



*The
Luminosity
of Lorraine
Harper*

GABBI POWELL

The Luminosity of Loriana Harper
LOVE IN CEDAR VALLEY BOOK 1

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Dedication

Steena

Elena

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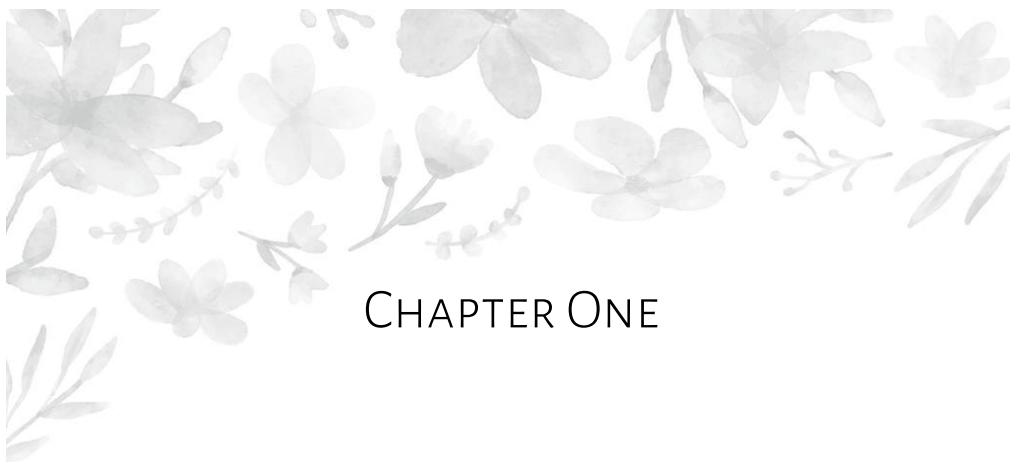
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Love in Cedar Valley



CHAPTER ONE

“**I**’m going to a cuddle party tonight.”

Loriana Harper liked to make declarations for both their shock value and so she wouldn’t back out. She didn’t enjoy admitting later to not doing something because she chickened out.

Her co-worker Marnie Jones gaped. The young woman glanced around the library where they worked, confirming they were mostly alone, and she drew closer to her boss. As close as they ever got. While Loriana was free with her physical affections, Marnie was guarded. Almost standoffish.

I wonder why?

None of your business.

“Is it...I mean, is it safe?” Marnie’s vivid green eyes shone with concern. “Are you at least going with someone? And this is, um, not...sexual, right?” She said *sexual* like she was a matron of sixty-four and not a woman of twenty-four.

Trust Marnie to be safety conscious. She didn't even like anyone going to the parking lot alone after dark during the winter months. Distrustful despite the fact the lot was located in downtown Mission City, a busy bus stop was nearby, and the lights were so bright and effective that it felt like midday.

Night came early in December in southern British Columbia. This close to the coast, the weather was also a crapshoot. Often rain, but sometimes snow.

The Christmas parade was in two days, and the women had created a display for the front of the library.

“Of course it's safe.” Loriana longed to reach out to touch her colleague while offering the reassurance but knew better.

Said colleague didn't look convinced.

“Cuddles Galore is a group on Facebook. They have platonic parties on the first Thursday of every month. I meant to go last month, but Miss Edna needed me to fix her television. By the time she was finished talking, the party'd long started.”

Marnie nodded solemnly. “You were very generous in doing that.” Then she snickered. “Dead batteries in the remote.” She caught herself, placing her fingers to her lips. Her eyes widened as if she couldn't believe her impudence.

Loriana reveled in the simple action. Marnie's skittishness always bothered her, and any time the woman loosened up, Loriana was thrilled. They had a no-gossip rule in the library. A rule they often broke.

Yes, a disappointment to miss the party, but Miss Edna was a fixture at the library, and Loriana was only too happy to help the old woman who never admitted she was lonely but clearly was.

Miss Edna taught in Mission City for almost fifty years before retiring fifteen years ago. She'd instilled the love of books and the drive toward community service.

When Loriana attended the woman's third-grade class back three decades ago, the teacher had encouraged acts of kindness in a way an eight-year-old could understand. Those lessons stuck with her pupils. Well, some more than others. Loriana was a success story. At least one of her cohort'd served time in juvie. So not always on the straight and narrow.

"Back to this party." Marnie wouldn't be diverted. "What do you really know about these people?" No masking of the disdain in *people*.

"Excuse me, ladies, sorry to interrupt."

Loriana pivoted, and her breath caught. The Black man stood tall above her own just-over-five-foot-eight height. More than five inches taller than Marnie. She tucked a lock of her long, light-auburn hair behind her ear. "Are you looking for something in particular?" *I've never met him before*. He was memorable. And not just because of his appearance. He exuded kindness in a way that made her instantly comfortable.

The gentleman raised an eyebrow.

“Loriana, Mitch is installing the new computers.” Marnie fluttered her hand. “You remember, I told you about this. He arrived while you were at lunch.”

Must’ve been working on the farthest machine, or I’d have noticed him.

The man held out his hand. “Mitch Alexander.”

She held out her hand in return and got the firm shake she was expecting. What she didn’t expect was the jolt of electricity. Or what felt like electricity. Something ran through her and knocked her right out of her complacency. The man’s fingers were callused, but his palms were soft. A noticeable contrast. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Alexander.”

“Please, call me Mitch.”

She didn’t miss the hint of amusement in his dark-brown eyes. Eyes just a shade darker than her own, she figured. “Okay, Mitch. I’m glad you’re here, but a little confused why. Is there something wrong with the computer? I’m pretty handy at figuring them out.”

“Miss Harper—”

“Loriana.”

He acknowledged her correction with a nod. “Loriana...”

He said her name softly and in a way that made butterflies flap in her stomach.

“You’re correct, there’s nothing wrong with the computers. But they are, frankly, old. You’ve done a great job of keeping

up with software updates, but the machines themselves are antiquated.”

“I won’t argue that point. I’m just not certain why you’re here.”

Mitch’s brow furrowed, creating a little *v* between his eyebrows.

Adorable. Wait. What?

“I have a work order to replace all ten computers. Your name’s on it.” He held her gaze. “At least you said you were Lorian Harper. I assume there’s only one.”

“I am.” But that didn’t clear up the confusion. “May I see the work order?”

“For sure.” He held up a finger. “I’ll be right back.” He held her gaze for one moment longer before heading to the back of the library.

Lorian turned to Marnie. “I don’t understand. We requested the computers three months ago, but the city council turned us down because they considered it a large capital expenditure. We were going to try to replace one machine at a time by cutting other costs.” Budgeting was her least-favorite part of the job, but a necessity as head librarian. If she cut into their book-buying budget, then she could replace the computers more quickly, but books were always the last thing on her list to go. If not for books, the library wouldn’t exist.

Marnie shrugged. “Maybe they changed their minds?”

“And didn’t tell me?” Loriana scoffed. “Not likely. Regan Lystrom would be lording this over me if that were the case.” She tried to like everyone, but Regan always rubbed her the wrong way.

The woman had been on the city council since the last election, and although young, she was also ambitious.

Normally Loriana admired that trait, but she found it repulsive in Regan, who was as likely to tread on some poor hapless person on her way up as she was to stab that person in the back, given half a chance.

Mitch reappeared, carrying a clipboard. He handed it to her.

Loriana scanned it quickly, noting not only were there no prices but that the document was marked *paid in full*. She handed the clipboard back to Mitch. “Who paid you?”

He looked surprised, then twisted his lips.

Why do I find this man so adorable?

“I received an e-transfer. For the entire amount. About a week ago. I put together all the equipment and came in today. It’s going to take me several days to install everything. Excuse me, but have I done something wrong?”

“Of course not.”

Well, look at that. *Marnie* was offering the assurances. “If you received payment, then I’m sure there’s a logical explanation. Or maybe somebody donated the equipment. I mean, you haven’t been quiet about your requests.” She directed that last comment at Loriana.

She was right, of course. Loriana'd been clear about her view that the library needed new computers to meet the needs of Mission City's growing population. Still, this turn of events stunned her. She hadn't seen this coming. With reluctance, she returned the clipboard.

Mitch took it and first met Marnie's gaze, then hers. "I, uh, offered a discount. Whoever paid me rejected the offer, which was considerate, but I'm always supportive of my community. I understand you have laptops you lend out to patrons who need them."

