



THE
Billionaire's
CHRISTMAS
Surprise



LAURA HALEY-MCNEIL

THE BILLIONAIRE'S CHRISTMAS SURPRISE

CHRISTMAS BILLIONAIRES

BOOK SEVEN



LAURA HALEY-MCNEIL

HUERFANO PRESS, LLC

The Billionaire's Christmas Surprise

Book 7 of the Christmas Billionaires Series

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Laura Haley-McNeil. The Billionaire's Christmas Surprise

For Beau

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CHAPTER 1



Emma Waite Haines' heart pounded dully when she followed her lawyer down the marble hallway to the New York City courtroom. The media crawled over each other trying to get a statement. They flashed cameras and waved microphones. Curiosity seekers jostled for positions with the press.

“Ms. Haines, did you sign a prenup?”

“Ms. Haines, how much money will you get in the divorce settlement?”

“Ms. Haines, rumor has it you're pregnant. Can you please confirm?”

Emma dragged air into her lungs. The blood drained from her face. She would've ignored that question had she not committed one devastating mistake.

Pregnant? What would that mean? A custody battle? That hadn't been part of the contract.

Silently she prayed for God to give her strength. If she had trusted in Him, she wouldn't be here.

Her attorney, Bill Molson, took her arm, the question in his eyes asking if she were all right. She hoped she gave him a reassuring smile. Once the divorce proceedings were over, she'd be fine—at least that was what she kept telling herself.

Bill had warned her the press and curiosity seekers would want to see her, though she hadn't expected this much publicity. She wasn't a rock star or royalty or some rich

heiress, but she may as well have been, because she was, after all, Emma Waite Haines—soon to be the ex-wife of billionaire Carter du Pont Haines IV.

“Ms. Haines will not be making any comment at this time.” Bill’s tone was gentle, but the look in his eyes was firm.

Emma followed Bill’s advice and looked straight ahead. Still, she felt the hard stares. Two years ago, she was nobody, but because of her marriage to Carter, the whole world now knew who she was.

She focused on placing one foot in front of the other. She barely saw the hallway before her. Looming at the end were the courtroom’s imposing double oak doors. She gasped and stuttered a breath, then tightened her jaw. She’d made it this far. She wouldn’t faint now.

The marriage and divorce had been stipulated in the contract she and Carter had signed two years ago. She always knew the marriage would end, but now reality struck. Once she stepped inside that courtroom, her life would change as it had two years ago when she and Carter uttered those fateful words, “I do.”

Through the windows lining the corridor, she glimpsed the bare branches of the trees growing along the street. How she longed to be outside, walking in the crisp air and not walking into a court session that made her want to weep.

The media’s questioning became more intense, their camera lights flashing brighter and faster. Her teeth set, she tried to ignore them. Instead, she stared at the approaching courtroom doors.

Bill opened one of the doors. She could hardly breathe. How had her life gone from small-town girl to soon-to-be ex-wife of the country’s high-profile billionaire?

But she knew why. She needed money, and her soon-to-be ex-husband needed a wife. If she followed the contract to the letter, and she and Carter remained married for two years, she would walk away a very wealthy woman.

She filled her lungs with the courthouse's stale air. Is that what she wanted? Money?

Would she still receive the settlement if she confessed she'd broken the terms of the contract? If she did that, Carter wouldn't get what he wanted.

Bill turned to her and smiled again with that questioning look in his eyes. Emma forced the corners of her mouth to curve, then, her stomach dropped. Even before stepping inside the courtroom, she knew the place was jammed. Her throat dry, she tried to swallow. Why did it feel as if she were walking into a death chamber?

When she signed the contract, the terms seemed simple—pretend to be Carter's wife for two years. She hadn't wanted to sign the contract, but if she didn't, she'd lose everything. If she'd only known pretending was the most difficult task she had to face. In the eyes of the world, she'd prevailed. No one knew she had failed. No one knew turmoil coiled in the pit of her stomach.

She hesitated but didn't miss Bill's curious glance. She took another breath, hoping it would give her strength, then stepped into the packed courtroom. She almost gasped when everyone seated in the public area turned and stared at her.

Carter and his legal team sat at the plaintiff's table. His blue gaze lifted and locked onto her. Even now, one look from him made her heart rise in her chest. That he looked tired shouldn't have surprised her. Their last night together had been one that never should've happened.

Their marriage should never have happened.

It had been one of parties and vacations and social events. Wherever she and Carter went, they played the game. The world had to believe they were husband and wife.

Like any game, there was a prize. To inherit his grandmother's estate, Carter had to marry.

That Emma needed money to save her grandparents' lodge was the incentive that made her agree to the fraudulent nuptials.

The lines at the corner of Carter's eyes deepened. His hand on the armrest, he seemed about to rise. Then his lawyer tipped his head toward him and murmured something that made Carter drop his gaze to a document on the table.

Emma fought against the emptiness that squeezed her chest. Only a little while longer, only a brief hearing before a judge, then she would be free to return to her life as simple Emma Waite from Colorado's Rocky Mountains.

Looking at her attorney, she saw he offered her an encouraging smile. It was meant to soothe her but did little to quell the cold that sent a shiver down her spine.

They walked past the pointed stares of the media and spectators to the table at the front.

"Are you all right?" Bill whispered when she started to take her seat.

She forced a smile and nodded, but she wasn't fine at all. She had never wanted to agree to this sham of a marriage.

For years, she'd worked at her grandparents' side to make the lodge at Falcon Lake the success it had been for generations. After her parents' death, her grandparents had raised her, and she wouldn't abandon them after the sacrifices they made for her. Though they were gone, she wanted to carry on the Waite tradition and manage the lodge with the same integrity as her grandparents.

She'd lost her grandfather years ago. When her grandmother fell ill, Emma managed the lodge with the help of her grandmother's friend, Gael Curtis. It wasn't until her grandmother passed that she understood the debt her grandparents had accumulated.

The mortgage was past due. The insurance premiums hadn't been paid in years. Outstanding bills owed to local contractors filled the filing cabinet.

Emma knew business had been slow, but she hadn't realized the income from the resort barely paid the utilities. Without funds to pay a staff, the cooking and cleaning fell to

Emma, her grandmother and Gael. When her grandmother became ill, Emma and Gael did it all.

Emma was in negotiations with the loan officer at the local bank when Carter walked into the banker's office. After reviewing her mortgage, Carter and the banker had a private meeting—a meeting that changed Emma's life forever. The offer he made was one she should've refused, but she didn't. She'd been too desperate to consider the consequences.

“All rise.” The bailiff's deep voice broke through her thoughts.

She and her lawyer stood. She didn't have to look at Carter to know he and his team of lawyers rose also.

The judge swept in from his chambers, his black robe fluttering behind him, and called the session to order. A rustle filled the courtroom as everyone sat. The judge reviewed the documents before him, then asked the lawyers to approach the bench.

Emma heard none of what they said, but Bill had told her the judge would ask about a chance of resolution.

It had been one of the terms of the contract that resolving the marriage would never be possible. She had agreed to that and everything else. She pressed down the sickening feeling that threatened to rise up her throat. She had agreed to all these terms—for a price.

Bill's smile was slight when he turned away from the bench and crossed the room to the table where Emma waited.

“I'm going to read the terms of your requests, then the judge will ask if you and Carter will agree to reconcile,” Bill murmured. “Just say what we rehearsed, then Carter's counsel and I will review the provisions of the divorce.”

Divorce! What would her grandparents say if they knew she'd married someone she didn't love so the resort could remain in business? And how long would it stay in business? To keep from thinking about the divorce, Emma worked on a plan that would make the resort a thriving operation.

Bill moved to the lectern in front of the judge and specified the terms that he had requested for Emma. She winced at the extravagance he relayed—none of which she wanted. For the past two years, she counted the days when she would return to Colorado.

Behind her, gasps and murmurs waffled through the crowd. The entrance doors opened and closed several times. Because the media were filing stories about her settlement? Bill had said it would be the largest paid in New York history.

Emma closed her eyes. She didn't want a divorce settlement, but what she wanted, Carter couldn't give her.

When the judge finished questioning Bill, the lawyer returned to the table where Emma waited. Though his face was expressionless, Emma saw he was pleased with his presentation. And he should be. This case would make him one of the highest paid attorneys in the city.

Carter's lead attorney moved to the lectern and explained what Carter was willing to pay and why. More murmurs rose from the crowd, followed by the courtroom doors again opening and closing.

Emma drew in air. Why didn't the media show this much interest in the city's crime rate? But she knew why. Carter's personal life garnered ratings. Even his friends scoured the papers and the internet for the latest gossip to discuss at parties and spas and yacht vacations.

When Emma had learned that she felt sorry for him. What life could anyone lead when they lived in a goldfish bowl?

Emma learned the answer to that when she agreed to marry Carter. As soon as she uttered, "I do," her personal life became media fodder, too.

She felt Bill's stare. When she looked at him, he indicated that the judge had asked her a question.

"I'm sorry, Your Honor. Would you please repeat the question?" Her voice trembled.

Bill set a small bottle of water in front of her. She only stared at it. She was too nervous to take a sip.

“Is there no chance of reconciliation?” the judge asked, his eyes soft and kind like her grandfather’s.

“No, sir.” Emma dropped her gaze. There was no chance because reconciliation hadn’t been part of the contract. A loveless marriage couldn’t be reconciled.

After a few more questions, the judge turned his attention to Carter, again asking if there was a chance for reconciliation.

“No,” Carter said softly, though Emma didn’t miss the ragged tone in his voice.

The judge sighed and leaned back in his chair. “It disappoints me that you young people aren’t willing to put forth the effort it takes to make a marriage work.” He gathered the papers he’d spread across his bench. He looked from Emma to Carter.

Emma dropped her gaze. She didn’t want anyone to see the pain she felt.

“It appears I have no choice but to dissolve this marriage,” the judge said on an exhaled breath. “Emma Haines.”

Emma’s head came up.

“Carter Haines.”

Carter lifted his gaze to the judge.

“I hereby declare your marriage dissolved three months from today.” The judge’s gavel hit its base with an echo that resounded throughout the courtroom.

Emma sank her teeth into her lower lip. It was that, or she’d burst into tears.

Behind her came a rush of voices. Feet pounded across the wood flooring as reporters raced out of the courtroom. Were they surprised? Had any of them thought Emma and Carter would stay married?

Bill had warned her the dissolution would burn up the internet and the media wires. He touched her elbow and helped her to her feet. She felt drained and prayed she had the strength to walk out of the courtroom.

In a daze, she stepped away from the table. When she lifted her gaze, she came face to face with Carter.

“Emma,” he whispered hoarsely. “I’m sorry I—”

His attorney murmured something to him. Carter’s eyes flickered, but he nodded and stepped back.

Bill looped Emma’s arm through his. Angling his shoulders, he forged a path through the crowd. When they stepped outside the courthouse, gray clouds peeked through the skyscrapers that rose around them. A microphone was set up at the head of the crescent-shaped steps leading to the sidewalk.

“I’m going to say a few words.” Regret filled Bill’s eyes. “It’s better to set the record straight before the rumor mills confuse the facts. Do you want to say anything?”

“No.” Panic rose in Emma’s throat. “I’d rather return to the hotel.”

“I’ll make arrangements,” Bill said. Looking past her, he nodded once.

The woman who had picked up Emma at Haines Estate that morning appeared at her side. She murmured that the limousine hired to drive her to the hotel waited curbside.

A team of security surrounded Emma. In a daze, she walked through the crowd, her jaw tight when the media shouted questions at her. She stared at the limousine, the open door revealing its maroon interior. She slid inside. The security guards followed and sat on the seat opposite her.

When the door closed, she flinched. Looking through the tinted windows, she watched as the crowd slowly slipped past. Reporters held microphones and cameras and shouted questions at her, but she couldn’t hear what they said.

A familiar figure stood in the crowd.

Emma went rigid when the limousine glided past Carter. His gaze was intense as he watched the limousine, though she knew he couldn’t see her through the tinted glass. Without thinking, she pressed a hand to the window. Carter lifted his

hand, then the media surrounded him. Soon she couldn't see him anymore.

She leaned back in the seat. Hot tears pricked her eyes. She'd never forget that last image of Carter standing alone on the sidewalk, watching her drive away.

She had thought she'd stay in New York to finish her work at the charities she'd supported, but now she knew she couldn't. She'd contact them and apologize for her change in plans. She had to return to Colorado. She had the money to revive the resort. It may not be a moneymaking prospect, but that wouldn't matter. Even if she never earned a dime, she had the funds to manage the lodge for as long as she wanted. Because she was only twenty-three years old, that would be for a very long time.

For that, she was grateful. Her heart belonged in the Rocky Mountains. She couldn't wait to return. She wished she'd never left.

And she wished she'd never met Carter. Though their two years together had been exciting beyond her dreams, she hadn't been the woman for him. She had thought she could endure two years of marriage and then walk away, but she'd been wrong. Walking away from Carter was like shuttering her grandparents' resort. She may be divorced, but she'd leave a part of herself in New York.

At the hotel, the limousine glided into the underground garage, where a valet opened her car door and escorted her to the private elevator that took her to the penthouse. In the bedroom, she stepped out of her gray suit and black pumps and pulled on a pair of loungewear. Though comfortable and flowing, they weren't the style for her.

When she returned to the lodge, she'd take the clothes Carter had bought her to the thrift store and buy a pair of blue jeans and some t-shirts. Those were the clothes that made her comfortable.

And she wouldn't be Emma Haines anymore. Once the divorce decree was final, her name would revert to her maiden

name—Emma Waite. She'd honor her grandparents by using their name.

In the living room, she stepped to the bar and poured herself a glass of designer water. This would be the last time she'd drink the carbonated beverage with its fruity scent and fresh taste. Once she returned to the resort and repaired the plumbing system, she'd drink spring water. It tasted better than whatever was in this bottle.

Picking up the remote, she turned on the television, then moved to the glass wall facing Central Park. She loved this view. It was similar to the view from Carter's apartment suite at Haines Estate.

"Emma Haines is now a very wealthy woman." The news announcer's voice sounded from the television. "John, do you have any idea of how New York's latest multi-millionairess plans to spend that money?"

Emma closed her eyes. Bill had warned her that speculation surrounding her and Carter would be the latest news until another item garnered ratings.

"Katie, it appears that she's already enjoying it." The reporter named John spoke above a pounding drumbeat. Behind him, people bumped and jived beneath flashing, colored lights. "We have it from some very reliable sources that she's hitting the nightclubs. She was at this club earlier, but since we arrived, we haven't seen her. Some of her friends have said her plans for the night include the nightclub scene on the upper eastside."

Emma whirled around. Reliable sources? Friends? She'd never liked the club scene. Thankfully, Carter hadn't either. He preferred to work at his family's corporation, which took nearly all his time.

Since their marriage wasn't real, she didn't mind too much that his work required him to travel, but she needed something to do. During the two years she'd spent with Carter, she devoted herself to various charities. That was where she made her friends.

Now it was time for her to step back and return to the land she loved. But leaving wouldn't be that easy, because she had broken one vital term of the contract.

She had fallen in love with Carter du Pont Haines IV.

CHAPTER 2



Charter stood in his apartment at Haines Estate and stared out the windows that overlooked Central Park. He had accomplished what he wanted—he'd inherited his grandmother's estate before he turned twenty-five years old. But at what price? His plan had seemed perfect. Fulfill the terms of the will—find a wife—and the Haines fortune would be his.

He hadn't realized marriage in name only would have disadvantages.

Had he fallen in love with Emma Haines? Ridiculous. Love wasn't part of the contract. The terms specifically stated no emotional attachment. He always followed the letter of the law no matter what negotiation he entered. Granted, he'd never been married before, but how difficult could it be? Find a woman who would agree to a two-year marriage, receive his inheritance, then pay the woman a sizeable settlement and divorce her.

The inside of his chest ached. If it were that simple, why did he feel as if he'd lost something precious? He'd never let emotions enter any transaction he negotiated. He was a professional and a gentleman.

Falling in love required two people. Emma didn't love him. He felt the same way. He liked her a lot. She was fun and had a sense of humor.

And she was compassionate. She'd devoted herself to volunteering at several charities. He'd yet to meet a woman of

his own social standing who had shown such concern for those less fortunate. Their conversations centered around parties, fashion and exotic vacations. Until Emma had met Carter, she'd never taken a vacation, unless you counted the weekend she and her grandparents camped at the hot springs near their lodge, and he didn't.

The silence in his apartment suite closed in on him. Because his life with Emma was over, he had wanted to spend an evening alone—maybe a week alone—so he'd given the staff the night off.

When they had learned Emma wouldn't live in the penthouse anymore—that she and Carter would go their separate ways—the entire mood at the estate changed. Conversations were kept to a minimum as the staff performed their duties. Several of the staff wept openly when they learned Emma would leave.

No more would she stroll the estate singing her made-up ditties that made everyone laugh or create her silly dances where she pirouetted down a hallway.

Carter laughed most of all, though he tried to maintain a semblance of decorum. He had tried to teach her how to dress appropriately for social functions, but she had her own idea of what to wear and when. His heart rose in his chest. He loved her style.

Emma Waite Haines was her own person. She loved people, and they loved her.

Which surprised him. Few people lived in that isolated area where her grandparents had managed their mountain resort. When he had asked her what she'd do after the divorce was final, she said she'd go home.

Her home wasn't New York. Though he had offered to include a Central Park penthouse in the divorce settlement, she had declined.

“I need to go back to my real home.” She had looked at him, tears blurring her dark eyes. “As much as I appreciate all

you've given me, I don't belong here. My heart belongs at Falcon Lake."

Her heart. The words cut deeply. Though he'd broken a cardinal tenet of the contract and allowed his emotions for Emma to deepen, she had maintained the terms of the agreement and kept her feelings in check.

Things would have been perfect, walking away would have been easy, if it weren't for the last night they'd spent together. What started out as an evening where they would have a quiet dinner and say their goodbyes had taken a stunning turn.

He and Emma spent an evening together he could never forget.

His hand gripped the glass of water so hard, the glass shattered. Shards of glass and water sprayed across the room. A night so close to Emma sent a hot rush through his blood.

The sting across his fingers made him utter an oath. He dropped his gaze. Blood oozed from a cut across his palm. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to his hand. Why did thoughts of Emma make him do things he normally didn't do—like losing control of his emotions?

He rifled through the kitchen drawers until he found a bandage and pressed it into place.

After the divorce was final, his friends had offered to take him out for the night. Maybe he should've accepted the invitation. He'd never been into the club scene but being with friends would've been better than spending an evening where his only company were the thoughts of the last night he'd spent with Emma—the night he lost control.

Why had he let that happen? He dragged a hand over his face. He needed to get his mind off Emma.

With a determined stride, he walked down the hallway to his home office. Sitting at his desk, he turned on his computer. He'd work. Studying contracts always helped him focus.

The monitor sprang to life. The image staring back at him made his stomach plummet. Looking straight into his eyes was

Emma's smiling face. Her dark eyes shone. He could still remember the day he'd taken that picture. He had wanted to teach her to sail. She had been eager to learn.

The kitchen staff had packed a picnic lunch that he'd stowed in the back of his SUV. When he and Emma had reached the marina, he'd sailed one of the family's smaller boats out to the bay.

Emma knew nothing about sailing and followed his instructions. When they reached the open water, he dropped anchor. Emma retrieved the picnic from the galley and was setting it up in the bow when a gust of wind caught the mainsail.

The boat tipped. Carter jumped to the side deck to keep the boat balanced. The picnic basket slid across the deck.

"Our lunch," Emma cried out and dashed after it.

"Emma, no," Carter shouted and grabbed for her. They could replace the lunch. He didn't want anything to happen to her.

His hand around her waist, he pulled her to him. He'd never forget what it was like to feel her warm skin, have her soft curves pressed against him.

Her lips parted as she lifted her face to his. At that moment, he forgot about the boat tipping, the picnic sliding into the ocean. All he wanted to do was kiss Emma Haines.

The boat shifted. Carter uttered an oath and leaped over the railing to right the boat.

Too late. The mast slapped against the waves that pummeled the small vessel until it filled with water, then shifted with the tow.

With Emma clutched to his chest, Carter leaped into the water. Holding her close, he swam to the beach of a deserted island.

"Are you all right?" He panted as he dragged her to safety. He helped her stand on the sand.

“I am, but what about your boat?” She looked sadly at the vessel buffeted by the waves.

“Don’t worry about that.” He didn’t care about the boat. He cared about her. Looking at her now, he saw water stream from the beach coverup that plastered around her body before running down her long legs. He dragged his gaze away from her and looked out at sea. “I’ll hire a crew to see if it can be salvaged.”

If not, he’d buy another one. The disappointment was he had wanted to spend a relaxing afternoon with Emma. Instead, they made an SOS signal from seashells on the beach and waited until a private plane flew over the area and reported them to the coast guard.

Carter would’ve preferred to enjoy the private time with Emma, but he’d told his father they’d only be gone a short time. He had meetings scheduled for the afternoon, which his staff had to cancel when he didn’t return to the office.

Funny how time alone with Emma had turned into an adventure.

He leaned away from the computer. He had to quit thinking about her. She was his past. He’d married her so he could focus on his future.

With an oath of frustration, he moved down the hall to the living room and turned on the television. He wouldn’t watch it, but he needed the noise to drown his thoughts.

“We’re at Winston’s, Emma Haines’ favorite club, according to my sources,” came a reporter’s excited voice.

Carter’s head came up. Emma’s favorite club? What was that woman talking about?

“Her friends say she’s been here since the hearing,” the reporter said. “I think I’ve seen her dancing in the VIP lounge, but you know how camera shy she is.”

“We’ll check back with you later,” said the newsroom announcer.

“Yes,” the reporter said. “It would be fun to learn what Mrs. Haines plans to do with all that money.”

“I’m sure you’re on it,” the newsroom announcer said.

“On what?” Carter’s temper flared, and he turned off the television. Why did everyone think that because Emma had received the largest divorce settlement in New York City that she couldn’t wait to spend it? They didn’t know her at all.

He’d spent two years with her, and he still didn’t know her. At least, not as well as he would’ve liked.

If he hadn’t been so focused on assuming the reins of the family corporation, he’d have taken time to get to know her. Now he’d lost his chance. Per the terms of the marriage contract, once the requests had been satisfied, the parties agreed further contact would never take place.

When the limousine drove Emma away from the courthouse, it drove her out of his life forever.

CHAPTER 3



The following morning, Carter rode the elevator to his office on the top floor of Haines Tower. He'd spent the entire night pacing his suite and wondering what Emma was doing. No doubt she was back at Falcon Lake and scheduling the repairs needed so she could reopen the lodge by Christmas.

Why couldn't he get her out of his mind? Granted, they'd spent two years together, but hardly as husband and wife. He had his room. She had hers.

Because thoughts of Emma kept Carter from sleeping the night before, he'd spent two hours in his private fitness center. He still wasn't sleepy. Rather than fight restlessness, he showered and dressed for work. Except for delivery trucks, the city was still asleep when his chauffeur drove him to his office.

Stepping from the elevator, he appreciated the quiet at this hour of the day. He hadn't eaten but wasn't hungry. He hadn't remembered eating the night before, but he worked better on an empty stomach. He'd eat when he was ready.

He strode across the lobby with the Haines Corporation logo etched into the marble flooring and turned down the office-lined corridor known as Executive Row. The double doors at the end of the hallway were open. The lights were on. Never had Carter arrived at the office before his father.

After unlocking the door to his private office, he set his briefcase on his desk, then strode to the office of Carter du

Pont Haines III. Voices sounded from the office. When Carter stepped inside, his father stood in front of a glass wall that overlooked Bowling Green. He looked over his shoulder at Carter, held up a finger and smiled.

“Jim,” his father said. “I have another meeting. Why don’t you look into those public offerings we discussed, and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

Jim agreed to do so and hung up.

Carter’s father stood behind his desk and smiled at his son. “Nice to see you bright and early. I have a breakfast meeting. Why don’t you join me?”

“I have work to do,” Carter said. Because he hadn’t gone to the office yesterday, he had queues of messages and emails to review. “Maybe we can meet for lunch.”

“Sorry.” His father glanced at his watch. “I have meetings in Atlanta, but I’ll return this evening. Join your mother and me for dinner. The Forsythes and the Gills will attend.”

“I’m sorry, Father, but I’ll have to make it another night.” Carter didn’t miss his father’s knowing expression.

“It isn’t good to spend so much time alone.” His father lifted a brow.

“For the past two years, I haven’t been alone. Last night was the first.” Carter laughed dryly. “I’ll be fine.”

His father hesitated. “Divorce isn’t easy, son.”

“Considering I wasn’t really married, this divorce should hardly be devastating,” he said. It shouldn’t be devastating, so why did it feel that way? “Trust me, Father. There’s no lack of things for me to do. My friends are looking out for me and extending invitations. When the time’s right, I’ll accept them.”

“Good.” The corner of his father’s mouth curved slightly, though doubt filled his eyes. “I look forward to having your undivided focus on all things Haines.”

“And you shall have it.” Carter nodded firmly.

“Then let’s start with these investments we discussed the other night.” His father sat at his desk and typed something into his computer. “Review the spreadsheet I just sent you and let me know which ones we should pursue.”

Carter’s gaze dropped to his father’s desk to an envelope labeled with his late grandmother’s elegant script. “What’s that?”

When his father looked up, Carter nodded to the envelope. “Something of your grandmother’s. I’ll look at it later and share the contents with you then.”

Carter nodded, though he thought his father’s response rather curious.

His father stepped to his coat closet and slipped his suit jacket from the hanger. “If you have any questions regarding these spreadsheets I sent you, I’ll make myself available.”

“Thank you, Father, but I’m sure I can manage. I’ll be traveling the rest of the week, but I’ll have your assistant make some time for our meeting when I return.” He walked with his father out of his office.

“I look forward to it.” His father smiled, though Carter didn’t miss his concern. He shook Carter’s hand, then turned away and strode down the corridor.

Carter stepped into his office and turned on his computer. He studied the list of investments his father had sent. Most were real estate properties, which may not be a good investment now, but once the market turned, they could be profitable. He’d have his assistant arrange his travel plans and visit each one. This was the project he needed to get his mind off Emma.

He leaned back in his chair and blindly stared straight ahead. What was she doing now?



EMMA LOOKED out the window of the Haines private jet as it prepared for landing at the Ortega County Airport. Private jets

weren't unusual to the area, but most of the passengers had chauffeurs to drive them to their ski chalets that now crowded the mountains surrounding Aspen. Emma's private chauffeur would be her grandmother's friend, Gael.

Already, Emma's heart warmed knowing she'd be near those she loved. She looked forward to working on the lodge and enjoying her time in the mountains. It would take most of the summer to complete the repairs, but once they were made, she could plan for Christmas.

The two Christmases she'd spent with Carter and his family had been wonderful, the gifts extravagant to the point of embarrassing, but there was more to Christmas than gifts. There was peace, joy, love and celebrating God's grace and salvation through the gift of His Son. She missed the simple holidays when she and her grandparents would string popcorn and cranberries and wrap the homemade garlands around the tree.

Carter's family hired a private company to set up their Christmas trees and decorations. It was like walking into an architectural magazine—beautiful, but sterile.

The plane touched down and skimmed down the runway. With a heavy exhale, Emma gathered her things and moved down the aisle to the private jet's door. The pilot and attendants greeted her and wished her the best. She hugged each one but was afraid to speak. The emotion filling her throat would make her voice crack.

Stepping through the jet's door, she moved down the steps. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Gael, her grandmother's friend, squealed her name and dashed across the tarmac.

"How was your flight?" Gael reached for her suitcase, but Emma waved her away. Gael wasn't her servant. They were friends.

"It was nice." Emma dragged her suitcase behind her as they walked toward Gael's truck. How could flying in a private jet be anything but pleasant?

On the drive to the lodge, Gael chatted about the latest news of all their friends, but Emma heard little. The closer they drew to Falcon Lake, the louder Emma's heart sang.

When Gael turned the truck to the side road that led to the lodge, Emma's throat closed. She stared through the windshield, eager to see the place she'd called home for the first twenty-one years of her life.

Falcon Lake came into view. The piers where the rowboats were tethered stretched into the blue water that reflected fluffy clouds. The truck rounded the bend. The timber and stone lodge sat on a knoll that overlooked the lake, its towering chimneys reaching to the sky.

Emma gasped. Tears filled her eyes. She was home at last.

Gael parked the truck in front of the stone steps that led to the double oak doors. Emma climbed out and pulled her suitcase from the backseat. She stared at her family lodge.

"You're home, hon." Gael's eyes shone, and she looped her arm through Emma's.

"It's good to be home."

Two rescue huskies Emma had taken in after her grandmother passed rounded the corner. When they caught Emma's scent, they released mournful whines.

"There are my girls." Emma dropped to her knees and hugged Juno and Keesha, who excitedly licked her cheeks.

She'd missed the dogs. Carter's mother had three miniature terriers who loved to play, but they weren't as adventuresome as Emma's dogs.

"Now that you're back, maybe they'll eat a decent meal." Gail sighed. "They haven't been themselves since you left."

Emma took a breath, understanding they'd missed her as much as she'd missed them.

With the dogs rushing around their feet and barking, Emma and Gael walked up the steps and into the foyer that was quiet though clean.

“I’ll take this upstairs.” Emma’s eyes filled with tears, and she looked away. She didn’t want Gael to worry about her.

“Oh, honey.” Gael wrapped an arm around Emma’s shoulders. “I’m so sorry the marriage didn’t work. I really thought you and Carter had a chance.”

“It’s in the past,” Emma said. She needed the money to repair the lodge. Never mind what two years with Carter did to her heart. Now, she could make the lodge shine as it had when her grandparents were in charge.

If there had been another way to pay the bills and back taxes, she would’ve done it, but Carter needed a wife and she needed to save the resort. The lawyers had explained to her that there would be no emotional attachment, which should’ve been easy. Carter was not her type. She knew she wasn’t his.

“That it is,” Gael said. “I have a nice lunch waiting for you.”

“Thank you, Gael.” Emma hugged the older woman. She didn’t have the heart to tell her she wasn’t hungry. She’d eat as much as she could. Once she started working at the lodge, she’d be hungry all the time. “It’ll be good to eat your cooking again.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” Gael grinned.

Walking through the lodge, she felt sad and happy at the changes that had been made. The paneling had been repaired, the old furniture had been replaced with leather chairs and sofas and rough-hewn coffee tables and end tables. The kitchen had been modernized with stainless steel appliances. Though not as nice as the kitchen in Carter’s suites at Haines Estate, it would be a pleasure to cook in a modern kitchen. Once the electrical and plumbing systems had been replaced, it would seem brand new.

Gael introduced Emma to the crew who had been hired to make repairs to the lodge, remodel the kitchen and refurbish the barn and the work sheds. Upstairs, Emma and Gael walked down the medallion-covered hallway, the dogs at their heels, to Emma’s old room on the west end of the lodge. The

furniture was the same, but it shone as if everything had been polished. A white duvet covered her bed. New towels hung in the bathroom. The dresser mirror had been replaced with a new one that wasn't dingy and wavy.

Emma saw Gael's reflection in the mirror, her face tight with anticipation. Emma turned to her and smiled. "It looks wonderful."

"I'm so relieved." Gael exhaled a breath.

"It's perfect." Emma tried to keep her emotions in check. "It's like when Grandma and Grandpa were in charge." She viewed the walk-in closet and bathroom before stepping onto the balcony that overlooked the snowcapped mountains.

"I'll let you freshen up." Gael moved toward the door and ushered the dogs into the hallway. "When you're ready, come down, and we'll have a nice chat over lunch."

"I won't be long." Emma stepped from the balcony. "I'll just unpack my luggage and get situated. I can help you make dinner for the workers."

"There won't be anyone here for dinner, including me," Gael said. "This crew's local, so they're gone as soon as the sun sets. Tonight, my niece has to work, so I promised my sister I'd help her with the grandchildren. You're welcome to join us for dinner."

"Thanks." Emma tried to smile. "But I think I'll stay here. If there's any project you want me to work on, let me know."

"Because of you, we don't have a lot pending. I just need to finish the curtains for the guest rooms," Gael said with a laugh.

Emma's heart beat heavily. Because of her, because of her marriage to Carter, the lodge would never want for anything.

"I can work on the curtains." Emma needed something to keep her busy.

"If you want." Gael's eyes darkened with concern. "You sure you won't join us for dinner?"

“I’ll be fine.” Emma hugged her. “Tell your sister hello and give those grand nieces and nephews of yours a big hug for me. Now that I’m here, you can concentrate on your family.”

“I’ll be back first thing in the morning,” Gael said.

“Why don’t you take the day off?” Emma looked into her eyes. “Just let me know what needs to be done. Otherwise, I’m sure I can find a few things to keep me busy.”

“Thanks.” Gael smiled at her. “I can’t think of anything else. Now, freshen up. I’ll see you downstairs.” She hugged her again, then slipped out the door.

Emma plopped her suitcase on the bed and unzipped it. Carter had encouraged her to take the clothes he’d bought for her, though she only wanted her jeans and t-shirts. What would she do with designer clothes? She couldn’t work in them. When she lived at Falcon Lake, church was the fanciest place she went.

Scooping her clothes from the suitcase, she sorted them into her dresser drawers, then placed the suitcase by the door to remind her to take it to storage when she went downstairs.

Turning back to her room, she walked through the archway to the sitting room and stepped onto the balcony.

She released a slow breath. “Well, Grandma and Grandpa, I’m home at last.”

A tear slid down her cheek. She was home, where she’d wanted to be for the past two years. So why did it feel as if part of her was still in New York?

CHAPTER 4



Two months later, Carter sat in his New York office and reviewed the financials for the Haines real estate holdings. He was pleased with the report he'd present to his father. Revenue for the Colorado ski resort exceeded expectations, which was the data he needed to invest in additional mountain property.

A quick check of the weather showed that the region had received record snowfalls the previous winter—another feature to attract the wealthy to the area. Though the ski season had ended, winter still hung over the area. He may not be able to ski, but he could always snowboard on the back range.

He picked up the phone and buzzed his assistant, Glynnis. This would be the perfect time to schedule that vacation he'd wanted to take. He'd contact friends in Aspen and see who was in town to enjoy a day on the mountain. He'd ask his assistant to discuss travel arrangements with his pilot, then have his chauffeur drive him to the Haines terminal at the airport.

His friends complained that he wasn't fun anymore, but with his workload, he had little time to play. Because Haines Corporation had garnered a record quarterly revenue, it was time to reward himself. He hadn't taken time off since the divorce—

The divorce.

His heart beat dully. During the day, he kept busy—too busy to think about the sweet woman who had agreed to be his wife for two years before she quietly slipped out of his life. During the night, she filled his dreams without mercy. How many times had he lain in bed remembering what it was like to be with Emma Waite? When sleep finally came, he relived his last night with Emma.

He moved to the glass wall that overlooked the financial district. Pedestrians crowded the sidewalk. Traffic jammed the street. He couldn't hear the noise, but he'd lived in New York his entire life so he knew people shouted at each other while drivers honked, swore and shook their fists.

He inhaled deeply. He loved New York. He thought Emma would, too, but she refused the penthouse he wanted to buy for her.

“I don't expect you to understand,” she said, and he'd never forget the sad look in her beautiful, dark eyes. “My heart belongs in Colorado. I can't live here anymore than you can live there.”

She was right. He didn't understand. Though he loved Aspen, the people there weren't much different than the people in New York. Most of them were *from* New York.

He turned from the window. Thinking about Emma after the divorce hadn't been part of the contract. He knew how to focus. What was best for Haines Corporation was what interested him, not one brief moment from his past. He appreciated what Emma had given him—access to his inheritance—but the agreement stated no emotional attachments, and he'd uphold the terms of the agreement.

So why did these thoughts of Emma continue to sneak into his mind to convince him otherwise? He was always in control. His fondness for Emma would fade soon. He hadn't seen her in two months. He just needed to give himself a chance. Soon he'd reach the point when he never thought about her. That moment couldn't come quickly enough.

His assistant paged him and announced his chauffeur had arrived to drive him to the airport. He thanked her, then sent a

quick email to his father that he would inspect the Colorado properties while staying at the Haines ski chalet in Aspen for a short vacation.

He turned off his computer, then pulled his suit jacket from the coat closet. He wouldn't have to worry about seeing Emma while he was there. Though he'd never visited the Falcon Lake Lodge, he knew it was an hour away from Aspen.

During their marriage, he had offered to take her to the Haines chalet, but she had declined. She didn't ski downhill. She liked cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Those sports let her bask in the beauty of the Rocky Mountains, something he should've taken time to enjoy. Maybe someday he would.

He stepped out of his office and took the elevator to the parking garage. An hour later, he was winging his way across the country to Aspen, where he'd contact friends and arrange to meet them the following day to snowboard in the back bowl—the perfect activity to get Emma out of his mind.

