace through my hair as he guides me onto his cock.

I look up, and his eyes are hooded with lust. “God, you’re beautiful with my cock in your mouth.”

I massage his balls as I slowly take him in. Swallowing the head, I push it past my gag reflex.

“Fuuuuuck,” he moans. “If you don’t stop, I’m going to come.”

I pull off gently, swirling my tongue around the crown. “Isn’t that the point?”

“Well, we’ve not really talked about your limits.”

I smile. “I think I said I was good for anything at least once.”

“That you did, but—”

He loses his train of thought as I dive back onto his cock, sucking it deep and hollowing out my cheeks as I take him in and out of my mouth.

“I... you... fuck....”

It seems his brain is scrambled eggs. I love that I have this effect on him. His balls tighten, and I know he’s close. I push him into my throat and let him fill me as I groan.

He pulls me up as I swallow and wipe my mouth. “You are so fucking sexy.”

His fingers find my bundle of nerves, which are on fire right now, and with just a few strokes, I have to grip his arms and hold my breath as the first wave of my climax hits. But he doesn’t stop. His fingers pivot in and out, rubbing that spot deep inside. I rest my head on his shoulder, trying to control my breathing.

“I want the entire plane to hear you come,” he grinds out. “And when we get back, I’m going to fuck you on every surface of both of our places.”

“Yes,” I moan.

“I’m going to make you come until you can’t walk.”

“Please,” I breathe.

His hand goes to my breast, pulling and twisting the nipple as the second wave of my climax hits me. I gasp for breath, and soon I'm completely spent.

"I can do this at least another dozen times." He pulls my damp hair back and kisses the side of my neck.

"No, no," I tell him. "I'm good."

It takes us a moment to collect ourselves as we reassemble our clothes, and then I follow him out to take our seats again. The cabin is dark, and I can hear Charles snoring. We adjust our chairs to the full recline position, and I think I lose consciousness the moment I pull a blanket over me.

When I finally wake, I hear voices murmuring. I look up to see Clay and Jim in deep discussion over a meal. My stomach rumbles for food. Jim spots me and motions for me to come join them. It takes a moment for the world to come into focus enough to walk over, but once I do, Bash is right behind me.

Charles is the only one still sleeping, but who knows when he last felt safe enough to truly rest.

Once I sit down, the flight attendant places a glass of water in front of me. "I can make you a sandwich, I have some salads, and I also have a chicken or steak dinner," she says.

My stomach rumbles again. "I'll have the chicken dinner."

"And I'll take the steak," Bash says.

"We were just talking about our plans for when we land," Jim tells us.

"How far out are we?" Bash asks before I can.

Jim consults his wristwatch. "We have about two hours left."

"This is going to sound silly, but what day are we returning?" I ask.

Clay smiles. "It's not silly. I'm a little scrambled myself. But today's the twenty-first."

“Okay, good. My mom comes in tomorrow. I realized I could have missed her flight, and even having Charles with me, I’d still be in trouble.”

“Nope. The last message I got was that my dad would bring her to your place. They’re leaving Palm Springs in the morning, and he’ll have a car service drop her.”

I nod, trying to think everything through. “Okay. That will give me time to figure out dinner plans and get a few things done.”

“Have you heard from your team about your brother’s place?”

I nod. “I’ve seen a few emails. They got the go ahead from the police to clean, so they got it all cleared out. Most of it went into a dumpster, and Jeannie from my office pulled some temporary furniture from our storage for him.”

“I pinged Detective Lenning about this. His team and the FBI have found the evidence that the MSS is behind the break-ins and what happened up in Muir Woods,” Jim says.

I nod. “It seems weird that they didn’t hit Charles’ office as well, but I think I would have heard something if they’d caused problems there.”

“Will he be safe at his home?” I ask Jim.

“My team has set up monitoring, and I may need your help to get Charles to accept a bodyguard, at least until this thing with the Chinese government is figured out and we believe the MSS has backed off.”

“I’m not sure he’ll have a problem with that, but I’ll talk to him,” I promise.

After a moment, something smells delicious, and the chicken meal appears in front of me soon after. I can’t imagine how they have food this nice on a plane. Eventually, we return to our seats, and I pull an old movie from the system and watch it. *The Breakfast Club* always takes me back to my youth—even though that movie is older than I am.

Then the pilot comes on the speakers and announces our final approach. As we hit the ground, it's hard to believe we were gone for three days, much of it on the airplane. It seems both shorter and longer than that. But either way, all I want to do is go to sleep in my bed.

"Let's get you home," Clay says as we exit the plane with Charles.

We all climb into Clay's truck.

"So do I just go to my house?" Charles asks. "It's so strange to be back here."

I look over at Clay, not sure how to approach this, but he's driving, so he's not much help. "Your house was broken into," I tell Charles, whose eyes widen with alarm. "I'm not sure when, but it might have been around the time my house and business were broken into."

"Your house and business were broken into? What did they take?"

"I don't know," I tell him. "I'm not sure they took much of anything. Mostly they just made a mess. And at your house, they destroyed almost everything. My team saved as much as they could, but all the furniture was toast. Even your bed."

He shakes his head. "This is all such a mess. Do I need to stay at a hotel? Or Mom's?"