"We do." Loriana frowned. Where was this going?

"I'm adding two netbooks to the order, free of charge." He ducked his head. "I didn't want to say anything, but you're bound to notice when you compare the work order to the equipment. You seem like an observant woman. I doubt anything gets past you."

"Well, the purchase of the computers seems to have." What in the world? Who would do such a thing? She shook off the feeling. "You came here to ask a question. I apologize for derailing you. Obviously you're busy."

"Never too busy when presented with the opportunity to speak to two lovely women." He focused on folding and unfolding a corner of the paper on his clipboard, then glanced up at Loriana. "Begging your pardon."

She grinned. "I never mind being called lovely. As long as intelligent follows soon after."

“Without hesitation.” He swung the clipboard, indicating toward the back. “I need someone to help me create a login and to test the software installation.”

“I’ll do it.”

Huh. What a surprise for Marnie to volunteer, since the young woman was usually hesitant to be in close proximity to men. Especially men she didn’t know. On the other hand, Mitch’s gentleness and compassion were readily apparent. Loriana smiled. “That’s kind of you to offer. I’ll let you and Mitch get to work while I try to track down what’s going on.”

“Oh, no, don’t do that.”

The vehemence in Marnie’s voice shocked Loriana. She couldn’t remember the woman ever being so adamant.

Obviously Marnie was shocked as well as her cheeks turned crimson. “I just...maybe in this instance, you can accept someone’s generosity? Maybe they want to remain anonymous.”

Loriana hadn’t even considered this. That thought opened up a whole new realm of possibilities. The library had plenty of wealthy patrons, some of whom made significant contributions. She couldn’t be sure any of them would show such largesse, but she’d do well to be gracious.

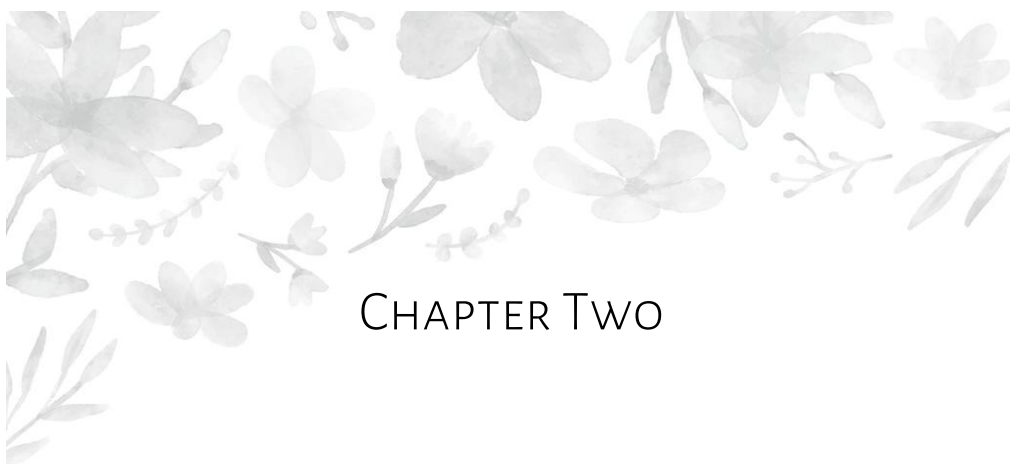
“Fair enough.” She smiled at both Mitch and Marnie. “I’ll leave you to it. I have some ordering to do anyway. I think my inbox needs some serious attention. That being said, I’ll keep an eye on the front counter.”

Toddlers and Books had run this morning, and Thursday afternoons were slower than other times of the week.

“Great, then lead the way, Mr. Alexander.”

Marnie’s smile seemed genuine, but Loriana could never be sure. Sometimes the expressions seemed forced, and other times those smiles came more easily. Certainly, things had improved from when the woman first arrived three years ago. Ah, her associate put some decorous distance between herself and the tall man as they headed to the back of the library.

Maybe... No, not going to go there. At least for today. She hadn’t yet responded to the cuddle party invitation, and she intended to do so now. And must remember to call Marnie when she got home after the event.



CHAPTER TWO

Mitch waited patiently for Marnie to enter the login information. He was giving her a wide berth—and not just because he didn’t want to see the password information for the internal library system. No, he had no trouble reading the body language asking for everyone to keep their distance. And as much as he was curious about the young woman with ebony-black hair and green eyes, he didn’t dare ask.

Many people were intimidated by his height. Often his skin color was the next thing they noticed. Mission City wasn’t as racist as some places he’d lived, but he still got sidelong stares. Nonetheless, a delightful mix of ethnicities abounded in the small town, so he wasn’t alone in being *the other*.

“I think it’s ready.”

Her quiet voice pulled him from his ruminations. And although the young librarian was striking, he was already thinking about her older colleague again. He hadn’t meant to say the rather cheesy *lovely ladies*, but he hoped the

compliment was received in the spirit with which it'd been given.

Marnie rose so he could sit at the computer. He'd preinstalled the software, so all he had to do was run it to be sure the licenses were working properly. Excellent, they did. "Do you mind trying out a few things to make sure everything's okay? I'll go out to the van and get the next machine." He rose, hunching to minimize the foot difference in height between them.

Marnie gave him a small smile. "I really appreciate you helping us out." A flush stole across her cheeks.

"You wouldn't happen to know about this?" He pointed to the work order.

Her large green eyes blinked several times.

Good, I haven't lost my touch.

At one time, he'd prided himself on being able to read people. After what happened at the firm, he no longer held the same confidence.

Still, she held his gaze. "You can't say anything." She yanked on her ponytail. "You promised anonymity."

He didn't actually recall making that promise, but this woman was spending a small fortune on the equipment, and had refused the discount he'd offered.

"And I appreciate the offer of the netbooks, but it's unnecessary."

Might as well be honest. “I bought them as part of a deal specifically for this purpose. To give as a thank you for the bulk purchases.”

She didn’t appear impressed with his reasoning. Yet, after an endless pause, she nodded. “Just so long as you don’t tell Lorian. Or anyone else.”

He had about a million questions, but curiosity led to serious consequences, and he didn’t want to risk this contract. Too much riding on it, and he needed the funds, especially this close to Christmas. “Your secret is safe with me, Marnie.”

Her smile grew. “I knew you were the right person to ask.”

Despite wanting to know how she’d found him, he again suppressed the desire to know. Didn’t matter. Her generous gift was the boost he needed. This job would give his fledgling business some credibility. Which reminded him... “Do you mind if I put this job on my website as a completed project once I’m done?”

She tilted her head. “Definitely. I’m sure I can get Lorian to write a reference.”

“If she’s happy with the work.”

“Of course.” She laughed softly. “Yes, that was a given.” She scratched her nose. “Let me know when you have the next one ready to go.”

He checked his watch. “I should be able to do two more today, four tomorrow, and the rest on Monday.”

That Cheshire-cat smile was back. “That would be wonderful.” She eased into the chair and clicked the mouse several times before typing.

Interesting. The woman not only touch-typed, she was damn proficient at it. At the height of his programming days, Mitch’s fingers had flown across the keyboard as the ideas bombarded him. He sighed. Those days were long gone. And given he was only twenty-nine, wasn’t that a depressing thought?

He waved to Lorianana as he passed the circulation desk, where she was checking out some books for a young man.

The brisk air and the low, gray clouds gave the promise of snow. It would be nice for the kids at the parade tomorrow night if snow covered the ground, but tonight it’d make for treacherous driving.

And speaking of tonight. He sat in the front seat and yanked out his phone.

Mission City Locals.

Ah yes, a singles group. He’d scoped it out when he first arrived in town, but had written it off. He clicked on the join button and was about to put the phone away when his application to the group was accepted. Okay, then, obviously not discerning. He’d shut off the geolocator on his phone as a privacy matter, so they—whoever they were—had no way of confirming he was even a resident of the town.

The rules of the group were in a pinned post, and as he scrolled, he quickly found the cuddle party. He clicked, and

the information came up. A private address, with a start time of eight tonight. He scanned the rules, and they all seemed innocuous. A few comments extolled the fun of the event, and a few people tagged others with invitations. Overall, almost twenty people had signed up.