During the flight, he called his broker and discussed a public offering. The flight attendant smiled when she told him they'd arrived at the Aspen airport sooner than expected and would land in twenty minutes. He stared out the window at the lights glistening below.

It had started to snow, which meant the backcountry would be covered with powder snow—his favorite type of snow for snowboarding.

When they landed, his SUV was waiting for him in the hangar. He thanked his flight crew for their service, then climbed behind the wheel of his SUV. He guided the vehicle toward the main road when he wondered about Emma's resort lodge. He'd seen some pictures, but those had been taken before the place had been repaired.

He turned the vehicle around. What would it hurt to drive by and see the changes her construction crew had made? He wouldn't stop. He wouldn't even approach the resort. She probably had guests to take care of so she wouldn't notice he'd driven by.

The reviews guests had left on the website for the lodge at Falcon Lake praised the amenities and the service. He would see for himself what a success Emma had made of the vacation favorite.

He entered the resort's location into his SUV's navigational system. As he drove down the two-lane highway the snowfall increased, and he slowed his pace. Briefly, he wondered if he should turn around, but that didn't make sense. He was so close.

When he turned onto the ungraded drive that led to the resort, he hoped he'd be able to leave, but with his SUV, he could navigate any road condition.

He followed the drive that curved around a mountain when at last a lake came into view. A wind kicked up white caps that raced across the surface. The empty pier made Carter wonder if the rowboats Emma had told him about were placed in storage because of the storm.

On a knoll overlooking the lake sat the stone and timber lodge. Lights shone from the front windows. There were no cars parked in front. Maybe Emma hadn't opened the lodge to guests yet.

The building was larger than he expected. Had Emma built an addition? Maybe one day he'd ask her about that. He didn't know when. The divorce decree declared there would be no contact between them.

He closed his fists. Why had his grandmother made that stipulation? He'd enjoyed the time he spent with Emma. When he returned to New York, he'd ask his attorneys to find a loophole in the condition. He wanted to talk to Emma and find out how she was doing—provided Emma agreed.

Snow fell on his windshield. His wipers whisked it away.

In the distance, he heard a dog bark. Lifting his gaze, he saw two dogs rush out the front door, then lope across the knoll to Carter's SUV. His jaw tightened. He'd stayed too long. He put the vehicle in reverse and checked the backup camera. It was blank. Looking over his shoulder, he stared out

the back window but saw nothing. It was covered with snow. His heart pounded. Why wasn't the rear wiper working?

He pressed the accelerator. The vehicle skidded, then jolted. He gritted his teeth. Had he just driven off the road?

The dogs paced around the vehicle and barked. Carter rolled down his window and looked for them. Snow fell through the opening, but he didn't care. He had to leave before Emma realized he was there.

"Hey, boys. Come here, boys," he called out to them, then whistled softly. He needed to see them. He didn't want to injure them.

He pressed the accelerator. The wheels spun, then slipped to the side. One rear wheel dropped. With a snort, he closed his eyes. He'd definitely driven off the road. So much for stopping by and not being noticed. Maybe he could call a tow truck before Emma realized he was stuck in front of her lodge.

The dogs circled his car, their heavy coats filling with snow. They whined and barked softly as if concerned about his predicament.

"Thanks for the support," he muttered.

Pressing the app for the flashlight on his phone, he climbed out of the SUV. Holding still, he held out his hand to the dogs to let them know he was friendly.

The dogs held back, growls stuck in their throats, then edged forward and sniffed hesitantly. After the first whiff, the sniffs became uncontrollable.

"That's good dogs." The snowfall thickened and fell into Carter's hair and eyelashes. "Your mistress probably didn't tell you this, but I'm her ex-husband."

He walked to the rear of the SUV and flashed the light over the rear tires. The dogs followed climbing over each other to sniff his legs. His mouth tightened as he looked from the rear bumper to the tires to the snow covering the hubcaps.

"Great." He exhaled roughly.

He'd have to call a tow truck to get out of this mess. In this weather, that could take hours. He lifted his gaze to the lodge. He'd have to confess everything to Emma if she didn't know already. Maybe she did, and that was why she sicced her dogs on him.

"Hello?" a woman's voice called out.

Carter's chest squeezed. A woman appeared at the lodge entrance, but he recognized her as Emma. Even at that distance, he could sense her grace and dignity.

He gave a slight wave hoping she'd realize he was fine and not come out to help him.

"I'll be right there," she said in that musical tone he'd basked in for two years. She started to close the door.

If he spoke, she'd know he, her ex-husband, was stuck in front of her lodge. Still, he didn't want her to come out here to help him. She'd freeze to death.

The dogs leaped around him and barked, then wrestled with each other.

"It's okay," he called to her. "Help is coming."

The door opened wide. Now he knew she'd recognized his voice.

"Carter?" The surprise in her voice made his heart rise in his chest. How long had he wanted to hear her voice again?

"Stay inside, Emma," he said. "I'll call a tow truck."

"What are you—" She shook her head and closed the door.

Good. Maybe she'd stay inside.

He climbed into the SUV and activated the vehicle assistance feature.

"All Star Assistance," came a woman's voice. "How may I be of service?"

"Hi." Carter winced at the ragged tone in his voice. "I need a tow truck."

“I’m having trouble locating your vehicle,” she said. “What’s your location?”

He looked at the windshield, now covered with snow. He didn’t know where he was. He’d followed the navigational system’s directions. He hadn’t paid attention to what road he’d taken.

“I’m at Falcon Lake. It’s north of Aspen,” he said, then muttered. “Somewhere.”

“Oh, my, you’re a long way out there,” the woman said. “I’m sorry, but due to the weather, all our services are scheduled for a while.”

It figured. He sank low in his seat. “How soon before someone can get here?”

Didn’t she realize that if someone didn’t come soon, he’d be spending the evening with his ex-wife? Not that spending time with Emma was a bad thing—for him anyway—but it would mean he’d broken the terms of the agreement. He shouldn’t see her at all.

“This is kind of an emergency,” he said. “Any chance you can get someone out here sooner?” If need be, he’d put the tow truck driver’s kids through college, even medical school, if he could get there within the hour.

“Sorry,” the woman said, and she did sound sorry. “I wish I could, but we’re shorthanded. Otherwise, I’d do everything in my power to get help to everyone who’s asked me, especially since I’ve received some very attractive bribes. One driver even promised to send my kids to medical school.”

Carter blinked. “You don’t say.” His tone was flat.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice breathy. “That was hard to pass up. I promise we’ll do everything we can to get someone out there.”

“Thanks,” he muttered. “Appreciate it.”

“Anytime, and if anything changes, call us back,” the woman said. The call disconnected.

“Will do.” Carter leaned back in the seat.

The dogs started to bark again. He looked at the window, but it was covered with snow. A sharp rap on the glass brought his head up.

“Carter?”

Emma!

Why had he thought he could drive to the lodge in a snowstorm and not be discovered? His heart beat like a war drum. After two months of no contact, he was about to meet his ex-wife face-to-face.

CHAPTER 5



“Emma, go back inside.” He opened the door a crack. “Someone will be here soon to help me.”

The dogs’ black noses filled the opening and sniffed noisily.

“I don’t see how.” She sounded confused. “I just tried to call a service. No one’s available until the weekend, and probably not then because the snowstorm isn’t expected to move out of the valley until next week.”

Great!

“Come inside.” White puffs escaped her full lips. “If you stay out here, you’ll freeze to death. The temperature has already dropped below zero. I have a stew in the slow cooker. That will warm you up.”

“Thanks, but—”

“Carter, don’t be stubborn.” She sounded worried. “Whatever happened, we can talk about it later. You need to get inside and warm up.”

“All right.” He let out his breath. He opened the door.

The dogs barked happily and leaped in the snow.

“Do you have luggage?” Emma asked. “I’ll help you carry it in.”

“It’ll be fine,” he said. “I won’t be here that long.”

“I hate to break it to you, but you *will* be here that long.” She opened the rear door and reached past the seats.

“It’s okay, Emma. I’ll get my luggage.” Thankfully, he traveled light since most of what he needed was at the chalet. “Please go inside.”

“It’s okay. I’ll wait.” She looked at him her large, dark eyes stirring an emotion within him he couldn’t assess.

“Now who’s being stubborn?” He narrowed one eye.

“Being helpful is not the same as being stubborn.” Her eyes widened with that innocent look that made his insides warm.

“Right,” he said dryly.

He climbed from the vehicle. The SUV rocked, the front of the car lifting a little higher. He swallowed hard. Was his car about to tip into the ravine? At least, he thought it was a ravine. It was snowing so hard, that he couldn’t see the rear of the vehicle.

The SUV rocked again.

“Get back,” he said firmly.

The dogs stilled, their gazes jerking from him to the vehicle’s rear.

The front end lifted one inch and then another.

“Emma,” Carter shouted. He dove toward her and wrapped her in his arms. Holding her tight, he leaped away from the SUV.

Flying through the air, he twisted his body. He landed with a thud on his back. Stars flashed before his eyes. Pain shot through his head. He heard Emma’s sweet voice call his name as he slowly slipped into a dark pit.



“CARTER? CARTER.” Panic filled Emma’s chest as she patted Carter’s face.

Snow fell softly on the shadow covering his jawline. Pulling off her glove, she touched her fingers to his jaw and let

air out of her lungs when she felt his pulse. At least, he was still alive.

A crack split the icy air. The dogs jerked their heads toward Carter's vehicle. Emma looked up to see the SUV's front end tip high into the air, then slide down the road embankment. It tore away boulders and trees, then crashed into the ravine below.

She swallowed. The luxury SUV was a status symbol for those who lived in the area and had to cost more than the locals made in a lifetime. She couldn't worry about that now. She had to help Carter.

"Keesha. Juno." Emma's firm voice brought the dogs to a sitting position. "Let's get the sled."

The dogs' ears pricked.

If she could roll Carter onto the sled, the dogs could drag him back to the lodge. How she'd get him inside, she'd worry about later.

She trudged back to the lodge. From the side shed, she dragged out the sled. The dogs waited patiently as she fastened them to the harness.

"Come on, ladies." She jumped onto the rig.

The dogs leaped forward and dragged the sled to Carter. Emma guided the basket next to him. Frantically, she cleared the snow away from the sled and then lay straps on the ground. With all her might, she rolled him onto the straps, then lifted them so he slid into the basket. Carter was tall, but thankfully, she was almost as tall as he. Stepping onto the rig, she ordered Keesha and Juno to return to the lodge.

When they reached the front steps, she jumped off and unfastened the dogs. Their faces concerned, they stepped back and watched her unstrap Carter from the basket. She lifted her face to the stairs. If she could get him to his feet, she might be able to drag him up the steps.

And if she couldn't?

She wouldn't think about that.

Crouching next to Carter, she draped his arm over her shoulder. Her arm around his waist, she dragged in a breath and shot to her feet, Carter's weight making her wince.

"Emma?" Carter's voice was ragged.

Her pulse raced. Was he coming to? She felt the dogs go rigid.

"Hang tight," she whispered hoarsely. "We just need to get up these steps."

"I can make it." He started to pull away, then fell against her.

"Lean on me, Carter." She dragged air into her lungs. "It's just a few steps."

When they reached the top of the steps, Emma thought she would collapse. She couldn't give up now. Once she got Carter into the lodge, she'd lead him to the sofa by the door.

She turned the doorknob. The dogs rushed ahead of her opening the door wide. Snow drifted over the teak floor. She pushed her hip next to his, lifted him over the threshold, kicked the door shut, then guided him to the sofa. Slowly, she laid him on the cushions. Breathing hard, she dropped to her knees.

She did it. She didn't know how she did it, but she got Carter into the house.

Working feverishly, she pulled off his wet clothes. Panting, she stood next to him, her gaze traveling over his sculpted body that looked like a Michelangelo creation. She shouldn't know what he looked like, but because of their last night together, she knew every inch of his body and so much more.

Heat flooded her face, and she turned away. She pulled afghans from the hassock in the seating area and draped them over him. After stoking the fire, she raced down the hall to the main bedroom and grabbed some of her grandfather's old clothes.

If she could drag him to the bathroom on the main level, she'd draw him a hot bath. For now, she'd try to keep him

warm.

In the kitchen, she called the town clinic and jotted notes as Dr. Yang told her what to do. Pulling a bottle of water from the refrigerator, she returned to the living room. She sat next to Carter, slipped an arm around his back and lifted him to her chest.

“Drink,” she whispered and pressed the bottle to his lips.

He frowned. The water dribbled down his chin, and his frown deepened. Sighing, Emma wiped the dribble away. He had to drink something. She’d keep trying until he did.

Keesha and Juno whined softly. Occasionally, they’d approach Carter and sniff as if reassuring themselves he was still alive. Emma checked his pulse several times. She wanted to make sure, too.

Stepping to the kitchen, she poured dog food into the dogs’ bowls. She’d eat later. She was afraid to leave Carter’s side.

She crawled into an armchair and pulled an afghan over her lap.

Apparently, Keesha and Juno weren’t interested in food either. They curled up in front of her chair and rested their heads on their front paws, their eyes shifting from Carter to Emma.

Emma watched Carter and prayed he’d wake soon. The fire crackled, and she felt comforted knowing her dogs were there.

The afghans covering Carter’s chest rose and lowered with each breath. As she watched him sleep, the same thought tumbled through her mind—what was Carter Haines doing at Falcon Lake?

CHAPTER 6



A moan sounded. Emma's eyes fluttered open. She looked around. What was she doing in the sitting room? She had work to do, including clearing the walks and parking area. She didn't have guests, but visitors always stopped by.

Glancing at the front window, she saw only black. She looked at the clock. It was only eight o'clock at night. The tension in her shoulders eased slightly. She'd wait until morning, then she'd start shoveling.

The moan sounded again. Her heart thundering, she brought her head around to Carter's half-covered form.

"What the—" Carter stared down at his bare chest, then reached for the afghan that had slipped past his waist.

"Carter?" Emma moved to the sofa and dropped to her knees.

"What are you doing here?" He frowned.

"I live here." She lifted her brows.

"You used to, but then we divorced. You left."

"Yes, I left New York, and now I'm back home at Falcon Lake. You drove here to Falcon Lake." She leaned back on her haunches and stared into blue eyes that still made her heart rise. Would she ever become immune to Carter Haines?

"No." Staring at her as if she were crazy, he shook his head. He winced and pressed a hand to his forehead.

“Do you need some aspirin?” She frowned at him. When he’d dragged her away from the teetering SUV and landed on the ground, he’d knocked himself out. He had to have hurt himself.

“No.” He touched his head again. His jaw tightened. “Maybe later.”

“Your SUV fell into the ravine.” She scraped her teeth over her lower lip. “When it started to fall, you pulled me away from it and fell to the ground. Do you remember?”

He looked at her as if she were crazy.

“I think you knocked yourself out, so you may have a headache.” She gave him a worried look. “Are you sure you don’t want any aspirin?”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice ragged.

“If you change your mind, let me know,” she said. He hadn’t eaten since he’d arrived at the lodge. Who knew when he’d eaten last. He probably didn’t remember. She wanted him to take care of himself. “Are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?”

“I’ll order something later.” He started to get up, then dragged the afghan to his chin. “Where are my clothes?”

“I took them off, because they were wet,” she said. Had he forgotten what happened?

“Why were they wet?” He looked confused.

“I’ll answer all that, but first things first.” She pulled the stack of clothes she’d found for him to change into. “Put these on. The stew I cooked today should be ready by now. We can sit in the kitchen and eat while I tell you everything that happened.”

“You can start by telling me why you returned to New York.” He sat up and wrapped the afghan around his waist.

“Carter.” Emma spread her arms wide. “Look around. You’re not in New York.”

Frowning, he scanned the room, then looked back at her. “And why am I here?”

Emma lifted a shoulder. “I’m not sure,” she said softly. “I didn’t know you were here until your SUV slid off the road.”

He winced. “Seriously?”

She nodded. “It slid down an embankment to the bottom of a ravine. I don’t know what shape it’s in, but it took a while to get to the bottom, so I have to think it’s been totaled. When the storm stops, we can investigate.”

“Storm?” He frowned.

She tipped her head toward the window framing the whirling white zipping past the panes. His afghan slipped from his waist and started to puddle around his knees. His face red, he grabbed the edge and pulled it into place.

He looked out the window. “It’s snowing,” he said bleakly.

“Quite a lot. I’ll call a tow truck to see if they can pull your SUV out of the ditch, but chances are, it may have to stay there for a while.” She sighed.

He nodded.

“If you want to take a shower, you can use the bathroom on the main level,” Emma said. “Dr. Yang—”

“Who?” Carter frowned.

“Dr. Yang, the local doctor. He advised that you refrain from climbing stairs and not move around too much.” She looked at him. “How do you feel?”

“Fine.” He acted as if he hadn’t knocked himself out and had to be dragged into the lodge.

“When you’ve finished bathing, you can wear these clothes until yours dry.” She curved the corner of her mouth.

“What’s that look for?” He frowned at her.

“Well, the clothes aren’t quite what you’re used to wearing, but until your clothes dry ...”

“Clothes are clothes, right?” He unfolded the shirt and held it up.

“For most people,” she said slowly.

He studied the shirt. A frown pressed between his brows. He dropped the shirt to his lap. “And for me, too. Thank you for finding these for me.” He tightened the afghan around his waist, then gathered up the clothes and stood. “Now, if you’ll point me to the bathroom.”

“Follow me.” Emma rose. Keesha and Juno scrambled to their feet as if concerned they’d miss the fun.

Emma crossed the great room and moved down a hallway. Carter followed.

“That’s another thing,” he said. “I haven’t been properly introduced to your, uh, friends.”

“What?” Emma looked over her shoulder at him, then saw he was watching the huskies. “They’re Keesha and Juno. Keesha has the blue eyes, and Juno has the one blue eye and one brown eye.”

“How do you do?” Carter’s sincere greeting made Emma smile. His gentlemanly mannerisms were one of the many reasons she liked being with him.

At the end of the hallway, she opened a set of double doors to a large bedroom with rustic furniture. The dogs rushed into the room that Emma kept closed since her grandmother had passed away. They sniffed the floor frantically, then sat and watched Emma and Carter, their tongues hanging out, their tails swishing back and forth.

“The bathroom’s through there.” Emma nodded toward a doorway on the far side. “You’ll find clean towels and a terrycloth robe in the linen closet. If you need anything else, let me know.” She turned away.

He caught her hand, the touch filling her with a disturbing warmth.

“Emma.” The way he said her name made her catch her breath. She lifted her gaze to his and prayed he wouldn’t say

something that made her lose it completely. “Thank you.” The softness in his eyes made her throat close.

She was never supposed to have any feelings for this man. Then the night before the divorce happened. Afterward, she had no idea how she had the strength to walk away, but she did. She had to. Sadly, that was the term of the contract.

She offered him a smile and dropped her gaze. If she said anything, her voice would crack. Stepping away, she felt his hand slide along her fingers and drop away. She winced at the loss of warmth from his touch. Stepping from the bedroom, she waited until the dogs followed her into the hallway, then closed the door. Her heart raced, and she pressed her hand to her chest. She wasn’t supposed to feel anything toward Carter, but God help her, she did.

Once she left New York, the pain of leaving Carter should’ve faded. It never did. Now, Carter was here at Falcon Lake. With him here, the tranquility and acceptance she had achieved over the past months vanished. When he left Falcon Lake, she’d find herself in the same emotional state as when she’d left New York.

He’d be here until the storm subsided. She couldn’t kick him out into the cold, which meant he may be here for days. How did she spend time with Carter while she struggled to protect her heart?



CARTER WATCHED Emma leave the bedroom. When the door closed, his stomach knotted. Why had he come? He knew seeing her again would be a disaster. He just hadn’t realized how much of one. Having his SUV fall into a ravine during a snowstorm was pretty disastrous.

Everything about Emma was as he remembered—her large dark eyes, her lustrous hair falling in waves to her delicate shoulders, that musical laugh that filled him with a surge of emotions. The feelings he thought he’d buried, struggled free and shot to the surface. That she seemed more relaxed made

his chest tighten. He hadn't realized how living in his world with the parties, the vacations and the entertaining would make her uncomfortable. He had grown up in that lifestyle. It never occurred to him what it was like for her to step into his world.

She grew up in a small town where everyone knew each other and was available to lend a hand. His social circle seemed like a small town, too, though he wasn't sure many of his friends would lend a hand to someone in need. They had servants who did that.

Reaching into the shower, he turned on the water. It had only one nozzle, not a dozen as did the shower in his suite at Haines Estate. This showerhead sprayed, stopped, then sprayed again. He snorted. If this was indicative of the shower he was about to take, he'd have to work fast. Stepping into the shower, he released a sigh. The hot water felt good. The sharp, needle spray pounding his back felt better.

He'd just shampooed his hair and was enjoying the massage, when the hot water turned icy cold. With a yelp, he plastered himself to the shower wall. He still had to rinse the shampoo from his hair and the soap from his body—with icy water?

"This should be fun," he murmured, but he'd prevail. If Emma could shower with cold water, so could he. His jaw tight, he jumped beneath the spray. This would go on record as the fastest shower ever.

He toweled off briskly, trying to warm his skin, then gladly slipped on the borrowed clothes. The bathroom mirror fogged, and he wiped it clean to glance at his reflection—a shadow covering his jaw and his damp spiky hair. There might be hope in turning him into a mountain man yet.

And what of Emma? He shouldn't be here. Coming to Falcon Lake, wrecking his SUV, taught him that. Now, he had to leave.

Leave Emma twice? He grimaced. That would require insurmountable strength.

CHAPTER 7



Emma was in the kitchen when Carter entered. She turned to smile at him. Her breath caught as she took in his hair, damp and spiky, the flannel shirt, worn jeans and work boots. Though the casual clothes changed his appearance, they didn't hide the elegant carriage that made him Carter Haines. Even dressed as a mountain man, he looked rich.

"If you're hungry, I've made some stew, or if you prefer, I can make you a sandwich." She turned away. It was that or gawk at the man. She still couldn't believe they'd been married—even if in name only. Mostly in name only.

"Stew's fine," he said, his low voice stirring an emotion she fought to control.

A battle she felt herself losing.

She ladled stew into bowls, then carried them and a plate of sliced sourdough bread to the round table in the breakfast nook.

He moved to the picture window that normally had a beautiful view of the majestic peaks surrounding the lake.

"Is anyone else staying at the lodge?" He looked over his shoulder at her as she set the steaming bowls on the table.

"No." Her mouth tipped. "Several of the guests canceled or asked to reschedule because of the storm. I'll try and fit them in when I have a better idea of how long the storm lasts."

His mouth flat, he nodded.

“Have a seat.” She indicated the chair near the window.

Keesha and Juno waited until he sat, then rushed to their places beneath the table.

“Sorry, girls.” Emma sat, then tipped her head to look under the table. “Carter’s an adult. He’s not going to drop anything on the floor.”

The dogs whined but didn’t move.

“I hope that doesn’t break their hearts.” Carter offered a sympathetic smile.

Emma laughed softly. She raised her head and saw Carter watching her. “They love it when we have guests. Whether guests drop crumbs purposefully or by accident, these girls eat like queens on table scraps.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Carter’s mouth tipped in that way that made her heart lift. “Though, I don’t want to teach them bad manners.”

“It’s too late for that,” she said and sighed.

Carter dipped his spoon into the stew. A light filled his eyes the way it did when she cooked while they were married. Though she rarely cooked during those two years they were together, she loved to cook, and she loved to cook for Carter. He appreciated every dish she prepared, even when she wasn’t pleased with the result.

“This is good.” He tipped his spoon toward the bowl.

“Thanks.” Heat flooded her cheeks. It always did when he looked at her that way.

She wished she didn’t blush, but that seemed the curse of her small-town life. Carter often told her she was beautiful when she blushed. Those were moments when they seemed especially close, but then they remembered the contract. And then they remembered they were to have no emotional attachment. That was when they would put distance between themselves—Carter would step into his home office, and she into her bedroom.

“It looks like you’ve done some recent work in here. The pictures of the kitchen you showed me had different appliances.” He looked away as if sorry he’d embarrassed her.

“I hired some local contractors.” She felt relief at changing the subject. “They’re good at finding deals. One of the workers was hired to remodel an Aspen mansion for a movie star and his fourth wife. His third wife ordered these appliances, which the fourth wife refused to accept, so my contractor bought them at a discounted price.”

“That worked out well,” Carter said with a surprised laugh. “Do you have more remodeling to do?”

“Just electrical and plumbing.” Emma shook her head. “I kept the remodel simple, because our guests spend most of their time outdoors. As long as they have the basics, a warm bed, a decent meal and a hot shower, which could use a little work, they’re happy. I can give you a tour if you like.”

“That would be nice,” he said, sincerity in his eyes. He finished the last bite of his stew.

“Would you like more?” she asked.

“This was fine.” He lifted his hands.

“Then how about dessert? I made a cherry pie. I have ice cream, and I can brew coffee.”

“I can’t say no to your cherry pie.”

They cleared the table of the bowls. She removed the pie from the pie safe while he pulled a gallon of ice cream from the freezer. It was a moment that made her feel close to him again—a moment she couldn’t acknowledge. Sighing inwardly, she lifted an ice cream spade from a drawer and handed it to him.

The dogs paced around them, sniffing the floor. When Emma and Carter returned to their chairs with their pies a la mode, the dogs hurried beneath the table.

Carter lifted a forkful of cherry pie. Emma sat still.

“You’re not going to eat?” he asked.

“I think we’ve ignored the obvious rather well, but I have to know.” She gave him a direct look. “Why are you here?”

“I don’t suppose you’ll believe I had business in Aspen.” He set his fork on his plate.

“I would, but we’re a long way from Aspen.”

“I was curious about the lodge,” he said softly. “You told me so much about it, I felt I’d been here.”

“You could’ve checked the website.” She studied him curiously. “After the repairs were finished, I uploaded pictures so everyone could see the changes we made.”

“I checked the website.” He smiled at her. “I wanted to see them for myself.”

“What do you think?” she asked, hope in her heart.

“Very impressive.” He nodded.

“Thank you.” She leaned back into her chair, feeling a modicum of relief. “But I have to know why you came when the contract stated we weren’t to have any contact with each other.”

A muscle worked in his jaw. “I hadn’t planned to see you. I had thought to stop by, look at the lodge and then leave.”

“But we did see each other.” She looked at him. “What do we do?”

“Yes, about that.” He released his breath as if he’d been struck. “I had wanted to see the lodge and then planned to leave, but the weather had other ideas.”

“You would’ve left without seeing me?” Her lips parted.

“If I were to abide by the contract, which I didn’t, so now here we are. I’ll have to talk to my lawyers about how to handle this indiscretion. In the meantime, please accept my apologies.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” she murmured. She dropped her gaze. It was good to see him again, even if it tore at her heart.

Silence fell between them.

“How are you doing, Emma?”

That brought her head up. “Fine.” She blinked.

“This is a big place.” He looked around. “You take care of this yourself?”

“Gael helps, but she’s at her sister’s tonight,” she said and wondered what he wasn’t asking her. “When the reservations pick up, I’ll hire help.” She *hoped* business picked up.

“If you need help financially—”

“Why would you say that?” She straightened. “I’m doing fine.” Mainly because of the payout she’d received for staying married to Carter for two years.

He looked around. “How? You have no guests.”

“Not yet.” She didn’t have to defend herself. This was *her* lodge, not Carter’s. She didn’t owe him an explanation. Still, she wanted him to understand she had a plan and was following through. “But only because of the snowstorm. Once this subsides, business will pick up. We’ll be as busy as when my grandparents ran the place.”

He studied her a moment. Did he doubt she could make the lodge successful again?

“I’m sure you will,” he said.

Carter ate half his pie and ice cream. She barely touched hers. When the ice cream melted, she picked up their pie plates and carried them to the sink. If Carter doubted her ability to make the lodge a success, so be it. She would not let his doubts interfere with her plans. She heard his chair move away from the table and his footsteps cross toward her. The dogs scurried to their feet and frantically sniffed the floor, certain they’d find a morsel.

“Emma, I didn’t mean—”

“I know you didn’t.” She rinsed the plates and put them in the dishwasher. She forced a smile and faced him.

“That’s something I’ve always admired about you.” Smiling, he smoothed away a lock of hair that had fallen across her forehead.

His gentle touch made her take a breath. The night she wanted to forget came rushing back to her—the night when they’d let the passion sweep them away.

They had strayed from the terms of the contract, which they had to follow. He needed to receive his inheritance, and she needed the payout to repair the lodge, though what she received would more than pay for the repairs. She was set for life.

Everything would’ve been fine if it hadn’t been for that one weak moment—the last night of their marriage.

She swallowed hard. He’d never know how much she treasured their last night together. Once the snowstorm stopped, he’d be on his way to Aspen, then he’d return to New York. They’d never see each other again.

“You admired me? For what?” she asked, confused. Running a lodge was hardly admirable, especially compared to the corporation Carter managed.

She stepped away from his touch. Feeling the tenderness confused her, and she wouldn’t complicate her future with thoughts of what had passed between her and Carter. They were two people who had made an agreement. Nothing more.

“Your determination to manage your family’s lodge.” Something flickered in his eyes. Turning away, he raked fingers through his hair and stared out the window. “How long will this snowstorm last?”

“A couple of days.” She dragged her gaze from him to the window. “It’s hard to say. Sometimes, the storm gets trapped in the valley and stays until it weakens. I’ll check the forecast.” She picked up her phone.

He had to be anxious to leave. He was probably meeting friends in Aspen. Except with his SUV at the bottom of the ravine, how would he leave? He could have a car delivered to

the lodge, or she could drive him to Aspen, which meant she'd spend more time with him.

Bad idea.

The lights flickered. Her jaw tight, she lifted her gaze to the ceiling.

"Does this happen often?" Carter looked at the ceiling before dropping his gaze to hers.

"Sometimes," she said slowly and silently prayed it wouldn't happen tonight. She wasn't sure if the generator was working. She'd call Gael and find out.

"That sounds a little vague." He lifted a brow.

"It's fine." She forced a smile. "If we lose power, I'll just turn on the generator." Why hadn't she paid better attention when Gael had reviewed the procedure with her? She was more of a hands-on person, anyway.

She glanced at her phone and tapped the weather app. A cloud with a sad face appeared on the phone's screen. Great! She'd lost internet access.

"What does it say?" Carter asked, bemused.

"To check back later." She showed him her phone's screen.

He muttered something, then stared out the window at the snowstorm.

The lights flickered again. Emma stiffened as she watched them grow dimmer. The room faded to black. Her breath caught as she prayed the outage was temporary.

"They're not coming back on," Carter said flatly.

"No." She gave a rough exhale. "I'll turn on the generator."

If she could remember where it was. Even better if she could remember how to turn it on.

CHAPTER 8



Carter pressed the flashlight app on his phone. The dogs watched him and Emma for a moment, then returned to sniffing the floor.

“Where’s the generator? I’ll turn it on,” he said.

“I think it’s in shed the at the back of garage.” She stared out the window and at the gusts of snow blowing past the glass. “I’ll need to wheel it to the concrete slab so I can hook it up to the transfer switch.”

“In this weather?” He gave a soft snort. “You’re not doing that. It’s freezing out. Stay in here. I’ll set it up.”

“Have you ever done that before?” She narrowed her eyes at him.

“I can figure it out,” he said, exuding an air of confidence.

“It’s better if we both go,” she said.

They shrugged into jackets and stepped out of the house. The blast of cold air that hit them was like sitting on a block of ice. In the garage, they set the switches and gathered the cords, then wheeled the generator into the cold and snow.

“Emma, go back to the house.” Carter didn’t want her to freeze. He could see her shaking and wanted to pull her into his arms. “I can set up the generator.”

“If we both do it, we’ll set it up faster and can return to the house faster.” She grabbed the generator’s handle. “I’ll show you where we set it up.”

“Emma, listen to me. You shouldn’t be out here.” He caught her arm and pulled her to him. Having her this close, breathing in the delicate scent of her skin, released a torrent of emotions. She stilled in his arms, then lifted her gaze to his, her lips parting.

He swallowed hard. His hands firmly on her shoulders, he set her away from him. How he had the strength not to pull her close and kiss her with the passion that brought back the memory of their last night together, he’ll never know. “Since I have the light, I’ll go first. Just tell me where to go.”

Her mouth opened, but she said nothing.

“It’s this way, right?” He grabbed the handle and dragged the generator through the snow.

“Right,” she said, her voice flat. Standing next to him, she grabbed the other side of the handle.

They shoved the generator beneath the small canopy built over the concrete slab to protect it. Carter started the engine and then helped Emma connect the cords. A light glowed from inside the lodge.

“You did it.” Emma lifted an awe-filled gaze to his.

“Tell me why I detect a note of disbelief in that statement,” he said dryly.

“I thought you were just another pretty face.” The corner of her mouth tipped.

“I’m going to assume there’s a compliment in there somewhere.” He took her hand, small and delicate, in his palm. “Now let’s get inside.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist, the memories of when he held her closer than he thought possible flooding him with a desire he should forget but couldn’t. He guided her up the steps and into the kitchen. Keesha and Juno sniffed them madly as they tried to understand the strange smells covering them. Compared to outside, the room felt hot. The lights dimmed, then glowed again.

Carter held Emma close. He didn't want to release her. She shivered slightly. From the emotions he felt or from the cold? He'd go with the cold. Slowly his arms slid down her curves. From the look in her eyes, he knew she was feeling something, too—something they agreed never to feel.

“When the snow lets up, I'll shovel the walks.” He turned away and rubbed the back of his neck.

“You don't have to,” she said quickly. “I know you want to get to Aspen. I can shovel snow.”

“Except that neither of us is going anywhere for a while.” A doubtful smile curved the corner of his mouth.

“I'd say I'd make us some cocoa, but since we don't know when the power will be restored, I don't want to overtax the generator.” She looked at the stove before returning her gaze to his.

“Let's go into the great room.” Taking her hand, he led her through the doorway and into the room that was filled with leather chairs and sofas. Bronze sculptures of bucking broncos and racing stagecoaches sat on the tables. Oil paintings of cowboys cooking over open fires, playing harmonicas or talking to Indians covered the walls. He led Emma to a sofa. “Have a seat. I'll stoke the fire.”

When she sat, he draped an afghan over her lap, then turned to the fireplace where crumbling logs burned from the remains of the fire. He threw logs on the grate, then stoked the glowing embers. He was relieved he had something to do, because being this close to Emma made him want to do so much more than just hold her. He turned back to the sofa.

Emma had curled into the corner, her head resting on an accent pillow. Dark lashes curved against her pale cheeks.

He released his breath slowly. How hard had she been working that she could fall asleep so quickly? And how could he have agreed to a contract that insisted on a loveless marriage with this woman? A muscle locked in his jaw. It would have been so easy to fall in love with Emma. How many times had his heart begged him to do so?

Sitting on the sofa, he pulled her to him. She murmured something, but what, he couldn't understand. At least, she hadn't opened her eyes. He rested her head in his lap. When she snuggled closer, he sucked in his breath.

She may not know what she did to him, but being this close to Emma, and knowing he could do nothing, made him summon more willpower than he realized he had.

Now all he had to do was fall asleep. With Emma this close and triggering every sensory nerve in his body, how was he going to do that?

CHAPTER 9



Emma stretched and yawned. Her hand slammed into something hard, immovable and warm. She stilled. Her eyes flew open. Turning her head, she saw the dying embers in the fireplace.

“Good morning,” came the deep voice that sparked sensations she had battled for two years.

She looked up and into Carter’s deep blue gaze. Glancing at her hand, she saw it was still pressed against his chest. She pulled it to her throat. “Sorry,” she murmured.

His laugh made her cheeks burn. “No harm done. I trust you slept well.”

If he only knew. It had been the most restful night she’d had since she’d left New York.

“Yes,” she said softly, “and you?”

“Better than I thought I would since I slept sitting up.”

“You should’ve said something.” She bolted upright. “I could’ve slept on the floor.”

“You are not sleeping on the floor,” he said firmly, though something flickered in his eyes that made her wonder if she’d said something wrong.

Her heart picked up speed, the memory of their last night together stirring long-dead emotions inside her. No matter what she felt toward Carter, she refused to let this feeling grow. She slid across the sofa and away from him. The sooner she could help him find a way back to Aspen, the better.

“Is it still snowing?” She rose and moved to the window.

Dim sunlight filtered through the glass and reflected against the flakes still pouring from the sky.

“That would be yes,” Carter said. She heard him rise behind her.

Looking over her shoulder at him, she saw the shadows beneath his eyes and wondered if he’d slept at all. He folded the afghan that had covered her and tossed it over the sofa’s arm.

“I did check the weather report on my phone a few minutes ago,” he said, “and the forecast is predicting another foot of snow.”

