

THE ANDERSON HEIRS

Sweet Noel

New York Times Best Selling Author
MELODY
ANNE

Sweet Noel

The Anderson Heirs

Book One

By:

Melody Anne

Dedication

This is dedicated to Santa Claus. Yep, I'm finally doing it. I love Christmas, and each time I see lights, Santa, and hear Christmas music I smile. I love it! Merry Christmas to all.

Copyright © 2022 Melody Anne

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Printed and published in the United States of America.

Published by Falling Star Publications

Editing by Karen Lawson and Janet Hitchcock

Note from the Author

I love Christmas. It's my favorite time of the year besides summer when I can be outside all of the time. But I love the joy Christmas brings. I think all of us have more grace during this time of year. I've been a bit bummed lately with the world seeming to have gone crazy, and I was thinking I *need* a Christmas book. It not only fills me with joy to write, but I think it fills others with the same as they read it. So that's how this story came about. I decided it was time for the Andersons to start having some matches for Joseph's grandchildren. He's married off all of his kids, nieces, nephews, and friends of the family. Now, the next generation is up to bat. I came up with this story because I wanted something fun to start this next series, and there's nothing like surprise family members during the holidays. I've noticed I like to write a lot of tragedies as well. I think that comes from my own childhood where I went through some trauma, and how the power of love helped those wounds heal.

Look for some nuggets in this book because Ruth Cardello and I are about to go on an adventure together so there's some hints of what's to come in here. There are also a few other

little nuggets about other books I've written in this story. Sometimes I amuse myself too much. Thank you for indulging me.

Here we go on to the next generation of the Andersons. I hope you all enjoy this newest series. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to all of you around the world.

Much Love,

Melody Anne

Books by Melody Anne

Romance

FIRST SERIES

[*He Saw Me First*](#)

[*She Saw Me First*](#)

[*At First Sight*](#)

The Andersons

[*Wins The Game*](#)

[*The Dance*](#)

[*The Fall*](#)

[*The Proposal*](#)

[*The Blackmail*](#)

[*The Runaway.*](#)

[*The Final Stand*](#)

[*Unexpected Treasure*](#)

[*Hidden Treasure*](#)

[*Holiday Treasure*](#)

[*Priceless Treasure*](#)

[*The Ultimate Treasure*](#)

The Anderson Heirs

Book One: Sweet Noel

Book Two: Jacob's story

The Titans

[The Tycoon's Revenge](#)

[The Tycoon's Vacation](#)

[The Tycoon's Proposal](#)

[The Tycoon's Secret](#)

[The Lost Tycoon](#)

[Rescue Me](#)

THE ANDERSON BILLIONAIRES

[Finn](#)

[Noah](#)

[Brandon](#)

[Hudson](#)

[Crew](#)

TWELVE HORIZONS OF CHARLIE

[Diamond](#)

[Sapphire](#)

[Opal](#)

[Emerald](#)

BECOMING ELENA

[Stolen Innocence](#)

[Forever Lost](#)

[New Desires](#)

TAKEN BY THE TRILLIONAIRE

[#1 Xander – Ruth Cardello](#)

[#2 Bryan – J.S. Scott](#)

[#3 Chris – Melody Anne](#)

[#4 Virgin for the Trillionaire – Ruth Cardello](#)

[#5 Virgin for the Prince – J.S. Scott](#)

[#6 Virgin to Conquer – Melody Anne](#)

SURRENDER SERIES

[Surrender](#)

[Seduced](#)

[Scorched](#)

[Saved](#)

UNDERCOVER BILLIONAIRES

[Kian](#)

[Arden](#)

[Owen](#)

[Declan](#)

FORBIDDEN SERIES

[Bound](#)

[Betrayed](#)

[Burned](#)

HEROES SERIES

[Safe in his arms – Novella](#)

[Baby it's Cold Outside](#)

[Her Unexpected Hero – Book One](#)

[Who I am with you – Book Two – Novella](#)

[Her Hometown Hero – Book Three](#)

[Following Her – Book Four – Novella](#)

[Her Forever Hero – Book Five](#)

[Her Found Hero – Book Six](#)

BILLIONAIRE AVIATORS

[Turbulent Intentions – Book One \(Cooper\)](#)

[Turbulent Desires – Book Two \(Maverick\)](#)

[Turbulent Waters – Book Three \(Nick\)](#)

[Turbulent Intrigue – Book Four \(Ace\)](#)

TORN SERIES

[Torn](#)

7 BRIDES FOR 7 BROTHERS

[#1 Luke – Barbara Freethy](#)

[#2 Gabe – Ruth Cardello](#)

[#3 Hunter – Melody Anne](#)

ANDERSON SPECIAL OPS

[Shadows](#)

[Rising](#)

[Barriers](#)

[Shattered](#)

[Reborn](#)

TRUTH IN LIES

[One too Many](#)

[Two Secrets Kept](#)

[Three Outs](#)

Young Adult / Fantasy

PHOENIX SERIES

[Phoenix Falling](#)

[Phoenix Burning](#)

[Phoenix Ashes](#)

[Phoenix Rising](#)

Table of Contents

[DEDICATION](#)

[NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR](#)

[BOOKS BY MELODY ANNE](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE](#)
[EPILOGUE](#)
[NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR](#)
[PREVIEW OF HE SAW ME FIRST](#)

Prologue

Lucas Anderson

I sit in stunned silence in a room with men and women I respect more than any others on this planet. I think some people say words like respect quite often, but they don't truly mean them ... I do. I look at my father, who appears quite stunned. We share in a mixture of shock and sadness for a person we'll never get to meet.

"Is this true?" I ask. I've asked before, but I guess I need to hear the words again and again and again to make them a reality.

"Yes, Lucas, it's true. The letter came to your father's address a week ago and I personally verified the information," Steve Bregon, also known as Brackish, tells me.

A few years ago my mother, Katherine Anderson, was attacked. That was something my father would never tolerate so he funded a special ops team of five men to not only help find my mother's attacker, but to clean up the city of Seattle. They did an incredible job. They still do things for my father even though they've all set out on their own paths now. If Brackish says this is true, then there's no doubt the information he holds is one hundred percent accurate.

"Start from the beginning, Brackish," my father demands in his booming voice that shakes the walls. We're all so used to it

that nobody even blinks at the force behind his words.

“Chloe Dawson was the daughter of Janet Dawson, who had a weeklong relationship with Lucas. When Janet left, she was pregnant. She never told Lucas about the baby. We recently received a letter because both Janet and Chloe have passed away.”

It's odd the tears I feel prickling my eyes at the news a child of mine I never knew existed has passed. I'm unsure what I think or feel. Was she truly mine? I wait for Brackish to go on.

“Janet Dawson gave the letter we received to her attorney and asked him to send it to the home of Joseph Anderson upon her passing,” Brackish finishes in a no-nonsense voice. His words rip a piece of my heart out even more. I had a daughter out there I didn't get to raise ... didn't get to know ... didn't even get to meet a single time. It's devastating.

There's a huge part of me that wants to punch through walls as rage tries to consume me. I barely even remember Janet, but how dare she take my child from me? I don't even get to confront her as she's now gone. What was my child like? I had a daughter two years older than my daughter, Jasmine, and four years older than my son, Isaiah. What will my children think of this? They had a sibling they'll never get to know. I don't even know how I feel, and I can't imagine how they'll feel about this.

“How do we know for sure she was mine?” I ask, feeling guilty for even thinking of questioning this. I'd be a fool not to, though. It isn't like my siblings and I haven't had women tell us babies were ours before. That's what happens with

families as wealthy as ours. Something in my gut tells me though, that this was my daughter.

“With the letter there was a DNA sample. It seems Janet was very aware this might be questioned,” Brackish says.

I gape at him. “You ran a test without my knowledge?” The steel in my voice shows everyone in the room why I’m the CEO of a multi-billion-dollar corporation. I don’t appreciate my basic rights being taken from me.

“Yes,” Brackish says without a trace of fear.

My father sighs. “I’m not going to allow Brackish to take all of the blame, though he’s a good enough man to do just that. The letter came to me, and yes, someone else checked it, but I’m the one who brought it to Brackish, and we decided to verify the information before coming to you. There was no point in upsetting the family for another false claim.”

The anger evaporates as quickly as it arose. My shoulders slump. My life is once again being thrown into the middle of a category five hurricane. This isn’t anything new, so I’m not sure why I’m shocked.

“I’m sure you did the right thing,” I say.

“Of course we did,” my father says. I almost smile.

“I guess I need to read the letter,” I tell them. My brothers, Alex and Mark, are strangely quiet. I wonder if they’re in shock as well or if they’re wondering what they’d do in my place. The three of us are happily married with families. This could change the entire dynamic of our family.

“The instructions from the attorney were to give you the DNA sample and letter.” Brackish pulls out the letter. I look at

it, unsure if I want to read the words on the paper. I don't want to deny having had a daughter who had no idea I existed, but I'm still scared ... I'm guilty even though I technically did nothing wrong. I guess I should've checked on Janet to make sure everything was okay, but I didn't and there's nothing I can do about it now.

"Give it to me," I say. Brackish stands and walks the letter to me. I hold it in the very quiet room. It's unusual for a room to be quiet when my family is in it ... still, no one speaks. I hold the letter, not yet ready to read it.

"There's more," Brackish says, the first to break the silence.

I look up, feeling defeated. "How can there be more?" I ask, my voice scratchy.

"Chloe has a sister," he quietly says.

"She wouldn't be mine," I say. Well, unless they were twins, but why wouldn't Brackish have said that in the first place?

Brackish nods. "Noel had to endure the loss of her sister last year while her mother was fighting for her life with cancer. She recently lost that battle."

"That's horrific," Joseph says, his own voice scratchy and surprisingly subdued.

"She's not mine," I say, deep sadness filling me again at not getting to know my child.

"Not exactly," Brackish says, seriously confusing me.

I know my brothers are dying to hear me read the letter, but they're patiently waiting while Brackish draws this out. I

appreciate them giving me time, knowing I can only focus on one thing at a time.

“Okay, explain faster,” Joseph says, clearly not knowing what Brackish is talking about any more than I do. That’s a shock. My father always knows everything when the rest of us are left spinning.

“Chloe had two children,” Brackish says, letting those words sink in.

“There are babies?” Joseph says, his eyes starting to sparkle.

“Yes, Lucas, your daughter had two children,” Brackish slowly says.

“Lucas, you’re a grandfather,” Joseph says in awe. I’m more confused. “I’m a great-grandfather,” he adds, his eyes sparkling with what appears to be unshed tears. The need to find these kids suddenly consumes me. They’re Andersons, and they need to come home.

“What do we do next?” I ask, for once in my life not having any answers for how to proceed.

“Read the letter to us,” Mark says.

“I agree,” Alex says.

I down my glass of bourbon then slowly open the handwritten letter. I take my time reading it, then reread it. I can hear shuffling in the room, but no one speaks ... not even my father. The restraint has to be killing him.

I set the letter on my lap, feeling the strange sensation of tears stinging my eyes. I never cry. It just doesn’t happen. I

can count on my fingers how many times in my life I've shed tears. I give myself a break that it's happening now, though, because it's not every day a man finds out he's missed out on the life of his child.

I pick up the letter again. I can hand it to them but reading it aloud might make all of this more real. I start reading.

"I'm not quite sure how to address this letter so I'm going to get right to the point. Lucas, you had a daughter ... another daughter. Her name was Chloe Dawson, and she was twenty-seven years old. I know this will come as a shock, and I'm sure you've had many women make this same claim over the years so I'm including DNA with the letter so you can run the tests." I go quiet as I rub my thumb across the beautifully written cursive.

"I know what a good man you are, Lucas. I'm sorry to have taken her from you. When I first found out I was pregnant, I panicked. Your world wasn't mine. I was only visiting Seattle and we had a whirlwind romance. Things happen and it wasn't until a month after I got home that I knew we'd created a child. There was never a thought in my mind of giving her up."

I choke a bit as I read the words. To think I might've had a daughter that never came to be was even more painful than knowing I'd lost out on knowing that child. At least she got to live for twenty-seven years.

"When I got sick, I found an attorney I could trust to send this letter after my death. I know this makes me a coward, but no one can do anything about it now because I'm gone. I didn't tell you because I loved my life. I know you'd have

made things right no matter what, that's just the man you are. I didn't want my daughter raised in the city with hordes of wealth. I wanted her raised the way I was, in the country, working hard, and appreciating the small things in life. It wasn't always easy for us, but we made it." I have to pause again as I take a deep breath.

"Losing Chloe was the hardest thing I've had to endure in my life. Now that she's gone, my other daughter, Noel, has moved back home to take care of me ... and to take care of her niece and nephew."

I once again stop as tears try to fall from my eyes. I'm a grandfather ... it's surreal.

"Lucas, your grandchildren are perfect in every single way. Layla is seven now, and Rowan is ten. They're angry and hurt that their parents died, and Noel is struggling as she cares for them. I don't have much time left and when I'm gone, Noel's going to need help. Her sister and brother-in-law left the children to her, and I know you won't rip them away from the only family they know. But maybe you can bring all three of them into the Anderson family, maybe you can give them the love they're going to need. The medical expenses have piled up so high Noel can't see above them. She doesn't give up, though. She returned home from Boston where she had a great job when her sister died, and I got sick. Noel's a beautiful soul inside and out. She didn't resent giving up on her own dreams to take care of her family. Even though you didn't get to be a part of your daughter's upbringing, you can be a part of your grandchildren's lives."

I have to pause again as I look at my father who's smiling with pride. We might be extraordinarily wealthy, but we also have strong family values. I'm glad Janet knew this even if she did take our child away.

"I hope you don't hate me for the choices I made. It's too late to do anything about it now, but I hate to think of you angry with me. I'm sending this because Noel and my grandchildren will be all alone in this world. Noel will fight this, but she's got a heart of gold and she'll do anything for her niece and nephew ... even if it pulls her from her world into one she can't begin to imagine being a part of. I'm sad I don't get to see you meet your grandchildren for the first time, but again, I was too scared to call you or to send this before I passed."

"This poor woman struggled with these choices she made," Mark, the most empathetic of my brothers, says.

I keep reading. "I thought about contacting you a few years after I made my choice, but I saw that you were married and had another daughter. I knew you'd still love Chloe, but I didn't want to share her, and that's what I would've had to do. I couldn't take the chance she'd want to be with you more than with me. There was so much more you could offer. All I had was love."

"We would've given her money," my father says.

"It's not about the money," I tell him, knowing this beyond any reasonable doubt.

"I get that," my father says.

“I haven’t notified Noel of any of this. I know who you are, and I know you’ll do the right thing, so I’m leaving it in your hands. I’ve often said that money is the root of all evil, but I’ve followed you for the past twenty-seven years and I know that you don’t use your wealth for evil. Take care of our beautiful grandchildren, Lucas; you and Noel are all they have now.”

She didn’t leave a signature. She didn’t have a greeting. She just had this letter with her words and truth. This one-page letter was going to change a lot of lives.

“We better call Jasmine and Isaiah home,” I say after a long moment.

“We better call *all* of the family,” Joseph says. I shake my head.

“Not yet. Let us figure out how to talk to Noel and the children first.”

“We’re bringing them here, right?” Joseph asks as if there’s no other option.

I smile. “Yes, we’re bringing them here, but we’re keeping it small until Noel gets to know this family. This will be a shock to not only her, but to the children as well.”

“Of course it will be a shock, but they’ll quickly discover they belong with us,” my father insists.

“Not everyone moves as quickly as you do, Dad,” I tell him. This makes my siblings chuckle.

“No truer words have ever been spoken,” Alex says.

“I agree,” Mark chimes in.

“I have two great-grandchildren out there I haven’t yet met. There’s no time to move slow,” Joseph insists. He then tries to shrink his size. “You never know how much time I have left on this planet.”

This makes Alex, Mark, and me laugh. “You’re anything but frail, Father,” I tell him.

“I’m not a young lad anymore,” Joseph insists.

“No, you aren’t, and I want them here just as quickly, but I want to do this right,” I say.

“Then we’ll do it right,” Brackish says.

“What’s the plan?” I ask, knowing he’s gone over every scenario in his mind. He smiles ... then he leans in, and we all do the same.

“It can’t be you or your father seeking her out. You’ll terrify her,” Brackish says.

“That makes no sense. What will tell her more how serious we are but us showing up?” I ask.

“I think that will overwhelm her. Send in a third party,” Brackish says.

“You’d scare her far worse,” I say.

Brackish chuckles. He knows it’s true. He’s a large man and scares people just walking past them. “Then find someone else.”

“It needs to be Ryder,” Joseph says, and all eyes turn his way.

“Why me?” Ryder asks. I look at my father, then at Ryder, and I have to hide my shock. There’s a twinkle in my father’s

eyes I know quite well. He's up to something. Should I step in and stop it?

“Because you're a closer, Ryder. If anyone can get Noel and the children here, it will be you,” Joseph says in a reasonable voice.

“I know nothing about kids,” Ryder says.

“You know women,” Joseph points out, which causes a chuckle in the room.

“Knowing about women isn't what this is about,” Ryder says.

“No, it's about bringing my grandchildren home,” I tell Ryder, who turns and looks at me.

All eyes turn to Ryder. I look him over. This might just work ...

Chapter One

Noel

It's really difficult to get into the Christmas spirit when it's only been a couple of months since I lost my mother, and less than a year since my sister was taken from me and I gained custody of my niece and ... understandably angry nephew. It hasn't been easy on any of us. I don't care how difficult it is for me, but my heart's been breaking for the kids for quite a while now.

I gave up a career and a life I'd built in New York, but it doesn't matter. I'm sitting at yet another temporary job, watching as snow falls outside the windows of the retail shop I can't wait to leave. I want to go home to the kids. I'd loved them immensely when my sister was still alive, and that love has only grown since they've become mine. I miss my mom so much that my love seems like a punishment instead of something beautiful.

We've all had long enough to grieve. It's time to move on with our lives. It's time for us to build new memories. I know this will be difficult, but we have to let go of the pain and move forward. If we don't, I fear I'll lose the kids forever ... and I'll lose myself as well.

Today's my last day at this temp job, and though my prospects for more permanent work aren't great, it's nearly impossible to find work that's flexible enough for me to be

with the kids as they navigate this new world they've been thrust into. Even the most sympathetic business owners still have jobs they need filled. They can empathize with my situation, but they can also find employees without a lot of burdens who will work without complaint. Unfortunately, that isn't me right now — the kids come first ... always.

The children's mom and dad died near Christmas last year, so it's more important for me to be with them than to make a few dollars. Sure, we need money to survive, but none of us are going to emotionally make it if we don't stay together. Losing my sister nearly killed me, then losing my mother took the rest of the wind from my sails. What am I going to do now?

Some people think it's okay for me to fall apart, but I simply don't have the luxury of that option, not when I have two children counting on me. Life's short, much shorter than I imagined before. I need to make the most of the time remaining.

There are times I feel selfish, wondering how my life has gone so wrong. I had a career, friends, and a wonderful family. All that was shattered in the blink of an eye. I want to feel sorry for myself, but I simply can't ... especially when my ten-year-old nephew is so angry at his own losses. My father ran off when I was about six years old, and we were glad to see him go, so I can't imagine what my nephew's feeling, but now that I've lost my mom, I know exactly how that feels. It's a pain I don't believe will ever fully heal.

I'm failing in so many areas of raising these beautiful children. My sister made parenting look effortless. Then again,

she was always the perfect daughter, sister, wife, and mother. There wasn't anything Chloe wasn't able to do. Maybe it was because she always knew who she was. I hope I'm not disappointing her as she looks down on me from heaven.

Another hour passes and it's finally closing time. The final customers leave the shop, and I close the door on my last shift here, locking it while the other clerks begin clean-up. It doesn't take long before we're ready to leave.

The roads are icy, but it doesn't bother me ... much. At least the slower driving gives me a few extra minutes to paste on a smile for when I step through my front door ... the door to the house that had belonged to my sister and her husband. They left me the home along with custody of the kids. They even had a modest life insurance policy, but that belongs to the children ... not to me.

The life insurance ensures the kids are able to stay in the private school they've attended since they began their education. I refuse to tap into any more money than I have to in order to maintain the kids' lifestyle. It wasn't like my sister and brother-in-law were wealthy. I'd say they were solid upper-middle class, very comfortable. I could've been considered in the same class ... before I'd had to quit my high-stress, long-hours job and return home.

I've been desperately trying to make as few changes for the kids as possible. The one thing I can't change, though, is the never-ending heartache they feel at losing their parents and grandmother.

"It will take time," I say out loud. I've been saying the same thing over and over for more than three hundred days.

Everyone I know keeps telling me all I need is time, the clock turning is the only thing that makes pain go away. Maybe someday that will happen, maybe we'll all become whole again.

I pull up to the quaint house in a nice neighborhood and take a breath of courage. I love the kids, can't wait to see them, but it's hard to keep smiling when all I want to do is cry. I square my shoulders, step from my vehicle, and walk with purpose to the front door.

It's too quiet, which scares me. When the house is this calm, there's no doubt something's wrong. They've been acting out for the past year, my nephew more than my niece. Maybe I'm overreacting. I've been known to do that once in a while.

I toss my purse on the entryway table and go in search of the two most important people in my life. As soon as I push my way into the kitchen, my feet slip out from beneath me. I yell as I go down hard, striking my tailbone on the tile floor.

"What the heck?" I yell as I put out my hands to try to steady myself. It's slippery. I lift my hand and smell ... is it cooking oil? I look around in horror. Yes, it's oil, and ... flour ... and it's all over the place. What have the kids done now, and where in the heck is their sitter?

The teenage sitter enters the kitchen, fury on her face as soon as I have the thought.

"You're *finally* home," she snaps.

"What happened?"

“Your monstrous kids happened,” she yells. I didn’t realize it was possible for a person’s face to turn this bright of a shade of red.

“You know they’ve been through a lot,” I remind her, which I’ve done a few times. The one sure thing I’ve discovered in the past year, or nearly a year now, is how hard it is to keep sitters. The kids seem to chase away every single one they can as if it’s a sport.

“I quit, in case you haven’t figured that out. The kids don’t listen, and they purposely make messes and tell me I’m paid to clean up after them. I don’t care what they went through. They’re brats and there’s no amount of money worth watching them.”

She suddenly bursts into tears before turning around and running from the house all while I’m trying to rise to my feet. It takes a while.

“Kids,” I call as I grip the counter and carefully slide out of the mess that’s not only coating the floor, but my entire body.

They slowly come into the room, their heads hanging as they stare at the floor, clearly seeing the mess they made.

“What in the world happened?” I ask, feeling on the verge of tears.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Noel,” Layla says with tears instantly streaming down her sweet cheeks.

“I’ve told you a hundred times we don’t need babysitters telling us what to do,” Rowan snaps. “I’m ten and Layla’s seven, but you’ve treated us like babies since you invaded our house.”

“Oh, Rowan, you’re *only* ten. You can’t be home alone or I’d be in serious trouble with social services, who still checks in on us. I know you’re still hurting, and this is how you’re showing me, but we’re going to be okay,” I assure him, all of my frustration at the situation vanishing as my heart breaks for this sweet boy who can’t seem to find himself anymore.

“On what planet do you think everything’s going to be okay?” he snaps. “Maybe in your nice little world where your parents don’t leave you.”

There’s so much pain in his words and it tells me again how much I’m failing. Maybe I should listen to the social workers and admit I’m in way over my head. What if holding on to them hurts them worse? What if they’d be better off with someone who actually knows how to be a parent?

“Rowan, it’s almost Christmas, a season full of magic and dreams,” I tell him. “We have each other and that’s more than others have.” I can’t give up.

Layla’s head sweeps back and forth between me and her brother, sadness and panic in her eyes. She focuses on her brother. “Maybe we should be a little better, Row-Row, or we’ll ruin Christmas,” she says, her dear voice making it harder and harder to keep my tears at bay.

“I hate Christmas. It’s stupid, Layla. The sooner you figure that out, the better. There’s no magic, no mom and dad, and there’s *definitely* not a Santa Claus,” he snaps. “Pathetic little kids make him up to justify wanting presents.”

“Oh, Rowan, don’t say that,” I beg him. I turn to Layla who looks like her heart is utterly shattered. “Don’t give up on magic, sweet girl. Christmas is more than a day, it’s a feeling,

and we only lose the magic if we stop believing. For one day a year, all of the bad disappears.”

“It didn’t disappear when it took my parents,” Rowan shouts before stomping from the room.

I cringe when he slams his bedroom door violently enough to shake the walls of the house. I don’t have time for a meltdown, and sadly enough, this isn’t the worst fit he’s thrown. Right now I need to comfort my niece while I try to figure out how to talk to my angry nephew. I’m not sure how strong I can be.

“I really am sorry, Auntie,” Layla tells me between sobs. I drop back to the floor and pull her into my arms.

“Oh, sweet girl, it will all be okay. I know this time of year is harder than other times. I know you’re angry and sad and don’t understand it, but we’ll be okay,” I assure her, not sure at all that I can keep this promise.

I hold my niece for a while then look at the floor again. “Okay, we’re going to get this mess cleaned up, which your brother is going to help with. We’ll figure it out one thing at a time, and this is something we can all do.”

“I don’t think he’s going to help,” Layla says.

“Yes, he’s going to help. Once the mess is cleaned up, we’ll forget all about it and bake Christmas cookies — in a bowl instead of on the floor,” I say with a smile that finally stops Layla’s tears. Her dimples magically appear, and she gives me a watery smile before nodding her agreement. I kiss her forehead then leave her with a rag as I go to Rowan’s room. Let the battle begin.

It takes me a little while, but I eventually get him out of his room, then help them clean up the mess, which takes a while. When they want to make a mess, they *really* make a mess. Rowan doesn't look at me or his sister, no matter how much I try to engage him. As soon as the mess is cleaned, Rowan turns on his heel and leaves the room. I let him go. I pull out all the ingredients and Layla and I begin making cookies.

It doesn't take long for my niece to bring up Christmas again. "Is it bad for me to still believe in Santa?" Her eyes are so wide and innocent, I have to fight tears again.

"Believing in Santa keeps the magic alive," I assure her.

"Why do bad things happen at Christmas if magic is real?"

Her words take my breath away. "Sweetie, the world is far from perfect, and sometimes bad things happen because people make wrong choices, and bad things even happen to good people without a good explanation. But, good things happen more often and that's the magic and hope we must hold on to."

Layla considers my words, then nods. "I like believing more than being sad."

"It's okay to be happy," I tell her.

"Rowan says if I feel happy, I'm forgetting about Mom and Dad," Layla tells me with a fresh tear falling down her cheek.

"Oh, Layla, your mom and dad loved you and your brother more than anything else in the world. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt it would break their hearts if they knew you were sad. They were the happiest when you smiled. Their only wish in life was to make sure you had a beautiful childhood and

grew into happy adults. It's not bad to be happy; it's exactly what they'd want for you."

"What if we're happy and we forget them?" she asks.

"We'll never forget them. We'll honor them by living a good life. We'll always look at their pictures and talk about them anytime you want. I love remembering them."

"For you, Auntie, I'll try to be happy," she tells me.

"I want you to be happy for you, not for me, not for your brother, and not for anyone else. I want you to be happy because you're a beautiful, wonderful, brilliant little girl."

"I want you to be happy too," she tells me.

"I'm very happy because I have you and Rowan. Nothing brings me more joy," I truthfully tell her.

She smiles at me, and we continue baking, the smell of cookies surrounding us. The second batch comes out and Rowan still hasn't come down to join us, so I decide it's time to have a chat with him as well. I might be doing it all wrong, but I'm trying my best.

Rowan's lying on his bed with his headphones cranked up so loud I can hear them thumping all the way from his doorway. I paste on a smile as I step into his room and sink onto his bed. He tenses but doesn't acknowledge me. Some days are better than others. This is a bad day ... but it will get better.

I wait for him to switch off his music. I've learned if I push too hard, I simply make him throw on his armor and not talk at all. Controlling his environment is how he's surviving. It

won't always be this way. The loss of his parents has been very hard, especially the loss of his dad, who was his hero.

It takes him about two full minutes, but he finally shuts off his music. He doesn't look at me, but at least he can hear me when I speak. I wait another thirty seconds as I tell myself to remain calm and understanding.

"I know you're angry with the entire world right now, Rowan. Things haven't been fair or easy on you and your sister. I also know how strong you are. It's hard to smile when all we want to do is yell. But I know you love your sister more than the world itself and for her sake we have to make Christmas as special as we can."

"It doesn't matter what we do because Mom and Dad are gone. Why should we celebrate anything at all?" he asks. There's a lot of anger holding on, but more defeat than anything else.

"I'd give my own life if it would bring them back," I tell him. "I've prayed for that, but no matter how much I yell or beg, I can't bring them back. I know they're so very proud of you and want us to live the best lives we can so they can smile from above."

"I don't want you to be gone, Aunt Noel. I love you. I just hurt and miss them so much."

I pull him into my arms, and for once he lets me do it. I hold him as tears slip down my cheeks. This boy is so wonderful, and I'm determined to give him a great life if I don't mess it up too much.

"I love you, Rowan, more than words can ever describe."

“I know,” he says. He finally hugs me back. He needs it as much as I do.

“Can we put on our happiest faces for the sake of your sister?” I ask.

“I want to do that,” he says. “I’m just so mad all of the time. I don’t know how to make it stop.”

“I know, sweetie. It will take time, but we’ll eventually get there. For now, can you join me and your sister? We’re making some really good cookies. They’re best right out of the oven.”

“Okay,” he says, and as he pulls back he gives me the smallest hint of a smile.

“Good,” I say, glad another crisis has been averted ... at least for now.

The two of us head downstairs and the rest of our evening goes smoothly. I’m not foolish enough to believe there won’t be more problems, but I’m learning to take one moment at a time, not just one day, but one *moment*. It will work out in the end.

Chapter Two

Noel

My hands are deep in a bowl of cookie batter when there's an insistent knocking on my front door. Flour flies up as I jump, coating my already disheveled hair, and blurring my vision. "Dang it."

I quickly move to the sink and scramble around for a washcloth, then turn on the water and try to regain my sight. As my vision starts to clear, another knock sounds at the door, this one more forceful than the other.

"Probably a bill collector. Maybe they're making house calls now," I mumble. I toss down the washcloth and make the short trek to the front of the house just as the oven timer starts buzzing. Bad timing is the story of my life. It doesn't matter. I'll send whoever is at the front door on their way then finish baking. I've been doing it for a week straight as the holiday draws closer. The kids aren't helping this time.

I fling open the front door and realize I must look worse than I thought because the shock on the stranger's face makes me think I should've glanced in the mirror before opening the door. Then again, many have said I'm not capable of raising my niece and nephew, and I've never been accused of being a homemaker. If this is another visit from social services, I might just look the part of a happy foster mom covered in

flour and who knows what else. Maybe they'll quit threatening to take the kids from me.

My vision comes more into focus and I gaze at the hard-looking man standing before me. Okay, there's no chance *this* guy is from social services. I don't even think he's a bill collector, unless it's from the mafia, and to the best of my knowledge I don't owe the mob any money. Then again, with all of Mom's medical bills, there's no telling where I owe money.

This guy, though, is tall, standing a few inches above six feet, with dark hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones that look as if they've been sculpted from clay, and a body that doesn't appear to have an inch of fat on it. Who in the heck is he ... and why is he standing on my front doorstep?

There's a stirring in my gut I haven't felt in well over a year ... if ever ... and it's in no way welcome. Just because a good-looking ... okay, great looking, man shows up at my house, doesn't mean I should go weak in the knees. What in the hell is wrong with me? I blame it on the constant stress of my life ... and maybe a little Christmas cookie drunk.

I don't have the energy or the time to be attracted to men. If I were interested in someone though, it wouldn't be a man like this, one who clearly doesn't appear to be happy at being on my doorstep. If that's the case, then why in the heck is he at my house? His jaw is clenched, and his lips couldn't be pressed any tighter together if they were sewn shut.

"Noel Dawson?" He doesn't add more. Maybe I should deny I'm me. This situation is becoming stranger by the moment as I find myself tongue-tied.

“Are you Noel Dawson?” he asks again.

“Yes.” I find my voice and make it short, letting him know I don’t have time for a visit.

“If you have a moment, Ms. Dawson, I need to speak with you about something important.” This stranger is absurdly formal, but it’s nothing less than I expect from a man who looks how he looks. The cost of his suit alone has to be my old monthly salary ... or more.

“Look, I have no idea who you are, so saying you have something important to talk to me about makes absolutely zero sense. I’m busy baking right now,” I tell him. I’ve spent more than enough time to burn the cookies now.

He completely ignores my words as he continues speaking. “I’m here on behalf of Lucas Anderson, the grandfather of your niece and nephew. He didn’t know of the existence of your sister until this past week, and he’s greatly grieved at learning of the passing of a child he didn’t get to know. He now wants to meet his grandchildren. He didn’t want to show up and scare you ... so he sent me.”

The blood drains from my face as this man’s words sink in. If this mystery man called Lucas doesn’t want to scare me then he sure as heck sent the wrong man to my home. This guy is terrifying. If Lucas is scarier than he is, I don’t want to meet him at all. Besides that, what’s he talking about? My mother never talked to my sister about her father. She told us it didn’t work out with him, and we accepted that. Maybe we had such a good life, there was no reason for us to seek out a man who didn’t stick around, or two men who didn’t stick around. We had each other so we didn’t need more than that.

“Is this a joke? If it is, I don’t find it funny,” I tell him as I gain my wits back. “My niece and nephew have been through hell this past year and they don’t need to go through anything else. I know for a fact that none of us have any family left.”

“I can assure you, Ms. Dawson, the children have a great deal of family. Their grandfather, great-grandfather, and many other relatives are alive and well, and want to meet them.”

My oven timer continues buzzing and I’m torn on what to do. Should I slam the door in the face of this arrogant man and go back to my baking, forgetting all about this strange visit? Should I invite him in to hear him out? I keep making wrong choices, and I don’t want to do something that will hurt the kids. The man looks hard, but not like a psychopath. My good manners and curiosity win out, and I open my door wider.

“Please step inside and wait here. I need to take care of my oven timer.” I turn toward my kitchen as smoke begins filling the air. Dang it, there goes another batch of cookies. I don’t have enough time in the day as it is, or the funds to ruin food. As I pull the pan from the oven, I turn to see he’s followed me. It sends a shiver down my spine I choose to ignore.

“Did you tell me your name?” I ask as I set the pan over the sink and move to open a window for the smoke to escape. I can’t afford the electric bill for an open window, but it’s either that or choking. I really don’t want to faint in front of this man from smoke inhalation.

“No, I didn’t,” he tells me with a bit of a smirk I don’t like one little bit. Something about this man tells me he wields power like most people wield forks and knives.

I lose patience. “As I’ve invited you into my home and you’re telling me there’s a lost family out there coming for my niece and nephew, the least you can do is give me your name.” I’m surprised at how firm my voice is. Parenting my niece and nephew this past year seems to have strengthened me.

“Ryder Berkley.” He waits as if seeing if I recognize the name. I don’t.

“You sure don’t like offering up information, do you?” I ask. I have to move so I set the burned cookies aside and grab another pan and start putting cookie dough on it. The smoke is clearing from the air.

The man has the gall to sit down at the kitchen island as I work as if he’s perfectly welcome in my home. I barely hold back a sarcastic comment telling him to make himself at home. My mother raised me better than that.

“I’m a business partner of Lucas Anderson and a friend of the family. In the Anderson clan, friends are family as well as blood,” he tells me. I don’t say anything as I continue dropping cookie dough on the pan. I finish, place it in the oven, and set the timer. I don’t know what to say.

“Ms. Dawson, my time’s very valuable, I’d appreciate your full attention,” Mr. Berkley says.

“Does my time have less value than yours?” I counter as I once again turn to face him. The man has the gall to reach over and grab a cookie ... and take a bite. Part of me wants to rip it from his hand. The longer I’m in the room with him the more irritable I become.

His smirk tells me that's exactly what he thinks without using words. It makes me want to punch the man in his smug face. I'm sure he's some bigwig and I'm on the bottom of the totem pole, but he can still kiss my butt. I'm just as important as he is.

"I know I'm being direct. It's just that the Andersons weren't aware of Chloe or the children until a few days ago. The entire family's devastated to learn of the death of a child they didn't get to know. They're equally elated to learn of the children. Everyone very much wants to meet them."

"Why were *you* sent?" I ask. I'm starting to believe this man, though I'm not making any decisions without checking facts.

"I was volunteered. I was visiting when the family was trying to decide how to move forward. They didn't want to overwhelm you. Joseph suggested a neutral party would be best to come and see you. They thought about sending another friend who would've ... um ... well, you might not have opened your door. He's a bit intimidating." He gives a bit of a smile as he says this.

"And you aren't?" I ask, my sarcasm coming out.

"I'm a good guy," he says as he grabs another cookie. "Do you have milk?" I'm staring at him in shock. This guy is used to getting what he wants. I find myself in more shock as I go to the cupboard and grab a glass. What is wrong with me? That might just be the number-one age-old question, and I don't have any answers to it.

I set down the milk. "Why should I let the children meet a family my mother obviously didn't want my sister to know?"

Why *didn't* she want Chloe to know this family?

My question seems to throw the man off for a minute. “The family received a letter from your mother. That’s how they found out, so she *did* want you to know ... just not until after her passing.”

“Where does this family live?” I ask. I pull out a chair and sit, not too close, but I’m tired all of a sudden.

“Have you not heard of the Andersons?” he asks.

“No, should I have?”

He chuckles. It’s a beautiful sound, but I push that thought right on out of my head. I don’t like this man.

“They live in Seattle,” he tells me without answering my question. I don’t push it.

“That’s on the other side of the country, Mr. Berkley,” I point out.

“It’s simply a jet ride away,” he counters. “A private jet ride that I’m sure the kids will enjoy.”

“Private jet?” I gasp. “Who are these people?”

“The Andersons want the best for their grandchildren and a private jet gives them privacy and comfort.”

“So, the Andersons are *those* people. I’m beginning to see why my mother kept us a secret,” I tell him.

“What do you mean by that?” he asks, obviously perplexed. Maybe this man has lived with money for so long, he doesn’t know how the rest of the world lives.

“It sounds like this family is the type that likes to buy others,” I say.

“It appears as if you’re calling your family snobs,” he says. The man stands and moves a little closer to me, which makes me want to move away. He’s making me nervous all over again. He’s certainly not the type of man I interact with on a normal basis. That’s obviously clear.

“They aren’t *my* family if any of this is true, they’re related to my niece and nephew. And it’s clear the suit you’re wearing costs more than my car in the driveway. I’m only stating the obvious.”

The man smiles, but the gesture doesn’t make it to his eyes. “Yes, I have money, as do the Andersons. That only means we’re used to getting what we want. It doesn’t make us bad people.”

I’m stunned at his words, though I don’t know why. He might’ve just threatened me, but it doesn’t feel like a threat. Is he saying I can cooperate and willingly bring the kids, or they’ll come for them? Would I stand a chance against a family with vast amounts of wealth? I’d think the will would be good enough for me to keep them, but I’m not sure. I know the system favors those with wealth.

“I’m sure you have good intentions, but seriously, there’s no way I’m taking these kids across the country to see a family they’ve never heard of. For all I know it could be a trap.”

“I can assure you there’s nothing underhanded going on. I have some information here on the family for you to peruse. I also have the letter from your mother. And, of course, you’ll

be the guests of the Andersons and wouldn't be forced to stay against your will if you want to leave."

"I still don't think we're going to be taking any trips. Why doesn't Mr. Anderson just come here himself if he's so anxious to meet the children?"

"I think it would be better for the kids to go there to meet all of the family."

"The children are in school, Mr. Berkley. I can't just uproot them," I say with frustration. This man doesn't easily take no for an answer.

"The family has already contacted the school, and they have private tutors on standby. The children could complete their lessons while visiting."

"You contacted the school? That was a bit forward, don't you think?" I want to scream, but somehow manage to stay calm. How did this family pull that off? Well, of course, the school administrators took one look at the money the Andersons have and salivated. Potential donations ... or already a donation.

"We didn't want you to have any concerns about this visit. It's very important to the family," he says before leaning forward, his eyes intense. I suddenly find it difficult to breathe. "If we do decide to do this, I won't leave the kids with some strange family."

"Well, I guess you'll be moving to Seattle then. I hope you'll enjoy it there. It rains . . . a lot." I rise from my seat to get away from this man, and immediately begin ushering him toward the front door.

“Ms. Dawson, the children’s great grandfather and great grandmother aren’t in good health, and this may very well be their last chance to see the children. Please don’t deny them this — not after they just learned of losing a granddaughter they didn’t get the chance to meet.” It seems he’s changing tactics. This strategy is more likely to get him what he wants because I do have a heart. I want nothing more than to throw him out without another word, but that isn’t who I am. This man hits me where it counts — in my kind heart.

“Okay, Mr. Berkley. I promise to look over your documents. But you can tell the Andersons I highly doubt we’ll meet.”

“Please, at least ask the children,” he says. “I understand you have guardianship over them, but the Andersons *are* their family as well.”

“I told you I’ll think about it. If I feel that the children should hear about this, I’ll talk to them. They’ve been through a lot, though, and I don’t want to upset them any further. I can’t give you any more than that right now.”

“I understand, Ms. Dawson. Please let me know your decision quickly. The holidays are approaching, and the Andersons, as I told you, are in a weak state right now.”

I don’t say anything more as I lead him to my door, open it, usher him out, then shut it in the man’s face. I exhale as I lean against the sturdy frame. I’m not in any way qualified to make the kind of decisions required for Rowan and Layla. I’m only twenty-five years old, and it seems as if something new happens every day, something confirming I’m not fit to raise my niece and nephew. I don’t know what the right decision is.

Baking is a lost cause, so I sit down at the kitchen island to look at the papers Mr. Berkley left. I'd be completely irresponsible if I didn't look through the information. After all, if the kids have more family out there, don't I owe them the chance to get acquainted?

A shudder runs through me as I examine the paperwork and the letter from my mother with tears falling down my cheeks. "Oh, Mom, what have you done?" I go to my computer and my fears intensify as I search the Andersons.

The Andersons appear to be from old money — true American bluebloods — and they certainly haven't fallen on hard times at any point in their history. They're multibillionaires from Washington State, and owners of a massive business empire. Who in the world had my mother had a fling with?

Why hadn't she told Chloe and me about the Andersons? Was she ashamed of the family? Were they horrible people she hadn't wanted us to know about? If that's the case then why did she send them a letter on her deathbed? I'd better try to find out a heck of a lot more before the kids get home.

By the time I'm finished surfing the Web, I'm back in my chair chewing my nails, wondering what I'm going to do. What if this family wants to keep the kids because they decide I'm unfit to raise them? My niece and nephew seem to be heirs of a great fortune. Wouldn't they want to be a part of that life?

But then again, don't the rich raise their children at a distance, with nannies and boarding schools? Sometimes it's even worse than the old line that "Children should be seen and not heard," because sometimes they aren't even seen. Aren't

my sister's children better off being raised with love instead of wealth? I wish more than ever before that Chloe was here to guide me, to help me make the right choices. Of course, if Chloe was here, I wouldn't be faced with this burdensome decision.