His finger hovered above the attending button. RSVPing wasn't a requirement. Just show up, the post said. He scanned the list of attendees. Hey, Lorian Harper. He'd never heard of a cuddle party before, but the name probably explained everything. Of course, this might be a cover for an orgy, but he didn't get that vibe. If the address was available for anyone in the group, then it'd be easy for the cops to drop by. They probably had better things to do than to break up an orgy anyway, and why was his mind going there?

Possibly because his mind kept wandering to the slender chief librarian. What did she hide beneath those plain clothes? A bright-blue sweater paired with jeans. Boring, perhaps, except her body had him sitting up and paying attention. Her smile was what attracted him, though. While Marnie's was tentative, and coaxing one from her gave him joy, Lorian's wide grin hit him in the gut. The woman was radiant when she beamed. Even when she frowned, she was striking.

And he had the same concerns about her safety as Marnie expressed. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop. Okay, maybe he had. Marnie had guided him to the computer and said a few halting words, so he'd recognized her voice. The second voice, though, had caught his attention. Deeper and rich. Like a good scotch.

Accept.

He could always change his mind, but somehow he knew he wouldn't.

A couple of hours later, he stood in the local men's big-and-tall store. He'd love to be able to buy clothes off the rack, but that rarely worked. He selected a pair of plaid pajamas and headed to the dressing room. Fortunately, the installation of the other computers had gone as seamlessly as the first and he'd finished about an hour before he'd planned—leaving him time to run over to Abbotsford to pick up clothes for tonight. The suggested dress was nightwear. And although Mitch owned a pair of worn sleep pants and a distressed T-shirt, he wanted something new and, frankly, attractive. He wanted it clear he'd put some effort into this.

Heck, no guarantee Loriana would be there, let alone that she'd give him the time of day. Might she even think he was stalking her?

Am I stalking her?

The pajamas fit perfectly, long enough to cover his legs completely. The top was a bit loose across the chest, but nothing unacceptable. He was on the slender side, although he had a few muscles. He worked out on occasion, but preferred cardio over weights, so tended to run more than pumping iron. And since he didn't have anyone he needed to impress, he didn't give it much thought.

So why am I thinking about it now?

After changing back into his street clothes, he headed to the register and didn't cringe when the salesperson rang up the purchase. Well, didn't cringe as much as he might've before landing the library contract.

Marnie Jones.

Okay, so the woman was enigmatic and obviously hiding something. But what? She didn't want credit? Ah, her largesse might affect her relationship with her boss. The dynamics might shift. Co-workers might treat her differently. Of course, none of this was really his business. Except, where had she come up with the dough? Ten brand-new high-end computers with curved monitors and several ergonomic keyboards and mouses cost a fortune. Certainly more than a librarian would make in a year. Unless librarians were quietly raking in the dough.

Ha. Paid by city hall? Not likely.

Maybe an inheritance? Savvy stock sales?

None of your goddamn business.

She was paying, and he was grateful. Nothing more to be said about it.

Once across the Mission-Abby bridge, he headed to the A&W for a burger and onion rings. He rarely indulged, but he wanted to get home to wash the pajamas as well as take a shower. And his beard could use a little trim. He wasn't vain, but grooming was important. True in the corporate world, and

just as important in the small-business world. His appearance represented his fledgling company.

The greasy smell of onion rings filled his car after he'd gone through the drive-thru, and he headed home. The condo on Second Avenue might be small, but he owned it. Well, he and the bank—with the bank owning the lion's share. Still, each month he chipped away at that mortgage, and he'd own the place before he was fifty, so that counted for something.

Far less impressive than the place he'd rented in Mountain View. He'd saved plenty, but much of those savings had been depleted when he'd been forced to give up his green card and head back to Canada. Tail between his legs, he'd taken up residence in the small town of Mission City, just over an hour outside of his beloved Vancouver. Far enough to stay under the radar, but close enough he could visit his old haunts if he wanted.

And he wanted. Wanted to see the old neighborhood. Spend time with the friends who still lived in Strathcona. Some had reached great heights of success, while others toiled away in less-impressive jobs. But his buddies'd always been tight, and they'd been thrilled when he'd been offered the job with one of the major companies in Silicon Valley. The company'd headhunted him right off the campus at the British Columbia Institute of Technology and wooed him with the promise of a great salary, fantastic benefits, as well as the lure and prestige of moving to the States. Some of his friends had been derisive, while others were happy for him.

None of them knew he'd moved back to Canada several months ago.

He should find the courage to come clean. He'd scrubbed his social media and had been keeping a low profile. That included keeping the locator off. He'd put planet Earth as his location. Cute—and not likely to raise too many alarm bells. Plenty of people wanted to be on social media for various reasons while wanting to keep their location private. He maintained a presence for his store, but hadn't attached his full name or any pictures of himself.

All this wasn't likely to hold. Some of his best friends were also programmers. If they wanted to find him, they could. They didn't, because they all believed he was happily living south of the border.

He backed his van into his assigned parking spot, then he grabbed his dinner and his laptop case. Exiting the vehicle, he set the alarm and headed for the elevator. One of the reasons he'd chosen the building was for its great security. Cameras in all common areas, including one aimed directly at his van. He also had his own surveillance set up, although he rarely kept anything of value in his vehicle. Most of his equipment was either piled in his spare bedroom or in his rented storage locker. The unit also had great security, and he'd added a few things.

That, plus the solid insurance, helped him sleep at night.

The elevator was blessedly empty, and he made it quickly from the basement to the third floor without interruption. He

loved several of his elderly neighbours, but they did tend to prattle on. Another few people in the building gave him the cold shoulder, so what? *Not worth my time.*

He unlocked the door, plopped the food onto the counter, shed his jacket, and headed straight for the washing machine. He had enough dirty clothes to do an entire load, so that was good. Putting the blue-and-green plaid pajamas in the machine, he set it to cold water and threw in the scent-free laundry soap. Although not overly sensitive himself, he was cautious of those who were. He always respected them—not wanting to cause undue pain.

His food was still warm as he sat on a bar stool by the counter to eat it. He hadn't grabbed the community paper today, so hopefully there'd be one left in the lobby tomorrow morning. Slowly, he was making this town his home, and that meant reading about it whenever he got the chance. Plus, he liked Spring Dixon. The reporter always had a turn of phrase that caught his attention. Creatively reporting the latest news from city hall was a talent.

Done eating, he sorted the containers and eyed the washing machine. He glanced at his watch. He'd made good time with his errands, so had a few minutes to spare. Heading into the living room, he settled in for an episode of *Schitt's Creek*. He'd shower after he tossed his laundry into the dryer.

Meanwhile, he'd try not to obsess about the woman who peppered his thoughts—with her long, softly curled hair, large

expressive eyes, and a smile that would warm him for many a night to come.



CHAPTER THREE

*Y*ou can do this.

And she could. If she could just fight off the nerves. She wanted to chastise herself for the worries, but they were totally legitimate. Every time she embarked on something new, those little butterflies appeared in her belly. She could tell herself a million times that nothing bad was going to happen—because it wasn't—but that small niggle in her brain wouldn't quit.

Todd hadn't planned for anything bad to happen either.

Wrong thought.

She didn't know anyone at the party tonight, but probably would recognize a few by sight. Having worked in the library her entire adult life meant she knew many of the people from town—even if names escaped her.

With determination, she exited her car and crossed the street. The house was decorated spectacularly with an inflatable Santa, reindeer on the roof, a fully decked-out pine

tree, and too many lights to count. On another night, it might've felt garish, but tonight it beckoned her in.

Before she could knock, the door opened and a short, stout woman gestured. Her blonde curls bounced as she bobbed. "So glad you made it."

Loriana didn't know the woman. Did everyone get such a warm welcome?

"May I hug you?"

What? Loriana nodded.

The shorter woman pulled her in for a bone-crushing hug.

Once over the initial shock, Loriana sagged into the woman's embrace. She often offered comfort while at work, but rarely did that involve any kind of physical affection. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd been held.

Way too long.

Finally, the woman pulled back.

"I don't know your name."

The woman grinned. "Sorry, so busy hugging people I forget to introduce myself. I'm Patsy, the Hugging Queen. My husband is Vance. He's around here somewhere."

As if she were able to conjure him, a man appeared.

"Perfect, sweetie, good timing. This nice lady is new. Could you give her a tour?"