Emma went rigid. At this rate, Carter would be stuck here for another month.

“Don’t worry.” Carter gave her a direct look. “The transportation department is readying the snowplows and as soon as there’s a break in the storm, they’ll make their way along the county roads.”

“I wasn’t worried,” she said in surprise.

He laughed softly. Apparently she was transparent enough for him to know she was very worried.

“How about I make breakfast while you freshen up?” he asked.

Emma’s stomach lurched, giving her a jolt. She was usually starving by morning and couldn’t wait to dig into a big breakfast. The thought of cooking breakfast made her throat dry.

“I’ll eat later,” she said. When he eyed her, she added, “I prefer eating when I’m very hungry.”

“Not that I recall.” He gave her a curious look, making her wonder what he recalled.

“There must be a gap in your memory.” She looked away. “If you want me to make you something—”

“I’ll make it. You have to eat something,” he said. When she opened her mouth to protest, he held up his hand. “Fine. We’ll do it your way. We’ll wait until you’re hungry.”

“That could be a while. You certainly don’t have to wait until then,” she said but wondered at the odd lurch in her stomach.

“I don’t mind,” he said, though she felt his curious gaze on her.

“I think I will freshen up, and then—” Her stomach jolted. She couldn’t finish.

Her hand went to her mouth.

“Emma?”

She heard the concern in Carter’s voice but couldn’t look at him. Instead, she broke into a run and dashed down the hallway to her grandmother’s bedroom. Closing the door, she rested her back on the wood and tried to catch her breath. Her stomach twisted, and she raced to the bathroom.

A moment later, she sagged against the toilet. How could she be nauseous when there was nothing in her stomach?

A light tapping sounded at the door. “Emma? Are you all right?”

She dragged herself to her feet. Glancing in the bathroom mirror, she saw her face was almost as white as the towels hanging behind her. She braced her hands on the vanity counter. How could she feel so terrible? Last night, she’d been fine. If she had food poisoning, why wasn’t Carter sick? They both ate the stew and sourdough bread, followed by cherry pie and ice cream, which she barely touched.

She crossed the room and opened the door to Carter standing in the doorway, a glass of water in his hand.

“I brought you this,” he said.

Her stomach jolted. She tried to shut the door, but Carter caught it and stepped into the room. She dashed back to the bathroom. His footsteps sounded behind her.

“Emma.” His voice was firm.

“It’s okay. I’m fine.” Dropping to her knees, she hugged the toilet.

“You’re not fine,” he said, concern in his tone. He smoothed hands over her shoulders.

She couldn’t argue. Nausea was not a sign of good health. Finally, the nausea passed, and she slumped against the bowl.

Carter crouched next to her. Slipping his arms around her waist, he pulled her to his chest. She collapsed against him, the steady beating of his heart a soothing tone that filled her with peace.

Holding her tight, he rose and carried her to the bed. “I should’ve insisted you sleep in here last night instead of on the sofa. Give me your doctor’s phone number. I’ll call him and see what he thinks is the problem. Maybe there’s something going around.”

“I haven’t been around that many people to catch anything.” Her eyes closed, and she shook her head.

“Still, your doctor should know,” he said. “What’s his number?”

“It’s in my phone,” she said. “I think I left it in the great room.”

“I’ll call him now, but before I leave, you need to drink some water.” He slipped a hand to the back of her head, his fingers weaving through her hair, and lifted her. He pressed a glass to her lips.

“I can’t,” she rasped and turned away.

“You have to try,” he spoke softly. “Please, Emma. You’re dehydrated.”

The urgency in his voice stilled her. Tipping her head, she took a sip, then collapsed into his hand.

“We’ll try again later.” He gave a rough exhale, then rested her head against the pillow. “I’ll be right back.”

She nodded and closed her eyes. His faint footsteps crossed the bedroom, then faded down the hall. She rolled to her side. Never had she felt so sick.

Soon, Carter's footsteps returned.

"I talked to Dr. Yang." Carter's voice broke the silence in the room. "He's not aware of any virus outbreak, but he did say it's that time of year. As soon as the roads are clear, he wants you to schedule an appointment with his office if you're still feeling nauseous."

"Hopefully, this will have passed by then," she murmured. "Did you find out anything more on the road conditions?"

"Yes, and they're impassable."

She closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, Carter, I know you'd planned a week of fun and snowboarding."

"Don't worry about me," he said in concern. "There's no joy in skiing when I know how poorly you feel. I'll have other opportunities."

"But still, that is why you flew to Colorado," she said, but when she looked at him, she wondered at the shuttered look in his eyes.

"The reason doesn't matter." He never stopped watching her. "I'm here as is this storm. I'll stoke the fire. Stay in here while I make breakfast. I'll make enough for you in case you change your mind about eating."

She offered him a wan smile. She wouldn't change her mind. The way her stomach felt now, she wondered if she'd ever eat again. She loved food. How did it become unappealing?

"I have some accounts to review," she said. "If you need me, I'll be in the office at the end of the hall."

Without waiting for a reply, she slid from the bed and strode down the hall. In the lodge's office, she dropped into the old desk chair that creaked beneath her weight. Staring at the computer monitor, she drew a breath. What was happening to her?

A few minutes later, the faint odor of frying bacon filtered into the room. Emma closed her eyes. A conversation she'd had with a friend popped into her mind. What had her friend said? That she'd been pregnant so many times, she was grateful she didn't get morning sickness anymore.

Icy horror took hold of Emma's heart.

Pregnant?

She sunk into her chair. It didn't make sense. How could she be pregnant after one night with Carter? But she wasn't naïve. One night would be enough.

Already the passionate night they'd spent together, the way Carter tenderly loved and cherished her made her body tingle with warm sensations. How could making love be so beautiful and dangerous? It had cost Emma her heart. Had it also created a life?

Already the thought of holding and nurturing this precious gift—a gift that was part her and part Carter—filled her heart with overflowing love.

She couldn't think about this. She'd wait and discuss her symptoms with Dr. Yang.

Stepping to a filing cabinet, she pulled a folder of receipts she had yet to enter into her accounting system. She had to get her mind off Carter and her situation. Being busy was the best way to do that.

Of course, Carter leaving would help. Every time she looked at him, the memory of what had happened flooded her mind.

And she wasn't sure she was pregnant.

Who was she kidding? Her shoulders sagged. She'd never felt this sick in her life. Enough friends had shared their experiences with her, each one detailing what Emma felt now. What else would cause this nausea?

And if she were pregnant?

She needed a plan. She couldn't keep the baby from Carter. He had to know. When would be the best time to tell

him? And what would he do when he knew? Would he let her raise the baby at the lodge or take him from her?

A bubble of panic rose in her throat. Carter was powerful enough to hire a team of lawyers to make sure he got exactly what he wanted.

She wasn't without the means to challenge him. Is that how she wanted to spend the rest of her life? Fighting with Carter for custody of their child? And it would be a fight. She'd seen Carter go after what he wanted in business negotiations. If he wanted to be part of this child's life, he wouldn't step aside. He'd fight for what was his.

Emma's heart pounded sickeningly. What kind of life would that be for her child?

Dear God, give me wisdom.

She didn't want to keep her pregnancy a secret, but she had to protect her baby—her and Carter's baby. Her heart fluttered like a trapped bird. She needed to talk to a lawyer.

CHAPTER 10



Charter stood at the entrance to the lodge's office. Through the opening, he saw Emma seated in a wooden chair in front of a rolltop desk. Her hair tumbled over her shoulder in a way that made him want to feel those silky curls.

She looked at a receipt. A pen in her delicate hand, she made a note in a ledger.

He tapped lightly on the door. "Emma?"

She jumped and turned to him. When she saw him, she pressed a hand to the slender column of her neck and laughed nervously. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," he said, though he wondered at the deep concentration so intense that it left her unaware of him. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Fine." She took a breath, then frowned. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes." He studied her. "If you're sure you don't want to eat any breakfast."

"Quite sure. Thank you." She turned away, her face suddenly pale and tight, making him wonder what the matter with her was. During their marriage, she'd always had a healthy appetite.

"The snow is lessening," he said and was relieved her color had returned when she looked at him again. Maybe he was reading too much into this situation.

The lights flickered, then suddenly brightened.

“We have power.” She looked at the ceiling and smiled.

“So it would appear.” He didn’t look at the ceiling. He looked at her. “I’ll disconnect the generator, and then, if you’ll tell me where a snow shovel is, I’ll start shoveling.”

“I can do that.” Emma’s eyes widened. “I know you didn’t fly out here to shovel snow.”

“Maybe, but since I’m here, I’ll shovel.” He narrowed his gaze. “And you won’t.”

“Carter.” Her eyes widened. “Of course, I’ll shovel. I’ve been doing that for years, except for the two years I spent with ... in New York.” She looked away.

“No, you won’t,” he said. What wasn’t she telling him?

“Hello? Anyone home?” a woman called out from the lodge entrance.

“Gael’s here.” Emma came to her feet. “The transportation department must have started to clear the roads. We’re back here,” she called out.

Carter looked over his shoulder to Gael, who stopped at the end of the hall and openly stared at him.

“You made it out.” Emma rushed past Carter and hugged Gael. “How are the roads?”

“Dicey.” Gael twisted the corner of her mouth. “Traucherous. I didn’t realize you had company. There wasn’t another car out front.”

“Hello, Gael. It’s nice to see you again, and you didn’t see my SUV because it’s in the ravine.” Carter pulled his phone from his pocket. “I’ll call my office and see about getting a car here to take me to Aspen.” He dialed his phone, then looked at Emma though he had to wonder at the lines that pressed into the corners of her eyes. “And I’ll call a tow truck and find out how to get my vehicle out of the ditch.”

“That’s going to be pricey.” Gael gave a low whistle.

Carter twisted the corner of his mouth. Pricey because he had wanted to see the lodge. More so, he wanted to see the

woman he let slip through his fingers. That curiosity would cost him a couple of hundred grand, though he had to admit it was worth it.

“If you want to use the library to make calls, it’s the pocket doors on the right.” Emma gave him an apologetic look.

“Thanks.” Carter moved down the hall to the library filled with a fireplace surrounded by leather chairs and bookshelves that reached to the ceiling. He sat in a winged chair and pressed the speed dial to his office. He spoke to his assistant about arranging a rental car and tow truck.

When he finished, he set his phone on an end table and stared at a painting of a cowboy stoking a campfire. This would be the last time he’d come to Falcon Lake. The emptiness welling inside him gave him a start.

For two years, he had meaning in his life. A day didn’t go by when he didn’t look forward to the moment when he’d see Emma, the brightness in her eyes, the smile teasing the corner of her lips. Wasn’t that why he couldn’t let her go the night before their divorce was finalized?

He dragged a hand over his face. What could he have done differently? Was there a way he could’ve kept her in his life?

That hadn’t been what she wanted, though their night together, she loved him in a way he never dreamed possible.

When she returned to Colorado, he hadn’t just lost her, he lost the meaning she’d given to his life.



EMMA WATCHED Carter step into the library. With a soft sigh, she turned to Gael and saw the older woman watching her.

“We had a bit of excitement here.” Emma smiled too broadly.

“Is that so?” The look in Gael’s eyes was telling.

Emma looked away. Though Gael never had children of her own, she’d helped Emma’s grandparents raise her as well

as helped her sister, a single parent, raise her children, then her grandchildren. Through it all, Gael became an expert at deciphering underlying meaning.

“We lost power,” Emma spoke quickly, then winced. A dead giveaway that she was hiding something. “We had to hook up the generator.”

“In this weather? That had to have been miserable.” Gael frowned.

“Exactly.” Emma laughed and moved into the hallway. “Now that the storm is moving out, I’ll shovel the walks.”

“No, you won’t.” Gael stood in front of her. “I took care of this place while you were in New York. If I need help, I’ll call somebody. Someone’s always looking for work.”

Emma frowned at her and wondered at Gael’s meaningful smile. She couldn’t know what had been plaguing Emma all morning. Emma wasn’t even sure she was pregnant. She wouldn’t know until she visited the doctor or bought a pregnancy test. If she were pregnant, her next call would be to a lawyer.

“Besides, I baked brownies for my grandnieces and nephews and never got it out of my system so I thought I’d bake some for us.” She still watched Emma.

Emma’s jaw tightened. When Gael nodded at her, she knew her secret was out. How, she didn’t know. Maybe because most everyone Gael knew had been pregnant at some point.

“I have some bookwork to finish.” Emma took a step back.

“I won’t interrupt. I’ll start making the brownies. I’ll let you know when they’re ready.” She lifted a brow, then turned away.

“I’ll pass on the brownies, but Carter likes them,” Emma called after her, but Gael had stepped down the hallway toward the kitchen.

Emma moved into the office and sat at the desk. Was she pregnant? She rested a hand on her stomach and smiled. She’d

always wanted children. Her smile vanished. But she didn't want them this way—alone and single and maybe locked in a custody battle with her baby's father.

Her hand stilled on her stomach. A shiver crawled down her spine.

She needed answers.

Fast.

CHAPTER 11



*A*fter Carter spoke to his assistant, he shoveled snow despite Emma's protest. She wanted to help, but he told her she should use that time to work on something that would benefit the lodge. From the look on her face, he guessed there were several needs that required her attention.

He'd barely finished a quarter of the shoveling when sweat began to pour down his face. Shoveling snow beat any workout his personal trainer had designed for him, and it was free. By the time he'd cleared the walkways and the parking area, his clothes, or rather the clothes Emma had lent him, were soaked and every muscle in his body ached.

When he stored the snow shovel in the shed next to the lodge, the car service arrived with the rental he would use until the auto broker delivered his new SUV to his home in Aspen. The tow truck arrived shortly after the car agency delivered the rental SUV. The sun was shining brightly when Carter, Emma and the tow truck driver peered into the ravine to the wreckage strewn along the embankment.

"That's a nice car." The tow truck driver gave a low whistle.

"Was a nice car," Carter said grimly.

The driver gave him a price to tow the vehicle away and explained the weather and the location had increased the cost. Even so, it was less than Carter had expected. He'd pay the driver what he thought it was worth.

The driver was smiling once he drove away with the wrecked vehicle and Carter's generous payment.

Carter and Emma returned to the lodge that was filled with the aroma of freshly baked brownies. The fragrance brought back memories of the times when the cook at Haines Estate let Emma take over the kitchen. Everything she cooked and baked was delicious. Carter enjoyed watching her buzz about the kitchen, then sharing a meal with her that she'd cooked—a novelty in his family.

Gael offered a brownie to Carter, though she eyed Emma.

"No, thanks," he said, but wondered at Emma who smiled bleakly before excusing herself to place a call from the lodge's office.

"Be sure to take some of these brownies home with you." Gael slipped a few into a sandwich bag and handed them to him.

"Thanks," he said and smiled. If they tasted as good as they smelled, they'd be gone before he turned the corner. "I guess I'll be on my way."

"Don't be a stranger." Gael smiled. "The door's always open."

Carter thanked her but wasn't sure Emma would appreciate that invitation. His seeing Emma had created a problem with the contract that the attorneys would have to work out.

Moving down the hallway, he found Emma in the office. She'd gathered her hair into a messy bun at the back of her head. A frown pressed between her smooth brows, she frowned at the computer screen and dragged her mouse over a column of figures on the spreadsheet.

As if sensing his presence, she looked over her shoulder at him. "You're leaving?" She started to rise, but he waved her back to her chair. Her gaze dropped to the bag of brownies he carried. "I see Gael packed your snack so you don't starve on your way to Aspen," she said, but he wondered at her suddenly pale face.

“She doesn’t take no for an answer.” He laughed softly. “Sorry to barge in on everything,” He noted the flicker in her eyes. He should never have come. Now, he didn’t want to leave.

She waved dismissively, then gave him a serious look. “Sorry about your SUV.”

“It was to be expected.” The corner of his mouth tipped. “It will make good scrap metal for some enterprising individual. It was good to see you again.” He looked around, then looked at her. “The lodge looks good. I believe you’ll make this a success.”

“Thanks,” she murmured.

They stood in silence. Was she wondering, as was he, if they’d see each other again? Not likely. They traveled in different circles. After he left Aspen, he’d fly to London to meet with investors, then to his yacht in the Mediterranean. Until he and Emma married, she’d never traveled far from the lodge. Now she’d been all over the world, but always in her eyes, he saw the longing she held for the mountains and the lodge.

He took her hand and pulled her to him. Hesitantly, she fell into his arms. He loved the feel of her next to him.

He. Loved. Every. Soft. Curve.

There was so much more he wanted to say—like how he’d never forget the night they were together. If the look in her eyes was any indication, she thought about it, too. So why was speaking of that night taboo? They’d been married.

With reluctance, he set her away from himself. “Goodbye, Emma,” he said, his voice filled with an emotion he struggled to hide.

She opened her mouth, but no words came. Instead, she nodded once and dropped her gaze. Silence seemed the best response for both of them. Turning away, he walked to the door. With one last look, he took in her form, the paleness of her skin and the errant, dark curls framing her face. Even

wearing jeans and an oversized sweater, she looked beautiful. He dropped his gaze and turned away.

Emma filled his mind as he crossed the great room. He leaned through the kitchen door and said goodbye to Gael. The dogs sat at her feet, watching her every move.

“Have a safe trip,” Gael said, a softness in her eyes. “Hopefully, most of the roads have been cleared by now.”

“Hopefully.” Carter offered a smile he didn’t feel. “Thanks for the brownies.”

“Anytime,” she said, then the lines around her eyes etched a little deeper. There probably wouldn’t be another time.

The dogs broke their sentinel to come and sniff his feet. Their tongues hanging out of their mouths, they seemed to sense something was about to change. Carter rubbed their heads and told them to be good. When he crossed the great room to the front door, they followed, their pants turning into whines.

“Stay inside,” he said when he closed the door.

He heard their loud sniffing at the threshold. A moment later, they stood at the picture window, their paws on the sill and disappointment in their eyes. He felt that disappointment right through his core.

The bite of chilled air greeted him when he crossed the parking lot to the rental SUV. Climbing inside, he stared at the lodge surrounded by mounds of snow. Smoke rose from one of the chimneys. Frost rested in the corners of the windows. Icicles dangled from the eaves. Past the lodge was the lake that had white caps racing over the surface. A couple of trucks parked at the barn indicated some of the help had shoveled out of their homes and had navigated the snowy roads to care for the animals.

When Carter left the lodge, he’d drive to his Aspen ski chalet. The mansion overlooking the ski slope would be empty unless he invited some friends over for dinner or drinks or something else—friends he hadn’t seen since he and Emma married. He’d been so wrapped up in fulfilling the terms of his

grandmother's will, that he hadn't made time for friends, something they'd reminded him of frequently.

Now he had time to associate with friends. He'd contact them when he returned to Aspen and arrange for a dinner party that evening. He was free and single. It was time he lived like it.

Throwing a dinner party tonight would be late notice, but he knew his friends would be there. It was one of the perks of being a Haines. Everyone wanted an invitation to a Haines party.



EMMA WANDERED into the kitchen that only faintly smelled like brownies. Her stomach growled but still felt tight. She wouldn't eat yet. She didn't want to dash to the bathroom again. She knew that Gael suspected she was pregnant, but Emma refused to believe she was until she'd taken a test.

"I'm going to make lunch." Gael placed a mixing bowl and beaters into the dishwasher. "Now that we have a crew back to help with the animals, I'll make something for them, too. Can I make you a sandwich?"

The nausea that rolled through Emma's stomach was the answer she needed. She still wasn't ready to eat.

"That's okay." Emma tried to sound casual. "I'll make something for myself later. I'll go ahead and work on those curtains for the guest rooms. If you need me, I'll be in the sewing room."

"If you're sure." Gael studied her. "After I finish with lunch, I'll help you."

Emma nodded and wished Gael wouldn't look at her that way. She was sure nothing was wrong with her. It was probably something she ate.

She made her way to the back of the lodge where her grandmother had set up her sewing room. She opened the cabinet and withdrew the fabric Gael had ordered for the new

curtains. She loved the bright, cheery material that added life to the rooms but wouldn't shock the hunters. She was at the sewing machine when Gael entered and picked up the stack of curtains Emma had already sewn.

"You're making progress," Gael said. "Where should we hang these?"

"I was thinking in the guest rooms on the north side." Emma clipped the thread from the last panel she'd sewn and added it to the pile. "The hunters tend to rent those rooms, and the stripes in these curtains will bring out the blue in the duvets."

"I agree," Gael said. "And I brought us a snack." She set a plate of brownies on an end table.

Emma turned away. "Maybe I'll eat one later. Right now, I want to finish these curtains. As soon as the weather clears, we'll have guests, and I want the rooms to be ready."

"They'll be ready," Gael said thoughtfully, though Emma felt her curious stare. "I'll take these upstairs and put them on the curtain rods."

"Thanks." Emma slipped another panel into the sewing machine.

"Are you sure you're all right?" came Gael's concerned voice.

"I'm fine." Emma turned to her and smiled. She couldn't avoid looking at the older woman. Avoidance would arouse suspicion. "And I'm so grateful for all the work you did while I was gone."

"Mostly, I hired people to do the work." She laughed, then turned serious. "I'm sorry the marriage didn't work out between you and Carter." Her eyes filled with sympathy.

"That's the way it is nowadays." Emma turned back to the sewing machine. "You know how hard it is to make a marriage work."

"I know." Gael picked up a brownie and bit off a corner. "But somehow I thought it would be different for you and

Carter. You seemed made for each other.”

More like needed each other, Emma thought but remained silent.

“Thank goodness you didn’t have children.” Gael took another bite of brownie. “That would’ve made your divorce a nightmare.”

“Children?” Emma looked at her. Tears filled her eyes. If she were pregnant, would Carter let her have custody of her baby? Though marriage to Carter had provided her with a comfortable lifestyle, she didn’t have the funds to match the Haines billions and their cadre of attorneys.

If she were pregnant.

She couldn’t be pregnant.

“Oh, Emma,” Gael said, shocked. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, of course.” Emma took a breath.

Why was she behaving this way? She knew Gael hadn’t meant anything heinous by her comment. She just spoke her mind like she always did.

To the world, Emma and Carter had a loving relationship—until they didn’t. No one knew she’d agreed to a loveless marriage with Carter Haines. But it hadn’t been loveless. Wasn’t their last night together proof of that? At least on her part. Carter wanted his inheritance. She had her ulterior motive as well—until she let her emotions get in the way.

Gael took her hand and sat in front of her. “Did something happen while you were married to Carter?”

“Just the normal things,” she said slowly.

What was she saying? There was nothing normal about their marriage.

“If you ever want to talk about it, you know I’m here for you.” Gael patted her hand.

“I know.” Emma withdrew her hand, then turned back to the sewing machine. “Now let’s get busy on these curtains. If

the weather holds, we'll have guests this weekend.”

She ran the fabric beneath the presser foot. The first chance she had, she'd stop at the drugstore and buy a pregnancy test, but she wouldn't go to the one near the lodge. If she bought the test at the local drugstore, everyone would know what she'd done before she got home, and that would include Gael.

She'd drive to Aspen and buy one there. She had to. That was the only way she could convince herself everything would be fine. And if she were pregnant? She'd have to tell Carter. What happened after that? She'd pray for the strength to endure.

CHAPTER 12



That evening, Carter's Aspen mansion teemed with friends he hadn't seen since he and Emma married. He'd given the household staff the night off, so the catering service took care of his guests.

Everyone had heard about the divorce and brought sympathy gifts including a subscription to an elite dating service, golf clubs and a Hawaiian vacation.

Some brought beautiful women who, obviously, had plans to become the next Mrs. Carter Haines. That wouldn't happen. One marriage was enough for Carter.

Conversation filled the mansion along with music as some people danced while others soaked in the jacuzzi.

As Carter stood on his deck near the fireplace and chatted with friends, he looked over the snow-tipped trees to the north. It was nearly midnight, so he knew Emma would be asleep.

He remembered how peaceful she looked the night she slept in his arms. He could've stared at her all night.

When the last guest said good night, the catering service cleaned away the remains of the party and left.

Now he was really alone.

And not ready to go to sleep. He knew what he'd dream. It was the same dream that worked through his mind every night—Emma lying in his arms, holding her soft, warm body next to his and basking in the subtle fragrance of her skin.

If only he could bring that night back. If only that night had never ended.

But it had, and he and Emma were now divorced.

His father had told him he'd get used to it and would soon move on with his life, but with each passing day, he knew his father couldn't be more wrong.



THE NEXT MORNING, Emma armed herself with a grocery list and the excuse she needed to drive into town. She had just turned onto the highway when Gael called and asked why she was driving toward Aspen rather than the small town of Winter Forks near the lodge. Groceries were more expensive in Aspen but paying more would be worth the price to keep her privacy.

“It’s been so long since I’ve been here, I thought I’d drive through the country and enjoy the scenery.” She tried to sound casual. “I may be gone a little longer than usual, but don’t worry.”

“I am worried,” Gael said. “You haven’t eaten in two days. You’re not yourself. I think that divorce was harder on you than you realize.”

If Gael only knew.

“I’m fine. Really,” Emma said and wished Gael would quit worrying about her. “If you think of anything else you need, call me.” She said goodbye and disconnected the hands-free app.

She had to make this trip to Aspen quick to quell Gael’s suspicions.

Aspen was crowded with tourists and residents enjoying a sunny day, though piles of snow from the recent storm covered the streets and sidewalks. Emma was relieved when she found a parking space in front of the drugstore.

Stepping inside, she hoped she didn't see anyone she knew. She wouldn't see Carter. He only planned to be in town for a couple of days. He should be back in New York or visiting a Haines overseas office by now. She was grateful when she found the pregnancy test, paid for it, then dropped it into her purse.

"Emma?" Carter's deep voice aroused feelings she had thought she'd buried.

Her jaw tightened. As long as she wasn't near him, they stayed buried.

"Carter." She suddenly found it hard to take a breath. Stepping away from the cashier, she pasted a smile in place and faced him.

He looked wonderful dressed in a turtleneck sweater, his hair slightly ruffled. He actually looked relaxed.

"Imagine seeing you here," she said, wondering how she managed to run into him. She didn't know where his ski chalet was, but apparently, it was nearby.

"Yes, imagine that." He gave her a curious look. "What are you doing in town?"

"I just had to pick up a few things, and thought I'd find a better selection here," she said. "What about you? I thought you'd be back in New York by now."

"I leave this weekend," he said, a roughness in his voice. "Do you want to have lunch?"

Her stomach lurched. Because she was near him or for that other reason?

"I'm sorry, but I can't," she said and saw the flicker in his eyes. "We're expecting guests at the lodge in a few days. Gael's there doing everything on her own."

"I see." He gave her a direct look. "Then I suppose you're too busy to get together before I leave."

"Sorry." She tipped the corner of her mouth. "Because of the storm, we had to juggle reservations, and now all the

rooms are booked. We'll be cooking and cleaning until Christmas.”

He nodded as if trying to understand. “It was good to see you again.”

“It was good to see you.” If only seeing him didn't bring back the memories she wanted desperately to forget.

He didn't move. He just stared at her.

“Have a safe trip.” She forced a smile, then turned away. The sooner she left Aspen, the better.

“Emma, wait.” The urgency in Carter's voice made her close her eyes.

She looked over her shoulder at him.

“You dropped something.” He picked up something from the floor. He started to hand it to her when his gaze dropped, and he stilled.

She looked at his hand. The pregnancy test! Her palms grew clammy, and she started to shake. How had that fallen from her purse?

“Thank you.” She took it from him and dropped it into her purse.

“We need to have a talk.” His gaze narrowed.

“You think this is for me?” She stuttered a laugh.

“Are you going to tell me it's for Gael?” His mouth curved slightly.

She exhaled slowly. She didn't know what she'd say, but whatever she said, he'd know it wasn't true. Looking around, she noticed several people watching them. Everyone would know who Carter was. No one would know who she was.

“Come on.” Carter wrapped his hand around hers and guided her out of the store.

“I need to get back to the lodge.” She tried to pull free, but he held her firmly. “Gael's going to wonder why I'm taking so long.”

“You can call her on the way to my place.”

“I can’t go there.” She skidded to a stop.

“You’re going to tell me what’s going on.” He turned to her, a darkness in his eyes, but didn’t release her.

“It could be nothing’s going on.”

“If you believed that, you wouldn’t have made that purchase.” His mouth firmed.

A couple moved past them and greeted Carter, though their curious expressions made Emma blush.

“Let’s go back to your place,” she said. “And I’ll call Gael.”

“Good,” he said. “Where did you park?”

“Right here.” She tipped her head toward the truck parked in front of the store.

“I’m across the street.” He tipped his head toward the luxury SUV that was different than the vehicle he’d rented after his other SUV had fallen into the ravine. Had he bought another SUV already? Probably. He was Carter Haines. “You can follow me. My place isn’t far.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded. A few minutes later, they were driving along a winding road. While following Carter, Emma called Gael and tried to explain why she’d be late. Gael pummeled her with questions. Emma patiently told her she’d explain everything when she got home.

Boy, would she.

Driveways protected by security gates lined the road leading to Carter’s ski chalet. Near the top of the mountain, he turned into a driveway surrounded by towering aspen. The gate floated open.

Emma took a breath and followed him along a brick driveway arranged in a geometric design, then passed a four-car garage. He parked in front of the stone steps leading to imposing front doors that opened when he climbed from his SUV. He moved to her truck and opened her door. When she

climbed out, she saw a woman dressed in a gray suit standing in the doorway.

She'd never been to his Aspen home, so she'd never met the staff here. This woman was either an assistant or an attorney. Emma swallowed. If the woman were an attorney, Emma would leave immediately. She wouldn't say anything that could be used against her. She sighed with relief when Carter introduced the woman as Mrs. Dobers, who was in charge of the Aspen home. Carter told her that he and Emma would have a meeting in Carter's home office. If Mrs. Dobers was curious about this meeting, she hid it well.

Following the introductions, Carter led Emma across the foyer of slate flooring to the hallway that passed beneath the welcoming arms staircases. Halfway down the hall, Carter opened the door to a large room lined with books. Emma stepped into the room and took in the glass wall on the far side that overlooked the ski slope.

"Would you like something to drink?" Carter moved behind the bar.

"No, thanks." Her stomach lurched. If she were pregnant, would this morning sickness last until the baby arrived?

He filled a glass with a bottle of sparkling water, then moved into the room. "Have a seat." He gestured toward the matching chairs in front of the fireplace.

She would've stood, but she didn't trust her stomach, and her back ached. She sat.

"Are you pregnant?" He sat next to her. Propping his ankle on his opposite knee, he leaned back into the chair and gave her a direct look.

Closing her eyes, she took in a breath, then looked at him. "I don't see how. I mean we only ..."

She didn't have to explain to him what happened. He was there!

"We only made love once." His voice was low and filled with the tenderness that made her remember that night all over again.

Like she could forget.

“Which makes me think it could be something else,” she said softly.

“Do you have a medical history that makes that a possibility?” He lifted a brow, though she saw doubt in his eyes.

She’d never been sick a day in her life. She dropped her gaze and shook her head.

“Then I believe we need an answer to this question,” he said.

“We?” She looked at him.

“As it takes two, and I’m assuming I am the other party involved ...”

Heat flooded her face. Did he think she’d been with someone else? “Of course, you are.”

“Good. I’m glad I can get a rise out of you.” His laugh was soft. “And I would like to resolve this issue now.” When she blushed, his eyes filled with tenderness. “I believe that was the reason for your purchase.”

“Yes.” She couldn’t deny that.

“Then ...” He rose and gestured toward a door on the other side of the office.

She went rigid. “You want me to take the test now?”

“Naturally.” He frowned. “As I’m involved, I’d like an answer.”

“I’d prefer to do this in the privacy of my own home.” She lifted her chin. “I’ll call you when I have an answer.”

“As I said, I’d like that answer now.” He lowered his chin, eyes challenging.

She’d like that answer now, too, but then what?

“Assuming I am, what will you do?” Her heart beat a little faster.

“First things first,” he said.

He was right. There was a very good chance she wasn't pregnant.

She rose and picked up her purse. Nodding once, she crossed the room to the door on the other side—to the jaws of fate that waited inside an elegantly designed bathroom. Her hand on the doorknob, she took a deep breath and stepped inside.

CHAPTER 13



Charter paced the length of his office, casting occasional glances to the closed door on the other side of the room.

How long did a pregnancy test take?

He received several texts and phone calls, but he ignored them. He didn't want anything to delay the answer Emma would give him.

The doorknob turned. Staring at it, he froze.

Emma stepped from the room. Her head down, she closed the door behind her, but that didn't hide her pale face. She stood near the door.

"Well?" He moved to her, then stopped. He didn't want to frighten her.

She lifted her face to his. A sheen filled her eyes. Still, he didn't move. He couldn't breathe. He needed to hear that answer from her own lips.

"Yes," she said, her voice ragged. "I'm pregnant."

He stuttered a breath, the wealth of emotions surging through him confusing and pleasurable.

A father. He would be a father. Never had he imagined himself in that role.

That meant Emma would be a mother—the mother of his child.

His gaze focused on Emma. She trembled so hard, that the purse dangling from her slender fingers quivered.

He strode toward her. His arm around her waist, he guided her to a chair. “Sit.”

“I have to go.” She shook her head.

“Not until we have a discussion,” he said firmly. “And we *are* going to talk.”

“No,” she said, a look in her eyes that made him pause.

“No?” he asked, bemused.

“I need time to think,” she said slowly. “And I need time to plan.”

“That’s why we’ll talk,” he said. “I’m this baby’s father. I’ll be involved with any plan concerning this child.” When she frowned at him, he said, “Did you think I wouldn’t be involved?”

Her eyes searched his before she stammered, “Yes.”

“This is my child—”

“And mine.” Lifting her chin, she looked at him, her dark eyes challenging.

His surprise turned to understanding. “This child is ours, so we’ll need to make some decisions. I’ll call my attorney.” He moved toward his desk.

“No,” she said with such fright, he turned to her.

“Emma, I want the best for this baby, as I’m sure you do.” He smiled, though her hesitancy strained his patience. He already had ideas that he would review with his attorney—where to raise the child, where to school the child. Once Emma knew his plan for raising the child, she’d agree—what he wanted was best for their son ... or daughter.

“Please, Carter.” Her eyes pleading, she crossed the room and stood in front of his desk. “I just found out I’m pregnant. There are so many things I need to think about.”

“As do I.”

“Yes, of course.” She blinked as if surprised. “But I’m carrying this child.”

That made him catch his breath. She was pregnant so of course, the baby would be with her. For nine months. Until the baby was born, how did Carter fit into this picture?

“You’ll return with me to New York.” He sat and reached for his desk phone.

Her hand covered his. “I’m staying at Falcon Lake.”

“Not during your pregnancy.” He frowned and shook his head. He tightened his jaw at the emotions rising in his chest. From her touch? *Ridiculous!*

“For the rest of my life.” Her eyes widened. “That was why I agreed to marry you. I needed the funds for the repairs so I could reopen the lodge.”

“I’m aware of that.” He stiffened. They had both wanted something—he, his inheritance, she, the lodge. The marriage in name only gave them each what they wanted.

It would’ve remained in name only if he hadn’t succumbed to the desire for this gentle woman that had been building inside him since the day he said, “I do.”

“I’ve spent my entire life at the lodge.” She took a breath. “It was a wonderful place to grow up. My baby—our baby—deserves that same opportunity.”

“I don’t doubt you had a wonderful childhood.” Looking into her eyes, he wondered at the intensity he saw there, then pushed it aside. He wouldn’t complicate this situation with feelings. “But as a Haines, this baby will be entitled to the best of everything.”

“And what is the best of everything?” Her voice trembled slightly, and she took a breath. “Things? Clothes? Boarding school? Exotic vacations? What about a mother’s love?”

“Is that what you think?” His jaw loosened. “That I wouldn’t let you be part of his life? Of course, you would be there for him ... or her.”

“At Falcon Lake,” she said softly, though he didn’t miss the dread in her eyes.

“No,” he said with a start. “In New York. This baby is a Haines. He’ll be raised at Haines Estate.”

“This baby is a Waite. She’ll be raised at Falcon Lake.”

“Fine.” He gave a dismissive wave. “We’ll hyphenate her name.”

“Right. A hyphenated name fixes everything.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I’m not saying that as a way to fix things, but I don’t want you to feel left out of his—her—life.” He watched her.

“And what about where she’ll live?” The look Emma gave him made his chest tighten.

“Would you please tell me why you’re being so stubborn about this?”

“I’m stubborn?” Her eyes widened. “This isn’t a piece of property or a contract we’re negotiating. This is a *baby*.”

“A baby that I’ve explained will be well cared for.”

“At Falcon Lake.”

“You can’t deprive me of my child.”

“But you’ll deprive me?”

Carter curbed his temper as he saw her stance was the same as his despite the different objectives. How could he deprive her of her baby when she carried the baby?