I finally conclude that the best thing to do is to ask the children. If they really want to see their grandfather and other relatives, I'll take them across the country to Washington. What else can I do? My fear of losing them doesn't give me the right to be selfish and keep them all to myself. Life keeps dealing me bad cards, but I'll do my best to win the game and to get myself and the children through it all. I hear the front door open, and laughter spills from my niece as Rowan and Layla come rushing around the corner.

"Hi, Aunt Noel," Layla says as she slides to a stop.

"What's that look for, darling girl?"

As Layla jumps into my lap, I hold her close to my chest, so afraid I'm about to lose this beloved child and her dear brother.

"I have a present for you, Auntie," Layla tells me, giggling in delight.

"Oh, that's wonderful! Do I get to open it now?"

"No, Aunt Noel," Layla says firmly. "You have to wait until Christmas morning."

"Okay, sweetie, if I have to wait, I'll wait," I reply before tickling her affectionately. I'm fighting back tears and praying this connection isn't going to end anytime soon.

“Mercy,” Layla cries, and I stop. Then I direct my attention to my nephew, who’s sitting on the other end of the island and not looking at either of us.

“Take off your headphones, Rowan. I need to talk to you both.”

“What is it?” he grouses.

“Someone came to see me today,” I tell them. “It seems your mother has some close relatives who are alive, but they live on the other side of the country. They want to meet you both, and to spend Christmas with you.”

“If they want to see us so badly, where have they been all of our lives?” Rowan asks with open resentment.

“I don’t know. It seems grandma didn’t want Chloe to know, and this family didn’t know about the two of you. They just learned of your mother’s passing. They’re grieving since they’ll never get to know her. As you know, it’s never easy to lose people. And this family would like to meet you,” I say. “You have a grandpa and many more relatives. I don’t know how many.”

“I have a grandpa?” Layla almost squeals. Yes, I knew my loving niece would want to see her relatives. She’d love them no matter who they are.

The decision really lies with Rowan. The two of them look at each other, and I can see the emotion he’s trying desperately to keep inside. It’s obvious he wants to meet them, but he’s still so hurt, and not willing to give his trust too readily.

“I don’t really care about stupid relatives I’ve never met before,” Rowan says after a long silence. “But it would be

kind of cool to travel somewhere, and at least get out of this house for a while.” On the plus side, the boy is showing some emotion other than anger. I’ve been so focused on keeping things the same for them I didn’t once think that being in this house might keep the wound ripped open far longer than it needs to be. Here’s just another example of me screwing up.

“Do you want to sleep on it before you decide?” I ask them, almost wishing they’ll decide not to go.

“You’ll be coming with us, right?” Rowan asks, apparently in a bit of a panic. Is he thinking that I’m trying to ship them off and be rid of them? That will never happen.

“Of course I’ll come, Rowan. You know how much I love you and your sister. No way will I ever abandon you guys.” I watch his shoulders relax. As much as he fights me, I know he loves me as much as I love him.

“Well, I really don’t want to be in this house for Christmas,” Rowan says. “Last year sucked, let me tell you.”

“Okay, I’ll call the family friend and let him know we’ll accept their kind offer,” I tell them. “I’m not sure when they’ll want us to go off on the big trip.”

“Is my grandpa nice?” Layla asks. I look at this beautiful, innocent child, and more grief fills me.

“I’m sure he’s a good man. And being around you will only bring out the best in him.” I hope what I’m saying is the truth.

“I can’t wait,” Layla says. She bounces from my lap and leaps up the stairs.

“Remember, I said I don’t know how soon we’ll be going,” I call after her, but it’s too late. The little girl is most likely

already packing a bag.

“Are you sure about this, Rowan?”

He stops at the bottom of the stairs. “I’m not sure about them at all. But I’m more than sure I’d like to get out of this awful house.” And he too bounds up the stairs.

Will there be no end to fighting tears? I pull out the card Mr. Berkley left and dial his number. He answers on the first ring, then tells me a private jet will be ready to depart as soon as I’m ready and have the children packed. He’ll send a car immediately. I tell him to stop, that we won’t be leaving today, that there are things we have to do first. He seems disappointed, but he doesn’t fight me. I tell him, I’ll call him when we’re ready. He isn’t pleased. Too bad.

It’s already moving way too fast ... and I don’t think anything is going to stop it, but I can slow it down the tiniest bit.

Chapter Three

Noel

“Kids, you have to hurry. The car’s waiting in the driveway.”

The last few days have gone by in a blur, with getting assignments from the children’s teachers, packing, and making sure the house is reasonably secure. And now we’re off to the races. Too soon, way too soon.

“We’re coming,” Rowan says, rolling his eyes at me as he emerges from his bedroom. His excitement is obvious, but he’s determined to pretend the trip is no big deal.

“I’m sorry. I’m just nervous, I guess,” I tell him. This is truth. I’m so afraid of losing these kids, but that’s my burden to bear, not theirs. This isn’t about me, it’s about them, and I’ll go to the ends of the earth for them.

“Is that all you’re taking?” he asks, throwing a doubtful look at my one pathetic suitcase.

“I don’t need very much. You just worry about your own bags.” I ruffle his hair as I smile. I’m not moving in with the Andersons. This is just a visit.

“Yeah, yeah,” he replies. He grabs two of our bags without being asked and makes his way downstairs, then rushes back up to get more.

Layla trails behind me as we follow Rowan. A new man is standing at my door when I open it and I take a step back. The guy is huge ... and I mean really, *really* big. Rowan even stops as he looks up to the beast standing before us. The huge man smiles.

“Hello, I’m Tyrell Rice, or Smoke if that’s easier for you,” he says with a wide smile before he winks at Layla, who beams at him. “Ryder had to fly back last night for a business emergency and I’m here to make sure you arrive safe and sound.”

“You’re huge,” Rowan says, his eyes focusing in on the man’s arms.

“I get that a lot,” Smoke says.

“How do I know you were sent by Ryder?” I ask. I thought Ryder was intimidating, but he has nothing on the man standing before us now.

Smoke smiles. “I’m glad to see you don’t instantly trust. I do work for the Andersons,” he says. He then holds out his phone. “I’m assuming you looked up pictures of your family members.”

“Yes,” I tell him.

He clicks on a name and in a couple of rings FaceTime is answered. “Hi, Smoke, what’s up?” a beautiful blonde woman asks.

“I’m here with your long-lost relatives and they need confirmation I’m not a human trafficker,” Smoke says, which makes the young lady laugh.

“Oh, yea, turn the phone, I want to see,” the young lady demands. Smoke does as she asks.

“You must be Noel. I’m so excited to see you,” she says. She looks so much like my sister it takes any words straight from my mouth. “I’m Jasmine, your sort of sister. If you were sisters with my long-lost sister, then that makes us family too. I can’t wait to meet you. I’m at the house right now and my dad said I’m far too chatty to be the one to come get you so I’m pacing instead. And you can one hundred percent trust Smoke. He’s the greatest guy I’ve ever known, my honorary big brother. He’s taught me everything I know.” The girl talks just as fast as my sister used to talk. It brings tears to my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Jasmine asks. I clear my throat.

“Yes, sorry. You just ... um ... you look a lot like Chloe,” I admit.

Jasmine’s eyes fill and spill over as she smiles at me. “I’m devastated not to meet this sister I never knew I had, but I can’t wait to hear all about her, and I’m more than excited to be an auntie to these amazing kids I’ve been hearing about. You can teach me the ropes of being a great aunt.”

This girl is so kind and genuine it takes some of my fear away. “I look forward to meeting you in person, Jasmine.”

“Me too,” she says.

“We should get on the road,” Smoke says.

“Fine, but keep me updated,” Jasmine says. Smoke disconnects the call.

Smoke picks up a couple of our bags and begins moving away from the house. Sitting in our little driveway is the

largest limo I've ever seen, and as we climb inside, we all feel a bit intimidated.

"This is a really big car, Aunt Noel," Layla says with huge eyes. Even Rowan is more subdued than normal.

"Yes, it is," I answer, not knowing what else to add.

Smoke joins us in the back seat and sits back as if he rides in limos all of the time. He then focuses on the kids. "As I told your aunt, my name's Smoke. I'm really happy to meet all of you. I have a little girl not that much younger than you, Layla." He gives her a wink. "That means I know what kids tend to like. I have snacks for all of you, and you'll be served dinner on the jet."

"You talk funny," Layla says as she moves closer to the man, not at all afraid of his huge bulk.

"I speak very well, young lady," he tells her with a laugh.

"Layla, that wasn't polite. Will you please apologize to Smoke?" I tell my niece.

Layla's head droops. "I'm sorry, Smoke."

"No offense taken, young lady. I don't have the Boston accent you're used to, and I've been told by my wife I have a deep voice. She likes it, but it might be scary to kids. When I was in the military the scary voice helped me out more than once to scare the bad guys though." Smoke says, clearly not offended at all.

"I bet you scared people. You're huge," Rowan says, making Smoke laugh again.

“Wait till you see the rest of my friends. I might be the biggest, but they aren’t hurting for size,” he says.

Everything in the limo fascinates the children, which stops this line of conversation, and then they’re overjoyed when Smoke opens a bottle of sparkling cider. Layla giggles when he gives her a glass of the bubbly liquid in a crystal stemmed glass.

After we arrive at the airport, my jaw falls several inches when the limo pulls off into a private terminal and parks in front of a huge jet with *Anderson Corporation* painted boldly across it.

“Wow! Are we flying in that? Just us?” Rowan asks as he sees all of the people surrounding the aircraft.

“Yes, Mr. Anderson has sent his personal jet to collect you. He wants to make sure you arrive without any inconvenience or harm,” Smoke says, and I cringe.

“Is our grandpa mega-rich?” Rowan asks.

“Well, I didn’t want to shock you both too much, but apparently your mother’s family has done quite well,” I tell him in as offhand a manner as I can, which makes Smoke laugh.

“I don’t think mega-rich is enough to describe how wealthy they are.” He’s not affected at all by the kids asking something no one’s supposed to ask.

“This is so unreal,” Rowan says, and then gives a real grin for the first time in what feels like forever.

I don’t know why, but I suddenly get the giggles. This entire situation is just so bizarre. Things like this don’t happen

in the real world — only in my favorite romantic movies and books. The kids seem to find the humor in the situation too, and soon the three of us are laughing so hard that none of us can breathe.

Smoke is looking at us as if he's been expecting just this reaction. Maybe he's seen it before. He waits for us to collect ourselves and exit the limo to board the jet. This just makes me laugh that much harder.

"I'm so sorry, Smoke. We're a little overwhelmed," I manage to say in between chortles.

"I totally understand," he says. I decide right now I like this man a lot.

We're led up the blue-carpeted stairs into the jet, and all three of us newbies look around the luxurious cabin in awe.

"This is really cool, Auntie," Layla squeals as she rushes forward and jumps into a cushioned chair.

"I could get used to traveling like this," Rowan says with a barely repressed twinkle in his eyes.

"I think this is a fun adventure, and there's nothing wrong with enjoying every minute of it," I tell the children. "But let's try not to get too used to it." Then I sit down in the chair next to Layla and decide not to let any worries of our real lives get to me until after this vacation. I only hope that it's nothing more than a vacation. Will this mysterious family try to keep the children?

If they do try, they'll find I'm not a person to give up without a fight ... a big fight. I love these children more than they could ever know. Money is a fine thing to have, but it

isn't a substitute for love. I need to remember that as we begin our journey in the lap of luxury.

Chapter Four

Noel

When the big city comes into view, my breathing lodges in my chest and my fears return. What if I'm making a mistake? The chances that this family doesn't want to take the kids away is slim. What if ...

No. I mustn't think these things. My sister wouldn't want me to keep the children from a family who wants to love them. At least I don't think she'd want that. I have to wonder again why our mother didn't tell us about this family. I'm so confused.

"Wow, Aunt Noel, this is so exciting," Layla exclaims. My sweet niece is having no trouble adjusting to this.

"Yes, honey, I know it is," I say as I stroke my niece's hair.

"Whenever you're ready," Smoke says to us once the plane lands. He leads us from the jet into a limo that's similar to the one we rode in earlier. The slow drive through heavy traffic gives me time to practice my breathing techniques and prepare myself for what's to come. For that, I'm grateful.

The car picks up speed as we leave the city and its skyscrapers. In an hour or so, we make a turn into a gated community, and Rowan's breath whooshes out. I turn to follow his gaze and can't stop my own gasp from escaping. The houses are all huge with yards that go on and on and on with

horse pastures, tennis courts, and impeccable lawns. We drive to the end of the block and go up a winding road where a gigantic house dominates the snow-covered landscape.

“Is this where we’re going?” Layla asks, her voice quiet as she leans closer to me.

“Yes, Layla, this is your family home,” Smoke tells her. “But if you think this one is big, just wait until you go to your great-grandfather’s home, it makes this place look small.”

I gasp. I don’t know how that’s possible. The home we’re pulling up to has to be fifteen-thousand feet ... or more. It’s crazy. I’ve never seen such big homes ... and I lived in New York for a while. Of course, I lived in the city limits where it’s all apartments. I’m sure there are huge homes in the suburbs of New York.

“This doesn’t look like a home,” Layla says.

The closer we come, the larger and more intimidating the mansion looks. I’m so far out of my element I fear I might not land safely on my own feet when this ride is over.

We drive around to the back of the mansion, which has windows that seem bigger than my entire place back in Massachusetts, and walls stretching halfway up to the sky and beyond. Will the children get lost in the depths of this palace the second they step inside, never to be seen again? Will I get lost? What if it’s all just a lot of halls, making us nothing more than rats in a trap?

“I want you both to stick with me,” I tell them as the limo stops. “And please behave.”

“We promise to be good, Aunt Noel,” Layla says quickly. My nephew gives no response ... which is worrisome, but I have so many other things to worry about I can’t think about his lack of response right now.

“Right this way, Noel.”

The massive door ahead of us looks like something Shrek would use. I walk slowly toward it, holding tightly to Layla’s hand. Rowan stands next to me, for once not issuing a snappy or snarky remark, but simply staring as Smoke opens the door.

“Why is the door so big?” Layla asks as we step through.

“Because Mr. Anderson is a large man,” Smoke tells her.

Layla stops, and her eyes turn into saucers. “Like a giant?” she squeaks.

“Not quite that big,” the man says, and he can’t repress a chuckle.

“You’re here!” Jasmine greets us in the hall with a wide smile. “I didn’t think you were ever going to arrive.” She seems to be bouncing on her feet as she looks at me, then the kids, then back to me.

“Jasmine, officially meet Noel Dawson, and the children, Master Rowan and Miss Layla,” Smoke says, then turns to me. “This is Jasmine, sort of your sister.”

“I’m so happy you’re here,” Jasmine says as she rushes over and throws her arms around me. I stand stiffly for a moment before accepting her hug. She looks so much like my sister it hurts, but there’s something about being in her arms that almost makes it feel like Chloe is with us.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Jasmine,” I say, my throat closing.

“Oh, the pleasure’s all mine,” Jasmine replies.

“Where’s the rest of the family?” I ask.

“They wanted to be here, but I told Dad not to overwhelm you. I figured you’ll want to rest up before dinner,” Jasmine says. “We can be a little much when we’re en masse.” She chuckles.

I have mixed feelings about this. We’ve come to meet this family but I’d appreciate getting to settle in before we have to greet a bunch of new people.

“You look like my mom,” Layla says. We all turn and look at my niece, approaching Jasmine, who immediately kneels so she can be eye level with Layla.

“I think that’s amazing,” Jasmine says. “I saw some pictures of your mom and she’s very beautiful so I’m going to take this as a huge compliment.”

Layla smiles at her. “You’re beautiful,” Layla says.

“So are you. Do you know you’re my niece? My one and *only* niece. I think that’s the coolest thing in this world.”

“I’m Aunt Noel’s niece too,” Layla says. She takes a second as she thinks about this. “Does that mean you and Aunt Noel are sisters?”

Jasmine doesn’t hesitate as she smiles. “It means your mom was my sister. I didn’t get to meet her because we didn’t know about her. It also means there’s nothing I’d like more than to be sisters with your aunt Noel. It might take grownups a little

more time to get to know each other, but I think it's all going to be okay.”

“Why does it take longer?” Layla asks.

“Well, because grownups aren't as trusting as we were as kids. It takes us a little longer to open our hearts to one another,” Jasmine says.

I'm shocked at how knowledgeable and honest this young woman, who looks so much like my sister, is. I like it. I like her.

Layla yawns. It's been a long day. “She probably could use a little rest before we have dinner with the whole family,” I tell Jasmine, who rises to her feet. Rowan hasn't said anything this whole time. I wonder what he's thinking about right now. It might take a little while to get it out of him ... but I'm determined I will.

“Jasmine, do you want to show them their rooms? I'll go find your father,” Smoke says.

“I'd love to,” Jasmine says.

“Thank you for helping us today, Smoke,” I tell the large man.

“It was truly my pleasure. Welcome to the family, Noel.” With that he turns and walks away. For such a large man, he sure moves quietly. As soon as he's out of sight I don't hear so much as a footstep.

“Smoke's amazing,” Jasmine says. She turns and we follow her for what seems to be a mile through hallways, up a set of stairs, and down more hallways. We finally stop in front of an ornate door. We're shown Rowan's room first, and then

Layla's, which I'm grateful is next to my own. I anxiously tug on the girl's hand.

"I'm fine, Aunt Noel," Layla tells me. "I want to jump on my bed."

"She will be okay. Not only do we have several staff members who are more family than employees to keep an eye on the kids, but this house is more secure than the White House. You haven't met Brackish yet, but he's the most gifted person I've ever known. He does security unlike anyone else. No one can do anything in this house without it being known. Trust me, I couldn't sneak out when I was a kid. While I appreciate that as an adult who knows the dangers of the world, I hated it as a teen trying to get away with mischief." She laughs.

"I'm not sure if this assures me or scares me," I tell her as I look up, trying to spot cameras.

She laughs again. "Don't worry, there aren't any cameras in the bedrooms. No way. Just the hallways and the outside, not even in the living room. I think that's because my parents get up to no good all over this house." A shudder runs through her, making me chuckle.

"Well, that will be embarrassing to walk in on entering the kitchen," I tell her. "If I can find it."

"This house is absurdly large, but you get used to it after a while, then you can learn all of the secret hallways. I'll show them to you. Of course since Brackish wired everything, I can't sneak out through the panic routes. I keep trying though. My goal in life is to outsmart that man. It might eventually happen ... in a hundred years."

“I’m not technical at all, but if you need any help it might keep my mind off everything else going on in my life right now,” I tell her.

“Oh, I’ll let you know,” she says. “I’ll think of the best mischief we can get up to together. I always dreamed of having a sister. I’m sad that I didn’t get to know Chloe, but I have you, and I’m excited to know you and learn all about Chloe. I have to pace myself. I work for the FBI, so I like to interrogate. I’m really holding that in right now.”

I’m so overwhelmed as we move to the next room and walk inside. I’m speechless as I look around. I slowly move to the bed and lift my bag up, unzipping it to give my fingers something to do. This room is easily the size of my last apartment, the one I’d been renting before the tragic accident.

“I can help you put your things away,” Jasmine says.

“That isn’t necessary,” I begin as she dives inside my suitcase.

My cheeks flush. Just my luck — because right on top are a couple of my favorite romance novels, with risqué pictures on the covers. Jasmine looks at me with a raised eyebrow and laughs.

“I like your taste,” she tells me, grabbing one of the books and opening it.

“I like romance books, but I read other things as well,” I tell her.

She laughs. “Me too. I read everything. We have a big library here and it’s a great place to sit and think when you’re

sick of talking to people. It was my haven when I lived at home.” She sets my book back down.

I yawn and Jasmine starts backing away. “I’ll leave you to rest up. I’ve told myself I’m not going to drive you crazy.”

“You’re fine,” I say, “but to be honest, I’m a little overwhelmed.”

“I’m sure you are. I’ll see you soon.” With that she skips out of my room, shutting the door. I let out a sigh. So far, I like both Smoke and Jasmine. I *didn’t* like Ryder. Two out of three isn’t bad, I assure myself. If I keep these odds, it might not be so bad being here. We’ll see.

I step into the adjoining bathroom and feel as if I’ve died and gone to heaven. The bathtub against the back wall is big enough to swim in, and it has a window beside it with a view of the snowy rolling hills that seem to stretch for miles. Maybe, just maybe, I can relax with a nice hot bath.

I turn on the tap, then take my time brushing my teeth and putting my hair up. The tub fills with amazing speed, and, after I add fragrant bath beads to the water, I sink down and let my worries melt away.

Somewhere in the distance I hear a knock on the door and a voice saying something or other, but I don’t care. The knocking becomes more insistent, and that’s when I shoot awake.

“Dinner will be served at eight,” Jasmine calls through the closed door. “Now I won’t bug you anymore.”

“Okay, thank you,” I reply, then sink back down into the water. This relaxing tub might be the only thing in the

monstrous mansion that will help me maintain my sanity.

As soon as the woman leaves, I lie back with another sigh and close my eyes. We'll soon meet the rest of the family and have to see how that goes. Like ripping off a bandage, it's sometimes better to get things over. Jasmine's great ... so maybe the rest of the family will be good too.

Chapter Five

Ryder

“What’s taking so long?” Lucas asks as he sits at the dinner table. “I shouldn’t have listened to you, Jasmine. I should’ve greeted them at the door.” He jumps from his seat and paces while Jasmine smiles at him. She has a way of wrapping her father right around her little finger no matter how old she gets ... not that twenty-five is old. Still, I’ve been around this family forever. I grew up with Jasmine, though I’m a few years older than she is.

My family has been business partners with the Andersons for years and Lucas is pretty much a second father to me. He’s far more affectionate than my own parents. I try telling myself this isn’t something that matters to me, but if it’s not, then why am I at Lucas’s home more than my own, and certainly more than at my parent’s house? That’s a road I’m not ready to go down at the moment.

“I’m telling you, Lucas, I met them, and the aunt is scared. If you want a good relationship with your grandchildren, you’re going to have to take it easy with the aunt. She’ll run off quicker than you can blink if you come on too strong,” I tell him, deciding to stick up for Jasmine, who happens to be a great friend of mine.

“Do you know how hard it was to keep my father away tonight? He’s probably growling at everyone in sight right

now. He's not happy with me," Lucas says.

"It's okay, Dad, I'll calm Gramps down," Jasmine assures him. She's correct. Lucas might be wrapped around his daughter's finger, but it's nothing compared to how the infamous Joseph Anderson is. Jasmine's his oldest grandchild, and the bond between the two of them is unbreakable ... and beautiful. Joseph will crawl on the floor for Jasmine ... and nobody else.

"You certainly can calm him down, Jazz, but right now I'm sure he's yelling," Lucas says again.

"I imagine Joseph's pacing like you right about now," I tell Lucas. I'd rather talk about Joseph and Lucas than what I'm feeling. I'm certainly not going to admit how much I want to see Noel again. There was a spark between us I might want to explore. I know it's a bad idea, but when has that ever stopped me from doing something? I wisely decide not to share this particular thought with Lucas. It might not go too well.

"I had to make sure Mark and Alex stayed with Dad, so he didn't try to sneak over here. I don't want to scare Noel off, and there's nothing like my father to intimidate someone. I need her to love it here. Now that I know they exist, I need to know my grandchildren. I can't believe I have two of them. I know now how my father felt all those years before when he was anxious for my brothers and me to get married. I've been excited for the day Jasmine will find the right man and give me grandchildren. Now the pressure's off her for a little while."

"Well, that's good to know. I'm in no way ready to have kids yet," Jasmine says.

“Speaking of family, how are things going with that partner of yours? Hunter?” Lucas asks. Talking about his daughter and her crazy life seems to take some of his anxiousness over meeting Noel and the kids away.

“Things are fine with Hunter. He’s nothing more than a partner to me,” Jasmine says.

“I don’t think so,” Smoke mutters from his place at the end of the table. He’s such a large man, but so quiet when he wants to be that it’s easy to forget he’s in a room. That’s why the man is so dang good at what he does. It’s also why his call sign is Smoke ... he can disappear in plain sight.

“Smoke,” Jasmine warns.

“Hey, I’m down in Florida with you, Jazz, I see the smoke rising from the fire,” Smoke says.

“We might’ve shared a kiss or two, but that’s bound to happen in the high-stress situations we find ourselves in,” Jasmine tells us.

“Kisses?” Lucas looks one part excited, and ten parts horrified. He might want his daughter married with children, but he doesn’t like the thought of his daughter intimate with anyone. It’s quite amusing to watch.

Jasmine is saved when we hear noise in the hallway, and then a giggle that has to be coming from Layla. I’m sitting on the edge of my seat as they get closer to the dining room. Then she’s here, looking inside, her face flushed, her eyes bright. She looks nervous, and the kids are hiding behind her.

Layla’s wearing a pink summer dress which is a perfect splash of brightness in the middle of a cold winter. The ten-

year-old boy is clad in jeans and an oversized sweatshirt. We don't dress up for dinner at Lucas's house, but a sweatshirt is a little underdressed. It doesn't matter though. Lucas is wearing a look of wonder and love as his gaze travels between the two children. He seems to be tongue-tied, which isn't usual for this strong man I've known my entire life.

"I'm so glad you're here," Lucas tells them.

"We're a little nervous," Noel admits as she moves forward with the kids.

I look at Noel, feeling a sense of wonder. The first time I met her, the punch in my gut had shocked me. This time, I'm irritated because that first time wasn't a fluke. The instant heat traveling straight to one area of my body at the sight of her flushed cheeks and bright eyes is unmistakable.

My eyes travel across her body, and I realize I can easily get lost in this woman. It's a mistake. This entire situation is difficult for everyone involved. The last thing I need to do is have an affair with the caretaker of Lucas's only grandchildren — children he's meeting for the first time.

"Don't be nervous. I know this is frightening for everyone. That's why it's just us tonight," Amy finally says as she rises.

"I'm Amy, Lucas's wife. He's a wonderful man, and terrified of saying the wrong thing. Welcome to our home. It took all we had not to bombard you when you arrived, but it always seems easier to chat with food ... and wine ... lots of wine." She chuckles, and the sound seems to ease the awkwardness of the situation.

“Do I get wine?” Rowan asks with a sly smile that makes me instantly like the boy.

The words break the tension with Noel. “Not a chance,” she tells him as she affectionately ruffles his hair.

“A boy’s gotta try,” he tells his aunt. It’s clear how much these children love their aunt. This will matter to Lucas. He didn’t know these children existed a month ago, but now that he does, their safety and security will be his top priority. He’ll want to know their aunt has been good to them. The fact that she has will make him love her. He’ll also want to learn all he can from her about the daughter he never got to meet.

“I’m sorry we’re late, but we got lost in this house. I think we went in a few circles. It’s huge,” Noel says as she looks at Amy, obviously deciding she’s the safest of the group to focus on.

“Yes, it’s insane, but we do a lot of work from home, and I have to admit I like it. I didn’t at first, but now I’m quite spoiled,” Amy says with a chuckle. “Please, sit down.”

Noel guides the children to the three empty seats with place settings. The little girl is practically bouncing in her seat.

“Are you my grandpa?” Layla asks.

Lucas’s eyes are bright as he focuses on his only granddaughter. “Yes, I am,” he says, his voice a little choked.

“Do you want to be?”

There’s a gasp from Amy that she quickly covers as she lifts her glass and takes a drink. Someone’s already pouring a glass of wine for Noel, and she picks her glass up and takes a

drink as Lucas clears his throat, seeming to have found a frog in it at the child's innocent words.

"More than anything in this world," Lucas says.

Layla beams at him before she jumps from her seat and rushes to Lucas, throwing her arms around him. She looks up with big brown eyes, the most adorable girl I've ever seen.

"I've never had a grandpa before. I had a grandma I loved very much, but I've never had a grandpa," she tells him. "I love you."

Lucas's eyes shine as he pulls the child close and holds her. I have to admit I'm having to clear my own throat at the scene before all of us. It amazes me at how easy it is for a child to love someone. I wonder what age we are before we hold our hearts closer to us, not being so willing to give them away anymore. Looking at this beautiful scene before me, it makes me wish we'd all give more of our love away ... free from cynicism.

"I love you, too, Layla," Lucas tells her. "You very much take after your aunt Jasmine. The two of you have the same nose."

Layla is wide-eyed as she leans back. "I have my mom's nose too," she says.

"It appears even if miles separate us, family bonds can't be broken. It's within us, coming out in every aspect of our lives, in our hearts, our souls, and our very faces. Family is love, and it's beautiful."

Layla turns to Jasmine, who's teary as she watches her father hold this precious little girl. There isn't a trace of

jealousy in Jasmine. Some children would have a very difficult time with this situation, but not Jasmine. Her heart's far too pure.

"Do you think maybe we can play a little?" Layla asks Jasmine.

"I think that would be wonderful, Layla. We'll have to go into the attic and dig out my old toys," Jasmine says.

"Oh, that would be really fun," Layla says. It seems everything about this situation only makes Layla happier and happier. Her joy helps ease the tension with everyone else watching the exchange.

"You know, Layla, you also have Uncle Isaiah who wants to meet you," Jasmine says.

"How old is he?" Rowan asks, seeming far more interested at this change of subject.

"Isaiah's twenty-three now," Lucas says as he looks at his grandson who's so far been much more distant than his sister.

"Oh, he's a lot older than I am," Rowan says, sounding disappointed.

"Ah, that just means he's old enough to show you all of the places he got himself into trouble when he was your age," Jasmine tells him with a wink. Rowan perks right back up again.

"That's true." He pauses then gives Lucas a steady gaze. "Is he happy about us? Some kids at school told us they'd think it was really weird if some strangers came to their house saying they were family."

“I promise you, Rowan, the day I found out about you and your sister was one of the happiest days of my life. I was very sad to find out I never got to meet your mother, but incredibly happy to learn of you. I know it will take you time to trust me, but I hope you’ll give me a chance. I hope you’ll give Grandma Amy, Jasmine, Isaiah, and me all a chance. We want to be your family, not just in name, but in every way. Isaiah is very excited to meet you. He had to finish some college work before coming home, though. He’ll be here tomorrow.”

“We had a good mom and dad, and Aunt Noel’s incredible. We don’t really *need* more family,” Rowan bravely says.

“Row-Row,” Layla complains as she moves away from Lucas and takes her seat next to her brother, reaching out to him. I’m not sure if she’s trying to stop him from talking, or if she’s trying to comfort him.

“It’s okay to feel that way, Rowan. All I ask is that you give us a chance to prove ourselves to you. I don’t want to take away any of the love you feel for the family you’ve grown up with. I just want to be more family. There’s a lot of us, and it’s killing all of them to wait to meet you, but they’ve agreed to let you decide when you’re ready.”

Before Rowan can say anything, I chuckle, and all eyes turn to me. I quickly pick up my glass and try to hold in my mirth.

“What’s funny?” Rowan asks.

I shrug. “Just wait until you meet your great-grandfather, Joseph. He’s not a patient man, so this should show you how excited he is about you coming to the family. For him to wait for anything is a miracle,” I tell the boy.

“Is he scary?” Layla asks.

This makes everyone chuckle. “He can seem scary if you don’t know him, but he’s really just a giant Santa Claus,” Jasmine says.

“Oh, I like Santa,” Layla says.

“Then you’ll love your great grandfather,” Lucas assures her.

“Can we meet him tomorrow?” Layla asks.

Rowan glares at her. “Why don’t you and your aunt and brother discuss it after dinner and let Amy and me know,” Lucas says. That instantly appeases Rowan. Layla wants to speed things up while Rowan wants to slow them down.

“I like that,” Rowan says, his shoulders relaxing. Lucas is amazing with the kids. I never had any doubt he’d be great.

“I think it’s a good time to start dinner,” I say. Even though it’s not my home, nothing eases a situation like good food, and Lucas and Amy have a great cook.

“I think that’s a great idea,” Amy says.

On cue, the first course is brought out.

“Do you have servants?” Rowan asks as he looks at the soup placed before him.

Lucas shakes his head. “No, we have very amazing staff who keep this big house running.”

“That’s cool.” He looks at a woman who tops off his juice. “Do you like working here? Are they nice?”

She beams at the boy. “Yes, I love working here. They’re very good people. I’m in school right now, which the Andersons are paying for. In two more years, I’m going to be a nurse.”

“I like nurses,” Layla says.

“I guess that’s cool,” Rowan says. He then takes a spoonful of his soup and his eyes widen in delight. It appears he likes the food. And taking a bite gives everyone else permission to dive into their own soup. The conversation continues while they eat.

Layla looks over at me. “Are you my uncle too?” she asks. I’m mesmerized by the bubbles she’s making in her soup as she plays with it more than eats it.

“I’m an honorary uncle,” I tell her.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“I’m a childhood friend of the family, so a lot of the Anderson kids call me uncle,” I tell her.

“Did you know my mom and dad?” she asks.

I shake my head. “I didn’t get to know them. I wish I did,” I say.

“They were great. We miss them a lot,” Layla says.

Noel looks devastated. I’m sure they all miss the people none of us knew. I’m not sure what to say, but Noel saves me.

“We do miss them a lot. And we get to tell these nice people all about them so they can feel as if they know them too. That’s one of the ways we always keep them alive in our hearts and the hearts of others.”

“I like that,” Layla says.

“I like that too,” Lucas says.

We continue with the meal and the kids like some of the dishes, and don't like others. I'm sure Lucas is watching everything so he can adjust things for the next night. His goal is to ensure these kids never want to leave. Now that he knows he's a grandfather, he wants to be with his grandkids. He doesn't want yearly visits, he wants real relationships. The meal is over too soon, and the kids look sleepy.

Noel stands. “The kids have had an eventful day. I'm going to take them up to bed now. I look forward to talking more with you tomorrow.”

“Thank you so much for being here, Noel. I look forward to tomorrow,” Lucas says as he stands.

Everyone says goodnight and then Noel and the children disappear.

“I forgot how empty this place feels without children in it,” Amy says. “I think that first dinner went really well.”

“I agree, my darling. Now, we have to make it so wonderful they never want to leave.” Lucas turns and looks at me. “I expect you to help with that.”

I give him a shocked glance. “How can I help?”

Lucas gets a sly smile on his lips. “I see the tension between you and Noel.”

I glare at this man I respect so much. “Don't turn into your father, Lucas, and start matchmaking,” I warn.

“I wouldn’t think of doing such a thing,” Lucas says. The twinkle in his eyes doesn’t assure me.

“I’ll help you, but not because I want something to happen between Noel and me. I’ll help because I love you.”

“That’s all I ask,” Lucas says.

I walk from the table and then the house, more confused than before. Now that Lucas has voiced his wishes, I can’t push it from my thoughts. I shouldn’t even think of something happening between Noel and me, but Lucas is right, there *is* a spark.

What in the heck does that mean, though? Should I try to do something about it? Hell if I know.

Chapter Six

Noel

I tuck Layla beneath the pink satin coverlet and sit while she says her prayers. Bedtime is always special, the part of the day I enjoy the most with the kids. I love the intimate time with my sweet niece, and Rowan seems to let his guard down just the tiniest bit when he gets sleepy, sometimes enough to allow me to kiss him on the forehead.

“Please bless Mommy and Daddy and watch over them. And please take care of my new family, especially my grandpa. Oh, and please keep Aunt Noel safe too. Amen.” Layla’s words make me choke up.

“That was a beautiful prayer, my sweet angel.”

“I love you, Aunt Noel,” Layla mumbles sleepily as she rubs her eyes.

“I love you too.” I read Layla her favorite princess story, “Snow White,” and, after giving my niece a goodnight kiss, I go to my nephew. He’s sitting in his room, listening to music, and, as usual, he refuses to acknowledge me.

“Oh, Rowan, you don’t have to be distant,” I say as I sit next to him. “This is your family. They want to know you.”

“They sure didn’t want to know us for the past ten years,” he says with a pout.

“Honey, they didn’t know you existed until now, and look how quickly they begged to see you when they knew you were alive. Maybe it’s time for you to let go of the past and focus on the future instead.” If only I could simply erase all of the hurt from his life.

“What does it matter to you?” he asks with suspicion. And then fear enters his eyes. “Are you trying to get rid of us? You said you didn’t want to do that, but maybe that’s what this trip is all about. I didn’t want to be home for Christmas, but you changed your life for us and maybe you’re sick of it.” He says with suspicion. I didn’t realize he was still worried about it.

“You know I’d never do that. I love you so much there aren’t words to express it,” I insist. I grab his hand and I’m surprised when he doesn’t brush it away. “I want so much for you to be happy, Rowan. I want you to not be suspicious of everyone’s motives. I don’t miss my old life, don’t miss the stress of New York. I’d give anything to have your mother back but not because I don’t want to be with you, but because I miss her. You and your sister are what makes each day special.”

“Whatever. I’m fine. We’ll all be fine.”

“Rowan, I know I’m not your mom, and I’d never want to replace her. But I do love you and your sister more than anyone else on this planet, and not a day goes by that I don’t miss your parents as much as you do.”

“Well, I think maybe you might want these strangers to take us so you can go away like my mom did.” Oh my gosh, I never thought his mind could go to such a horrific place. I squeeze his hand.

“Rowan, I can’t imagine my life without you. I’ve loved you from the moment I first held you in my arms, and that was when you were only a few minutes old. I love you even more as I watch you turning into a fine young man. I’ll never leave you, not ever. I know you’re having a hard time trusting people right now, and you’ve been through more than any child should have to deal with. But in time you’ll know that you can trust me. As an old saying tells us, time heals all wounds, I promise this is true. We all just need more time.” I lean in and give him a kiss on his forehead.

“I want to go to sleep,” Rowan says with a suspiciously tight voice.

I can tell he’s done listening, so I leave his room with a heavy heart. Am I doing more harm than good with my sister’s children? I honestly don’t know. But I won’t give up on either of them, even if I have to tell Rowan every single day for the rest of my life how much I love him.

We’ll all stop hurting so much — eventually. Today isn’t going to be that day. Maybe tomorrow will. Maybe this family is who they say they are and will bring so much love to the kids, they’ll wonder how their lives were before knowing them. I can hope for that and so much more. I can also give myself a break about being scared that I’ll lose the kids. It won’t happen if I don’t let it happen.

I’m going to take this one day at a time, just as I’ve been doing for the past year. I might have doubts about how I’m doing, but I’m confident in my love for them, and sure that it will all work out.

Chapter Seven

Noel

I don't see the extra shine on the newly polished floors, and before I know it, my feet fly out from beneath me, and the sound of my surprised yelp echoes through the hall as I land hard. Ouch!

Tears spring to my eyes, but with nearly inhuman restraint I manage to push them back. I scoot backward against the wall and decide to stay put for the moment. I hate my klutziness, and I'm not loving this huge home at this moment.

"Are you okay?"

My head whips up.

Of course.

It's the man who's been making me feel uncomfortable from the moment I met him, and he's standing in front of me with an amused look on his chiseled features.

"I'm fine," I say. "Go ahead and carry on." I try but fail to hide the pain laced in my voice.

"Most people learn how to walk by the time they're one," Ryder says with a chuckle. I'm not laughing with him. He reaches out a hand to help me up.

I glare at him. "You insult me ... and then offer to help?"

“A gentleman would never fail to assist a lady when he finds her flat on her ass.”

“Well, since we both know I’m not a typical lady, you’re free to be on your way. I like it right here where I am. It’s a very comfortable floor to sit on.”

He just stands in front of me with that same smug look on his face and his eyes twinkling. I start to get up and he again holds out his hand, but I push it away. I finally manage to struggle to my feet. It seems to take forever, and Ryder, realizing I’m not going to accept his help, just stands there. I wish I could read his thoughts ... then again, maybe not.

Once I’m up, I take a couple of careful steps backward and have a face-off with this man who’s messing with my hormones in a way they’ve never been messed with before.

“Come with me to the den. The family is taking their time coming down so we can have coffee while we wait.” I don’t think this is a good idea. I should go back to my room, but then I might not find my way back down again.

“Have the kids made it down yet?” I ask. “They weren’t in their rooms.”

“I don’t think so,” he tells me. “Let’s see who’s made their way down. I know Jasmine takes hour long showers, and though Lucas and Amy have been married for twenty-five years, they still act like newlyweds and sometimes don’t make it downstairs til lunch on the weekends.” I’m a little embarrassed at these words. I don’t know Lucas and Amy yet, and I certainly don’t want to imagine what they’re doing in their room all morning ... I’m sure it’s not sleeping.

He holds out his arm to guide me, but I pretend not to see his offer of assistance. I do, however, make sure to stay by his side, so I don't get lost again. It's easy to do in this huge house. I'm sure there are bigger ones, but seriously why does anyone need thousands and thousands of square feet to live? It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, but I can't imagine the upkeep.

When Ryder and I enter the den, I stop dead in my tracks because there's a group of strangers sitting and chatting. I don't recognize a single face. For just a moment I feel a trace of insecurity as I stand before them in my sweater and jeans, until I remind myself these people are strangers, and it doesn't matter if they're judging me or not. I'm sure they aren't ... but it doesn't matter one way or the other. After this holiday I'll never see them again ... or will only see them in passing when they visit the children.

"Ryder, where have you been hiding?" A woman looking to be in her mid-twenties — around my age, but clearly from another universe — rises from her chair and rushes over. She gives Ryder a chaste kiss.

"Alexandra, I'm sorry," he says coolly, not appearing pleased she's here. "I wasn't expecting you ... or the others."

"Well, I went to your house, and you weren't there, so I figured you'd be here. How could you forget our plans, darling? We're supposed to be discussing the spring fundraiser."

His gaze flicks upward, but the move is almost imperceptible. "You know I don't get involved with that sort of thing," he tells her.

“I thought things were different now, and you agreed to sponsor the gala this year which means you’re involved.”

The woman’s whine grates on my nerves. But this ultra-wealthy woman is ignoring my presence entirely, so maybe I can simply slip back out of the room unnoticed. No such luck. Ryder turns back to me, and much to my distress, I feel a little leap in my pulse as his sharp blue eyes focus on me.

“Alexandra, this is Noel Dawson, the woman I’m sure everyone’s been talking about — Noel, this is Alexandra Clifford.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Alexandra,” I say, sticking out my hand.

The woman ignores the gesture and turns back to Ryder. “Let’s talk privately for a moment.”

Before I know what’s happening, Ryder and Alexandra disappear. I turn and gaze at the other people all staring directly at me. The kids are nowhere to be found and I have an immediate urge to rush out and find them.

“The kids are in the kitchen making cookies,” Lucas says as he stands. I look in his direction and let out a sigh of relief. I didn’t see him at first. Apparently, he decided to come down early today. At least I’m not going to be left with a room of people I don’t know the names of. Then again, I still want to run.

“I should go help them,” I say with relief.

“They’ll be here soon. Please join us. Maybe we can talk about some things we can’t with the children in the room,” Lucas kindly says. He really is a good man. I’m sad that my

sister never got to meet him. I look at the other faces, and don't know if they are family of the kids, or are friends. I hate feeling so out of sorts.

“Okay, thank you,” I tell him, taking a chair on the edge of the group. There's no way I want to be in the center where it's easier for everyone to stare at me. Just as I sit, Ryder and Alexandra walk back into the room and he takes a seat far too close to me, leaving Alexandra to sit across from us on the other side of the large coffee table between us. She doesn't appear too happy about the seating arrangement.