"No. I pulled furniture from my storage and got you back in business. You can borrow that until you find what you want."

Charles nods. "Thank you."

As Jim asked, I explain that Clear Security will be providing monitoring and a bodyguard for him, at least for a little while, who will be meeting him at his place.

Charles nods. "As long as I can be at my house and not at Mom's." He looks at Clay. "No offense, but I'm not interested in hanging out with your dad and our mom."

"Mom swears they're just friends," I explain.

Charles and Clay snort at the same time.

“Men can’t be friends with women,” Charles says. “We all know Henry has a thing for you. Stop trying to fool yourself.”

“I’m not going to argue with either of you,” I huff. “I’m going to believe our mother.”

Clay pulls up to Charles’ home, and I’m relieved that everything seems normal.

“I don’t have my keys,” Charles says as we get out of the car. “They were in my briefcase at the office in Shanghai.”

“We’ve changed the locks,” Lincoln calls as we walk toward the front door. “I have new ones for you.” He opens the door and hands Charles some keys before extending his hand. “I’m Lincoln Tanner. I’ll be staying with you for a bit.”

Charles smiles. “Thanks. I guess you can have the spare room on the back.”

Lincoln nods.

Charles turns to me. “All my shaving stuff and toiletries... I don’t have any of that.”

I hope he’s not going into full-on freakout. “Jeannie picked all of that up for you,” I assure him. “She said they cut up most of your clothes. We think maybe looking for something in the hems? She was able to save some of it, but not all.”

Charles opens the door to the garage and shakes his head. “They took the spare key but didn’t take my car?”

“Oh, I have the spare key at my place. Sorry. After you left, Mom and I figured it wasn’t smart to leave the spare here.”

He nods. “That makes sense. Thank you. And I guess it doesn’t matter now that the locks are changed anyway.”

He looks a little bewildered, so I step in and give him a tight hug. “You don’t have to hurry to return any of this furniture. It will only go back into storage. If you want to go



shopping with me or Jeannie, we can get you the designer discount.”

Charles nods. His mind is likely moving at warp speed.

“Mom arrives tomorrow. Do you want to surprise her at my place, or maybe we can come over here?”

He scratches his head. “Can I tell you in the morning? A lot has happened, and I could use more sleep before I even think about facing Mom.”

I nod. “She’s going to be so excited to see you.”

He gives me a half smile. “All thanks to you.”



## CHAPTER 28

# *Anna*

It's Christmas Day, and I love having my family together, but I have to say, ever since Mom arrived, her focus has been entirely on Charles. That's understandable, I suppose. I'm pretty focused on him too. It still seems surreal.

Last night, we did Christmas Eve with Hamish and Clay, which was mostly a lot of fun. We did [Christmas Eve Choral Eucharist](#) at Grace Cathedral and opened some of our gifts at Mom's house. Clay and Charles seem to get along well, and once Mom learned Clay had been part of the team that brought Charles back to her, Clay could do no wrong. Mom's friendship with Hamish still seems to be blossoming, and I think everyone is comfortable with that. This is our first Christmas without my dad, and I know that has to be hard for Mom. She struggled some during the church service and held either my hand or Charles'. It's hard for all of us, but I'm so glad we can be together, and she's had friends supporting her these last few weeks.

Charles has been interviewed by the FBI twice in the last two days. No one is optimistic that he'll see his possessions again. I think he is still coming to terms with the business decision to go to China in the first place, and what he could have done differently to make it work. But truthfully, Dad and Charles were sold a bill of goods that wasn't what it

seemed, and they were doomed from the beginning. It was nothing Charles did. I hope he'll see that eventually, but in the meantime, we all agree that having him back is much more important than the money the company lost.

Except for missing Dad, having all of us together at Mom's makes this feel so much like childhood holidays. It was always so cozy and warm in our kitchen during the holiday season. The tree would twinkle in the corner, and Charles and I would sit at the table with hot drinks, chatting about what presents we wanted. I always looked forward to being together as a family on Christmas morning. And now it's one of my favorite memories from growing up.

Sitting in my mom's kitchen, I take my first sip of coffee. The air is filled with the smell of cinnamon rolls, and holiday music is playing throughout the house. Clay left early this morning because he's working the day shift, and he had to be at the hospital before seven. I was not awake when he left, but we're hosting dinner for Hamish and Clay after he returns this evening.

The buzzer sounds, indicating that the cinnamon rolls are ready, but Mom is nowhere to be seen. Maybe she's still asleep? I put the rolls in after I found them in the fridge, but I thought she'd be up and about by now. I take them from the oven and make her cream cheese frosting.

While they're still hot, I take one up to her room. When I enter, she's lying in bed, and when she looks over, I can tell she's been crying. "Mom, what's wrong?"

She sighs. "I'm just missing your father."

"We all are. It's not the same."

She shakes her head and takes the cinnamon roll, but then just stares down at the plate.

"Do you want to cancel having Hamish and Clay over?"

"No, I think it's good for us to do something else." She sits up straighter and wipes her eyes. "Plus, I already ordered dinner."

“You ordered?”

She cracks a smile. “I’ve been ordering dinner for over a decade.”

*What?* “You have? I thought you were just experimenting.”

“Your dad talked me into it years ago. He thought it was too stressful to do all that cooking, and he wanted us to spend more time together.”