Vance was also short, although very slender. He looked like a stiff breeze might knock him over, and his light-brown hair

held definite strands of gray. Easily fifteen years older than the young and vibrant Patsy. He held out his hand to indicate the way.

Loriana followed him into the large home. After toeing off her boots, she trailed the older man up a short flight of stairs in the split-level home.

He pointed to an open door. “You can put your coat in there, and there’s a bathroom just beyond where you can get changed. Just holler when you’re ready.”

Showtime.

Her pale-lavender flannel pajama set featured little white snowflakes. Very modest. Removing her coat took mere moments. Moments she used to center herself. She hadn’t brought a purse, opting only for her license and twenty bucks tucked into an inside pocket. She added her keys to the little stash and then laid the coat on the bed with the others. About fifteen, if her quick count was accurate. She snuck into the bathroom and quickly changed into her pj’s. Then she returned to the bedroom, where she tucked her cloth bag under her coat.

She exited the room to find her host waiting for her.

Beset by nerves, she shadowed him back down the stairs to the main living area, where Patsy enthusiastically greeted an older couple. Okay, so at least she wasn’t going to be the oldest one here. She was still in the early half of her life—she hoped—but more often these days, she was finding herself the oldest in the room. Except when Miss Edna was around, of course.

Vance took a sharp left, leading to another set of stairs. Those ended in a family room with a big-screen television and numerous reclining chairs. Another sharp turn down another set of stairs and finally they arrived at their destination. The floor was littered with mattresses covered in flannel sheets, with blankets strewn about. Around the perimeter of the room were a huge number of folding chairs, stuffed couches, and bean-bag chairs. Almost every seat was full. Ah, nearly twenty people. She'd seen that many RSVP for events in the group, but rarely did everyone turn up. Maybe they did for this event.

Vance pointed to one of the empty chairs.

Loriana was about to take him up on his offer, but she spotted a familiar face next to another empty seat. "Do you mind if I sit there?"

He squinted, then nodded. "You can sit wherever you like." He patted her arm. "We just want you to have fun tonight."

Something told her things were, at the very least, about to get more interesting.

She edged her way around the mattresses, nearly trampling on several toes, before finally making it to the far side of the room and the empty chair. "May I?"

Mitch nodded.

Sitting was easy enough. Figuring out what to do with her hands was a whole other thing. She had a habit of twisting her fingers in her hair when she was nervous. Thankfully, in her dull and staid life, that didn't happen often or she might have

bald patches. “Uh, funny seeing you here.” Yet funny wasn’t quite the right word. She had a sneaking suspicion their running into each other wasn’t a coincidence.

“Lovely to see you again, Loriana.”

His voice was soft and smooth and did all kinds of nice things to her insides. “I don’t remember seeing you on the RSVP list.” She hadn’t memorized the guest list, but the look on his face confirmed his name hadn’t been there when she’d added hers.

“I’ve always been curious, and I’ll admit, when I overheard you speaking to Marnie, my interest was piqued. I decided to check out tonight. I’d hoped to do it unobtrusively, but that doesn’t seem like an option.”

“Participation is voluntary.” She wracked her brain for the exact wording. “You don’t have to cuddle if you don’t want to.”

“I’m not sure they want voyeurs.”

She tilted her head. “I hadn’t thought of that. No, I guess not. But surely if you’re a first-timer then you can sit back and observe.” She’d read that, right? At least she was pretty sure she had. “And if you’re uncomfortable, you can always leave. Nothing says you have to stay.”

He gave her an inscrutable look. “I plan to stay.”

Well, all right then.

The door at the top of the stairs closed and Patsy came down with a huge grin on her face. “I think this is the best

turnout we've ever had, and I see several unfamiliar faces tonight. All very exciting." She made her way to the center of the room. "Those who want to may come and join me while we go over ground rules."

Most of the participants eagerly clambered off their chairs and sat in a circle with Patsy at the perceived head.

Might as well go all in.

She turned to Mitch. "Join me?"

"Glad to."

In a rather undignified manner, they crawled across several mattresses to join the circle. Several people held hands while others sat still.

"I'm a cuddle facilitator." Patsy's grin was wide. "And, as you know, my husband Vance is my partner. We're here to make sure you have a good time and get the most out of the evening." She slapped her hands on her thighs. "Everyone has a different reason for coming out tonight. Some of you are repeat flyers, and we're thrilled to have you. Some of you are new to this, and the only thing you might want to reflect on is why you're here and what you hope to get out of it.

"Ground rules are pretty basic. You have to ask before you touch. Each and every time. You need to receive an enthusiastic verbal *yes* before you proceed. That person has the right to say no, and you have to respect their wishes. You have the same rights. You don't have to agree to anything, and if you're feeling uncertain—if it's a maybe—say no. You can

always change your mind. You're always allowed to change your mind."

Everything Patsy said echoed the literature Loriana'd read, but her mind still churned. Could she actually go through with this? And was it easier because she knew Mitch, or harder because she knew they'd be facing each other in the morning? Her brain was running at such a high intensity, she almost missed the next piece of advice.

"You might become aroused. That's quite normal. It'll pass, I promise you. We don't act on that arousal, and pajamas stay on at all times."

Mitch shifted subtly.

Was he worried about this? It'd been a while for her, that she didn't figure this'd be anything to worry about. Of course she was flattered when men asked her out. And especially touched when a younger woman had. She'd marshalled her surprise and turned her gentle rejection into an offer of friendship. That young woman was getting married next month to a lovely older woman, and here Loriana was, still single. Still yearning. Still unsatisfied.

"...puppy pile."

What the hell?

Mitch leaned over to whisper in her ear, "I'd like to watch that, but I think I'll restrain from jumping in since it's my first time."

Again, she'd read something about puppy piles, but the memory was slipping away. All she could focus on was how close Mitch was to her. He smelled vaguely of, well, man. No chemicals, just a lingering scent she associated with masculinity.

Patsy slapped her hands again. "And, finally, remember that tears and laughter are both welcome. Cuddling brings forth some powerful emotions. Let them wash over you. Take a break if you need to, ask for help if that's what will help you through. Just remember tonight is fun."

Fun.

Huh.

Patsy rose, and immediately people turned to each other. Some whispered while others spoke at normal volume. Lorianca caught the discussion with three people to her right. Questions asked, enthusiastic answers provided, and soon the trio were crawling onto one of the many mattresses. She was about to turn to Mitch when a young man approached her. He couldn't be more than twenty-two, and she didn't recognize him.

"I'm Geoff. With a g." He laughed. Not nervously, but not comfortably either. "I'm from Maple Ridge, but I drive over here because Patsy gives the best parties in the Lower Mainland." He pointed to a spot in front of Lorianca. "May I sit?"

She might not feel an enthusiastic yes, but something about the young man spoke to her inner teacher. "Yes, of course."

She offered a genuine smile, only belatedly realizing Mitch still lingered. She turned to him. “Are you staying?” Was that hope, desperation, or both?

“I thought I’d wander a bit.”

Not everyone had formed groups yet, and perhaps he wanted to make other connections. Although he’d come to see her, maybe he didn’t intend to actually cuddle with her. He’d said he was feeling more like a voyeur tonight. After Patsy’s reminder that anyone could say no at any time, Loriana suspected Mitch would be under no pressure to participate.

Before she could say anything, he rose. He offered her another enigmatic smile before wandering away.

Okay, then.

She turned her attention back to Geoff who’d settled before her. “I’m a newbie. Which, at my age, is really saying something.”

He cocked his head. “I’m not good at guessing people’s ages. I kind of suspected you were new, and I wanted to welcome you. Your friend would’ve been welcome to stay. I’m an equal-opportunity cuddler.”

Was he gay? Or bi?

Doesn’t matter.

“May I hold your hand?” His question was asked softly.

“Of course.” No forced enthusiasm here. Geoff gently took her hand in his. Not as a handshake but with a gentleness that

spoke to her heart.

His left hand supported her right while he stroked gently from her fingers to her wrist.

She wasn't turned on, but she was intrigued. Soon she was leaning into the touch.

"I love your pj's." Again, quiet words.

She couldn't hold back the grin. Her pajamas were plain compared to Geoff's Spiderman onesie. It made him look even younger, and also harmless. She sensed only genuine goodness from him.

"I like yours too."

He pinkened. "I have several superhero ones. I like to rotate."

"Well, they are different. And I like different." She was quick to add that, lest he think she was making fun of him.