“My father, Joseph, will be here by dinner along with Isaiah,” Lucas says. “These are some business acquaintances I wasn't expecting today. They had a meeting with Ryder.” He introduces the strangers staring at me, but I don't even bother committing their names to memory as I hopefully won't see them again after today. “There are often people in and out of the house, but I'll make sure and put a hold on all work talk until after the holidays ... after today,” he says with a chuckle. I guess tycoons like him don't get to where they are without being workaholics, so it makes sense he does a lot of work from home.

I chuckle through my nerves. “Yes, that might be a little less overwhelming,” I admit.

Everyone chuckles as snacks are set before us. I don't recognize anything that's on the table. I don't want to try something I can't swallow. This thought nearly makes me burst out in laughter. I don't need to be thinking of anything going into my mouth and swallowing, not when my nerves are shot, and everything is either making me want to laugh or cry.

“Mr. Anderson you have a call,” a woman says from the doorway. He groans as he rises.

“I’ll be right back,” he assures me before he leaves the room, leaving me alone with Ryder and several strangers. I really should’ve stayed in my room longer. I look at the food again, sort of wanting to throw some in my mouth just so I won’t have to talk.

“Is something wrong?” Ryder asks.

“I’ve never had any of this before,” I whisper. “Sometimes I’m a bit ... sensitive to foods.”

He chuckles. “If you don’t like it, you can have anything you want,” he tells me with a shrug as if it’s not a big deal. Maybe they really don’t care, and it’s all in my head.

“Aren’t you from Boston?” Alexandra pipes in. I brave it and take a bite of something that looks like a pastry ... and it’s delicious. I sigh with relief as I smile at the woman across the table from me.

“Close to Boston,” I tell her. “I lived in New York for a while, but then went back home.” I don’t tell this woman why. She might be asking about me, but I can clearly see she’s not interested. If anything, she’d like to tear me down. It hardly matters. She means nothing to me, just as I mean nothing to her. I won’t allow a stranger to make me feel anything about myself.

“This is certainly a long way from home,” she says with the fakest smile I’ve ever seen. “When will you be going back?” Even though the woman manages to ask this with a polite

mask on her face, I have no doubt the question is in no way friendly.

“I’m not sure yet. The children are getting to know their family right now,” I answer after a moment.

“Which we’re grateful for,” Ryder says with a smile. I don’t think he realizes this woman doesn’t have the best of intentions while talking to me. Then again, he’s used to having people like her in his home. I’m just a tagalong.

“And you need to be here for that?” Alexandra asks, confirming my suspicions.

I look at Ryder, but he clearly doesn’t know what to say. Maybe he’s seeing how strong of a woman I am. If I can’t handle one little conversation, how in the heck will I raise the children related to this elite family?

“I’m their legal guardian, so, yes, I need to be here,” I inform the wicked witch of the West Coast.

“Don’t you feel they’d be safe with their grandfather and other relatives? I mean, it’s not as if they wouldn’t have proper supervision, or be lacking in anything. They have everything they could possibly want at their disposal.”

“There’s more to raising and loving children than material things,” I tell her. I realize I’m not suppressing my disapproval. This finally seems to catch the attention of Ryder.

“I disagree. Children raised in better environments rule the world as adults. Consider Ryder, for example,” she says, and she turns to look at him, batting her eyes, her smile much friendlier.

“Do you rule the world, Mr. Berkley?” I ask.

He's silent for a moment and I can't read what he's thinking, but I wait to see what he'll say. Alexandra starts to interrupt, and he simply holds up a hand, stopping the woman in an instant. Wow. I wish I could harness power like that. I'd have far fewer arguments with my nephew — that's for certain.

"I rule my portion of it," he finally says, the slightest of smiles taking over his lips, and a bit of arrogance shining in his eyes.

"I guess being raised in circumstances of wealth and power helped set you up for that. Nice job if you can get it," I tell him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ryder asks with a twinkle in his eyes. He seems quite amused by all of this ... not at all offended.

"If you'd been born into poverty, you wouldn't have been able to participate in the activities or to *network* with the bigwigs who obviously have helped you succeed." It's an insult and they both know it. I'm trying to stay unaffected, but everyone has a petty side. No one else seems to be interrupting our conversation. In their defense if I wasn't the one in the middle of it, I'd be sitting back enjoying the show as well.

"Whether I'd grown up rich or poor, I'd still be where I am in this world, Noel, because I have ambition and drive. Those who succeed are those who want to."

"So, you think the poor choose to be that way?" I ask. He gives me a curious look and seems to actually think about his answer.

“I think those who want to better themselves will stop at nothing to do it.”

“So, if you’re born into poverty and don’t have the opportunity to go to school, to follow your dreams, that’s all because of choice?”

“For some.”

“And others?”

“I believe some fail because they have no way out. Why does this seem to affect you so much?” he asks, seeming to genuinely want to know my answer.

“Because I’m tired of people thinking they’re so much better if they have money, especially if they’re born into it and all of its advantages. I’m a good person and have worked hard, but then my sister died, and my mother got sick, and I had to change my circumstances. Does that make me any less than someone else?”

I can tell what Alexandra thinks from the woman’s cultured snicker. It’s a good thing I don’t care what she thinks of me. Unfortunately, I *do* want to know Ryder’s opinion.

“I’ll have to think on this. Let’s just say that you’re helping to open my eyes a bit to the world around me,” he says.

“That’s all I can ask from anyone. If we all take a moment to listen instead of just speaking, I think we’d learn much more in life,” I say.

“That I fully agree with,” he tells me.

“Have I missed much?” Lucas asks as he walks into the room, breaking this little bubble that holds Ryder, Alexandra,

and me. I appreciate the escape.

“Not at all,” I say. I want to jump up and give him a hug. He’s interrupted me throwing hot water in Alexandra and Ryder’s faces, but they’re both so perfect, it would probably flow around them instead of hitting them.

“I’d really love to hear everything about you and your sister,” Lucas says. “When you are ready, of course.”

“I don’t know where to begin,” I say with a chuckle.

“You can start anywhere,” Lucas suggests.

“You realize she’s going to have to repeat herself when your father gets here,” Ryder says with a laugh.

“Maybe I can tell you a bit about our family, then you can tell us all about your family this evening,” Lucas suggests.

“I’d like that a lot,” I say. I don’t know where to begin when it comes to my family. I know I need to talk about my sister, but it still hurts. Instead of having to focus on that right now, I sit back, enjoy my breakfast, and listen to Lucas talk about his life. We’re joined by Jasmine and Amy before too long, and the conversation flows. They all have some amazing stories about how they met, and how many arms of the Anderson empire there are. It’s quite overwhelming.

“It’s hard to believe my sister could’ve been here instead of with me,” I tell him. “It might be selfish, but in a way I’m glad she never knew. We were close. I’d have hated to lose her.”

“Oh, Noel, we understand that. We’re a close family and it would’ve killed us to not grow up together. I do wish I would’ve known I had another daughter, though, not to take

her from you, but to know this beautiful child I'd have loved as much as I love Jasmine and Isaiah."

"She was wonderful, Lucas. You would've certainly loved her. I'm sorry you didn't get the chance." He smiles at me.

"At least I get to know you and my grandchildren," he says with so much kindness I believe him.

Before anything else is said, one of the staff walks into the room. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but it looks like a package has arrived for you, Ms. Dawson."

I'm relieved to be able to escape even if the conversation is now going well since Alexandra isn't grilling me. I rise as I smile at the man. "Are you sure it's for me? No one I know is aware I'm here."

"Your name is on the box," the man says. "It was left at the front door."

"Um, thank you," I say then turn to the group. "Thanks for a great conversation. I'm going to check out this package and then find the kids. I'll talk with you all soon." I walk away after the family tells me goodbye. I don't look at Ryder this time.

"Would you like me to take this to your room?" the man asks once he shows me the package.

"No, I'm sure I can lift it," I tell him, and wonder what it could be. It isn't exactly heavy, but not light either.

When I get to the privacy of my room, I open it and break out in a smile. Several beautifully wrapped gifts sit inside the cardboard, and it takes everything in my power not to tear into the wrapping without delay.

There's no return label, nothing to indicate where the package came from. The gifts are addressed to the children and me. Where did it come from? Is it from the family? Why wouldn't they just give it to me? Nothing seems to make sense. The holidays can't come soon enough, though. I'm not usually known for my ability to wait for anything, but for my niece and nephew I'll do it for now.

I decide not to go back downstairs for a while. The kids are having fun, and they're safe, so maybe a nap can be squeezed in. I lie down thinking there's no way I'm getting any rest, but I'm out within minutes and immediately begin dreaming of a man I don't even like, and most assuredly don't want to dream about ...

Chapter Eight

Noel

An incredibly loud voice sounds as I come around a corner. I was searching for the den for the past ten minutes, and I made three wrong turns. Seriously, who in the heck needs a home this large? Then again, the men in this family all seem to be oversized so I can see their need for huge homes.

Laughter draws me in the right direction, and soon I see an open doorway where I hear more voices. I move forward, telling myself to have confidence. I've been here for four days, and I've only had one person be rude to me ... Alexandra ... and she doesn't matter. The Andersons are who matter, and they've been wonderful to the children and to me.

Besides, I tell myself, this isn't about how comfortable I am, it's about the kids. They've lost their parents and the only grandparent they've ever known this past year. To be given this family is a true gift for them. What they need and want is what matters. I'm an adult and can adjust, even if it scares me. They only have so much time before their innocence is shattered forever. I want to make that time last for as long as possible.

"Noel, I was beginning to worry," Jasmine says as soon as I enter the room. Jasmine rushes to me and wraps her arms around me.

“Sorry, I got lost again,” I admit. She laughs.

“I’m going to draw you a map, then I’m going to take you on an adventure and show you all of the ways to sneak around in this huge house. You can catch people getting up to no good if you know the secret doors.”

That sounds like a lot of fun. Where boisterous sounds were a moment ago, at my entrance the room seems to have gone quiet. I’ve never enjoyed being the center of attention so I’m afraid to look up and confirm my fears that all eyes are on me.

“Noel, I’m very glad you’re here,” that same loud voice says, drawing closer to me. I look up ... and up ... and up to see a giant of a man with snowy white hair and a matching beard who has to be six and a half feet tall quickly approaching me. What in the heck do the women in this family take to have such huge adult children?

“Hello,” I say, having no doubt this is the infamous Joseph Anderson everyone’s been talking about.

“I’m Joseph,” he says as he steps up to me and pulls me into his arms. I’m not expecting this so I’m unsure what to do as he squeezes the air out of me. I hear Layla giggle as she rushes to my side. Joseph lets me go and my niece takes my hand. She might only be seven, but she’s brilliant and surely knows all of this hugging by strangers is making me more nervous than I normally am.

“Grampa Joseph likes hugs,” Layla says. “He looks like Santa, doesn’t he?” she finishes, her eyes filled with wonder.

“He sounds a little like him too,” I say to Layla. This makes Joseph and the rest of the people in the room laugh.

“Gramps isn’t known for his quiet voice,” Jasmine says.

“I have to make all of you hoodlums listen so I need a mighty voice,” Joseph says. He focuses all of his attention back on me. It’s eerie having a man as clearly powerful as Joseph Anderson fully focused on you.

“Noel, I want to thank you for accepting this family’s invitation to come here. It means the world to us. We sure are heartbroken to hear of the loss of a family member who we love without ever having met. We’re more than pleased though to have you and these glorious grandchildren here. There aren’t words to express how much it means to us that you’ve come. You might not be Lucas’s child, but you’re the sister of his child, and that makes you family. Please, never doubt this. As you get to know us, you’ll realize we say what we mean. You’ll also realize once someone is family, there’s nothing we won’t do for them.”

He pats my shoulder, and I have to fight tears as I process his words. I’ve been told this man is a little overwhelming, and the people who’ve talked about him haven’t been exaggerating, but I can read the truth in his eyes and voice. He means what he’s saying. I’m just not sure what to feel about it. The kids are related to these people. No matter how much they say it though, I’m not. I’m just along for the ride.

“Joseph, quit hogging the child all to yourself,” a demure woman’s voice says. I turn and look at a petite, white-haired, elegantly dressed woman sitting in a velvet covered chair. She might be tiny, but it’s clear to see she’s the true matriarch of this family. The respect and love directed her way is undeniable. Even the huge man before me turns and looks at

the woman with so much devotion and love it takes my breath away.

“I’m sorry, Katherine,” Joseph says in a much softer voice. He turns to me. “Come meet my wife, the most beautiful, kind, brilliant woman on the planet.” Joseph holds out his arm.

I don’t hesitate to put my hand around his elbow and walk with him to Katherine. I take a seat next to her and she reaches out. I give her my hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you ...” She pauses, and I realize she’s forgotten my name.

Joseph quickly covers for his wife. “Noel, this is Katherine,” Joseph tells me.

“I’m so pleased to meet you, Katherine,” I tell the woman. No one uses last names in this family, so I figure it will seem weirder for me to try to call her Mrs. Anderson than to call her by her first name.

“These children are so wonderful,” Katherine says. She beams at me. “Where are you from?”

I’m shocked at this question as I’m sure they’ve all talked a lot about the children and me. Then again, maybe she’s simply trying to make polite conversation.

“The children and I have lived in Boston for most of our lives,” I tell her.

“Oh, Boston is a beautiful area. I have friends there. Dominic Corisi is a great man and has quite the interesting family,” Katherine says with a chuckle.

“Interesting to say the least,” Lucas says with his own chuckle.

“I’ve heard of the Corisies, but I’ve never met them. They’re a little out of my social circle,” I say with a smile. It doesn’t bother me that I’m not on the billionaire classes’ radar.

“Who?” Katherine asks. Now, I’m confused. I open my mouth to speak, but Lucas quickly jumps in.

“Would you like a warm eggnog?” he asks.

I’m getting whiplash as I look up to him. “I’d love one,” I tell him.

“Spiked?” he asks with a knowing grin.

“Yes please.”

Jasmine taps me on the shoulder and crooks her finger. I look at Katherine. “Thank you for visiting with me,” I tell her as I stand.

“Oh, yes, please visit anytime,” she says. Joseph quickly takes my chair and starts talking to his wife as Jasmine pulls me aside. I see the kids have moved to the corner of the room where they’re talking to a young man who seems to be telling a story. Both Rowan and Layla are laughing so it must be a good one. Lucas hands me a cup and then heads over to the kids. I immediately take a sip.

“I’m sorry, Noel, I should’ve said something before you came in here,” Jasmine tells me with a little bit of a sad expression.

“Told me what?” I ask.

“My grandmother is the greatest woman in the world. Our family is so used to the situation we don’t really think about it anymore. It’s automatic for us to jump in and help her,” Jasmine says.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, concerned for this person I didn’t know before this very moment. She’s such a kind person and seems so delicate. It’s natural to want to help her.

“My grandmother has dementia. At first it was really hard on the family, but we’ve gotten used to it. We protect her, but also keep her active with the family. They say that’s really all we can do to slow it down a little bit. It gets worse and worse as time continues on. There are times she doesn’t recognize any of us. When that happens we just keep talking to her, assuring her she’s safe. She’s always loved parties, and truly enjoys speaking with strangers, so it’s not scary for her when she doesn’t know who we are. I think it takes her back to her youth. It’s funny, though, because she’ll remember people she hasn’t seen in years more than she’ll remember us at times. I’m not sure why. That’s probably the reason she mentioned the Corisies. We haven’t seen them in forever, but to my grandmother it probably feels like yesterday.”

“Oh, Jasmine, that’s terrible. I’m sorry you’re going through this,” I tell her.

“We’re honestly okay. It does hurt, and my grandfather has had a few breakdowns, but this family is full of love, and that’s in good times *and* bad. Together, we can get through anything. I hope you’ll see that. I hope you’ll stay.”

I freeze as she says these words. I don’t know how to reply. “We’re just here for a visit,” I tell her.

She gives me an assuring look. “Noel, the choice is always yours. I pray you know that. Just know that my family is hoping you’ll stay ... at least for a long while. They’re so happy you’re here, so happy to have found these lost family members ... and yes, we really do believe that includes you. We don’t want this to be a two or three week visit. We’re hoping it’s longer. Don’t panic and don’t decide right now. Just look around you while you’re here and see how much nicer it can be having a family than being on your own. The kids are phenomenal and that’s because of you, your sister, and their father. They can continue to grow with all of the love our family has to offer.”

I nod, unable to speak with how tight my throat is. I lift my glass and take a slow swallow of the delicious drink. There are so many more people to meet and so many emotions to sort through.

“Come on, that was heavy, so we’ll lighten up the mood. I want you to meet my brother,” Jasmine says.

“Okay,” I tell her.

We walk over to where a crowd has gathered as Isaiah tells the kids about a giant airsoft gun war they all had. Of course Rowan’s more than interested in this and Layla seems fascinated. This really is a whole other world from what I’m used to. I’m not saying it’s a bad world, it’s just different and I don’t know what to think of it all. Hopefully I figure it out sooner rather than later.

For now, I’m not being rushed to make any decisions. I know for sure though, that as long as Rowan and Layla are smiling and happy, I’m happy. It’s what I’ve wanted for them

for a long time ... and it seems the Andersons are giving that to the two children who mean more to me than anything else on this planet.

Chapter Nine

Noel

I stand in the stables and look at the horse with a bit of fear. What was I thinking when I agreed to take a ride? I know nothing about the huge animals. I have no doubt that I'm going to hurt myself ... yet I'm still here.

"I've only been on horseback a few times, and it wasn't snowing when I was. Plus, I think the horses were about twenty years old," I say. "You promise she won't buck me off?" I glance doubtfully at the mare, who's acting all too innocent as she munches on hay.

"It's a perfect day for a short ride, Noel, and you told me you want to get out of the house. The kids are becoming pros at riding after only a few days. The winter landscape is pure and clean," Smoke tells me. I've clung to him a little bit since he's the one who picked me up and he's not a member of the family so he seems safer as if maybe we're both outsiders. He obviously doesn't feel like an outsider as the family loves him. Will they love me too if I stick around? I can't imagine it. I don't bring anything to them like Smoke does. He helps the family.

"That was yesterday," I tell him. "I was caught up in the excitement of watching Layla's delight when she rode."

“I’ll be with you the entire time. You have nothing to worry about,” he assures me. “Besides, Penny’s fifteen years old — that’s not far off from twenty — and she’s incredibly gentle. She’s perfect for an inexperienced rider like you.”

“Okay. I’ll do it.” I decide not to let my fears stop me from living my life. “But I *will* hold you to your promise, Smoke. If she throws me, I’ll remind you every day of the rest of my stay that you were wrong.”

“And if that’s to happen — which it won’t — you’ll be more than justified in doing what you threatened,” he says with a happy and rare smile. Just as I get comfortable in the saddle, I hear a voice that seems to haunt me at every turn.

“Smoke, Joseph needs you. I’m more than happy to attend to Noel,” Ryder says as he enters the barn looking far more comfortable than I am, and incredibly sexy as usual. It seems he’s around every corner I turn, and even when he isn’t around, I’m thinking about him. How can a man I didn’t know existed a month ago be on my mind night and day? It seems to be the case.

“Of course,” Smoke replies. “I’ll return as soon as possible,” he adds before walking away.

“We can reschedule for another time. I’m perfectly fine with that,” I call out. Maybe I can get out of this ordeal without looking like an utter wimp.

“Nonsense,” Ryder says. “I’ll take Noel on the ride.” Smoke waves his hand above him without even turning, then exits without another word. If Ryder says he’s doing something, there’s apparently no questioning it.

That doesn't sit well with me. "I wasn't all that excited about riding. The ground's covered with snow and I'm certainly no expert horsewoman. I don't need to waste your time with this." I begin to swing my leg over my horse to dismount. Ryder's hand shoots out to stop me. The feel of his fingers squeezing my calf sends a sharp pang of electricity through me.

"I insist," he says.

"Really, I'm sure you have better things to do," I tell him.

He smiles. "There's nothing better to do than spend time with a beautiful lady."

His words cause me to halt any further protests as he gets his own horse and saddles him. I should get down, but I'm fascinated watching him, and even worse, wanting to go on a ride with him. I'm finding I want to spend time with him, which is a mistake. We don't live on the same side of the States. This visit will end, and the children and I will go home, and it would be foolish of me to fall for some man who lives far away and is so far out of my league, it wouldn't matter even if we did live next to each other.

"Are you ready?" he asks, his horse moving beside mine.

"I guess," I tell him, trying to hide my fear.

He turns, and much to my shock and delight, my mare begins moving obediently behind Ryder's stallion as we leave the stables. I don't even have to use the reins. Neither of us speak as Ryder leads me on a slow gait through the snow-covered pastures. Slowly, slowly, slowly. We go down a trail,

then up a hill and around a corner with no speaking. Finally, I can't stand the silence a second longer.

"Did you grow up here?" Ryder remains silent for a few more heartbeats, and I'm beginning to think he isn't going to answer.

"Yes, my family goes back many generations. It's a good place to grow up, especially with my friends nearby."

"And you have a lot of land to roam," I say with a laugh. "Pretty impressive when you live so close to Seattle. There aren't that many wide-open spaces around these parts."

"That's what people think, but once you get out of the city there's a lot of unused land and bigger home lots. This is a nice neighborhood, but it's great living on the end of it because of these trails. I don't know why I like living in the suburbs so much more than the city where people never sleep."

"Maybe because you like the freedom," I tell him.

"I don't know. I like structure more than freedom," he says.

"I don't think it has to be either freedom *or* structure. I think we can have it all," I tell him. At times, I've doubted this, but at the end of the day I believe anyone can have whatever they want as long as they keep believing.

We've been at the Andersons' for only a week, but so much still confuses me. There's no doubt Lucas loves his grandchildren, and he deeply wishes he'd have gotten to know my sister, the daughter he lost without ever getting to know, and he hopes to have more time with the kids. I'm still undecided about Ryder. He's an unreadable book. We haven't

spoken a lot, but if I'm being honest, I'll admit the sexual tension between us is sharp enough to cut through cement.

We come around a bend and ride toward another huge house ... no, another mansion, all kitted out with stables and a yard almost as impressive as Lucas's place.

"Where are we?"

"This is my place."

"Oh, I thought you lived with Lucas."

He leads the horses toward the barn, and I can't do anything but sit in my saddle and go where the horse wants to take me.

"I'm twenty-six years old, Noel. Do you honestly believe I'd be living with my friend's father?" It's not something I really thought about. He's at the house all of the time. We ride inside the barn and Ryder jumps down. A man appears and takes the reins of his horse.

"I just ... well, I assumed you lived there because you're there so often, eating with us, and ... I don't know. You're just always there," I finish lamely as he holds out a hand to help me dismount. "I really shouldn't get off. I need to get back to the kiss ... kids, I mean the kids!" I absolutely don't want to go inside his home. I don't trust myself to be alone with him.

The look he sends me definitely tells me he's caught my Freudian slip ... no, nothing Freudian about it. It was a mere slip of the tongue, one I can't account for. I don't want to kiss him. I haven't been thinking of doing just that. No kissing. Nope. Not gonna happen.

"The children are fine, as you well know. I need to make a few phone calls, and *you* need to warm up before we head

back to Lucas's place."

How can I argue with that? "I can just stay in the barn while you make your calls. It's warm and toasty in here, and I can brush the horses down."

"You can brush your mare when we return."

He moves a few inches closer, and unless I want an all-out fight, I have little choice but to go with him. He'll surely have staff in his house so it won't be as if the two of us will be *all* alone where he can have his wicked way with me. I only feel a small measure of comfort at this thought, but I give him my hand, this time more prepared as the tingling zip of electricity shoots through my body at his barest touch.

We quickly walk across the large yard to his house, then we're out of the cold. He ushers us down a hallway, still holding the hand he'd grabbed when helping me from my horse. He only lets go of me when we enter a large room with a burning fireplace, the warmth immediately drawing me in. Still, a shiver travels down my spine when he lets his hands rest on my shoulders. I have to fight not to turn around and propel myself into his arms.

"Consider taking off your coat. We're going to be here for a little while." Ryder's breath brushes across my ear, sending a shiver straight through me.

"I'm still a bit cold," I say, barely able to get the words past the tightening in my throat. He reaches around me and begins slowly unzipping my jacket. My eyes are drawn to the movement as another shudder passes through me. Ryder pulls off my coat, sliding it down my arms and tossing it away. We

stare at each other for several moments before he shakes his head as if coming out of a trance.

“Do you want something to drink?” It takes a moment for his words to process.

I turn and move a few steps from him. My throat’s absolutely parched. I blame it on the crisp air.

“I’d love some coffee,” I tell him, my voice husky. I move over to a mantel where pictures are displayed. There’s a striking couple and a young boy standing in front of the Liberty Bell. None of them look too excited.

“Is this your family?” I ask.

He moves closer. “Yes, my mother and father.”

“Do they live close?”

“They retired last year and spend most of their time in the Bahamas now.”

“Oh, that would be really nice,” I tell him. “I’ve always thought it would be fun to go there.”

“It’s a nice vacation but I’d never want to live somewhere away from everyone I know.”

“That surprises me,” I tell him. He moves to a bar and soon I smell coffee. Returning in a couple of minutes, he hands me a cup. I take a sip and sigh. It’s perfect, telling me he’s paid attention to how I like it, with a little cream, sugar, and a hint of peppermint for the holidays.

“Thank you.”

“Why does me preferring home surprise you?” he asks as he moves over to a comfortable looking couch. I decide not to

sit with him as I move to a chair and take a seat.

“Don’t you have phone calls?” I ask.

“They can wait. I’m enjoying a drink. It’s cold out there and I need to warm up.” I can think of other ways to warm up, but I push that straight from my head.

“It surprises me because you don’t seem to be a warm and fuzzy sort of man,” I tell him. He grins at me.

“Trust me, Noel, I can be plenty warm and fuzzy,” he says, heat flashing in his eyes. We can be talking about anything, and he can make the topic dirty. Everything about this man screams sex.

This sort of thing happens in my favorite romance books, but not in real life. I’ve never met a man who makes my body ache by simply being in the same room. It’s why I love to read so much. I love reading something and getting a hit of endorphins rushing through my body. I love having to squeeze my thighs shut because an ache rushes through me. I’ve only felt that while reading ... until now. This man makes me experience all sorts of feelings I didn’t know were real until him. It makes me want to kiss him that much more, to see if the heat will flow through my entire body.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I’m not going to be able to stay over here,” he tells me. I look in his eyes and see passion swirling. I’ve given myself a million excuses not to do anything with Ryder, but right now I’m not thinking clearly. Will one little kiss be so bad?

“Who’s telling you to stay over there?” I ask, shocked at my boldness. My fingers are trembling, another thing I thought

was only in romance books. I set my nearly empty coffee mug down. Ryder does the same as he comes to his feet. I thought his eyes were on fire before, but they're blazing now. It's as if he's been waiting for permission and now that he has it, he's not letting it slip through his fingers.

He crosses to me and pulls me from my chair, taking my breath away. "I've waited long enough to do this."

That's my only warning before he pulls me against his body and presses his lips against mine. It's only milliseconds before I feel my own lips parting, as he claims my mouth and makes my knees shake with the intensity of the kiss.

Ryder's hands move down my body, travel to my back, and fall on the top of my behind before moving upward again, sending shivers through me. The kiss is all-consuming and leaves me wanting more and more. He breaks away, leaning back only a couple of inches so when my eyes open, I clearly see need burning in his gaze, making me want nothing more than to pull him back to me. This kiss is so much more than I was expecting. It's everything I never had before. It's terrifying.

"Let's go upstairs, Noel. This has been inevitable since the moment I first laid eyes on you."

It takes a few seconds for his words to sink past my lust-filled haze, but when they do, I stiffen, and my hand comes up to push against his chest. He doesn't fight me when I draw away, which I'm grateful for.

"Nothing's inevitable, Ryder. Nothing. I don't jump into bed with a man just because he thinks it's inevitable. I wanted to know what a kiss with you would be like, and now I do." I

stop speaking because I'm not sure I can get more words past my throat. I've never been this turned on in my entire life.

"I didn't plan this; I really do have calls to make, but you consume my thoughts day and night. I see desire in your eyes as well. Why fight it?" he asks. His eyes hold no anger, only puzzlement.

"You kiss me once, which I clearly wanted, but now you assume I'm ready to jump into your bed? My world doesn't move that fast. What sort of world do you live in?"

"The real world, Noel. If you don't want me, that's one thing, but it's clear that you do." He slowly moves away to a cabinet in the corner. Pulling out two glasses, he pours us each a stiff drink of bourbon. I guess coffee time is over.

"I live in the real world, Ryder. You live in a fantasyland where you get everything you want at the snap of your fingers. I'm not going to lie and say I don't desire you, but even if I do desire a man, it doesn't mean I act on it the second I realize that's what's going on. If that was the case I'd have slept with a hundred men by now," I tell him as he approaches.

This stops him in his tracks as he raises his brows. He grins at me, hands me the glass, then downs his in a single swallow. I sip mine.

"You've been this turned on by a hundred different men?" he questions. I realize how silly that statement is.

"Well, I've been turned on a hundred times ... at least," I say with a shrug.

"By real men or romantic movies?" he pushes. I actually laugh.

“Okay, maybe more times by romantic leads in books,” I admit.

He smiles. We’ve gone from friendly, to molten, to joking with each other. It’s not a bad afternoon. Before he can say something else a boom of thunder explodes over us, and the lights go out. A shiver of fear — and more desire — runs through me as I look at Ryder in the gray light coming through the windows.

“It doesn’t look like we’re going anywhere for a little while,” Ryder says, a smile of victory unmistakable on his sexy lips.

“It might be safer to face a storm than an evening alone with you.” I don’t trust myself to stay strong if we’re left alone ... in the dark.

“You’d probably be safer in the storm,” he tells me before setting down his glass and moving back toward me.

I have no idea what to do. I only know if he touches me again, I might melt right into his arms. I do the only thing I can do, I panic, turn ... and run. I don’t make it far before Ryder catches me. He smiles in victory as he pulls me close ... without me trying to get away.

What’s going to happen next? I can take a good guess ... and maybe this is what I want. Maybe I want the choice taken from me. Maybe I want to be the heroine in one of my favorite Victorian romances. Those are definitely hot with men who get what they want ... What is happening to me?

I don’t know ... but I sort of like it.

Ryder's lips take mine once more and I don't think of resisting him. I wrap my arms around his neck and hold on for the ride. I have no willpower — none at all — because as Ryder presses me against the wall and sips from my lips, I'm jelly in his hands. Within seconds, my knees buckle, only the hardness of his body holds me up.

I realize with every fiber of my being that this is moving too fast, I don't really know this man, there's no way I should be giving myself to him, but I can't seem to stop the madness. After he plunders my mouth for a few moments, he shifts, lifts me in his arms, and carries me to the very inviting couch sitting in front of the burning fireplace.

He lays me down and stretches his body across mine, pushing his hips against me, making me moan with the pleasure of having his arousal cushioned right where I want it. He tears his lips from mine, but only so he can trail his tongue down the side of my neck. He sucks my skin and scrapes his teeth over the point where my pulse is pounding out of control.

“Ryder ...” I moan as his fingers make quick work of slipping beneath my sweater and traveling up the taut skin of my stomach.

“You taste incredible, Noel,” he moans before drawing the sweater over my head and letting it slip to the floor.

This would be a great time to come to my senses, but as his mouth finds my lace-covered nipple and sucks, all I can do is arch against him, overcome with more pleasure than I've ever experienced before.

He reaches behind me and undoes the clasp of my bra, leaving my upper half bare to him. He massages my tender

breast with one hand while his mouth continues making magic with my swollen nipple.

When he leaves the sensitive peak and his mouth slides back up my neck, I wiggle against him, feeling an ache unlike anything I've ever felt. Pressing my hips upward, I revel in his hardness seated against me. Thoughts evaporate as his lips capture mine once again, burning me up in a passion so intense colors flash behind my eyelids.

Just as he reaches for my jeans, the lights flash back on, and the phone begins ringing. It takes a second for me to realize what's happening. The distraction is exactly what I need to come to my senses.

"Ryder, stop!" I quietly say, my voice hoarse and thick with passion.

He slowly lifts his head, his eyes hooded, blazing with lust and confusion. "Please don't make me stop, Noel. We both want this."

"Ryder, someone's calling," I gasp.

"It can go to voicemail," he says, his voice desperate.

This isn't the type of woman I am. I don't make out with strangers, and I certainly don't allow them to strip me and ravish me when I barely know them. The only thing I can blame this on is temporary insanity ... and extreme lust.

"It might be important," I tell him.

For a brief moment frustration flashes through his eyes, but then he blanks his expression and sits up. As soon as he's walking to his phone, I shoot up and grab my bra and sweater,

turning my back to him as I throw on the garments. I'm grateful there isn't a mirror anywhere in the room.

I'm sure my hair's a mess, and the little makeup I'm wearing is smeared. A woman doesn't get ravished so thoroughly — okay, not *quite* ravished, but why put a fine point on it — without looking like it.

Running my fingers through my hair to smooth it out, I listen to the clipped tones Ryder uses with the caller on the other end of the line. When he hangs up, I glance in his direction without actually looking in his eyes.

“That was Smoke. Lucas is concerned about your safety riding in this weather and he's sending him over to give you a ride home ... if you want it.” I nod. He sighs. It's very clear he hoped I'd refuse the ride. Part of me wants to ... but I also don't want regrets. I need to get out of here so I can think.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“Yes, she'd like a ride,” Ryder mutters. “Shut up.” I have no idea what Smoke said to him to elicit that response, but Ryder hangs up the phone. “He'll be right over.”

“Okay, thanks,” I say. I can't think of anything else to say to him. I've never been in this weird position before. I've never made out with a person I wasn't in a relationship with. How do people do this all of the time, meet at bars or parties, make out, and then pretend nothing happened, or be okay with it happening? I'll never be that girl. I don't think I *want* to be that girl. I'm not sure because I did enjoy this, but now I feel awkward.

I turn toward the door, afraid to even look in Ryder's direction. I should've realized, though, I won't get away quite this easily.

"Noel." Those two syllables are spoken in a tone of command that actually stops me. Hmm, interesting.

I slowly turn back, afraid of what's coming next. And I have every right to feel this fear. Because the look in Ryder's eyes assures me he isn't finished with me — not even close to being finished. I don't stick around to find out what he has to say ... I turn back around and flee.

It doesn't take long for Smoke to arrive, and when he does, I sprint to his vehicle and don't say a word on the short ride home. I give him a quiet thank-you when we arrive, and then go straight to my bedroom and practically fall into the bathroom.

Even after a hot shower, a cup of soothing tea, and hours of lying in bed wide awake, I still can't sleep. I'm not sure if I'm more upset that I nearly made love to Ryder or that we didn't complete the act.

Either way, I spend the entire night tossing and turning — and being incredibly angry with Ryder for making me suffer this way. I push away any thoughts that tell me I could've been incredibly satisfied had I just stayed there. That would be foolish, I remind myself ... *very* foolish. I'll be leaving soon. I can't forget this one solid fact ... or I might start to like the man ... then my heart will surely be shattered.

Chapter Ten

Noel

“Where were you last night, Auntie?”

I rub the sleep from my eyes with one hand and use the other to try to contain a very wiggly niece. I’m not a morning person on the best of days, and I’m particularly not a morning person when I’ve spent a night tossing and turning.

I somehow managed to resist falling into Ryder’s bed the day before, but I’ll never know exactly how. Such temptation ... Just thinking about it again sends desire swelling through me.

“Auntie? Hello? Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry, Layla. I zoned out. I didn’t sleep very well last night. You see, I got stuck in the storm, and then the thunder kept me awake ...” I trail off at the innocent look on my niece’s face. Why am I trying to explain myself? Layla has no clue what happened the night before ... and we’re going to keep it that way. Just the thought of my niece knowing anything about it horrifies me.

“You promised to make a snowman with me today, remember?”

“Yes, of course I do, baby girl. Why don’t you get snow clothes on? I’ll take a shower. Then we’ll have breakfast and go outside.”

Layla jumps from my bed, more than happy to accommodate me now that she knows she's getting what she wants. I throw myself back on the pillows and take several deep breaths as I close my eyes. I need to control myself if I'm ever going to survive this visit.

Closing my eyes isn't the best idea, though, because the second I do, all I can see is Ryder's face moving toward mine as he prepares to kiss me.

"No. This isn't going to happen. I won't have inappropriate thoughts about Ryder Berkley today. Not once," I say as I climb from bed. I make it to the bathroom and feel more alert just moving around.

I finish my shower, dress in warm clothes for the nasty day, and walk down the quiet hallway in search of Layla. At least I'm starting to know my way around the mansion. Jasmine's been a huge help in navigating this place. I see a group of the household staff at the large windows on the rear side of the home, and my curiosity draws me to the spot. One of the staff turns at the sound of my footsteps and gives me a welcoming smile.

"Come join us, Noel," the woman says.

I walk to the window and look outside. It takes me a moment, but I spot Ryder and Rowan riding horseback in the lower pasture. My heart swells with joy when I see Rowan's face blossoming with a beautiful smile. He looks so at ease down there with Ryder, and has the air of a budding young man instead of the angry child he's been this past year.

All of my worries might've been unnecessary. It's clear I've made the right choice in bringing the children to their

grandfather's home, even if my heart's breaking a bit each day at the thought that I might lose them to this family.

I shake my head at the thought. It isn't about me; it's about the children's happiness and safety. And if being with their lost family is best for them, I'll somehow accept that. I'll do anything to make sure my sister's children have the happiest possible life, filled with love, laughter, and opportunity.

"It's good to see him smiling," I whisper.

"I agree with you. It's also nice to see that same carefree look on Ryder's face. He takes on a lot of responsibility for such a young man," the woman says with a smile. "I haven't seen this much joy on his face in a long time. He certainly likes having you and the children here ... he's spending far more time at the house than normal. He does come a lot, but not daily." The woman winks at me and I blush.

"This is all about the kids, not me," I tell the woman with a laugh I don't feel.

"You bring a lot more to a room than you realize," Smoke says as he joins us.

"You're all so kind to me. I couldn't ask for anything more than that. Thank you," I tell them, then I flee. It seems my best act is vanishing. Whenever I'm uncomfortable I make a run for it. I don't want to analyze what that says about me.

If they'd said anything more to me, though, I might've fallen apart. And with Christmas not far away, and the happiness of my niece and nephew on the line, I don't have time for that sort of weakness. Right now I need to find my niece, and we need to build a snowman. If I focus on the small

stuff, and take each moment as it comes, I might just manage to make it through the confusing parts of all of this.

Doubtful, but I'm determined to give it a good old American try anyway. I make my way downstairs and step outside.

"Auntie," Layla calls and I find her with Jasmine.

"I'm joining in on building a snowman," Jasmine says. "It's been too many years."

"We'd love to have you join us," I tell Jasmine. She's certainly become my favorite Anderson.

"We used to make snowmen, then come inside for warm cookies and hot chocolate. I bet we can find some as soon as we're finished," Jasmine tells us.

"That sounds super yummy," Layla says as we start rolling our first ball of snow.

The three of us manage to get our snowman built without too much trouble since Jasmine is far stronger than the girl looks. She gets the second large snowball on top of the bottom layer in an impressive way. We're all sweating by the time we get the head on.

Jasmine pulls out licorice in red and black and a carrot stick so we can make eyes, a nose, and a mouth. I'm pretty dang proud of our snowman by the time we're finished, and we step back.

"Not bad at all," Lucas says as he steps up to us. "It's been too long since we've had a snowman in the yard."

“I know. Why did we stop?” Jasmine asks as she moves to her father and wraps an arm around him, looking absolutely adorable with her flushed cheeks and red nose.

“I’m not sure,” he says. “I guess we forget how much fun it is as we get older,” Lucas says.

“I’m never going to forget,” Layla says as she looks at her grandfather with pure love that squeezes my heart.

“You’re reminding me how much I love many things,” Lucas says as he kneels down and holds out his arms. Layla runs straight into his embrace and he lifts her up. They both laugh as he spins her in a circle.

“I like having a grandpa,” Layla tells him.

“Well, I love having a perfect granddaughter,” he replies.

“Aunt Noel says no one’s perfect. She says the world would be very boring if everyone was perfect. She says our imperfections are what make us great.”

“Well, your aunt is a very smart woman,” Lucas says before turning and giving me a smile. “I mean that, Noel, you’re an incredible person.”

I blush as I look at him. “Thank you,” I say, not knowing what else to say. He gives his attention back to Layla.

“How do warm cookies and hot chocolate sound?”

Layla beams at him. “Jasmine said we could have that after building the snowman. It sounds great.”

“Then let’s get to the kitchen before they’re all gone. I smelled them baking when I came out here.”

“Let’s go,” Layla agrees.

I follow behind Lucas and Layla with Jasmine at my side.

“My father is typically a very happy man, but bringing these kids here has made him even happier, Noel. Thank you for giving our family such a wonderful gift this Christmas,” Jasmine tells me.

“Thank you for including me,” I reply.

“You’re family. You’re always going to be included,” Jasmine tells me as if this is simply a fact. She places her arm through mine and we walk into the house as if we really are one big happy family. I have to fight tears. I find I’m doing this a lot with this family.

I smile, feeling warm all over. I’m not sure what the future’s going to bring, but right now I’m feeling pretty dang hopeful and optimistic. This might all work out like a great fairy tale. I sure hope it does.

Chapter Eleven

Noel

Okay, I know I'm a big chicken, but I don't care. I'll be a chicken all day long because I'm not ready to face Ryder yet. It's been a few days since our hot make-out session, and I'm still feeling the tingles down to my toes. I don't know what to do ... so avoidance it is.

A bunch of the Andersons are heading out to do some Christmas shopping and Rowan was thrilled to be included. He's lost a lot of his attitude in the last week, and that, more than anything else, has filled me with joy ... almost enough joy to counter my confusion over my feelings toward Ryder.

"What are you doing?" Jasmine whispers in my ear, making me jump at least a foot off the ground.

"Nothing," I say with too much guilt in my tone.

Jasmine laughs. "You're totally hiding from Ryder, aren't you?" she guesses.

"No," I say, way too high-pitched, instantly showing I'm lying.

"I won't press, but let me tell you, I've known Ryder my entire life and I've never seen him look at a woman the way he looks at you. The crush is definitely mutual. I say go for it."

I gape at this beautiful girl. “If you think he’s so great, why don’t *you* have a crush on him?”

Jasmine makes a face. “I grew up with him and he’s seriously like a brother to me.” She shudders. “It would be gross for me to like him, but I love that you do.”

“I don’t like him,” I say, then sigh. “Okay, I *might* like him, but I’m really trying not to.”

“Why?” Jasmine asks.

“Because I don’t live here and ... well, he’s ... um ... well, we’re from two different worlds.” I trail off when Jasmine looks at me with confusion.

“You’re going to have to explain because I’m confused,” Jasmine says.

I sigh. “Look around you, Jasmine. You’re so used to this, it seems normal to you, but this isn’t how most of the world survives. The rest of us live paycheck to paycheck and we have to decide which bills aren’t going to get paid in order to buy the kids Christmas presents in December. We don’t have endless funds, we don’t go to the best of the best colleges. Ryder’s from the elite class, and I’m from ...” I don’t know how to end this so I stop, especially with Jasmine glaring at me.

“Do we treat you like crap here?” Jasmine demands. I’m rightly shamed.