“Dad was a smart man,” I tell her. After a moment I add, “And I do like Hamish.”

She nods. “He’s become a good friend. That’s all we’ll ever be, though.”

I reach for her hand. “That’s fine. I’m so glad you have that. I also think Dad wouldn’t want you to be alone, so I don’t want you to feel guilty for spending time with Hamish or any other man, whether he’s a friend or more than that.”

She smiles. “Hamish and I are both excited about you and Clay. He says Clay was always lost after he and his mother split up. But he’s so happy now with you in his life.”

“I like him, Mom. It’s been a process to sort a few things out, but we’re dating and enjoying being together.” I look over my shoulder to make sure Charles isn’t lurking in the hallway. “I’m taking Charles with me to the hospital during Clay’s break later today. Do you remember Sheri Thompson?”

Mom narrows her eyes as she goes through her mental rolodex. “The name is familiar, but I can’t place her.”

“She’s a physician with Clay at the hospital, and when I met her, she said she knew Charlie, as she calls him, from high school. I’m going to re-introduce them.”

Mom’s face lights up. “I like that idea. Charles needs to get his mind off of Shanghai. That could be fun.”

“If you and Hamish want to join us when we go, feel free.”

She grins. “That’s too much pressure. But let me know how it goes.”

“I will. And now, I’m going to go down and get myself one of your cinnamon rolls, because they are delicious.” I stand and look back at her. “These are your rolls, aren’t they?”

She laughs. “Yes, those are mine.”



On Christmas afternoon, Charles and I roll a catering cart full of pans of turkey, ham, and lots of sides into the emergency department at the hospital. This is Clay’s treat for the ER staff on duty today. Lucy Lee, the managing nurse, is here to greet us. “Follow me!” She waves and leads us down the hall.

The break room has been decorated for Christmas and set up to receive the food.

“I’m so happy that Clay did this for the staff,” she says with a smile as we unload. “He’s always so generous. The cafeteria is not the greatest when the head chef is on holiday, so this makes up for it.”

“We’re happy to be the delivery people,” I say with a smile.

Once the food is ready, Lucy broadcasts a message, and soon, doctors and nurses and techs are filtering in as they have a break. When Sheri comes in, she spots me and heads over. “Clay thought you might—” She stops abruptly when she notices who’s next to me. “Charlie?”

Charles nearly stumbles when he sees her. “Sheri? What are you...?”

She grins. “I couldn’t believe it when I met your sister. Talk about a small world. She said you were living in China.”

He nods, seeming a little dazed. “I was, but I’m back now. I’m taking over my family’s business here in the States.”

“Oh yeah?” Sheri links her arm with his. “Tell me more about that...”

They walk away to talk, and I feel Clay at my side before I see him. “Hey, beautiful.” He kisses my cheek.

“Hey, hot stuff. Any ladies come by for a pelvic exam today?”

Lucy chortles. “That’s a nice way of putting it.”

My eyes widen. “Wait, what? I was only teasing. You had someone come in? On Christmas?”

“He got a sex toy,” Lucy adds with a snort.

I smother a laugh. Since the problem of his number getting out has been solved, Clay has stopped getting so many random messages. That and the overall reduction of stress in my life lately has helped me have a much more relaxed attitude about female attention he might be getting. Poor Clay. “Really?” I shake my head. “A sex toy? Is it a good one?”

Lucy laughs. “I like this one. I hope she sticks around.”

“I plan on making sure of it,” Clay tells her.

Lucy moves over to the buffet and loads up a big plate of food. “Thank you again,” she says on her way out. “I’ll send more nurses back as they free up.”

“Great,” Clay calls after her. “Thank you.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that you didn’t answer my question. Is that because you’re going to re-gift it to me?”

He chuckles. “No, I left it in the room and said anyone who wanted it could have it.” He shakes his head. “It was gone when I was done with my next patient.”

“HMMMM, too bad for me, I guess,” I say with a shrug.

“You don’t need any other sex toys.”

I grin. “Are you saying you’re my personal sex toy?”

“How did you guess?”

I shake my head and laugh. As I look around the room, I can see Sheri and Charles still chatting away. “Looks like we might have made a match.”

Clay nods. “I like Charles, and Sheri is great. If he can handle her schedule, I think they might have fun together.”

We talk until an emergency pulls both Sheri and Clay away. “I’ll see you tonight,” Clay says as he kisses me quickly and leaves me standing with Charles.

I turn to my brother and smile. “Ready to go? Let’s get home and help Mom with her ordered-in Christmas dinner.”

“What? She ordered this year?”

“Apparently, she’s been doing it for over a decade.”

“No way!”

“I know.”

We settle into Mom’s car and head out of the parking lot.

“Thank you for making sure Clay and his friends came and got me,” Charles says as we return to the road.

“I’m just glad they were successful. I was getting worried about you, and I know Mom has been worried ever since you couldn’t come home for Dad’s funeral.”

“I would have been a mess back in Shanghai if I was still there. I was so ready to come home.”

I pat his hand. “I saw you and Sheri talking. She told me she had quite the crush on you in high school.”

He smiles as I glance over. “I had a crush on her, too. She’s not working over New Year’s. Do you think she could join us up in Tahoe?”