His disarming grin assured her he didn't interpret her comment as anything other than a compliment. "May I touch your arm?"

A question she'd never thought to hear. "Yes." She almost added *please*. Something about this young man disarmed her. She was fighting a losing battle to keep her defenses up.

He scooted closer and ran his hand up and down her arm with long gentle strokes.

Part of her was tempted to look around to see what everyone else was doing, but she didn't want to take her focus away

from him. He'd so generously offered, and his touch soothed.

“Would you like a neck massage? You seem tense, which is totally understandable. Or we could lie down. Or I can just keep this up.”

All sounded like great options. This time she looked up and caught Mitch in her peripheral vision. He sat across from an older woman, and although they were engaged in what appeared to be a very intense discussion, they weren't touching.

Pay attention.

“Uh, lying down sounds nice.”

He grinned again. A perpetual and sunny disposition. “Do you prefer to be the big spoon or the little spoon?”

Another question she'd never thought to be asked. She'd assumed she'd be the little spoon, but something in the hitch of his voice had her rethinking that. Plus, it'd give her some element of control. And, finally, she'd never been the big spoon in her life. Few were the times she'd been the little spoon as well, but she wouldn't focus on that now. “Big, please.”

He clapped his hands together softly and rubbed them as if in glee. He pointed to one of the beds and she followed him, crawling on her hands and knees. He positioned himself on the edge facing away from the group. Part of Lorian was disappointed because she wanted to see what was going on—

especially with Mitch—but in this position she'd be focused on Geoff, and wasn't that the point?

Gently she eased in behind him. Although the temperature in the room was quite warm, she shivered.

“We can use a blanket if you want. I didn't want to suggest it because you might not be comfortable, but it's definitely more fun.”

And obviously warmer. She snagged a comforter and drew it over them. She lay her head on the pillow and placed her hand tentatively on Geoff's arm.

“I like that. You can do more if you like or just keep doing that. Anything you're comfortable with.”

You can do this. It's why you came.

She wriggled closer so their bodies were aligned. Geoff was about her height so they fit well together. She tentatively moved her arm under his and placed her hand against his sternum. He gently rested his hand on top of hers, offering unspoken assurance he was happy with what she was doing.

“So, uh, do we talk?” She giggled. Actually giggled. After a moment, she sensed his smile.

“We can do whatever you like. I'm good with twenty questions, a discussion of geopolitics, or just laying here and soaking up some of your positive energy.” He sighed. “From the moment I saw you, I just knew you'd be good at this.”

“Not sure how to interpret that comment.”

“As a compliment. Everyone has a unique aura and gives off a different vibe. Yours is one of the most positive I’ve sensed in this group—and that’s saying something.” He stroked her knuckles. “Now, the guy next to you? Kind of closed off. I suspect he’s also new, and although this is a safe space, it can also be intimidating. Especially if you’re not used to touch. I grew up in a household with plenty. I moved down here from Chetwynd to go to school, and I never went back, but I miss the hugs I used to get from my family.”

“What did you study?” Innocuous, right?

He chuckled. “Sociology with a minor in mathematics. My mother gently suggested it was a complete waste of time, but I work for Statistics Canada, and I have to say I love my job. I help construct surveys and find the results endlessly fascinating.” Another chuckle. “Here I am, rambling on about my job. What do you do?”

“I’m a librarian.”

“You must have stories.”

She did and embarked on telling some of the funnier ones without revealing any identities.



CHAPTER FOUR

Mitch was doing his level best to pay attention to Ardelle, but he was struggling. Oh, the older woman was lovely. With her brown curls with streaks of gray and the crow's feet around her eyes, she had some mileage. She'd attended parties regularly since her divorce.

See, I'm paying attention.

Except he couldn't stop from glancing over at Lorian and Geoff.

"May I touch your arm?"

Ardelle's question caught him unawares. "Yes, certainly." He wasn't feeling enthusiastic, but curiosity warred with the maybe and won out.

She pressed a sturdy hand to his forearm. "Go see how she's doing. Maybe offer to lie next to her. There are plenty of threesomes."

He glanced around. And a foursome, and what he assumed was the puppy pile. At least six people contorted into a pile of

limbs.

Was he that obvious? That he wanted to be near Lorian? That his protective instincts were kicking into high gear? Placing a hand on Ardelle's, he offered a genuine smile. "I don't want to abandon you."

She laughed. "You're not, I promise. Vance assured me a neck rub, and that tickles Patsy to no end." Her eyes grew a little misty. "As long as you're doing it for the right reasons, she'll see you care."

"The right reasons?"

"You know—abiding affection, desire to be close, wanting intimacy—although platonic here, to be sure."

"And the wrong reasons?"

"Jealousy. Desire to dominate. Need to be in charge." Her smile was wistful. "Most people don't come here looking for a caveman, if you know what I mean."

He did. He appreciated her articulating those thoughts, because although he wasn't jealous per se—he was concerned.

Ardelle squeezed his arm. "I've known Geoff for several years. He's as safe as they come. Your friend is in excellent hands."

He couldn't see what was going on beneath the comforter, but Lorian's head appeared relaxed on the pillow. No, he couldn't argue with Ardelle's assertion that all was well. "Do you think I'd be welcomed?"

She tilted her head. “You do what feels right. You can sit next to me while I get my neck massage and look around so it’s not obvious what you’re doing, or you can get up the gumption to go over and ask to join. Geoff’s an equal opportunity cuddler, so don’t worry about him. Last month there were four single men, and they all got together.”

Mitch raised an eyebrow.

“Nah, they weren’t all gay. Just that women were fewer, and the men weren’t going to miss out on the opportunity for some quality cuddling.”

He hadn’t expected such enlightenment, but he wasn’t surprised either. “Thank you.” Quietly said.

Ardelle’s smile was wide. “If you come back another night, we might do a puppy pile together.”

He wasn’t sure about that, but would he return? His gut instinct told him it’d depend on how his relationship with Loriana was progressing.

Progressing? Hell, it hadn’t even started. Yet the undeniable pull was there, and he again glanced over at her. He turned back to Ardelle. “May I give you a hug?” Not just because he felt he owed her some kind of physical affection, mind, but because she’d given him plenty to think about. And encouragement he really needed.

She nodded vigorously, but instead of allowing herself to be enfolded, she wrapped her arms around him. Although unexpected, it wasn’t unpleasant. She smelled faintly of roses

—a scent he associated with his mother—and he was thrown back into a memory of the woman who had raised him until she was gone too soon under tragic circumstances and, as with every other time he remembered her, he choked up.

“I hope you find happiness,” Ardelle whispered into his ear.

Before he could respond, she let him go, rose, and headed over to Vance who greeted her with a beaming smile.

You can do this.

Perhaps he *had* to do this would be more precise. Because he wasn't a chickenshit. Or at least he hadn't been. Maybe he should've stayed in California and fought.

So not the time.

Action now—wallowing later.

He managed to shuffle his way over to the bed in the far corner. He was debating the best approach, but when he knelt on the far corner of the mattress, Lorian turned. Her expression turned from wary to welcoming in a heartbeat.

“Mitch.” Soft and warm.

She patted the space behind her. “Join us.” She held up a finger. “Sorry, one moment.” She turned and whispered something into Geoff's ear.

He propped himself on one elbow and glanced back over at Mitch. “Oh, he's more than welcome to join us.”

Mitch would consider the enthusiasm later. For now, he accepted the offer, raising the comforter and crawling in

behind Lorian. When he began to settle, she threw a glance over her shoulder. "You can get closer." Pause. "If you want." Almost as an afterthought.

Well, he most certainly wanted.

He eased himself so he lay flush against her. He pressed his chest against her back and placed his hand on her arm. She snagged it and, to his surprise, pulled it under her arm and placed his hand on her chest. Below her collarbone but above her breasts. Then she melted back against him so there wasn't a breath of space between them. He lowered his head to the pillow and sniffed her hair.

Creepy much?

And yet not. He'd struggled to identify that hint of something earlier. Strawberry? Raspberry? Definitely something from the edible side. Made him want to nibble on her. She'd tucked her hair under her head, so he had the most perfect view of her delicate neck and earlobe. He'd never bitten a woman's earlobe before, but the urge was gnawing at him. She fit so perfectly against him. Their thighs touched, and her ass pressed against his groin.