“No, everyone’s been great to me and to the kids, but that doesn’t change that we’re from different worlds.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m trying not to be a jerk here, but I want to be. I can’t stand when people say things like this to

me. Yes, I grew up wealthy, and yes, I've had guilt over it as I see how some people live, but what I discovered in the past few years as I went through FBI training and moved to Miami, is that we're all accountable to who we are and who we want to be. I work with some great people. They weren't born with silver spoons in their mouths, but they've worked really hard and have made something of themselves. They don't sit around and cry about what they don't have, they strive to be better. You can keep on thinking you aren't worthy, or you can see who you are and how much worth you *do* have. It's your choice."

I don't blow off Jasmine's words. I let them sink in and think about them. Am I the one being a jerk here just because these people have more possessions than I do? Am I really a jealous little girl? I don't want to be that kind of person. I'm proud of who I am and how far I've come in life. I've worked for all of it.

"Thank you, Jasmine, you've honestly given me something to think about," I tell her.

"Okay, good. Now, back to Ryder ..."

I hold up my hand. "I said I have a lot to think about, but that doesn't mean I'm going to chase after him. It's not only his money that bothers me, it's so many things. I don't know what I'm doing for the next eleven years until Layla turns eighteen. A relationship is the last thing on my mind."

Jasmine gives me a long look. Then she sighs. "Okay, I'll let it go for right now, but not forever. For now, we're going shopping."

“Shopping?” I ask, confused. This girl can change topics so fast it’s impossible for me to keep up with her.

“Yep, shopping. Have you done any yet?” she asks.

I shake my head. “I can’t.” I don’t want to tell her I have no money. That’s far too mortifying.

She tilts her head, then smiles again. “If you dare tell me it’s a money thing, I’m going to kick your ass,” she says.

I stand here with my lips pressed together, not knowing what to say. I can’t help it if it’s a money thing. People either have it or they don’t. No matter how sweet and hard-working Jasmine is, she can’t comprehend having only a few dollars to her name. She’s never experienced that.

“You do know you’re now an Anderson, right?” Jasmine says as if this is a done deal.

I smile, not in the least offended. “Jasmine, I love your family. Truly, I do. You have all been kind to me, but the *children* are Andersons, not me. My sister was, not me.” I don’t say these words unkindly.

“Well, the Andersons give each other a helping hand. All of us start out with a trust fund. It’s just reality, but we all work our asses off to prove ourselves as well. We don’t let the trust fund define us.”

“I believe you, Jasmine.”

“Good, then you won’t mind taking your sister’s trust fund, which I have no doubt she’d want you to have,” Jasmine says. “Now that that’s taken care of, let’s go.”

“What are you talking about, Jazz? You didn’t know about my sister until a couple of weeks ago,” I point out.

“The second it was confirmed that my father had another daughter who’d sadly died, and it was her sister who had her children, three trust funds were set up. It’s already done. I wanted to tell you right away, but Dad said we should wait so we wouldn’t scare you away or have you think we’re bribing you. You might not have as much money as Ryder, but you have a pretty penny, that’s for sure. You can buy as many shoes and purses and . . . houses as you want. You can go back to college, work at a convenience store, or sit on the beach in Cabo. You can do what you want, the choice is yours, but you won’t be able to use money as an excuse anymore.”

I just stare at her, trying to figure this out. “This isn’t right. Your family doesn’t owe me anything,” I tell her.

“No, they don’t. It’s not a trust fund out of obligation, it’s a gift out of love. You’re raising the youngest Andersons in the family now. There’s no way we can turn our backs on you or them, and there’s no way we aren’t going to do this.”

“I don’t know how to process this,” I tell her.

“The great thing is you don’t have to process it right now. What we’re going to do is head to town and do some shopping. I’ll get your debit card and we’ll be off,” Jasmine says as she takes my hand and pulls me toward her room.

“How can you have a debit card in my name?” I ask.

This makes her laugh. “Oh, you haven’t met Brackish yet. I forget you haven’t been here forever. I can’t wait for you to meet him. He’s great. There’s nothing he can’t do.”

My head's spinning as we enter Jasmine's room and she pulls out an envelope from her desk and hands it to me. She doesn't even give me a chance to look at it before she's dragging me out of her room and the house, where a driver is waiting. She practically shoves me into the back of the car, and we're off.

Jasmine chats away as we start driving. I'm grateful for her chatter because it doesn't require me to talk too much. I give a few comments here and there, which seems to satisfy her. We drive for about an hour before we enter Leavenworth. Now I'm more shocked as the vehicle stops and we step outside.

“Are we at the North Pole?”

Jasmine laughs again, something she does quite often. “This is the ultimate Christmas experience,” she tells me.

And we're off. Jasmine takes me in and out of shops, and I buy things with this new debit card of mine. I don't really feel comfortable doing it, but she's pushy, and if I'm honest, it's sort of nice to buy things for the kids I never could've imagined buying before. The joy they'll feel is outweighing my guilt.

Music plays in the streets, and the lights fill me with more joy than I've felt before at Christmas. Even though nothing in my life is worked out, I can't find an ounce of worry in me. I'm *that* enchanted by all of this.

We're coming out of a shop when I run smack dab into a person and start to fall backward. He reaches out and grabs me, stopping me from falling on my butt. I smile up at him, and he looks down at me as if he's tongue-tied.

“I’m sorry,” I say as he steadies me and then lets go. I turn to leave, and Jasmine stops me.

“That’s all. This man saves you and you’re just going to turn and run away?” she asks.

I look at her, then the man, then back to her. “What?” I’m confused.

“Hi, I’m Jasmine and this is Noel,” she says to the man.

“I’m Jeff,” he says, holding out his hand. Jasmine takes it, then he turns to me, his smile growing. I reluctantly take his hand.

“Thank you, Jeff. I do appreciate you not letting me fall after I nearly mowed you down,” I say.

He laughs. “I’ll get mowed down every single day if it’s by someone as beautiful as you,” he tells me.

I feel ... nothing as he flirts with me. It’s too bad because he’s quite good-looking. All I want to do is turn and leave though. It seems Jasmine has other ideas. She starts talking to Jeff. I tune in and out of the conversation. Finally, we’re able to leave.

When I’m sure the man’s out of hearing, I look at her with confusion. “What in the heck was that?”

She grins even bigger than normal. “Let’s just say there’s nothing wrong with a little jealousy to speed things along,” she tells me.

I have no idea what in the world she’s talking about, but I forget all about it as soon as Jeff’s out of sight. We finish our day with more shopping, more food, and a few drinks. By the

time we get back to Lucas's home I feel better than I have since Ryder showed up at my door and turned my world upside down.

Maybe things can get back to a semblance of normalcy. If today is any indication it will be a constant roller coaster ride, but at least the adventure will never be boring.

Chapter Twelve

Noel

“It’s been four days, and while I applaud your creative ways of avoiding me, don’t you think it’s time we discuss what happened?”

I jump at the sound of Ryder whispering in my ear. It seems people are able to sneak up on me quite a bit in this large house. I need to work on this. I saw him come into the house an hour earlier, and I managed to escape his notice — or so I thought. Apparently, I’m not as stealthy as I hoped I was.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I tell him in an overly bright voice. “I’m just trying to go about my day.”

“We both know that’s a lie. We nearly made love the other night. You’re obviously over-obsessing about it, though I don’t understand why.” He literally backs me into a corner.

“I’m not *over-obsessing*, as you so delicately put it,” I snap. “I’m uninterested in this topic. I have things to do.”

“What plans do you have?”

I didn’t expect him to call me on my statement. There isn’t a heck of a lot to do in a place where I’m simply a guest.

“I don’t need to describe my day to you, Ryder.”

“Maybe I’m interested in it, Noel ... interested in you.”

“Have you ever thought I simply don’t enjoy your company?”

He doesn’t even blink at my rude remark. This man is impossible to put off. That’s a first. Most men in my experience go running for the hills when they know a woman has no desire to go to bed with them.

Of course it’s only words. My body speaks an entirely different language. But if you add that neither of us trust the other’s motives, the two of us make a truly volatile combination.

“I think you’re not used to having a man be so assertive, so ... confident,” he says with a grin. “But you *should* get used to it. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“Oh, please,” I say as I roll my eyes. “Is that line supposed to impress me? Should I tremble inside because you find me suitable?”

He looks confused for a moment as if no woman has ever challenged him when he’s paying a compliment, but his arrogant smile pops back into place almost as soon as it dropped away.

I decide to keep walking, and he quickly moves up beside me.

“I’ll tell you everything about you I deem irresistible,” he says with the confidence I don’t want to find so attractive yet can’t help but like.

“Well, it shouldn’t be too long a list, since you don’t know me,” I tell him.

Unbelievably, though, I find my arm in his as the two of us continue moving down the hallway toward a back door. We only pause long enough to collect heavy jackets, and then we're moving along the snow-covered path around the mansion.

"I did my research on you before I showed up on your doorstep," he says.

"I'm not surprised by that. I'm sure you wanted to find out if Lucas's lost grandchildren were being taken care of properly. Plus, you would've had to do some kind of research to figure out where we lived." What worries me is they might've found me lacking in parental abilities. I need to address this issue with Lucas, but I'm afraid to do it, afraid of what he might have to say. "And of course," I add, "you were driven by the shock of learning Lucas had a daughter who died before he could ever meet her."

"Yes, it was quite a shock. The Andersons love their family. To know one was out there that they had no relationship with isn't easy on them. There were other lost members, but they were all found and have great relationships with the rest of the family."

"There are other lost family members?" I gasp.

He chuckles. "Yes, Joseph is a triplet. However, he spent his entire life thinking he was a twin. It was just him and George ... until they saw an article in a paper with a man who looked identical to them ... Richard. To make a long, complicated story short, at the time Joseph's parents delivered him, fathers weren't too often in the room. When a surprise triplet came out, the doctor figured they had enough with the

two babies, and they took the third without Joseph's parents ever having known he was born."

"How could a mother not realize she's delivering a baby?" I ask with skepticism.

"Easy. She had complications and was put under while they did a C-Section. When she woke up, she had two beautiful babies and never knew of the missing third child the doctor hadn't even known about until he opened her up."

"Wow, that sounds like a book," I say.

"It sounds like a *great* book," he agrees. "It's certainly an unexpected treasure.

"It's odd to think about." I pause for a moment. "I can't imagine not having known my sister. We talked nearly every day, at least on the phone, and if we didn't see each other at least twice a week, it was only because some sort of disaster had occurred to keep us apart. She was more than a sibling — she was almost a second mother, and later, my best friend. There are days I can't breathe I miss her so much. Raising her children in her home is rough because of all of the memories the place holds, but I don't want the kids to go through any further changes. But each day I'm there, I feel as if she should walk through the front door with a huge smile on her face and some bag in her hand filled with groceries or something for the kids. She and her husband were incredible parents."

My eyes fill with tears as I think about my lost sister. Even after a year, the ache hasn't gone away, and I don't expect it ever will. Sometimes it's less of a burden, but it's always front and center in my heart.

“I’m sorry you have to go through that. I’m an only child so my friendships are what matters most to me. If I lost my friends, I don’t know if I’d survive.”

I appreciate that he seems to mean these words. This man is difficult to read. One minute he seems so cocky, certainly a man holding the world in his hands, and the next he seems normal and kind. It scares me how easy it would be for me to fall for him.

“At least I get to know that my sister and her husband were happy, *truly* happy. They lived a great life even though it was far too short.”

“I’m glad Lucas’s daughter was happy but saddened that we didn’t get to know her.”

“I’m willing to talk about her all you want,” I tell him. “I want her memory to live on forever. I want to make sure her life mattered and that she doesn’t just disappear.”

“Good.” He gives me a smile. “I think people who are remembered in history are the ones who make personal impacts on those around them. It doesn’t matter how great they were themselves, it’s what they did for others. We all know those people such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Thomas Edison, and other famous and rightfully celebrated figures, but there are others who might not get so much attention like Irena Sendler, who freed Jews in Poland. She was only twenty-nine and offered food and shelter at great personal cost. She’ll be loved for generations to come, not because she was seeking glory, but because she loved others more than she loved herself. There are many families alive to this day because of those she saved. Your sister can be

remembered for all the good she did, and that's something not everyone can say about themselves.

"Will you be remembered for your acts?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I don't think anyone can say that about me, but I still have time to change my image. I might just do that."

I'm shocked at his words. Is he feeding me lines or is this something he truly wants to do.

"Now, back to us. I think I mentioned I had you investigated," he says. Is that a hint of shame in his tone? It isn't possible.

"And did I come out poorly?" Should I even ask?

"You've had a rough year. Losing your sister and mother within a year of each other couldn't have been easy."

"Yes, it was hard, but I didn't get to wallow because I had the kids to take care of. I miss my mom and my sister all of the time, but I can't focus on it or I won't function. I'm hoping I can give Rowan and Layla all of the love they need and deserve, but a lot of the time I feel like I'm failing badly. My sister was perfect ... I'm not."

"I think you've done the best job you could do under the circumstances," he tells me.

"I lived with my sister and her husband for a year when I started college. It's probably another reason we were so close. Her husband was very good to my sister, and me too, and of course, to their children. We were a truly happy family."

“Your strength of character is one of the things I find most attractive about you, Noel.”

“You barely know me,” I remind him. “You can’t determine from a piece of paper whether I have a backbone.”

“I can determine it by what you’ve accomplished.” I turn to look at his profile as I shake my head.

“Yes, I’ve accomplished so much,” I say with sarcasm. “I finished my degree in mathematics and was on the bottom rung of a great company. I had a small apartment in the city until my sister’s house was willed to me, and I can fit all of my possessions into one room. On top of that, I don’t know how to heal the children’s pain. There are days when failure is the *only* thing I know with surety.” I shouldn’t be spilling my guts to this man of all men. My insecurities are the last thing I want to hand over to this family.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Why am I telling him all of this? Do I want to give the Andersons more reasons to take the children from me? Of course not. But sometimes it’s so damn difficult to hold it all in, to stand strong. Ryder stops and turns me toward him. He rubs his hands up and down the outside of my jacket as he looks into my eyes.

“We’re allowed to pity ourselves once in a while,” he tells me. “As long as you don’t let it consume you. Focus on your strengths, and you’ll find that you’ve done a lot more than you realize.”

“I don’t understand you, Ryder. I really don’t. Why does any of this matter to you?”

“I like you,” he says as if it’s the simplest thing in the world. “And I want to know that you’ll be okay.”

“I can’t get into a relationship with you. It’s too complicated, and I won’t be around long enough to make something happen. It’s foolish to even contemplate it.”

“Then we should definitely make the most of the time we have together. You’ve done a great job with the kids, the best job possible under the circumstances. Maybe it’s time for you to focus a little more on yourself now.”

“What do you mean I’ve done *the best job possible*?”

“We’ve had a pleasant evening,” he tells me. “I don’t want to ruin it.”

I narrow my eyes and pull back from him. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I don’t want to know what you mean.”

I tug myself away from his grasp and whirl around, back in the direction we’d come from. I’m surprised he doesn’t follow me when I walk away, but I’m also relieved. I can see myself being worn down by his determination. That’s the last thing I need in my life right now.

My fears continue to grow the longer I remain in this unusual world. Ryder’s telling me I’ve done the best I could do, but I also know what he isn’t *quite* saying — that the Andersons can do better.

Is this seduction nothing more than a way to distract me? If it is, it’s working, because I’m more focused on this man than the bigger picture — the picture of where my niece and nephew will spend the rest of their childhood.

The biggest problem of all, however, is that I know he's right. I know there are so many more opportunities for the kids on this side of the country. Maybe the easiest solution of all will be for me to move close to the family. We could all share the children and Ryder can quit pretending he wants me. I have a lot to think about. That's the only thing I know for sure right now.

Chapter Thirteen

Noel

“The fundraiser is coming up fast,” Lucas says during lunch. “It’s going to be formal, and there will be music and entertainment.”

“What’s a fundraiser?” Layla asks.

“It’s something that raises money for those who aren’t as fortunate as you, darling,” I tell my niece. “Or for good causes.”

“Yes, and sometimes for politicians, but that’s another matter entirely,” Lucas jokes. “And if you go to the right fundraisers, they’re a lot of fun. You get to dance and dress up in a very pretty gown.”

“Ooh, that sounds like fun! Are you going to dress up too, Auntie?”

I’m at a loss for words. I have nothing to wear to a fancy event, and even if I did, I don’t know what to do at such a thing. The biggest fundraiser I’ve been to is a school carnival where I accepted tickets at a game for children.

The school raised about \$20,000 that night, and it had seemed like a lot of money at the time. But I somehow doubt that the event Lucas is speaking of will net less than seven figures. And I’ll most likely trip on my own two feet as I enter the room. Nope. Don’t want to go.

“Of course your aunt will go.” Ryder says, which makes Layla smile broadly. I’m not smiling.

“Dancing and fancy clothes doesn’t sound all that fun,” Rowan says, though I can see he’s intrigued. Appearing too interested in anything isn’t what *cool* boys do.

“You’ll have a wonderful time, Rowan, if you allow yourself to,” Lucas tells him. Rowan looks at him skeptically, but his grandfather goes on. “Just give it a try. If you hate it, you can *sneak* away early.” That seems to do the trick. Rowan’s frown disappears.

“You both should get back to your school lessons for the day, though. With the fundraiser coming up, we’ve added dance to your lessons,” Ryder tells them. Rowan groans, and Layla squeals in delight.

“I don’t need any extra lessons. We do more schoolwork here than we do at our *actual* school,” Rowan says with a pitiful sigh.

“That’s an exaggeration,” Ryder tells him with a semblance of a smile. “Besides, don’t you think it’s wise to introduce yourself to new pursuits?”

“Pursuits? What do you mean by that?” Rowan asks, suspicion clear in his tone.

“Do I get to do them too?” Layla asks, not caring what the word *pursuit* means — just making sure she’s doing anything her brother’s doing.

“Of course you do, Layla. And, Rowan, you’ll enjoy the new activities,” Ryder says. And then his lips twitch.

“The look on your face doesn’t exactly give me confidence, Uncle Ryder.” Rowan turns toward me with a look of panic.

I want to rescue him, but I have to be practical. I can’t interfere in the small stuff because I’ll seem petty. Besides, I happen to agree that dance is a good thing to learn. Rowan will appreciate it later in life, when all of the girls want to dance with him. Granted, he won’t want that for a few years, maybe four or five, but it will happen all too soon.

“Rowan, you’ll go to your piano lesson before dance, so you get some time to brood about it,” Lucas says with obvious amusement. “Layla, you’re up for dance right after lunch.”

“We still get to do sword fighting, right?” Rowan asks.

“Yes, you’ll still study *fencing*,” Ryder replies.

“I’m finished eating now,” Layla says, excited to start the new lessons. The young girl is always up for trying new things. She’s so like her mother, which makes me miss my sister even more.

“But we’re only here another week or two, Ryder,” I remind him. “Should you really start new lessons of that sort when they’ll not get to follow through on them?” The room goes quiet as all heads turn my way.

“Things change, Noel. Maybe you’ll decide to extend your vacation,” he tells me.

“We can’t do that. We told the school they’d be back after Christmas break. They’ve already missed two weeks of classes for this trip.”

“And they’re getting their lessons while here. Plus,” he adds, “there are excellent schools here.” He sends me a look I

can't quite interpret, but most certainly frightens me. I might have no choice but to move here ... it could be that or lose them altogether. Instead of facing that problem right now, I decide to agree with Lucas and Ryder.

"I don't see a problem with having the children do more lessons. They might discover a new hobby they can pursue when we get back home." But I shoot a warning look Ryder's way when I say this.

"Good. Now that that's settled, we have a very busy day ahead of us. Let's get started." Ryder rises from the table and walks from the room.

"Let me show you to the dance room," Amy says, and I give her a grateful smile. It'll be nice watching my beautiful niece swirl around the dance floor.

I haven't seen a dance room in a house before, and when we walk in, I can't help but feel delight flow through me. The room is large enough to hold at least a few hundred people, and the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling are so sparkly I wonder if diamonds are mixed in with the crystals.

It's a room I'd love to dance around in, but instead I sit in a chair off to one corner. I'm trying my best to be a quiet observer, but as Layla continues her lesson, I have to struggle not to clap with pride at how quickly my talented niece picks up on what the dancing master is teaching her. I want to learn the dance myself, so I finally rise and begin imitating the steps I see. Though I lack a partner, I'm not doing too badly.

"May I cut in?" Ryder asks. I blush bright red at getting caught dancing on my own. He's not supposed to be here.

“I don’t want to take you away from whatever you’re doing,” I tell him. Touching him again will most certainly prove harmful to my health.

“There’s nothing I’d rather do right now than dance with you.”

I find myself accepting the hand he’s holding out. “I guess I could use some help.”

“I consider dancing an important art. It teaches many valuable lessons for journeys we’ll all take throughout our lives.”

“I’m going to warn you that I’ve never danced formally before, and I can’t be responsible for your toes.”

“I appreciate the warning, Noel, but I have a feeling you’ll do just fine. Now put this hand on my shoulder and use your other to take my hand like this.” The usual tremors rack my body. I try to ignore them — unsuccessfully.

“I’m really not a musical person.”

“Upbringing plays a big part in that. I took lessons in playing several instruments. My favorite was probably the violin.”

“You play the violin?” I ask, and my resistance to him fades a bit more as he sweeps me across the floor, his eyes focused on me, his body making light contact with mine.

“I’m hardly an expert, but ... yes,” he says with a slight growl as he pulls me tightly against him for just a moment before pushing back and turning me in a slow spin. “Now focus a little more so my toes will survive.”

“I have a feeling you’re not telling the full truth. I can’t imagine you taking up any new task without mastering it,” I say. He only smiles at me.

We circle the dance floor for the next half hour, and I’m surprised I’m making fewer and fewer mistakes as I learn first a simple dance, and then a more complicated one, and without any harm to his feet.

“You’re a *very* good teacher,” I tell him. He pulls me a bit closer, and those butterflies in my stomach fly off in a flurry.

“I can’t teach someone who’s unwilling to learn,” he says, and it takes a moment to remember what we were talking about. But the music stops playing, and it’s time for Layla to have her piano lesson. My moment with Ryder is broken, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I give him a look that has him gazing back at me suspiciously. “What are you up to, Ms. Dawson?” he warily asks.

“How about I teach you a few of *my* dance moves?”

“I suspect that’s not something I want to learn.”

“Oh, my goodness, let down your hair for a few minutes and allow yourself to have some fun.” I walk over to the music player and switch the music to one of my nephew’s favorite hip-hop songs. I turn back to Ryder and chuckle at the horrified look on his face.

“You can do this. It’s very easy. You just move your hips to the beat,” I tell him, and I start swaying my body in a way that has a new light shining in his eyes. He looks at me for a moment longer before joining me in what wouldn’t count as

the greatest attempt at hip-hop dancing known to man ... or woman.

A few songs later, though, and we're both laughing and sweaty, and I'm having more fun than I've experienced in a very long time. He grabs my hands and swings me under his arm, and we do a blend of waltz and hip-hop, neither of us aware of the rest of the world.

When he trips and falls to the floor, I can't keep my laughter from spilling out. Snooty Ryder is filled with surprises, and I'm beginning to succumb to his spell. As the song ends, a throat clearing alerts us we're no longer alone. We both turn to find Alexandra, the starchy aristocrat ... oops, aristocrat ... I met several days ago, standing next to the door with a look of horror on her face.

"What are you two doing?"

"That's none of your concern," Ryder says. He stands, and ice fills his eyes as he begins straightening his clothing.

"Considering that you've kept me waiting, I believe it *is* my concern," she snaps, sending a fiery look my way.

"Waiting? For what?"

"We have a meeting," she reminds him.

"I've scheduled nothing with you," he tells her.

"Maybe if you weren't playing instead of working, you'd remember what's important," she says. I don't know what to say or think. But I don't have to respond. Fury ignites in Ryder's eyes, making me wish I was anywhere but where I'm at right now.

“It’s time to leave, Alexandra,” Ryder tells her.

With an outraged glance my way, Alexandra turns and sweeps from the room, grace in every step she takes. Sophisticated women like her never stomp.

“I apologize for her,” Ryder says. “I allowed the time to get away from me.” He leaves the gigantic room and follows Alexandra.

For just a small moment in time I forgot I have decisions to make, forgot I shouldn’t flirt with this man, and shouldn’t enjoy his company. I should only be focused on the kids right now, and nothing else. I can’t be selfish.

I won’t allow such a memory lapse again. I can’t if I want to do right by my sister and take care of her children and love them as much as she would’ve. I’ll make mistakes sometimes, but I’ll always figure it out in the end.

Chapter Fourteen

Ryder

Noel's engrossed in a book when I find her in the library in the afternoon.

"I need to get out of here for a while," I say. When she looks up, her cheeks are flushed, and she seems to be squirming in embarrassment. Interesting.

"What did you say?"

"I'm feeling cooped up. I want to get out of the house," I tell her. She seems lost.

"I thought you had plans with Alexandra."

"Nope. Let's go for a walk."

She slams her book shut and tucks it beside her in the chair. I decide I'd really like to know what has her so hot and bothered ... or at least bothered.

"I guess I could stretch my muscles. It seems I've lost track of time," she says. "But let me run upstairs first. I'm not dressed for the chilly weather." She almost scampers from the room.

I walk over and pick up her forgotten book. I open to the page she has marked and begin reading. I feel my body tighten at the words on the page and I suddenly understand her flushed cheeks.

I close the book and put it back down. It won't do me any good to read about throbbing arousals and swollen buds in some cheesy paperback right before spending time alone with this compelling woman. I already want Noel far too much, even though I know the situation is impossible.

I can't be with a woman like her, not for long, at least. She's too naïve, too innocent, not to mention, the aunt of the children who should be living here in Seattle. With the Andersons, the kids will have unlimited opportunities for advancement. For me to even consider a fling with Noel is a fool's mission. And yet I want her with a passion that borders on obsession.

I flick the book away and, after striding purposefully over to the drink cabinet, pour myself a shot of scotch ... that's better. The liquid makes a fiery path down my throat and helps ease the tension in my stomach. At least it softens the longing until Noel comes back into the room.

"Sorry I took so long," she says as she comes to stand beside me. "I had a hard time finding my boots."

"You took hardly any time at all," I tell her. If she'd taken longer, I might've gotten my libido under control.

"So, what's this about, Ryder? Is it the children?" she asks as we step through the doors into the cold late afternoon air. A few snow flurries fall around us, but not enough to force us back inside. I don't answer. I want to say the right words. Why does this seem so hard?

Noel stiffens as she walks beside me. Perhaps she knows what's to come. But instead of pressing me, she backs away and changes the subject. "It's beautiful today. Every time I

look out the windows or step through the front doors, I'm reminded of a winter wonderland. We get snow in the Boston area, but it's different here."

"I hate to admit it, but for a long time I've rarely noticed the beauty around me. You and the children are somehow altering the way I see things, though, giving me a new and fresh perspective."

She smiles at me, light shining in her eyes, and I can't help but touch her. I place her arm through mine and take her on a path that leads us to a cave, one I always enjoyed playing in as a child. We walk in silence while I think about my life, think about what's to come. There's so much I need to tell this woman, and yet I'm reluctant to do anything right now except hold her arm and attempt to see things through her eyes. When Noel gasps a few minutes later as a herd of deer pass by, my cold heart leaps a bit.

"Surely you see deer in Boston," I say with a laugh.

"Not often, and these bucks are huge and so close."

"There's no hunting allowed in this area," I tell her. "The animals aren't afraid of humans. And they definitely reproduce fast."

"I'm not against hunting, at least when it's done for food or for other good reasons, but I can't be the one to pull the trigger," Noel says. "Deer are too majestic — and then, of course, there's Bambi ... and his poor mother."

"We should've brought some hay in our pockets, Noel. They most likely would've wandered over and taken it from you." As soon as the sentence is out, I'm questioning who in

the heck I am. I don't make statements like this, don't stroll down paths and feed hay to wild animals.

"That would've been amazing."

"Next time we'll remember." I give up. I'm simply a different man when it comes to being with this woman.

"I don't know if there will be a next time. I'm leaving soon," she says with a sad sigh. These words don't make me happy, but why should I care? I shouldn't. That's the short answer.

"I'm taking you to a place that has special meaning to me," I say as we reach the end of the trail.

"This is spectacular," she says as she gazes at the giant cavern.

"Beware," I tell her.

"Why?"

"My great-great-grandfather blocked this off at one time. The cave is rumored to have magical powers and was always a favorite place for all of us to hide or play in."

"Magical powers?"

"I'm just telling you the story. I don't in any way believe in such things," I make sure to inform her. "I'm definitely not a romantic."

And yet I'm finding it difficult not to believe in magic when I'm with her. A break in the clouds lets the sun shine directly upon her, causing her hair to glow and her eyes to light up even more. Is she the Good Witch of the West? Maybe.

“I’m relieved to hear you say that. The order of the world might change if super-businessman Ryder Berkley believes in something as silly as magic.”

Though she’s joking, her words sting just a bit. No, I don’t believe in things that aren’t here. But the way she’s saying this, it makes it sound like a put-down.

“Here’s the family tragedy. My great-great-grandfather’s oldest son came out here the night before his eighteenth birthday. He was to be made a partner in the company the next day. But he was never seen again.”

“How do you know he didn’t run away?”

“About half a mile inside the cave, blood was found, along with his jacket and the satchel he carried his art supplies in. He loved painting more than anything else, or so I’ve been told.”

“Maybe that was all a setup. Maybe he just didn’t know how to tell his father what he truly wanted out of life, and he went on to be an artist.”

“No. That’s ridiculous. It couldn’t have happened that way,” I tell her, though my mind’s reeling.

“I think the story is far more *romantic* that way.”

“This is the way we know the story. He was taken into another world, but his spirit still resides here, to protect future generations of children from dying as tragically as he did.”

“That makes quite a touching ending to the story too, but I like my version better,” she tells me as she steps inside the cave. “He felt trapped and went off to pursue what he loved.”

I'm mesmerized by Noel and her odd perspective on life. What if she's right and my great-uncle had decided to run away and start over? If only there was a way to find out ... but there isn't.

"I never wanted this life. I never wanted to work seven days a week and turn into the man my father used to be. I came to this cave and planned on running away, living on the land, maybe even becoming a cowboy. Anything seemed better than a never ending nine-to-five."

"It's never too late to be a hippie." She looks as if she's feeling sorry for me. There's nothing to feel sorry about.

"I don't need sympathy, Noel. That was just a foolish thought from when I was young."

"It obviously matters to you if you're telling me."

"Maybe it matters a bit, but I'll be back to my normal self soon enough."

"I rather like this guy who's not so normal." She shivers in the frigid air.

"I'm sorry for keeping you out for so long in this weather."

"I'm okay," she says. "I want to enjoy the peace and quiet for a few more minutes."

I look down at her red nose and open expression, and I can't help myself. I have to taste her lips again so I wrap my arms around her waist and watch as awareness flashes through her eyes. I bend forward and our lips connect. I mean it to be short and sweet, just a simple touch, something to ease the ache I always feel with her, but as soon as my mouth meets hers, I lose control.

Her tongue is soft and wet against my lips. She darts it out, more like a question than a demand. I answer her in the only way I know how, and oh how I enjoy the contours of her mouth. I wish these thick layers of clothing aren't between us, because I want to feel her skin, all of it, with no barriers. She clings to my shoulders as I cup her backside and draw her against me.

I deepen the kiss, sliding farther inside the warm recesses of her mouth and moving my fingers desperately through the silky strands of her hair. I only wanted one simple kiss, to prove I'm in control. I'm being proven wrong ... I have *no* control when it comes to her.

She pulls herself together more quickly than I can, and scoots back.

I look into her flushed face and groan. Her eyes are dilated in passion and she's breathing heavily. It would be so easy to seduce her into continuing, but I'm not about to force her. Still, I have to say something.

"I don't know why we keep stopping."

"Because this can't go anywhere. I don't regret it, but I don't regret stopping either," she tells me. She turns and, once more, walks away from me.

I want to chase her, but she's right. This can't go anywhere. It will be for the best if I forget about her, forget about this feeling inside me, and simply move on. But I don't think that's what I'm going to do.

Chapter Fifteen

Ryder

I put my head in my hands, and though I fight it, I sigh deeply. It hasn't been an easy few days.

"Is everything all right?" Lucas asks as he enters the room.

"Yes. I just ..." What can I say? Nothing. There's no rational solution. "It's nothing. Too much work," I lie.

Two days have passed since I shared a kiss with Noel in the cave. Since then, she's taken pains to avoid me ... again, but my body has burned with need for her ever since we got lost in each other's arms again. The need extends beyond mere lust, though, beyond the hope for a simple exchange of pleasure. The needs torment me to talk to her, to share with her, to learn about her. And those sorry needs aren't getting met.

"I see," Lucas says in a knowing voice, one that immediately grates on my nerves.

It's time to change the subject. "Did you want to talk to me?"

"No, not really. I'm just checking in with you. Noel has a caller in the main hall," Lucas says offhandedly.

"A caller? What do you mean by that?"

“A gentleman caller. A man has come to *call* on her. Surely you know that expression.” It takes a few moments for the meaning of Lucas’s words to penetrate.

“I wasn’t aware she knew anyone here.” I’m trying to seem casual, but I’m feeling anything but that.

“She apparently met someone when she went to town with Jasmine last week,” Lucas says.

“She’s not staying here. Why would she care to meet anyone?” I snap.

“This is a good thing,” Lucas says. “For *her* and for *us*.”

I send an irritated look his way. “Why is it a good thing?”

“Because if she falls in love with someone, she’ll most certainly want to stay. Then I get to be with the children,” Lucas says. “I was hoping it would be the two of you, but that hasn’t worked out, so at least there’s a guy here seeking her attention.”

“She doesn’t need to be falling in love with some idiot,” I grumble, making Lucas chuckle. I glare at him.

“Yes, as I was saying, hopefully this suitor will sweep Noel off her feet. Then we get the best of all worlds, the kids and Noel here, and she’s happy to do it,” Lucas says.

I’m done with this conversation. “It would be rude if I didn’t go and say hello to this *suitor*,” I say. Without another word, I walk from the room. I make my way quickly down the hall and the first thing I hear is Noel’s laughter, which tightens my gut.

“I’m so delighted you’ve agreed to come with me,” a man is saying, making me tense even more. When I step into the room and see the guy, I grow even angrier. This worthless stranger is obviously trying to sweep Noel off her feet, just as Lucas wants, and it looks as if it’s working.

“I’m thrilled you thought of me,” she says, and laughs again.

I cough to make my presence known. “I see you have a visitor, Noel.”

“Oh, Ryder, this is Jeff Smith. Jeff, this is Ryder Berkley.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Ryder,” Jeff says, holding out his hand.

I ignore the gesture. Yes, I know I’m being rude, but I don’t care.

“So, what are your plans this evening?” I ask.

“I’m going to take this beautiful lady to dinner and a show,” Jeff says. The man looks a bit uneasy as he starts picking up the tension from me. I stare at him a moment longer, then turn my attention to Noel.

“I thought you were taking the children to a play tonight,” I say with clear disapproval in my tone.

Noel gapes at me for a few seconds. “The play I took the kids to was last night, Ryder.”

“My mistake. I hope you have a pleasant evening,” I tell them, and quickly spin on my heel and walk away. Still, I hear Jeff tell her he’ll be back in a couple hours to pick her up for the show and dinner, making it a *very* long night.

I mean to go to Lucas's office and then to leave the house. I in no way need to talk to Noel about her date. But somehow I'm moving toward her bedroom instead of away. She's not there, but apparently I'm willing to wait for her to come back to her room. We need to talk. I shouldn't care, but obviously I do.

What in the hell am I thinking?

Chapter Sixteen

Noel

“How did you meet Jeff?” Ryder asks as I reach my bedroom.

I didn’t expect to see him again today, and the sound of his voice, clipped and formal in the extreme, nearly makes me jump a foot in the air. My heart’s racing as I whirl to face him.

“You scared me to death, Ryder.”

His arms are crossed over his chest as he waits for me to answer his question. I finally do. “I met him at the market when Jasmine and I were shopping. I’m surprised he came to see me.”

“How did he know how to find you?” he pushes.

“Jasmine,” I say. I don’t need to add more. He growls, and I’m not sure how to interpret it.

“That was quick of him, don’t you think?”

“Are you angry about something?” I’m not going to stand here and play games.

“No. Why would I be angry?” he asks with a shrug.

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

He’s wearing his standard mask, and I can’t read him very well. I don’t understand any of this. We’ve only shared a

couple of kisses — okay, plus a little more — and he’s expressed his desire to bed me, like a typical male who only wants sex. But he now seems to be acting ... jealous. This makes no sense.

“I thought you told me any relationship here would be pointless,” he says after a brief pause.

“I’m not planning to enter into a relationship. I met a man at the market, and he’s offered to take me to the theater. I thought it sounded fun — maybe it will expand my horizons, as someone like you might say. I don’t know why I’m explaining myself to you.”

“You’re in my home.”

“I am not. I’m in *Lucas’s* home. But why would that matter anyway?”

“It doesn’t.”

He turns and walks away, leaving me more confused than ever. What on earth is going on? I decide to blow off any thoughts of Ryder, *and* his weird behavior, and go inside my room. I need to focus on getting ready, and I refuse to suffer from any sense of guilt about going out. The children are taken care of, and I haven’t been on a date in so long I might well have forgotten how to speak to a man in an intimate setting.

The problem is I don’t have anything fancy enough for an evening at the theater, and I feel a little self-conscious as I get dressed. I could ask Jasmine for something, but I’m not comfortable doing that. The only item that works, or seems to work, is my classic little black dress. I don’t like wearing it —

it's too short in my humble opinion. But my sister had insisted on buying it, and I'd caved.

After a long and relaxing bath, I get dressed and head down the staircase just as someone lets Jeff in the front door. I don't want to keep my date waiting, especially because Ryder's in such a mood. I hope Ryder went home and Jeff won't have to see him again. That might chase the man away before we get a chance to go anywhere.

"You're a vision, Noel." Jeff says as I reach him. "Truly a vision."

He lifts my hand and brushes his lips across my knuckles. Odd. Why doesn't the gesture send butterflies to my stomach? Nerves, probably — what else could it be? When a man as sexy as Jeff kisses my hand, the least my traitorous body can do is experience a few ripples of pleasure.

"Thank you, Jeff. You look very handsome."

And he does with his short brown hair and twinkling green eyes. I should definitely feel more attraction. He takes my arm and leads me outside, where a limo's waiting. What is it with all of these limousines?

"Your carriage awaits, my lady," he says with a flourish. The driver opens the door and I climb inside, delighted to find champagne and strawberries. He pours two glasses of the bubbly, and we have a pleasant ride to downtown Seattle.

We go to a restaurant and it's easy to talk to Jeff. He's not pushy, and he even makes me laugh a few times. I should be having the time of my life. Instead, I'm thinking too much

about Ryder. Has he ruined me? I surely hope not, as nothing is going to happen with Ryder and me.

We go to the show, which I honestly won't be able to tell anyone much about as my attention is only halfway on the show. When Jeff talks about business though, he doesn't make such great company. He's a CFO for a dot-com business, and he loses me within less than a minute as he begins talking about his day-to-day activities. How can such a good-looking, confident man be so boring? I love math too, so this is really saying something.

By the time we're in the limo again, I'm aching to get back to Lucas's mansion. I try to muster up some physical attraction toward Jeff, but I can't. Ryder Berkley really might have ruined me. Maybe all other men will pale in comparison from now on. How sick is that?

"Thank you for a wonderful evening," Jeff says as he walks me to the door. "May I call on you again?"

I can see he wants to kiss me, but I'm holding my purse determinedly between us. And yet, before I'm able to utter a word, he clasps me in his arms and brings his lips to mine. I stand stiffly for a moment against him. He tries to get a response from me, but none is forthcoming, and he finally pulls back. After an awkward moment of silence, I speak.

"I'm sorry, Jeff. I had a lovely evening, but I'm terribly tired." I'm not sure if I want to close the door on any possibility of another date. But I'm leaving soon anyway, so what does it matter?

"I understand, Noel. You know, there's a Christmas concert tomorrow. Will you do me the honor of accompanying me?"

“That sounds like fun,” I reply. No, it doesn’t, but I need a distraction from the impossible situation of being around Ryder all of the time.

“Sweet dreams,” Jeff says, and he makes a swift exit. I suspect he does this so I won’t have time to change my mind. I don’t know why he’d want to take me out again when I’ve only been half present on this first date. I guess I’ll never really understand men. Taking a deep breath, I head inside. It’s late, so the halls are empty. Once upstairs, I peek in on both children and see them sleeping soundly.

I walk toward my door, feeling slightly depressed, but unsure of exactly why. I’d gone out, had an attentive companion, and should’ve had a wonderful time, but instead a lonely ache dwells deep inside me.

“How was your date?” Ryder asks. He steps out of the shadows and my heart thunders at the sight of him.

“Do you like to lurk in dark corners just so you can give me a good scare?” I ask. “This is the second time today.”

“Do you like to avoid questions?” He has a dark scowl on his face. “And technically it’s tomorrow, but who’s counting?”

“I had a great time. I’m exhausted, though, so I’ll see you in the morning, perhaps. Or later.” I place my hand on the doorknob and start to twist it when he grabs me and hauls me toward him.

“Think about this tonight,” he says nanoseconds before his head descends. I have no time to react before his lips are pressed against mine.

My pulse beats out of control and I can barely breathe. I involuntarily wind my arms around his neck and cling to him while his hands roam up and down my back. I feel his arousal — it's impressive — and my stomach flips upside down. I can't seem to get enough of his taste, scent, or touch. I'm quickly forgetting why kissing him is a major blunder.

“Invite me into your room,” he growls against my ear as he runs his skilled tongue down the curve of my neck, making me moan. All I have to do is say yes. I open my mouth to utter the simple word as his hand slips around my side and cups my aching breast. He flicks his thumb over my sensitive nipple, and I throb with the intense pleasure of the contact through my clothes.

I can't help but cry out, and his body seems to harden more. He presses me firmly against the bedroom door, molding the two of us closer. Ryder brings his lips back to mine, almost devouring me, then he moves his hand to the hem of my little dress, sliding it upward, touching the skin of my inner thigh. I shake with need.

“Invite me inside,” he murmurs again.

I'd say yes, would beg him to take me right here against the door if I was capable of speech. His hand slides farther up, over the top of my stockings, and his fingers are against the bare skin of my hip and curling around my delicately rounded backside. Trailing his lips down my neck, he ignites a fire I've only managed to feel with him. I'm still standing because of the pressure of his arms and the door behind me.

He moves his fingers up and begins unzipping my dress as his tongue slides across the swell of my breast. My peaked

nipple begs for his warm lips to capture it, to send me spiraling out of control. A door shuts somewhere in the house, and that small sound brings me back to reality. What in heck am I doing? I'm practically making love to this man in the hall, where my niece or nephew can walk by ... not to mention a myriad of other people.

"Ryder, we have to stop," I whisper. I can barely get the words past my throat, choked as it is by desire. I bring my hands down to his chest and push.

He lifts his head and stares at me in confusion. And those passionate eyes of his are almost my undoing. When he bends his head to take my lips once more, I don't know how I find the will to pull away, but I do. He lets out a deep sigh and steps back. Then he walks away without another word. I let out a sigh, gather the strength to open my door, and slink through it. After closing it, I sag against it, and a shudder racks my body.