I look at him, surprised. “I didn’t know you were going?”

“Mom, Hamish, and I are all going with you and Clay.”

“Oh...” I shrug. “I thought it was going to be a romantic getaway with my boyfriend. But if everyone else is



going, please feel free to invite Sheri.”

“Good.” He laughs. “Because I pretty much already did.”



## CHAPTER 29

# *Clay*

“Come on,” I call back to Charles and Anna as I ski down the new Sonora trail. It’s a beautiful day, but I keep remembering that the last time Anna and I did this, we got stuck in the Sky Lodge. My heart races. It’s New Year’s Eve, and today there are a lot of people around us. The trail is much wider since the avalanche took out so much. I’m just impressed that they were able to get it all cleaned up in time for the busy season.

We’re having a good time, though Charles is a bit of a third wheel. But Sheri is coming up before tonight, so that will give Anna and me some private time.

We ski down to the Sky Lodge and pop our skis off at about the same place we did during the avalanche, just in front of the building this time. A woman dressed in dark blue ski pants and a Paradise Valley fleece rushes up to us. “Mr. McGrath? Ms. Standing? So wonderful to see you both. I’m Gemma Lowell. We met briefly at Thanksgiving. Please come in.”

I smile and shake her hand. “And this is Anna’s brother, Charles Standing.”

Charles takes his hat off and runs his fingers through his hair. Gemma stares. Yep. Charles is a looker, it seems. Sheri is going to have her hands full.

We follow Gemma into the main hall of the lodge, which looks very different from the last time we were here. “Wow. Amazing how beautiful this is when the view isn’t obstructed,” Anna marvels.

“We’re still working on some repairs, but it’s most of the way there,” Gemma says with a smile. She leads us into a room I don’t remember from when we were here before. “The architects made some changes during the repairs,” she explains. “Now we have a few private rooms we can rent. Everything has a silver lining.”

“What a great idea.” Anna turns and looks around.

The ceilings are high, and the room is bright, and there are several people dressed the same as Gemma waiting.

An older man steps forward—your quintessential ski bum with bleached blond hair, a permanent tan, and white-ringed eyes from too many years of wearing sunglasses. “Greetings. I’m Gunther Muller, CEO of Paradise Valley Ski Resorts.”

I extend my hand. “Clay McGrath. It’s wonderful to meet you. This is Anna Standing and her brother, Charles.”

“Excellent. We’re so happy to have you return. How are you enjoying the snow? A little better than in November, yes?”

Anna smiles. “Yes. Definitely. And I’m impressed with what you’ve been able to accomplish so quickly.”

He nods. “One of the advantages of being a ski resort is that we can always sweeten the pot for our workers with free ski passes.”

“I’m sure that helps.”

Gunther introduces us around to each person. We meet the head cook, the manager for the pizza place, the head of Ski Patrol, the head of maintenance, the head of the repair shop, the gift shop manager, several people who we talked to over the radio, and employees of the resort from catering, marketing, and sales.

“All of you made our brief stay possible,” I say.  
“Without your early supplies, we wouldn’t have made it.”

That gets a nice chuckle from the crowd. They present us with giant gift baskets that include things from each part of the resort, including a pizza, which makes Anna giggle.

“This is so much better than the can of peaches we ate,” she says.

“I have peach muffins for you,” the chef teases.

“Also better than the can of peaches.”

The gift shop has included all sorts of Paradise Valley goods—blankets, hats, gloves, and ski gear—and there are plenty of surprises, including a Ski Patrol first aid kit, a snow shovel holiday ornament, and a ski repair kit.

Gunther smiles. “I’m sure getting on the slopes today was a little challenging, but we’re glad you’ve not given up on us.”

Anna shakes her head. “Not at all.”

“In fact, we should thank all of you,” I tell them.  
“Anna and I spent all that time together, and we got to know one another. Since then, we’ve become quite serious.”

“That’s wonderful! We do a nice wedding reception year ‘round,” the head of catering says.

Anna gasps, and I squeeze her hand. “We’ll keep that in mind,” she promises.

We spend the next hour talking with everyone. It’s amazing how many people were involved in our rescue. I’ll be forever grateful to them and all they did to find us and get us out.

After posing for some pictures and getting a tour of the refurbished lodge, we finally put our skis back on and ski down the hill. Charles waves goodbye almost immediately, as Sheri has texted him that she’s arrived.

I turn to Anna and pull her close. “We’re finally alone,” I breathe and kiss her.

“I know.” But then she snickers. “You’re the one who invited my family.”

He shrugs. “After my dad invited himself, I figured the only way we’d get any time alone was if your mom was entertaining him.”



“May we cut in?” Felicity asks with my father behind her.

The Ritz-Carlton really puts on a nice New Year’s Eve party, and the dancing is just the beginning of tonight’s festivities.

“Of course,” Anna says.

I internally groan. *When am I going to get time with Anna?* Felicity steps in, and we move around the dance floor.

“Did you enjoy the snow today?” she asks.

I nod. “It was much better than the last time Anna and I were here.”

“I would expect so.” She sways to the music.

I look over at Dad and Anna just as she throws her head back and laughs. Dad looks at me and winks. “Are you enjoying your time here?” I ask, turning back to Felicity.