Don't get hard. Don't get hard. Don't...

Fuck.

It happened. The thing he dreaded the most. Part of him was relieved he could still get hard, and part of him was horrified because this was so not the time and place. He started to ease away when she reached out and pressed a hand to his thigh.

“It’ll pass.” Her words were soft.

Geoff chuckled. “It does, I promise.”

Heat burned in Mitch’s cheeks. Bad enough Loriana felt his erection, worse still that Geoff now knew about it. He wanted to pull back. Wanted to make an excuse and leave. But he’d been welcomed by these two, and since this was probably going to be the closest he ever get to Loriana, he’d have to make the best of it.

He tried to focus on his other senses. He heard soft murmurs and plenty of laughter. He flashed to the puppy pile and wondered what it’d be like to join them. He remembered Ardelle’s kindness in encouraging him to come over, and besides the erection that was slowly waning, he couldn’t regret the decision. Then he reviewed all the specs for the work tomorrow, estimating how long the entire installation would take. If he shaved a few minutes off each station, he might be able to fit in one more. Of course that meant less time with the lovely Loriana and the enigmatic Marnie.

Could he find a way to prolong that contact? Because the last thing he wanted was to say goodbye on Monday and never see the women again. Okay, if he was brutally honest, his life would carry on much as it had if he never saw the raven-haired beauty again. But this feisty redhead? No, not a redhead. Auburn with flecks of gold. Did her hair lighten in the summer?

“Mitch.”

Her tone led him to believe this was not the first time she'd called his name. "Sorry, yes?"

"It's okay." Again, tender and soft. "I was just telling Geoff how much I'm enjoying this."

He didn't miss the hitch in her voice. A warning of sorts. Unbidden, he almost asked how long it'd been for her. Since someone had held her. Made her feel safe. Made her feel treasured.

And for him? Months since he'd been with a woman. Perhaps he'd never been so intimate. Especially with all his clothes on.

His senses went on high alert when Lorianana tensed. Subtle, but there nonetheless. Had Geoff done something? Had he done something?

Then she sniffed.

In that moment, everything came into sharp focus. He grasped her closer, and she held on tight to his hand. Each sniff broke his heart and each shudder-wracked sob broke his soul. He had no idea why she was crying. He couldn't even remember what they'd been talking about. She'd been smiling when she'd asked him to join her, and now she was sobbing quietly.

Movement drew his attention as Geoff gently extricated himself. "I'll go grab tissues." He offered a sympathetic smile as he stepped away.

Feeling helpless, yet knowing now was the moment to step up, Mitch held her close. “You can let it out, Loriana. Whatever you’ve been holding inside, it’s okay to feel that. To embrace it.” God, was he saying the right things? A crying woman was so out of his wheelhouse. He remembered his mother crying when he was a young boy and trying to comfort her. He felt as powerless now as he had back then.

Geoff returned with a box of tissues and a sympathetic Patsy. She crouched before Loriana and took one of the tissues, handing it to the sobbing woman.

“I’m so—” Hiccup. “—sorry—” Sob. “—embarrassed.” Sniffle.

“Here, now, young lady, none of that.” Patsy settled in. “May I touch you?”

A vigorous nod.

The older woman took Loriana’s hand in hers. “There’s a reason I give that warning before every party. Intimacy draws on deep emotions. Especially ones we’ve pushed down for days or months or even years. Touch can unleash that pain. What you’re going through is perfectly normal. Healthy even.”

This felt far too precarious and intimate to Mitch, so he tried to pull back.

Loriana gripped him tighter.

Patsy met his gaze and held it for a moment. Conveying a message or just acknowledging his presence? He wasn’t sure.

“Do you want to talk about it or just let it ride? There’s no right answer to that question and you’ve got two wonderful men and myself. We can all listen, or you can choose, or we can let it rest for tonight.”

“I can’t.” A broken whisper. “I just can’t.”

“Perfectly acceptable answer.” Patsy adjusted herself to a more comfortable position. “We’ll just hang here for a bit.”

Loriana shifted to move. “I should get going.”

Patsy tiskied. “Your choice, of course. Everyone is always free to leave. But you have three people worried about your safety. They’d prefer to see you calmer before you drive off.”

Thank heavens Patsy was in charge. Mitch would never’ve had the strength to convince Loriana to stay if she wanted to go, but he’d worry about her.

Another hiccup. “I guess I’ll stay. But I don’t need everyone watching over me. I’ll be okay.”

“Yes, I believe you will.” Patsy pressed a palm to the other woman’s cheek. “How do you want to do this?”

A heartbreaking moment later, she whispered, “Just Mitch.”

His gaze shot to Patsy who gave him a reassuring smile. “I think you’ve made an excellent decision. And I think Geoff’s itching to join the puppy pile.”

Geoff smiled and, briefly, met Mitch’s gaze. “Another time.” Then he moved out of sight, and within moments giggles erupted.

Patsy's smile was wistful. "Such a lovely young man. Always a favorite."

Mitch could appreciate why. Geoff'd been the first to approach Loriana, greeting her with a hearty but gentle welcome. He'd cuddled with her. Then he'd sought the right help at the right time, never making her feel silly for her emotions. At some point, Mitch would have to thank the young man.

Who was only a handful of years younger than himself, but the difference felt monumental.

Patsy placed the box of tissue beside the mattress and rose. Not gracefully, but with some dignity, given her age. She gave them one last smile and moved away.

He held himself still as his flattened palm still rested on Loriana's chest.

One of her hands grasped it, while the other handled the tissues. "I'm sorry." Another broken whisper.

"Please don't be." He wanted to do so much more. "Like Patsy said, it's normal. She said it might happen, and it did. She also warned about laughter, and I think that's okay as well. I'm grateful you want me to stay..." He wanted to explain he wasn't sure what to do, but that felt like the wrong approach. She needed assurances, not his self-doubt.

"You barely know me."

Here he could respond truthfully. "True enough. But I can sense your empathy a mile away. You care about people. I see

how you are with Marnie. And I saw you interacting with other people. You deal with the public all day, every day, and yet you never seem to tire of it.”

She snickered. “There are days.”

As he’d suspected there would be. But work felt like a safe topic. “And yet I’ll bet you never lose your proverbial cool. You’ll always be professional. Now, you might scream later —”

“I do not scream—”

“Or take it out on some poor punching bag—”

“I’m not a boxer—”

“But you’ll come back to work in the morning ready to put on a smile and lend a helping hand to everyone in need.”

Another sniff. “Okay, I might resemble that remark.”

Yes. “How did you wind up choosing to be a librarian?”

A shrug. “I love books. I mean, as a kid I devoured multiples a day. That continued on into my teen years, so studying literature was a no-brainer. From there it just flowed into library science. The profession wasn’t so technologically based fifteen years ago as it is now. I’ve learned to adapt.”

“You kept those computers going long past their expiry date.”

Another shrug. “That’s what we do. We get creative. We find innovative solutions. We keep trying new things until something works. Then we recycle that over and over again.”

The note of pride in her voice was unmistakable.

She squeezed his hand. “I do need to be going. I start a bit later tomorrow because of the Christmas Parade, but I still want to be on hand while you install the machines.”

“Because you don’t trust me, or because you want to ogle me?”

A distinctive chuckle. “Maybe a bit of both.” She lifted his hand to her lips and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “Thank you.”

The profound gratitude was unmistakable.

He eased his hand away and let her sit up on her own. He also sat, giving her the space she needed but staying close. He yearned to continue touching her. To continue trying to soothe—even as he felt inadequate to the task.

She wouldn’t meet his gaze at first, and he wanted to tilt her chin up, but that involved touching. That meant asking, and now didn’t seem the right moment for that.

Then, at length, she raised her chin.

Her soulful dark-brown eyes were red, her lids swollen, her cheeks hectic with color, and her lips puffy. Despite all this, she’d never looked more beautiful to him.

She held up the used tissues. “I’m a mess.”

Perhaps, but a beautiful mess.

So inappropriate.

“I think if you leave them on the plastic chair, Patsy will find them and give them a good send-off.”

A small smile.

“Why don’t we head upstairs and find our coats? I didn’t realize we were supposed to bring our pajamas here to change, so I wore them. I got at least one odd glance while going to my car.”