Why didn't I invite him inside? Why can't I be selfish for one single night? It won't hurt anyone. Even as I have these thoughts and wishes, I get how misguided they are. It would hurt me, and hurt my sense of self. I can't have a one-night stand without regret. Still, as I climb into bed, my body in absolute agony, I wish I could be the kind of woman who could let go and enjoy the moment without a care in the world about tomorrow.

Chapter Seventeen

Noel

I dash down the stairs, running late and not wanting to make Jeff wait. And in no way do I want him to be left alone with Ryder if he shows up. I'm not sure what he might say to Jeff, especially after that kiss the night before. Well, to be honest, it was a hell of a lot more than a kiss. That's par for the course when I'm alone with him in the middle of the night.

I hear talking in the front foyer and scurry around the corner, slightly out of breath. *Just my luck*. Ryder's standing with Jeff, and Jeff doesn't look all too happy about it. I slow my pace.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Jeff," I say as I walk up to the two men.

"It's always a pleasure to wait for a beautiful woman," Jeff tells me and takes my hand, bringing it to his lips. I notice the way Ryder's eyes narrow.

"That was certainly the right thing to say," I tell him with a laugh.

"I hear you're going to the Christmas concert," Ryder unexpectedly says. "I may see you there." He's acting as if he's trying to make polite conversation, but his words come out more like a threat.

“I didn’t know you were attending,” I remark. “But a lot of people will be there, so the chances of our running into each other will *surely* be slim even if you do show up like a stalker.”

“We’ll just have to see. Have a wonderful evening,” he replies before striding off. I let out the breath I was holding.

“Are you ready to leave, Noel?” Jeff obviously wants to get out of here as fast as humanly possible.

“Yes, of course,” I say.

He places his hand on my back and leads me to his waiting car. This time it isn’t a limousine, but a silver Jaguar, and it gleams in the setting sun. The vehicle’s beautiful, one that absolutely *screams* money, which means that the fellow is trying to impress me. Anyone can rent a limo, but this is different. He helps me inside, and I sink into the soft leather seat. Screw Ryder and his intoxicating kisses. I’m going to put real effort into this date. Jeff surely can’t be boring two dates in a row — not if the fates care at all about me.

The drive isn’t bad, most likely because we don’t do much talking. The flashy car has a high-end music system, and we take full advantage of it while making our way to the concert. Still, Jeff’s a gentleman and opens my door for me when we arrive at the hall.

We make our way toward the front of the indoor concert arena. Soon, everyone is on their feet while a band plays Christmas songs in a livelier way than I’ve heard them before. At intermission, Jeff and I have a few drinks and snacks, and I notice he’s starting to look a little green around the gills. The

food here isn't the best, but it's certainly not the worst. I hope he's not coming down with a bug.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I'll be fine, Noel. Something I ate must be disagreeing with me. I'll shake it off." He gives me a reassuring smile, but I'm not so sure. He really doesn't look good.

We move toward some unoccupied benches in the back of the room. I feel bad that I'm not more concerned about him, but I really want to enjoy the show, not babysit my date. No. I can't think like this. I was brought up to do the right thing. I should be more focused on him than what I'm missing out on. If it wasn't for him and this date, I wouldn't have known about this concert in the first place, so missing it shouldn't be a big deal. I really need to be a nicer person.

"Would you like to leave, Jeff?"

"Of course not. I'll sit down for a few moments, then I'll be perfectly fine."

"A few moments" stretches out. But at least Ryder isn't here to see my second failed date in a row with Jeff. That would be the icing on his cake. I sit with Jeff, even if I want to rush back to the dance floor and sing songs while I dance. It's not much fun to do on my own anyway. I'm much better off sitting here with Jeff, who's been very kind to me.

This too shall pass ...

Chapter Eighteen

Ryder

“Would you two like to go to a concert with me?” I ask Rowan and Layla.

Of course, they readily agree. I know it’s ridiculous to crash Noel’s date, but I can’t seem to stop myself. I’ll have the children as buffers, however, so she might not be quite as upset as she deserves to be.

The bigger problem is why I’m doing this. I can’t stop thinking about her. Is this more than a desire to bed her? I’m beginning to think so. If I only wanted to have sex with her I wouldn’t care if she’s out with another man, I wouldn’t care what she’s doing when she’s not in my arms ... I never have before. I don’t think of women when they aren’t under me. It sounds crude, but it’s just the way it’s always been. It’s not that way when it comes to Noel, though. She’s constantly on my mind and I don’t like her out with another man ... I don’t like it at all.

When we arrive at the concert, I start to worry about what I’ve done. The place is unusually crowded. I have on a baseball cap, jeans, and an old college sweater, an effort to disguise myself, but all it will take is one person to figure out who I am and then I’ll be mobbed.

That article about me in *People* magazine made my life a living hell. Who in the world cares about the fifty most eligible bachelors anyway? Okay, a lot of people do when the bachelors are billionaires. I happen to think that's all nonsense, though.

The children and I manage to get in without trouble, and I keep an eye out for Noel. I finally spot her sitting on a bench with Jeff, who doesn't look as if he's doing too well. I make a beeline in their direction, hoping Layla will work her magic and Noel will abandon Jeff and join us.

"Aunt Noel!" Layla cries. She jumps into her aunt's lap and gives her a hug. Noel looks up in surprise ... and spots me. I can't tell what she's thinking about me being in front of her while her date sits slumped next to her. What is going on?

Jeff speaks up. "Noel, I'm sorry, but I don't think I can stay any longer. My stomach is really hurting," he says. He swallows several times, and she moves back, obviously praying he isn't about to hurl all over her.

Noel looks up at me with suspicion. I can tell she desperately wants to ask me if I slipped something to her date while he was at the house. But there's no way she's posing that question. I'll let her wonder, although I didn't poison the guy. The fates are just on my side ... I like to think it's because I'm a hell of a guy.

"I'll go with you," she tells Jeff, and I panic.

"You can't leave, Auntie. I just got here," Layla says with her big, innocent eyes. Noel looks at me again, and I give her a look of challenge. It's her niece begging her to stay, not me. How can she say no to such a perfect little girl?

“I don’t want you to miss the concert,” Jeff says. “Please stay. You can catch a ride back with the children and Ryder.”

I have to admit that Jeff’s a much nicer man than I am. I enjoy the frustration in Noel’s eyes. She clearly wants to stay for the rest of the show, but she has pride too, and it’s pulling her in the opposite direction. I see the moment she gives in to what her niece wants, and I feel like jumping in the air in victory. And yet I’m not thrilled when she decides to walk Jeff to his car.

“If you really are sure,” she says as he slowly rises to his feet.

“We’ll do this again when I’m better,” he says, but I hear the uncertainty in his voice. Even before he got sick I can tell their date wasn’t going all that well. It’s clear to see a connection with someone within seconds. Hell, from the moment I first saw Noel with flour all over her, I was smitten. The electricity between us is cosmic. It’s clear there’s none of that between her and this punk Jeff.

“Sure,” she tells him, and the two of them walk away. It takes all I have not to follow them. If the kids weren’t with me I’m not sure I’d be able to resist.

“Let’s get some snacks,” I tell the kids, keeping my eye on the door Noel exited out of.

I wait impatiently for her return, and don’t hear a single Christmas carol until she finally reappears. It’s only when she stands with the kids and me that I relax for the first time since the kiss the night before. I like being with her ... it’s truly that simple. We make our way to the front of the theatre and listen

to several songs. I try not to make any eye contact with the band, but I know they realize I'm here ... dammit.

As the next song ends, one of the performers speaks to the crowd. "Are you having a good time tonight?" The audience explodes with shouts of joy and approval.

"I'm always glad to hear that," the man says. "We have a special guest in the audience tonight. I know for a fact he can play one mean fiddle. Would you like him to come up here and play for you?"

I panic as both the performer and the band leader look at me and smile. That's when Noel figures out what's going on. Now *I'm* the one turning a little green. Noel's lips turn up in an evil smile as she takes hold of my arm and drags me to the stage. The children are jumping up and down in excitement.

"I just want to blend in," I desperately say.

"Now, don't be shy, Ryder. All of the eligible women in the audience want to hear you play," the performer says, and the crowd goes crazy again. I'm locked in now and can't back out without inciting a riot. Considering the venue, a tame holiday riot, but a riot nonetheless.

"I'll return the favor, Noel," I mutter before jumping on the stage. "I don't know why you want to hear me play," I say into the mic. "These guys have been doing an amazing job tonight." When the crowd cries out for me to perform, I smile broadly. "Okay, okay, I'll do it."

I'm handed a fiddle, and the band starts playing.

As the music soars, and even as I draw the bow over the strings, I look down, my eyes connecting with Noel's, and my

heart leaps. I'm in trouble because of this woman ... serious trouble. I'm starting to think I don't want her to go anywhere ... and it has nothing to do with the kids.

Chapter Nineteen

Noel

He isn't the guy I thought he was. Ryder grins at the audience and plays his fiddle like a pro. Heck, I saw Charlie Daniels at the state fair when I was young, and he has nothing on Ryder. I'm clapping along with the crowd, and what truly amazes me is I'm having a lot of fun. Why does it have to be because of Ryder? I have no business having fun with this man ... especially since I was on a date with another man a while ago ... a man I've already forgotten all about.

Was I trying to make Ryder jealous? I certainly hope not. I don't play games, and I hope I'm not starting to do that now. Will the universe the Andersons live in change me if I stay too long? I don't want to change. I like who I am ... or I usually like myself.

After a few more songs, the crowd allows Ryder to leave the stage. But he can't stay at the concert any longer — there's no way the people will give him any peace. So, we make our way out of the concert hall. Why had I been so reluctant to leave for Jeff, who'd been sick, but I'm not bummed to leave early with Ryder? I shouldn't analyze this too much ... I might not like the answers I come up with.

"Let's get ice cream before we head home," Ryder says when we make it outside.

“Yeah!” Layla squeals. “I want ice cream!” At least my niece is the one accepting the invitation and not me. And I can’t possibly tell her no. It doesn’t take long to reach the shop, and then, somehow I end up sitting right next to Ryder on the bench in the parlor. Ryder is acting far too smug and sitting way too close.

As our sundaes arrive, his leg brushes against mine and I force myself not to react. Refusing to look at him, I focus on Layla and Rowan, who are scarfing down their sundaes like something they’ve never eaten before and will never have again.

“Slow down before you get brain freeze,” I warn.

The kids don’t acknowledge my statement. But Ryder’s paying attention. “You have a bit of chocolate on the corner of your mouth, Noel,” he tells me.

My cheeks go up in flames. “Where?”

“I’ll get it.”

Before I’m able to tell him *No way*, he’s caressing the side of my mouth with his thumb and running it across my bottom lip. I should turn away, but the heat in his eyes is enough to melt the rest of my ice cream. When he lifts his thumb to his own mouth and sucks the chocolate off, I squeeze my thighs tightly together, trying to subdue the pressure I suddenly feel in my core.

“Mmm, missed a little,” he tells me.

He bends down and swipes his mouth across my lips, once, twice, and a third time, before he raises his head and sends a flood of desire ripping through me.

“Gross,” Rowan says.

It takes a moment, but my nephew’s aghast expression breaks me from the spell Ryder’s put me under, and I turn away in horror. But Rowan isn’t looking at me. He’s looking down at the floor, where a giant spider is crawling by. Thank goodness! What was I thinking? How can I act so intimately with Ryder in front of the kids?

“That is gross, Rowan,” I tell my nephew, drawing his eyes back to me. “If you two are finished, we should get back to the house. It’s late.”

And I can’t take being pressed between the wall and Ryder’s hard body, especially when the man continues to look at me as if I’m next on the menu. A *hot* menu. Ryder pays for our treats, and we ride back to the house. Though the kids are tired, Layla chats all through the drive home about the exciting evening. I could kiss my niece for keeping Ryder’s attention on her and Rowan.

After we park and make our way inside, we wearily make our way up the winding staircase and down the long hallway. To my surprise, Rowan throws me a smile and a quick hug before he enters his room. It nearly makes me cry. He’s acting more his age now and doesn’t feel as if he has to be the man of the house. That’s because of *this* family. If I mess this up, I’ll be responsible for what happens to Rowan later in life. It’s a lot to put on my shoulders.

Ryder and I walk Layla to her room and together tuck her into bed. Ryder stays while I read her a bedtime story. Layla insists that her honorary uncle stay during the bedtime ritual.

A little later as Ryder accompanies me to my bedroom door, we're both silent. Will he kiss me again?

"Thank you for a wonderful evening," Ryder tells me outside of my door. "It was hardly a typical date for me."

"This wasn't a date, Ryder. I was actually on a date with another man."

"I'll consider it a date," he insists. "I laughed tonight, and it's something I don't do too often. I enjoyed your company — both yours and the children's. So, I'll say it again. Thank you."

I'm afraid to make eye contact with him. My body's humming with desire, and I want nothing more than to fall into his arms, especially while he's being so ... so ... almost ... sweet.

"It was very kind of you to take the children to the concert," I say without looking up. "And to ask me to join you when Jeff became ill." I'm counting the specks on my sparkly shoes.

He gently grasps my chin as I struggle not to panic. Looking determinedly into my eyes, he bends his head forward and pauses, my breath catching as I wait for what's to come. After an eternity, or so it seems, he brushes his lips lightly against mine, and my heart thunders. Then, he lets me go and backs away. With a seductive smile, he turns and leaves me leaning against the solid oak door.

I stand in the empty hallway for a long while; I can't seem to move. My knees have turned to rubber, and I feel as if my spine has dissolved. And all of that from the simple touch of Ryder's lips.

When my legs finally convince me they might be able to keep me upright, I stagger inside my room. I have a restless night, tossing and turning and dreaming all sorts of erotic dreams for the entire night. In my fevered imagination, Ryder and I do a hell of a lot more than kissing. Or a heaven of a lot more. And when I wake in the morning, something has to happen. I'm just not sure what that something is.

Do I want to be so stubborn I can't admit I might've been wrong? Do I want to bury my head in the sand? I don't do one-night stands, but Ryder and I passed a single night long ago. This has been a production, and what person walks away from a great play without an incredible crescendo? Maybe it's time Ryder and I have our final act.

Chapter Twenty

Noel

“You have to come with me, Noel.”

I look up as Jasmine stands in the doorway to my bedroom wearing a heavy coat, looking very pleased with herself.

“What’s going on? I thought dinner was at seven,” I say.

“There’s been a change of plans. If you follow me, your ride’s waiting,” she says. She holds out a brand-new beautiful jacket for me to wear, making me more suspicious.

“Jasmine?” I say her name with a questioning suspicion in my voice.

“Oh, get over yourself and get your butt off that bed. If you don’t, I’m going to grab a pitcher of water and douse you.” I can’t tell if she’s kidding or not. This mischievous girl is stubborn enough to do just that if I don’t do what she wants ... I know this for sure in the few short weeks I’ve known her.

I’ve been here long enough now to know she isn’t going to tell me anything she doesn’t want to, so I can fight it or go along with it. I decide to go with her, partly because I like Jasmine and partly because I’m curious.

She doesn’t say a word as we make our way through the house and out the back door, where a golf cart decorated in twinkling lights and roses is waiting. I eye it with suspicion

but admit to myself that it looks charming in a Disney sort of way.

“I don’t understand,” I tell her.

“Just enjoy the moment, Noel,” she tells me with a secret smile.

“Where in the world are we going on a golf cart? It’s freezing.”

“It’s not far, I promise.”

With a strange sense of excitement, I climb into the golf cart. Jasmine gets in after me and begins driving down a plowed trail. It isn’t long before a large black helicopter comes into view.

Jasmine pulls up to a lighted path leading to a large open door on the helicopter. Ryder stands waiting. He’s wearing a beautiful charcoal suit with a red handkerchief in the pocket, a matching tie, and a smile adorning his lips. To top that off, he’s holding a long-stemmed rose. Is this an episode of *The Bachelor*?

“Enjoy,” Jasmine says as she grins like the cat that ate the canary.

He strides up to me and holds out the rose. “For you, my lady,” he says in a deep, sexy voice before giving me an exaggerated bow.

“What are we doing here, Ryder?”

“I’m taking you out, showing you the sights of Seattle,” he says as I accept the rose. I take his hand as I emerge from the

golf cart and walk with him. “Unless you think *Jeff* was sufficient for the task ...”

I ignore that remark. “What? We’re going up in that?” I ask, drawing back as we reach the helicopter’s door. “Who’s flying?” There’s fear in my voice.

Ryder laughs as he gives me a little nudge inside. “Don’t worry. I have a very responsible pilot. I want to be in the backseat with my hands all over you,” he says with an elaborate wink.

Where did this playful Ryder come from? Is this a new tactic? If it is, I sort of like it, though I won’t admit it. Then again, wasn’t I just lecturing myself on enjoying the moment? If I’m foolish enough to continue making mistakes, I may never be happy. I can’t let that happen.

“Ryder,” I say, then stop, not knowing what I want to say. Instead, I climb into the chopper and soon the doors close, the seat belt is strapped around me, and a headset is placed over my ears.

“Can you hear me?” he asks, his voice in my ears.

“Yes, but I have to confess I’m a bit scared. I’ve never ridden in a helicopter before. I’ve heard they’re dangerous.”

The blades begin to whirl, and my stomach drops as the chopper lifts into the air. My hand clasps his, resting against his hard thigh.

“Ah, I’m glad I’m with you as you take your virgin voyage,” he says with a gargantuan grin. “We’re taking a circuitous route.” Our conversation ceases as we fly over the beautiful lighted skyline along the harbor.

My fear vanishes when we soar over the Space Needle and the many islands that make this area so unique, ferries moving back and forth across the water.

“This is incredible, Ryder.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself,” he says, tugging me against him. In my happiness, I allow him to do it. I relax, enjoying this date. I quit fighting that we’re on an actual date. Yes, it’s a date, and so far the best one I’ve ever had.

“It’s so bright down there,” I say, not trying to contain my smile.

“Yes. It’s beautiful, isn’t it, especially this time of year? All of the Christmas lights make it festive. Hold on; we’re going to be landing soon.”

We begin our descent and I’m clutching Ryder more tightly as the chopper touches down. We’re far too close to another helicopter for my liking.

“Do they always land this close to each other?” I ask, taking my first deep breath of the whole ride when the rotor blades still.

“At this helipad, they do,” he tells me. “But it’s a great place to land for where I want to take you for dinner.”

The door opens, and Ryder jumps out and reaches up for me, his hands wrapping around my waist as he helps me from the chopper. I lose my breath again when he pulls me against him.

“I need one kiss before we go any farther.”

I don't try to fight as Ryder's mouth connects with mine. I expect heat, passion, an ardent assault, but instead, he caresses my mouth softly before nipping my bottom lip and soothing it with his tongue.

This man can kiss — *really* kiss. He manages to make my knees grow weak and my core tighten all at once. He makes me want the impossible.

Just when I'm ready to grab hold of him, he pulls back, heat in his eyes but a gentle smile on his lips. "Mmm," he says, "that will satisfy me ... for a little while."

But not me! Somehow I manage to avoid saying that out loud. Instead, I accept the arm he offers and proceed about twenty feet down a walkway to where a black limo awaits us.

"You know, a regular car would do," I tell him. "I really don't want to get used to all of this fancy stuff. It'll make going back to the real world a bit depressing." He ushers me into the warm leather seat and waits for the door to shut before he responds.

"You deserve to be pampered. Every woman does. But if you'd rather I get a moped next time, I can accommodate you," he says with a laugh.

"It might be a bit cold for a moped, Ryder, but a nice sedan would do just fine."

"But I wouldn't get to sit behind this nice privacy glass, where all sorts of crazy things can be done." He slides his hand up my thigh as he says this.

"Cocky, aren't you?" I push his hand down ... but not away.

“Always,” he tells me, resting his fingers on my knee. I like the touch enough to let it stay. “Some people might say I pack a lot of heat.” I’m not about to touch that remark with a ten-foot pole.

“Where are we off to now?” I ask, deciding to get off this track of conversation.

“We’re going to have a nice glass of wine as we drive to one of my favorite restaurants. I hope you’ll find the evening romantic.”

My last night on the town in Seattle had been nice enough, but far from romantic. No smoke, no fire. And as we drive through the city, I make comparisons. And this night is already markedly better ... dang it.

“And do you think this will get you a happy ending?” I ask boldly, going right back to where we’d been before I changed the subject.

“I don’t *expect* anything,” he says before grinning. “*However*, I wouldn’t say no if you decided to ravish me.”

I could be irritated with the man, but instead I laugh. One thing can be said about him, he’s certainly persistent. I can’t remember any man chasing me this hard.

We pull up in front of Ristorante Picolinos, which Ryder informs me is known as one of the most charming and romantic restaurants in Seattle. “Picolinos strives to maintain the warm and casual neighborhood style I love,” he says. We pass beautifully decorated tables and well-placed antiques. Lit candles give a warm glow to the space.

But Ryder must have wanted to kick the romance up another notch, because we're led to a private area, where more candles burn, and the area is basically empty except for one table set up in the center with a waiter standing at the ready.

"This is perfect," I say.

"I thought you might enjoy it," Ryder replies.

He pulls out my chair and waits for me to sit before moving across the table to his own seat. The waiter immediately shows Ryder the wine menu. Ryder chooses one without delay, and he approves it in the classic fashion before a glass is poured for me.

The night drifts by as we savor cuisine inspired by Italy: bread and Umbrian olive oil, Calamari Siciliana, Insalata Di Lattughette, Rigatoni Salsiccia, and Veal Saltimbocca. We finish with Cannoli, Thin Mint Martini's, and very full bellies. The meal is as delicious as the company.

"Did you know that, according to legend, Edgar Allan Poe was inspired to write *The Cask of Amontillado* in a restaurant similar to this one on the other side of the States in New York?"

"Really? I've always wondered how those legends came up with their stories. Is it all in their head, or are they inspired when out in public? I'm a fan of Poe's work."

"That's what the legend says. No one knows for sure. But I'm a believer that legends come from truths."

"I'm going to believe that's true. I can't wait to tell ..." But I can't finish my sentence. Who do I *really* have to tell? That's an incredibly depressing thought, one I don't want to have

right now, not when my night has been so magical so far ... not when I'm in a place to let down my guard and do what feels right instead of what I know to be right.

As if he knows what my thoughts are, he rises from his seat and moves to the chair next to me, takes my hand, and lifts it to his lips.

"You know, Noel, we have a lot in common. I think there's more we share than that we don't." I might believe him.

"Yeah, people either love or hate Poe. I don't think there's an in-between," I say with a laugh. But the laugh turns into a sigh as he caresses my wrist with his thumb. But as I remember Poe's story, *The Cask of Amontillado*, my eyes turn to slits.

"What's the look for?" he asks.

"You do remember the plot of Poe's story, right?"

"Well, yes, I think so."

"Explain it, then," I demand.

He seems to think about it a moment before deciding it can't get him into any trouble by replying. He takes a sip of his drink before speaking.

"The short version is that it's about a man taking revenge on a friend he believes insulted him," he says.

"*Fatal* revenge," I remind him. "Where the so-called friend is buried alive."

"And don't forget the story is being told from the murderer's perspective," he adds. "So I'm sure he's only telling one side of the story."

“So, are you telling me something by bringing me here? Am I your enemy?” I’m only partially kidding when I lob this question at him.

“You’re far from my enemy, Noel,” he tells me. “I’d never bury you ... though I might bury myself in you.”

“You think you’re amusing now, don’t you?”

“I’m so many things — including amusing,” he tells me.

“Fine. So, what are your plans for me?”

“Here’s one — let’s leave. The night’s still young.”
Anticipation is evident in his voice.

“Yes, Ryder.”

And I’m saying yes to more than a ride. Maybe it’s foolish, and maybe my heart will get broken — hell, that’s more than just a *maybe* — but this night has been magical. Soon I’ll leave this world behind, whether I stay in the Seattle area or not, I’ll leave this kind of things behind. The kids will live this lifestyle. Whether I have a trust fund or not, I’m not a person to dine in fancy places and take helicopter rides. I have to remain true to myself. But still, I want to take *some* memories with me when I return to the real world.

He seems to realize what I’m telling him. He pays the bill, stands up, and escorts me from the restaurant. And I go along willingly. I refuse to let doubts creep in on the journey home. My mind is made up. It’s time to stop fighting him and myself. I don’t want to go anywhere anymore ... unless it’s with him.

Chapter Twenty-One

Noel

Ryder walks me to my bedroom; his lips are pressed against mine as he's twisting the knob, then pulling away, and gazing into my eyes.

"Come," I say. He doesn't need to hear anything more to spring into action.

I know we should probably slow this down, but it seems like an eternity since I last felt his touch. I'm not able to stop what's happening, and even if I could, I don't want to.

He backs me up until my legs hit the edge of my bed and he presses against me. I feel his arousal pushing against my stomach and I want to reach out and grip him there, but I'm unsure of myself. Will that be too bold, too shameless?

I move my hands from his well-defined shoulders and bring them slowly down his chest, unbuttoning his shirt along the way. I'm desperate to feel the contours of his solid chest. While I work on removing his clothes, he's slowly stripping mine off. The cool air whispers along my skin. Excitement surges within me.

"I need you," he growls, and nips my earlobe.

I feel his words all the way through my body. I can't get any words past my closed throat. The entire night has been

magical, and this is the perfect ending to it all ... the perfect flourish of the magician's wand.

All of our clothes are finally discarded, and he lifts me into his arms and lays me on the bed. I instinctively try to shield my naked body from his roving eyes, but he joins me on the bed and draws my hands away.

He starts on a journey to caress every inch of my body. His fingers skim over my skin, sending ripples of delight through me. I become more daring in my need and desire and begin running my fingers across the hard planes of his torso.

I reach his hip and circle around to touch his arousal, unable to suppress my excited gasp. He's so ready for me, and so ... so ... big. I don't know how the two of us will manage to fit together, but I'm more than willing to try.

He senses my fear. "I won't hurt you, I promise," he tells me. I relax at his words. He's being so gentle with me; how can I do anything but trust him?

He kisses me deeply, exploring the sweet recesses of my mouth, touching every satiny surface. When I'm absolutely breathless, he moves his head down my throat and urges his mouth against my heightened pulse. I bring my hands up, running my fingers through his hair, holding him firmly against me.

He arches upward and brings his lips over my breasts, swiping his tongue across my peaked nipples and then blowing warm air across the tender buds. I arch off the bed and groan. Wetness builds in my core. I'm done with foreplay, and I grind my hips against his. All fears have vanished.

“Patience,” is all he says as he continues his travels down my body. I can’t protest, since what he’s doing is melting me from the outside in.

He reaches my thighs and spreads them apart, something no man has done before. I want to hide from this intimate exposure, but he won’t allow it. I’m on display for him, and to judge from the look in his eyes, he enjoys what he sees.

“You’re breathtaking,” he whispers before bringing his head down and grazing the sensitive skin on my stomach.

I stop fighting him and simply enjoy the sensation washing through me. He moves his lips farther down, his tongue sliding against my hot flesh. When he inserts his finger into my tight core, I nearly shatter. It’s too much. He’s relentless. He starts moving faster, pressing his hands and mouth forward in a rhythm that has me exploding in passion.

My head falls back as wave after wave of intense pleasure masters me. He slows his movements and makes sure I enjoy every single second of the prolonged orgasm. After the final shudder passes through my body, he moves upward once again. But I’m utterly spent. I can’t possibly do anything more. I can’t even open my eyes.

And yet, when he nibbles on one of my hard nipples, I’m proven wrong. That gentle bite wakes my body once more. How can he pleasure me so well and then make me want more?

He lavishes attention on my breasts before climbing upward and taking my mouth with his in another deep possession. He’s no longer slow and gentle. He’s fast and demanding and I’m

answering his call. The more fevered he becomes, the more I need him to join us together.

He reaches down and lifts my leg around his hip, pressing his generous arousal against my core, with just the tip teasing me. I jerk my hips, no longer afraid of his size. I want him to finish what he's started, and I want all of him.

He continues caressing my mouth while rubbing his hand along my hip and the smooth curve of my backside. His every touch sends shivers through me. I jerk my hips again, tired of waiting. Finally, he enters me inch by amazing inch.

I'm so slick that his thick shaft slides effortlessly inside. There's no pain, despite my fears, only pleasure, and I feel fuller than I thought possible. He sinks deep, up to the hilt, and pauses so we can both relish the sensation.

He looks into my eyes, and the moment's so beautiful that I almost weep. I realize I'm truly falling for him, and there's no better way for us to be close. He starts plunging in and out, and the pleasure consumes me.

He locks his lips on mine, gripping my hips tightly in his hands, and thrusts hard. I meet him stroke for stroke as our movements grow frantic. My entire body starts shaking and I shatter yet again while Ryder throws his head back and groans. I glory in feeling him pumping his release inside me.

He collapses on top of me, and I can hardly breathe from the weight of him. I love it and sink back into the bed. He shifts me so he's lying on his back with me snuggled tightly against his side.

“Thank you,” he whispers as he tenderly strokes my back. I can’t reply as a veil of darkness takes over and I slip into a deep, blissful sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Noel

I sit frozen and terrified in my room. I know nothing about fancy fundraisers. The outcome is obvious — I'll make a complete fool of myself. Why had it seemed so easy for Cinderella? Well, that's easy ... she had help.

There's no fairy godmother here, though. All I can see ahead of me today are hours of fraught nerves and then utter disaster. The only choice I have is to contract some sort of vile flu. Projectile vomiting always gives a person an excuse to get out of things.

I drink my morning tea, trying to compose myself but without any success. How can I help but feel sorry for myself? I hear a knock on my door. I'm not up for visitors, but maybe one of the children needs me.

"Come in," I call. Jasmine walks into the room with a big smile. "I have a surprise for you, Noel."

"I can't imagine what you have up your sleeve now, Jasmine," I say. This girl has a surprise around the corner every time I see her.

"You're finally going to my favorite grandpa's house tonight, so we have a lot to do."

"I don't know if I can do this, Jasmine. I promise you I'm feeling more confidence in myself, but your family is

terrifying. I'm sure you've had others in your life tell you this exact same thing," I plead with her.

She sits on my bed. "I know they can be intimidating. I work in the FBI now, and I have great friends who live in small places and live on a budget as they have their entire lives. I've tried living on a budget and I don't do too well with it, so I know I'm spoiled. We have way too much money to our names, but I promise you my family's great. You've met Gramps and Grams already and they were awesome. I will warn you though, that Gramp's place is insanely huge. It makes this house look small." She shrugs.

"Are you serious?" I ask, even more scared now.

"Yes, I didn't want you in too much of a shock when you show up. Gramps has his own ballroom."

"I so can't do this," I tell her, my head beginning to spin.

"Yes, you can. I've watched you these past few weeks turn into a more confident version of yourself. Remember, money just gives us pretty things, it doesn't make us who we are. You can do this because we're doing it together. Gramps is my favorite person in this world. Don't tell the rest of my family this or they'll be crushed, but it's true. I can't imagine how empty this world would be without him in it. I want you to see him shining, and there's nothing like a big party to make him happy."

"Now, I'll sound like a complete butt if I say no," I grouse.

She laughs. "That's the point," she tells me with a wink. "But it doesn't make my words any less true. I've told you a million times already that you're family now. I think we're

going to be great friends forever. I like you. I feel like you really are my sister. I know I would've loved Chloe if I'd have met her. I sadly didn't get to do that, but I do get you, and that's special to me."

Tears fall down my cheeks. It would be impossible not to love this girl. She's incredible. "It makes me sad you and Chloe didn't get to have a relationship," I tell her.

"Well, we aren't allowed to be sad about it anymore. If Chloe was anything like you or me, and I have a feeling she was, then she'd want us to be happy."

I smile as I wipe my cheeks. "Yes, she was very happy, and she'd want us to be happy."

"Good, then we're going to do what makes me happiest. We have a full day of *pampering* scheduled," Jasmine says. I stare at her in confusion.

"I don't need that," I manage to stutter. I've never had a pedicure, let alone a full day of pampering. How's it pampering when you go through hours of torture? What if there's a bikini wax? Hell, I've seen the movie *Miss Congeniality*.

"You're a beauty, as you must know, but all of us need a day at the spa once in a while to really make us glow," Jasmine says. She comes over, takes my hand, and, ignoring my protests, leads me from the room.

The next several hours are a whirlwind of activity, though I don't do much but sit in a chair or lay on a table. Masks are put on my face, feet, and hands. I'm thrown into a vat of mud, and if that isn't enough, my body is plucked and waxed —

yep, it's torture — until I have nothing left of my original skin or body hair.

And yet, when I finally climb from the shower at the end of it all, I'm amazed when I look in the mirror at my silky body. I actually feel beautiful for the first time in my life. Before I have time to think, I'm rushed to another room, where I'm dressed in the most beautiful gown I've ever seen. I don't have time to look at myself in the mirror for long before I'm in a chair to have my hair and makeup done properly.

I can only stare and blink several times once I'm able to see myself. The stylists haven't overpowered me with heavy layers of makeup, instead they've highlighted my eyes and lips, enhancing my natural glow with fetching simplicity. My hair's piled up gracefully on top of my head, with several tendrils curling around my face and shoulders.

I want to stand up and twirl around in my gown. It hugs my curves from the bodice and past my waist, then flares out into a full skirt that's perfect for gliding around a dance floor.

"Thank you so much," I manage to tell the attendants, despite my tight throat.

"Don't you start crying and ruin all of the hard work," Jasmine says, sounding suspiciously close to tears herself. "You have a man to impress tonight."

"A man? What man? I have no escort."

"There will be a room full of eligible men tonight, but I have a feeling you'll only have eyes for one," Jasmine smugly says.

I have to protest. “Oh, that’s so not true. Ryder is ...” I don’t know how to finish this, so I just trail off.

We made love — spectacular, out-of-this-world love — and then I haven’t seen him for two full days. He’d finally managed to conquer me, and now he’s finished. Isn’t that typical of a man, especially one I like?

“Then how do you know he’s the man I’m talking about? Interesting.” After that remark, Jasmine disappears.

For the millionth time in only a few weeks, I’m panicked, but I brush it aside. I feel good about myself, despite Ryder’s rejection. Does that mean I’ll feel the same tonight?

We’re leaving for the party soon. At least I’ll get a little time to catch my breath before heading to Joseph Anderson’s mansion. I guess I’ll see what I’m truly made of tonight. Can I rub elbows with the elite of the elite? Is there a chance Ryder and I can have a semblance of a relationship? Does he want that? Do I want that? Maybe I’ll figure it all out ... at least I’ll be figuring it out looking and feeling incredible.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ryder

Noel enters the ballroom and I forget how to breathe. She glides into the room wearing a shimmering silver gown that cascades down her perfect body. She's unadorned by jewels, but she doesn't need them to make her shine as her hair's enough of an accessory. Even the nervous smile resting on her lips captivates me. She's gently biting her bottom lip, capturing my full attention. I want to brush her pouting mouth with my tongue.

I'm falling for this woman, but the difficulties surrounding our situation seem insurmountable. So I've stayed away for a couple of days to gain back control — or to *try* to gain it back. Yeah, right. I've failed. And I'm grateful for this. My body automatically moves to her. Before I can say a word, Joseph appears.

"Noel, you're stealing the show tonight," Joseph says as he lifts her hand and kisses it. Noel giggles.

"This place is stunning, Joseph," she says with a sigh.

"It's home to me, but I do appreciate the beauty of my home," he tells her.

"It's so huge you can discover new parts of it on a regular basis," she tells him, and Joseph laughs.

“Well, you might be right. It’s been a long time since I’ve gone to every corner of the house. You’re going to have to come back during the day and go exploring with me,” he says.

“I love that idea,” Jasmine says as she dances up to us. I haven’t gotten to say a word to Noel yet. It’s okay because I’m pretty tongue-tied at the moment. She looks *that* spectacular. “We’ll do it after Christmas. I know several secret passageways.”

“Oh, do you now?” Joseph wraps his arm around Jasmine’s shoulders. The love shining in his eyes as he looks at his eldest granddaughter is clear for all of the world to see. It’s a mutual love.

“Gramps, we haven’t danced in a while,” Jasmine says.

Joseph’s smile grows even wider. “It would be my pleasure, my beautiful granddaughter,” Joseph says. He and Jasmine make their way to the dance floor and look like they should be on Broadway as they smoothly match each other’s steps and flow to the music. It’s stunning to watch.

“Wow, they truly are incredible,” Noel says.

I return my attention to her. “Just as incredible as you,” I tell her. She finally looks in my eyes with a bit of confusion in her gaze.

“May I have this dance?” I huskily ask.

Noel blushes, but she doesn’t pull away from me. She tilts her head.

“Why?” she finally asks, and I’m stumped.

“Because you’re the most beautiful woman in the room and a second doesn’t go by that I don’t think about you,” I honestly tell her.

“But you walked away from my bed without a word for two days.”

I watch the vulnerability flash in her eyes before she manages to tamp it back down. I hurt for her — for what I’ve done to her. I haven’t been a good man for a very long time. This needs to change.

“I was overwhelmed,” I tell her. “And I’m incredibly sorry. Forgive me. Men panic too, it’s not just women. Please have this dance with me.”

“Everyone’s looking at you, Ryder. I don’t know if I can take that kind of pressure.”

“It’s just the two of us,” is my only response before I take her hand and lead her to the dance floor. The moment we step into the center of the room, the musicians begin playing a waltz. The sigh escaping her beautiful mouth nearly drops me to my knees.

“You’ve been practicing,” I whisper as we twirl around the room.

“I didn’t want to look like a fool in front of all of these people,” she says. “I wasn’t sure I was going to dance, but in case I did ...” she trails off, and a sweet blush spreads over her face.

“You dance like a princess.”

“In this fairy tale castle I *feel* like a princess. I’m half expecting these glorious shoes Jasmine gave me to turn to

glass at midnight so I can run down the staircase and lose one.” She laughs in delight as I twirl her.

I’d be happy to hold her in my arms for the rest of the night. I’m waiting for the obstacle to appear in our path as in all good fairy tales. I don’t want it, but I’m waiting for it. We can’t possibly just ride off into the sunset without delay ... or can we?

“If you lose a slipper, I’ll surely find you and replace it,” I tell her.

I stop dancing and lean in to taste her cherry red lips. Delicious. I want to devour her, but I manage to restrain myself and give her a simple kiss before pulling back and twirling her in another circle that makes her laugh again, the sound beautiful and echoing through the room.

The song ends and I want to keep dancing, but it’s time for a drink. We move to the bar and grab a couple of glasses of wine before we move toward the open patio doors. It’s cold in Seattle but the large patio is covered with heaters. A few other couples are out enjoying the bite in the air to cool off from dancing, staying close enough to the heaters to not get too cold.

“What’s happening between us?” Noel asks. She looks scared, but accepting, at the same time.

“I don’t know. I know I’m happy to be right here with you, happy to see where this can go. I don’t want you to go back to Boston.” She doesn’t realize I’ve never said these words to another woman, doesn’t understand the significance of them, but I’m very aware. I hope she’ll give us a real shot.

“I don’t want to go. I’m not sure what’s going to happen, but I think I want to stay close. I love how the kids are thriving, and to be honest, I’m starting to fall in love with this family. I know they technically aren’t my family, but they are my sister’s, and they are the kids’ family, and I feel like they want me to be here. It’s foolish, but I feel like I belong.”

“It’s not foolish at all,” I tell her. I pull her close and kiss her again. She sighs against me, and I’m more than ready to leave this place and hold her tight without anyone looking ... without clothes. I’m obsessed with Noel, and I want to show her how much.

A shuffling sounds beside us and I turn to see Alexandra. My body goes on instant alert. Why is she here? This was my fear earlier, the other shoe dropping. We can’t ride off into the sunset without some wrenches being thrown into our happily ever after. If only it would be that easy.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Miss Dawson?” Alexandra asks. “Your hands are all over a man who belongs to me.” Noel immediately stiffens and gives me an unsure look.

“I, in no way, belong to you,” I say, not allowing Noel to free herself from my embrace. “Our relationship ended six months ago, Alexandra. I’m sorry if you can’t accept that.”

“How can you say that to me?” Alexandra asks, raising her voice. None of the people on the balcony take their eyes off the soap opera unfolding before them. Of course Alexandra wants to make a scene. It’s not something I’d have thought she’d be willing to do a few months ago. She used to have more class than that.

“If you can’t act in a civilized manner, I’ll have to ask you to leave,” I say tightly. Alexandra is embarrassing Noel, and I’m not about to put up with that.

“This isn’t your place, Ryder, it’s Joseph’s. You don’t have the right to ask me to leave.”

“Trust me, he’ll ask you to leave if you cause a scene. Joseph believes in family. He also can’t stand liars.”

“Maybe everyone in the room would like to hear who you really are, Ryder,” Alexandra says, not backing away, and not taking my hints to stop.

“I have nothing to hide. You’re the one making a fool of yourself, and also making the guests here uncomfortable,” I say, stepping in front of Noel in a protective manner.

“They won’t think so highly of you when they learn you’ve abandoned the child I’m carrying.”

This statement causes a gasp around us. My fury rises to an entirely new level as I shoot a searing look at her. How had I ever been foolish enough to date her?

“If you were pregnant with *my* child, Alexandra, you *and* your baby bump would be a lot farther along. Don’t even think you can blame an unplanned pregnancy on me. I’d be delighted to see the DNA results. And so will my lawyer.”

She takes a step back — a very wise move indeed. Noel tries to pull away from me, trying to escape, but I’m not letting her go. Certainly not because of the spoiled and twisted woman standing in front of us.

“You’re a fool, Ryder. You made promises to me, and I’d have made the perfect wife for you. I have a name and a

pedigree that you can be proud of. And I'd have turned my head when you had your sad little indiscretions, as men like you always do. Do you honestly think this *peasant* will do the same?"

I'm rarely surprised, but I have to admit I wasn't expecting this level of animosity from Alexandra. We didn't click at all, and when we parted, I thought she'd been fine with it, like I was. Obviously, I was wrong.

"I feel sorry for you, Alexandra. Sorry for the bitterness and the darkness that seems to drive you. Yes, I was there myself. But I'm trying to let go of my demons. You might try doing the same."

She growls — actually *growls* — at me before turning her full attention to Noel. After giving her a high-bred sneer, Alexandra gives these words of wisdom: "Don't think you won't be discarded just as easily as I was. He grows bored quickly, and you're not in his class ... not even close." The woman then turns on her four-inch heel and glides from the balcony. Good riddance.

When I turn back to Noel, her cheeks are void of color and she appears on the verge of tears. I pull her close and hold her.

"I'm so sorry you had to witness that, Noel. But please don't let her ruin our night. She isn't worth it."

"What she says is true, though. I'm nothing special. I'm just a girl from a small town near Boston with nothing to offer. We both know this is a fantasy for someone like me. I can't compete, and I have no desire to play the games that you and your friends seem to be so fond of," she says before taking a breath. "I can't imagine ever saying the horrible things that

woman just said, or of making a spectacle of myself in a room full of my peers. Yet even though I don't want to be the center of attention, that's exactly what just happened. I've been forced into a drama I didn't ask to be involved in."