She nods. “It’s absolutely lovely. Everyone I care about is here, and that includes you.”

“Thank you.”

I spin her out, and when she comes back in, she looks at me expectantly.

“Am I missing something?”

“Well...I know you never met my husband, John. He was the love of my life. We had over thirty years together. Don’t get me wrong. It wasn’t all roses, but it was special. I see potential for that with you and Anna.”

“I think I do, too,” I hedge. I feel like I’m walking up to a sleeping lion.

“We’re all wondering if you’re going to propose to Anna this weekend.”

My heartbeat kicks up, and I spin Felicity around. “I have every intention of proposing to Anna, but it won’t be this weekend. I haven’t even asked her mother and brother if it would be okay with them.” I tilt my head. “Do you think they’d have a problem with it?”

Felicity’s mouth curls. “I think they adore you and would absolutely be supportive of a proposal. A lovely wedding back here next Christmas would be perfect.”

I nod. “Maybe. But I was thinking a summer wedding in Hawaii. Maybe Maui on the cliffs above the ocean. That is, if Anna agrees. Do you think she’d agree to something like that?”

“I really don’t know, but I’m sure her family would cross any ocean to be wherever you decide to marry.”

I pull Felicity close. “I want to ask her, but everything has been so crazy. I thought it might be better if we have a few months of just being together before I inject another round of drama into the situation.”

She gives me a squeeze. “Your father is absolutely right about you. You are the smartest man in the room.”

I snort a laugh. “I almost lost Anna. I’m certainly not the smartest, but I feel like I’m getting to know her, and I understand what she wants and deserves. I hope we can have the kind of relationship you and your husband had. I’m sure she’s going to want to kill me regularly, but I’ll always love her.”

“There’s nothing more a mother could want.”

On our next spin across the dance floor, Felicity returns to dancing with Hamish, and I get my girlfriend back.

“What did my dad say?” I ask as she settles into my arms.

Her eyes sparkle. “He wanted me to know that he’s crazy about my mom. He said he’s going to wait for her to come around, and if she doesn’t, he’ll be her friend for the rest of their lives.”

“Really?” My brow furrows. “I wasn’t expecting that. But I’m glad they have each other. Just like I’m glad I have you.”

She steps close and whispers in my ear. “Let’s ring in the new year naked upstairs in our room.”

I smile, my dick already straining behind the zipper. “You lead the way.”





## EPILOGUE

### *Clay*

We arrived in Redding for my half-sister Misty's wedding a few hours ago, and I didn't want to mingle with my family so instead I dragged Anna to our room. She now lies below me, naked and breathing heavy.

"I don't know how you do that," she gasps. "You always know just how to get me going."

I smile. She's had a small orgasm. I'm chasing a big, loud one where she moans my name. I focus on her clit, circling and rubbing. Harder. Faster. She grips my arms as I lean down and suck on her nipple, drawing it into my mouth and biting hard. After a moment, she goes rigid and moans my name. That's what I'm looking for.

While she's consumed with her bliss, I open her wide, grab my shaft, and push myself into her tightness. I jerk my hips in and out as I caress her breasts, nipples, and thighs.

"More," she moans.

I grasp her hips tightly as I slam into her harder. Her breasts bounce, and she takes everything I give her and begs for more. I shudder as I reach my climax and the friction becomes almost painful. After a few moments, the world slows back to normal.

I fall beside her and pull her close, our bodies wet from perspiration. “I love you so much,” I murmur.

Her chest shakes with her chuckle. “Do you think we can face your family now?”

“Only if you make me.”

“I’d rather we go to them than they come to us.”

I nod. “That’s a good point.”

We shower, and I’ve never been so grateful that Anna takes some time to get ready. When we finally go downstairs, I see Felicity with my dad. They’re a great pair. She’s now renting a room in Dad’s Palm Springs condo, and they’ll be returning together to San Francisco when it gets too hot in Palm Springs. Anna and I are glad they have each other, regardless of how they define their relationship.

Eventually, we take our places in the seating area, and the wedding begins. Misty is dressed in a beautiful, light pink floral dress with a crown of flowers. Her groom, Kyle, wears a white seersucker suit with a pink tie. The wedding is very bohemian. Misty looks happy as they exchange vows, and that’s all that matters.

Afterward, we have a nice dinner and Dad introduces Felicity to everyone. I’ve been asked more times than I can count if he’s dating her. I just tell people what they’ve told me—they’re friends.

Anna cajoles me into a dance, and as we circle the dance floor, I whisper in her ear about how I’m going to make her scream my name all night. Then I feel a tap on my shoulder.

“Care to dance?” asks Crystal, Misty’s mother and my father’s second ex-wife.

Anna releases me and smiles.

“Sure. Why not.”

“You seem very happy,” Crystal says as she steps into my arms.

“I am. How about you? Misty had a great day today.”

She nods. “I’m happy you’re here. I know you didn’t always get along with Misty, but you were always an important part of our family.”

I smile. “I owe you an apology. I never blamed you for the breakup of my parents’ marriage, but I never accepted you either. I’m sorry. I was a jackass teenager who was confused and mad at the world.”

Crystal smiles. “You’ve inherited your father’s charm. He always could get me to forgive him, no matter how heinous his crime.”