“Why are you rejecting what I can financially offer this baby?” He studied her. “You had no objection when the Haines fortune was the financial contribution you needed to repair and reopen the lodge.”

“You’re right.” She straightened. “That was a mistake. I’m sorry I took your money.”

“Be reasonable.” He blinked, then stood.

“I believe that’s advice you should heed as well.” She lifted her chin. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to return to the lodge.”

“No.” He rounded the desk. “We have some things to discuss—”

“Are you going to keep me trapped in this—” Her gaze swept his office. “—prison?”

“Prison?” He choked. He’d heard many names associated with his award-winning chalet. Prison hadn’t been one of them. He needed to calm down and discuss their baby’s future peacefully. “No, of course not.”

“Good.” She turned away.

“This isn’t finished.” His words made her hesitate.

“No.” Her shoulders bowed as if weighed down by the humiliation of her loss.

“This isn’t a battle. We both want to be involved in this baby’s life. There’s a simple solution.”

“What is it?” She looked over her shoulder at him.

“Let me talk to my lawyer—”

“If I have to hire a lawyer to negotiate with yours, it will deplete my funds.” She looked defeated.

“You don’t have to hire anyone,” he said. “Leave everything to me. My attorney will draft a shared custody agreement—”

“You can’t treat our baby this way.” Sorrow filled her eyes.

“Then do the right thing and come back to New York with me.” He took a step toward her. That was where he wanted her. That was where she belonged. She withdrew, and his mouth flattened. “You’ll have everything you need.”

“No, I won’t.” She looked horrified.

“You’d have access to the Haines fortune.” He shook his head, confused. “What else is there?”

Tears streamed down her face, and suddenly he felt as if he were missing something, but what? He’d yet to meet a woman who didn’t want even a small portion of the Haines’ wealth. Though at first Emma wasn’t comfortable at the parties and

social events they attended, she soon learned to mingle and make friends. Because she had to?

“If you don’t ...” Her voice quivered. “I’ll make sure you’re repaid everything you gave me, because I will never live in New York again, and neither will my baby.” Turning, she fled from the room.

“Mr. Haines.” Mrs. Dobers opened the door as a sobbing Emma reached for the handle. “I beg your pardon.” She nodded slightly.

Emma could only shake her head. She slipped out the door.

“Emma,” Carter called after her, but she didn’t stop.

“Is everything all right, sir?” Mrs. Dobers looked after Emma before turning back to him.

“No, Mrs. Dobers, it isn’t.” He walked back to his desk and sat down. “It appears I’m going to be a father.”

“Oh.” Mrs. Dobers smiled, then turned serious. “Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.” Carter turned on his computer monitor. “And with the young woman, formerly known as Mrs. Haines, who vacated the premises.”

Mrs. Dobers remained quiet as if waiting for instructions.

“The young woman who has rejected my generous offer to raise the child as a Haines,” Carter said in a strained voice.

“If there’s anything I can do, sir.”

“At the moment, no.” He typed something into his computer. “For now, I’ll leave the resolution with the attorneys. Did you want something?”

“I, or rather Mrs. Wolff, is asking if you would like to dine once your guests arrive this evening, or if you would prefer to wait.” Mrs. Dobers’ face was unreadable, though she had to wonder about this ... situation.

“Dine?” Carter snorted. He had invited guests to the house for the evening—friends he had planned to meet on the back bowl for a day of snowboarding.

They had to wonder why he never met them at the slope. They'd probably called and texted him several times today. If only he could cancel this evening's dinner, but what would he say?

By the way, I'm going to be a dad. Anyone have any ideas on how to convince the mother to let me raise my child?

He snorted softly. He'd have to work on that.

"Yes, I did invite some friends over this evening, didn't I." He moved to the glass wall. The sunset cast orange and purple across the mountains. "Tell Mrs. Wolff we'll play it by ear."

He hadn't seen these friends while he was married and had been looking forward to the dinner.

Not anymore.

"Very good, sir," Mrs. Dobers said.

"And, Mrs. Dobers, would you please tell security to open the entrance gate for Ms. Waite?"

"Certainly, sir."

Carter heard the door close behind him.

This wasn't good at all. His ex-wife was pregnant with his child, and she wanted to deprive him of any connection with the child.

A Haines could not be raised at a lodge. Why couldn't she understand that?

He should've made her see reason. He was a master negotiator, except when it came to Emma.

He needed another chance. If it weren't for this dinner party, he'd drive to the lodge now.

Maybe the dinner party was a blessing. It would give him time to think of how he should approach the situation. Emma was afraid he would remove the child from her life, but that would never be his intention. Once she understood that, she would agree to everything he wanted.

Why hadn't he realized how simple this resolution could be?

CHAPTER 14



Emma could barely see the driveway as she drove toward the mountain road. The gate was closed when she reached it.

Great! How was she going to get out of here? She'd have to go back and ask Mrs. Dobers to open it. That she couldn't do. She'd rather leave her truck here and climb over the fence.

She was ready to get out of her truck when the gate slowly opened. She released a sharp breath. Maybe Carter had told someone to open the gate. It didn't matter. She was free.

When she reached the main road, she called Gael.

"I was so worried about you," Gael said. In the background came voices, and Emma wondered if the work crew had arrived to make necessary repairs to the lodge.

"Everything's fine." She shook her head. Everything was not fine. Her life was a disaster. How could she bring a child into this mess? "I saw Carter, and we had a nice chat." Ha!

"Somehow you don't sound fine," Gael said slowly.

"I'm fine. Really. I'm stuck in tourist traffic, but I should be back at the lodge in an hour or two," she said. "Don't wait on dinner for me. I'll eat when I get home." She'd eat if her stomach could tolerate food. It rocked inside. Maybe she wouldn't eat.

"It's a good thing," Gael said. "I cooked for the work crew. They're leaving now."

“If you want to stay with your sister ...” Emma said. It would be nice to have time alone so she could think through this dilemma.

“No, I think I’ll stay here for a while.”

Emma tightened her jaw. When Gael saw her, she’d know nothing was fine. She’d have to tell Gael about the baby. She exhaled slowly. Maybe it would be better to tell someone about the terrible mess she was in. Tomorrow, she’d call Dr. Yang’s office and schedule an appointment. She needed to find out what to do now that she was pregnant.

When she walked out of the divorce court with the proceeds she’d needed to repair the lodge, life had seemed simple. She’d leave New York, a place where she’d never belonged, and return to Falcon Lake, the place that was truly home.

She’d walked out of the courtroom to a barrage of reporters shouting questions and flashing cameras. Her stomach turned remembering the fear she’d felt that day.

Carter was walking down the corridor with his attorneys, who answered reporters’ questions with a curt, “No comment.” They’d strode past Emma, who stood in an alcove with her attorney. Carter stared straight ahead, except when he passed Emma. He hesitated and looked right at her. When the crowd swarmed him, she couldn’t see him anymore. The last she saw of him was when her limo drove past him. She’d never forget the look in his eyes.

Her mouth went dry. Did he think as she did of their last night together? She could never reveal to anyone what they’d done, even though it would soon be obvious something happened.

Nor could she reveal how that night made her feel. Even now she couldn’t forget the way Carter loved her.

But she had to. She would have nothing to do with Carter Haines. She refused to be indebted to him in any way.

Now, she had to break the news to Gael.

“I’m not leaving you alone tonight.” Gael’s voice brought Emma back to the present.

“I’m fine. Really.” Emma sank her teeth into her lower lip.

“Then sound like it.” Gael took a breath. “I don’t know what’s going on, and you don’t have to tell me, but I’m worried about you, Emma. You haven’t been the same since you returned from New York.”

“It may take me a day or two to get back into the swing of things—”

“It’s been two months,” Gael said weakly.

Emma pressed her lips together. Why was Gael keeping track?

“Come on home,” Gael said. “I made your favorite macaroni and cheese.”

“I’m not really hungry.” Emma tightened her jaw against the lurch in her stomach.

“That’s the other thing.” Gael sounded concerned. “You have to eat.”

The traffic slowed. Emma tapped her brakes.

“Gael, I have to go,” Emma said. “The traffic is slowing, and there’s already one accident on the side of the road.”

“You be careful.” Concern filled Gael’s voice. “We’ll talk when you get here.” She said goodbye and hung up.

Emma should’ve felt relieved. Instead, her throat tightened. The baby wasn’t a secret. Carter knew, and he wasn’t happy. Now she had to tell Gael about the baby and explain to her what they had to do—pay back every cent Carter had given her. She wanted no attachment to Carter Haines, which was going to be hard because nothing could make them more attached to each other than this baby.

CHAPTER 15



Carter sat in his Aspen home office and fielded phone calls while reviewing the monthly financials. Haines Corporation had exceeded the investors' expectations, which was a surprise. He had been so distracted since he and Emma divorced that he had to force himself to focus on the company's negotiations. Apparently, Emma was better for business than he realized.

That should've pleased him. Instead, his mood darkened.

He hadn't talked to Emma in a week—not that he hadn't wanted to. He'd reached for the phone several times, only to withdraw his hand. He didn't just want *her* to calm down from their last conversation. He needed to cool off, too—and forget what it was like to be with Emma Waite.

His private line rang, and he glanced at the caller identification—his personal attorney. He frowned. Since his divorce from Emma, he had no impending matters to discuss. His heart kicked up a notch—that he knew of. He picked up the phone. He had yet to explain to his attorney the complication that had arisen.

“Hershel.” He forced a lightness into his tone. “This is a surprise.”

“Carter. I hope you're well.” Hershel spoke in his usual cool tone. “And I hope you're seated.”

“Why is that?” he asked slowly. A current ran over his nerve endings. This call had to do with Emma—and their baby. Were they all right? He wouldn't mention the baby to

Hershel. Though he trusted his attorney, personal information always had a way of leaking to the media. Carter would leak that information when he was ready.

“Because Bill Molson—”

“Emma’s attorney?”

“Yes.” He hesitated. “Bill has sent me an offer for your consideration to receive all monies paid to Emma when you and she divorced.”

“She can’t do that.” He was on his feet.

“I agree,” Hershel said, “but he claims that the marriage agreement wasn’t fulfilled as directed, which voids the contract. Because Emma said she gained these funds contrary to the agreement, she’s returning them.”

“Tell her she can’t.” Carter paced in front of the glass wall facing the ski slope.

“I tried to negotiate with Bill, but Emma isn’t open to any discussion,” he said. “In fact, she’s already talked to the local bank and is in the process of taking out a mortgage to repay the settlement.”

“Then she’s talking to *my* bank.” Carter stilled.

“Yes.” Hershel drew out the word.

“Tell the loan officer she doesn’t qualify.”

“Under what criteria?” Hershel asked slowly.

“Talk to the loan officer and find out what we can use,” Carter said. “Repaying the settlement is not an option.” He wouldn’t allow a child of his to grow up destitute.

“Very well.”

“Then please report to me all updates every hour,” Carter said.

“You’ll have them,” Hershel said.

Carter thanked him, then ended the call. He stared out the window at the ski slope. Most of the snow from the last snowstorm had melted. Now the mountains were turning green

with occasional patches of wildflowers. Hikers walked up and down the mountainside.

One thing Carter had learned about Emma during their marriage was that she was clever and resourceful, but she didn't have the means to combat him with what he wanted for his child, even with her attorney.

He wouldn't do anything yet. He'd wait, though he had no doubt a face-to-face meeting with Emma Waite couldn't be avoided.

Already his heart rose in his chest. A meeting with Emma was exactly what he wanted.

That gave him a jolt. Why was he thinking that? He wasn't in love with her. He liked her a lot.

The memory of their last night together filled his mind, and he returned to his desk. The sooner he got Emma out of his system, the better.

How was he going to do that when she was carrying his child?



EMMA CLUTCHED the phone in her hand and fought the tears that blurred her eyes. Why was she being so emotional? The bank had denied her loan, but she knew how to negotiate. Why would being pregnant make her feel differently?

“Are you sure the board won't reconsider the terms of this agreement?” she asked Tom Baker, the bank's loan officer.

“I've tried,” Tom said, and Emma believed him. If he closed the loan on the lodge, he'd earn a very nice commission. “Apparently, the terms of your divorce decree prohibit certain transactions, a mortgage on the lodge is one of those terms.”

“But the lodge belongs to me,” she said, shocked and sounding like it.

“I understand,” he said, “but encumbering it with a mortgage allows the board to request certain criteria. It would be better if you approached a different bank, or just forwent this tactic. We ran a report on your accounts. Because you’re flush with cash, and you’ve recently remodeled the lodge, the board would like more information regarding your need for the mortgage.”

“I ... I ... have plans I’d like to pursue.” She took a breath.

“I’ll need a little more information than that,” Tom said.

Of course, he would. What explanation should she give? The truth? That she wanted to return the divorce settlement to Carter?

When she confessed her pregnancy to Gael, she had thought her friend would think she was crazy, but the older woman supported her and would help make sure she had no involvement with Carter—if that was what she wanted.

Want had nothing to do with it. It was vital she and Carter had no ties whatsoever—a little difficult because she was pregnant with their child. Worse, if she couldn’t repay Carter, how would she break all connections with him?

“I guess I’ll have to think of something,” Emma said softly.

“I’m sorry, Emma.”

“That’s okay.” Emma sighed. “It isn’t your fault.”

She ended the call and leaned back in the desk chair. Was the entire town going to be involved in her pregnancy?

A notification on her phone indicated she’d received a message on her social media site. Clicking on her computer, she opened the notice and saw that some friends from high school were raising money for an elderly resident who needed her house painted. Emma clicked the donation button. She had plenty of money. She may as well put it to good use. She glanced at the total that had been raised so far. Her throat closed at the generosity that would help the woman live her last days in a freshly painted home.

She stilled. Could she ask for help to repay the settlement she'd received from Carter? Even if she didn't receive the entire amount, these donations would be a start. She would just need the money until the lodge turned a profit, then she'd repay everyone who donated.

All she had to do was try.

She opened an account on the crowdsourcing site and explained her need, but without involving her baby or Carter. She ended her request with a promise that all donations would be repaid. She included pictures of the lodge in the summer and the winter. Maybe a donor or two would like to visit the lodge. She drew in a breath, then posted the request. She was ready to log out when the counter showed someone had donated a dollar. Her heart warmed for this person who would be so generous. The counter turned again—two dollars, then ten, then fifty.

Emma dropped back in her chair as the donations streaming in registered three figures, then four, then five.

“Emma?” Gael's voice called from the great room.

“I'm in here,” Emma said, then winced when her voice cracked.

“What's going on?” Gael stepped into the office, a frown pressed between her brows. “Are you all right?”

Emma tried to talk, but emotion clogged her voice. She nodded to the monitor.

Gael read the description. Her mouth fell open. “You're crowdsourcing to repay the settlement Carter gave you?”

Emma nodded and smiled through her tears.

Gael read the amount. “You've received all that money already?”

Again, Emma nodded.

“Oh, honey, you're a genius.” Gael hugged her.

“Too bad I didn't know about this way to raise money before I married Carter, then I could've saved the lodge.”

“But then you wouldn’t have this little one.” Gael gave her a sympathetic look.

Emma rubbed a hand over her stomach. Despite the complications this pregnancy had caused, she couldn’t deny the joy she’d feel of holding her own baby, something she never thought she’d have.

“Look at those donations,” Gael said excitedly. “If this keeps up, you’ll have the amount you need in no time.” She grew serious. “What will you tell Carter?”

“What I would’ve told him if I had received the mortgage.” Emma pulled a tissue from the box on the desk and dabbed her eyes. “I don’t need his money, and he can’t tell me how to raise my child.”

“But this baby is his child, too.” Gael sat in a side chair. “It sounds like he wants to be involved.”

Emma looked at the older woman, her mood suddenly somber. “He’ll be involved. We’ll have to decide how, but I don’t want to feel indebted to Carter when we discuss custody arrangements.”

Gael glanced at the screen, her eyes widening. “I’d say you’ve definitely accomplished that.”

Emma’s gaze followed hers, her mouth spreading into a relieved smile. The amount flicked higher and higher. Now, she felt she could approach Carter with the leverage she needed to make sure her baby—their baby—was raised at Falcon Lake.

CHAPTER 16



Three days later, Carter stood in his New York office and stared at the check Hershel had just handed to him. Emma had repaid every cent she'd received from the divorce settlement.

"The bank was supposed to deny her the loan." Carter gestured that Hershel should sit in a guest chair.

"And they did." Hershel relaxed into the chair, though his keen eyes focused on Carter.

"Then how did she get so much money?" Carter dropped the check on his desk. He still stared at it.

"I had my staff research that. There are no secrets on the internet these days."

Carter hoped that wasn't true. He still had told no one Emma carried his child. He had to think she hadn't either. The media was always scrounging for information regarding his personal life. Even when he and Emma married, the media hadn't lost interest. After the divorce was final, their prying increased.

"It appears Emma set up a crowdsourcing account." Hershel watched him.

Carter blinked. "With that, she received enough to reimburse me for the entire settlement? This has to be the highest amount ever received."

"It did break a record," Hershel said. "Because she promised to repay the donations, apparently the donors

thought they had nothing to lose.”

Carter’s mouth tightened. Emma wanted to make sure *she* had nothing to lose, confirming once again, that she didn’t like to lose.

Neither did he. He handed the check back to Hershel, who frowned slightly. “I want you to put the check in escrow.”

“What do you want me to tell Emma?” Hershel took the check and slipped it into the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

“Tell her ...” Carter moved to the window. He turned to Hershel. “You don’t need to tell her anything.” When Hershel arched a brow, he said, “I think it’s time I paid Ms. Emma Waite a visit.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” Hershel’s gaze held warning.

That would be wise, but Carter still wasn’t ready to take his personal attorney into his confidence, especially since Carter had broken the terms of the contract. He’d like to work out the custody arrangements with Emma in a reasonable manner rather than involve his shark-toothed attorney. If Hershel got involved, Emma wouldn’t know what hit her and could be less likely to negotiate.

“The initial meeting should be between her and me.” Carter ignored Hershel’s doubtful gaze. “I believe I know Emma well enough to convince her of the best way to approach this settlement.”

“If you say so.” Hershel rose. “But if you need me, I’m always available.”

“I appreciate that.” Carter shook the attorney’s hand and walked him to the door.

Alone in his office, he turned to the windows. “Well, Miss Emma, it looks like we are about to have that meeting after all. It appears I can’t buy you, but then you can’t buy me. So where does that leave us?”

He paged his assistant and told her to notify him when his chauffeur had arrived and then contact the flight crew to

prepare for a trip to Aspen.

Where would this meeting between him and Emma leave them? He was about to find out.



EMMA STOOD on a ladder in the Molly Brown guest room and dabbed lavender paint on the flowers she'd stenciled on the wall when she heard the door open behind her. Gael came to the room a couple of times a day to see how she was doing. She had wanted to help, but Emma loved creating these designs and had told her she'd let her know if she needed anything. So far, she was doing fine. Gael loved seeing Emma's creations and encouraged her, even when Emma wasn't satisfied with the result.

"What do you think?" Emma leaned away from the wall and inspected the painting.

"Nice."

Her heart leaped at the deep timbre in Carter's voice. What was he doing here? Was he here because of the payment she'd sent to his attorney? She'd only just couriered it to Hershel. She expected his attorney to call her and ask her a dozen questions before presenting the check to Carter. And why hadn't Carter told her he was coming? Maybe he had. She hadn't listened to any of his phone messages or read his texts.

"I didn't expect you." Grabbing the ladder's top cap, she looked over her shoulder at him and swallowed.

"I know." His gaze flickered over her.

Her jaw tightened. Would he make some comment about her clothes? He never had when they were married, but then he had someone on his household staff who helped her dress for parties, functions and vacations. Thank goodness she was now free to dress herself.

He looked as if he'd just stepped out of a men's magazine. Here she was in her painting smock and ripped jeans. At least the smock covered her baby bump, though she wasn't sure

why she wanted to hide it from him. He knew she was pregnant.

“I suppose you’re here because Hershel gave you the check,” she said and saw a muscle work in his jaw.

“He tried to,” he said with a sigh. “That’s quite a large sum you collected.”

“You paid me well to be your wife for two years.” She climbed down from the ladder. It would be hard to have this conversation with Carter and try to paint.

“Money that you earned.” He gave her a direct look. “We both had a need at the time. The marriage was the best way to resolve our issues.”

Right. Issues. Without the marriage, she would have lost the family lodge, and he would have lost his inheritance. Now that she was pregnant, she had a different definition of issues. That topic would come up soon enough.

“And now the marriage is over, and you have your inheritance, so I’m wondering why you’re here.” She set a paint can on the table.

“Because the marriage isn’t over.” His mouth tipped wryly. “There’s a little matter of your being pregnant.”

“But that was never addressed in the contract.” Her eyes widened.

“Because this marriage was never supposed to be ...” He exhaled roughly. “Consummated.”

She flinched at the word. She hadn’t meant to feel anything toward Carter. That was the deal. They were supposed to endure for two years, then be off on their merry ways, but then that night before the divorce proceeding happened.

“Well, it was, and now I’m pregnant.”

“With my child.”

Her head came up, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

He cleared his throat. “Our child.”

“I want to raise ... our child here at Lake Falcon.” She lifted her chin.

“You’re not cutting me out of my child’s life,” he said, this time not looking apologetic about leaving her out of the role of bringing this child into the world.

“I wouldn’t,” she said quickly. “You’re free to visit her whenever you wish.”

“If you make this difficult, I’ll get my lawyers involved.” His face darkened.

“Don’t you see?” She gave him a pleading look. “I made this very simple so we wouldn’t have to involve the lawyers.” When he frowned, she said, “That’s why I did the crowdsourcing on the internet. That check I sent to Hershel repaid every cent you gave me.”

“I know,” he said, his voice flat. “Which is a lot of money. And how are you going to repay everyone who donated to your little venture?”

Her breath caught.

“Yes, I read all the details on the internet,” he said, his tone edged with impatience.

“That’s easy,” she said. She set her paintbrush on the tray. “Since we reopened the lodge, we’ve had more reservations than ever. Our waiting list extends into next year.”

He looked ready to say something. Was he surprised that this little lodge stuck in the mountains could actually be a financial success? He said nothing—just watched and waited.

“At this rate, I’ll have reimbursed all the donors by the middle of next year.” She couldn’t help but smile.

“I find that ... hard to believe,” he said slowly.

“I know.” She laughed softly. “I was surprised, too, but I have all the spreadsheets. I won’t owe anyone anything.” She looked at him. “And I won’t owe you anything either.”

“You can’t get rid of me that easily.” The edge in his tone made her blink.

“That was never my intent.” Her heart picked up speed. “I just don’t want to feel obligated to you.”

“What?” He looked at her as if she were crazy.

“The settlement you gave me. It makes me feel as if I owe you.”

“Why?” He shook his head as if still not understanding. “You paid your debt by being my wife for two years.”

“The connection is still there,” she said wishing he could understand. The money he gave her was Haines money. She wanted her own money. She wanted the lodge to feel like it truly belonged to her. The settlement made her feel as if she hadn’t turned the lodge around on her own. Carter would still be involved because of the baby, but at least by paying him back she felt free.

“As well as that other connection.” Carter looked as if he were working hard to control his temper.

“I know.” She dropped her gaze. The baby would be the connection they could never remove.

“So, what do we do about that?” he asked, again with that barely controlled tone.

“First, please accept the repayment of the settlement,” she said, hoping he’d see the logic in her plan.

“I won’t do it,” he said calmly though intensity glowed in his eyes. “What else?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, disappointed. “That was a big one and would make everything else about this situation easier to resolve.”

“Then how about you listen to my idea?” He gave her a direct look. “You return to New York with me.”

CHAPTER 17



Emma stared at Carter in disbelief. Did he really believe she'd walk away from her life at Falcon Lake because he wanted her to live in New York?

"That isn't possible," she said and stuttered a laugh only because she was afraid she'd burst into tears.

"Which is the response I expected, so I have an offer that should be more palatable," he said. "You live with me in Aspen."

"How is that more palatable?" She frowned.

"Because the Aspen chalet is a beautiful home that has been designed to meet your every need." He looked at her, confused.

"Maybe *your* every need, but not *mine*." She stared at him.

"This is getting us nowhere." Turning away, Carter exhaled roughly and dragged fingers through his hair. He faced her. "Let's talk about the most important aspect first—our baby."

That made Emma still. She felt a small leap inside her as if her baby were telling her she should listen to what Carter had to say. She was certain he'd say nothing she wanted to hear, but she'd listen.

His face relaxed as if relieved he had her attention.

"I believe the best place to raise our child is in New York," he said as if laying out a tactical plan, which he probably was. "You believe Falcon Lake is the best place for our child."

You've rejected New York and the next best place, which is Aspen."

"You've rejected Falcon Lake." Emma eyed him.

He owned property all over the world. He could continue to make suggestions as to the most exotic places to raise the child. She only had Falcon Lake.

"Not completely," he said.

She stared at him, not sure she'd heard him correctly. "You'd be willing to let me raise my—our baby here?"

"I'm willing to consider that possibility." He almost seemed amused at her surprise. "With certain conditions."

Her heart dropped. Naturally, there would be conditions. Carter was too much of a master negotiator to see *everything* her way—the right way.

"What would those be?" she asked bleakly.

"I will be involved in every aspect of this child's life—starting now."

"Of course, when she's eighteen, she may have an opinion on that." Emma lifted a brow.

"We'll cross the bridge when we come to it," he said. "Because my business takes me all over the world, I can't stay here full time."

"What do you mean by here?" She narrowed her eyes.

"I mean here." He opened his arms as if encompassing Falcon Lake. "At the lodge."

Carter here at Falcon Lake? She wouldn't mind. When they were married, they had fun together, but they'd also had a staff that catered to their every need. The guests who visited Falcon Lake came because they liked roughing it.

"I don't think that's a good idea." Emma shook her head.

"Then how else do I spend time with my child?" He gave her a challenging look.

“I don’t mean to deprive you of that.” Emma’s chest tightened. “You’re welcome to stay, but this place doesn’t have servants or chauffeurs or a landing pad for your helicopter. The only thing we can offer is guides for hunting trips or fishing trips or horseback riding. I mean, you’re welcome to bring your staff here, but there isn’t much for them to do since Gael and I take care of the cooking and cleaning. We’ve hired help for taking care of the animals and guides to take the guests to the hunting and fishing areas.”

With each word she spoke, he looked more confused. He really had no idea what life was like outside the walls of Haines Estate or the Aspen ski chalet.

“That’s fine,” he said firmly, though Emma still doubted he understood what life would be like without his staff. “I understand not everyone has personal staff.”

Emma refrained from rolling her eyes. She was certain he didn’t understand that at all.

“Then you’re welcome to stay here,” Emma said. He’d soon learn this lifestyle was not for him, something she’d make sure their baby never thought. “There’s a room upstairs that was once used by the cook until she retired. We’ve been using it as a storage room, but I’ll move everything out and make it very comfortable. We’ll set up a table for your computer, though it still won’t be anything like what you’re used to.”

“Oh, ye of little faith.” He looked at her, the light in his eyes making her heart lift. “I’m sure you’ll find I can be quite accommodating.”

“We’ll see.” She exhaled slowly. “Now about that check—”

“Let’s leave that for now,” he said. When she opened her mouth, he held up his hand. “I understand you want to feel independent from me, and I respect that, but with the baby on the way, this complicates things.”

“Boy, does it ever,” she muttered.

“But I do want you to have one of our family staff doctors care for you during your pregnancy and after the baby’s born,” he said.

“I have my own doctor,” she said defensively.

“Fine.” He lifted his hands as if to calm her. “But remember you’ve spent several weeks not feeling well.”

“That’s morning sickness.” She laughed, though there was nothing funny about morning sickness. “A lot of women get that, but it goes away.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “All right. We’ll monitor that, but if for any reason I believe your doctor isn’t providing adequate treatment—”

“He’s cared for every pregnant woman in the valley,” she said. “He knows what he’s doing.”

Carter looked doubtful but seemed willing to drop the matter for now.

“When can I move in?” Carter asked.

Emma’s pulse roared past her eardrums. That was the purpose of this conversation. “I think I can have your room ready by tomorrow.”

“That quickly?” He lifted a brow. “Then I’ll have everything shipped here tomorrow afternoon.”

“What do you mean by everything?” she asked slowly. “This room is very small. It’s nothing like your suites at the Haines mansion or at the ski chalet.” She’d never seen his room at the chalet, but she had an idea.

“I’ll bring the bare necessities,” he said simply.

She’d like to see what that was. She’d find out tomorrow, but she had a feeling her definition of bare necessities didn’t match his.

“Fine.” She moved toward the door and opened it. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Carter’s smile slight, he nodded and left the room.

Emma plopped into an armchair. Never had she expected this visit from Carter, but she had a feeling this wasn't part of his plan either.

One thing she knew for certain—he wouldn't last. Once he realized how much his lifestyle would change, he'd be on his private jet to New York.

“What happened?” Gael rushed into the room.

“Carter's moving in.” Emma felt the blood drain from her face.

“With you?” Gael sat in the chair across from her.

“No!” Emma went cold, then hot. “I told him I'd fix up the cook's old room for him. He wants to be more involved in the baby's life starting now.”

“That's good, isn't it?” Gael looked confused.

“I suppose.” Emma rose and stared out the window.

Carter was talking to one of the contractors. He said something that made them both laugh, then shook the man's hand and climbed into his SUV.

“Then why are you upset?” Gael stood next to her as they watched Carter drive away.

“I'm not,” Emma sighed and turned away from the window. “I'm glad, because I don't think he'll stay long. He's used to a much different lifestyle than we live here at the lodge. I'm sure he'll be on his way back to New York by the end of the week.”

Gael twisted the corner of her mouth and nodded.

“I'll get his room ready.” Emma stepped to the paint cans and covered them, then picked up the brushes.

“I'll help,” Gael said.

“You don't have to.” Emma tipped the corner of her mouth grateful to have a friend like Gael. “I know you have things to do before the guests arrive.”

“I’ve finished most everything.” Gael smiled. “I’ll help you clean the brushes, then we can get started on Carter’s room. I’ve been planning to clean out that room anyway.”

“Good,” Emma said. “Though I don’t think our idea of making the room presentable matches Carter’s, but we’ll see.”

CHAPTER 18



Carter spent most of the night fielding phone calls and reviewing documents. One thing he understood about moving to Falcon Lake—his life would be different.

After breakfast the following morning, he stowed a minimal amount of clothing and items he'd need for his makeshift office, then drove to the lodge.

Juno and Keesha were playing in front of the lodge when he drove up. When he climbed out of the SUV, they bounded toward him and sniffed frantically.

“Sorry, girls.” He scratched their heads. “No treats for you today, but I’ll see what I can manage during dinner.”

The dogs circled him as he carried his luggage and other items to the lodge.

Emma stepped to the front porch dressed in a pair of jeans and an oversized shirt that skimmed the life growing inside her. The glow in her eyes made his heart rise. He had always thought Emma attractive in a simple sort of way, but now she looked radiant. If she were still his wife, he'd be proud to show her off to the world.

He tamped down that thought. What he and Emma had was an arrangement that would be a continuation of their marriage. That made him cringe. Theirs had never been a marriage until the last night. Then it felt like a marriage. Then it was over.

“I see you’re at the mercy of the welcoming committee.” Emma’s laugh was musical, bringing back all those moments

they'd spent together attending parties and functions and anything else that would convince the world they were married.

When she looked at him, she turned serious and cleared her throat.

He tightened his jaw. He wanted her to relax. He wanted to hear her laugh.

“Makes a fellow feel right at home.” He tore his gaze from Emma and watched the dogs wrestle as they vied for a place close to him.

“Let me take something.” Emma reached for his luggage.

“I can manage,” he said. “I planned to travel light. If you'll tell me where to go.”

“It's this way.” Turning away, she walked through the foyer to the staircase that led to the gallery.

At the end of the hallway, she opened the door to a narrow staircase that rose to a hallway paneled with red oak. The dogs followed and sniffed everything.

Emma opened the door to a room that was larger than Carter expected despite the slanted roof. Tall windows overlooked the barn.

“What do you think?” Emma eyed him.

The dogs sat in the doorway, their gazes switching from Emma to Carter.

“It's nice.” Carter hoped his smile eased the tension he saw in her eyes.

The room was smaller than his dressing room at Haines Estate. Living here until the baby was born was going to be a challenge. He hoped he could convince Emma to return to New York with him before the baby was due.

“Great!” Emma seemed more relaxed. She scanned the room before looking back at him. “I'll let you get settled. The wireless connection in here is good, and the heating system

works well.” She worried her lower lip. “Are you sure you can tolerate living in this room for the next few months?”

“Sure,” he said with more enthusiasm than he felt. “The view’s nice. I’m sure the time will pass quickly.”

“I don’t know.” She rested a hand on the swell of her stomach. “Some days, time seems to stand still. If you need anything ...” She sighed.

“I’ll let you know.”

She nodded and turned away. “Oh.” She looked back at him. “A few guests have arrived already, so we’ll serve lunch at noon, but feel free to eat whenever you want. The kitchen is always open.”

“I believe you told me the lodge keeps strict meal hours.” He arched a brow.

“Well, we do, but since you’re a special case—”

That gave him a start. “I’ll eat when everyone else eats.”

“Okay, but that table can get pretty crowded.”

“Sounds like my kind of meal.”

“Then, I’ll see you at noon.”

He nodded and looked at her. The soft curve of her lips, the slight frown between her dark eyes. Her long hair clasped carelessly into a ponytail that cascaded down her back. Everything about Emma was perfect. His blood grew warm. That child she carried would be perfect, too.

Her gaze shifted, then she turned away and stepped into the hallway closing the door behind her. The dogs’ soft whines faded as if they followed Emma down the hallway.

Carter looked around the room that was simple but tidy. On the far side of the wall was a closet. Next to it was the bathroom that allowed for enough room to turn around if he stood between the sink and the shower.

Yes, he definitely needed to work on his plan to take Emma back to New York—or at least Aspen.

His phone rang, and he pulled it from his pocket. His father. He had told his father during their video chat last evening that he'd relocate to Falcon Lake for the next few months, though he didn't explain why. His father thought he was insane.

"I trust you're settled in," his father said.

"Yes, I plan to take care of a few things before lunch." Carter pressed the speakerphone button and set the phone on the dresser.

He moved to the window. Below, Emma stepped into the chicken yard and tossed feed to clucking chickens. Next to the kitchen was a tilled section with stakes in evenly spaced rows of corn, tomatoes, lettuce, carrots and vegetables he didn't recognize.

Carter dragged a hand over his face. Was he really going to live here for the next few months? He'd been determined to be with Emma until she gave birth. Clearly, he hadn't thought this through.

"Good. I have some documents for you to review," his father said. "I trust you have a printer."

"Yes." A portable one, but it would do. He'd packed a few reams of paper, because he didn't want to take any of Emma's supplies.

"Good. I'm sending them now. Once you've noted your comments, call me, and we'll discuss what steps we should take."

"I'll be in touch shortly," Carter said and hung up.

He looked around the room. There was one outlet near the bed, but a light was plugged into that. For now, he'd rely on his laptop's battery. After lunch, he'd talk to Emma about installing more outlets in the room.

An hour later, Carter was sitting on the edge of the bed and editing on his laptop when a gentle tap sounded on the door.

"Come in?" he said, though he didn't look up.

“If you’re hungry for lunch, we’re ready to sit down.” Emma leaned through the doorway. She scanned the room, and the smile on her face fell. “Oh.”

“Come in.” Carter set the laptop on the bed. Standing, he opened the door wider. He looked around. He had stacked some printouts on the bed and some on the dresser. This was hardly the neat office he maintained at Haines Corporation.

“Carter, I don’t think—”

“What?” He looked back at the room and realized the place was a disaster. “Everything’s fine.” He looked back at her. “How are you feeling?”

“Me?” Her eyes wide, she looked at him. “I’m fine. Do you want to eat now, or should I keep it warm for you?”

“Now’s fine.” He’d been concentrating so hard on a recent negotiation, he hadn’t even thought about lunch. “Let me send these last changes to corporate, and I’ll be right down.”

Emma nodded. Stepping into the hallway, she closed the door.

Carter looked back at the room. Now, where had he put the latest edits to the document he needed to send to his father?

A half-hour later, he’d managed to email the changes he wanted legal to make with the latest negotiation and straightened his room to some semblance of order. At home, he had a staff who did that. Finding the changes satisfactory, he rushed down the stairs.

Conversations floated from the dining room. When he turned the corner, he saw a large table with every seat occupied. Guests chatted and passed platters of sandwiches and sliced vegetables.

Emma walked around the table holding a tureen and ladling soup into guests’ bowls.

“There’s a chair for you here.” She nodded to an empty chair between a man with a beard and a woman wearing a kerchief.