"You're absolutely right. What she did is unforgiveable, and I should've stopped it sooner. I keep asking for your forgiveness when I never should've put you in the situations in the first place," I say, "and that pains me. I hope your kind heart keeps accepting the apologies, because no matter how many times I say them, I mean them each and every time."

As her eyes well up, I want to kiss the tears away and make her happy again. That's definitely a first for me. I've never fallen prey to women's tears. These are real ones, though. I know she's hurting, and I know it's up to me to make it right.

"I feel so insignificant in your world, Ryder."

"You can't imagine how valuable you are, so much more than anyone else in this place. I've never met anyone like you before, and everything about you draws me in."

"I don't know what to think about this," she says before ducking her head. "But I want to go now. She effectively killed the magic of this ball."

She tries pulling away, but I cup her cheek and run my thumb along her satin skin, then bend down and brush my lips across hers.

"You're beautiful, Noel, beautiful inside and out, and I'm not letting you leave like this. This night will end on a positive note."

"I don't know, Ryder," she says.

“If you truly want to leave, we can do that, but you have to give me at least one more dance. Let me try to make you smile again.” The anger I’d been feeling toward Alexandra is already disappearing. I can’t hold on to any negative emotion for too long when I’m in Noel’s presence. She brings that much light into my life.

“You make me want to stay, Ryder,” she tells me, allowing me to relax a little more.

“Then stay. It’s truly that simple.”

“Even if I know one night can’t possibly change anything?”

“One night can shape a lifetime, Noel.”

“I’m not going to bed with you tonight, Ryder, not when I’m this confused.”

I pull her closer to me. “Ah, my beautiful Noel, never say *never*,” I tell her with a smile. “For now, let’s just dance.” I stop speaking and spin her in a circle, hoping to make her forget about anything but the two of us.

Once Alexandra departs the party and the melodrama of the evening dissipates, the people quickly forget about her and her lies. They simply await the next big scandal to entertain them for a few minutes. As I hold Noel tight in my arms, I feel more at peace than I ever have before. It’s time to admit that I don’t want to let her get away. I need to come to terms with that fact — and sooner, rather than later. If I take too long, there’s no doubt in my mind I’ll lose her forever ... and that would be a true tragedy.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Noel

I can't sleep. I'm more excited about Christmas than the children are — how is that possible — and this year is more intense than most. The last few days have been enchanting. True, Ryder is playing the gentleman, dang his hide. He's paid me every attention but the one I most want in the days after the fundraising ball. His goodnight kisses aren't enough. But I'll take what I can get.

Yes, I've told him I won't go back to bed with him again, but after being in his arms for hours while he caresses my skin, kisses my lips, my neck, my shoulders — well, a girl can change her mind. I think he's trying to prove he has patience too. I don't like it.

I also won't beg him to take me, especially not after I've so emphatically told him I don't want him. Oh, the tangled web I've weaved. Or is it *woven*?

It doesn't help my nerves when the grandfather clock in the hall chimes midnight. I never will get any rest. I decide to climb from bed and sneak into the kitchen for a cup of herbal tea. Chamomile sounds just about right.

When I crack my door open and start to tiptoe down the hall, I hear another sound, then I see Layla standing there.

“What are you doing awake?” I ask my niece.

“I can’t sleep, Auntie. I’m afraid Santa won’t find us here.”
The poor little girl seems to be on the verge of tears.

“Oh, baby, of course he’ll find us. Why don’t you come into the kitchen with me? I’ll get us something to drink that will help us go back to sleep. And when we wake up ... you’ll see the magic.”

We think we’re sneaky as we creep downstairs, but the rest of the household appears to be awake too. Rowan looks up with a guilty grin, as does Ryder, who with one glance makes my toes curl. For a man who doesn’t live in the house, he sure seems to be here all of the time. Is it to torture me? I certainly think so.

“It seems we all have the same idea,” I say as Layla and I join them at the large island in the center of the kitchen. Even Jasmine’s here, bustling about.

“I’m always this way on Christmas,” she says. “I tried doing it in Florida last year, and it sucked. I love Florida, don’t get me wrong, but it’s not my favorite place to be for Christmas. It’s too warm. Even the cool days in Miami are too warm for Christmas. Plus, I miss my family too much to be away when Santa circles the world. If my friends could be here with me, it would be perfect. Maybe sometime I’ll get them all out here.”

Jasmine looks as if she’s been sipping espressos all day. She’s jittery as she makes herself a hot chocolate with lots of marshmallows.

“Is there a special man in Florida?” I ask her. Jasmine actually blushes and I’m very intrigued. “There is!”

“No!” she says much too quickly for me to believe her. I grin even bigger. “Okay, there might be a guy, but I don’t know where it’s going, and don’t know if I want it to go somewhere. It’s very confusing,” she tells me. “And I really don’t want my dad to know. If he knows, Gramps knows, and if he knows, I’m going to be married off and pregnant in about two seconds.”

This makes me laugh as I stir my tea. “Really?”

She laughs. “Maybe not that quick, but it isn’t much of an exaggeration. I swear my gramps has magical powers. When he decides someone will wed, they do every single time. I’m not kidding ... the man has a hundred percent track record ... not exaggerating. He’s never failed when he’s up to his matchmaking.”

“Do you really think he’d matchmake with you?” I ask.

“I’m twenty-five now, practically an old maid in his eyes. My gramps likes babies in this family, and he wants a revolving door of them. The next generation is at the table. Luckily, you’ve come into our lives and that will appease him for a little while ... but not for too long,” she says. She then looks over at Ryder. “Of course I have a feeling more babies will be coming soon, so that might take me off of the hot plate for a little while.”

I blush as I look at Ryder who doesn’t appear to have heard her say this ... thankfully.

“Let’s slow down here. I’m afraid you might have some Gramps mojo in you,” I whisper, making her laugh some more. She finishes her hot chocolate and rises to make another cup.

“Maybe I do, and I don’t think you’d hate it as much as you think you would,” she says with another wink. Thankfully, Ryder interrupts.

“I haven’t been this excited about Christmas since I was a young boy,” Ryder says with a laugh as he moves closer to us, a laugh I’d be happy to hear every day for the rest of my life. I’m not sure if I really feel that or if Jasmine’s gotten into my head.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into me,” Amy says as she walks into the room. “I never stay up so late, but I can’t sleep tonight.”

“We’re all here with you,” I say as she comes in, sits down, and starts a cup of hot chocolate just like her daughter. She adds a bunch of marshmallows too.

When we finish our tea and hot chocolate, Lucas enters the room. “I’ve been looking all over for you guys,” he says. “Come quickly!”

I’m concerned by the urgency in his voice. I hope nothing’s wrong, not on this day of days. We all follow Lucas down the hallway and pile in behind him when he disappears inside a door. I gasp at the sight of Santa stacking presents beneath a massive tree. I can’t believe how real the fellow looks — this is no mall Santa. I turn to look at Layla, who’s beaming.

“Oh, my goodness, it looks as if you’ve caught me,” Santa says with a chuckle. Layla immediately runs across the room and flings herself into his arms.

“I knew you were real, Santa,” she says as two tears trickle down her cheeks.

He returns her hug. “Of course I’m real, my beautiful Layla,” he tells her.

“You know my name,” she gasps in awe.

“I’m sorry, Layla,” Rowan says to his sister. “I was wrong. Santa is real,” he says as he moves over and hugs his sister.

I’m so happy with the way my nephew has changed and grown during the time we’ve spent at the Anderson mansion. The boy’s going to become a fine young man ... and it’s taken all of us to help him heal. I’m a part of it, but so is Lucas and Amy and Jasmine and Isaiah ... and Ryder. Layla gives her brother the most joyful of smiles, but she quickly grabs Santa again.

“I have a special gift for you because you’ve been such a good girl this year,” Santa says to her. I recognize the gift I snuck beneath the tree the night before — the one from the package I received a few weeks ago. How does Santa know what’s in it? Does he know who sent it? I suspect my questions aren’t going to be answered.

Layla gasps as Santa hands her the present wrapped in shiny paper, and she looks at it reverently before opening it without damaging the wrapping. Inside the box is a heart-shaped locket with a picture of her mom and dad inside. Santa places it around her neck and says, “Your parents love you very much, little Layla, and they’re always watching out for you.”

I’m overcome with emotion, and I turn toward Lucas with gratitude shining in my eyes. It has to be from him, though he seems to be as surprised as I am. But still, this is all because of him, and he’s truly given the best gift he can to my niece —

the gift of love from her parents, and the belief that they're still looking out for us.

“Thank you so much,” Layla says as she throws her arms around Santa again. I wipe a tear from my cheek, and after giving Lucas a hug and an affectionate kiss, I retrieve my niece from Santa's embrace and sit down next to her. Santa passes out the rest of his gifts and then quietly slips away.

“Aren't you going to open your present, Rowan?” I ask as the boy places his large box on his lap without tearing the wrapping.

“I thought we had to wait till morning,” he says, as if he's afraid of what might be in the box.

“Since Santa brought these, it's okay to open them,” I tell him. “We'll save the rest until morning.”

My nephew finally begins taking off the wrapping. When he pulls out the quilt inside, my eyes overflow with tears. And for once Rowan doesn't hold back his own tears. I have no idea how this gift has been pulled off.

Last year my sister had been trying desperately to get a quilt finished for each of the children before Christmas. She finished Layla's, but she'd only gotten halfway through with Rowan's. I don't know how to sew, and when I found the project Rowan had been with me. I offered to take it to a seamstress to have it finished, but he'd grown angry and insisted that he didn't need it — didn't want it.

So the unfinished project had been tucked away. Who'd found it ... all the way back in Boston? Who'd completed it? Do we really have a Christmas angel? The quilt is sewn with

pieces from his first baby blanket and his first outfits. And there are pictures of Rowan and his parents on some of the squares, and quotes from his mother. This truly is a piece of his mom that will comfort him for the rest of his life. But who found it? Who completed it?

Again I look at Lucas, but there's nothing in his expression that shows he's behind it. And Ryder looks as in awe of the quilt as I am.

"It's wonderful, Rowan," I finally say, moving over to my nephew and pulling him to my side. The lovely quilt falls over both of us.

"It is," he chokes out. "I miss her so much."

"So do I, darling," I tell him.

"But I don't want to be sad anymore. I don't want to be angry. I just want to remember the good, like in this picture — last baseball season when we won the championship. Mom and Dad rushed out on the field, and you took the picture." It's a photo with his dad holding Rowan high in the air, and his mom hugging them both. All of them are bursting with joy.

"I think nothing will make them happier than that," I say. There's a moment of silence as the entire family comes to terms with their loss, and then Ryder stands up and moves toward the piano.

"How about some Christmas songs before we turn in for the night?"

Ryder sits down at the piano and starts playing, and everyone joins in on a mesmerizing version of *Silent Night*. Lucas moves over to the couch to sit between Layla and

Rowan when I walk over to sit on the piano bench beside Ryder.

After a few rounds of Christmas carols, I notice my niece is nodding off. It's time for bed. It's well after midnight now, and we'll all be lucky to get a few hours of sleep before excitement gets us out of bed again for a holiday breakfast and more gifts.

"I think we'll get you tucked in now," I tell Layla. "When you wake up, it will officially be Christmas morning and we'll have a lot to do."

"But I'm not tired, Auntie," Layla says. A loud yawn belies these brave words.

"I know you're not, but we'll try to get some sleep anyway. I'll read you another bedtime story."

Layla rubs her eyes and reluctantly agrees. Ryder walks with us to Layla's room. Before the story's even halfway finished, the little girl is sound asleep.

"You've done an amazing job with these children," Ryder tells me as we pause together at my bedroom door.

"I love them more than anything. I wish my sister could be around to watch them through the years, but I'm grateful that I can at least help them grow since their parents can't."

"Don't you see that their parents *are* here?" Ryder tells me. "They're here each time the children laugh, each time something good happens, and each time a tear falls. I know your sister wouldn't want anyone to raise them but you. You're incredible."

"Thank you for giving us this healing Christmas," I say. Ryder reaches down to brush his lips against mine.

“Thank you for showing me there’s more to life than just work.”

“Do you mean that, Ryder, or do you just say it because you think it’s what I want or need to hear?” I’ve never felt more vulnerable than I do right now.

“I’ll admit I’ve been confused, but I’m not just spouting lines,” he tells me.

I stand for several moments before taking a step forward and putting my hands on his face. How I love the slight scratchiness of the stubble on his fine jaw.

“Please come inside with me, Ryder.” I whisper the words, but there’s no doubt he hears them. He opens my door without releasing his grip on me. How can I possibly let go of this man? I have no earthly idea. But it’s too late to dwell on it now.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Noel

Ryder lifts and carries me to the bed. His eyes are burning with a need that sends waves of pleasure through me ... and he isn't touching me yet. It's crazy to think I've fought him for so much of my time here. Being in his arms feels right, feels like right where I belong.

"I've missed seeing you like this," he says with a groan as he begins stripping his clothes away. The sight makes my mouth water.

"Then why haven't you shared a bed with me in the last few days?" I ask in a voice I hope sounds casual. But I know I fail miserably.

"Because I want to show you — and myself — that this is more than just sex; we can *be* more." I don't know how to reply. I feel the same, but my fear prevents me from acknowledging it. Plus, now isn't the time to talk. It's time to make love — to show how we feel instead of talking it to death.

Ryder must come to the same conclusion because he climbs on the bed and straddles me, trapping my legs and holding me captive. He grips the bottom hem of my shirt and lifts it, blinding me for a moment as he pulls it over my head.

Next he unclasps the front of my bra, then slides the straps down my shoulders, trailing his fingers across my skin, leaving a blaze of fire in their wake. He tosses the bra aside and runs his hands back up my arms, across my neck, and down, only stopping when he's cupping my swollen breasts.

“Mmm, you're so responsive. I love the way your nipples reach for my palms, the way your legs quiver beneath mine. I love that hitch in your breathing, and the embers glowing in your eyes.”

He moves his hands lower to caress my stomach, but quickly brings them back up and strokes my cheek, then leans down, takes my lips, and nips as I sigh. Before I can grab hold of him, he drags his lips tenderly across my jaw and down my neck, then takes his time licking each of my nipples. He slowly moves down my stomach.

While his lips work their magic on my skin, he undoes my slacks and begins pushing them away as he tastes my thighs, my calves, and even the soles of my feet while he frees me from the rest of my clothing.

He begins kissing his way back up my body, slowly, reverently, thoroughly, leaving me quivering and weak beneath his touch. By the time he sucks one peaked nipple into his warm mouth, I'm ready to explode. I arch up from the bed in ecstasy. While he laves my breasts, my stomach tightens, my core heats, and I grow agonizingly wet. Ryder is preparing me, tormenting me, and delighting me all at once.

“I want you inside me, Ryder. Please.” I have no qualms about begging. I need him.

“Are you mine, Noel — *only* mine?” he asks as he continues circling my breasts with his tongue and hands. I’m most certainly his to command.

My response is a moan of acceptance. I grasp his back, and the fine sheen of sweat coating his skin from the heat of our foreplay turns me on even more — if that’s possible. I brought him to this state by simply responding to him, and I feel desirable, wanted, and seductive ... but I want more. I wriggle beneath him, opening my thighs and pushing up. I need him now, and he needs me.

“I’ve never wanted a woman as much as I want you, Noel. Just you — only you,” he growls.

“Yes, Ryder. Only you.”

He takes hold of my hip and poises himself at my core, then dips inside of me, but gives me only an inch. I whimper in frustration. Finally, he bends forward and kisses me with such tenderness, such ... love that tears spring to my eyes. I reach for him, wanting to deepen the kiss, but he pulls back and looks at me with burning passion.

I can’t speak past the lump in my throat. Ryder, at long last, pushes forward, slipping inside me in a slow, controlled thrust that opens me fully to him. I cry out when our hips are pressed together and the two of us become one.

“I can barely control myself when I’m with you, when I’m inside you,” he moans. His eyes are dilated, his breathing heavy as he rests within me.

“Then lose control, Ryder. Lose yourself in me.”

His fingers tighten on my hip, and he gives a low rumble from his chest. Yes, this is what I want. This slow and beautiful lovemaking has made me his again, and now I want to finish with heat and uncontrollable passion.

With a low groan, he pulls back and thrusts forward again, this time harder, shaking me roughly but exquisitely. I'm closing in on the ultimate pleasure. And then there are no more pauses, no more holding back. He begins moving faster, plunging in and pulling nearly out before surging forward again.

Each time he sinks within me, the pleasure intensifies, bringing me higher and higher, closer and closer. Greedy for more, greedy for it all, I grip his back and wrap one leg around him as I meet his thrust for thrust. I keep forgetting to breathe, but we find a perfect rhythm.

We crash together, and my entire body goes up in flames. Wave after wave of wild sensation washes through me and encompasses every cell of my body. Yet he doesn't let up, and the explosions within me grow more powerful. A cry is ripped from me.

Ryder's shout of ecstasy joins mine as he slams deep inside me, his body shaking from the power of his release. Both of us are exhausted ... and well sated. We take a long while to get our breathing under control.

"I'm sorry. I have to be crushing you," he murmurs before turning over to lie beside me.

"That ... that was ... indescribable," I whisper.

What am I feeling now? I know for sure walking away from this man will mean leaving a piece of myself behind.

“I agree, Noel. Give me a few minutes to recover and we’ll see what comes next.”

“I don’t think I can do that again,” I tell him. “Though I’m willing to give it my best shot.” He laughs, shocking me at the joy radiating from him.

“That sounds like a challenge, Ms. Dawson,” he says before climbing back on top of me. “And I never could resist a challenge.”

He kisses me, this time hard and long. And to my amazement, and utter delight, his manhood hardens against my core.

“Yes ...”

That’s the last of our talking for the rest of this Christmas dawn. All that can stop us now is the kids pounding on the door. So far, this is my merriest Christmas ever ... and I hope it continues forever ...

Chapter Twenty-Six

Noel

I look around the mess of a room, wrapping paper everywhere. There are ribbons and bows in places near and far. How did a bow manage to get up on the painting on the wall? That must be some aggressive unwrapping.

None of the mess matters. What counts are the smiles on Rowan and Layla's faces. They're filled with joy as they laugh and not only play with all of their new goodies, but also watch as others unwrap gifts and thank those around them for the thoughtful presents.

"I'm so glad you're here." I smile as Lucas takes a seat next to me on the couch. Ryder's sitting on the floor next to Rowan as the two of them study the Ghostbusters Lego gift set, lights included, planning on putting it together.

"I'm glad too, Lucas. You've been so kind to me, and it's very clear to see how much you already love Rowan and Layla. Thank you." I'm having to fight tears a whole lately. "I miss my sister all of the time but being here makes it better. I think we'd all be sad at home right now, thinking about what we're missing instead of what we've now gained."

"I've thought about all of this a lot these past few weeks," he says, taking my hand. "It felt like being hit with a sledgehammer when I found out I had a daughter I'll never

know, and it's strange to miss a person I never met, but having the kids here, helps. It's not just them, though, it's you as well. Having you here not only helps me feel I'm getting to know my daughter, but I'm very much growing to love you because you are great. I'd be honored if you moved here. It's not just the kids, it's you as well. I love how close you've become with Jasmine, love that my beautiful children have shown no jealousy at knowing another sibling was out there. I'm not sure I'd have given so much grace had someone come years later and told me my father had another child before we were born. I'd like to think I'd have handled it with grace, but that's a difficult thing for a child to accept."

"I didn't really know my father. He left when I was six years old. My sister obviously didn't know you, but we both knew our mother. She might've made choices we didn't get to be part of, but she was a wonderful mother, and she loved us very much. She did the best she could with what she knew. I guess this isn't easy for any of us, but I think we're making it work," I tell him.

"I think you're handling it with grace. I love how you put Rowan and Layla first. The thing is though, that children do grow up. They move away from home, they fall in love, and they make their own families. It's good to devote ourselves to our children, but we also have to think about ourselves. I love my family more than I love myself, but I also realize that I have to do what makes me and my wife happy too. It's okay for you to do the same. Love these kids, help them, but don't be afraid to take help with raising them, and don't be afraid to think of your own happiness while you're doing it."

I smile at him. “I’m happy. It’s taking time, but I do feel joy. Right now, seeing the children smile, laugh, and open up, brings me more joy than anything else. My own happiness is wrapped up in them. I understand it can’t last forever. I understand I’m going to have to find my own purpose in life that has nothing to do with them, but that can come later,” I tell him.

“You can do both at the same time, Noel. You can be focused on them and yourself at the same time. If you stay here, you’ll be surrounded with family, with love, and with help. We’ll never try to override you.” He laughs before holding up a hand. I wait.

“Okay, my family can be overwhelming, so I can’t promise we won’t come in like a full eighteen-wheeler, but if you tell us to back down, we will. We truly do want you to be as happy as the children are. We want the best for all three of you.”

“I believe that,” I tell him. “I’ve seen nothing but that since we arrived.”

“Rowan told me it’s difficult for him to be in the house he shared with his parents. He said it’s a constant reminder that his parents aren’t there. I’m not telling you this to make you feel guilty, just saying that sometimes shaking up your life is what it takes to help you heal when something tragic happens.”

“I’ve thought more and more that it would be better for us to relocate. It’s hard for me to make that final decision though,” I admit.

“I understand that. Maybe you need to go back and see the house, see how it makes you feel. We can go with you, or we

can watch the kids while you do it on your own. If you choose to do that, I promise you nobody will try to keep the kids from you. If you need to take a journey on your own, know that your place is now here and you're always welcome."

"I've thought about that as well. I decided to wait until after the holidays to make a decision. We're all filled with so many emotions this time of year. My sister and her husband died right before Thanksgiving so I'm not sure we'll ever feel full joy this time of year. But then again, this holiday season has been beautiful instead of tragic."

"I'm glad we've come together and brought joy to each other," Lucas says.

"Aunt Noel, look," Layla says as she jumps up and rushes to me.

"What is it?" I ask.

Layla holds a fairy toy in her hand. She does something with it, and then it flies into the air and circles above us. Both Layla and I look in amazement at the toy.

"Wow, that's really great, Layla," I tell her, meaning it. I look at Lucas. "Toys really have evolved since I was little."

"If you think they've evolved since you were a kid, imagine how I feel," he says with a laugh.

"You played with Lincoln Logs," Ryder says from across the room.

"There's nothing wrong with Lincoln Logs," Lucas says. "We even made our own Lincoln Logs from the trees. Now, *that* was fun."

“I want to do that,” Rowan says, looking fascinated.

“We’ll go cut some wood this afternoon and I’ll teach you,”
Ryder says.

“Who wants hot chocolate?” Amy asks as she comes into the room with a tray filled with a large pot, cups, and all sorts of goodies.

Everyone wants the tasty treat. When it’s my turn to make a cup, I’m fascinated that we not only have hot chocolate, but lots of ways to spice it up. There are peppermint sticks, chocolate curls, marshmallows, cinnamon sticks, toffee, and more. I make the best hot chocolate I’ve ever had and sit in the corner of the room and watch the joy all around me.

I do miss my sister more than anything, but if I’m being honest, this might be the best Christmas I’ve ever had. I feel guilty about this, but there’s so much joy in this room, so much love. The spirit is real as everyone laughs, sings, and shares. The presents are great, but the love and Christmas spirit are what’s making this such a lovely holiday. I don’t want to give this up.

I have no idea what’s going to happen between Ryder and me, but I do realize it will have nothing to do with my decision on whether I’m moving here or not. I don’t want to admit even to myself that I’ve made the decision to move here, but I think I already have. I can’t take the kids from this family ... and to be honest, I don’t want to take myself away from them either. I’m falling in love with more than a man, I’m falling in love with an entire family. If it does work out with Ryder, that’s just the cherry on top of it all.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Noel

So this is home, at least until I close up my sister's house and find a place for myself here in the area. It's indeed a new year, and I don't think it's possible to be happier. The children are off doing their school lessons, Ryder and Lucas are discussing business ... and I'm wandering. I have so much to do ... and yet nothing at all.

I need to go back to Boston, but I'm scared to do it. Why? I think if I do I'll run headlong into that pain I've managed to push back for the last month. The second I step into my sister's house again, I'm afraid the pain will wash all over me and I'm not going to be able to keep myself from breaking down.

It doesn't matter how much it will hurt me, I'm going to do it, I'm going to face it. I'm too strong to bury my head in the sand. Maybe I'm afraid to leave Ryder while I do this mission as well. Things are good between us. Is this a fluke or is it real?

Thinking of Ryder sets my heart hammering and makes my head fuzzy. Against all odds and obstacles, he seems to feel the same way I do. How is this possible? A month ago, this would've seemed like a royal mistake. But the children are thriving, and the house in Boston is fraught with too many memories, a constant sense of the loss of my sister. I need to

be here, but I can't fully be here until I close the doors on the past.

I need to remedy this sooner rather than later. Maybe I'll get a job here or go back to school and get a master's degree. For now, though, I'm simply walking the halls of this huge house. Perhaps I can get a ride into town, but I'll be wandering around the town all alone, just as I am in this house.

I'm not alone for long, though. Her negative presence is felt before I turn a corner and see her standing at the end of the hall, looking smug and perfect as usual. After the fundraiser, I didn't think I'd see her again. Unfortunately, I hoped for too much.

"Are you nice and cozy, Noel?" Alexandra asks. She seems smug like she knows something, like she has something she can't wait to spring on me.

"I'm very comfortable. Thank you for asking," I say sweetly as if she's truly asking, not being a sarcastic wench. This throws her for a moment, but she recovers quickly.

"Do you understand how selfish you are?" she asks.

"No, I can't say I do. Why don't you tell me why you believe that?" I could walk away from her, but I want this to be over. I want her to stop attacking me. Maybe if I let her have her say, she'll do just that.

"You moved in here on your dead sister's name. This family doesn't like you, they don't want to know you. They put up with you so they can do right by their family, which doesn't include you. They're only nice to you because you have custody of the kids. If you didn't, they'd have nothing to

do with you. But you don't mind using the name of your sister or these kids you proclaim to love. If you really loved them, you'd leave them here with their rightful family and be long gone. I'm sure they've paid you off already. That should tell you right there that you aren't wanted. They want the kids and nothing more from you, but they're too kind to tell you to get out. Do you have so little pride in yourself that you're okay with this?"

I wait for the knives to stab me in the gut at her words. They don't hit. I'm not sure why. Is it because I don't believe her words? Or is it because she doesn't matter to me. Her opinion means nothing. If she's trying to get a reaction out of me, it isn't working. I'm actually pretty proud of myself for this.

After a moment passes, I smile at her. "Are you waiting for me to start crying and run away like you've changed how I think about myself?" I ask.

I've again shocked her. She gapes at me.

"What is wrong with you? You're not wanted here," she says. "Leave."

"I'm wanted here a lot more than you are, Alexandra. I'm sorry if that hurts you. I'm sorry things didn't work out for you the way you hoped they would. I'm not sure what will happen between Ryder and me, but I know nothing will happen between him and you. If you accept that, you'll be happier and won't feel the need to attack me. I could be a jerk and say a bunch of horrible things to you. I could feel so badly about myself that I believe your words. I'm not going to do either." I

pause for a moment then keep talking before she can say something else.

“I am the children’s aunt, not their mother. I will make mistakes, but I will never use them. I won’t use this family. This conversation has helped me though. I’m not going away, but I do have to let go of the past in order to move forward. I hope you can do the same. I hope you can find your own happiness.” I turn and start to walk away. She rushes up to me and grabs my arm, spinning me around.

“How dare you speak to me this way. Do you know who I am?” she snaps.

I shake my head. “I know your name, but other than that I don’t really know much about you. I would’ve loved to get to know you, but with how you’ve spoken to me, I don’t want to do that. I mean it, though, I hope you let go of your anger and move on with your life. My presence in this family should have nothing to do with your own happiness. This is a big world and we can both be in it without hurting each other. You’re beautiful, talented, and obviously smart. If I were you, I’d focus on that instead of this anger you feel. It will get you a lot further in life.”

I pull my arm from hers and she takes a step back, looking like I’ve just slapped her. She opens her mouth but doesn’t speak, then closes it again. Her eyes fill with tears, and she spins around and rushes away.

I start moving down the hallway, a lot on my mind. I hear voices and, though I’m not trying to eavesdrop, I hear Lucas speaking.

“You and Noel are spending a lot more time together,” Lucas says. “I’m glad the problems seem to have evaporated.” I smile. I realize no good ever comes from listening in on somebody, but I need a little ego boost after that confrontation with Alexandra. I’ll leave in just a moment.

“Yes, we have,” Ryder replies. “She’s been very good company, and she loves Rowan and Layla so much. She’s good with them.” Okay, so it isn’t a declaration of love, but it’s still pretty nice.

I decide now is a good time to leave. If I try to hear more, I might hear something I don’t want to hear. I also need to head home for a little while. I’m sure both Lucas and Ryder will try to talk me out of it. Lucas has said he’ll watch the kids if that’s what I want to do, but I know this family now. I know they’ll insist someone come with me.

This isn’t a journey I want to take with anyone else. It’s something I need to do for me and for the kids. I need to think. I need to let go of my past, and I need to figure out what Ryder means to me. I know being in a relationship with him won’t be easy, so I need to decide if it’s something I’m willing to give a try. I can’t do that if I’m with someone else. The best thing for me to do is to sneak off. The family will take care of the kids, and we won’t be apart too long. It might only take me a few days ... or it might take weeks. I’ll take the time for me to decide what comes next in my life.

I make my way to my room and start packing my things, which doesn’t take long. I go to find the kids. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, but I know I have to do it. The children

are clearly benefiting from being with the Andersons, and they'll be fine while I'm gone.

Though being away from the kids for even a little while is going to rip me apart, I can't take them with me for this part of my journey — they're doing too well.

I find my nephew first. He's in his room, looking so handsome and happy. He's smiling every day now. This simply solidifies my decision. He's a new young man now, someone completely different than he was in Boston, missing his mom and dad so much he never smiled.

“Can I talk to you for a minute, darling?”

He beams at me. “Of course, Aunt Noel.”

“I have to leave for a little while, but I want to let you know that you can call me anytime, and I'll be back for you soon.” Okay, maybe I could've said this a little better. I blame my muddled brain.

Rowan stares at me. “Why do you have to leave?”

“I have to go back to our house and straighten things out. We're going to stay here like you and your sister want, but we can't do that until I handle things back home. It scares me to do it, but we have to face our demons, or they'll always come back to haunt us. I don't want Boston to haunt any of us anymore.” I'm fighting tears as I speak as much truth with him as I'm willing to share right now.

“I understand,” he says in way too mature a voice for a ten-year-old boy. He looks a little sad, though. “Please don't take too long, it won't be the same here without you,” he adds, sounding more like a child than the young man he's becoming.

“I’m proud of you, Rowan. You’ve grown so much since we arrived here. I know your parents are looking down on you and are very happy about who you are.”

“I love you, Aunt Noel. Please come back fast.”

“I don’t want to leave for long, I promise. I really don’t. But right now, this is what’s best for me so I can be the best aunt possible,” I say. The ache is growing worse by the second. Goodbyes are never easy, whether they’re for one day or one month.

“You aren’t leaving forever, right? You still want us, don’t you?”

I clutch him to me and hold on tight. This is the last thing I want him to believe. “I want you more than anything. I also want what’s best for you. I swear.” He’s silent for a few seconds, his young eyes full of too much knowledge about things he should know nothing of.

“Promise again that you won’t be away for long,” he says.

I love hearing these words. It makes me feel as if I haven’t completely failed. “I promise, Rowan,” I tell him. “And that’s a promise I guarantee I’ll keep.”

“Aunt Noel, you aren’t ready for dinner,” Layla says as she comes into her brother’s room.

“I won’t be able to make it tonight, sweetie,” I tell my niece.

“Are you not feeling good?” she asks.

“Not really, baby girl. But I’m working on feeling better.” I smile as I say this. It’s very true. I am working on feeling

better ... much better. I hope this trip will do just that.

“Can I do anything to help, Auntie?”

“Isn’t that a question I’m supposed to be asking you?” I say as I pull my niece onto my lap.

“You’re the one who tells me grown-ups need help sometimes too,” Layla reminds me.

“You’re growing into such a beautiful young woman,” I tell her, hoping and praying I can take a small amount of credit for that.

“I hope you feel better soon.” A tear runs down Layla’s cheek, and my heart shatters for her. We’ve had an emotional year, and for a little while, it feels like all is good. I don’t want to bring any pain back to our lives. The sooner I get this trip over with, the better it will be for all of us.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m feeling just fine. I need to take a short trip, and then I’ll be perfect again. I promise, I’ll feel better for the rest of our lives. Don’t you worry at all.”

After a little more convincing the kids that I’ll be back soon, I hug them both then scurry away. If I don’t leave this place right now, I’ll talk myself out of it, and it’s obvious I need to take this trip ... and take it alone. I have to run out in the dark or I’m going to have a lot more people trying to stop me. This needs to happen and it needs to happen now.

I grab my bag, then make it to the taxi and away from the mansion before I allow any more tears to fall. I’ve survived so many disasters in my life, and I’ll survive this too. I’m grateful for the money Jasmine showed me that the family gave me. It’s how I can afford a last-minute airline ticket. I go straight to

the airport and finally let out my first breath of relief when the plane lifts from the tarmac.

I'm going home ... my old home. Hopefully I won't be there long ... hopefully I'll be creating a new home very soon.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ryder

“Where’s your Aunt Noel?” I ask Rowan as the children come into the dining room.

“She left, Uncle Ryder. Didn’t she tell you?”

“Left? Where did she go?”

“She told us she had to go back and say goodbye to the past, but we don’t really understand why,” Rowan replies.

“She tried to smile, but she looked really sad. She did promise to come back, but I’m a little scared. I haven’t seen her so sad since ... well, since ... you know.” The boy bows his head and looks at the table.

I’m rendered speechless. What happened? I take a moment and take a deep breath so I don’t scare Rowan. But he might know something else.

“Did she say something happened that made her leave?”

Rowan shakes his head. “She just said it’s time to say goodbye to the past,” he says with a shrug.

Jasmine walks into the room with a smile. “She told me she needed to see the house, needed to make some decisions.”

“What do you mean make decisions?” I demand.

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. I’m just telling you what she messaged me. The jerk didn’t even bother to tell me in

person. I think because she knows I would've insisted on going with her. I've had times I've needed to take a solo journey though, so I get it even if I'm a little mad I didn't get to go with her."

"I should be the one going with her," I insist.

"Why is that?" Jasmine pushes with a sly smile.

"Because I'm in love with her," I practically shout.

"You love Aunt Noel?" Rowan asks with wide eyes.

"Yes, I love your aunt," I tell the boy. "Are you okay with that?" He looks at me for several long moments and I'm sweating. If he doesn't approve there's no way I'm going to get Noel to accept me. The kids' opinions matter more than anything else.

"I think I'm okay with that," Rowan finally says. "Does this mean you're going to get married and stuff?"

I feel the color drain from my face. "I haven't really thought about that," I admit.

"Well, Aunt Noel says when grownups fall in love, they get married and have kids like my mom and dad did."

"Yeah, Ryder, does this mean you're getting married and having babies?" Jasmine asks with a chuckle. Holy hell, this fills me with terror ... but also joy. I turn and walk from the room. I don't want to have this conversation with these guys ... I want to have it with Noel.

With my connections, it doesn't take long to find which flight she's on, and when she'll be landing. I get the personal jet ready and I'm soon in the air. It's a race to see which of us

lands first. She might have a head start on me, but I have speed and determination on my side.

The flight to Boston gives me time to think about what I want to say to the woman who's changed my life. It's only been a month, and I can't picture living without her. That doesn't mean we have to decide to get married right away, but it does mean I don't want her living in Boston. I want her with me, I want to see where the two of us are headed. I want to be committed to her ... and her committed to me.

I get off the jet and climb in my waiting vehicle, then make the hour drive to her place. I smile when I see the lights are on. She's here. She landed about an hour before me, but with deplaning and such she can't have gotten here too much quicker than I did. I walk with confidence to her front door and knock.

There's no sound. I knock again. I finally hear footsteps and let out a sigh of relief. It takes another few seconds until I finally hear her sweet voice.

"Who's there?" My heart thumps as I stand on the other side of the door from her, wondering if I should tell her it's me standing here. I don't hesitate long.

"Open the door."

Silence greets my command. I can feel her on the other side of door. Placing my hand against the wood, I hang my head, waiting. I need to hold her.

"I'm not leaving, Noel. I don't care if it takes all night. Open up for me."

Finally, the locks unlatch, and the knob turns. I don't move as it opens ... and now she's standing before me. When I see her red-rimmed eyes, my heart bursts out in a gallop.

"Why did you leave without telling me?"

"What are you doing here, Ryder?"

She sounds so sad, it kills me. Being in this house alone has to be hurting her so much.

"Why on earth did you leave like that?" I ask, unable to keep from pulling her into my arms.

"I had to come, Ryder, and I had to do it alone," she says on a sob.

"Don't you realize you don't have to do things alone anymore?" I tell her. "You not only have me, but an entire family who wants to hold you up when you feel like falling."

She shakes her head, but she doesn't push me away. This is a good sign. "I needed to do this. You shouldn't have followed me."

I smile. "I love you, Noel. There was no way I wasn't following you."

Her breath hitches as I say these words to a woman for the very first time in my life. I love her. There's zero doubt about it. I'm not sure how it happened, but I know I love her. I know this love will only grow. I just have to convince her. I'm sure I can do just that. I've never given up on something that matters ... and Noel matters more than anything I've ever wanted in my life.

My heart pounds in triple time, my happiness is in this woman's hands. I stand in agony as I wait to hear what she has to say. This moment might be the longest, most hellacious of my life. This is why I haven't wanted to fall in love, haven't wanted to put my happiness in someone else's hands. I can't stand this loss of control. But even more frightening to me than losing control is the thought of losing her.

If she needs time, I'll give her time. I'll give her whatever she needs ... whatever she wants. It's going to be her and me against the world from here on out, no matter how long it takes me to convince her of it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Noel

I stand in shock as Ryder declares his love for me. I don't know what to say, but I love the feeling of being in his arms. This is all too much. Being in this house again hit me so much harder than I expected. Having my mother here with me the year after losing my sister made it more bearable. After losing her, it's been even more painful. Now I'm here without my sister, without my mother, and without the kids.

But Ryder is here.

"Say something," Ryder pleads.

"We've been together for only a month, Ryder. I don't know what to say."

He pulls back and looks in my eyes. "I know it's happening fast. When a person knows, they know though. I never thought I'd find someone I want to spend the rest of my life with, but I see my future with you. I don't want to scare you, and don't want to do something to ruin what we're building, but when the kids told me you left, all I felt was panic."

I smile at him. "I told them I'd come back. I had to come here and close this door of our lives. I needed to know I'm strong enough to make the journey on my own."

"Do you want me to leave?" he asks, looking afraid I'll ask him to go.

I shake my head. “To tell you the truth I’m glad you’re here. I’m just sad and to be honest I’m ... scared.”

“What are you afraid of?” he asks, his hands rubbing along my back, easing my fears.

“Everything. I’m afraid of how it makes me feel to be here, afraid of how it makes me feel in your arms, afraid of how it feels to be without you. I seem to be scared of everything right now.”

“Me too,” he tells me. “I’ve never experienced anything like what I feel with you.”

“Did you know Alexandra came to see me earlier today?” I see rage flash in his eyes.

“Is that why you ran? She means nothing to me,” he insists.

I shake my head. “No, I feel sorry for her. She didn’t shape my decision. I realized I don’t want to be her. I don’t want to be angry or bitter. I want to be free of things I’m afraid of. That’s why I came now. I’ve known I’m going to say goodbye to this house, but I’ve been afraid to do it.”

He nods at me. “I understand that. But we can do this together. We can close up this house, and we can work through anything as long as we do it together.”

I smile. “I really like the sound of that,” I tell him. “It might not work out though.”

“Or it might,” he says. Then he grins bigger. “I’m just trying to make you feel better by saying that. There’s no doubt in my mind that we’re going to be okay. We’re going to be very happy together.”

I laugh. “I love you too, Ryder. It feels crazy to say it, to even think it, but you snuck into my life, right past my defenses. You made me smile when all I felt like doing before was crying. I think of you all the time, and even when I try to protect myself from you, I want it to be you who makes me feel better. I think you and the Andersons move at warp speed in all aspects of life, but that’s what both the kids and I have needed. We need unconditional love and new memories.”

He leans down and kisses me, taking my breath away. He reluctantly pulls back and caresses my face.

“We certainly move quickly. When we know a good thing, we tend not to let it slip through our fingers,” he assures me.

“Come inside, Ryder. Let’s go through this house together so I can let it go. I want to start my new life on your side of the world.”

“There’s nothing I’d like more,” he says.

We go inside the house, and we don’t get anything done that night. He shows me again and again how much I mean to him, and though the words are hard for me to say, I can easily show him how much I love him with my body, with my lips, with my hands. I do love him. The more I think it, the easier it is for me to accept.

I’m still unsure of what the future holds, but I know I’m happier than I’ve been in my entire life, and certainly far happier than I’ve been for the past year. I might get to have it all, a great relationship with my niece and nephew, a new family who have lovingly taken me in, and the man of my dreams. Maybe my sister is my guardian angel, looking out for me and her babies. Maybe the stars are all aligning.

I don't know how this man was brought into my life, but I don't want to go back to who I was. I want to move forward from here on out. I want to live big and bold with no fear.

Chapter Thirty

Ryder

One Year Later

“I can’t believe this day has finally arrived. It seems to have taken forever and yet gotten here in the blink of an eye,” I tell Rowan as I help the boy put his tie on correctly — no clip-ons for this occasion.

“I love my aunt so much, though I didn’t always show it,” Rowan says. “She’s been the only good thing in my life since I lost my mom and dad ... until I met you and the Andersons. I don’t think Layla or I could’ve made it through everything if she hadn’t been there to take care of us.” He smiles up at me. “And now we have you and Grandpa. I thought my life was over after losing Mom and Dad, but I think they’re looking down on us and still here.”

“I believe you’re right about that, Rowan. I think your parents will always be with you. I also think Noel’s one of a kind. We’ll all be a family and take care of each other from here on out.” I stop fiddling with his tie then place my hands on my nephew’s shoulders.

“We’ve got to get all of this sappy stuff over with,” Rowan says, trying to pull himself together. “Today’s a happy day. It’s the bride who’s supposed to cry, not us.”

“I agree with you on that,” I tell him. “Just know if you ever need anything, I’ll always be here for you. I can’t replace your father, and I don’t want to try, but I can be the best uncle you’ve ever had.”

“You’ve already proven that,” Rowan replies. We give each other a hug before we finish getting ready for the wedding. It won’t be long until Noel arrives, and she probably won’t be happy if the groom and best man aren’t in place.

“May I join you?” We turn to see Lucas walking into the room, looking suave and more relaxed than I’ve ever seen him.

“Of course, Lucas.”

“Since your dad isn’t around, it’s my duty to give you the best advice I can,” he says.

My parents are in the Bahamas and sent their best wishes, but are too busy to come to the wedding. Instead of upsetting me, I’ve accepted that it’s who they are. They were raised by nannies and staff, and they’d me raised the same. Family doesn’t mean a lot to them. It doesn’t offend me, but I know I’ll never raise my children this way. Without family, nothing we have in life has meaning. They have money and each other ... but that’s all they have. I feel sorry for them even if they don’t think there’s any reason for anyone to feel that way. I have Lucas, though, and he’s more of a father to me than mine will ever be. It’s him I want with me now.