I shake my head. “I’m trying not to gloss over what a jerk I was.”

“You don’t have to apologize. You were a teenager, and you didn’t get to choose the situation. I came from a similar background, so I understood.”

“Thank you. I’m glad I was able to be here.” I realize I really am glad they forced me to come. “And I’m glad you got to meet Anna.”

“She’s lovely. I like her.”

Strangely, I feel taller because she said that. “I’m glad. I’m taking her over to Clear Creek this weekend, and I want to hike to the waterfall. Do you know if the falls are running?”

“There’s a good chance. We had decent snow this year, so there should be plenty of run off. But it’ll be too cold to skinny dip,” she adds with a wink.

“That’s not my plan. I used to go there to think about life, and I want to show it to Anna. If all the stars align, I plan on proposing.”

“Ah, in that case...” She thinks for a minute, and then gives me lots of options and details about the light and the weather and what time might be optimal to visit. In the end, she hugs me tight. “I wish nothing but love and happiness for you both.”

“Thank you. That means a lot. But promise me you won’t tell Dad. He and Felicity will try to follow us or join us, and it will ruin my plans.”

She laughs. “No problem. I won’t tell him.”

After the song is over, we walk over to Misty and her new husband. Anna is chatting with them, and Misty reaches out and hugs me. “Thank you for coming this weekend,” she says. “I really wanted you here.”

“I’m glad it worked out.” I shake Kyle’s hand. “Congratulations. That was a beautiful ceremony.”

“I was just telling them the same thing,” Anna gushes. I lace my fingers with hers. “Thank you for including us. I’m also glad to see where Clay grew up.”

“The Sundial Bridge is very popular,” Misty says. “You should check that out. It wasn’t here when we were kids, but it’s pretty neat.”

I nod. “I plan on it. We’re having lunch with my mom tomorrow.”

“Tell her I said hello,” Misty says.

“Thanks, I will.”

My plan is to steer Anna back to our room now, but it takes some time for us to get away. It’s shocking how many people I haven’t seen in years want to catch up with me.

When we’re finally back in our hotel room, Anna changes into pajamas and rubs lotion into her legs. “I had a fun time today. Did you?”

“I did. I’m glad I went.” I tell her about my conversation with Crystal.

“She seems very kind.”

I nod. “She always was. She’s married to a great guy now, and they have a hardware store downtown. I told her I was thinking about showing you Clear Creek and the waterfall. She thought the best time was tomorrow morning for sunrise. You interested?”

Anna has no idea of my plans. We've spoken about getting married, but never created any sort of timeline. I hope this isn't too soon for her.

She nods. "That sounds like a lot of fun."



Anna slept in my arms all night, and when I open my eyes in the morning, I have no doubts about my plans today. I'm excited.

It's still dark when we get up, and we dress warmly. I have the ring in my front jean pocket, and as we sit in my truck, I can feel it pressing against my leg. Anna's hand rests on my thigh as I drive, and I'm worried she's going to feel the ring if she moves it any higher. I want this to be a surprise.

We arrive and park just off the trail. Using a headlamp, I lead Anna through a thicket of trees. The rush of the water thunders, and I feel confident the falls will be spectacular with the sun rising behind them. The path seems to be less a path these days and more overgrown natural scrub. This makes me hopeful that we'll be alone.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" Anna asks.

"I hope so. It's probably been fifteen years since I've been here, but there should be a clearing up here above the river."

"Don't bears and cougars come out in the mornings to eat?"

I can hear the anxiety in Anna's voice.

"I'm more worried about a raccoon trying to take *our* breakfast."

She giggles, and we continue through the brush, following the river until we get to the clearing. When the trees open up, the sun has just broken the horizon.

I open the blanket and lay it out, urging her to sit down. We settle in close to each other as the sun slowly rises behind the trees and the waterfall becomes more visible.

“Did you bring me here because you knew our parents couldn’t follow?” she asks after a moment.

“I’ll never tell, but that may have been a consideration.”

“Look!” Anna points to the water’s edge by the falls, and there’s a doe and her fawn.

I wrap my arm across her shoulder. “I loved this place when I was growing up. Before I met you, I was convinced I was destined to be a bachelor. I don’t know how it happened, but you burrowed right into my heart. I’m crazy about you. I want to quit my jobs and spend every minute with you. I want to take out billboards and advertisements staking my claim.” I kiss her head and reach into my pocket. “Anna, you are my everything. Will you marry me?”

Her breath catches, and when I look over, her eyes are shining. “Yes.”

I slip the two-carat solitaire on her finger, and we make out like teenagers as the sun rises.

Eventually we eat our ham and cheese croissants and drink coffee from a thermos. Life is nearly perfect.

There is a preview down below, but if you’re interested in some deleted scenes,

[Check this out.](#)

## SECRET SANTA SNEAK PEEK

# Cora

\*\* This is an unedited preview. Chances are it will change.

## July

Brushing the hair off my face, I take a deep breath. “I can do this,” I mutter as I rap on the door to my sister’s apartment. She’s lived in San Francisco for less than six months, and not only has she met a man, but they’ve already gotten engaged. Who works that fast? I mean really...

“Cora!” Leah says as she swings the door open wide. “You made it.”