The guests greeted him as he took his seat. Lunch was filled with talk of the latest fishing trip. Though Carter enjoyed the discussions, he didn't like that Emma was waiting on everyone. She was pregnant and with his child. She needed to take it easy.

When the last of the guests left the table, Emma wheeled a cart into the room and stacked the dishes on the shelves.

"You shouldn't be doing that." Carter rose and stacked dishes. He hadn't finished eating, but he wasn't going to sit while she worked.

"Why not?" Her lips parted, making his eyes widen. Never more than now did she look like she needed to be kissed.

"Because." He turned away and dragged fingers through his hair. "You're pregnant." He lowered his voice.

She burst into laughter. When he turned to her, she touched fingers to her lips. How could she be so cavalier about her situation?

"I'm sorry, Carter." She pressed her lips together. "I'm not that far along, but even so, I can still work. Pregnant women have been working for generations. I run a lodge. I can't just sit around while everyone else works."

"Not my ..." He let out a slow breath. "Did you talk to the doctor about this?"

"Not exactly, but he didn't tell me not to work." She turned back to the table. "Grandma said she worked through her pregnancies, and so did my mother." Something flickered in her eyes. She rarely talked about her parents whom she'd lost when she was young.

He started to say she wasn't her grandmother. Instead, he clenched his jaw.

"What about *your* mother?" She lifted her chin in challenge. "She's worked at the corporation since she married your father. I'm assuming she still worked when she was pregnant with you and your sisters."

“Working in an office is not the same as working at this lodge.” He kept his voice low. “You’re feeding chickens and slopping hogs and cooking and cleaning.”

“It’s still work.” Emma lifted a shoulder, then cleared the rest of the table.

Carter helped, though he wasn’t sure how she managed to fit twelve place settings on that tiny cart. The table was cleared except for Carter’s half-eaten lunch.

“Did you want to finish that?” Emma nodded toward his sandwich.

He looked, too. “No,” he said finally. He’d lost his appetite. He set his plate on the cart. “What else do you need to do?”

“Carter, you are not going to monitor me.” She scowled at him.

Two guests walked through the great room. Carter and Emma greeted them, then remained quiet until they left.

“Of course, not,” he said defensively, even though he realized that was what he wanted to do. Actually, he needed to. She carried *his* baby ... and hers.

“You know what?” Her mouth tipped into a smile that stirred emotions he hadn’t felt until their last night together. “I think it would be a good idea for you to know a little more about the lodge. Let me clean the kitchen—”

“I’ll help.” What was he saying? He’d never cleaned a kitchen in his life!

“Okay,” she said slowly, “and then we can tour the lodge and the barn and anything else you want to know more about.” She frowned. “Unless you need to discuss some business matter with your father.”

“No,” he said, though that wasn’t true. He had several matters to discuss with his father, but they’d have to wait. Hopefully, his father understood.

“Good.” She pushed the cart toward the kitchen. “Because I’m going to give you the deluxe tour.” She looked over her

shoulder at him and grinned.

Something warm rose in his throat. What he was feeling toward Emma right now, he should never feel at all. How was he going to fight this feeling for the next few months?

CHAPTER 19



The air was brisk and fresh when Emma and Carter followed the path from the back door to the barn. It smelled warm and clean inside. In the stalls, the workers raked hay for the horses the guides used when they took hunters to the flat tops.

“You have quite a crew here.” Carter lifted a brow at Emma.

“I feel very fortunate to have found people who want to work hard,” she said with a laugh. “They love the animals and working with them is always rewarding.”

“Some of these workers look like they should be in school.” He nodded to the teens who greeted them as they carried fresh straw to the stalls.

“Most of the kids in the area are homeschooled,” she said. “They’ve had lessons since they were three and their reading levels exceed that of the kids in the public schools. It’s very impressive. When my baby ... our baby is old enough, I’ll homeschool her.”

“I attended Middleton Prep.” Carter gave her a sharp look. “It’s an excellent school.”

“But it’s a boarding school,” she said trying to still the horror she felt of sending her child across the country. When his eyes narrowed, she said, “We have time to decide.” And time to convince him her way was best for their child.

As they walked through the barn, Emma pointed out the tack room and the mares’ birthing stall. She felt guilty not

helping the workers but knew they had everything under control. She and Carter walked out the rear end of the barn.

“To the south is the acreage where the cattle roam.” She indicated rolling hills dotted with aspen groves. “Last spring, we had a population explosion with many of the cows calving so this year we’ll have a good herd to send to market.”

“When do you open up the lake?” He looked past her to the pier.

“Probably in a few weeks. We’ll need a couple of warm days for the rest of the ice to melt. Of course, we have some diehards who can’t wait and ice fish in the winter. And we try and clear an area for skating.” She looked at him. “We’ve planned a hayride for the guests tonight if you’d like to join us.”

“A hayride sounds fun.” Carter’s surprise turned into a grin.

“Good.” She looked at him. “If you need warm clothes, I’m sure I can find something of my grandfather’s for you to wear.”

“I brought warm clothes,” he said. “Though I haven’t spent too many summers here, I do remember that the evenings are cool.” He released a deep laugh that flooded her body with warm tingling. How she missed those moments when they were together. Her breath caught. Thinking of those moments had to end.

“I need to get back to the house and start dinner.” She looked into blue eyes that had grown serious.

“I don’t want you to overdo it,” he said, concern in his tone.

“The doctor said I could do almost everything I did before I was pregnant.” She wanted to ease his concern. “I’m careful, and cooking isn’t hard work.”

“If that were all you were doing, but you’re doing other things.”

“Trust me. I won’t do anything that isn’t good for me or the baby.” She smiled at him. “I want a healthy baby, too. Now I have to get back.”

His mouth tightened but he still didn’t seem convinced. Walking side-by-side, they moved up the path to the house.

In the kitchen, Carter said he had some work to do before he joined a teleconference and left Emma in the kitchen to help Gael. When he left, Gael arched her brows at Emma.

“Nothing’s going on.” Emma rolled her eyes and grabbed an apron from the pantry.

She was touched that Gael held out hope the marriage could be salvaged, but it was over because it had never existed, though this baby entwined Carter and Emma more than any marriage.

“You were walking awfully close together.” Gael lifted her chin.

“I didn’t realize you were watching us.” Emma’s mouth fell open.

Gael flushed as she rolled dough, then tore off small pieces to shape into dinner rolls. “I just happened to look out the window.”

“I don’t know why you’re making a big deal about walking together.” Emma snorted. “It’s obvious we did more than that a few months ago.”

Gael’s face reddened, her eyes wide with confusion. “I’m sorry, Emma. I didn’t mean—”

Emma waved away her apology. “It doesn’t matter. I’m expecting a baby, but you want to know something?” She looked at Gael and wished she could stop the tears filling her eyes. “I’m not sorry.”

“Nor should you be,” Gael said, shocked.

“I’m not sorry, because never had I expected to be married let alone raise a child. Carter has given me something that has made me very happy. Sometimes I have to pinch myself

because I can't believe I'm pregnant, though morning sickness took the joy out of that rather quickly."

"You make it sound like you'll raise this child on your own." Gael's eyes narrowed slightly. "I'm assuming that isn't Carter's plan."

"Maybe not now, but he'll come around." Emma tried to ignore the wave of panic washing over her. "Right now, Falcon Lake is the best place for me to be."

"I'm surprised Carter agrees with that." Gael arranged the rolls on a tray then covered them with a damp dish towel and placed them in the oven.

"He does." She wouldn't explain that he agreed with great reluctance, but he knew pressuring her to return to New York would drive a wedge between them. It was worth preserving their friendship rather than using this baby in a tug-of-war. "Now tell me what you want me to get ready for dinner."

The sooner they dropped the topic concerning Carter, the better. Emma didn't want to have any doubts that Carter would let her raise this baby as she saw fit.

CHAPTER 20



Carter was analyzing data when Emma knocked on his door to let him know dinner was ready. When he opened the door, the numbers he'd been studying vanished from his mind. His heart rose at the sight of his ex-wife—wisps of hair curling around creamy cheeks. The oversized work shirt she wore was open at the collar and revealed the graceful curve of her neck.

Juno and Keesha started to dart into Carter's room, but Emma commanded them to sit. They obeyed but showed their disappointment.

Carter closed his computer and was grateful it was dinnertime. He'd missed Emma all afternoon and didn't want to be away from her any longer.

When they arrived at the dining room, the other guests were seated. Carter took the same chair he'd used for lunch and accepted the platter of barbequed beef from the woman sitting next to him. He was disappointed that Emma didn't join him. Instead, she slipped into the kitchen. Emma and Gael wouldn't sit at the table because they were the hired help.

Never had he considered Emma hired help. Even when she was his fake wife, he treated her as if she really were his wife—in more ways than one.

If Emma were the hired help, then he would help, too. He wasn't a paying guest. He had to do something for his room and board.

After dinner, the guests went to their rooms to change for the hayride. Carter helped Emma stack dishes onto the cart, even though she told him not to, then followed her into the kitchen. Gael flitted from the stove to the cupboards with the dogs on her heels.

“Because I’m not a paying guest, I should help, too,” Carter told Emma.

Gael stopped stirring the cocoa and stared at him. Even the dogs stilled.

“It isn’t necessary.” Emma looked at him, surprised. “Besides, there isn’t much room in here for another person.” She gestured toward the crowded kitchen.

“I don’t like it that you and Gael aren’t at the table sharing the meal with the rest of us,” he said. “Instead, you’re waiting on everyone.”

“That’s what our guests pay for.” Her eyes widened. “This is their vacation. Some of them save all year just to spend a week at the lodge. We have to make it worthwhile. This is what my family has always done.”

That surprised him. He never thought of someone scraping together enough money to spend a week at a mountain lodge. He flew all over the world at a moment’s notice.

“I believe I’m part of this family.” He tipped his head.

“I’d say so,” Gael piped up. When she caught Emma’s glance, she turned away.

Carter saw in Emma’s eyes that she couldn’t argue with what he’d said.

“We have to get ready for tonight.” Emma flushed and looked around at the dishes that needed to be loaded into the dishwasher.

“Fine, we’ll discuss this later.” His gaze followed hers. “Tell me what to do. I’ll help you get ready.”

“You have a job.” Emma gave him a hard look. “You brought your laptop and everything else so you could work for your company in your room.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t help here.” He wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Though Carter had never worked in a kitchen before, except in college when the microwave became his best friend, he soon learned how to efficiently load a dishwasher. Gael showed him how to stir cocoa while she heated the cider. After filling the thermoses, he, Emma and Gael carted them along with homemade cookies to the wagon for the hayride.

Emma had planned to drive the wagon, which alarmed Carter, so he artfully talked her into letting him take over the reins. It wasn’t as difficult as he’d thought it would be. During the ride, Emma played the guitar and led the singalong that others joined—including Carter. When they reached the other side of the lake, everyone piled out. Carter helped the others build a bonfire where the guests roasted marshmallows, then he stood with Emma and Gael as they manned the refreshment table.

Everyone enjoyed the quiet evening in the cool air, but a couple of hours later, they were ready to return to the lodge. After settling the horses in the barn and cleaning the kitchen, Gael wished Carter and Emma a good night.

“Thanks for all your help today.” Emma told Carter when they were alone. She looked at him, sincerity in her eyes.

“I’m glad I could.” Carter raised his gaze to the ceiling. “It’s quiet.” Since moving into the lodge, he hadn’t noticed it ever being quiet.

Emma burst into laughter. “Welcome to Falcon Lake.”

“Why is it called Falcon Lake?” he asked. “I haven’t seen any falcons.”

“And you won’t,” she said with a sigh. “When the French trappers came here, they didn’t understand the Indian name of the lake, but it sounded like the French word for falcon so that’s what they called it. Sadly, the Indigenous name is lost, and who knows what French word the trappers used for the name. Falcon was a name everyone understood, so that’s the name we use today.”

“I see.” He took her hand. “Since we have a few quiet moments, how about we spend it in front of the fire?”

Emma looked ready to argue. When she let Carter take her hand and lead her to the great room, he was relieved. They sat on the leather sofa in front of the fireplace.

He sat in the corner. Emma moved to the other end, but Carter caught her hand. “We were married for two years.” He looked into her dark eyes. “I think we can sit closer together for one night.” When he saw her doubtful look, he said meaningfully, “Nothing will happen. I promise.”

He felt empty inside. He wanted something to happen. It was hard to be this close to Emma and not long to hold her close, taste her lips, inhale the subtle fragrance of her skin, but he wouldn’t betray Emma’s trust. He needed that so they could reasonably discuss their arrangement after the baby was born.

As much as he liked Falcon Lake, a Haines couldn’t be raised here. Eventually, he’d convince Emma he was right.

Leaning toward his ex-wife, he wrapped his arm around her waist. She gave a soft yelp when he drew her to him. Her eyes wide, she stared at him.

“Everything’s fine,” he murmured.

Of course, he’d said the same thing the night before their divorce. In his mind, everything had been fine. As the night went on, it became even better. He’d let the passion sweep him away and believed Emma felt the same way.

When he woke in the morning, he was disappointed to find his bed empty. Emma wasn’t at breakfast, either. The staff informed him her attorneys had picked her up hours ago. He didn’t see her again until she stepped into the courtroom. If he’d known she were pregnant, he would’ve stopped the divorce—even if it cost him his inheritance.

Now they sat on a sofa before the fire and listened to the wood crackle and pop. His arm around Emma, Carter basked in her warmth and softness. His hand on her waist, he felt the swell of life she carried. An emotion he couldn’t fathom filled

his throat. Never had he thought he'd be a father, and never had he realized that was what he wanted to be.

Emma's head grew heavy against his shoulder. He looked down at her face, pale with sleep, her dark lashes resting against her cheeks.

Gently, he rose and scooped her in his arms. That she didn't wake was evidence of how tired she was. He had to talk to her in the morning. She was overdoing her work here. Never mind what Gael could endure. The woman was hardly young, and she wasn't Emma. He wanted Emma to take care. This was her first pregnancy.

In the dim light of the dying embers from the fireplace, Carter carried Emma up the stairs and down the hallway to the wing where she and Gael had their rooms. Emma had mentioned her room was at the end of the hallway and overlooked the lake.

He turned the doorknob. Stepping inside, he turned on the light and was relieved to see her coat hanging over the back of a chair. When he laid her on her bed, he glanced at the picture on the nightstand—his and Emma's wedding picture. That gave him a jolt. He hadn't realized she had that picture.

The wedding planner had insisted they hire a photographer, and he and Emma agreed. They needed this wedding to appear convincing.

The wedding photo album was somewhere in Haines Estate, but he never looked at it. Thinking of the time he'd spent with Emma made him feel empty. He didn't need any more reminders that their marriage was over.

Looking back at her, he watched her sleep. Compassion filled his throat. He fought against the desire to hold and protect her—a feeling he felt helpless to stop.

Glancing around the room, he looked past the archway to a sitting room that was furnished with a bassinet and changing table. A brightly painted dresser stood next to a crib.

She was furnishing the nursery! Though not everything looked new, it was evident that the furniture had been lovingly

restored.

Turning to her, he removed her shoes and set them in the closet. Taking the afghan from the end of the bed, he draped it over her. Soft light filtered through the window and fell over her face, peaceful with sleep. Her full lips parted. He wanted to kiss her. Instead, he stepped back. She needed her sleep. He'd kissed her before. He'd have to be satisfied with that.

Releasing a slow breath, he stepped from her room, then quietly went to his own.

CHAPTER 21



Emma awoke with a start and was surprised to find herself in her room. Heat flooded her face. Carter had to have carried her up the stairs—she, a pregnant woman. Though she hadn't gained a lot of weight, she weighed more than when they were married.

Looking around the room, she realized what he saw—their wedding picture on her nightstand. More concerning were the furnishings for the nursery. Would this spark another discussion about where their child would be raised? She hoped he understood the best place for this baby was Falcon Lake.

She glanced at the clock and realized Gael would be downstairs cooking breakfast. She had to help. This morning, she'd skip the shower and hope she'd have time for that later. She had an appointment at the clinic, so she needed to plan her day around that.

In the closet, she shoved her feet into shoes, then rushed to the kitchen. Gael greeted her as she whipped eggs into a froth. A pitcher of freshly squeezed orange juice sat on the counter.

Through the bay window, Emma could see the workers feeding the livestock.

She jerked her head to the griddle—to Carter flipping simmering pancakes.

“What are you doing in here?” Her mouth fell open.

“Good morning to you, too.” He lifted one brow.

“Good morning.” She gave him a slight smile. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude, but I didn’t expect to see you here and working in the kitchen.

“He wanted to help,” Gael said. “He was in here when I got up this morning.”

“Is that true?” She still couldn’t believe that he was cooking in the kitchen. During their marriage, he never cooked. He never cleaned up afterward, but he’d helped her and Gael clean the kitchen last night—another first, she was certain. At Haines Estate, she and Carter occasionally dined with his family but usually took their meals in his private dining room where the staff served them, then cleared away the dishes.

“Every word.” The corner of his mouth tipped.

“But how did you know—”

He tipped his head toward Gael.

“I told him the recipe and where to find the ingredients,” Gael spoke quickly. A flush filled her face. “Though he did find the mixer a challenge.” When Emma looked around, Gael added, “But we cleaned it up.”

“I wish I’d seen that.” Emma laughed, then pressed fingers to her lips.

“Hey.” Carter scowled at her, and she noticed a smudge of flour above his brow, making her wonder about that battle with the mixer. “These pancakes are going to be the best you’ve ever tasted.”

“That I don’t doubt.” She picked up a dishcloth and wiped his brow. “Now, I believe everything’s been cleaned up.”

“Thanks.” He flashed her a crooked grin.

Her stomach quivered. Because of his grin? No, that had to be the baby. Turning away, she took a quick breath.

“What can I do to help?” She looked at Gael. She didn’t dare look at Carter. He would sense something about her had changed, if he hadn’t already

“Just put the food on the table.” Gael scraped hash browns into a serving bowl. She looked toward the kitchen door. “And just in time. It sounds like the guests are coming into the dining room.”

Emma placed a platter of sliced honeydew and cantaloupe on the cart. Carter set another platter of pancakes and bacon next to it. Gael set the pitchers of orange juice and coffee urns next to the serving dishes. With everything set, Carter wheeled the cart into the dining room, then he, Emma and Gael served the guests.

Once the guests left, they cleared the table, then returned to the kitchen. When the breakfast dishes had been loaded into the dishwasher, Gael left to finish sewing the curtains.

By then, Emma was starving. She was about to snatch a pancake when Carter moved next to her.

“Sit down.” Carter nodded toward the breakfast nook. “You didn’t eat.”

She looked at him, eyes wide. “Are you keeping track?”

“No, but you’ve been working since you came into the kitchen, so I know you haven’t had time,” he said.

“I’ll just grab something before I head to my appointment.”

“With Dr. Yang?” He frowned.

“Yes, but I also have an appointment at the clinic for a sonogram.” When he looked at her, her smile faded. “I should’ve told you.” For weeks, she’d felt a fluttering in her stomach. She couldn’t wait to see the ultrasound of her baby.

“I’m glad you’re telling me now.” Something flickered in his eyes that made her throat tighten. She couldn’t exclude him anymore. “What time is the appointment?”

“At eleven.”

“Then you have time to eat before we leave.” He pulled out a chair and gestured for her to sit.

“Carter, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“It’s all right.” His smile was tender. “I know this is new for you. It is for me, too. We’ll work something out.”

A bubble of panic rose in her throat. “What—”

“I’m not going to take this baby from you, Emma, but he’s my child, too.” His voice was low. “I don’t know how we’ll work this out. I’ll have to talk to my attorneys.”

“Attorneys?” Emma asked weakly.

“It’s the best way,” he said, though she didn’t miss the hesitancy in his eyes. “We’ll tell them what we want. We’ll both have to give a little.”

“But she’s just a baby.” In desperation, she took a step toward him. How did she make him understand?

He took her hands and gave a little tug. Without meaning to, she stepped closer to him, felt his warmth, and inhaled his subtle, masculine scent. If she wasn’t careful, she would let Carter weave his way into her life again, the way he had their last night together. That moment of weakness created this baby. Another moment of weakness could take this baby away from her.

“Please, Emma, we’re not there yet.” Slowly, gently, he folded her into his arms.

She wanted to feel this reassuring hug but feared what it would mean—feared what it could lead to if she weren’t careful. She pulled away from him and wiped at her tears. They hadn’t made a decision yet, but they had to.

“Don’t be afraid of me.” Carter took her hand. “I want what’s best for all of us.”

The sincerity in his eyes made her nod. She would believe that until he gave her a reason not to.

“Now about that appointment.” He pulled out a chair for her at the breakfast table. “Eat your breakfast. I have some calls to make.” When her head came up, he said, “And no, it’s not to my attorney. This is business. How long does it take to drive to the clinic?”

“Half an hour.” She sniffed back a tear.

“Then I’ll be ready to leave at ten-thirty,” he said. “And, Emma, please don’t worry.”

Easier said than done. She couldn’t explain this fear that she’d lose her baby, but Carter was a powerful man from a powerful family. What he wanted, he’d get. She had to make sure that she was involved in every decision concerning her baby.

CHAPTER 22



Carter felt nervous when they stepped into the clinic and the receptionist checked them in. Never had he thought he'd be a father. He hadn't thought he'd be a husband either, but his grandmother's will changed that.

Now he was with the woman who carried his child. Raising this child would have rough patches as they worked through the details of dual households, but he had faith his attorneys would work through those.

The clinic was small but filled with several patients—several pregnant women. Funny, he'd never noticed pregnant women before. Now they were everywhere.

He looked at Emma, who spoke to the receptionist and showed her identification and medical cards. When the woman asked for payment, Carter pulled out his wallet.

"I can pay for this," Emma said quietly, though her eyes held his.

He smiled at her while handing the receptionist his credit card. This was his baby, too. He'd be involved in every way he could.

The receptionist told them to take a seat and that the technician would be with them shortly. Emma headed toward the windows, but before they sat, an assistant called Emma's name and asked her to follow her to the back of the clinic.

"He'd like to come, too." Emma gestured toward Carter, who didn't miss that he didn't have a title. He wasn't her husband, and he wasn't her boyfriend.

“That’s fine.” The assistant smiled. “We have plenty of room.”

She led them to a small room. She told Carter he could sit by the door and told Emma to lay on the table. The technician lifted Emma’s shirt.

Carter’s eyes went wide. Except for their last night together, he’d never really seen her. Sure, she’d hung out at the family pool in her bikini, and he couldn’t ignore her soft curves and her lightly tanned skin. This was different. Now, her slightly rounded stomach swelled with life.

He hadn’t touched her since he learned she was pregnant, but now the urge to smooth his hands over the belly that carried his child overwhelmed him. He shifted in his chair.

The technician squeezed a clear jelly onto Emma’s stomach, then touched a sensor to her skin. “You can see your baby here.” The technician nodded to a monitor.

Emma tilted her head, then frowned. “Is that my baby?”

“Yes.” The technician moved the sensor. “Here’s his head, and here’s his leg. Oh, he’s an active one.”

Emma’s eyes filled as she watched the monitor.

Carter rose and stood next to her. Watching the baby move around the screen made his throat close. Never had he thought of a baby being alive. As he watched this tiny person stretch an arm and then a leg, he felt breathless. He could hardly wait to hold this child.

“Do you want to know the baby’s gender?” The technician looked from Emma to Carter.

He had no idea.

“You can tell now?” Carter stared at her.

“Yes, I can, but I won’t say a word unless you want me to.” That gave him a jolt. The baby couldn’t weigh more than a few pounds, but already he could be identified as a boy or a girl.

“I want to wait,” Emma said, then shifted her gaze to Carter. There was so much hope in her eyes.

They’d never discussed knowing the baby’s gender before he was born. Little wonder. They hadn’t decided anything concerning the baby. She was decorating the nursery without any input from him.

“So can I,” he said. His chest relaxed slightly when he saw the tension drain from Emma’s face.

“All right.” The technician pressed a button on the side of the sonogram. A ticker of paper slid from the printer cover. She tore it off and handed it to Emma. “There’s your baby.”

Emma stuttered a breath, then tears filled her eyes. “Thank you,” she murmured.

Never had Carter felt so emotional. Without thinking, he wrapped his hand around Emma’s.

Her eyes wide, she looked at him. Slowly, a smile slid across her sweet face. This loving woman was going to have a baby. He felt proud to know they’d have this baby together.



“Do you want to stop somewhere for lunch?” Carter asked after they spoke with Dr. Yang, then left the clinic. She had to be hungry. She’d eaten little for breakfast. He remembered that when his sisters were pregnant, they’d said they were hungry all the time.

Emma shook her head and smiled. “We should get back. I don’t want Gael to have to make dinner by herself.”

Carter hid his disappointment. There was much they needed to discuss. Instead, he agreed, though they had to make time soon to discuss the arrangements they’d make for their baby.

During the drive back, Carter and Emma said little to each other. He assumed she was lost in her thoughts. He didn’t miss

the way she lovingly stared at the sonogram as they drove back to the lodge.

Gael was in the kitchen when Carter and Emma walked through the back door. She gave them an expectant look. She knew something was up.

Emma smiled tearfully and held out the sonogram.

“Oh, honey, he’s beautiful.” Gael pulled her into a hug, then withdrew slightly.

Carter still wasn’t sure how they could tell the image was a baby, but he’d take their word for it.

“Do you know the gender?” Gael asked.

Emma shook her head. “We decided to wait.”

Carter didn’t miss that Emma had said, “we.” From the look in Gael’s eyes, she didn’t either.

“I’ll go upstairs to change, then help you finish cooking this yummy dinner you’ve got going.” Emma stepped to the kitchen door.

“Unfortunately, I have some calls to make,” Carter said. “But as soon as I’m finished, I’ll be down to help, too.”

Gael waved away his offer. “You don’t have to.”

“I’ll help, just the same,” he said and followed Emma out of the kitchen.

“I suppose you’re going to call your attorney.” Emma gave him a tentative look as they crossed the great room to the stairs.

“No,” he said. He saw the surprise in her eyes. “Eventually, we’ll have to discuss what we’ll do, but right now I have other business to take care of.” When they reached the top of the stairs, he said, “Emma, I’m not your enemy.”

“I know,” she said, and he was relieved to see trust in her eyes.

He’d make sure he didn’t break that trust. They’d both made mistakes, the biggest one being the one that created this

baby. Funny, he didn't consider that a mistake. His life was about to change, and he looked forward to it.

She turned toward the hallway leading to her room. She still held the sonogram in her hand.

“Oh.” The concern in her eyes made his chest tighten. “I should've asked for two printouts.” She held out the sonogram to him.

“Keep it,” he said, touched that she would give him something so precious to her. “If I need to look at it, I know where to find you.”

She burst into that musical laugh that made his heart lift. It was moments like this, he wanted to cup her face and kiss her. With a jolt, he realized that feeling was happening more frequently.

He waited until she stepped into her room, then climbed the back stairs to his room in the garret. Two hours later, he rushed to the kitchen in time to help serve dinner to the guests. After the kitchen was cleaned, Gael wished them good night, then climbed the stairs to her room. She'd return later to attend to any of the guests' needs.

Some guests sat in the great room before the fireplace. Emma carried a coffeepot into the room in case anyone wanted that extra cup before retiring. Carter stoked the fire.

“Can you make some time to talk tonight?” he asked when they'd returned to the kitchen.

She let her air out slowly. She'd been avoiding the inevitable. Though the baby wasn't due for a few months, they had to be ready for him ... or her.

“Yes, we can talk now,” she said. “Let's go to my room.”

Tension drained from his shoulders. Now they were getting somewhere.

He followed her up the stairs and into her room.

“We can talk in here.” She gestured toward the sitting room. Though filled with baby furniture, two armchairs sat in one corner, an accent table between them. “I suppose you saw

the furniture when you brought me to bed last night. Thank you for that, by the way. I can't believe I was so tired, I didn't even realize you carried me."

"I was glad to, and yes, I saw the furniture and the picture on your nightstand." He watched her face. She showed no surprise. She must have realized what he saw when she woke up this morning.

"It was a wonderful day with a lot of special memories, even if it was a fake marriage," she said and sat in one of the armchairs.

"I thought it was special, too," he said, but didn't miss the troubled look in her eyes. He sat in the other chair.

"Everyone thought the marriage was real." She looked at him, her mood serious.

"It seemed that way with the two thousand guests, the ten groomsmen and bridesmaids. Then there was the reception." He rested his elbows on his knees and looked at her. "There were a couple of reporters who had their doubts. I guess your pregnancy proves them wrong, which brings us back to the issue at hand."

"Meaning the baby." She pressed her lips together, then rested a hand on the swell of her stomach.

"The baby."

Silence fell between them.

"I'd like to name—" They spoke at the same time, then stopped and stared at each other.

"Go ahead." He gestured for her to continue.

She cleared her throat. "I'd like to name her after my grandmother."

"What was her name?"

"Tara. It means leader."

"Tara Haines." He tested the name, then smiled at her. He liked that they were meeting on common ground. "I like it, and what if the baby's a boy?"

She gave him a knowing smile. “I think the baby’s a girl.”

“Just in case, let’s pick a boy’s name.” He wanted to maintain that common ground.

“All right.” She sighed. “Who would you like to name the baby after?”

“My grandfather. His name was Axel.” He lifted a brow.

“Axel Waite Haines,” she repeated. “We could work on that.”

“What’s wrong with it?” He frowned.

“I don’t know that I could stand at the back door and call out ‘Axel, it’s time to come home,’ but I guess your great-grandmother didn’t have a problem doing that.” She seemed concerned.

He wouldn’t tell her that his great-grandmother didn’t stand at any backdoor and call her children to come inside. A servant would’ve done that, though he had heard wonderful stories about his great-grandmother and how much she loved her children.

“Maybe I could call him when it’s time for him to come inside.” He smiled at her.

“You’ll be on the other side of the country.” She laughed, then grew serious. “But I guess he or she will visit you once in a while.”

He took a breath. They were straying from that common ground. His son would visit him more than once in a while. Carter would be busy running his branch of the company, but he’d always make time for his son.

“Besides, I’m sure I’ll have a girl,” Emma said.

“Then that’s what we’ll plan for.” Boy or girl, he’d love that child no matter what. “We should make time to discuss—”

She stood. “I’m so sorry to do this, but I’m rather tired. Today was a busy day.”

He stood, too, though he understood what she was doing—avoiding the subject in hopes it would go away.

“All right. We won’t discuss custody now, but we’ll have to soon,” he said.

She pressed her lips together, then nodded.

“Emma, I promise to be fair in every way.” He didn’t want her to doubt him.

“I believe you. It’s just hard to think about custody when she hasn’t been born yet.”

“I feel the same way, but we need to have something in place before he ... the baby arrives.”

“I suppose so,” she said, then gasped. Her eyes widened.

“What is it?” He stared at her in alarm. He wrapped his hand around her arm.

“The baby.” She lifted her gaze to his. A love he’d never seen before shone in her dark eyes. “She moved.” Another gasp. “She moved again.” Placing her hand on the chair’s arm, she sat down.

So did he. “Is that normal?” Carter, who had everything under control, felt out of his element.

“I think so.” She giggled. “The doctor said to expect it, and my friends said all their babies were very active. They said their babies were most active at night probably because the mother is still. They usually keep up that schedule after their born—quiet during the day. Active at night.” Her eyes filled, and she lifted her gaze to Carter. “She’s never seemed more real to me than she is now.”

An emotion he couldn’t control filled his throat. “Nor to me,” he rasped.

“Do you want to feel her?” Her lips trembled unleashing that unreasonable desire in Carter to kiss her.

“I’d like that very much.” His voice was low.

“I’ll lie on the bed,” she said. She rose and crossed into the bedroom. Laying on top of the duvet, she lifted her shirt to reveal the smooth stomach, the creamy skin, which made him

catch his breath again. Something pointed stuck out at her waist, then disappeared.

His mouth fell open. Never had life seemed more precious than watching this little person tumble around in the belly of his ex-wife.

Ex-wife. That word dragged air from his lungs. In the two years he'd spent with Emma, he'd never thought of her as his wife. She was his partner in a contract. They played the roles of husband and wife well, showing up at parties, hosting functions, and discretely sharing two-bedroom suites while vacationing. To the world, they were married.

To Carter and Emma, they were fulfilling needs—he to receive his inheritance, she to save the lodge from foreclosure.

A knob on the other side of her stomach appeared, then quickly vanished.

Emma laughed that musical sound that stirred in him a sensation he wanted to surrender to. How he needed to be close to her, to hold her.

He curled his hands into fists. He wouldn't do anything to ruin this moment.

The baby stirred for a few more minutes, then quieted.

Emma looked up at him with an innocence that made him feel emotions he couldn't identify. "I think she's asleep." She pulled her shirt over her stomach. "But I'm sure she'll wake soon and let me know she's in there."

"Yes," was all he could say.

When Emma struggled to her elbows, he took her hand and helped her to a sitting position. Releasing her hand and the tenderness he felt there, he stepped away.

"I'll let you rest," he said, his voice rough.

Her smile slight, she nodded. Her eyes were large as she looked straight at him. A swallow slid down her throat.

Leaving her wasn't what he wanted at all, but what he wanted, to hold her close, to feel her against him, could ruin

this rocky progression they were making toward a compromise.

It took every ounce of strength in his body to turn away from Emma and walk out the door.

CHAPTER 23



Emma should've fallen asleep immediately after Carter left. Instead, she was wide awake.

What had passed between them? Something confusing, and something she wasn't even sure was real. She needed to keep her emotions in check and not read something into her and Carter's relationship. They didn't *have* a relationship. They were divorced—divorced and expecting a baby.

Maybe they had a relationship, though she wasn't sure what to call it.

As far as Carter was concerned, that relationship was called custody. She pressed her hands to her racing heart. Knowing she'd bring new life into the world should've been a moment of pure joy. Instead, it carried *that* distasteful moniker.

It would be simpler if the baby were just hers, but that wasn't their situation. Carter wanted to be involved. For their baby's sake, she was glad.

Though Emma wasn't poor, thanks to Carter, the life her ex-husband could give their child would be irreplaceable. Her heart broke remembering that many of her friends struggled as single moms. Emma's fear was that Carter would cut her out of their baby's life.

Funny. That she would cut him out of their baby's life was his fear, too.

Emma wasn't sure how she fell asleep, but was relieved she did, though she woke several times during the night to the

baby rolling from one side of her belly to the other.

“What are you doing in there?” she murmured sleepily and ran a hand over her stomach. She was glad her baby was enjoying herself.

When morning arrived, she wanted to stay in bed for another hour. Instead, she threw back the covers and crossed to the bathroom. Removing her nightgown, she stared at her rounded stomach. She snorted.

Carter hadn't shown any shock or disdain for her expanding waistline. He was more interested in the baby. Though she shouldn't care what Carter thought of her appearance, she did. If he had found her unappealing, she wasn't sure how she'd have handled that and hoped her raging emotions wouldn't allow her to burst into tears. Sometimes, she felt like crying for no reason at all. And sometimes, like when the baby moved, she wanted to laugh. She loved knowing her baby was having a good time.

Had her other friends felt that way when they were pregnant? Emma couldn't remember them behaving differently during their pregnancies.

Emma stepped into the shower. Her hair still damp, she shrugged into jeans and a work shirt, then rushed down the stairs where Carter had taken the same position as the day before at the griddle. He smiled when she stepped into the room. His smile was so warm and tender, that she struggled to hide the joy she felt.

“What should I do?” She dragged her gaze to Gael, who grated hash browns.

“You can juice those oranges.” Gael grated feverishly. “Yesterday, we almost ran out of juice, so I ordered extra oranges to make sure we had plenty.”

With breakfast prepped, they wheeled the meal into the dining room to serve the guests. Afterward, they cleared away the dishes and cleaned the kitchen.

“I need to talk to you.” Carter followed Emma out of the kitchen. Taking her hand, he led her into a room off the foyer

that was still called the phone room, though the phone had long since been removed.

When he released her hand, she tried to ignore the shift in her stomach. Talk had to mean they'd discuss custody. Why did having a baby have to be so complicated?

She remained quiet and waited until he closed the door.

"I have to return to New York." He turned to her. "I want you to come with me."

"I can't do that." She took a step back. "I can't leave Gael to work the lodge alone."

"She worked the lodge alone the two years you spent in New York." He frowned. "And you've hired help."

"That was different," she said, though she doubted Carter would agree. "We didn't have guests. Now we're at capacity, and the help is part-time."

"I don't want to be away from you." His declaration made her gasp.

He couldn't mean her. He had to mean the baby.

"Carter," she said gently. "Everything will be fine. My doctor's here."

"I can get you the best medical care."

"Dr. Yang is a very good doctor," she said firmly. Without meaning to, she took his hand. The strength she found there made her struggle to breathe, but she didn't release him. "Please don't worry. I'm feeling great."