I smile. “I’d love some good advice.”

“Treat her like a queen, and always keep her at your side.”

I smile at Lucas. He doesn't need to give me this particular lesson. I already love my soon-to-be wife to the point of bursting, but I'm not going to stop Lucas from giving advice.

"Don't ever take her for granted," Lucas continues. "Every single day you have together is precious. Remember, even on the days you think the universe is conspiring against you, to take a moment to thank her, even if it's only to thank her for loving you. So often we don't appreciate what we have until it's gone."

"I can't imagine there will ever come a day I'll forget how much I appreciate her," I tell him.

"Ah, because you're newly in love. Time makes these feelings seem to fade, though they're always inside of us. Don't let time erase what comes in the beginning. And that includes respecting her. If you don't respect her, you can't respect yourself."

"Aunt Noel has said this same thing to me many times," Rowan says.

"That's because she's a wise woman," I tell him as I ruffle his hair.

"Only two more things," Lucas says. "Communication is key to it all. Listen and be heard. Don't dwell on the small stuff, but embrace everything about her. She's unique and you're lucky to have her, as she's lucky to have you." I feel I'm coming out much farther ahead than Noel is, but I keep this to myself. I don't want to admit to the weakness in my knees when it comes to her.

"I will, Lucas," I promise.

“Here’s the most important thing you can do as a husband. Show your future children how much you love their mother. That will teach them how to treat their spouses later in life.”

“I love and appreciate you, Lucas. I promise to love my wife forever ... just as you and Amy have shown me how a real marriage should be.” I step up and hug my second father.

“Now, my son, let’s get you married.”

“That’s the best piece of advice you can give me.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Noel

I try to catch my breath. Passing out at the altar won't make a great impression. It's my wedding day — unbelievable. Less than two years ago, after losing my sister, I never thought I'd be able to feel joy again ... and now I feel more joy than I've ever felt before.

From the moment Ryder showed up at the door of my sister's house nearly a year ago ... for the second time, I knew we'd stay together. He proposed three months after that fateful day, and then it took a little over six months to plan the wedding, but here we are.

Ryder promises me things will slow down after all of the hoopla of the actual wedding, but I don't care if our lives are a circus or not. I only care that I'm with him, and he's with me. I just care that it's us and the kids for the rest of our lives.

He's going to take me on a month-long honeymoon to a private island, far away from cameras, reporters, family, and well-wishers. It will be just the two of us, and I can't wait. With the wedding here, I haven't seen Ryder in two days, and that's far too long.

A knock on my door makes me freeze. I'm not ready to face the crowd yet, and certainly I need a few more minutes before doing the wedding march.

“Your carriage is waiting,” Jasmine says as she steps through the door. “Oh, Noel, you’re a vision.” This girl I can call my sister comes inside and adjusts my already perfect bridal headpiece.

“I’m having trouble breathing,” I say.

“The wedding itself will soon be over,” Jasmine replies, “and then you’ll have the rest of your lives together without all of the pomp and circumstance.” I throw my arms around Jasmine and hug her tight.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me,” I tell her, emotion crackling in my voice.

“Now, now, don’t start ruining your makeup,” Jasmine says, but the tears in her eyes take away the seriousness of her words.

“I think I’m ready,” I tell her as I lift my chin in determination.

“Yes, you are,” she says before leading me from the room, down the long staircase, and out the front door. Sitting in front of the mansion is a beautiful horse-drawn carriage, with a footman waiting outside of it.

It takes several people to help me inside because of the long train of my wedding gown. I was intimidated by all of the silk and lace when I first saw the exquisite dress, but it floats on me, and I can barely feel the yards of fabric now.

The bodice and skirt gleam with thousands of pearls and crystals, and the gown hugs me tightly down to my hips, then cascades into a full skirt. Before the train was attached, I’d twirled in a wide circle, loving the way the layers of silk flared

out as I moved — it reminds me of when I was a little girl and dreamed of being Cinderella. The buttons up the back of the dress took many minutes to fasten. I smile, thinking how crazed and frustrated Ryder will be when it comes time for the gown to come off. He'll certainly like what's on beneath it, though. It will make it well worth it taking the dress off of me.

My long hair is up in a chignon, with sparkling gems throughout. I'll glow when Ryder takes me into his arms on the dance floor.

The carriage starts its journey, and after half an hour's ride, it finally enters the small town square. I've grown attached to this beautiful little town not far from Seattle, where almost everyone I meet is kind and helpful.

The carriage arrives at its destination, a beautiful old church many couples have been married in before. Many of those marriages have passed the test of time ... just as I'm sure mine will. The door opens and Smoke is waiting outside to help me from the carriage. I take his hand and step onto the white carpet rolled out before me.

"You look enchanting, Noel," Smoke tells me. I beam at him and reply in a hushed and affectionate tone.

"Thank you, Smoke." Attendants come forward and straighten my train so it's flowing on the carpet behind me. I think we're going to look quite stunning together as he walks me down the aisle ... him with his chocolate skin, black suit, and bright smile next to my sparkly white gown, red cheeks, and glowing eyes. We make quite the unusual pair, but he's become one of my favorite people on this planet and it's an honor to have him by my side.

“Aunt Noel, you look like a princess,” Layla says as she comes barreling through the doors, looking adorable in her beautiful blue dress, her hair almost identical to mine.

“You’re so beautiful, Layla. I love you so much, but you already know this,” I say, and I bend down to take my niece in my arms, ignoring the murmurs from the attendants, who are grumbling about having to redo my wedding train. I need to hold my niece. It doesn’t matter if it causes a delay.

“I have a basketful of roses I’m going to drop on the floor,” Layla tells me with a big smile. “Uncle Ryder says you’re so beautiful that you should walk on rose petals every day of your life.”

“Your uncle is quite the romantic, isn’t he?” I have the ultimate warmth in my chest. Layla looks at me, clearly uncomprehending. I hug her again and then let the attendants get the two of us into position.

“It’s time,” someone says, and my nerves spike.

No, no. I can get through this. It’s only a couple of hours more and then I’ll have Ryder all to myself. I take a large breath and begin walking behind Layla, clinging to Smoke, keeping my eyes steadily forward.

I glide into the historic church, everything a blur, not seeing the people in the pews, though they’re all standing and watching my every move. Once I approach the altar and catch my first glimpse of Ryder, it takes everything in me not to rush forward into his arms. Though he turns my legs to jelly and my stomach inside out, I also feel a calming deep down inside. This amazing man will be my husband in mere minutes.

When the minister comes to the critical point in the wedding service — no, no one breaks in to object — he and I repeat our vows and light a candle, unifying us as one. And it's over in a flash. We're pronounced husband and wife.

Ryder pulls me close and presses his lips softly to mine, making me tremble when his tongue slips out to rub against my bottom lip. My first kiss as Ryder's wife can't be more perfect. We pull apart when we hear throats clearing, and my cheeks heat up with embarrassment, but the kiss was well worth it. As our guests call out their congratulations and goodwill, we walk down the aisle as husband and wife.

We ride back to the mansion as newlyweds ... what a beautiful feeling. The reception is another incredible fairy tale. My laughter rings out as I cut cake with Ryder, and he kisses away the extra frosting from the piece he feeds me. Cameras snap and reporters fire off the usual questions, but I float along in my own perfect bubble.

When it comes time for my first dance as a married woman, I glide into Ryder's arms. There's still too much expansive material separating us, but soon we'll be alone.

"Thank you for becoming my wife," he tells me, a look of pure love flashing in his eyes.

"Oh, Ryder, becoming your wife is an honor. You've been so good to me and the children, and I can't imagine how I existed before you," I reply.

"I feel the same, as if I was simply sleepwalking before I met you. Now, I'm alive and well, and so very happy."

“I guess we’re going to live happily ever after,” I say with a twinkle in my eye.

“I insist on it,” he tells me.

And as the two of us walk through two lines of well-wishers, I have no doubt we’ll keep this promise to each other.

Epilogue

Noel

Eight years later

I walk toward the hoots, the guffaws, and the giggles coming from behind my house. Ryder has to be up to no good with the children. Yup. When I turn the corner and go out through the patio doors, I don't know whether I should laugh or run for cover.

Rowan's home for the summer. He calls regularly, but he loves college and is on the dean's list. He's already bragged many times to his uncle about his many girlfriends, which makes his uncle proud of him, but worries me. He's only nineteen, far too young to be dating, dang it, at least in my humble opinion. Too bad I can't get the young man to listen to me.

Layla's thriving in high school. She's so beautiful, it takes my breath away. The girl reminds me so much of my sister, and I dread the time — too near — that this child will also leave for college.

“Mama, we're having a water fight!” little Vinnie says as he comes running up to me, soaking wet and wearing a gigantic grin on his face. The boy seems to be growing a few inches every day. He was conceived on our honeymoon, and has been the joy of our lives.

“I see that, Vinnie,” I say. “Are you having fun with your cousins?”

He giggles in answer before he dashes away. I spot Lucas sitting in what I assume is a safety zone, since he’s holding my two-year-old daughter, now fast asleep in his arms.

“Good afternoon,” I say, kissing both him and my daughter on the cheek. “I’m surprised you’re not in the middle of all of this excitement.”

“Ah, my precious granddaughter wanted to cuddle with me, and then she fell asleep. I couldn’t disturb her.”

I’m not surprised he’d rather hold little Sienna. They’ve been close since she was born.

“Has Ryder given you the good news yet?” I ask.

He just stares at me.

“I was just getting around to that when my nephew decided to tag me with a water balloon,” Ryder says as he walks up and kisses me. “I had to pay Rowan back first — we men have our ingrained codes of honor.” Even after all of these years together, he has the ability to take my breath away. He’s still so damn fine.

“Well, don’t keep an old man waiting,” Lucas demands. He knows only too well that once we get distracted, the rest of the world fades away.

“Sorry, Lucas. We wouldn’t want to do anything to upset you,” Ryder says. “After all, you tend to feign illness whenever you want to get your way.”

“That’s nonsense,” Lucas sputters.

“We’re delighted to tell you that we’re going to have another baby,” Ryder says. He places his hand against my still-flat stomach and beams with pride.

“Oh, that’s wonderful news indeed.” Lucas gets up slowly from his seat, lays Sienna in her portable bed, and hugs both of us. I look at the patio, filled with my family, and I count my many blessings. And it isn’t for the first time. The tragedy of losing my sister and mother led me to this wonderful family. I know it’s them up above, still guiding me and the children.

They are doing a great job because all of us have never been happier.

“I love you both,” I whisper. I can almost feel their arms around me ... and as Ryder pulls me against him, I know my life truly is complete.

Note From the Author

Hello my beautiful fans. I hope you are all with your loved ones during the holiday season. I know after losing my father, I wanted nothing to do with Easter, Thanksgiving, or Christmas. I missed him so much I didn't think the ache would ever go away. I kept the holidays going for my nieces and nephews, and I'm thankful I did. Then I met the love of my life, and I once again love Christmas, bringing lights and decorations back, and enjoying wrapping, listening to holiday music, and watching ten-thousand Christmas movies, which drive my husband and bonus son crazy. I love writing holiday stories since holidays bring me so much joy, I hope it does the same for all of you.

Now, enough of the mushy stuff. I decided it was time for the Anderson Heirs to begin. I also needed to fast forward after this story so I could age the children a little bit. We all know Joseph's going to live to be 500 years old, so I've just stopped trying to keep track of his age, but I love Jasmine so much, I decided it was time. I wanted to start with this story because this actually happened to my uncle George. After almost 40 years a woman contacted him, and he found out he had a daughter. His 4 children handled it very well. Sadly, he didn't get much time with her before he passed. Of course when I use real life, I add a whole lot of fiction, but I like how the Andersons embraced Noel.

Next will be Jacob's story and I love it!! He's quickly become one of my favorite characters. There will be a link below to pre-order your copy coming out in 2023. I'm also adding a six-chapter preview of my newest release He Saw Me First down below. It's different from anything else I've written, and I love it so much!! It's a romance, but I'd say it goes more into the women's fiction category. My childhood wasn't easy. I went through some things and was in foster care for about a year before my dad was able to get custody of me. A lot of children suffer, and I wanted to show with He Saw Me First that we can heal from that suffering. If we have good people around us, we can become the best of ourselves. Please leave reviews for this book and all of my stories. I love to hear what you think. I also listen to you in the reviews. It's shaped some of the directions I've taken in my writing. I want to give you what you want while also writing what's in my soul. I appreciate you all. Happy Reading!

[Get Jacob's Story Here](#)

Preview of He Saw Me First

[Buy Here](#)

Prologue

I feel nothing as I look at the man on the floor at my feet. Have you ever truly heard silence before? I know this is a weird thing to ask, but really, have you ever actually heard silence? It's such an odd sound ... and yes, it's a sound. If it weren't, horror movies wouldn't do as well as they do. We're so used to constant noise surrounding us that it's both eerie and unmistakable when there's an absence of sound.

The knife is clutched in my hand, and I look at it with an odd sort of detachment as blood slowly trickles down the shining silver blade. My gaze follows a trail of blood on the smooth silver surface. It doesn't drop in a straight line but makes a zigzag pattern on the two-inch wide blade until it reaches the sharp tip. The beads of blood pool for an endless second before falling from the edge in a single drop.

I watch in slow motion as the droplet of blood descends.

Splash. It hits the pool of blood already on the floor. A small ripple occurs, then smooths out before another drop splatters on top of the first. The sound is oddly soothing.

A moan interrupts my peace. I turn and my gaze travels up the legs, past the torso, and to the face of the man I call ... father. His dark brown eyes blink at me as his mouth gapes open. He tries to speak, but he can't ... his vocal cords have been severed. He sort of looks like a fish out of water, his

mouth opening and closing ... fear and realization present in his eyes.

Sound returns as I hear sirens in the distance. Should I run? Why? I don't want to run. I don't want to hide anymore. I don't want to live this life. I've lived in this hell for fourteen years ... well, at least I think I've lived for fourteen years. I only remember the past nine. The first time my father hurt me I was five years old, and every day since then ... I remember the branding on my shoulder ... I remember it all.

"You can't hurt me anymore," I tell him.

He opens his mouth again. The blood on the floor oozes toward my white sneakers, already stained crimson. I step back. I don't want to stand in his blood, not out of morals ... never out of morals. He's made me bleed before; it's fitting for it to be his blood on me now. This time I've made him bleed ... this time it's his blood on my hands instead of my blood on his. I wasn't cruel like he's been ... I simply protected myself from him ... I finally said enough is enough.

The sirens draw closer.

Tires screech to a halt, then I hear the sound of feet moving outside the massive front doors of my home. I don't move. There's a fist pounding against the door as red and blue lights stream through the enormous front windows of the vast mansion in the McLean neighborhood in Washington, D.C.

"Police! We're coming in!" a voice shouts. I still don't move.

There's an ear-piercing sound as something smashes against the thick, ten-foot-tall doors. They are hit again ... and

one of them flies open, slamming against the window beside it, glass shattering. I stare at the chaos as men surge into the substantial front foyer.

I'm still holding the bloody knife. I don't know if my father is still alive and attempting to make sounds. I'm focused on the armed men rushing toward me. You'd think I'd be afraid, but I'm not. I'm so used to pain that nothing scares me anymore. I can't remember the last time I cried ... I believe I'm broken ... that I've been broken for a very long time.

"Drop the weapon," a man shouts.

I don't move. I don't drop the knife, but I don't hold it up in defense. I stand and wait to see what will happen next. It's like I'm watching this happen instead of being present in the moment. Will they shoot me? Would that make this better? I can't be saved. I've asked before, and no one will save me. This is the only way to be free.

"Drop the weapon," a man shouts again.

I don't even realize I do as he demands, but then I look down in surprise as the bloody knife clatters against the blood-soaked marble floor.

Interesting.

I'm so used to being told what to do that I can't stop myself from obeying. If I live, will this always be who I am? Somehow, that thought repulses me more than anything else that's happened.

Before I have time to blink, arms grip me. I know the feeling of being grabbed quite well. My arms are thrust behind my back and the familiar steel of handcuffs latch around my

small wrists and tighten. I feel no pain as they cut into my flesh. I know how to ignore the pain and take myself to another place in my mind as I'm abused.

I look at my father one last time as two men grip me, one on either side. I smile when I realize my father is still looking at me ... but his gaze is void. There's no longer life in those cruel brown irises of his.

He's dead.

My father is dead.

No matter what happens from this point forward, I'm free ... at least from one of the many monsters who have abused me. You never know which monster will be just around the corner, though. They are everywhere, and they come in all shapes and sizes. They aren't who you might think they are. And you wouldn't believe me if I told you my story ... but I'll tell it anyway ... even if it kills me.

"She killed him," a woman gasps as she rushes out to us.

"Ma'am, are you the one who called?" one of the officers asks as he looks at the visibly shaken woman.

"Yes," she cries as she stops a few feet from my father. She looks down in horror. She's quite a good actress.

"Name?" the officer asks.

"I'm Isabella Moore. The man on the floor is my husband." She then looks at me, hatred in her eyes. "That monster *was* our daughter. She's no longer anything to me." She never was my mother — it just took me a long time to realize that.

The room goes silent.

“Take her away. I don’t ever want to see her again,”
Isabella snarls.

The officers begin pulling me from the house while another officer stays behind talking to Isabella. I don’t know what will happen next ... and I don’t care. I won’t ever have to be in this house again. Nothing else matters.

Chapter One

Fourteen Years Later

Step inside,

Walk this way,

You and me, babe,

Hey, hey.

Smokey red lights turn on, a beam shining directly on Samantha and me as we stand still, my back to her chest, her arms wrapped around me, my head down. I've done this routine a thousand times, and there's no fear as I get ready to perform ... and that's precisely what it is ... a performance. This isn't who I am, but a character I'm playing to get what I want.

No, what I want is too simple for words. I'm getting my soul back ... and the only way to do this is by selling a few pieces of it first. I won't ever be whole again, but I'm okay with that because I've never been a complete person. I shattered long ago ... and no glue in the world is strong enough to put me back together again. Doing what I'm doing will at least start the process. It not only gives me power, it gives me the funds I need to be free.

Pour Some Sugar on Me plays in the background as my dancing partner and I begin our choreography. Her hands slide

over my stomach, lightly brush across my covered breasts, and caress my cheeks. She leans over my shoulder, her face close to mine, bringing her lips within kissing distance as I open my mouth. Before our lips touch, I turn and do a pirouette, extending my long shapely legs.

I face her as she wears a men's white shirt half unbuttoned, and a blue tie with a bowler hat on her head, keeping her blonde tresses bundled beneath. I'm wearing a sleek two-piece dress that's easy to remove. Both of us have on four-inch heels and stockings with garters.

We're on stage ... and we have a packed house ... as usual in the exclusive club only attended by the elite in society. We take stripping to a whole new level ... and I can't say I don't enjoy it. It may not be something I'll do forever, but it's given me the gift of what I want in life ... and I'm very good at turning on the men I think of as the monsters they are. I've gained power from doing this, and once you know my story, you'll understand why I need this in my life.

I glide to Samantha and place my hand on her chest, sexily pushing her backward. I walk forward while she glides away until her knees hit the edge of a chair. She slides down, and I turn, gripping the sides of the chair and swinging my hips over her lap. I lean back, bringing my leg forward as she lifts a hand and glides it down my body. I turn my head, and this time her lips brush mine in a flash ... before I stand.

I circle the stage as she watches ... the audience leaning in so they don't miss a moment. I grip the pole and haul myself up before dropping backward and twirling. I hear a moan from the crowd. I upright myself, leap down from the pole, then

slide my hands into the bottom of my top, slowly pulling it over my head, leaving only scraps of a lace bra covering my breasts.

I walk back to Samantha and reach out, gripping her tie and pulling her from the chair. She grabs ahold of me, and we circle the stage together in a dance before I push back again, then turn and bend in front of her. She runs her hands down my backside before pulling me against her and circling her hips.

I moan as I look out at the crowd. I don't normally notice the people watching us. I pretend to notice them, but I rarely do ... however, not this time. For some reason my gaze is drawn to a man sitting in the middle of the room, a glass gripped tightly in his fingers, his eyes on me alone.

We stare at one another for an endless moment, a shiver rushing through me. I miss my step as the connection between us nearly takes my breath away. I shake it off as I rip my gaze from him.

He doesn't matter ... none of the men gazing at us matter beyond the green notes in their hands they willingly throw at us. I'll give them all a show, but they're the ones truly stripping. We're stripping away their money, their pride, their relationships ... their identities. We don't beg them to come to us, they willingly rush through the doors to give all of themselves until they are left bare.

They are a tool we'll use until we break them ... and then we'll move on to the next ... and the next ... and the next.

Samantha barely blinks as I miss another step. She knows things happen, and she knows how to recover. The audience

won't miss a beat as they're too busy staring at the skin we're displaying. We go right back into our routine as she gazes at me before pulling off her tie, slipping it between her legs, and swinging her hips back and forth. I move to her and rip her shirt open, pushing it off her shoulders. She grips my face and leans in close ... before both of us turn away and I wrap my arms around her from behind as we swirl our hips together.

You gotta squeeze a little, squeeze a little,

Tease a little more.

Easy operator come a-knockin' on my door.

Samantha reaches for the clasp of my bra and slings it off before covering my breasts with her manicured fingers. I lean my head back and sigh as we move toward the pole. She lets go of me before slinging her own bra off, leaving us nearly naked, only a thin pair of thongs and garters covering us.

We grip the pole and wind around it, moving in perfect sync. We slide down, then press our hips together on the floor as we lean back and arch our backs.

Take a bottle, shake it up.

Break the bubble, break it up.

Pour some sugar on me ...

A mist opens above us, and fine water droplets drip down, wetting our skin. Samantha leans up, slides over, and pulls me into her arms as our slick skin molds together. The crowd cheers as the song continues and we move on the stage floor.

We curl up in each other's arms and lean in for a kiss ... and the lights go out. The crowd groans as we rise, quickly

sneaking away to the back room without anyone seeing our exit.

“What in the heck happened out there?” Samantha asks as she grabs a robe and covers herself while I do the same.

“I don’t know. I met this guy’s gaze, which threw me off my game for a minute.”

“Oh, was he hot?” she asks, moving toward the curtain as if she wants to look out.

I laugh. “He was unusually hot, but we see hot guys in here all of the time,” I say with a wave of my hand. “This isn’t exactly where I’d ever hook up with someone. They’re all pervs.”

“Yeah, of course. If people knew I’m a mechanic in real life living about two hundred miles from here they’d lose their fantasy of me. I need this money, and I’m damn good at stripping,” Samantha says with a laugh.

“Well, my bookstore is almost finished, and it won’t be long till I’m done with this life,” I tell her. I trust this girl. I don’t share my other life with many people, especially in this world, but I like Samantha.

“It’s almost open. Yahoo!” she says with an excited giggle before she gives me a bear hug that’s anything but sexy. We’re different people on stage for the men staring at us. We put on an act for the masses, but it’s not who we are in the real world.

“I hope the store does well enough that I can leave this life behind forever,” I admit.

“Don’t leave me, you’re the only partner I can work with,” Samantha says with her perfected pout in place.

I laugh. “Your pout only works on the sex-crazed men out there.”

“Hey, don’t knock sexiness. I bet you’ll sell more romance books in your little store than anything else. Besides, every story is a love story, even if the book is a thriller. If there’s no love interest, what’s the point in living or saving the planet? Sex and romance sell in every area of life.”

I shake my head. “Yes, sex sells, that’s for sure, because underneath our cool exterior, we’re all a little sick and twisted inside. We need something exciting to stimulate us.”

She gives me a sly smile. “That’s what my handy dandy vibrator is for. It doesn’t talk back to me like men do, and it always gives me a perfect orgasm, unlike the fumbling idiots who only worry about their own pleasure. The day I find a real man to rock my world will be the day I eat a grasshopper.”

“I’m going to remember that and hold you to it,” I tell her.

“You’re such a pot to my kettle. You hate men,” she says.

“I don’t hate men ... I just don’t trust them.”

I keep smiling, but my gut clenches. I’ve been through horrific things in my life. No one in this new life I’ve been living for fourteen years knows the pain I’ve suffered. I don’t use it as an excuse to stop living, but it’s certainly kept me closed up. I haven’t had one real relationship that’s lasted.

Samantha might be the only person I come close to calling a friend. People have come and gone, but I trust Samantha. I can’t say the same for anyone else. I hope that trust never shatters. But if it does, it won’t destroy me. I’ve been through

worse ... through so much worse, however, it would suck to lose her.

“We better get out there and make the rounds. I want to leave early tonight,” Samantha says.

“I hate this part,” I tell her.

“Me too, but the crazies want to see us on the floor, and that’s where the big tips come in,” she says.

“It’s crazy we make so much money dancing and showing our bodies to strangers. I mean seriously, in a world full of porn, they still come to watch us live. I’m not complaining, but it’s insane that men pay us so much and don’t even get to touch us.”

“Except for the lap dances,” she points out. I groan. I hate those more than any other part of my job. “I do love my work, though. I feel sexy,” Samantha says with a wink.

She’s right. We have to go out on the floor quickly to profit from our performance. We change into our skimpy bralettes and short skirts, paste seductive smiles on our lips, and grip hands as we walk from the back of the stage.

All eyes are on us as we move across the crowded floor. I lean over and give Samantha a sexy kiss that all of the men can see before we let go of each other and move to opposite corners of the room.

Hands come out and brush my sides, ass, and legs, not enough to get the men kicked from the exclusive strip club with a hundred-dollar cover charge, but enough to annoy me. I don’t show my displeasure. I stop and chat, give a few public

lap dances, and collect thousands of dollars in only an hour's time.

I'm almost finished when I turn and run into a brick wall of a chest. I give the mandatory innocent giggle as I look up ... and the sound gets trapped in my throat. It's him ... the man I spied while on stage.

"Hello," he says in a deep, dark voice that sends pulses straight to my core. I can't remember this ever happening to me. Usually, a man's voice sends shudders of displeasure through me. Who is this man, and why am I reacting this way? Why does it feel good instead of repulsive? What in the hell is happening? I push this all down as I plaster a fake smile on my lips.

"Hey, Sexy. Want a dance?" I lift a finger and trail it across his hard chest. I don't break character, but keeping my breathing steady is difficult. Holy hell, he's dangerous. I want to run ... and run far. I learned long ago I can survive any situation. I won't let my strange reaction to this man cost me money.

"I'd like to take you out of here," he says, his eyes smoldering.

I take a step back from him. "That's not going to happen. I'll give you a nice dance that will give you sweet dreams ... but there are no overnights."

"Everyone has a price. What would it take to get you alone for an entire night?"

My strange attraction to the man disappears ... thankfully. Now, I have his number, and I'm not interested in selling my

body. Sure, I sell it to the highest bidder to watch me dance, but I don't sell actual sex. Implying that instantly turns me off. I step forward without fear, or at least, certainly showing none.

I press my ample breasts against him as I run a nail along the back of his neck and lean forward, our lips only a couple of inches apart. His hardness presses against my stomach. It takes all I have not to flinch away. I've done this for too long to be jumpy. I have this.

"I'm far too pricey for you, sugar. Jenny is available for an all-nighter, though." I point out another of our girls who will make men beg for mercy for a hefty price tag.

I bite my lower lip, then laugh as I release him and turn to walk away. He grips my wrist, not aggressively, just enough to stop me. I turn and raise my brows. I'm still not worried. We have the best of the best bouncers in this place, and I'm not some sweet, innocent little thing. I can take down any man in this club. I'll never be a victim again as long as I live. I'll die before letting that happen.

"I think our story is just beginning, Cassandra." I lose all my breath. Before I can say another word, the man lets me go and walks away. I stand in shock as he leaves.

Finally my feet move, and I don't pretend to flirt with anyone else as I quickly make my way across the busy area with men catcalling me. I don't stop moving until I'm safely behind closed doors.

How in the hell does that man know my real name? Who is he? What does he want? For the first time in a long while ... I feel fear, real fear. I quickly change, gather my things, and

leave. My eyes are glued to my rearview mirror as I exit Boise, Idaho.

I have a long drive home, and it's almost midnight. I don't care. I want the security of my small town that's a whole other world away from the nightlife I've worked for the past ten years. It's only twice a month now, but for a long time it was nightly ... my only way to survive.

Soon ... very, very soon, I won't have to strip anymore. Soon, all of my dreams will come true. I'm in a new place with a new name and life. My past can't come back to haunt me. It can't. I refuse to let it. I'm so close to getting what I've searched for. There's no way I'm letting anything get in my way now.

This man doesn't really know who I am. He's just better than the average Joe. That's all. He figured out my name. No big deal. At least he doesn't know my birth name. If that happened, there wouldn't be anywhere far enough for me to run to.

I finally realize no one is following me and put on a Ruth Cardello audiobook, sit back, and enjoy my quiet ride home. Once I'm out of Boise, it's green pastures. I'm going to be okay. It's all going to be okay. There's no other choice, not when I'm this close to getting exactly what I've been striving to get for the past fourteen years.

Chapter Two

Our journey through life takes us down different paths: some we love, and some traumatize us. I can unequivocally say my journey hasn't been easy, but it's shaped me into who I am today. Given a choice, I wouldn't choose the life I've lived, but I can't take any of it back, so all I can do is move forward and appreciate how far I've come.

I have a choice to wallow in what's been done to me or to prove those evil abusers wrong and live happily for the rest of my life. It's easier said than done, but I try each and every day to truly live. I still wake up with a knot in my gut as I tense, fighting back panic before I remember I'm safe now, no one is coming after me ... and nobody is going to hurt me. I wonder if this insecure feeling will ever go away.

It's taken ten years to get to where I am now, but I did it. I pull out my license and look at the name, Cassandra Montana, twenty-eight years old, one hundred forty pounds, blonde hair, blue eyes. I'm no longer Tina Moore. I'll never be her again. I've grown into a woman, and my past will stay where it belongs ... in the dark.

Sweet relief fills me as I walk through my new town toward my bookstore and coffee house. Indescribable joy washes over me as I visualize the brightly colored shelves filled with books. I did this all on my own. I created a business, a dream come true.

I landed in Ravish, Oregon six months ago. I knew I'd live in Ravish for the past five years, but it took this long to get here. I had to establish a business for this small community so the population would respect me. It's the only way I'll get exactly what I want ... and desperately need.

I finally earned enough money to pay cash for my little corner building on the town's main street. When a person pays cash, some become suspicious, but I told the realtors I don't trust banks and I'm not too fond of financing, so I waited to buy until I could fully pay for it. That explanation might not work in a city, but they nod in agreement with me in a small town. Small towns are worlds apart from cities. They're like two countries, sometimes separated by as little as thirty miles.

Ravish has a population of about two thousand people. It caters to many tourists all summer, as its location along the fabulous McKenzie River makes it an ideal vacation destination.

The town is full of charismatic people and many charming businesses. I walk past The Clark Family Fishing Tackle Shop and see Micah Clark out front, setting up a display with his trusty silver lab, Bass. I wave, and he smiles and waves back, then walks over to greet me.

"Hello, Cass, it's another beautiful day. Are you going to do some fishing?"

"You know how well I do at fishing," I reply with a laugh.

"We all have to begin somewhere. I promise before long I'll have you fishing like a pro."

“From your lips to God’s ears,” I tell him, making him laugh. This man always seems happy.

He returns to work, and I continue walking. I’ve taken up fishing since coming to town, but I’m hopelessly terrible at it. Micah’s a great guy and plenty helpful, but he’s a bit of a flirt and makes me nervous. He’s tanned all year round with dirty blond hair, a constant five-o-clock shadow, and twinkling green eyes. He’s lean and muscled in all of the right places, and I think more women shop at his store trying to purchase him than the items they walk away with. He’s managed to avoid their hooks so far.

As for me, the last thing I want is to date anyone in this town. That’s not my mission. I do love Lloyd, his crotchety employee. I swear he’s a hundred years old. I can sit with Lloyd for hours on end listening to his stories.

Not far from Clark’s is Eye of the Storm, a fabulous bar and restaurant where all of the locals gather to listen to country music and line dance to Jason Aldean on Friday nights. The owner, Dillan Scott, is one heck of an intimidating man. I’ve heard he’s a former biker gang leader who once took lives.

I don’t know if it’s true since he’s only in his late thirties, but the man has a mile-wide stare with the darkest brown hair I’ve ever seen and eyes that makes me think he takes one look at me and knows every little secret I’ve ever tried to desperately hide. He’s huge, too, with arms the size of ordinary people’s legs and a jaw I don’t think a brick could break. I don’t go there every week, but often enough to know the bartender, Emmy, and a few of my neighbors. It’s undoubtedly the local hangout for gossip.

The next block over from the bar is Ravish High School, which I find quite amusing. Nothing like a bar and school within walking distance. I guess this only happens in small towns. It's not a large school, but the kids always do something or other in town. I like the principal, Mr. Wright. He's a hoot to chat with over coffee. His many stories about this town fascinate me. I have yet to figure out Mr. Wright, but I'll know all of his secrets before too long.

I like to know who's around me. No one is the same in public as they are behind the safety of their closed doors, but you can get a bit of an understanding of them if you speak to them enough. I've become adept at seeing more to a person than what they're trying to portray. It's saved my life more than once.

Across from the bar is the Ravish Pony Express. It's a U.S. post office, but it's called the Pony Express, which I find humorous. This town likes to live like it's back in the eighteen hundreds, but I don't mind at all. Some advancements haven't made the world a better place. I can't imagine not having internet now that we have it, but at the same time, it's taken the purity out of many wonderful things. I hope they never change the post office's name.

Neil Majors, who's pretty dang sexy with his dark red hair, green eyes, and fabulous shoulders, is the postmaster, and he obviously loves his job. Many ladies in town keep boxes at the post office, so they have an excuse to go inside and chat up the very flirty postmaster.

"Cass," a voice calls.

I turn and laugh. “I was just thinking about you,” I say as Neil sidles up.

“I hope it was naughty thoughts,” he says with a wink.

If I thought he meant the words, I’d probably run, but I know he can’t help but flirt, it’s built into his DNA. He’s helped me not to be so distrustful of all men. I’ve learned some who flirt don’t want anything from me, it’s just who they are.

“You have enough single ladies in town with dirty thoughts about you to keep you happy,” I tell him.

“Does that mean you’re single?” he asks. There’s a waggle of his brows and just enough heat in his eyes to tell me he’d pounce if I showed actual interest ... but he won’t do it without my consent.

“Nope, not single. My bookstore is my one true love,” I tell him, which I’ve said repeatedly. I’m careful not to offend any of the men hoping to take me out. That would mar my good reputation in a town of people who all know each other. I’m the newcomer and don’t need to stand out too much.

“I’ll be here waiting for you,” he tells me.

“You better deliver the mail first or you’ll have a riot on your hands.”

He waves his hand in the air. “The mail is already out. I’m manning the counter today,” he assures me.

“Well, that will make all of the ladies happy.” He laughs as he moves to the entrance of the post office. If I were going to be interested in a man, I’d be a fool not to take him up on his

offer of a date. He really is cute ... but so many of the men are. This town is a firefighter calendar come to life.

Next to the post office is the police station. The first time I walked down this street I stopped and gaped at the giant sign on the front lawn. I had to look twice ... then I laughed. The sign reads: Ravish City Police Department in small letters, then Crime and Punishment Center in bold letters with a large set of handcuffs nailed beside it.

The Police Chief, Dan Spangler, has a hearty sense of humor. Then again, there isn't a lot of crime in Ravish. An occasional drunk and disorderly, a domestic dispute here and there, and definitely speeders, but other than tourists getting too rowdy on a Friday night, this town is about as American Apple Pie as it gets. I hope I never have to leave. Feeling this safe after years of terror is wonderful.

The fire department is next to the police station. It has its own sign, competing with the police station. Their sign reads: You start 'em. We hose 'em. Right below that is a sign that reads: Somebody call 911. Shorty fires burning on the dance floor. I smile each time I pass by and automatically start singing the dang song.

The grocery store in town is Cans and Nuts, which again makes me chuckle. The owner, Ethan Sawyer, is an Italian-German, caramel-skinned, blue-eyed, dark-haired grumpy old man who's been married to the same woman since they were seventeen. He might be cranky, but I adore the man. I love watching him play chess with Micah at the store and listening to the two banter.

A mechanics garage and auto parts store are located on the far side of town, aptly named Loose Screws. The owner, Booker Washburn, is in his thirties, incredibly tall at six foot five inches with sleek brown skin, stunning hazel eyes, and muscles that make all of the ladies drool. I swear each business owner in town just gets hotter and hotter.

“Hey, Cass, why are elevator jokes so classic and good?” Oh yeah, he’s also a jokester. You can’t pass by him without a daily dad joke. I love it.

“Why?” I obediently ask.

“They work on many levels.” He starts laughing, and I join him.

“Hey, Booker, what do you call it when a group of apes starts a company?”

“Hmm, what?”

“Monkey business.”

He bends over, laughing. It’s the first time I’ve flipped a joke back to him. I may be starting to become a genuine member of the town. Perhaps I do belong here.

“I might need to rename my shop,” he says.

“I think it has a good ring to it,” I agree. A customer pulls up, and I move along.

Next to Booker’s place is Safe Harbor Church, where Pastor Chad ministers. I’ve gone a few times but worry I’ll be struck by lightning every time I enter the building. I like the sense of calm and serenity it gives me. They also have an incredible youth program.

Across the street from the church is a vast building, Mountain Fitness. Now, this is the fanciest, most elaborate gym I've ever seen in my life. Not only does it have a pool, steam room, hot tub, and all of the best workout equipment any athlete would drool over, but you feel like you're in a spa whenever you walk inside.

This fancy gym is only in this Podunk town because the owner, Derek McConnel, moved here about five years earlier. I heard he has a tragic story in his past, and coming here has been healing for him. He wanted to build the ultimate gym and live in a place like Ravish. The town might be small in numbers, but all of the residents use the gym so it has plenty of members. Derek's a beast of a man who I heard does muscle competitions. I can see why. Holy hell, he's yummy.

As you walk inside the front doors, you're hit with the aroma of a tropical vacation. Several staff members dress nicely, and there's a clothes section where you can stock up on fitness attire. They have childcare with school-like programs, a chiropractor on site, a cold tub, and the shower rooms are enough to make any woman weep with high-end accessories, hair dryers, straighteners, curling irons, and hair products.

At the end of a day at the gym, you can go to the café, with indoor and outdoor seating, to order healthy food and smoothies or grab-and-go protein boxes. Membership is a little pricy, but well worth it. I've stopped every day I've been in town while getting my business ready.

I do my workouts, shower, then spend hours in the café eating, drinking, and doing all of my internet business. It's

been heaven. I'll come back even with my own business up and running.

Luckily, my bookstore is just around the corner from the gym. Yes, I have a coffee counter with pastries and quick snacks, but nothing that competes with this gym. I like the owner, and he's been more than helpful while I set up my bookstore. He also has some impressive clients driving or flying in, some seriously impressive clients like Cam Hanes and David Goggins. If they trust him to train them, he must be a superstar.

On Call Advantage is an extension of his building, a private medical practice everyone in town uses. The nurse practitioner who owns and runs it is Stephanie, who everyone adores. Gayle is the counselor who isn't afraid to put teens in their place when they're getting out of hand, and she does a lot of work at the high school.

There's something great about a small practice versus going to a large hospital where you're simply a number. Here the staff knows the patients inside and out. Stephanie is constantly saying she needs to hire more providers because she's so busy, but she's also picky and wants more than someone with a degree, she wants her providers to truly care about their patients.

I finally walk inside the doors of Safe Haven Books. The gym inspired me, and I take a deep whiff of vanilla at the entrance to my store as I look around. The shelves are filled, and the café in the center of it all looks better than any at the Barnes and Noble stores I was inspired by. I want this to be a daily hangout for locals. They can come inside, buy a book,

sit, visit with their neighbors over a cup of coffee, and then come back the next day — a safe haven for all.

I placed a help-wanted ad in the mailboxes last week and hope I have a good turnout for interviews today. I only need three or four employees to begin with. If we're really successful, I can add more. My goal for the store goes beyond retail sales, though ... they go so much further than that.

I go to my office, and it doesn't take long for the first applicants to arrive. Many are probably more curious about meeting me than actually interviewing, but I don't mind. The more people trust me, the easier it will be for me to fit in. I take myself out of my comfort zone and interview for a few hours, pleased that I have some great options.

As the end of the day nears, the bell on the door chimes. I look up and see a young, sweet-faced blonde girl walking inside with a big smile on her pink lips. My heart thuds a bit at her youth. I'm never going to get used to seeing teen girls without my heart breaking all over again as I think about my daughter I never saw again after she was ripped from my arms.

"Hi, you must be Ms. Montana," the girl says. "I'm Madison, but everyone calls me Mattie, spelled with T's after my dad, Matt, and I'm going to be your best employee." The young lady holds out her hand.

"Hi, Mattie, it's a pleasure to meet you," I say. I take a deep breath. "What makes you my best employee?"

She beams at me. "I know I'm a teenager, but I've worked hard ever since I could barely walk. My parents say I have a great work ethic. There's no job I'm unwilling to learn, and I pick up on things quickly. I have a four-point GPA and take

honor classes. I volunteer in town and have many references. I want a real job now. I'm in classes during the school year, but I can work evenings, weekends, and all my breaks, including any hours you want in the summer. I'm going to be a doctor someday so I have to start saving now."

"Wow, that's quite the résumé." I'm sufficiently impressed with this beautiful child.

"Here's my résumé," she says as she hands over a crisp folder. I take it from her and open it to see a perfectly typed résumé that lists everything she's been talking about. She is impressive.

I smile as I look back at her. "You're hired," I say, my voice somewhat choked. "As a matter of fact, you're officially my first employee."

The girl's eyes widen as she looks up at me with a huge smile and what appears to be hero-worship in her eyes. I'm no hero, but I'll take it. She launches forward and wraps her arms around me before quickly stepping back.

"Sorry, I know that's unprofessional, but I'm so happy. This is my first real, hourly-wage job, and I can't wait to prove myself."

I fight tears as I look at her. What would it have been like to raise my daughter? What joy her parents must've had in getting uninterrupted years with this beautiful child. My child was taken from me, and that pain never ends. Maybe ... just maybe ... being in this town will finally be what heals me. Perhaps all of my dreams will come true. I deserve it. I've suffered long enough, and though my sins aren't repaid yet, I'm still a child of God, and I know there's nothing my child

would do that I wouldn't forgive. That gives me hope that I'm worthy of a free life ... a beautiful life ... a life filled with happiness.

I'm almost there ... I can feel it. I'm going to get what I came for ... and nothing will stop me.

Chapter Three

Fourteen Years Ago

This place is strange. I've seen rooms like it on television, not that I was allowed to watch much TV, but being in one of the rooms like I saw on Law and Order is odd. I feel like I'm in my own show. It's surreal. After a couple of days, I should feel something, but I'm still numb. Then again, I've been numb for a long time, so it isn't anything new.

A man walked in about ten minutes ago, introducing himself as the district attorney, and I have yet to listen to him. I don't even know what a district attorney is other than the man who's supposed to go after bad guys ... which apparently is me. I do know he's not my friend ... no man is my friend. I have no desire to speak to him. It won't help anyway, nothing ever helps.