“I need to get changed.” She exhaled. “I suppose I could’ve worn them. I live in a house, so I’d only have to scoot between the car and the side door. I would’ve been more concerned about getting from the street to here.”

“Something tells me the neighbors are used to this.”

Another small smile. “Yes, I suspect you’re probably right.” She pushed herself up onto her knees and then rose, still a little unsteady.

He followed as quickly as he could and had a grasp on her elbow to steady her.

“My Galahad.”

Huh?

His look of confusion must’ve conveyed his uncertainty because she explained.

“A knight from King Arthur’s Round Table. The gallant one. Also the name of the cat in one of my favorite thriller series by J.D. Robb, and I’m sure you don’t want to hear about that.”

“I want to hear about anything you’ll tell me. I find you fascinating.” *Perhaps a little too honest?*

Her initial expression was skeptical, but it quickly morphed to a shy smile. “You know, I think I believe you.” She moved to the edge of the mattress and led him through to the stairs.

Various groups still cuddled, and now he got a good look at the puppy pile where Geoff was, in fact, clearly enjoying himself.

Could I ever do that?

Doubtful. The amount of trust involved was pretty amazing. To let five strangers be able to lay hands on him. That being said, he’d quite enjoyed being the outside of a Lorianana sandwich. Even if things’d gone sideways, he’d have wonderful memories to cling to. When she left his life, and he went back to his solitary existence.

He followed behind her as she walked up the three sets of stairs before getting to the bedroom. She snagged a cloth bag and stepped into the bathroom.

Am I supposed to wait?

Well, he would. He grabbed his winter jacket and pulled it on.

Lorianana returned and nabbed a navy-blue coat that went almost to her ankles while his jacket barely covered his ass. Hardly surprising his neighbor’d looked at him funny.

“You have a purse?” Several were strewn about. A trusting group of people.

She shook her head. From an inside pocket of her coat, she pulled out a set of keys. “I tend to travel light.”

He could see that about her. Not making a snap judgement—but she didn’t wear make-up, and didn’t seem the type to fuss over things. The last woman he’d dated seriously had carried everything possible in her purse and could’ve used the thing as a lethal weapon if anyone ever tried to get fresh with her. One bop to the head, and the guy’d be out cold.

After palming his own keys, he met her gaze. “May I walk you to your car? I’d offer to drive you home—”

“No, I’m good.”

As he’d suspected. Whatever she’d endured had passed, and she was back on an even keel. “Fair enough.” He followed her as she left the room.

Vance and Patsy were at the front door to greet them.

Mitch and Loriana put on their boots, then Loriana tucked her hair behind her ear. “I’m so sorry.”

Patsy clucked. “Don’t you be worrying about that, my dear. I’m just hoping you’ll come back. Next party is on December 31st. A New Year’s Eve celebration.”

“I’ll have to, um, think about it.”

Not an outright refusal, but not an enthusiastic yes.

“May I hug you?”

To Mitch’s surprise, Loriana asked this of Patsy.

The older woman held out her arms and Loriana stepped into the embrace.

Vance held out his hand to Mitch. “Or we can hug it out.”

Normally it would’ve been a hard *no* but Mitch took a moment to consider before offering his hand for a shake. By the time Loriana was finished with Patsy’s hug, the men had shook.

Loriana stepped over to him, and Mitch instinctively put his arm around her. Not something he’d ever consider doing, even with someone he was dating, but it felt right. Like she needed to know she had his full support. Like he was staking that little claim on her, if only in the moment.

Vance opened the door and a wall of cold air hit them.

The temperature had dropped precipitously.

Mitch glanced at Loriana’s boots, glad to see they looked sturdy. Nothing drove him crazier than women wearing high heels at inappropriate moments. On a frigid night like tonight, no sense doing anything but sensible.

With one last wave to the older couple, Loriana headed down the walkway, him at her side. When they got to the street, she pointed to a mid-size sedan.

Practical. And, yep, a hybrid. So good for the environment.

She disarmed the alarm, and he opened the door for her.

“Do you mind if I follow you home? Or is that too creepy?”

She didn't hesitate. "Of course you can follow me home. I mean, I don't need you to, but I get the feeling you're someone who might worry, and I don't want to be the cause of worry to anyone."

"So you'll remember to call Marnie?"

She guffawed. A truly magical sound. "Just how much did you overhear?"

"Is there a safe answer to that question?"

"No, probably not."

Her face was partly in shadow due to their distance from the streetlamp, but he couldn't miss her smile.

"Thank you for following me here, tonight. And thank you for following me home. And thank you for the work you're doing at the library. I guess that's about all the thanks. Unless I've missed something."

"No, Lorian, I believe you've covered everything. And all of it was my pleasure. I was happy to get the job, but now I've gotten so much more."

"Yeah, like you can check cuddle party off your bucket list."

"That's very true." A bucket list that'd shrunk in size relative to his new reality. He didn't believe in reaching for the unattainable anymore. Better to stick to reasonable goals and keep expectations low.

She met his gaze for a moment, then leaned toward him.

He reciprocated, unsure of where she was leading, then his eyes widened when she pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek.

She tucked herself into her car, closed the door, and turned the engine on.

He quickly sprinted over to his van and climbed in. He gunned the engine and set defrost on full while he watched her car closely. She didn't pull out right away so was likely having to defrost her car as well. Something he definitely missed about California—few nights below freezing and little snow. Little precipitation at all these days.

The southern coast of British Columbia had been rainy the past few months, and winter precipitation was forecasted to be heavy. Rain down in Vancouver and snow in the mountains.

He had his humble van with newly installed snow tires. Hopefully that'd get him through the winter without any major incidents. He hadn't had a car when he lived in Vancouver all those years ago. He'd taken enough lessons to pass his test, then had hoofed it everywhere while in school.

In California, everyone drove. Or at least where he'd been living. Mission City was too small to support a major transportation hub, and his work often took him farther afield. And carrying multiple computers on the bus wasn't practical, so he'd traded in his sports car and bought this boring and eminently practical van.

Fortunately, when Lorian pulled out, his windshield was clear. He followed her closely, careful to keep just the right amount of distance. They exited the subdivision, and she

headed back toward the city center. As they drove down Cedar Street, he gave thanks there was no ice.

She made another turn, onto 7th, and then a couple of blocks later, down James Street.

By the time she pulled up to her little house on Fourth Avenue, he was stunned. Mere blocks from his condo, and well within walking distance of the library.

She pulled up her into driveway and tucked her car under the carport. She exited the vehicle, gave him a wave, unlocked her door, and slipped inside.

The light in the living room came on.

The sheers were drawn, and he debated waiting until she pulled the drapes, but she might look out and then he would be like the voyeur he professed to not wanting to be.

Putting the van in gear, he headed home.



CHAPTER FIVE

L oriana gazed into Marnie's blazing green eyes and sighed inwardly.

Shit.

Yep, I've messed up.

Big time.

Her employee rarely got riled. Just not her jam. Helped keep things on an even keel at work, and contrasted with Johanna, their fiery assistant who worked evenings and alternate weekends.

"I meant to call. I swear."

Marnie tapped her foot.

"Mitch even reminded me to, but I just forgot. I'm sorry. Really sorry."

"Mitch?" Marnie pitched her voice low even though they were alone in the back room. "What does Mitch have to do with this?"

“He, uh, might’ve been at the party with me?”

“Was that a question or a statement?” Those green eyes still blazed.

“Both?” God, she was all flustered, and that wasn’t like her. She was known for being unflappable. Right now, she was seriously flapped.

This ire was also completely not like the Marnie she knew. Normally a mouse, she was showing her mama lioness this morning.

“I...something happened, and I kind of lost control of my emotions, then I got them back under control, and I drove home with Mitch following me, and I was so exhausted I went right to bed and fell right asleep.” Literally. Her head hit the pillow, and she’d been out.

One eyebrow arched. “You lost control of your emotions?” Marnie’s expression took on concern. “That doesn’t sound like you. You’re always on such an even keel. Did something happen? Did someone touch you? Oh my God, are you okay now? Should you even be here?”

The escalation of panic stunned Loriana. Again, so not like Marnie.

She longed to reach out to comfort the young woman, but very early on she’d figured out Marnie couldn’t stand to be touched. By anyone. Loriana respected that boundary fiercely and was protective of Marnie, ready to step in lest anyone step out of line. Fortunately it’d never come to that.