“I promised I would.” I suppress an eye roll. She acts like I’ve stood her up or been late every time we meet. Usually, I’m the one waiting for her.

She hugs me tight and brings me inside. I try to let my anger and jealousy go as I sink into the overstuffed chair in her apartment. She takes the seat opposite me.



“How are things going at your new job?” Leah asks.

“I’m still loving it. Clear Security has all the things I loved when I was in the FBI without all the red tape.” I spent ten years working for in the FBI, and I thought I was a lifer. But then I hit the glass ceiling, and I realized the good-ol’-boys club was going to make moving ahead hard—not impossible, but hard. Then an opportunity with Clear Security presented itself, and how could I say no to four times the pay, regular hours—well, sort of—and challenging work?

Greg, Leah’s fiancé, walks out of the bedroom looking like he just took a shower. He’s a lawyer at a big swanky downtown law firm, and he looks at Leah adoringly. “Have you told her?”

Leah looks at him with puppy dog eyes. “She just got here.”

Greg sits on the armrest of Leah’s chair across from me, and it almost looks like they’re posing for a photo.

“We’ve set a date for our wedding,” Leah says. She stares up at him with love, and I want to puke. Greg’s a nice enough guy. He’s just a little rigid for my taste. And I live in the world of rigidity.

I paint a smile on my face. “That’s fantastic. Congratulations! When are you thinking?”

“We’re looking at Christmas Eve in Aspen.” Greg pats my sister’s hand.

“Aspen, Colorado?”

Leah nods. “Yes! Can you believe it? We can use Grandpa’s ranch for the rehearsal dinner and show off our skiing skills on good snow.”

Grandpa’s ranch is about an hour outside of Aspen, and the last time I was there, the barn was falling down. The caretaker has been quiet since he moved in, which is not a great sign. “Have you been out to the ranch recently?”

She shakes her head. “Nope, but Greg has a client in Eagle, so we’ll combine the trip and check it out sometime

soon. Maybe you can come with us?”

Leah prattles on and on about their plans. I love my younger sister, and I’m happy for her. I am. It’s just that she came to San Francisco determined to take a break from men. But still, men swarm her. She’s catnip for them. I can’t even explain it.

I force myself to nod and stay with the conversation. “That sounds fantastic. I can’t wait.”

“Do you think you can find a date for the wedding?” Greg asks.

I’m a little taken aback. “Does it require one?”

“We were thinking I could set you up with one of the partners at my firm,” he offers.

“Yes, now that you don’t carry a gun and an FBI badge—not to mention those awful shoes—you can dress pretty,” Leah explains. “One of Greg’s partners is getting a divorce, so it would be perfect.”

I wave that away. “I’ll be busy as your maid of honor. I’ll be fine on my own.”

Greg looks pained. “You know conversations happen in pairs—”

“What Greg’s trying to say is that we’re asking everyone to have a date,” Leah jumps in. “And not just at the wedding. We’ll have several activities that will be better if you have a partner. But don’t worry. If you don’t think you can find one, we’ll help you.”

I look at them. Why is it that people who are in couples think everyone wants to be in a couple? I’ve been single long enough that I’m very comfortable on my own. I don’t need a man to validate me. I have an incredible job. I own my house—in San Francisco even. And I have fantastic friends. But still, I nod. “I’ll see what I can do. Don’t worry about me.”

“I know, but we want couples because it makes table planning and things easier when there are even numbers.” Leah can’t let this go.

She has never been one to stay single. Throughout school she had a string of boyfriends, never letting one off the hook until she had another one on. When she told me about it last year, I loved the idea of her coming to San Francisco. We were going to have so much fun, but then my house needed a complete electrical rewiring, and the steel pipes needed to be replaced, and then I found a new job. Ultimately, I was too busy for her liking, so she met Greg.

I look down at my hands. “I’ll have a date.”

She smiles, and Greg disappears toward the kitchen. After a few more minutes, we sit down to eat. Leah acts like she made the dinner herself, but I know her cooking skills. This meal is far beyond adding noodles to boiling water and opening a jar of sauce.

As we eat, Greg regales us with stories of his law practice. “They would have had to close their doors if I didn’t work my magic and get the IRS to back down...”

I smile as Leah hangs on his every word. All I can say is that Greg is boring. I’m glad my sister adores him, but he would not be a guy I’d want a second date with, let alone a life.

After dinner, Leah and I clean up, and Greg goes into his home office. Once he’s out of earshot, I turn to her. “Where did you order dinner from? The Italian Place?”

Her eyes go wide, and I know I hit the spot. “Don’t tell Greg,” she tells me.

I shake my head. “That you can’t cook? Don’t you think he’ll figure it out?”

“I’ll have a housekeeper who cooks by the time we get married.”

I tilt my head and look at her. “What else are you trying to fool him about? Is that a smart way to start a relationship? You know the ranch is a mess. Why would you want people to drive into Glenwood Springs on nasty snowy roads around Christmas? That’s a crisis waiting to happen.”

“I have a plan for that. We’re staying at the Little Nell downtown, and they have a beautiful ballroom,” she tries to explain.

“I hope you know that getting a block of rooms is going to be really hard at Little Nell. Remember Janna Sue? She worked in reservations there, and I remember her saying Christmas week was booked two years out.”