"Maybe when you're farther along, your being alone won't be concerning." His hand firmed around hers. "But at this early stage, I don't want to take that risk. I should be nearby in case something happens."

"Gael is here." She laughed softly. "She's a midwife. She's delivered half the babies in the county. She knows what to do."

He watched her a moment. "Against my better judgment, I'll agree to your staying behind, but if anything changes—"

“I’ll notify you immediately.” She hoped the straight look she gave him reassured him.

“All right.” He straightened. His hand fell away from hers.

She tightened her jaw against the coolness that swept away his warmth. She refused to get used to being this close to Carter Haines.

“You can stay this time,” he said.

“This time?” She lifted her brows.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “This is our baby. Because of my work, I can’t always be here. We’re going to have to compromise. You need to meet me halfway, Emma.”

“As long as halfway doesn’t mean you always get your way.” When he arched a brow, she said, “Thank you for agreeing that I can stay. I’m grateful. I really am.”

Why had she ever agreed to the fake marriage with Carter? But if she hadn’t, she wouldn’t have this amazing gift growing inside her. She wouldn’t trade that for anything. Her friends had told her they loved being pregnant. Emma had thought that strange. Now, she understood.

She was dealing with Carter Haines, a master negotiator. She had to be aware of every agreement they made. She didn’t want to find herself cut out of her baby’s life. And what happened if Carter remarried? Her stomach clenched. No one but she would raise her baby.

“I’ll get my things.” Carter walked out of the room.

Emma watched him leave and wondered at this emptiness she felt realizing they wouldn’t be together, but they hadn’t been together for a few months. Life without Carter was something she needed to accept, but life without her baby? She’d never accept that.



CARTER STARED out the window of the private jet and watched Aspen disappear beneath a blanket of clouds. He leaned back

into his seat. Why couldn't he get Emma out of his mind? She'd reassured him everything would be fine. He was certain she was right. Still, he couldn't ignore that troubling doubt that dragged his thoughts back to her.

He wanted to talk to someone about his concern, but whom? No one knew she was pregnant. It seemed safer to keep the pregnancy a secret. The media had a field day when he and Emma divorced broadcasting Emma sightings at nightclubs for several days. Thankfully, the public tired of news regarding New York's latest It Girl, and the paparazzi had moved on to other trivial items.

Emma loathed the intrusion from the media. He did, too, but had learned to live with it. He wouldn't subject her to that invasion again.

When he landed in New York, his chauffeur drove him to his office where a team of tech wizards pitched him their latest creation for funding. Their invention was about to take the tech industry by storm, and that interested him. Otherwise, he never would've left Falcon Lake and Emma.

After the meeting, he met with his father. He was still catching up on work at dinnertime but skipped that meal. He'd eat when he returned to his suites at Haines Estate. It was nearly ten o'clock when he walked into his apartment filled with silence and void of Emma's laughter.

How he missed her.

His jaw tight, he crossed the great room. He wouldn't think about Emma. He'd return to Falcon Lake in a few days.

He removed his suit jacket and draped it over the sofa, then loosened his tie. Stepping to the bar, he pulled a bottle of water from the under-counter refrigerator. He knew he should eat. His personal chef would have prepared a meal that he had only to place in the microwave, but he wasn't hungry. Maybe he'd eat later, but he doubted it.

Standing in front of the glass wall that overlooked Central Park, he sipped from his water bottle. In the glass reflection,

he saw the image of a man who looked tired and strained. *He* looked tired and strained.

Because of a moment of weakness, his life had changed forever. After the divorce, he'd convinced himself he could easily walk away from Emma. He knew better, otherwise, he wouldn't have driven to Falcon Lake during that snowstorm. Now, he knew she was pregnant. He'd never abandon Emma or his child.

He turned away from the wall. He couldn't look at himself after the way he'd treated Emma. He'd made love to her and felt that love with every fiber of his being.

He stuttered a laugh. Was he glad she was pregnant? The baby would keep her in his life at least until the child turned eighteen.

Yes, he was glad.

How did she feel? Not the same, but he had no intention of stepping out of her life again. Because of the baby, he was there to stay.

Moving to his suit jacket, he pulled his phone from the front pocket and stared at the screen. No calls from Emma.

How many times had he wanted to call her today? He longed to hear her voice and know how she was feeling. Fine, no doubt. She'd spent her entire life working hard. The pregnancy wouldn't interfere with her running the lodge. Still, he felt concern for her and their baby.

They still had to determine the baby's custody. Despite Emma's reluctance, he'd find a way to settle the matter that was agreeable to both of them. Even then, it wouldn't be finalized. They'd always have to make adjustments during this child's life.

Dear God, how he wanted to talk to Emma.

His phone rang.

He glanced at the screen. Gael's cell phone number flashed.

His throat dried. Why was she calling? He pressed the speakerphone. “Gael?”

“Hello, Carter?” Gael’s voice made him close his eyes. Had he taken too much for granted?

“How’s Emma?” He winced that he bypassed a greeting, but Gael calling him forewarned of the answer he didn’t want to hear.

“The doctor says she’s fine,” Gael said gently. What was she preparing him for?

“Is she in the hospital?” He was on his way up the stairs to change and grab his packed suitcase.

“Yes, the one in Aspen. She was just admitted. She’s sleeping now,” Gael said. “I’m standing in the hallway outside her room.”

“I’ll call our family doctor and have him call the attending physician.” Carter scrolled through his phone for his doctor’s number. “I’ll have her flown here when she’s released.”

“What?” Gael’s voice rose. “Don’t do that. The doctor said everything’s fine. She’ll probably be released tomorrow.”

“Let me talk to the doctor,” he demanded. He slipped out of his suit and dragged on a pair of jeans.

“He isn’t here, but I have his number. I’ll text it to you.”

“Thank you.” He took a breath to calm himself. “Now tell me what happened.”

“I’ll tell you, but please don’t get excited,” Gael spoke cautiously. “She had some cramping. The doctor said it’s perfectly normal, but she may have been overdoing things.”

“Then she should be here.” Carter struggled to keep his voice level.

“She should be where she’s most comfortable,” Gael said calmly.

“If my child is at risk—”

“Your and Emma’s child,” Gael said quickly.

“Yes, of course.” A muscle worked in Carter’s jaw. “I’m flying out there.”

Gael was quiet, and Carter thought the call had dropped.

“I’ll let her know as soon as she wakes up.” There was no disapproval in Gael’s voice and there shouldn’t have been. Carter had just as much say in the child’s care as Emma.

“Thank you.” He felt slightly relaxed. “When I have an idea of my arrival time, I’ll text you. And Gael?”

“Yes?”

“I promise that any decision concerning this baby will be a mutual decision.”

“I know,” she said. “I know you care about this baby. The circumstances are slightly different. They certainly aren’t what Emma expected.”

“What do you mean?”

“She thought she’d be married when she started her family.” Gael’s laugh held more relief than humor.

“I had thought the same thing,” he said.

Did he? He had never planned to marry. He loved running the family corporation, traveling around the world, and entertaining friends and colleagues in exotic locales. The thought of raising a child had never entered his mind.

This baby was front and center in his life now.

And he was glad.

He told Gael she should go home, but she made it clear she wouldn’t leave Emma’s side. She had hired part-time help to take care of the guests until she returned.

Carter felt slightly relieved and slightly guilty. Gael wasn’t young, though she had the vim and vigor of someone half her age.

After Carter texted his pilot to prep the private jet for a trip back to Aspen, he notified his chauffeur to drive him to the airport.

The storm clouds hovering over Aspen made it nearly impossible to land, which made Carter's stomach tighten. He didn't want to land anywhere else. He needed to be with Emma. When the pilot guided the jet safely into the airport, Carter heaved a sigh of relief. A driver took him to the Haines hangar where he had left his SUV.

A half hour later, Carter entered the hospital, where the front desk clerk gave him directions to the maternity ward. Gael stood in the hallway outside a closed door.

"Hi." Carter smiled at her. Seeing how relaxed she was helped him to relax, though he knew she had to be exhausted. "Is this her room?"

"Yes, she's been quiet so far."

"Why don't you go home?" Carter said. "I'll stay with her."

"She's been asleep the entire time, so she didn't know you were coming." Gael lifted a brow.

"I promise, I won't say or do anything that will upset her." His heart pounded wildly. Emma belonged with him in New York, but he'd broach that conversation with her later.

"All right." Gael slipped on her coat. "But if you need me to come back, just call."

"Thanks," he said, his voice ragged.

He wanted to tell her everything would be fine, but when Emma saw him, that may not be the case. She hadn't expected to see him for several days.

Gael cast another wary look at the closed door to Emma's room. Her look tentative, she offered him a slight smile, then strode down the hall.

Carter watched her leave. Turning to Emma's room, he drew a breath and stepped inside.

CHAPTER 24



The pounding in Emma's head was a dull ache that brought her out of a deep sleep. A light drifted over her face, and she squeezed her eyes tight. Slowly, she opened them.

To Carter.

"What ...?" She frowned. Why was Carter in her room?

"There you are." He moved next to her bed. A warm smile spread over his chiseled jaw, shadowed by a day's growth. How long had he been here? "How're you feeling?"

"Fine." She looked past him to a white counter where a vase of red roses sat. A television hung on the wall above.

"Why—" Her breath caught. Why was she in a hospital room?

"You don't remember?" He spoke gently, though concern filled his eyes.

She frowned trying to remember, then it came back. The cramping, the nausea, and Gael driving her to the hospital in her truck while Emma lay on the backseat.

Panic gripped her, and she touched her stomach. The baby. She still had her baby.

"I remember." She lifted her gaze to Carter. "Did Gael call you?"

"Yes," he said simply, his smile patient. "I'm glad she did."

“Did you talk to the doctor?”

“Yes,” he said on an exhaled breath. “He said everything’s fine, but because this pregnancy could be considered high risk, you’ll need to make some changes.”

“What sort of changes?” Her heart beat dully.

“Like working at the lodge,” he said. “We can discuss that later. For now, let’s focus on your health and the baby’s health.”

“The roses. They’re beautiful. I suppose I have you to thank for them.” She lifted her gaze to his.

Carter may be tough, but he was compassionate.

“It was the least I could do to dress up the place.” He looked at her, the tenderness in his eyes making her heart melt.

She swallowed hard. She needed to rein in any feelings she had toward Carter.

The door opened, and the doctor stepped into the room. Carter greeted him and stepped to the windows. The doctor asked Emma a few questions, then made some suggestions regarding her work and diet. Before he left, he said Emma would be released later that day. Carter was relieved to feel the tension drain from his body.

“I should call Gael.” Emma tried to sit up.

“Let’s talk about this first,” Carter said firmly and stepped to her bed.

“Talk about what?” She eyed him suspiciously.

“Where you’ll stay, and what activities you can tolerate.”

“I have a place to stay.” She continued to watch him. “And as long as I’m careful, my pregnancy will be normal.”

“New York would be a better place for you.” Carter’s voice was low. “You’ll have access to immediate medical care. This baby deserves the best, and I can provide that.”

“*I* can provide that,” she said in challenge. “Have you forgotten? Because of our marriage, I’m able to care for this

baby.”

“I haven’t forgotten, but the lodge is an hour away from the hospital.”

“I hadn’t planned to deliver the baby at the hospital.”

He froze and just stared at her. “Where were you planning to have the baby?”

“At the lodge. Gael is a midwife.”

“So you told me.” He dragged a hand over the back of his neck.

“We have everything we need at the lodge.”

“I’d say your circumstances have changed.” His voice was low. “Your pregnancy is now considered high risk.”

She stilled. The cramping would’ve changed things, but by how much? She’d been studying Gael’s books about at-home births. The lodge was the perfect place. Most of her friends had bounced back after their deliveries. Emma knew she’d do the same.

“I’ll talk to Dr. Yang,” she said.

“*We’ll* talk to Dr. Yang.” He gave her a direct look.

“We’ll talk to him.” She sighed. Carter was the father of her baby. As with everything else, he’d want some say in that decision. “I’ll agree to have the baby at the hospital, but the Aspen hospital has a birthing center, so I won’t need to go to New York.”

He frowned. “Is the center equipped to deal with a high-risk pregnancy?”

“I’m not sure.” She dropped her gaze. The Aspen hospital catered to the wealthy. It would have state-of-the-art equipment, but the wealthy wouldn’t have their babies at a local hospital. Most would be like Carter and his family and have medical personnel on their staff. They’d want someone who could monitor their pregnancy and meet their needs at a moment’s notice.

“Then that’s something we’ll discuss with Dr. Yang also,” he said. “Though returning to New York would make things simpler.”

“For whom?” Her face came up. “For you?”

“For *you*.” He looked surprised.

“Not for me.” She shook her head.

He stared at her, his eyes dark with confusion. Sitting in the chair next to the bed, he rested his elbows on his knees. “Why don’t you want to return to New York?”

She gave a dry laugh. “I don’t belong there. At least, not at Haines Estate.”

“You don’t like it?” he asked, perplexed.

“It’s nice. It’s *beautiful*. What’s not to like about a five thousand square foot apartment in a thirty-five thousand square foot mansion, and servants to cater to your every need?” An aching sadness filled her. “But I don’t belong there.”

Carter’s mouth tightened. He dropped his gaze before looking at her again. “You belong here.”

“And so does my baby.” Hope welled inside her.

“I can’t stay here all the time,” he said slowly.

“That’s fine,” she said feeling he understood her need to keep the baby at Falcon Lake. “You know the door is always open.”

“*My* door is always open for *you*,” he said. “And because your pregnancy is high risk, I want to be near you and the baby, so I know what’s going on. I’ll come to Falcon Lake when I can, but we know that won’t be often. I won’t go through this again. I won’t be halfway across the country and receive another call from Gael telling me you’ve had another complication.”

“I won’t have anymore,” she said with sincerity. “I didn’t know there would be a risk, but now I understand there is one. I understand what to do to prevent this from happening again.”

“There has to be some give and take on both sides, Emma.” He looked at her. “I’m willing to let you spend time at Falcon Lake. I’ll spend time here when I can. I believe it’s a reasonable request for you to come to New York when my work takes me there.”

She pressed her lips together. Why did he have to make so much sense?

“But what about travel?” she asked. “That could cause a complication.”

“Then we’ll discuss the situation with Dr. Yang. Agreed?” He leaned back in his chair but never stopped watching her.

“Yes,” she said softly.

Carter pulled out his phone and called Dr. Yang’s office. The receptionist told him the doctor was still on his rounds but would see them before he returned to his office.

An hour later, Dr. Yang came to the room and listened to Carter’s explanation of having Emma travel to New York.

“I don’t advise it,” Dr. Yang said.

Carter looked shocked. Rarely did anyone tell Carter no. He was Carter Haines.

Emma felt relief though she struggled to remain unaffected.

“Then what do you suggest?” Carter asked calmly.

“That Emma remain here. If you can move your business here until the baby’s born, that might solve the distance problem, which is probably not the answer you wanted to hear,” Dr. Yang smiled sympathetically.

“No, it isn’t, but I appreciate your time.”

“You have my number,” Dr. Yang said. “If you have any more questions, please call.”

“I’ll do that,” Carter said. When Dr. Yang left, he expelled a sharp breath.

“I’m sorry,” Emma said and meaning it. She wanted to stay at Falcon Lake but wished the differences between her and Carter didn’t mean they’d maintain different homes thousands of miles apart. That Carter wanted to be involved in this baby’s life was a blessing and a complication, especially after the baby arrived.

“At first, I was, too.” His mouth tipped. “But now I’m not so sure. You’ve given me a room at Falcon Lake.”

“Not a very nice one,” she said. He was used to mansions, not garrets.

“If it was good enough for the cook, it’s good enough for me. When we return to Falcon Lake, I’ll talk to one of the contractors about wiring it so I have a dedicated line for my computer and can get better cell phone service.”

“You’re going to stay?” she asked, her eyes huge. She had missed him when he’d returned to New York, but she knew that was their future. He’d live in New York, she at Falcon Lake.

“I believe I was invited.” He looked slightly amused.

“Yes, of course.” She felt the color rise in her cheeks. “How long will you stay?”

“At least until the baby arrives. By then, our attorneys will have worked out the custody agreement, and visitation arrangements will be based on that.”

Visitation arrangements? That sounded like jail.

A tap sounded on the door. Emma looked up to see the floor nurse enter the room.

“Sorry to interrupt.” She smiled and moved to the bed. “But Dr. Yang has signed your discharge order, so I wanted to review recommended procedures with you before you left.”

Emma sat up in bed. She was ready to get out of the hospital. That her baby was all right was a big relief. That Carter was planning to stay at Falcon Lake gave her pause.

The day she walked out of divorce court, she knew she’d never see him again.

Then she learned she was pregnant.

Then *he* found out. Now they were together at least until the child could travel on her own. In other words, a long, long time.

And what happened when Carter married again? He may be married to his work, but he was handsome and kind. Whenever she and Carter went someplace together, she knew other women wanted to be with him, and that they envied Emma. She wanted to laugh. Who would've guessed the girl from Falcon Lake would be envied by New York socialites?

After the divorce, Emma returned to Falcon Lake and tried to put Carter out of her mind. Like she could do that after their last night together.

Once she'd returned to the lodge, she didn't check the internet sites for news about Carter. It would hurt too much seeing him with other women and reading about his latest love, fiancée or *wife*!

If Carter was seeing someone, he hadn't mentioned her.

Emma hadn't found anyone, not that she was looking. With a baby on the way, she was off the market. She felt relieved. She had her baby. That was all she really wanted.

When they returned to the lodge, Gael was in the kitchen making lunch for the guests.

"I can set the table and make a salad." Emma offered.

"No!" Gael and Carter said at the same time, making Emma jump.

"You need to follow the doctor's orders." Carter gave her a direct look.

"Gael can't do this all by herself." Emma was full of guilt.

"I've talked to Orna from church," Gael said. "She's been looking for a part-time job since she retired, and she wants to help during lunchtime."

"Every day?" Emma asked. Orna wasn't young.

“Just during the week,” Gael said. “We don’t have as many guests on the weekend. I can take care of those meals.”

“But what about breakfast and dinner?” Emma hated the thought of Gael spending all day in the kitchen. She still helped her sister care for *her* grandchildren and chauffeur them to music lessons and soccer practice.

“We have the funds to hire help,” Gael said. “I’m working with an agency that recruits workers for guest ranches. They’ll review the resumes. Once we select the candidates, the service arranges times for phone interviews. If those go well, we’ll have face-to-face interviews.”

“It sounds like you have everything worked out,” Emma said. Maybe Gael could manage the lodge without her—at least until Emma had her baby.

“Honey, don’t worry.” Gael took her hand. “You won’t be pregnant forever. Once the baby arrives, you can ease back into things.”

“Providing it doesn’t interfere with our baby’s well-being,” Carter said.

“Exactly.” Gael’s eyes widened. “The baby always comes first.”

“My baby will always come first,” Emma said.

“Now, go upstairs and rest.” Gael swept her fingers at her. “I’ll bring up a tray later.”

“I can do that,” Carter said. “I’ll be back down to help after I get Emma situated.”

Emma was exhausted when she lay on the bed. She couldn’t remember anything after her head touched the pillow, though she sensed Carter was nearby and found his closeness comforting.

That comfort would disappear once they discussed custody arrangements. Carter wanted their baby to be with him in New York. Emma couldn’t imagine letting that happen. Already she felt empty knowing she wouldn’t be near her child. How were she and Carter ever going to work through this problem?

And then she understood the real problem. She was trying to solve this situation on her own which resulted in no resolution at all.

Quietly, she prayed. *Please tell me what to do, Lord.*

CHAPTER 25



Charter sat at the table in the room that adjoined Emma's bedroom and scanned the emails that had accumulated since he'd left New York the night before. Even though he focused on his work, he was aware of every breath Emma took. When her breathing changed, he knew she was awake and glanced into the bedroom. She rolled to her back and looked at the ceiling.

He rose and moved to her bed. "Hello, sleepyhead."

She lifted her gaze to his, her full lips spreading into a smile that stirred feelings in him he didn't know he had. "I guess I am sleepy, though I'm not sure why. I haven't done anything."

"Maybe being pregnant is tiring." He loved watching her face—so full of expression.

"It must be." She rose to her elbows. When her face whitened, he pressed a hand to her shoulder.

"Take it easy," he said firmly and was relieved when she rested her head against the pillow. "I'll go downstairs and see what Gael set aside for you for lunch."

"I hate that all I can do is lay here." Her mouth tipped with disappointment.

"It's the best thing," he said.

"I know, but I keep thinking of all the things I should be doing."

"Instead, think of how resting benefits our baby."

Her face came up. Even his referring to their child as “our baby” caught him by surprise and made him smile. He liked thinking of the baby as theirs.

“I’ll be right back,” he said and was out the door before she could comment.

In the kitchen, he found the sandwich, sliced peppers and cookies Gael had set in the refrigerator for Emma. Placing everything on a tray, he carried it to her room. When she sat up, he arranged the bed pillows to support her back, then set the tray over her lap.

“Thank you,” she murmured, then raised her face to his. “I wish you didn’t have to do this.”

“Why?” He frowned at the regret in her eyes.

“Because I know you have other things to do.” She sighed.

“Trust me. I’ll do them. I’m glad I’m here to help you. Now eat,” he said, before she could give her argument and returned to the table to review his documents.

While she ate, he worked on his computer. A half-hour later, she set the tray aside. He moved to the bed and studied the half-eaten sandwich and barely touched vegetables and cookies.

“You didn’t eat much.” He picked up the tray.

“I’ll try to eat more at dinner tonight.” She smiled weakly.

“I’m holding you to that.” He arched a brow at her.

Her exhaustion and lack of appetite bothered him, not just for the baby’s sake but for hers. If her lack of appetite persisted, he’d call Dr. Yang.

Giving her what he hoped was an encouraging look, he took the tray to the kitchen. When he returned, she begged him to let her sit in the adjoining room. He hated seeing her confined to a bed. She was too energetic and vivacious to stay in one place, but they had to think of the baby.

Finally, he conceded but told her she couldn’t go anywhere else without his knowledge. She wouldn’t go downstairs. The

guests would be there. Though she loved mingling with the guests, for this pregnancy, she would isolate herself.

A tap sounded on the door.

“Come in,” Carter called out.

Gael poked her head through the doorway. “How’s our girl?”

“Fine.” Emma beckoned her to come in. She looked relieved to have a visitor.

“I brought you something.” Gael placed a tote bag in Emma’s lap.

When Emma peered inside, her smile made Carter curious.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Something for me to do.” Emma hugged Gael, then pulled yarn and knitting needles from the bag. “Thank you. I was about to go crazy from reading and staring out the window.”

“You’re welcome, and I have a suggestion.” Gael sat in the chair next to Emma’s. “The contractors have been working on the old caretaker’s cabin near the barn. They should finish all the repairs by tomorrow. I thought maybe you’d like to stay there until the baby arrives, and maybe even afterward. Everything’s on one level so you don’t have to worry about climbing stairs several times a day.”

“She’s not staying in the cabin by herself.” Carter frowned. She needed someone to be near her in case something happened.

“It has two bedrooms,” Gael said quickly. “And it has internet access and cell phone service.”

“I thought we were fixing it up for guests?” Emma looked at her.

“We are, and you can rent it out when you don’t need it anymore,” Gael said.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” She cast a wary glance at Carter.

Was she thinking of their last night together before their divorce? He was. Being alone in a cabin would be the temptation he didn't need, though he'd do nothing to jeopardize their baby's health.

"How about we talk about it?" Carter asked.

"That's a good idea," Gael said. "And I stuck a few patterns in the knitting bag so that should keep you busy for a while."

"Thank you, Gael." Emma pulled out a booklet and flipped through the pages filled with sweaters, hats and booties. "These are adorable."

"Good." Gael grinned. "Now I'm going downstairs to get dinner ready, but if you need anything ..."

"I'll help you." Carter moved to his laptop to turn it off.

"No need." Gael held up her hand. "Orna and her sister were free this afternoon, so they stopped by to help and learn about the meal prep."

"She must be anxious to have something to do." Emma's laugh filled the room with its musical sound.

"I think so. Once dinner's ready, I'll bring up a tray for you and Carter," Gael said and slipped out the door.

Emma released a slow breath. "I don't think we should go to the cabin."

Carter pressed his lips together. "How about we at least look at it?"

"I would like to see the updated interior," Emma said. "It was built during the depression and still had the old kitchen and appliances."

"Let's look at it tomorrow," Carter said.

"It doesn't hurt to look," she said and pulled yarn and needles from the knitting bag Gael had brought her.

Carter released a slow breath. When it came to Emma, the best tactic was to proceed with caution, especially when he wanted nothing more than to be alone with her.



THE NEXT MORNING, Carter drove Emma to the cabin even though it was within walking distance. When they stepped inside, she gave a soft gasp.

“Has it changed that much?” he asked. The interior was nice and not as rustic as he expected. Though it didn’t have the amenities he was used to—face it, he was living in a garret—it provided the comfort of an insulated home. The modern appliances were similar to those in the lodge. He could certainly live here for the next few months and feel safe about leaving Emma and the baby there alone when he had to travel.

“Yes.” She looked around. “It’s insulated, for one, and now it has modern appliances.” She looked at him, a wariness in her eyes.

“Emma, the decision is yours, but I can promise what happened the last night we were together won’t happen again.” How did he tell her his feelings for her hadn’t changed? Still, he wanted to protect their child. “Our baby’s safety is of the utmost importance to me. I won’t do anything to jeopardize that.”

Something flickered in her eyes, and his chest gripped.

“When I tell you nothing will happen, know this, my feelings for you haven’t changed.” He couldn’t believe what he was telling her. Except when they cited their wedding vows, they’d never declared their love for each other. The night they made love, everything changed, but they both knew professing their feelings would complicate matters, so Carter said nothing. Why hadn’t he told her how he felt?

Was it too late?

“I don’t want to move.” Emma’s gaze swept over the tastefully decorated living room.

“Then we’ll keep things as they are.” Carter ignored the regret building up inside him. But if he hadn’t been swept away in the moment, Emma wouldn’t be pregnant. Now that

she was pregnant, he couldn't think of anything he wanted more than having that child in his life.

When they returned to the lodge, they told Gael they wouldn't move into the cabin, then Carter helped Emma up the stairs. While she knitted, he reviewed documents from two of his vice presidents. An email popped into the inbox that made him catch his breath.

His attorneys were ready to present the custody agreement to Emma and her lawyer. He and Emma had barely discussed what would be an acceptable arrangement for them and their child, but he needed his attorneys to start a draft. He printed it out and then sat in the chair next to Emma. He could see in her eyes that she understood what he held.

"From your lawyers?" Her hands held knitting needles with yarn woven in the shapes of baby booties. They trembled slightly. She dropped them to her lap.

"Look it over." Carter placed it on the end table. "Your attorney received one also, so you can talk to him about these requests." He rose.

"It would be easier if you would accept the check my attorney sent to yours." She looked at him through her lashes.

"Do you really want me out of your life and the baby's life?" He gave her a direct look.

"At first, I thought it was the only way." Her chest raised and lowered on a breath.

"And now?" He lifted a brow.

"I'll read what your attorneys have sent." Her full lips seemed to struggle for a smile.

"As will I."

"And what about the donations you received?" he asked.

"I guess I won't need it." She looked at him and saw the tension drain from his face. "I'll return everything to the donors."

Knowing this obstacle was no longer a wedge between them made her breathe easier, though she couldn't forget they had many other things that stood between them.

“Thank you for that.” His smile slight, he gave her a direct look. “For now, I'll go downstairs and see if Gael and Orna need help. We don't have as many guests tonight, and the ones that will be here for dinner will check out afterward. I'll bring up a tray later.”

Emma took a breath and nodded.

Carter's jaw tightened. If only things hadn't become so complicated, but this was a complication he wouldn't have traded for anything.

“We'll work through this,” he said. He wanted to take her hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. He hated seeing the vacant look in her eyes.

His heart heavy with the regret of the decisions they had to make, he walked out of the room.

CHAPTER 26



Emma spent the next hour sitting in an easy chair talking to her lawyer about the terms of the custody agreement for her and Carter's baby. She closed her eyes and smoothed her hand over her stomach. Though the requests were reasonable and the child support generous, she didn't need the money. She felt as if the baby were a bargaining tool rather than a human being. She didn't want to raise a child who would be shuttled between two households and two completely different lifestyles.

She finished the call when a knock sounded on the door.

"Come in." She tried to keep her voice level.

Carter entered carrying a tray with mashed potatoes, fried chicken and squash making her wish she were hungry. Her baby needed nourishment so she'd force herself to eat as much as she could.

He placed it on the table, then moved to her chair. His gaze shifted to the stack of pages now covered with notes.

"My attorney will be calling yours," she said.

"Then we'll leave the rest to them." He held out his hand to her and led her to the table. "Let's eat."

While they ate, she had little to say, so Carter filled the silence with what the workers were doing at the lodge.

"Next, they'll change the electrical wiring to bring it up to code," he said.

Emma nodded. Her grandparents had said the wiring and the plumbing needed to be replaced but had delayed the repair because of the cost. Now Emma had money, so cost was no longer a concern.

When they finished eating, Carter placed the plates on the tray. An email notification sounded from his laptop. He stepped to his computer and clicked the mouse.

“Is that from your lawyers?” Emma’s heart pounded heavily.

“Yes.” He gave her an apologetic look. “I’ll print it out now, but we can discuss it tomorrow.”

“Let’s talk about it tonight,” she said. “I’d rather know the terms than wonder about them all night.”

“All right.” He moved the computer mouse and clicked an icon on the monitor. Pages fed through the printer. “You can take these. I’ll print another copy when I get back.” He handed her the printout. Picking up the tray, he left the room.

He didn’t return until after Emma had reviewed the draft with her attorney. Carter had agreed to nearly everything she requested, which made her feel guilty. They shared a child. He had a lot to offer that child.

When Carter returned, Gael and Orna were with him, the dogs at their heels. Because they had no guests that evening, Gael would spend the night with her sister.

“But you be sure to call me if you need anything.” Gael hugged Emma.

She promised she would, but with Carter there, he’d help her if a need arose.

After Gael and Orna left, Emma and Carter reviewed the custody draft and made a few more changes. When they finished, it was ten o’clock. The lodge was quiet.

“Should we sign this tonight?” Carter printed clean copies and set them on the table.

“I’d like to wait until tomorrow.”

Carter paused briefly, then slipped the pages into a folder. “That’s fine.” He stood and offered her his hand. “Now promise me you’ll go to sleep.”

She took his hand—warm, comforting and filled with strength. “I promise,” she said, but didn’t know how she’d keep that promise. The turmoil racing through her mind pulled her thoughts in one direction, then another. Why did two separate households have to be their baby’s future?

When she rose, he didn’t release her hand. Confused, she lifted her gaze to his.

“Oh, Emma.” He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his well-muscled chest.

She closed her eyes, basking in the embrace that was tender and reassuring at once. For now, they were friends, but as their baby grew, and the child’s needs changed, would they remain friends?

Slowly Carter’s arms loosened, and he looked down at her. His finger at her chin, he tipped her face to his, then lowered his lips to hers. The kiss took her by surprise but the softness and feeling unlocked a torrent of emotions. The taste of him, the feel of him, she never wanted this moment to end.

When he lifted his head, what she saw in his eyes confused her even more. She was glad she was pregnant. She didn’t need another moment of weakness to regret.

“Emma, I—”

“Please don’t say anything.” She touched fingers to his lips.

An intimate moment with Carter was one she cherished. An apology from him would make her feel guilty. Working through the custody for this innocent life growing inside her left her confused and bewildered.

His lips a firm line, he nodded. Turning away, he stepped out of the room.

Emma dropped into a chair. She felt hollow inside. She couldn’t deny she had feelings for Carter. Was it love? How

would she know? What did he feel toward her? He'd never told her he loved her, not even the night they were together.

Even if he did love her, could they be together? Their lives were so different. She hadn't tried to adjust to life in New York, because the marriage was temporary. After two years, she'd returned to Falcon Lake.

Now, Carter was at Falcon Lake, but after the baby was born, after the custody papers had been signed, he'd return to New York and his lifestyle there.

She'd stay at Falcon Lake.

Their child would bounce between Carter's life of luxury and her simple one at Falcon Lake.

Would that confuse her child?

No doubt, it would. She needed God's wisdom to keep her child on the right path.

"Oh, Lord, help me," she murmured and rested her face in her hands.

CHAPTER 27



Emma lay in bed more wide awake than when she'd slipped between the sheets. She glanced at the clock and grimaced when the digits turned to midnight. She'd felt drained after the kiss she and Carter had shared and had gone to bed hoping to convince her body she was tired, but it wasn't fooled.

Throwing back the covers, she slid her feet into her slippers and lifted her robe from the bench at the foot of her bed. Wrapping it around her waist, she snorted softly at the sash she could barely tie. She didn't care. Losing her waist was worth having this wonderful human being growing inside her.

The baby moved, and she gave a soft laugh.

"How's it going in there?" She smoothed a hand over her stomach.

The baby tumbled again making her laugh more.

The dogs leaped from the bed and watched as she moved to the sitting room.

"Don't worry, girls. Everything's fine." She sat in the armchair and pulled her knitting from her bag. May as well make good use of her time. Anything to keep her from thinking about Carter, his kiss, the feel of his arms strong and secure when he held her close.

In the quiet, she moved the needles quickly and watched the booties take shape.

Her nose twitched, and she stilled. A slightly syrupy smell drifted past her. It was the smell she'd noticed from the fireplace. Carter had lit a fire in the fireplace in the great room that afternoon. Was it still burning? The dogs whined softly but didn't move.

Picking up her phone, she stepped to the door and opened it. The smell strengthened.

Panic gripped her. She moved down the hallway to the stairs and glanced into the great room to the fireplace. The fire was out, but she still smelled the smoke. She stepped down the stairs and moved toward the kitchen. Smoke seeped from beneath the kitchen door. Her mouth dried, and she backed up. Had something caught fire in the kitchen? Her pulse shot up in alarm.

The contractors were supposed to install smoke detectors. Had they not done that yet, or had the detectors malfunctioned?

Because Falcon Lake didn't have any lodge guests that evening, she and Carter were the only ones in the resort.

Emma dialed the emergency number on her phone.

"What's your emergency?" the operator's clear voice sounded.

"I'm at the lodge at Falcon Lake. There's smoke coming from the kitchen." She walked up the stairs.

"Get out of the house now," the woman said. "I've notified the fire department. They're on their way. Who else is with you?"

"My ..." How did she describe Carter? It didn't matter. Her kitchen may be on fire. "A friend and my dogs."

"Get everyone out now," the operator said. "And if—"

"What?" Panic squeezed her throat. "Are you there? Can you hear me?"

She glanced at her screen. The call had dropped. She dialed Carter's number. *Call ended* flashed on the screen. Fear coiled in the pit of her stomach. Had she lost cell service?

“Carter?” She called out and rushed down the hallway to the attic stairs. Opening the door, she climbed the steps, the dogs close behind. They didn’t whine, and she hated that they were afraid. “Carter?”

“What?” Carter appeared at the top of the stairs barefoot with hastily pulled on jeans and dragging on a t-shirt.

“We have to get out.” She was breathing hard.

“What’s that smell?” He frowned and inhaled.

“It something from downstairs. I called the emergency number.” She grabbed the handrail and leaned against the wall. “I saw smoke—”

“What? Get out now.” He raced into his room and returned wearing boots and carrying pillowcases. He tossed one to her. “Press this to your face if it’s smoky.”

He drummed down the stairs. He wrapped an arm around her waist and practically carried her down the stairs. He squeezed her so tightly she had to catch a breath.

“Where’s the smoke?” he asked. They reached the second-floor landing.

“The kitchen.”

“Where do these stairs go?” he asked nodding to the back stairs that led to a closed door.

“To the mudroom by the kitchen.”

“Let’s go down the main hall and use the front stairs.” He touched the door. “It isn’t hot.” He opened it.

Emma peered after him. No smoke. She let air rush from her lungs, but Carter’s arm firmly about her waist made her yelp as he half dragged, half carried her down the hall. He held her close when he peered down the stairs. Her gaze followed his. Smoke had seeped into the great room and curled around the furniture.

She gasped.

“It’s all right.” He held her close and rushed down the stairs. Opening the front door, he stepped into the cold night,

the dogs scurrying after them. He shut the door behind them. Striding to his SUV, he helped Emma into the passenger side. He opened the back door, and the dogs leaped inside. Carter climbed behind the wheel. Starting the engine, he backed away from the lodge.

“I can’t leave.” She placed a trembling hand on his arm. Something broke inside her chest. She couldn’t abandon the place that had been her entire life.

“We can’t stay.” Sympathy filled his eyes. “The fire department will be here. They’ll save what they can.”