"Ms. Moore, are you going to answer?"

I finally look at the man sitting across from me. He's nobody special ... just a man, like all men, who have abused me my entire life. I give him a blank stare. I have no idea what he wants me to answer. My body is here physically. But my mind is somewhere else entirely.

Where am I? What is my life going to be like now? I don't know. The only thing I'm sure of is I won't go back home. What does this mean? No clue. Where do I go from here? That's still up in the air.

“Ms. Moore?”

“Yes?” I finally say. The sound of my voice is odd as if I don’t recognize it. Have I separated from myself? Maybe. If I can stay numb I might survive, not that I care all that much either way.

“Ms. Moore, why did you kill your father?”

My facial expression doesn’t change. Should I tell the truth? I’ve tried before, and all that got me was more punishment. My father’s a very prominent man ... scratch that, my father was a very prominent man. He’s nobody now. He’s dead ... exactly how he should be. I wish all of them were dead. I don’t want to take their lives with my own hands, but the world would be safer if they were gone.

“I can’t tell you why,” I finally say.

He lets out a sigh. “Why is that?” he asks. He seems to care, but all of the men have seemed to care ... until the lights go out, until their clothes come off. All of them thought what they were doing was okay, all of them thought I was nothing more than a toy for them to play with. They probably even thought I liked it. Whatever they needed to believe in order to justify their depraved behavior. They’re all monsters in ten-thousand-dollar suits. Is this man any different? I doubt it.

“You’re all the same. Even those who said they wanted to help haven’t,” I tell him in my constant monotone.

“We’re not all the same, Ms. Moore. I want to understand what would drive a fourteen-year-old girl to take her father’s life.”

“You won’t understand,” I tell him. It’s not an accusation; it’s simply the truth.

“I could give it a shot. I hear a lot of cases from many people. You have no one else on your side right now, so why don’t you try trusting me? You have nothing to lose by doing so.”

We gaze at each other for long moments. I sigh. A part of me wants to tell him everything and see if he’ll help. I’ve asked for help before. No one cares. All that matters is money and power, and I have neither.

He opens the folder on his desk and then stares at me with sadness. I don’t believe him. I don’t think he’s capable of feeling sorrow for me. I’m nobody to him. Well, that’s not exactly true. I’m a case file he needs to close. He’s the DA for Washington, D.C., and has a job to do.

“Do you know you’re pregnant?” he asks.

My face drains of color as I look at him. I’m only a child, although my innocence left long ago, but in age, I’m still a child. How is my body capable of carrying a baby? My hand automatically goes to my stomach. It has gotten a little bigger this past month, but I don’t pay much attention to my body. It’s been nothing but a tool for others since I was five years old, so why should I care about it? It’s never belonged to me ... and it likely never will.

I can’t comprehend a baby inside me. Was this baby the little stirrings I’ve had the past few weeks, the odd sensation I’ve been feeling? I’ve had all sorts of sensations in my body my entire life. That’s what happens when a person’s abused as much as I’ve been.

“Ms. Moore, did you know you’re pregnant?” he asks again. His voice is gentle, but I still don’t believe he cares.

“No,” I finally say.

“Then you don’t know how far along you are,” he states.

“No.”

“We’re going to get you in for an ultrasound. We think it would be best for you to abort the child,” he tells me.

“No,” I say.

He looks at me in shock. “Ms. Moore, you’re a child yourself, incapable of raising a baby, and besides that ...” He pauses as if he doesn’t want to finish talking.

“I’m going to jail,” I finish for him.

“Yes, you will go to juvie,” he tells me.

“What will happen to my baby?” I ask. I don’t care what happens to me, but now that I know there’s a child, I actually ... I care. How is that possible?

“I think you should get an abortion,” he says again.

“That’s not an option,” I tell him. I don’t know my options, but killing this innocent child won’t happen as long as I can stop it. I wonder if I’ve been pregnant before. I wonder if the beatings I’ve received have killed other babies. It’s certainly a possibility. It’s something I’ve never given any thought to.

“We can’t force you to have an abortion, but if you choose to have the baby, you’ll deliver while incarcerated. The baby will immediately be taken from you,” he tells me.

“Who will take the baby?” I ask.

“It will be adopted,” he says.

“Can I choose?”

He shakes his head. “Your rights are limited in juvie.”

“Will they be good people who won’t abuse my baby?”

Now tears fall from my eyes. How can I protect this child? My parents didn’t protect me, so how can I expect strangers to love this baby they have no bond with?

“Parents adopting babies normally can’t get pregnant and desperately want a child. I think you should abort, but if you’re adamant about it, the baby will go to a good home.” His demeanor softens, making me hope I can trust that he’s telling me the truth about this at least.

“You can’t guarantee that,” I tell him.

“No, nothing in life’s guaranteed.”

I lean back. “I don’t care what happens to me, but please make sure my baby is safe. I haven’t been safe most of my life. I’ll confess everything and take my punishment if you promise to keep my baby safe.”

The man has tears in his eyes. He glances down, and when he looks back up, he nods. “I’ll do everything within my power,” he tells me.

I give him a semblance of a smile. It’s all I have in me.

“Why did you kill your father?” he asks more gently.

I told him I’d spill all. I take a breath. “I didn’t want to be touched anymore.”

“What do you mean by touched?” he asks. He looks as if he doesn’t want to hear the answer. I’m sure he doesn’t. Maybe

all men aren't monsters, but I have yet to see any good ones.

"He beat me, stripped me, and used my body," I say.

"Do you believe he's the father of your child?" he asks, trying to look calm, but not covering his horror.

I shrug. "I don't think so. He hasn't done ..." I pause as a shudder runs through me. "He hasn't done that in a while. There's another person who claimed me exclusively this past year."

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"A friend of my father decided I was his. He came to the house at least once a week, sometimes up to three times. After he took me the first time, he wouldn't let anyone else touch me. It didn't stop my father's fists on me, but he was more careful so the other man didn't know it was happening. I was his toy, and his alone."

"Who is this man?" he asks, leaning forward.

"I won't say. It doesn't matter. Nothing will happen to him. Nothing will happen to any of them."

"If this baby's DNA matches we have proof and can prosecute," the man says.

I shake my head. "I won't say. It won't go well for me."

He leans closer to me. "I want to help you, Ms. Moore—"

"Don't call me that. I don't want that monster's name anymore," I interrupt.

"I understand. What do you want me to call you?"

"Can I pick anything?" I ask.

“Sure,” he tells me. I don’t care if he’s humoring me. I don’t want to be Tina Moore anymore. I never want to be her again. She’s broken, damaged, irreparable. I can’t be her anymore, not with this child inside me.

“How about Sassy? It’s a name I read in a book once, and I like how it sounds.”

“Okay, Sassy, let me help you. Tell me the names of the men who’ve abused you.”

“I won’t,” I tell him again.

“I might be able to get you out of serving time if this is self-defense.”

I shake my head. “I’ll go to jail or my baby and I will be dead anyway. They won’t let me be free. You have no idea how powerful these people are.”

We go back and forth for a while, but he doesn’t break me. Our interview ends, and I’m taken to the hospital ... in cuffs. I’m used to wearing cuffs. They don’t hurt me anymore.

Soon I’m lying on a table, and a cold gel is smeared on my stomach. Then, miracle of miracles, a sweet thumping sound fills the room. The nurse turns the monitor toward me, and I see a form on the screen moving around inside my stomach.

“Here’s your baby,” the nurse says as she smiles at me.

I see a perfect little head and the shape of a tiny face. My baby. This is my baby. The nurse doesn’t know I’ll never get to keep it, but she knows I’m in trouble as I have cuffs on and an officer standing next to me.

“It looks like you’re twenty weeks along and you’re having a little girl,” she says. She’s smiling but also looks sad. I’m not surprised. She might not know I’m fourteen, but it’s evident I’m young ... too young to be having this baby.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Would you like me to print a picture?”

“Yes, please,” I say. I’m shocked to find tears streaming down my cheeks. I can’t remember the last time I cried. It’s been a very long time, though, that I know for sure.

I’m taken back to the juvie center, where I’m left alone. They let me keep the picture. I stare at it long into the night and then tuck it away. I’m twenty weeks along, and they say most pregnancies go to forty weeks. That means I get to hold my baby for another twenty weeks before she’s ripped away from me.

I didn’t want a baby, and I definitely know who the father is, but I don’t care about any of that. All I care about is the next twenty weeks. I have something to live for. I’m no longer hopeless with no desire to live; I have a reason to survive. This baby won’t be abused like I was. I don’t care what I have to do, I’ll find her someday. I’ll do my time, get out of here, and then I’ll find her. I don’t care how long it takes.

I place my hand on my stomach and smile. “You’ve made me want to live,” I whisper.

I feel a thump in my belly. She hears me. She knows I’ll keep her safe. We’ve already bonded. I won’t get to name her. I don’t know if I’ll get to hold her once she’s born, but for now, she’s mine ... and mine alone. No one can take that from

me. Who did this to me doesn't matter. He doesn't want her. He'll destroy her if he finds out about her. He wants no proof of what he's done ... of what a monster he is.

I'll never tell them who he is ... he's too powerful. She'll never make it from the hospital if he knows. I'll beg the DA to keep my pregnancy a secret. I'll confess to killing my father, and there won't be a trial. I'll do whatever it takes to protect my baby girl.

I didn't think about what would happen when I killed my father, I just needed him to stop hurting me. I shouldn't be shocked at this, though. This is my life for now, and I need to focus on my baby girl.

"We'll be together for another twenty weeks ... and one day we'll be together again after you're born. I promise," I tell my little girl. I finally fall asleep, smiling for the first time in many years.

Tomorrow is a new day. The day after that is another new day. One day at a time. Each one will get better and better until one day I'll be free as a new person. I can survive anything now that I have a reason to live.

Chapter Four

Greyson

I despise strip joints. I know, I know, that's what all men have to say, but I truly despise them and the desperate men who need to sit in the audience and stare at barely legal women as they remove their clothes.

Maybe I hate them because I've never had a problem finding a woman to satisfy my needs. If anything, I have a problem getting rid of women. This might sound arrogant, but I am who I am, and I was blessed with good genetics, a hell of a work ethic, and a body that's been described as a combination of Chris Hemsworth and Jason Momoa. Personally, I think they want to be more like me.

I smile as my dark blue eyes blaze before I run my hand through my short dark brown hair. I move up to the doors of the said strip club and make my way inside. I might hate strip clubs, but there's one woman I need to see, and so far, this is the only location I know of to find her.

I step up to the front desk. This isn't a club you walk right onto the floor. No, that would be a run-of-the-mill club. This place is exclusive with a hundred-dollar door fee.

"ID please," the giant bouncer says with zero expression.

I pull out my license. Greyson River, thirty-four years old, six-foot-three, two hundred pounds of pure muscle. I hand over a crisp hundred. The man waves me through.

It's Friday night, a week after I saw Cassandra for the first time ... in person. I knew who she was before I stepped foot in the club's doors a week earlier. My reaction to her wasn't at all what I was expecting, though. That shocked me from that very moment. I still don't know what to think about it all.

I'm always a composed man. I know what I want, and I go after it. There's no doubt about that. I also always get my man, or woman, in this case. Okay, when it comes to romance, it's always a woman. Hey, I like what I like. But in life and in work, whoever and whatever I want ... I get.

Now Cassandra Montana has entered my life ... and my plans have altered. I don't want to want her, but I can't remember the last time I've had such a visceral reaction to a woman. The fact that she turned me down and easily walked away has only made my hunting instincts that much greater. Maybe I'll need to bed her before all is said and done. There's nothing that says a person can't mix work and pleasure. As a matter of fact, that's what makes this world so great. We can have our cake and eat it too.

I move to the same table I sat at the week before and order a Johnnie Walker Blue Label. The waitress smiles, knowing the tip is going to be huge with this expensive of a drink. I'm a man who likes only the finest things in life, and I'm not afraid to pay for them. That shows in the five-thousand-dollar loafers and ten-thousand-dollar suit I'm wearing. My job doesn't pay

for my shoes or suit, but nobody here knows who I am or what I do for a living. They don't need to know anything about me.

Being incredibly wealthy doesn't mean I don't take extreme pride in my work. I'm not afraid to get dirty when the day calls for some dirt beneath my nails. It does mean, however, that I can appreciate the finest things life has to offer, and I'm not afraid to take what I want.

I watch the show for the next hour, not turned on by a single woman who appears on stage. I give distant smiles to the dancers who approach my table, and they quickly figure out to move past me. There's only one woman I'm here to see tonight. I'm frustrated I have yet to figure out where she lives or works beyond this place. She's sneaky. I admire that in her. If she was easy to hunt, I'd grow bored quickly. The last thing that can be said about Cassandra is that she's easy.

What's my plan when I have her in my presence again? I don't need a plan. The fact she easily walked away from me last time was a fluke. I'm not an easy man to escape. It was our first meeting, though, so I give myself a break. Tonight will go differently ... I guarantee it.

The lights go low, and the stage lights up ... and Cassandra's partner shows up ... alone. She does a sexy number that has every man in the audience leaning a little closer. She does her twirling and gyrating, and my eyes narrow. Where's Cassandra? Her partner, Candy, or some other stripper name, looks up and meets my gaze. I practically hear her intake of breath. I can't imagine what she's seeing in my expression right now — frustration, anger, determination. I'm sure all of this and more.

Candy, as I'll call her, finishes her performance, then exits the stage. I know the routine now, know that she'll be making her rounds on the floor real soon. I pull out five hundred-dollar bills and hold them in my hand, in view, resting on top of the table.

Candy comes out and flirts her way across the floor before reaching my table. I meet her eyes as I scoot back my chair. She gives me a seductive smile I can see right through. This is her game face, and she knows how to make men pant. It's too bad I'm not interested in her. I think she'd be easier to land.

She straddles my lap and sits, her breasts close to my face as she effortlessly slips the bills from my fingers and they disappear into a little pouch glued to her body. The practiced look on her face falters as she rotates her hips on my lap.

I'm not going to lie, she's sexy, and I'm affected ... slightly. She presses her breasts against me as she rotates her hips. "What can I do for you, sugar?" she purrs, real lust in her eyes and voice.

I smile, not moving my hands to touch her. I know the rules of the club. I also don't want my hands on her as sexy as she is. I want them on only one woman. Since laying my eyes on Cassandra, I haven't found a sexier female.

"How about you tell me about your partner," I say with a genuine smile, an innocent smile, a look that assures her I'm a good guy ... which I'm not. Her gyrating stops, and I know I'm about to lose her. I reach into my coat and pull out five more hundreds. Her eyes widen a little. I'm sure this is the biggest tip she's getting tonight. The men here pay a lot, but

not a thousand for one woman, not unless they're taking her home.

"I don't talk about other women, but I do give one hell of a private dance," she tells me as she leans forward, putting my face in her cleavage as the money I've just pulled disappears. She scoots her hips even closer to me and really grinds. You'd think I'd be sporting some major wood. I might feel a bit of arousal, but not enough to perform. How can I want this woman when I'm thinking of another?

She stands and turns, sitting back down on me and taking my hand to wrap around her. I allow this as I'm curious how far she's willing to go for money. She places my hand on her chest and squeezes her fingers over mine as she lets out a moan, her head leaned back against my shoulder, her butt digging into my groin ... I don't think she's faking her desire.

"Want that private dance?" she huskily asks. Yep, her lust is far more real than an act. There's no doubt I could have this woman tonight ... just as I can have any woman I want ... except for Cassandra. That will soon change.

"I'd love one," I tell her. I might get her to talk if we have our own room together. She stands, excitement in her eyes. She takes my hand and leads me through the club, through a set of doors guarded by two large men who give me firm eye contact, letting me know nothing better happen without consent. Candy leads me to a small room with a couch and a table. Before she pushes me onto the sofa, the waitress comes in, sets down a fresh glass of scotch, and then disappears, the door clicking shut.

Music plays, and Candy gives me my own private show as she gyrates in front of me, moving on and off my lap before standing and tossing her tiny bra away, her breasts out in the open. She climbs on my lap again as I pull out more hundreds, laying them on the table. She doesn't bother putting them away now that she has me in private, just gives me a dance worthy of more hundreds. I need her to trust me, so I wait to bring up Cassandra again.

The dance goes on for fifteen minutes with her all over me. Her lips come near mine, and her tongue finds my neck. I should be aroused. I should be offering her thousands to bend her over the very plush couch. But I'm only waiting to ask where Cassandra is. I'm insane.

She finishes as I drain the last of my drink. She's on my lap with her breasts inches from my face as the waitress slips back inside, discreetly sets down a fresh glass, then saunters back out of the room after Candy hands her a hundred-dollar bill. They work well as a team.

"I don't offer more to many, which you can believe or not, but for you, I'm offering the entire night," Candy tells me.

I give her a seductive smile as I touch her for the first time, my large hand splayed on her back. She leans in as if to kiss me, and I easily block it as I lay my head against her shoulder. She smells like candy so the name is fitting.

"How much for a private party with you and your partner?" I ask, the lust real in my eyes at the thought of Cassandra giving me this same dance. I have to remind myself I'm not offering money for a dance, I just need to get Cassandra alone for ten minutes ... that's the job.

Candy stiffens the slightest bit before she composes herself again. I'm sure they're asked for this a lot after one of their sexy performances. She smiles before licking my neck again. She's good at picking up on cues and can see I don't want her mouth on mine.

"She's not here tonight, but a dance can be arranged for next Friday," she tells me. I see the gleam in her eyes. She knows I want her partner bad, and she's deciding how much I'll pay. I decide to make sure it happens. I'm not even showing my frustration at going another week before seeing Cassandra again.

"Five thousand for one hour," I tell her.

She's shocked, but covers her reaction quickly. Then she gives me a genuine smile as she climbs off my lap.

"Damn, you're either the sexiest stalker I've ever had the pleasure of dancing for, or you have it bad," she says with a laugh. She moves over, grabs her top, and puts it back in place. "Then again, a lot of men have it bad for Cassandra. I think it's the untouchable aura she puts out. It's not an aura; she won't have sex with you."

"I might have it a little bad, and I've been known to change the toughest of minds," I say. What's that going to hurt? A little honesty might get me more of what I want. I take out a few more hundreds and toss them on the table. The night has cost me thousands, and I have to wait another week ... but it's well worth it.

"Well, the pleasure has been all mine, sugar. I'll see you in a week."

With that, she puts the rest of the money away and slips from the room. I wait a few more minutes as I finish the rest of my drink, then walk from the room and see the smirk on the bouncers' faces. I wave before I exit the club. Candy was nowhere to be seen. I paid her enough so she can go ahead and make her way home without any other lap dances.

I don't like that I have to wait a week before I see Cassandra again. Patience is a virtue, though, and she's worth the wait. I can already tell the lines between work and pleasure have been drawn and erased. When I come back I won't need to be on the floor ... I'll go straight to the private room. Candy left me the instructions at the host station. I wonder if she's going to warn Cassandra ... I hope not. I want to see her face when she enters the room and sees me.

Cassandra and I have just begun our dance. It might be off to a slow start, but all of the really good dances begin that way. Soon, we'll come to the chorus, and rockets will flare.

Let the games begin.

Chapter Five

“Another day, another dollar.” I laugh as I put the finishing touches on my makeup at the long table with girls sitting on either side of me. This room is nicer than most strip clubs, yet still the same. There’s a large table in front of a long mirror with a lot of lights where we change from our everyday lives into the sophisticated sex kittens the men in the club want to see. If they saw us as we truly are, they’d be disappointed. Outside of these walls we look just like their wives and girlfriends.

The difference is we sell seduction and sex. We put on an act for a length of time to make them kneel at our feet. We don’t complain about bills or about them leaving the toilet seat up. We’re their wet dream come to life. As soon as we walk out of these doors, we’re right back to being their wives and girlfriends, just the same as every other woman in the world.

If the men in the many clubs understood that, they’d stop paying us, stop participating in the game. That might be good for family life, but it wouldn’t be so good for my bills.

“A lot of dollars,” Samantha says as she finishes her lipstick, then sends me a kiss through the air.

“Yeah, Samantha smoked us all last Friday in tips. Tonight, it’s on for who can be the ultimate seductress,” Stephanie says with a sexy look.

There's undoubtedly competition between us to get the attention of the men with the deepest pockets, but there are enough pervs to go around and keep all of us in a life of luxury. The younger women tend to clean up quite nicely; I'm almost considered an old maid in this business, but I don't look my age, and I have moves some of these women have no clue how to pull off, so I'm not worried. I don't want to do this much longer. It's time to pass it on to the next generation. In a club like this, some of the men want women a little older, a little more sophisticated in their eyes. This isn't a dollar-tip sort of place.

"We have a private dance before our stage performance in a few hours," Samantha tells me.

"Already?" I ask.

"Yep, a date last Friday was disappointed to have only little old me. He wanted us both," she tells me with a wink as she flutters her hands up and down her stunning body.

"Ohh, is it the super hunk who paid you thousands?" Stephanie asks with real lust in her eyes.

"Yes," Samantha replies with a sigh.

"Oh, you're lucky," Stephanie says dramatically. "I want a turn with him. I'd be willing to do it for free. That man is as hot as they come."

"And filthy rich," Peggy says. "I looked him up, and it seems he's from old-world money, the kind no person can ever hope to spend." She must've bribed the bouncers at the front to get his name. I'm not interested enough to find out. Okay, I

might be a little interested, but I won't let myself follow through on my curiosity.

“Then we won't mind taking some of it off of his hands,” I say as I paint on bright red lipstick. I'd never wear this color in real life.

“We sure will,” Samantha says. “Let's give him a show he'll never forget. I think we can make him spill.”

“Gross,” I tell her. “I don't want any stickiness on me.”

All of the ladies laugh. “I'll get hot and sticky for that man,” Peggy assures us.

“You're all sex addicts. No wonder we work here. We're too shameless to be anywhere else,” I say with another laugh. It's time to have our game faces on so we get the last of the giggles out of the way.

Samantha and I put on a few layers so we can do a good strip show for the man with deep pockets, then we make our way through the club. A few men hand over bills as we pass by and make us promise to stop by later. Of course we tell them we can't wait. It's a good thing I only do this twice a month now. I'm losing my energy for it. It's getting more and more difficult to pretend I want these men.

We pass the bouncers, then make our way to the primo private suite. This room is for the longer shows with its own pole inside, a bathroom with a shower, and a personal waitress who slips drinks in through a door in the wall behind the table. This is the room where a lot of things happen.

“He knows we aren't having sex with him, right?” I ask. Samantha has never steered me wrong, but I've also never

performed in this room before. I won't admit I'm nervous, but I am growing a little concerned as we stand in the hallway.

She smiles. "He knows," she assures me. "Though, I'd do this man in a second if he wanted me. He's that hot."

I'm concerned by her words. Samantha might play the seductress, but she's a good person. She doesn't sleep with clients. The two of us might be the only women in the building who haven't taken a client to a hotel room. I've never been tempted, and Samantha is a country girl at heart. We both know this is nothing more than a game where the winner gets paid the most.

"He has eyes for only you, but he knows the rules. I'm not at all worried," she tells me.

As she opens the door, I immediately know who it is. I want to turn and run, but I haven't run in ten years, and I'm not about to start now. If this man wants to pay us thousands to perform for him, he'll get a hell of a performance ... and that's all he'll get. He might be sexy as hell and have all of the women in here panting, but I can guarantee he's never met a woman like me before.

We move inside the room, and he's sitting on the couch. He doesn't even look at Samantha as his gaze takes me in from head to toe. Our eyes meet for several long moments, and I feel an extra little thump in my chest. Holy hell, he hasn't even touched me and I'm already getting hot and bothered. How in the heck am I going to get through the next hour of entertaining this man?

"Welcome back, Cassandra," he says with pure sex in his voice. Then again, most men I've encountered have the same

voice. They see a woman as their own personal doll to do with what they want. I've learned how to exploit their needs and use them to my advantage.

"Since you have my name, do I get yours?" I ask, just as huskily. I tell myself it's all part of the performance.

"Greyson," he tells me.

"Like Russell," I say with a smirk.

"He doesn't compare to me," he says, and the confidence radiating off him certainly makes his words true.

"Okay, Greyson, what are you expecting in the next hour?" We might as well get the business side on the table and out of the way.

"To be entertained," he says with smugness. There's a line between confidence and arrogance, and this man has no idea what a line even is. He knows exactly who he is and has every right to feel as he does.

"We can do that, sugar," Samantha says.

"I'm well aware of that, Candy," he tells her with a wink, finally acknowledging her for the first time.

"Let's get the rules out of the way," I say as I sexily slide across the room and sit beside him, placing my hand on his thigh. Samantha sits on the opposite side, caressing his chest.

"Yes, rules," he says, once again giving me his full attention.

"In the private room, you get a little more freedom with touching, but if we're uncomfortable with something, we'll simply remove your fingers from where we don't want them.

Under no circumstances do the hands go into this area,” I say as I take my hand and run it between my legs. He watches with a hint of lust as I touch myself. I take a little longer than usual as I give him a wicked smile.

“If we’re happy, we don’t mind a little touching here,” Samantha says as she wraps her finger over his knuckles and guides his hand over her chest before moving it to whisper across my breast, which makes me jump the slightest bit as my nipple hardens. What in the actual hell? This doesn’t happen to me ... I mean, like ever. It never happens to me. I’ve been touched a lot, and I don’t respond. I just make the men think I respond. This man is dangerous, just like I knew he was the first time I laid eyes on him.

“That’s only if we think you’re being ... a ... very ... good ... boy,” I slowly say as I lick my lips.

“Oh, I assure you I’m the best,” he tells me as his fingers flex over my chest. Samantha can see my expression and moves his hand down to rest on her thigh.

“As for the rest, Jennie will bring you as many drinks as you like without you asking, and we’ll all have some fun,” Samantha says.

“What about talking?” he asks.

“You can talk as much as you like,” I tell him as I run my finger down his chest.

“I’ll just sit back and relax for now,” he says. He does just that as he leans into the back of the couch. I give him a smile as I rise. Samantha joins me, and we turn on the music.

I don't look Greyson in the eyes as Samantha and I perform a well-honed routine. We slowly remove each other's clothes, leaving us standing before him in tiny bras, thongs, garters, and stockings. I slide around the pole as I lean back; Samantha runs her hands over my body.

We turn as her lips brush mine before she drops to the floor and arches her back in a way that makes most men drop to their knees. That's when I make the mistake of looking over at Greyson who isn't watching Samantha ... his eyes are on only me. There's something hot about it, something that makes this strange desire in me grow.

I move across the room and straddle him. I tell myself I'm doing it for the tips, but I like sitting on him. I grab the back of his head and pull him forward, letting his lips glaze over the humps of my breasts, just skirting my nipples. I arch my back while scooting forward and feel his enormous erection pressing against me as my chest pushes forward.

“What do you do when you're not here, Cassandra?”

I've been asked this before. “What makes you think I do anything other than this?”

He chuckles as I take his hand and place it at my throat, instantly stopping his laughter. I let go of his hand as I swirl my hips against his arousal. He runs his hands between my cleavage and down the flatness of my stomach before stopping at my panties. Never have I wanted a man to go lower, to soothe this ache I feel right now. I want him to, though, so much so it's throwing me off my routine.

“I have a feeling there's a lot more to you than you like showing the world.”

His words make me inhale sharply. I don't like this road he's trying to take me down. I refuse to speak to him, which means I need to make him unable to talk.

I circle my hips again, and he wraps his hand around my back and caresses the hot, bare skin. Samantha comes up behind me and wraps her arms around me, covering my aching breasts. I give her the slightest shake to tell her not to remove the clasp on the front of my bra. I don't want to be that exposed with this man. Yes, he's already seen my breasts, but not while I'm pressed against him. She leans down, kisses my neck, then moves beside Greyson on the couch. I turn around and circle my hips over him as he holds my sides with his hot breath on the back of my neck.

I rise, do a slow spin, then lift my foot onto his lap, my toes feeling his erection. He lets out a groan, then seems shocked the sound escaped. I lick my lips, smile, and curl my toes, making him stiffer. It seems I'm making this man of steel come undone ... and strangely, I like it.

“Undo the garter clips,” I whisper huskily.

His hands circle my thighs, intensifying that sweet ache in my core. This is all rehearsed, this is something we've done a thousand times before, but I've never had this reaction. I'm becoming more confused and trying to push the feeling away.

He slowly undoes the clips, one by one, then places his fingers in the thigh-high stocking before he peels it down my leg, his fingers caressing me in every sensitive place I didn't know I had before tonight.

As I lift my foot, he peels the stocking away before giving my foot a firm rub that feels like absolute heaven. I'm a little

shaky when I meet his gaze while putting my foot on the floor and lifting my other to his lap. He performs the same routine, and I'm almost a puddle at his feet when he finishes. I spin away before I reveal how much I desire him. The line between performance and lust blurs more by the second.

Samantha leans against him as I climb the pole, doing a few slow spins back down. She wears a big grin before she rises, moves to me, and swings around the pole. We dance together, our hands caressing each other before she does a slow spin away. She then winks at me before she exits the room. I stop, confused.

“This isn't our routine,” I say.

“I made her an offer she couldn't refuse,” he tells me.

“What do you mean?” I ask. He's thrown me off. I'm getting a lot of firsts with this man.

“I want to be with you alone,” he says.

Samantha wouldn't take offense to this. It's happened before both ways. It's been evident since we entered which of us he has eyes on, but I was comforted having my friend in here. I have over half an hour left with this man, and I'm wondering if I can keep my hormones or my act in place that long.

A small part of me likes that he only wants one woman. Too many men want multiple partners. I've seen it all too often before. It's one of the things that helps me keep my distance. His eyes on me alone might be my undoing.

“Well, sugar, then I'll give you a great show,” I say, recovering fast.

“Greyson,” he tells me.

“What?” I ask as I move toward him.

“I like my name on your lips,” he says, his voice incredibly husky.

“Okay, Greyson,” I say. This is just a performance, this is just a performance, I repeat over and over as I turn around and sit on him again, giving him the best lap dance he’ll ever get.

He’s hard beneath me as I twirl and let his hands rest on my waist. His thumbs sit at the curve of my breasts, and I ache all over as I mimic sex, the only things keeping him from entering me are his pants and a tiny scrap of satin barely containing me.

“I’m going to take you out,” he huskily whispers.

“I don’t date,” I say.

“You don’t date?” I can see he’s having a hard time keeping the conversation up ... unlike the hardness pressing against me.

“No, I don’t date.”

“Anyone? Ever?” It’s clear he doesn’t believe me.

“Nope, not ever.” We gaze at each other for several moments. He grins.

“I’m going to break your non-dating streak,” he assures me.

“Good luck,” I tell him, gaining my confidence back. If there’s one talent I have, it’s the ability to turn men down while still turning them on and continuing to tip me with nice crisp hundred-dollar bills.

I get up again, needing to break our connection, and he pulls out a wad of hundreds, throwing them on the table, reminding me I'm being paid very well for this act. There's lust in his eyes that I've seen a thousand times in other men, but with him, unlike with others, it causes a reaction inside me.

I want the money. I need the money. But I also want him. I'm horrified and ... elated at the thought. I didn't think enjoying a man with what's been done to me was possible. I figured that part of my life was broken long ago, never to be fixed again. I'm not running from him anymore. I'm taking what I want.

I smile and walk back to him before sliding down and straddling him once more as I lift his fingers to the clasp of my bra. I told him if he was a good boy he'd get to touch me more, and he's indeed being a good boy. He doesn't have to be asked twice. He flicks the clasp like an expert, and my breasts spill from my bra, which he slowly peels from my shoulders.

I feel wet heat between my thighs, something I've never felt before, as I swirl my hips against his arousal. He groans again, this time louder as he reaches up and cups my breasts. I lean down and lick his neck. He tastes fantastic, like spice and whiskey with a hint of pine. I gently suck the skin before turning, finding our lips only centimeters apart.

His hands cup my breasts, making my nipples stiff and achy. I gasp at the sensation as he closes the gap between our mouths and kisses me. I never have, and I repeat, never kissed a man in this club. I don't stop him as he deepens the kiss, his tongue tracing my lips before plunging inside my mouth.

This time I moan, and it's not an act. I continue rubbing my core against him as he holds one of my breasts, squeezing, kneading, and making me quiver while his other hand circles my back, keeping me on top of his pulsing arousal.

Our groans increase as I move faster against him, not understanding what I'm feeling. I don't want to stop, though. This is me ... not an act. I'm following my body's desire and pushing against him as I seek relief. Our kiss deepens as his fingers pinch my nipple, and I grind against him, heat smoldering, hotter and hotter.

He tilts my head as his fingers do things to my nipple I didn't think possible. He's squeezing, pinching, rubbing, and building a delightful fire inside me. I press my hips harder against him as I rock back and forth, the tingling sensation throbbing in my core.

Relief.

Relief.

Relief.

"Please," I gasp against his mouth, not understanding what I'm begging for.

He deepens the kiss as he pushes his hips higher, helping me grind against him. His tongue is masterful as he owns my mouth and pinches my nipple.

I push hard against him, then rip my mouth from his as my back arches, and I cry out in pleasure. My body starts shaking; heat and lightning rocket through me, and my core tingles in something I can't describe. I'm panting as he bends down and takes my nipple in his mouth, sucking, licking, and nipping

while I shake on top of him. Sweat is beading on my body, and I tremble so badly I couldn't move if I tried.

After what feels like hours, the throbbing stops, and I sag against him, my body spent. What in the hell was that? I need to move, but I'm not sure I can. I think I just experienced my first orgasm. What in the hell have I missed for twenty-eight years? Okay, for at least ten years of my life.

I was victimized and tortured, but I've never felt pleasure before. No wonder sex sells. No wonder so many pay so much for it. If this is the end result, I get why there are sex addicts. How have I performed so well over the years without knowing exactly what this feels like? This could change everything in my life.

"Cassandra?" Greyson asks after a solid few minutes of silence. I realize I've been plastered over him without moving. I slowly lift my head, still shocked at how good that felt. My body is jelly right now.

"Yes?" My voice is raw.

"I'm dying here," he says, his voice barely contained.

That's when I realize I'm pressed against him, and he's still as hard as a boulder.

"Oh, sorry about that," I tell him. Then for some reason I begin to giggle. I start, and there's no stopping me. It might wipe out any more tips I'm going to get from him, but I can't stop laughing. It takes a couple of minutes to get myself under control. Then I climb from his lap and stand before him on shaky knees, wearing nothing but my minuscule panties which

weren't any protection from the friction of our bodies rubbing together.

I look down and see the enormous bulge in his pants. I should have empathy for him, but at this moment, I don't. Too many men have abused me. It's befitting that I found pleasure ... and he's found none.

"There's a bathroom through that door if you need to relieve yourself," I tell him. I've said these words in other rooms many times before. Nine times out of ten, when the men realize I'm not going to take care of the problem for them, they've taken the bathroom option. We even have a little screen in each room with porn-on-demand so they can finish with an X-rated show.

"How much do you cost for the night?" he asks, lust ... and something else that scares me more than sex, burning in his gaze.

"What do you want from me?" I ask, hating the fear in my voice.

He looks as if he's contemplating what he should say. I want to reach down and demand he tell me. There's more to this man than meets the eye, and that's why he's more dangerous than anyone I've known before.

"I want to talk ... with our clothes on. I want an entire night."

I take a breath as I gain strength. I'm stronger than this. I'm not a victim anymore. I can and do say no all of the time.

"I'm not for sale ... at least beyond a dance," I tell him.

He still has fifteen minutes, but I'm not going to refund him, and I'm not staying. I need a break before I go out there and perform for a roomful of horny men.

"Everyone has a price," he insists. "What's yours? Ten thousand?"

I barely manage to keep a gasp from escaping. I shake my head. "Nope."

He eyes me as if there's no price he's not willing to pay. "You got a happy ending. Don't you think I should get mine?"

"You're free to take your own happy ending just like I did," I say, feeling the sass return to my body. What's funny is I'm tempted. I've never had good sex in my life. I've never had consensual sex. Would having consensual sex change how I feel? Would it give me back more power? I don't know, but I'm afraid to find out. It might send me over the edge of the life I've spent years building. It's too risky.

"Twenty-five thousand," he says. I realize he's dead serious.

I don't know what to think as I stare at this man who makes me feel things I've never felt before. I'm speechless, but I want him. One word finally escapes my mouth before I have time to think about it, before I have time to tell him no.

"Done," I tell him. I turn and walk from the room. What in the hell did I just do? What did I just say? Did I agree to have sex with him for twenty-five thousand dollars? No, I couldn't have done that. It's not possible.

I don't have time to analyze it. I need thirty minutes alone before my next performance. I'm sure he'll be in the audience

waiting for me. What will I do? I'm going to come to my senses ... I'm sure I'm going to remember exactly who I am ... before it's too late.

Chapter Six

Greyson

I don't leave the room until my hour plus a few more minutes is up, and I'm still half erect when I walk out. I've never before reacted to a woman the way I responded to Cassandra Montana. I also know I have to have her. I won't function properly until I do. I don't think she planned on having an orgasm, but when she exploded in my arms it took all I had not to explode with her. That hasn't happened to me since I was fourteen making out in the back of my car.

I have far more self-control than most men. I take pride in my control. I don't desire a woman so much I can't think of anything but her. In this case, with this woman, though, I'm obsessed. I have to have her. Even with this knowledge, I'm slightly disappointed she accepted my offer so quickly.

I need to bed her, as well as get information from her, but I like this chase. I like the seduction. I love having her in my arms, and tasting her for the first time was heaven. Now, I want to spread her thighs and bury my face in her sweetness. I need to taste every inch of her and have her come again and again beneath me. Once she's done that, I'll take her hard, make her mine ... for the night ... only the night. Then I can purge her from my system and do what I've come here to do. I

knew I'd have to get close to her ... but I wasn't planning on getting this close. I didn't expect to want her.

I enter the club floor and take a seat in the middle of the room. It will take all I have to watch her on that stage, knowing every eye on the floor is on her. Of course her partner is hot and sexy, but no one compares to Cassandra. I don't want other men watching her, which is absolutely ridiculous as this is her job, where I found her. She's not mine. I don't want her to be mine. I want to taste her, to rock her world, then to be done with her.

I'm disappointed she accepted sex for money, but I won't turn it down. I have enough money to burn, more than enough. What I don't have is her naked beneath me. I want to take her in every position I've ever enjoyed before. I have a feeling it will be different with her. I have a feeling she's a once-in-a-lifetime partner. Maybe it will take more than one night to appease my raging appetite for her. I don't care. I'll take as much as I need to purge her.

I won't feel guilty as she'll get more than enough satisfaction from our mating. I'll please her so much she'll beg me to stay ... many women have. I can walk away without a backward glance, though. Once I've gotten what I want and need, I won't have to stick around for more. It becomes monotonous by then.

It doesn't take long for the lights to dim on the stage, and I sit back and wait. When they come back on Cassandra and Samantha are in place, this time in Old West clothing. They do their performance, and I can't take my eyes off Cassandra. A few times she glances out, and our eyes meet. She licks her

lips and smiles just for me. That doesn't stop other men from hollering and throwing money on the stage. I clench my fists and fight the urge to go up there and carry her off. I could take these bouncers. I could have her now. I will take her anywhere ... anytime.

I want to take her away from this life. I want ... I stop myself. What in the hell am I thinking? This is insane. I know who she is ... or I have an excellent idea of who she is. I need to bed her and move on. That's all it is. I don't care if these men look at her. They've done it a thousand times before, and she's not mine to protect. She's mine to own for a night, and that's all.

No matter how much I tell myself this, I still clench my fingers into tight fists. I want the performance to be over. It finally comes to an end with bubbles falling over the two women as they're wrapped in each other's arms. The lights go off, and I let out a sigh of relief.

I have another drink as Cass and Candy appear on the floor and make their way through the room. I force myself to stay in my seat as Cassandra slides onto other men's laps, throwing her head back and dancing for them as she collects more and more money.

When I think I can't take another second of watching her with other men, she makes her way to me. She smiles as she sits on my lap, making my erection jump back to life as I circle my hand around her and pull her close. I want to taste her nipple again so badly it's taking away my breath.

"Careful, Jimmy doesn't like it when men get touchy," she warns.

I give her a forced smile. After watching other men touch her for the past hour, I'm not in the best of moods. "I gave Jimmy one hell of a tip when I came out of the private room," I tell her with a smirk.

"Oh, buying off my protection. Tsk, tsk, that's not playing fair," she says. A sparkle in her eyes tells me she's not all that worried. I have a feeling she can protect herself just fine. I might have to test that theory. I think hot, rough sex with this woman is just what the doctor ordered.

She gives me a modified lap dance before dropping a note on the table and ignoring the hundreds I have sitting there for her.

"This one's on the house," she says before she turns and saunters away. I'm not sure if she will change then meet me or how this will work. I just know I'm closer than ever to taking her from this room and making her mine. I smile to think anything has been on the house. I can positively say this is the most expensive sex I'll ever have. Then again, I've never paid for sex before. I'm paying for so much more than sex right now, though, she just doesn't know it yet. When she figures it out, I have a feeling more fireworks are going to burst in the sky. I have a feeling Cassandra doesn't like getting fooled.

After she's out of view, I drain the rest of my scotch, then tell the waitress, who's immediately at my table, to bring me water instead as I hand her a bundle of bills to pay for my drinks and tip. I finally pick up the note, figuring it's the instructions for the rest of our night. I'm confused as I read the words written on the front.

Deal or No Deal.

What the hell?

I open the note, and on the inside, it says No Deal, then has a kiss done in lipstick next to it. I stare at the words for a moment, then laugh. Sure, my dick isn't appreciating the situation, but she just turned me down ... and for some strange reason I like it a hell of a lot more than I should.

Cassandra might not realize it yet, but she's just activated the lion inside of me, and with two little words, she just made me the most dangerous predator she's ever dealt with. I'm officially on the hunt and won't stop until I get my prey.

I know she's won tonight, but I'll have the ultimate victory in the end. I can't wait to see how this game ends. One thing I know for damn sure is it will end with a big explosion that will rock both of our worlds. I'll make damn sure of that.

I rise and exit the club. I didn't get what I came for, but I got enough to keep me happy ... until my phone rings. I look down and let out a sigh. What in the hell am I going to say?

"Yes," I say shortly.

"What in the hell is taking so long?" comes the thundering voice on the other end of the line.

"You and I both knew this was a long game," I reply.

"There are limits," he replies.

"I'm closer. I'm sure it's her," I say.

There's a long pause. "How sure?"

I take a breath. A part of me wants to protect her and keep her far away from the coming storm. I brush this feeling aside. It's absurd I'm having these thoughts.

“Ninety percent sure,” I reply.

“Make it a hundred percent,” the voice says before the call disconnects.

I walk to my vehicle in a far worse mood than I was only a few minutes ago. This is so damn complicated, which I usually love. For some reason I’m not loving it now. It can’t have anything to do with Cassandra, I assure myself. I know I’m wrong, though. I’m too close, and it’s only just begun. How in the hell will I feel about it if we do sleep together? I shake my head. I can’t think about that. I have a job to do ... and it will get done ... the stakes are too high for it not to happen.

I push all doubts from my head as I drive away from the club. It’s time to up my game. We’re running out of time ...

[Buy Here](#)