“I have a plan for that, too.”

“Okay, but just know I don’t enjoy being blackmailed into bringing a date to your wedding.”

Leah puts her hands on her hips. “You have six months to find a hot guy. Just make sure it isn’t one of those nerdy FBI guys who buys his suits from Penney’s.”

My mouth falls open, and I don’t even know what to say to that. Since when did my sister become such a snob? We may have grown up in the mountains in Colorado, but we didn’t have two pennies to rub together. I put myself through college and joined the FBI right out of grad school. I never cared about money until it meant selling my house because I couldn’t afford the repairs. These days I make as much as good old Greg here makes.

“I’ll make sure that I have a date for all these festivities. But I was prepared for the event to be right here in San Francisco.”

She shakes her head. “It can’t be here. It needs to be out of town. The most important thing to Greg is a destination wedding, and Colorado is home to us. It’s always been my dream to be married there.”

I sigh. Her dreams and reality don’t often meet. “But Aspen is a destination for many people during the holidays. We made a lot of money working during the holidays. I’m not sure it’s something that can be done the way you’re thinking about it now.” Her face falls, and I just can’t stand it. “But I’ll go with you, and we’ll figure out how to fulfill your dream.”

“And maybe under the Colorado stars, you’ll fall in love yourself.”

I snort. She's hopeless. "It's not that I've given up on love. I just don't see it in the cards for me."

After finishing the dishes, we talk more about her plans and start making lists for the trip. In the back of my mind, I know I'll need to start thinking of other possible locations so my sister can still have her destination wedding once she realizes Aspen at Christmas isn't going to work. It's after ten by the time I tell her I need to get home. I have to get into work tomorrow before seven.

I hug and kiss Leah goodbye and give it one more shot at being positive. "This is going to be so much fun. I'm thrilled for you."

She's smiling wide as she closes the door.

In my rideshare home, I text my closest friends, Marci Clifton, Caroline Sullivan, and Kate Adelson. If anyone can help me, they can.

**Me: SOS. My sister is getting married in six months, and she's told me I'm required to have a date or she's going to fix me up. Can we meet for drinks tomorrow night and come up with a plan?**

**Marci: Yes! I need a break. Count me in. Meet at Bubbles?**

**Me: Great idea. 7 o'clock?**

**Kate: Perfect. Just in time to have Jim put the kids down.**

**Caroline: I was just thinking the same thing. See you then. We'll find you someone. I'm usually pretty good at this.**

**Me: Anything beats one of my sister's fiancé's law partners. The one they're pushing is getting divorced from his third wife and twice my age.**

**Marci: We've got you covered.**

Once I get home, I lie in bed, thinking about what a disaster this wedding is bound to be. I don't even know what my sister is thinking.



It's six fifty when the rideshare drops me off in front of Bubbles. Today was long, and I've been looking forward to this. Bubbles is a great bar with all sorts of sparkling wines and cocktails, and it definitely has a feminine vibe.

When I walk in, Caroline is already waiting. "You're early, too," I tell her.

She stands and hugs me tight. "I spent the morning getting the kids ready and out the door so they didn't miss me so much this evening."

"How well does Mason do when you're not at home?" I ask.

Mason Sullivan is the managing partner of Silicon Valley's leading venture capital fund. He started it with two of his closest friends, and they've grown it into a several-billion-dollar company. He's also tight with my boss, Jim Adelson.

Caroline shrugs. "He does fine, but mostly because the nanny does the lion's share. Don't get me wrong. He's a fantastic father, but twins are hard."

"You have a twin brother, too, right?"

She nods. “Trey. He’s married to one of Mason’s business partners.”

“How incestuous.”

She laughs. “They chased my college roommate, Emerson, to join their firm and when she did, she brought the group of us along. And now we’re a giant family, which you’re also part of since you’re with Clear Security now. How is that going?”

I smile. “I’ve never worked so hard and loved every second.”

Caroline nods. “Jim Adelson is a great leader—”

“Are you talking about my husband?” Kate swoops in to hug and kiss us on the cheek. “He’s likely fighting with the boys even as we speak. I swear, they are him exactly. He has a silent stubborn streak, and he draws a line in the sand. The boys draw their line together, and it’s usually far away from their father. All that to say, our house is often World War Three, and tonight is no exception. But I am not there, so that’s a win for me.”

Kate also has twins, so there must be something in the water around here.

Just as we’re settling in, Marci arrives, a bit out of breath. “I escaped. I was worried I was going to be stuck going to Sacramento tonight. Walker had some big political shindig he didn’t put on my calendar.” She rolls her eyes as she drops into her seat. “He’s mad at me for not dropping everything to be at his side.”

“You could have gone! We can catch up later.” I look at her, concerned.

She shakes her head. “Are you kidding? I’m so over politics sometimes. He won’t miss me, and I’ll be extra nice to him when he gets home tonight, so he won’t be upset for long.”

“Extra nice?” I raise my brows.

Marci blushes and we all laugh.

“Yeah, well, my cat doesn’t care if I’m home or not, as long as she has food.” I shrug. “I’m not missed by anyone.”

“Well, let’s dig into this and fix that. If you want it fixed,” Caroline is quick to add. “But at the very least, we can find you a good man for this wedding.”

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