An explosion ripped through the air. They jerked their gazes to the lodge. A burst of fire leaped from the roof. Sparks lit the dark sky.

Carter jerked the SUV into reverse and punched the gas. It shot across the gravel lot to a fence.

Her throat tight with tears, Emma pressed her hands to her mouth.

Tenderness and strength wrapped around her and pulled to the warmth and comfort she’d found in Carter’s arms before. Shaking with fear and sorrow, she stared at the lodge and watched white-hot flames leap to the sky.

CHAPTER 28



Carter pressed Emma's head to his chest. A muscle worked in his jaw when she trembled. She felt small and fragile in his arms.

Looking through the windshield, he watched the flames climb high and lick the dark sky. A siren's wail pierced the night. At last, he could breathe.

"They're here." Emma lifted her tear-stained face.

The truck, followed by a tanker shuttle, parked in front of the lodge. The ambulance parked next to Carter's SUV. The firefighters piled out and set to work dragging hoses and equipment toward the lodge.

"Stay here," Carter said gently. "I'll talk to them."

"I'll talk to them." She placed her hand on the door.

"You're only wearing a nightgown. You'll freeze," he said.

But she was already out the door closing it firmly so the dogs would stay. Carter followed.

"Hey, Emma, sorry to see this. How're you folks doing?" A tall man in heavy gear strode toward them. Carter assumed he was the chief.

"Hi, Tim." Emma's smile was slight. She introduced him to Carter. "We're fine—considering."

"No one else is in there?" Tim asked.

"No." Emma shook her head. "Gael's at her sister's, and the guests who stayed this week checked out this evening."

“Good. That makes our job easier. I’m sorry, Emma.” His mouth tipped.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll talk to you after we’re done.” He glanced at the lodge. “I’m not sure how much we can save.”

Tears spilling down her cheeks, Emma nodded. Tim tightened the chinstrap to his hat, then strode toward the crew.

“Emma, how’s it going?” one of the paramedics asked as he and his partner strode toward her and Carter.

“Hi, Bill, I’m okay,” she said, then introduced Carter to Bill and George.

Carter envied Emma living in this small community where everyone knew each other. That had to be comforting, especially at a time like this.

“If you folks will come with me, we’ll get you checked out.” Bill’s gaze flicked to her stomach. “The baby’s doing okay?”

“I think so.” Emma rested a hand on the swell of her stomach as she walked toward the ambulance. “We got out before the smoke filled the front part of the lodge.”

Carter followed. He hadn’t realized he was cold until he felt the warmth inside the ambulance. His jaw clenched. Emma had to be freezing.

The paramedics checked their vitals and asked them questions. By the time they’d finished, Tim opened the door to the ambulance.

The hope in Emma’s eyes made Carter’s throat tighten.

“I’m sorry, Emma.” Tim looked at her, regret etching deep lines into his soot-covered face. He removed his hat and dragged his hand through his hair, now plastered to his head.

“Thanks,” Emma murmured. “I know you did what you could.” Tears streamed down her face.

“I’ve called the hospital,” George said. “They’re expecting us.”

“But why?” Emma frowned. “You said everything checked out.”

“Little Emma, you’ve been through a lot, and you’re pregnant.” George took her arm and helped her lay down on the stretcher. “I wouldn’t sleep tonight knowing one of the docs hadn’t checked you over.” He looked at Carter. “You want to ride with us?”

“I’ll follow you,” Carter said. He rose and looked down at Emma.

“What about the dogs?” Panic pressed fine lines into the corners of her eyes.

“I’ll call Gael and see if she can take them until we figure out what to do about the lodge,” Carter said.

“I’ll rebuild it.” Her eyes widened. “I have to.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Carter said. He’d do what he could to make sure that happened. Taking her hand, he gave it a gentle squeeze. The sorrow building in her eyes made it difficult for him to breathe. With more strength than he realized he had, he stepped out of the ambulance.

Looking at the smoldering heap that had once been the lodge made Carter catch his breath. Except for the chimneys reaching toward the starry sky, nothing remained. The crew had already packed the firetruck, and it and the shuttle lumbered toward the county road. Their engines ground into the night. The ambulance followed them, its siren a painful wail.

Carter climbed into his SUV. He called Gael, who was stunned to learn the lodge had been lost but happy to take the dogs. After he found her sister’s house and left the dogs there, he drove toward the hospital.

What he had lost could be replaced. Emma had lost more than a place to live. The lodge had been her life. Carter had the money to replace everything except the memories.

During their marriage, she had talked excitedly about remodeling the lodge and opening it to the hunters and fishermen who had frequented the place before her

grandmother passed. Running the lodge had been her dream. He'd do everything in his power to make that dream come true.

He drove in silence down the dark road. When he reached town, he turned onto the service road that led to the hospital.

The emergency department was busy on this August night. A smiling check-in clerk was expecting him and guided him to the windowless room where Emma lay on a bed. A doctor and several nurses greeted Carter as they rushed in and out of her room.

"They're going to admit me." One corner of Emma's mouth dropped.

"I heard." He hated seeing her disappointment. She'd worked so hard to restore the lodge. He moved next to the bed. "It's for the better."

"I suppose, especially since I don't have a place to go." She closed her eyes.

"You can stay with me."

"I'm not going back to New York." Her eyes flew open.

"Not New York." He laughed softly. "To my place here in Aspen."

"Thanks," she murmured. "But I have the dogs, and I have to find a way to rebuild the lodge. How did Gael take the news?"

"She's devastated," he said. "And as far as the lodge is concerned, we'll work on rebuilding it."

"We?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Yes, we. I'm not going to leave you here to fend for yourself."

"Carter, as much as I appreciate the offer, you run a corporation. You don't have time to rebuild a mountain lodge."

"You let me worry about my corporation," he said. "Tomorrow, I'll have my assistant call your insurance

company and find out what we need to do to rebuild the lodge.”

“I wanted to be open for Christmas.” Her voice trembled. “I had this image of how it used to be when my grandparents would have the lodge decorated with a big Christmas tree and the great room decorated with boughs and twinkling lights.”

“You can still have that,” he said.

“But there’s so much to do.”

He lifted a brow. Christmas was the season of miracles. He’d keep his plan to himself. If he couldn’t deliver a rebuilt lodge, he couldn’t bear seeing her more disappointed than now.

“You’re not paying for the lodge to be rebuilt.” She gave him a hard look. When he frowned at her, she said, “Remember, I have the divorce settlement. I can pay to rebuild the lodge.”

“Let’s start with the insurance company,” he said. “We’ll find out what the settlement will be, and we’ll work from there.”

He had to remember, the lodge was hers, not his, though the time he’d spent with Emma and at the lodge, he’d never felt more at home.

CHAPTER 29



Though Emma tried to convince Carter to spend the night at his Aspen home, he spent that night in her hospital room. She fell asleep once the staff admitted her to a private room. When she woke the following morning, Carter was sitting in a chair by her bed.

“How’re you feeling?” He leaned forward, concern in his eyes.

“Fine.” She smiled at him. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Some.”

“I think you’re a bad liar.” She laughed softly.

“Yeah?” He continued to watch her, though his mouth curved in that way that made her heart rise in her chest. “Mom used to tell me the same thing.”

“She knows you best. Go home. Get some rest,” she said. “Everything’s fine.”

“Let’s hear what the doctor says,” he said. “Are you hungry?” He rolled the overbed table in front of her.

“No,” she said quickly, then twisted the corner of her mouth. She had to be honest. She was starving, and her stomach wasn’t upset. Maybe she was past the morning sickness. “Yes. Have you eaten?”

“No, here’s the menu.” His gaze shifted to the table.

Her gaze followed his.

“Order something,” he said. “The nurses’ aide said the kitchen can have the meal delivered to you right away.”

“Not sooner.” She scanned the menu. “I don’t think I can wait that long. What about you? Will you order something?”

She saw that he was about to say no, but when she gave him a direct look, he said yes.

Later, they munched a meal of scrambled eggs, bacon and hash browns, while Carter told her what his assistant had learned from the insurance company.

“You’ve already called her?” Emma chewed slowly.

“They are two hours ahead of us,” he said. “The insurance company will have an adjustor out at the lodge this afternoon.”

“You must have some influence if they’ll be out there that quickly.”

“No, they don’t know I’m involved,” he said. The warmth in his eyes stirred her, and she dropped her gaze.

“Thank you for scheduling that ... and thank Glynnis,” Emma said, referring to his assistant. She could never thank him enough for what he was doing for her.

“I’ll pass that along,” he said.

The doctor came as they finished eating. Emma was relieved when he gave her and her baby a clean bill of health and said someone from hospital administration would help her check out.

She looked down at the nightgown she still wore from the night before. It was the only thing she owned. Everything else would’ve been destroyed in the fire.

“I had my housekeeper bring you something to wear home.” Carter rose and picked up a shopping bag that sat in the corner.

“I didn’t even notice that.” Her heart quickened at his thoughtfulness. “Thank you.”

“Hopefully, it fits, but if you’re up to it we can shop later.”

“I want to look at the lodge.” Her face turned serious. She had to make plans to rebuild.

“We can do that. Because it’s cool outside, let’s make sure you’re dressed properly.” He gave her a direct look. “Once that’s settled, we’ll drive to the lodge.”

Carter stepped into the hallway and waited while she changed. Apparently, the housekeeper hadn’t brought him a change of clothes. After last night, he was probably dying for a shower. She was grateful to have showered last night when the hospital admitted her.

From the bag, Emma pulled out a fashionable maternity smock and pants. Tears pricked her eyes as she stared at her first maternity outfit. Even the jacket had room for her bulging stomach. She recognized the label as one of the designers the Aspen boutiques sold.

She liked loose-fitting clothes and bought larger sizes so she could wear them until the baby arrived. Even then, she’d probably still need those larger sizes until she lost the weight she’d gained during the pregnancy. She pulled on warm socks that felt like silk then slipped her feet into lined boots and sighed. She’d never worn such comfortable boots.

Did she look like a wealthy Aspen wife? Probably not. It would take more than expensive clothes to look that pampered.

She opened her hospital room door to see Carter leaning against a wall in the hallway and checking his phone for messages. He looked up. The smile spreading across his face was tender and warm. Her heart lifted seeing in his eyes that he liked the way she looked.

For a moment, Emma wished she and Carter hadn’t divorced. She would love to look into those eyes every day. She looked away. There was no turning back. She had her life. He had his.

Except now a baby was involved. The person growing inside her would intertwine their lives until she turned eighteen.

“You didn’t change your clothes.” She stepped into the hallway.

“I’ll take care of that later.” He pushed away from the wall. “How about lunch?”

“I’d rather drive out to the lodge and see if there’s anything to salvage.” She gave him a hopeful look.

“My guess is there isn’t.” He exhaled roughly. “First, let’s think about the baby and get you something to eat, then we’ll drive to the lodge.”

Though Emma was anxious to see the lodge, she knew he was right. With a reluctant nod, she agreed.

Carter drove them to a tiny restaurant that served sandwiches and soups. Because the tourists and the locals hadn’t taken their lunch break yet, the restaurant was quiet. So were Emma and Carter. Their occasional conversation skirted the obvious—the lodge and the baby. Carter silenced his phone, but Emma almost wished he hadn’t. Some noise would’ve been nice.

After Carter paid the check, he leaned back in his chair.

“Now can we go to the lodge?” Emma asked. Not because she wanted to see her grandparents’ hard work lying in ashes, but because she needed to know what she had to do.

The baby was due in the fall, and she knew the lodge wouldn’t be open by then, which meant her dreams for a Christmas celebration would have to wait until next year. For now, she’d plan for an opening next summer.

Could she juggle a new baby and rebuild the lodge? She had to try.

“We can go.” He helped her stand. Taking her hand, he led her outside and into crisp air that foretold an early fall.

Emma said little as they traveled along the winding road to the lodge. When Carter turned onto the side road that led to the lodge, her heart beat dully. Though she could see the chimneys now blackened from the fire, the red roof that used to peek above the trees was gone.

When Carter turned into the parking lot, her throat closed.

Laying before them were the charred remains of the lodge reaching toward the sky. The roof had collapsed leaving the chimneys as sentinels to guide Emma to Falcon Lake. Only the blackened wood and stone remained. Tears poured silently down her cheeks.

Faint tire tracks and footprints ringed the remains. Had the insurance adjuster been there already?

“I have to rebuild. At least the contractors finished remodeling the caretaker’s cabin, so I’ll have a place to stay,” Emma said, though she didn’t know why. Carter’s concern wasn’t the lodge. It was his corporation.

“I’ve been thinking.” Carter turned to her, and her breath caught. “Stay at my Aspen place until you’ve rebuilt the lodge.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” She shook her head. Carter wouldn’t be there all the time, but when he was? What kind of temptation would she have to resist?

“Do you plan to live in the cabin alone?”

“I’ll see if Gael will move in with me, but I spent time alone at the lodge before you arrived,” she said firmly.

“And you weren’t this far along in your pregnancy.”

She blinked. “What do you suggest?”

“Because your pregnancy is considered high risk, I don’t want you to be alone,” he said. “It isn’t good for you, and it isn’t good for the baby. I suggest you stay at my place in Aspen.”

“If I stay at your place, I’ll still be alone.” She stared at the lodge’s charred ruins. “I can’t ramble around in some big old mansion day in and day out.”

“You rambled around in this lodge.”

“Not when the guests checked in.” Her voice lowered.

“It’s too much of a risk. Gael can’t be with you all the time, since she helps her sister with her grandchildren. I want

you to stay at my place. Mrs. Dobers will be there.”

Emma swallowed hard. Her staying at Carter’s place wasn’t a good idea. Though she felt certain nothing would happen, she couldn’t endure the pain when Carter moved on.

She closed her eyes. Tears squeezed through her lashes and down her cheeks. She quickly wiped them away. God help her, she was in love with this man. *He* was concerned about the baby. For that she was glad but being pregnant and living in his Aspen mansion with him felt so impersonal. They were both waiting for the baby. Once she arrived, Emma would live her life between the visits her daughter would have with her father. Emma would spend the rest of her life waiting for her daughter to return home, and Falcon Lake would be their home.

“I have money.” She didn’t miss the flicker in his eyes. “Once I talk to an architect, I’ll rebuild the lodge.”

“And live in the caretaker’s cabin?” He frowned.

“If need be,” she said. “I’m feeling fine now.”

“It’s better if you stay in a place where I can be with you.” He started the engine and turned up the heat. Rain mixed with snow spotted the windshield. He turned on the wipers. “You’re too close to your delivery date, and the doctor doesn’t want you flying at this point in your pregnancy. I’ll remain in Aspen—”

“What?” Her face came up. She shifted in her seat. “What about your corporation?”

“I can run it from anywhere,” he said. “I ran it fine from the lodge before the fire.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“We’re safe. That’s all that matters.” He gave a dry laugh. “Everything else can be replaced. I should have a new laptop by this afternoon. I ordered one for you, too.”

“You didn’t have to do that. I’ll—”

“Please don’t tell me you can buy your own.” He turned to her. “Let me help. The sooner we can get you settled, the

better for you and the baby.”

She nodded. She wanted to be settled. As for the baby, she'd been collecting items for the nursery. She'd have to start over, but where would she put everything?

Carter put the SUV into gear and drove toward the county road. Emma looked into the side-view mirror and watched the lodge disappear from view. When the forest covered the charred remains, she felt raw and scraped inside.

“Where're we going?” She dragged her gaze from the mirror and watched the SUV slice through the rain.

“To my place.” He glanced at her, his smile slight. “I have plenty of room. You can pick out rooms for you and the baby.”

She nodded. Living in his Aspen chalet made the most sense. It was what Carter had wanted all along. Now that the lodge had been destroyed, this loss was working in his favor.

Their drive into town was quiet. When they neared the ski slope, he turned off the highway to the private road that led to the enclave of exclusive mansions. He stopped in front of the wrought iron gate leading to his home. Emma watched the gate slowly swing open. How much more was her life about to change?

Carter drove along the tree-lined drive and stopped in front of one of the doors to the four-car garage. It opened, and he guided the SUV into the bay. He helped Emma from the vehicle and up a short flight of steps that led through a mudroom to the kitchen that was filled with the aroma of a roast. Emma's stomach growled. She flushed when Carter looked at her and smiled.

Mrs. Dobers sat at a built-in desk on the far side of the kitchen. Her smile sympathetic, she rose and greeted them.

“I'm so sorry about your lodge,” she said. The compassion in her eyes reminded Emma of her grandmother—another loss that still hurt. “My daughter and her family were so disappointed as they loved to fish at Falcon Lake.”

“Thank you.” Emma tried to ignore the ache rising in her chest. “I hope they'll continue to go there. Once the lodge has

been rebuilt, it will feel more welcoming.”

“I’ll let them know.” Mrs. Dobers smiled. “If you want to freshen up, I’ll tell Mrs. Wolff she can get everything ready for your meal.

“I don’t know why I’m hungry.” Emma flushed. “We didn’t eat that long ago.”

“In your condition?” Mrs. Dobers lifted a brow. “You’ll be hungry even after the baby comes.”

Emma’s face went hot. She’d never been thin. The weight she’d gained during her pregnancy made her feel comfortable, though the last time she’d visited the doctor she was shocked at how much she’d gained. Her friends had told her chasing their little ones helped them to lose weight. If that were the case, she hoped her baby ran like the wind.

“Would you like something warm to drink while you wait for dinner?” Mrs. Dobers asked.

“I can wait.” Emma looked around the kitchen. “Can I help with anything?”

“Aren’t you a sweetie?” Mrs. Dobers patted her hand. “Mrs. Wolff has everything under control.”

“Mrs. Dobers has been managing the house since before I was born,” Carter said.

“Then you must have been one of the original town residents,” Emma said, surprised.

“I haven’t been here that long, but I’ve seen a lot of changes.”

“I’m going to show Emma her rooms,” Carter said. “We can serve ourselves. It might be a good idea if you head home before the roads get too bad. It’s raining now, but it could turn to snow.”

“You think I can’t navigate these roads?” Mrs. Dobers laughed. “I’ve been driving over them since before they were paved, and before there were snow tires, but I appreciate your concern. I’ll let you know when I leave. Now give this sweet girl the tour.”

Carter took Emma's hand, his touch filling her with the warmth and reassurance she so desperately needed after all that had happened. He led her through the kitchen and into a great room with arched ceilings. Though tastefully decorated, it showed no similarities to Carter's suite of apartments at Haines Estate, which was all glass and chrome accented with colorful artwork. In the great room, furniture of wood and leather surrounded a stone fireplace. A grand piano sat in front of a glass wall that framed the ski slope.

The floorplan flowed from one room to the next creating an inviting atmosphere for guests to mingle.

They walked up the curved staircase and down a hallway lined with doors. Carter opened the one in the center.

"This can be your room." He moved back so she could step inside. "It has a sitting room that can be converted to a nursery. My room is at the end of the hall."

"I'll have to reorder everything I already bought for the nursery." She took a breath. "Even the yarn and knitting needles. I had almost finished knitting those booties. At least, we're safe."

"That's what I'm most grateful for." Carter's smile was soft, his gaze direct. "As for the nursery items, I have a designer who can help you select what you'll need for the baby."

"I can do that." She looked at him. "I *want* to do that."

"I understand, and you will," he said, understanding in his eyes, "but she has contacts with every exclusive designer here and overseas."

"Since I'll be taking all the baby furniture back to the lodge with me after it's rebuilt, I should order everything for the nursery. What she would order would never fit in with the Falcon Lake lodge."

He studied her a moment, then nodded. "I'll let you get settled. Mrs. Dobers did buy some clothes for you to wear, but I'm sure you'll want to order more."

“As much as I appreciate what Mrs. Dobers has done, I’ll need clothes I can wear while rebuilding the lodge.”

“You are going to hire a crew to rebuild, right?” He looked bemused.

“Of course.” She frowned. “But I have to oversee the rebuilding. I want everything to be as it was before.”

“The lodge was old,” Carter said. “This will be an opportunity to update some of the features.”

“The most important feature was the lodge’s charm.” She smiled, remembering the special touches her grandparents had added. “Whatever the design, it has to let the guests know it’s still that unique get-away-from-it-all vacation.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Carter said, and she saw in his eyes the sincerity that made her love this man more than she ever should.

CHAPTER 30



The rebuilding of the lodge wasn't as complicated as Emma had expected, though watching the contractors scrape away the remains and haul away the charred wood and stone broke her heart. She worked with an architect to recreate the original design but knew it would be months before it was rebuilt.

Being pregnant and overseeing the construction was a challenge, but what would happen after the baby arrived? Could she still oversee the construction with a baby in tow? She had to. Overseeing the project was the only way to make sure the lodge would be rebuilt exactly as she wanted.

Because there was no work for Gael at the lodge, she moved in with her sister and found work in town while she helped her sister raise her grandchildren. Juno and Keesha stayed with Gael, which delighted the children. Emma missed the dogs but visited them frequently and looked forward to bringing them back to the lodge.

On an afternoon after a long day at the construction site, Emma returned to Carter's Aspen home to be greeted with the news that he had to leave town. He wanted Emma to come with him.

"Since Dr. Yang advised against travel, I think I should stay here." She gave him a surprised look. "My due date is near."

"Make an appointment for Dr. Yang to check you. Maybe it won't be a problem," he said with sincerity.

“I have too much going on.” She hoped her smile reassured him. In his eyes, she saw his doubt.

“If you’re not with me, I’m calling you every hour—”

“Don’t do that. You’ll never get any work done.” She laughed.

“Then every two hours.”

“Carter, I’ll be fine.” She pressed a hand to his chest. Until that moment, she’d forgotten the rock-hard muscles his sweater concealed. She pulled her hand away.

This was the strangest pregnancy imaginable. She and Carter had conceived this child, but because of the divorce, they were roommates.

Divorced and living with her baby’s father wasn’t how she’d planned to start her family.

There was no point in thinking what might have been. The contract stated they wouldn’t remain married. Her reality was shared custody of her daughter with Carter Haines.

Because Dr. Yang advised against Emma traveling, she remained in Aspen while Carter traveled for business. During those nights, Emma stayed in the mansion alone, though Mrs. Dobers offered to stay with her. Emma assured her she felt fine but would contact her should anything change.

On an evening when Carter was out-of-town, Emma returned to the mansion during a light snowfall. She’d spent the entire day meeting with the architect and the builder. Because she hadn’t seen Gael in several days, she’d stopped at the shop where Gael worked to see how she was doing.

When Emma stepped into the mansion kitchen, the place was quiet. Mrs. Dobers had told her she would visit her sister in Grand Junction and wouldn’t return until the weekend. Carter planned to fly in later that evening.

After a light dinner, Emma sat at a table in her sitting room that was now crowded with baby furniture and studied the architectural plans.

She felt a twinge.

Her hand on her stomach, she rose and walked downstairs to the kitchen. She needed to drink more water. The doctor had warned her to stay hydrated to ward off premature labor.

When she was filling her glass from the dispenser, she felt another twinge.

She glanced at the clock. Carter wasn't due to land for another hour. Because of the snow, his plane could be late.

Remembering her Lamaze class, she lay on the sofa in the great room and took deep breaths. Carter had been concerned she'd be alone when the baby arrived. Because she hadn't felt any pain, she was certain she was doing everything right.

Suddenly, she didn't want to be alone. Suddenly, she wished someone were with her.

Suddenly, she wanted Carter.

From the kitchen, she heard the garage door open, then close.

She struggled to a sitting position. "Hello?"

"Hello?" Carter's voice floated into the room.

Relief flooded her. "I'm in the great room."

He stepped from the kitchen and set his laptop case on an accent table. Looking at her, he frowned and strode toward her. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm not sure." She tried to smile.

"What's going on?" He sat next to her and took her hand.

"I'm cramping, but I think it's labor pains."

The lines tightened around his mouth. "Did you call Dr. Yang?"

"No, I'm still a couple of weeks early."

"Assuming Dr. Yang estimated your due date correctly." Pulling his phone from his pocket, he ran his thumb over the screen, then set the phone on the coffee table and pressed the speakerphone option. When a woman's voice answered, he asked her to page Dr. Yang.

The phone rang a few minutes later with Dr. Yang telling them he'd meet them at the hospital.

"Is your bag packed?" Carter slipped the phone into his pocket.

Her throat closing, she nodded. She was about to have a baby.

She wasn't ready. Would she ever be ready?

"Is it in your room?" he asked.

Again, she nodded.

Taking her hand, he gave it a gentle squeeze. She looked into his eyes and saw the tenderness she'd seen the last night of their marriage—the night that changed everything.

Slipping his hand from hers, he strode down the hallway to her bedroom. He returned a moment later and helped her put on her coat. His hand around her waist, he walked her through the kitchen and into the garage, where he helped her climb into the SUV.

He set the suitcase in the back, then moved behind the steering wheel. Giving her a slight smile, he backed the SUV into the gently falling snow.

A contraction rolled over her. She stifled a scream and pushed against it.

"Remember to breathe." Carter glanced at her.

"I'm trying." She gritted her teeth.

The ride in Carter's luxury SUV was smooth, like flying, and Emma was grateful she didn't have to endure a bumpy ride in the old lodge truck.

When they arrived at the hospital, the staff was waiting for her. A nurse helped her into a wheelchair and pushed her down the hallway. Carter walked beside her, his voice soothing and calming.

Her insides were shaking when she reached the room. A nurse helped her to bed and prepped her. Another nurse helped Carter don protective clothing.

Standing beside her, he continued to coach her, his deep voice comforting and reassuring. She closed her eyes, grateful that she didn't have to face this alone. When Carter learned of the pregnancy, he'd stood beside her. To take the baby from her? They still hadn't finalized visitation.

Her heart did a nauseating flop. She couldn't think about that now.

Her body shook as it gripped, then relaxed, a force beyond her control pulling her baby into the world.

"The head's coming," Dr. Yang's voice floated from the end of the room.

She felt a rush that wasn't painful, but surprising, then a soft cry. The connection she'd felt for the last eight and a half months separated.

Her heart wrenched. She couldn't bear that she no longer carried her baby. She gripped Carter's hand hard and tried to lift her head. Beyond her legs, tiny arms flailed. She reached for them.

"Almost done." The top of Dr. Yang's head and that of the nurse bobbed at the end of the table.

Emma glanced at Carter and saw a sheen in his eyes.

"We have a son." Carter's voice was ragged. He looked down at her. "He's beautiful."

The baby's tiny cry filled Emma with anguish. "Where is he?" She barely had the strength to speak.

"Right here." Dr. Yang placed the baby on her abdomen.

Emotions surging through her, she touched a finger to the baby's palm. When tiny fingers closed around hers, a flood of tears streamed down her cheeks. Scooping the baby into her arms, she held the trembling child close. When he turned to her and opened his eyes, a playful grin spread across his round cheeks revealing pink gums.

Emma laughed, which made the baby smile more. Soon the smile vanished, and a frown pressed between his brows. Tiny cries interrupted by gasps for breath filled the room.

Nurses and other staff swirled around her and the baby, each showing her what to do while dressing her and cleaning her and the baby. She didn't care what they did. She held her baby. Nothing else mattered.

Exhaustion swept over her. Someone slipped the baby from her arms. She didn't want to release her son, but she was too tired to hold him. Feeling him leave made her gasp.

"It's okay." Carter's voice sounded as if it were coming from a tunnel. "They'll bring him right back."

Emma didn't have the strength to nod, though it wasn't all right that they took her baby. She wanted to keep him close. She'd waited months to hold him.

She tried to speak, but the words never came. Soon she slipped into an exhausted sleep.

CHAPTER 31



Carter sat in the chair and watched Emma sleep. Never had he seen anything more beautiful than the peace on his ex-wife's face.

Next to her bed stood the hospital bassinet that held their sleeping son. He was wrapped tightly in a blanket covered with blue and pink elephants and teddy bears. Sleeping peacefully, he never stirred, even when Carter would get up and stand next to the bassinet just so he could marvel at this tiny being who was part him and part Emma.

His ex-wife stirred.

“Hey.” Carter rose and looked down at her. “How do you feel?”

“Okay.” She laughed, then grimaced. “Sort of.”

He sat in the chair next to her bed and took her hand. “You did great.”

She smiled her thanks, then looked around. “Where is he?” When she saw the baby, she stuttered a breath. “Can I hold him?”

“Probably.” Carter pressed the call button. “The nurse said to call her when you woke so she could review procedures with you.”

“Who thought having a baby could be complicated?” She dropped her head to the pillow and shook it.

Carter gave a low laugh. Except for what they learned during Lamaze, he had no idea what to expect. He'd know

next time.

Next time? Would there be a next time?

The nurse bustled in. Carter stood near the windows but listened as the nurse explained nursing and bathing and a dozen other things to know about the baby. She placed several pamphlets on the overbed table. When she left, Emma stared at the pamphlets, bewilderment in her eyes.

Carter gave a soft snort. How many new mothers studied that information?

“We’ll go over it together when we get home,” he said gently.

She looked at him surprised before her face spread into a smile that made his heart race. When she gave a slight frown, he knew she wondered where home was. The lodge was gone. Now that the baby was here, there would be an even longer delay to rebuild the place.

When they returned to his Aspen home, they’d discuss living arrangements. She could stay at the ski chalet for as long as she wanted, but she’d already told him, she’d never consider it her home—just as she didn’t consider Haines Estate her home.

What had she said? She didn’t belong there.

Did he belong at Falcon Lake?

Throughout the day, more experts stopped by and discussed feeding and changing and bathing the baby. They also taught Carter a few things. Holding his son gave him more joy than closing any negotiation for Haines Corporation. While Carter held their son, Emma watched him and smiled, though she never took her eyes off their son.

He could see in Emma’s eyes that she was exhausted. When they were finally alone, she fell asleep.

Carter stayed. He didn’t know how much longer Emma would be in his life. He wasn’t willing to spend more time than necessary away from her and away from his son.

When Emma woke, Carter notified the nurses so Dr. Yang could visit her and the baby and write the discharge orders. A nurse helped her pack, then guided Emma to a wheelchair. She pushed Emma down the hallway. Another nurse carried the baby.

Carter parked the SUV beneath the *porte cochère*. Snow fell gently, a sign that winter would come soon. When they returned to the house, Mrs. Dobers greeted them at the door leading to the garage. The warm scents of a roast beef dinner floated from the kitchen.

“If you’d prefer to eat in your room, I’ll bring you a tray.” Mrs. Dobers eyed the baby with tenderness.

Carter had a feeling she would be bouncing the baby on her knee at her first opportunity.

“I’ll let you know.” Emma smiled weakly. “I’m still pretty tired.”

“Of course, you are,” Mrs. Dobers said with sympathy.

Carter’s throat tightened. He had wanted to hire a nanny—his sisters had them—but Emma had insisted she didn’t need one. Seeing how tired Emma was made him realize he should’ve insisted.

That would change when he took the baby to New York. The baby would definitely need a nanny when he stayed at Haines Estate. Carter should’ve hired one before the baby was born, but whomever he hired would require Emma’s approval. Would she come to New York to help him with the selection? She’d want to see what arrangements he’d make for their son.

A weight pressed against him. Their son would bounce between New York and Falcon Lake. Once the lodge had been rebuilt, Emma and Carter would never be together.

If only there were another way.

When Emma woke, she lay in bed and nursed the baby, a sight Carter had thought couldn’t be more beautiful.

“There’s still something we need to discuss.” He sat in a chair next to her bed.

The baby fell asleep. Emma broke the connection, then propped him against her shoulder and rubbed his back. Never did she look more perfect than as a mother. On the day of their wedding, he had thought she made the perfect-looking bride. She was made for her new role as mother.

Emma lifted her gaze to him, a wariness in her eyes.

“His name.” Carter arched his brows.

She relaxed slightly, though he knew she expected him to bring up the custody arrangement. That would come later. He hated to ruin this special moment by discussing it now.

“You had said you wanted to name him after your grandfather.” She continued to rub the baby’s back.

“Yes. Axel, but not a name you were thrilled with,” he said. “What was your father’s name?”

“Jonah.” She never stopped watching Carter.

“Jonah,” he repeated. “Jonah Haines. What do you think of that name?”

“I like it.” Her eyes filled with gratitude that warmed Carter inside. “If it’s that important to you that the baby have your grandfather’s name, we could use it as a middle name.”

“Jonah Axel Haines,” he said, then laughed. “That’s a mouthful.”

“We still have time, if you want to try a few more names.”

“I like Jonah,” he said. “If that’s agreeable to you, I’ll complete the paperwork and forward it to the hospital.”

She dropped her gaze to the baby. “My father would be very pleased to know his grandson was named after him.”

“Then Jonah it is.” He rose. “I have some things to take care of. If you need anything, let me know.”

“Thanks,” she murmured. She smiled before dropping her gaze to the baby.

Carter stepped from the room and closed the door. He was glad this conversation ended on a high note. The next

discussion they had wouldn't be so pleasant, but the sooner they agreed on custody and visitation, the sooner they could move on with their lives.

Separate lives.

Taking a breath, he moved down the hallway to his office. The two years he'd spent with Emma had been years of harmony and joy, but he could see in Emma's eyes that she wouldn't agree to anything that wouldn't benefit their baby's life.

CHAPTER 32



Emma slept little in the next few days. She was grateful for the help from Mrs. Dobers and even from Carter, but she couldn't forget that her and Carter's complex relationship was about to become more complicated.

As she stood in the nursery and watched Jonah sleep, her throat closed. He was still too young to be whisked across the country to his other home in New York. She was grateful Carter was spending time in Aspen but knew this wouldn't last much longer.

As she cared for her baby, she found time to finalize the architectural drawings and the contract with the construction company that would rebuild the lodge. Once that started, she'd be busy driving back and forth between Aspen and Falcon Lake. What would she do with Jonah? He couldn't sit in the car while she oversaw the construction.

And she needed to be closer to Falcon Lake. Aspen was an hour away.

She could move into the caretaker's cabin, a much simpler abode than what Carter's Aspen mansion offered but still comfortable. Gael had said she'd be happy to watch Jonah while Emma managed the lodge's construction.

Whatever she decided, the decision wasn't just hers. She had to discuss the arrangement with Carter.

Jonah fussed, so she picked him up and nursed him. After changing him, he wanted to play. Ten minutes later, he was sound asleep.

“Someday you’ll stay awake longer, then we can play all sorts of games.” She patted his bottom, then pulled the blanket a friend had crocheted over the tiny body curled in the middle of the bassinet.

How tall would he be? Probably tall. Carter was tall, and she wasn’t short. By the time he was a teenager, he’d probably need a queen-sized bed so his feet wouldn’t hang over the end. She laughed at the thought. Jonah jumped, and she pressed fingers to her lips.

“Sorry,” she murmured, then stepped into the hallway.

She needed to stretch her legs. Because Carter had a household staff, there was little for her to do, though Mrs. Wolff did let her fix a few meals. Once she moved into the caretaker’s cabin, she’d have plenty to do.

Stepping into the hallway, she took a breath. The sooner she shared her plan with Carter, the better.

She walked downstairs through the great room she and Mrs. Dobers had decorated for Christmas. They had shared a quiet Thanksgiving that included Gael, her sister and her family and Mrs. Dobers and her family. Though Emma and Carter had received several invitations, they thought it best to limit the activity around Jonah. She could see in her baby’s eyes that he was fascinated with the children who loved playing with him.

Despite trying to rebuild the lodge, Emma had managed to sneak in a few Christmas shopping trips. She didn’t know if she’d still be at Carter’s Aspen home during the holiday, but she couldn’t imagine waking up Christmas morning and not having gifts beneath the tree. She moved down the hallway to Carter’s office at the far side of the house.

He was seated at his desk and reading something on his computer. Tall and strongly built, his intelligent eyes scanned the screen. When she walked into his office, he looked at her, his smile slight. He seemed to know why she’d come. Rising, he gestured toward the sofa.

He waited until she sat before taking his seat. He said nothing.

“We’ve been avoiding the obvious.” She tried to ignore the flutter in her chest.

His mouth pressed into a straight line, but he remained quiet.

“I know the fire destroyed the custody agreement, but I’m assuming you sent a copy to your attorneys,” she said.

“And you to yours, but you had agreed to everything we sent them.”

She nodded. “Jonah’s too little to be away from me.”

“I’ve been telecommuting for several months now,” he said. “Though it isn’t the most convenient, I’ll continue to do that until I can take Jonah to New York with me. You’re welcome to come with us.”

“I don’t see how.” She rose and rounded the sofa to the glass wall that overlooked the ski slope. It was covered with snow and crowded with skiers. When she heard Carter rise, her heart beat faster. “I want to reopen the lodge by this summer.” She waited for his comment. He would have something to say. Jonah was his son, too.

“You know you’re welcome to stay here until you can move into the lodge.” He stood behind her.

“It’s a far drive.” She turned to him. “The caretaker’s cabin survived the fire. It has two bedrooms so I could hire Gael—”

“Why would you move into a cabin when you have everything you need here?” He gestured toward the room.

“Once the lodge is finished, I won’t live here,” she said.

“What about help with Jonah?” He frowned slightly.

“I can hire Gael. It will be a lot of work, but I’d like to hire her.” She tried not to sound defensive. “It’s only until Jonah can take care of himself. Life at the lodge will give him a lot of responsibility and help him to become self-sufficient very quickly. When you’re in town, you can stay at the lodge, too.”

“You’ve thought of everything.” The corner of his mouth curved slightly.

“I’m trying.”

“All right, then.” He rose and moved to his desk. “I’d say we’re very close to this custody agreement, so let’s call our attorneys and tell them we’re ready for them to forward and send us the final agreement.”

Emma’s heart beat a little faster. Would her life ever feel normal again? It quit feeling normal the day she met Carter at his bank.

He pressed a button on his phone. When the operator for his law firm answered, he asked for his attorney.

Emma swallowed and sat in a guest chair in front of Carter’s desk. Why did it have to come to this? Jonah was an innocent baby sleeping peacefully in his bassinet upstairs. This wasn’t the life she’d planned for her child, but then she hadn’t planned to have a child.

When Carter told Hershel they were ready to finalize the custody agreement, the attorney cleared his throat.

“I had an associate review your file, and there seems to be an obstacle,” the lawyer said.

“What’s that?” Carter frowned.

Emma went rigid.

“It appears that your wife—”

“You mean ex-wife,” Carter said and frowned.

“I mean wife,” the lawyer said calmly. “It appears that Emma never signed the final dissolution.”

“I signed it.” Her stomach jumped.

“I contacted your attorney and asked for the most current document. I’m looking at it now.” He hesitated. “I’ll forward it to you. What Emma signed wasn’t the final agreement, which means you never signed the dissolution papers.”

“Which means we’re still married?” Carter looked at her, his face unreadable.

“Unfortunately, yes. I apologize for the oversight. My office is drafting a codicil now. I’ll forward this to Emma’s attorney for review,” the lawyer said.

“Send it over.” Carter took a steadying breath. “I’ll sign it and return it.”

“It won’t be that simple.” The attorney spoke in measured tones. “The case will need to be presented to a court of law. A judge will need to hear the case. Once he gives his decision, then your and Emma’s signature will dissolve the marriage.”

“I have to fly back to New York?” Emma’s nerves tensed.

“I’m afraid so,” Hershel said. “I’ll have my assistant work with the court to get your case on the docket as soon as possible.”

“I can’t just drop everything and go.” She gave Carter a pleading look. “I have a new baby.”

“I’m sorry, Hershel.” Carter pressed his lips into a firm line. “Flying to New York isn’t possible for Emma right now.”

“Then, I’ll delay the hearing.”

“For how long?” Emma felt weak. “I need to work on rebuilding the lodge. Can’t my attorney represent me?”

“He could,” the attorney said. “But in cases like this, judges prefer to speak directly to the parties to determine a chance of reconciliation, especially now that a child’s involved.”

“There is no chance of reconciliation,” Emma said. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. The entire marriage was a sham.

She thought of the innocent babe sleeping upstairs. He was evidence of the connection they’d developed while they were married.

Why, why had she given in to that moment? But then she wouldn’t have Jonah.

“If you want to discuss the matter ...”

“Thanks, Hershel, we’ll call you back—”

“We won’t need to call you back.” Emma lifted her gaze to Carter, who looked at her with narrowed eyes as if trying to understand her. “It would be better to finalize the divorce as soon as possible. As soon as you can schedule the hearing would be better for everyone. I’ll arrange my schedule to be there.”

“Good.” Hershel sounded surprised and pleased. “My assistant will call you to finalize the time and place.”

He said a few more things. Carter tapped notes into his computer and ended the call.

“Emma, we don’t have to do this now.” He turned to her. “I know you’re as concerned about Jonah as am I. If you’d prefer to wait, I’ll call Hershel—”

Emma shook her head. “I’ll call Dr. Yang and find out about traveling with Jonah. I don’t want to leave him. He’s so little.” Her emotions welling inside her, she swallowed the tears burning in her throat. “It shouldn’t take long. We can do this in a day, so I won’t have to delay any of my construction meetings with the crew.”

Carter nodded once.

A small cry sounded from the baby monitor app on Emma’s phone. The pain in her chest melted away. There was nothing that warmed her heart more than hearing her baby.

“I’ll check on Jonah.” Rising, she moved to the door.

Carter said nothing, but what could he say? Striding to the stairs, Emma realized Carter hadn’t said much of anything, but he probably felt as she did. Their marriage should’ve ended nine months ago. Once they spoke to the judge, the marriage would be over. Carter could move on with his life and she with hers.

Her heart pounded dully. It should’ve been that simple, but now they had precious little Jonah.

CHAPTER 33



After Emma fed and changed Jonah, she spread a blanket on the floor and laid him on top. He looked at her and grinned a smile that was so much like Carter's. She smiled back though her chest gripped tight. Every time she looked at Jonah, she'd see Carter—the crystal blue eyes, the sandy blond hair. She sighed. He was the baby's father.

A tap sounded on the door.

"Come in," Emma called out though she kept her gaze on Jonah.

The door opened, and the warmth she felt whenever she was near Carter entered the room.

"How's he doing?" Carter crouched next to her.

"Fine," she said but watched the baby. When he wobbled his head and grinned, she grinned back.

The baby sensed Carter's presence. When he saw his father, his smile widened, and he waved his arms.

"He's happy to see you," Emma said with surprised laughter.

Carter sat on the carpet and touched a finger to Jonah's palm. The baby wrapped his fingers around Carter's. His eyes stretched wide, his little mouth forming a perfect circle.

"You didn't expect that." Carter's deep laugh made the baby's eyes widen more.

Carter slid a hand behind the baby's back, his fingers supporting Jonah's head. The baby waved his arms, his face serious as Carter lifted him to the curve in his elbow.

"Am I doing this right?" Carter asked.

Emma smiled at the hesitancy in this confident man's voice. "You're doing fine. You're supporting his head, which is what matters."

Jonah stared up at Carter and studied him a moment before waving his arms and looking around.

"He hears your voice." Carter looked down at his son.

The baby turned his gaze to Carter.

"And yours." Emma pulled her knees to her chest and watched.

"What do you think, tiger?" Carter smiled at his son. "You've been hearing these voices for nine months and now you can put the face to the sound."

Again, Jonah waved his arms.

Carter rose and walked around the room while talking to the baby. Emma watched, marveling at this giant of a man holding an eight-pound baby in his arms. If anyone was made to be a father, it was Carter. She released her breath slowly. As much as she would miss Jonah when he visited Carter, she was relieved to know he would be in good hands.

And when Carter remarried?

The heavy weight of realization pressed against her chest. She'd face that hurdle when the time came.

"He's asleep." Carter's voice broke through Emma's thoughts.

"I'll take him." She rose.

"I can put him to bed." Carter laid him gently in the bassinet. His eyes filled with love, he pulled the blanket to the baby's chin, then looked at her. The corner of his mouth curved. "How'd I do?"

“You’re a natural.” She released a shuddering breath. Everything about Jonah’s father was more than she could ask. The emotion filling her chest brought quick tears to her eyes that she blinked away.

“Coming from you, that means a lot.” He smiled though a hint of sadness filled his eyes.

His phone rang making Jonah jump though he didn’t wake.

Carter’s mouth tightened, and he glanced at the screen. “It’s the law office.”

With reluctance, he turned away and stepped to the windows that framed the ski slope.

Emma dropped her gaze to Jonah and waited. Carter spoke in low tones, so she didn’t hear the words. Her throat closed up tight. She’d know soon enough how this marriage would be dissolved.

Dropping the phone to his side, he turned to her, his face serious. She swallowed hard, trepidation racing across her nerve endings.

“We’re on the docket for next week,” he said.

“That’s Christmas week.” Her lips parted.

“It’s worse than that.” He exhaled roughly. “We fly out Christmas Eve. It shouldn’t take long, so we can return that night. We’ll be able to celebrate Jonah’s first Christmas here.”

She nodded but felt bleak. She couldn’t speak. It didn’t matter when the marriage ended. They had both agreed—the marriage had to end.

Carter stared at her a moment, then turned away and spoke into his phone. A moment later, he disconnected the call and moved next to her.

“We can fly to New York Wednesday morning,” he said though he looked down at Jonah. “Miles will meet us at the terminal and drive us to the courthouse. After the hearing, we’ll fly back here. My parents will be disappointed that we won’t stay longer, but since they plan to visit after the

holidays, it might be a more pleasant visit since the divorce will be final.”

Yes, they had to remember the divorce was part of the plan.

“We can hire a nanny to go with us,” Carter said.

“What about Mrs. Dobers?” Emma would rather have someone who knew how to care for the baby. “She knows Jonah, and she’s good with him.”

“I’ll ask her.” Carter’s smile was slight. “Once everything’s finalized, you’re welcome to stay here until the lodge is finished.” When she opened her mouth, he said, “I know you had planned to move into the caretaker’s cabin with Gael, but I’d like to have you and Jonah stay here. I plan to be a part of his life. The drive isn’t convenient, but it’s only for a few months. Once the lodge is completed, I understand you and Jonah will live there.”

She couldn’t deprive Carter of being with his son. How blessed was Jonah to have a father like Carter? This was a relationship she had to encourage. She couldn’t let her own feelings interfere with Jonah’s relationship with his father. “I can stay here. If everything goes as planned and the lodge is finished by summer, I’ll move to Falcon Lake then.”

She didn’t miss the flicker in his eyes. He wanted to be part of Jonah’s life. She wanted that, too.

His phone rang again. He looked at the screen. “It’s the office. I have to take this.”

He gave her a look of apology. Her mouth tight, she nodded. While living with Carter she’d learned one thing—as a Haines, he had to be available for anything involving his company.

Carter cast one last look at Jonah, then pressed the phone to his ear and strode from the room.

Emma dropped her gaze to Jonah, his face filled with peace. If only she could feel that peace. She prayed silently, because she couldn’t ignore the feeling that flying to New York to once again divorce Carter was wrong.



CARTER WALKED into his office and took the call that dragged him away from the woman who was like a sweet fragrance in the house that had felt sterile until she and their son moved in. When she walked into the room, he smelled fresh air and felt warm sunlight. Everything changed when she was near.

As he spoke to his assistant, he had to focus hard on the terms of the contract he'd been negotiating for the past few months. His mind would rather concentrate on Emma, and his thoughts drifted to her and the baby. Finally, Carter told his assistant to email the contract to him. He'd review it, make changes, then send it back.

While he looked over the contract, he received another call from his investment banker. As they spoke, Carter stepped from his office to the gallery and paced back and forth. Movement from the great room below caught his eye, and he stopped.

Emma stood on the far side, Jonah in her arms. She held him close, breathed in his scent and spoke words Carter couldn't hear. Jonah bobbed his head. Emma capped the back of it, her laughter like music to Carter's ears.

He finished the call. He had a contract to review. Instead, he braced his hands on the wooden rail and watched Emma. The love she poured out to their son filled him with warmth and an emotion that squeezed air from his lungs.

As if she felt someone watching her, she looked up at him, a smile of relief filling her face, but only briefly. Another look came into her eyes, and she crossed the room toward the staircase.

"Don't leave on my account." He moved down the stairs and strode toward her.

"I was walking him until he fell asleep." She peeked down at the sweet face that rested against her chest.

“Is he still awake?” Carter asked, but felt his body respond to her closeness. Nothing stirred him more than seeing her hold their son.

“Yes,” she said. “He’s listening.” She turned so Carter could see his face. “Do you want to hold him?” She looked at him.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” he said.

Emma gently laid the baby in Carter’s arms.

“Should I walk him?” Carter watched Jonah’s eyes round as he listened.

The baby tried to lift his head, but it flopped back against Carter’s chest.

“Hold on there, tiger.” Carter cradled the baby’s head in his palm.

“He likes to walk.” Emma stepped back.

“You’re not going anywhere, are you?” He eyed her. He felt a hint of panic stir.

“I’ll be right here.” Her musical laugh floated around them.

Carter walked back and forth before the glass wall, but it was the baby in his arms and the smiling woman who perched on the arm of the sofa that filled his senses.

This is what a family should be—he, his wife and his son.

A great emptiness hollowed out his chest. This moment—no matter how brief—he would cherish in his heart forever.



AS THE DAYS PASSED, Carter soon learned the baby’s schedule and timed his calls so he had more time to spend with Emma and Jonah when she played with him or walked him around the house. Having that tiny baby in his arms filled him with awe and wonder.

Having Emma near him filled him with a desire to pull her close.

As the day of the hearing drew closer, he noticed Emma's demeanor grow more subdued. The day they were to fly to New York for their court date, she said little.

Mrs. Dobers was excited to help with Jonah and assisted Emma with the packing. The flight crew had set up a nursery on the jet with seats for Emma and Mrs. Dobers during takeoff and landing. Emma had privacy for nursing and changing the baby.

When they landed in New York, Carter sensed how tired Emma was and wished he'd insisted they spend the night at Haines Estate. After the hearing, he'd ask if she wanted to stay, but who knew how they'd feel once the judge declared the marriage over?

For the past week, Carter had felt close to Emma. He loved sharing time with her and the baby. He felt more married to her than he had during the marriage they'd entered into so he could inherit his grandmother's estate.

Had the fake marriage been worth it? It made him rich, but he was already rich.

When they landed in New York, Miles greeted them at the Haines hangar and drove them to the courthouse. Thankfully, Hershel had arranged for them to enter through a rear door to avoid the media circus in front. After Miles dropped them off at the courthouse, he would drive Mrs. Dobers and Jonah to Carter's suite at Haines Estate to wait for them until after the hearing. He knew his parents would be thrilled. Though they'd seen the baby during video chats, they wanted to hold the latest addition to the Haines family.

"My baby." Desperation filled Emma's face when she had to climb out of the limousine. She looked at Carter.

Jonah looked at him, too, his blue eyes round as if he sensed something had changed. If only Carter could convince him this change would be for the better.

“This will be over quickly.” Carter didn’t want to be separated from his son any more than Emma did. “See you soon, tiger.” He touched the baby’s cheek.

His smile slight, he looked at Emma. Her pale face made his throat close. He’d be glad when they moved past this part and got on with their lives. He couldn’t bear to see that demolished look in Emma’s eyes. Why did they have to go through this again?

She nodded once and climbed from the limousine. Carter took Emma’s hand and led her inside. The attorneys rushed to them. Emma’s attorney, Bill, took her arm and led her to a small conference room off the hallway.

Carter’s heart beat heavily when Bill closed the door. Turning to his attorneys, he followed them down the hallway.

CHAPTER 34



Most of what Carter's attorneys said to him, he didn't hear. His thoughts strayed to Emma, the strain in her eyes, and the serious look his son gave him.

He was about to divorce the woman he'd been married to for three years. Granted, the marriage had been a sham, but he couldn't forget what it was like to be with Emma.

Was divorce what he wanted? Was a custody agreement what he wanted for his son?

What did Emma want?

That gave him a jolt. He'd never asked her that question. They had both gone along with the terms of the contract—marriage for two years, then divorce.

She had talked about rebuilding the lodge and raising their son there. He had no doubt Jonah would have a good life. That Emma loved their baby was unquestionable. Everything she did and said was filled with love.

Could he and Emma stay married?

Hopelessness twisted his stomach into a hard knot.

What kind of a marriage would they have? They'd live together, but what about living as husband and wife? He couldn't deny he had feelings for Emma, but love?

Never had they professed their love for each other—not even the night they'd spent together.

If he and Emma stayed together, what example would that be for Jonah? Children weren't dumb. Jonah would figure out something was different about his parents' marriage. Carter wouldn't set that example for his son.

Carter swallowed hard. Dissolving the marriage was the best solution for everyone. He couldn't deprive Emma of a chance at love. She was a wonderful woman who would make a wonderful wife. He knew that first hand.

He was surprised when his attorneys rose and indicated it was time to enter the courtroom. It was packed with spectators and the media—all talking, all watching. He felt their stares as he followed his attorneys to the front of the courtroom. Emma and her attorney sat on the left side. It struck Carter as odd not to see Emma with Jonah, but divorce court was no place for any child. Mrs. Dobers would take good care of him as would Carter's parents.

Carter had requested a closed hearing to protect Emma from media scrutiny, but the judge had denied it. For Emma's sake, Carter wished he could protect her, but she was tough. Many times, she'd proved worthy of protecting herself.

When Carter followed his attorneys past Emma's table, he hadn't meant to look at her, but he wanted her to know he'd make this as painless as possible. He saw the hurt on her face. Maybe it was too late for that.

As if feeling his gaze upon her, she lifted hers. The flicker in her eyes told him she wanted this to end as quickly and as simply as possible. He'd do his best.

The judge spoke to the attorneys, who each gave prepared speeches of how ending the marriage was best for everyone, including the child.

"I find that interesting." The judge's gaze shifted from Carter to Emma. "Because at the last hearing there was no child."

"No, Your Honor." Carter's attorney stood. "But my client wants the best for this child, as does Mrs. Haines."

“I should hope so.” The judge removed his glasses. His exhale sounded exasperated. “I asked this before, but I’ll ask it again. Is there any chance the parties can work out their differences?”

“Your Honor.” Carter’s attorney cleared his throat.

“Your Honor.” Carter was on his feet.

His attorney jerked his gaze to his. Behind him, murmurs waffled through the crowd.

“Order in the court.” The judge pounded the gavel, but the murmuring continued.

“My apologies for interrupting, Your Honor.” Carter gave the judge a pleading look.

“This is highly irregular, but very well.” The judge tipped his hand, giving Carter permission to continue.

“I believe there is a chance we can work out our differences.” He gave a dry laugh. “We really don’t have any differences.” He looked at Emma, her eyes wide with surprise, and something else. “I believe we can bring this to a satisfying conclusion. That is if my wife will agree.”

A smile tipping the corner of her lips, she blinked.

He looked back at the judge, whose face remained stony. His lawyers whispered among themselves.

Hershel leaned toward him. “Are you sure this is what you want?” he murmured.

“It’s what I want.” He looked back at Emma. Her attorney spoke to her but her gaze remained on Carter.

“Your Honor, may we have a word?” Hershel stood.

“I believe your client is the one who should have a word.” The judge turned to the bailiff who watched him. “Would you please show Mr. and Mrs. Haines to the conference room so they can have their discussion?”

The bailiff nodded and stepped toward the tables.

“When you’re finished, we’ll meet in my chambers,” the judge said. Looking at the courtroom, he said, “Court will recess for fifteen minutes.” He pounded his gavel, then strode from the bench, his robe fluttering in his wake.

“I’ll be at your side,” Hershel murmured to Carter.

“Actually, this is a discussion Emma and I can have alone.” He never stopped watching her but heard Hershel’s gasp. Carter looked at him. “You’ll know soon enough if there’s no resolution. Then we’ll proceed as planned.” He could see in Hershel’s eyes the lawyer didn’t approve.

The bailiff approached Emma, who was trembling as she rose. Carter stepped to her table. The bailiff gestured to a doorway behind the bench. Carter took her hand, and they walked down a hallway to a door the bailiff unlocked.

“When you’re finished, open the door,” he said. “I’ll take you to the judge’s chambers.”

“Thank you,” Carter said. He followed Emma into the room and closed the door.

“What’s going on?” Emma turned to him.

His jaw clenched at the turmoil in her face.

“Maybe we should sit down.” He gestured toward the ladder-backed chairs at the wooden table.

“Carter, tell me what’s going on?” She looked beautiful and desperately confused.

He dragged fingers through his hair. Maybe their staying married wouldn’t work after all.

No. He had to try.

“I think we should stay married.” He took her hands and was relieved she didn’t pull away.

“Why?”

“Because I love you.”

Her mouth fell open. Shock filled her eyes.

“I love you, Emma. I want to stay married to you.” He closed his eyes. He was ruining everything. He should at least have told his attorney what he’d planned to say, but he hadn’t known. He looked into her eyes and saw nothing but confusion. “Even if you don’t love me now, maybe in time you’ll learn.”

“Are you doing this for Jonah’s sake?” The tension drained from her face. Her lips curved in that slight smile that made his stomach lift.

“I’m doing this because I love you. I didn’t realize how much until I walked into the courtroom,” he said. “And yes, I want the best for our son. Two parents are the best for Jonah.” As he spoke, he felt Emma’s hands tighten around his.

“I won’t have to learn to love you.” Her voice was soft. Her lips trembled. Tears filled her eyes. “I’ve always loved you.”

“What?” He almost choked.

“The day I walked into your office.” A tear streamed down her cheek. “The day I met with you and your attorneys to sign the marriage contract.”

The contract! Why had he ever arranged this fake marriage? It was all for naught. He would stay married, and he’d lose his grandmother’s inheritance to charity. To stay married to Emma? That was worth more than all the money in the world.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped away her tear. He pressed the handkerchief into her hand. Wrapping her in his arms, he pulled her close.

“I knew if I wasn’t careful, I’d fall in love with you.” She wiped away another tear.

“I knew that, too.” The warmth rising in his chest was proof of his love for this woman. “Where does that leave us?”

“I’m not sure.” She looked so sad his heart ached. They loved each other. That should’ve been a moment of joy. “Our lives are so different. I can’t live in New York. That isn’t where I want Jonah raised. He needs a normal life. One where

he's out of the spotlight. One where he can grow up and discover life on his own."

Carter's heart dropped. How could he live anywhere but New York? How could she live anywhere but Falcon Lake?

"Then that's what he'll do." Carter saw the surprise in Emma's eyes, but he was more surprised.

"You'll let Jonah live at Falcon Lake?" Her eyes widened.

"Yes, but remember, he has grandparents and cousins who live in New York." Emotions surged in his throat. Would she like his idea? "Like all children, he'll need to visit them."

"He can visit," Emma said softly. "I want him to know about all his relatives."

He exhaled roughly. Pushing his fingers through her hair, he cradled the back of her head and drew her to his chest.

"What about us?" She lifted her gaze to his.

"You'll want to live at the lodge at Falcon Lake." He studied her eyes.

"And you'll want to live at your Aspen house."

"No," he said and smiled at the surprise in her eyes. "I agree that Falcon Lake is the place where Jonah can have a normal childhood."

"Oh, Carter." Emma threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

The touch of her lips, the taste of her, the intoxicating scent of her, filled him with a feeling he could no longer resist. Wrapping her in his arms, he kissed her the way he'd wanted to since their last night together.

A knock sounded on the door.

"The bailiff." Emma gasped and stepped from him. She smoothed her hair into place and straightened her suit.

Carter groaned. He wasn't ready to release her.

"Come in." Carter's voice was rough.

“It’s fifteen minutes, folks.” The bailiff leaned through the doorway. “I’ll need to take you to see the judge.”

Carter looked at Emma who nodded.

The bailiff gestured toward the door to the judge’s chambers.

They stepped inside. Their lawyers were pacing back and forth. They turned as Carter took Emma’s hand and led her to the chairs the judge indicated.

“What’s your decision?” The judge leaned back in his chair, his keen eyes watching them.

“We’ll remain married,” Carter said calmly, though he grinned from ear to ear.

“Carter, are you sure?” Hershel stepped to him.

“Emma, is this wise?” Bill frowned at her.

“I’m positive.” Carter held Emma’s hand and looked at her.

“It’s the wisest decision I’ve ever made.” Looking at Carter, she squeezed his hand.

“I knew you’d make the right decision. Case dismissed.” The judge pounded his gavel. “And I don’t want to see you again.”

“Don’t worry, sir. You won’t.” Carter looked at Emma, the love in her eyes filling him with warmth. “I do have one favor to ask.” Carter looked at the judge, who lifted a brow. “We’d like to renew our vows, that is, if my wife agrees.” He turned to Emma.

Color filled Emma’s cheeks. “I’d like that very much,” she said and smiled.

Carter wove his fingers through hers.

“I have to say this is the best request I’ve had all day.” The judge’s laugh was deep. “And, yes, I’ll preside as you renew your vows.” He replaced his reading glasses and stood.

The lawyers’ surprised silence filled the room.

Carter rose, bringing Emma with him.

“Emma Waite Haines,” the judge said. “Will you continue to have Carter as your husband and continue to live in this marriage, to love, honor and cherish, forsaking all others for as long as you both shall live?”

“I will.” Emma lifted her dark gaze to Carter’s, her tremulous smile making him want to pull her into his arms and kiss her.

“And Carter du Pont Haines IV, will you continue to have Emma as your wife and continue to live in this marriage, to love, honor and cherish, forsaking all others for as long as you both shall live?”

“I will.” Carter pulled Emma into his arms and kissed her the way he had wanted to for months.

The judge cleared his throat.

His face flooded with heat, Carter released Emma, then shook the judge’s hand. “Thank you, sir.”

Taking Emma’s hand, he marveled at its softness as they rushed from the judge’s chambers and stepped into the now empty courtroom, the lawyers at their heels. They packed their briefcases but gave final instructions to Carter and Emma. He didn’t hear a word. Feeling Emma’s excitement, he was sure she hadn’t either.

“There’s a crowd waiting out front,” Hershel said. “They’ll ask for a statement.”

Did he want to give a public statement? What he wanted was to slip quietly away with his wife and son. Now that he was truly married, he wanted to love Emma the way she was meant to be loved—the way he wanted to love her since he first met her. In order to combat the rumors sweeping through the media, he had to give a statement.

He looked at Emma and saw the dread in her eyes. His heart filled with love for the woman who’d been his wife for three years. Even dressed in the tailored suit, small-town innocence permeated her aura. He needed to get her away from this circus.

“Tell them ... I don’t care what you tell them,” Carter said.

“You don’t want to share a word?” Hershel asked, surprise cracking his lawyer’s veneer.

“That’s what I pay you for.” Carter clapped him on the back.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he called Miles and asked him to meet them behind the courthouse.

“No can do, boss. Word got out that’s how you entered the courthouse. The alley’s jammed. The police made a way for me to pull to the front, but just so you know, everyone in New York is waiting out there. Carter-watch teams are all over the city, and they’re yelling for you to say something,” Miles said.

Carter rubbed his temples. So much for an undetected getaway. He thanked Miles for the information. Dropping his phone to his side, he looked at Emma. “It looks like I’ll have to say something.”

Emma’s mouth tight, she nodded.

Carter took her hand and followed the lawyers out the door.

The large crowd looked as if everyone in New York had gathered in front of the courthouse. When Carter and Emma stepped to the microphone, they cheered and shouted good wishes.

“It appears they already know our decision.” Carter looked at Hershel.

“It’s hard to keep a secret these days,” the lawyer said.

Carter leaned into the microphone. “We want to thank you for your support,” Carter said, and the crowd quieted. “For our sakes and for our baby’s sake, we’ll stay married. This is the woman I’ve always loved.” He looked at Emma, his heart closing when he saw the sheen in her eyes. “I’m only glad I realized that before it was too late.”

The spectators cheered. Cameras flashed while some in the crowd shouted questions, which Carter answered until he saw Miles guide the limousine to the curb. Carter grabbed Emma’s

hand. As they raced down the steps, well-wishers tossed rose petals and birdseed. From behind sounded Hershel's voice as the press pummeled him with questions.

Carter and Emma slid through the door Miles held for them. As the chauffeur drove them away, they turned and stared out the rear window at the cameras. More well-wishers tossed rose petals followed by frantic waves.

"It's finished," Carter murmured.

Looking into Emma's dark eyes, he gathered her into his arms and kissed her lovingly and deeply.

"I love you," he murmured.

"I love you," she whispered.

Her soft form melted against him. Joy filled him knowing they could at last begin the life he'd wanted for the past three years.

Knowing he and Emma were really married filled him with more joy than he had ever imagined.

CHAPTER 35



Emma and Carter stepped quietly into the foyer of Haines Estate exhausted, starving and glad to be home. They spoke briefly to Carter's parents, who had seen everything on television and were eager to offer their congratulations.

"And we've enjoyed our afternoon with the newest Haines," Mrs. Haines said. "So be sure to bring him back soon."

"We will," Carter said. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we're anxious to see how he's doing."

"One more thing." Carter's father handed him an envelope. "It's from your grandmother."

"What is it?" Carter frowned. Taking the envelope, he recognized it as the one that had sat on his father's desk the day after his and Emma's first divorce hearing. His grandmother's elegant script covered the front of the envelope.

"I don't know, but if this day ever came, when you decided not to end the marriage, she instructed me to give this to you."

"That's rather cryptic." Carter stared at the envelope but felt Emma's confusion.

He and Emma wished his parents a good night, then rushed down the hallway to Carter's suite. When they stepped inside, Mrs. Dobers crossed the living room to the foyer. She took their coats.

“I saw everything on the news,” she said. “You’re the toast of the town. I have dinner warming in the oven. If you want to freshen up, I’ll put everything on the table.”

Emma looked around the suite to the decorated Christmas tree standing before the glass wall that overlooked Central Park. Boughs and lights covered the staircase banister and the rail of the gallery above. A nativity scene sat on the coffee table.

“You decorated for Christmas,” Emma said in surprise.

“It is Christmas Eve.” Mrs. Dobers hung their coats in the closet. “Since we’re not returning to Aspen tonight, I thought you’d like to enjoy some Christmas cheer.”

“That’s wonderful.” With the upcoming hearing, the meetings for rebuilding the lodge, and Jonah’s arrival, she’d had little time to focus on the season that gave her so much joy.

She and Carter would exchange gifts tomorrow when they returned to Aspen. The rest of the staff had received their bonuses before she and Carter flew to New York. Carter had mentioned Mrs. Dobers would receive an extra bonus as thanks for helping them with Jonah.

“How’s Jonah?” Emma asked. She’d never been away from him so long, and she couldn’t wait to hold him in her arms.

“Sleeping peacefully.” Mrs. Dobers smiled at her. “He had a busy day visiting with Carter’s family, which he thoroughly enjoyed.”

“I’m going to check on him.” She looked at Carter.

“We’ll go together.” He took her hand.

Feeling his strength from this simple touch made her gasp. When he looked at her, she smiled, then followed him up the stairs.

They slipped quietly into the guest room and peered into the bassinet where Jonah slept. Emma took in his pink cheeks, his tiny mouth open and his soft breathing. Her heart squeezed

tight. She needed to hold him, but maybe he'd wake by the time they'd finished dinner. Until then her arms would ache to feel her son's soft, warm body next to hers.

"Let's get ready for dinner." Carter took her hand and led her down the hall to his room—now their room.

They'd brought no luggage since they'd planned to return to Aspen after the hearing.

Emma followed Carter into the bedroom where they'd spent the night that had changed their lives forever. Now that they were really married, Emma could let her true feelings for Carter flow forth. What a different turn her and Carter's lives had taken.

Carter pushed the door closed. Slipping out of his suit jacket, he pulled the envelope his father had given him from the inside pocket. He slit it open and lifted a single sheet of stationery.

"What does it say?" Emma's heart beat heavily as she watched his face.

"What my grandmother knew along." He gave her the letter.

My dear Carter:

If you are reading this, then you have discovered the true meaning of life, not an easy feat for someone who has grown up surrounded by so much wealth. Now, that you know that love is God's gift to us, I know my prayers have been answered. By staying married, you have sacrificed the inheritance promised you for this precious gift from God. Though you won't receive my estate, I know you will oversee its disbursement and give it to those in need. My eternal rest is at peace knowing you accepted this decision.

May God richly bless you and your family for making a decision that will give others the chance they need to live a more fulfilling life.

All my love,

Grandmama

“She knew.” Emma lifted her face to Carter, a sheen in her eyes.

“And now we all know. This was money I didn’t need, but I know exactly where it needs to go.”

Emma nodded.

“And now.” Taking the letter from Emma, he set it on the dresser and pulled her into his arms. With more tenderness and love than she thought possible, he kissed her with the emotion that had been simmering between them for three years.

“I’ve waited hours to do this,” he murmured against her lips. “Or should I say years?”

“So have I.” She trembled inside, the love she held for this man filling her to overflowing.

When he pushed his fingers through her hair, she let the walls surrounding her heart tumble down. Emotions she’d reined in during their marriage burst forth.

The passion sweeping them away was the greatest gift they could give each other. She only cared that she loved Carter and would receive his love for the rest of their lives.

EPILOGUE



One year later ...

Christmas Eve, Emma put the finishing touches on the Christmas tree that stood in the great room of the lodge. In the kitchen, Mrs. Dobers and Gael tended to the dinner they would share with the lodge's crew and their families.

The construction crew had completed the lodge in time for guests who had scheduled vacations during the summer. Guests who had stayed at the lodge when Emma's grandparents managed the place were delighted to learn Falcon Lake had been rebuilt and was open for business.

Emma placed a hand on the swell of her stomach. She loved this feeling of life growing inside her. She'd love being pregnant with Jonah despite her unsettled life. When she'd told Carter to expect a little brother or sister for Jonah, he'd been ecstatic.

Now they spent most of their time at the lodge, which was crowded with guests from spring through the fall. Off-season, they would visit family in New York. Jonah loved playing with his cousins, and though older than he, they loved having a baby to fuss over.

That Carter had agreed to make the lodge their home had thrilled Emma. She was concerned that sacrificing his lifestyle for life at the lodge would be too much of a shock, but he fit in nicely learning to care for the horses and livestock and helping Emma care for the guests.

Carter's family occasionally stayed at the Aspen chalet, but because it sat empty most of the year, the staff's hours would've been cut. Instead, Carter offered them positions at Falcon Lake, which most of them accepted.

Mrs. Wolff took over meal planning and cooking while Mrs. Dobers and Gael tended to other lodge matters and looked after Jonah, which was a relief for Emma. Jonah adored them and called Mrs. Dobers, Doe, and Gael, Gae. Now that he was walking, he was into everything.

Carter divided his time between his responsibility at Haines Corporation and the lodge, where he fit in nicely with the guests. Few knew he was heir to the Haines fortune, which suited him fine. At Falcon Lake, he could live a life of anonymity.

At six o'clock, the staff and their families gathered in the dining room to share Christmas Eve dinner. Juno and Keesha dutifully took their places beneath the table near Jonah's chair. After the blessing, everyone dined on turkey with all the trimmings. Following a dessert of mincemeat and poached pear, they moved to the great room to exchange gifts. The excitement of the holiday overwhelmed Jonah and the dogs. By the time the guests left, Jonah had fallen asleep on the sofa. The dogs curled into balls of fluff on the floor.

"I'll take him to bed and help you clean the kitchen." Carter smiled at her.

"I'll help in the kitchen," Mrs. Dobers stacked the dessert plates on the table. Gael helped her.

"No, you won't," Emma said firmly. "I know both of you plan to spend tomorrow with your families, so go to bed and rest up."

"I'll do as you say," Mrs. Dobers said.

"As will I," Gael said, "but if you need anything ..." Gael eyed Emma.

"We'll be fine." Emma hugged them. "Merry Christmas and thank you for everything you've done to make this first Christmas in the new lodge special."

“It was my pleasure.” Mrs. Dobers smiled, then moved down the hall to her room.

Gael hugged Emma and Carter, then followed.

After Emma and Carter cleaned the kitchen, they set out the gifts they’d bought for Jonah. Emma sneaked in a few presents she’d wrapped for Carter and noticed he did the same.

He took her in his arms. “Should we sit by the fire and wait for Santa?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Emma said and kissed him.

Snuggling on the sofa, Carter read the birth of the Christ child from the Gospel of Luke. When he finished, he stoked the fire, then sat next to Emma and pulled her into his arms.

The fire crackled. Snow fell past the picture window.

Slowly, Emma’s eyes slid closed. She basked in the gentle strength of this powerful man, heard the steady beat of his heart, and thanked God for the blessings of the past year and the many years to come.

Merry Christmas, Dear Reader!



START READING [The Billionaire’s Christmas Proposal](#) to find out if Brynn and Grayson can keep their agreement professional, or will the sparks flying between them make them question these unfamiliar emotions?

DEAR READER

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Warmest regards.

Laura Haley-McNeil

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of California, Laura Haley-McNeil spent her youth studying ballet and piano, though her favorite pastime was curling up with a good book. Without a clue as to how to write a book, she knew one day she would. After college, she segued into the corporate world, but she never forgot her love for the arts and served on the board of two community orchestras. Finally realizing that the book she'd dreamt of writing wouldn't write itself, she planted herself in front of her computer. She now immerses herself in the lives and loves of her characters in her romantic suspense and her contemporary romance novels. Many years later, she lived her own romantic novel when she married her piano teacher, the love of her life. Though she and her husband have left warm California for cooler Colorado, they enjoy the outdoor life of hiking, bicycling, horseback riding and snow skiing. They satisfy their love of music by attending concerts and hanging out with their musician friends, but Laura still catches a few free moments when she can sneak off and read.