Marnie never put herself in a position where someone might be able to reach out and touch her.

No, that wasn't true. The toddlers in the Toddlers and Books program were free to touch her, and she reciprocated with them. Would she ever tolerate touch from an adult?

"I'm fine." Such a banal word. "Nothing inappropriate happened. Everyone there behaved entirely appropriately. Mitch was a gentleman."

"Yet something upset you."

Man, she's not going to let this drop.

"Let's just say I was triggered and flooded with unhappy memories. That led me down a dark path and the tears were an unintended by-product. But it won't happen again. I'll be prepared next time."

"You're going back?" Disbelief. "You said you were triggered." Marnie's gaze cut away to the door, to the ceiling, to the window overseeing the front stairs, and finally back to Lorian. "It's none of my business, of course. But do you want to, I don't know, talk about it?"

She wasn't sure she'd ever seen the younger woman more discomfited—and that was saying something. She could share, of course. But that might trigger Marnie in turn. Whatever spooked the younger woman, it was never far away.

Plastering on her bravest smile, she offered, "it's really not necessary. I appreciate the offer, but I don't need to go over it again. It's in the past. I've moved on."

Another arched eyebrow.

Give her something.

“I knew someone. A long time ago. Things happened, and although I’ve accepted that, it sometimes catches me when I’m not expecting it.”

Marnie’s eyes grew wide. “Did this person hurt you?” Her tone left no room for misinterpretation.

“No, no, nothing like that.”

The relief was unmistakable. Which only led to more questions. Why had Marnie’s mind gone there first? Why was she always so on edge? Maybe the answer was obvious, but Loriana didn’t want to make assumptions without facts.

She had to get them off this topic. “Do we have everything ready for tonight?”

The other woman’s scowl didn’t lessen. “You know we do.”

“Oh, there’s Deanne. She was just here yesterday, so I’d better go make sure everything is okay.”

Totally lame, but a valid excuse. The older mother had visited with her daughter Calleigh yesterday and rarely visited on days when Toddlers and Books wasn’t running.

Loriana left the back room with a huge smile on her face.

Deanne’s responding smile was just as wide.

“You’re back.” The librarian rounded the circulation desk to find little Calleigh strapped into her stroller.

The two-year-old had a wicked grin on her face and extended her arms upon seeing Loriana.

Loriana checked with Deanne first and, upon receiving permission, unbelted Calleigh and pulled her into an embrace. “Hello, darling girl, nice to see you back so soon.”

“Ba ba ba.”

“Yes, you’re back.” She turned her attention to Deanne. “Everything okay?”

The woman smiled warmly. “We were in town for Calleigh’s checkup, and I thought we could drop in here.”

“Everything’s good, I assume.” Because it had to be. Loriana loved these children as her own, and anything happening to them would be devastating.

“She’s fine.” Deanne ruffled Calleigh’s hair, and the young girl batted her mother’s hand away. “Rusty Stevens was also at the doctor’s office.”

“Is something wrong with Mira?” Rusty’s daughter was the same age as Calleigh.

Deanne shook her head. “I shouldn’t say anything. I mean, it’s not my place. But I’m worried about him.”

Loriana nodded. “This have something to do with his wife?”

“Well, yes.” She glanced around to make sure no one could overhear. “His wife was there, and she looked very ill. Rusty was holding Mira and soothing her while the woman just sat there.”

Knowing Deanne's strong protective nature, Loriana saw the problem. "You think there's something wrong."

"Well, yes." She cleared her throat. "Rusty's said a few things over the last few months. About how tough parenting is. He even let slip he wished he had help. I wanted to point out he had a wife, but something told me to hold my tongue and now I'm glad I did. I just..." She patted down her dark curly hair. Such a contrast to Calleigh's fine blonde hair. "Do you think I should offer to help? Albert and I are so lucky—having everything we could possibly need and more. Calleigh's such a calm baby, and my other daughter Remy secured a job in the prosecutor's office...well, I feel incredibly blessed."

Loriana understood that well.

Deanne and Albert were pillars of the community—known for their generous donations and acts of charity. Rusty was a proud man who wouldn't accept charity—even if he needed it. The puzzle was how Sissy Stevens fit into the picture.

Loriana knew Sissy, of course.

The young woman grew up in Mission City, the only daughter of a known alcoholic who was often neglectful. She and Rusty'd married right after high school. The pregnancy after a few years been a surprise, but they both appeared happy. Since Mira's birth? No happiness.

The few times Loriana glimpsed Sissy, the woman did not, as Deanne pointed out, look well.

Rusty never missed a Toddler and Books session while Sissy had never appeared at one.

“Maybe offer to have Mira over more often? Calleigh loves her company—so make it clear he’d be doing you a favor if you could borrow her for a few hours a couple of times a week.”

Deanne’s dark eyes lit. “That’s a brilliant suggestion. I don’t have his phone number, but I’ll talk to him next week to see if we can plan a Christmas playdate. Oh, Calleigh would love that.”

The toddler, who’d been quiet, looped her arms around Loriana’s neck and cuddled close.

Loriana pressed a kiss to the top of her head, inhaling the sweet baby smell.

“You’re so good with her.”

She heard the unspoken question. Why did she not have children of her own? Her biological clock must be ticking, so why wasn’t she marrying and popping out babies? Some patrons were direct, while others like Deanne and Miss Edna, were more circumspect.

“Sorry to interrupt.”

The voice yanked her right out of her introspection and back into the real world.

Mitch stood off to the side looking decidedly uncomfortable.

“Yes, Mitch.” She shook herself mentally. “I apologize. Deanne St. Claire, this is Mitch Alexander. He’s very kindly installing new computers generously given to the library by an anonymous donor.”

Deanne smiled warmly. “If I’d known the library needed new computers, I would’ve helped. Glad to hear someone stepped up.”

And although Loriana knew Deanne had money, she’d never directly solicit a patron. She counted on city hall, and that’d been a disaster. Next time she’d go to the local paper to get the word out.

Mitch offered a smile in return. He towered over the petite older woman. “I need someone to login and check to make certain the system is running properly. Marnie’s assisting someone else. I can wait, of course.”

“No, I’m happy to do it.” She attempted to extricate herself from Calleigh’s firm grasp.

The toddler was not happy at this turn of events and yowled when Loriana placed her firmly in Deanne’s arms.

“Nice to see you again, Deanne. Looking forward to Tuesday.” She could barely be heard over Calleigh’s cries of protest.

As always, Deanne was calm and collected. She shushed the toddler while strapping her into the stroller and was expertly maneuvering them out of the library within moments.

The silence left in their wake was as deafening as the crying had been.

“Okay, so which computer did you want me to check?”

Mitch cringed. “I’m sorry. It probably could’ve waited.”

She waved him off. “No worries about that. There’s rarely a good time to separate me from Calleigh.”

“You’re good with her.”

Exactly what Deanne had said earlier.

“It’s an illusion. I’m great with them in small snippets, but terrible if left alone for extended periods of time.”

He cocked his head.

“I love children, don’t get me wrong, but not my own.”

“You have children you don’t love?” His voice reflected the incredulity on his face.

“What? Oh, no, nothing like that. I love children. I adore Calleigh and Mira, another young girl her age. And I can tolerate them in small amounts. An hour or two at most, and then I’m grateful to give them back. I have a low tolerance for extended periods of time with children.”

“So you don’t have children?”

The smile she bestowed upon him was genuine. “No, I don’t. Thank goodness. Never had a hankering to either. I love my job, and that’s enough exposure to children, thank you very much.”

Mitch indicated which computer he needed her to check, and she sat.

“But you’d feel differently if they were your own kids, right?”

She logged into the system. “That’s what everyone says, but have they ever proven that scientifically? That if you don’t want children then having some of your own will make you change your mind?”

“I... Huh.”

After clicking the mouse a few times, she executed several commands. “And I don’t go around advertising the fact I don’t want children, but I do get tired of everyone assuming they know why I don’t have them. Or trying to drop broad hints that I should get married because then I’ll want them or even that single women can adopt or have babies on their own.”

Another few keystrokes. “The hints have been getting stronger over the past few years. I’ve considered marching down to the paper and writing an essay about how not every woman wants to be a mother and that there’s nothing wrong with that.” Another flourish of keystrokes.

“Besides, the earth can’t handle the population she has now, and we keep adding people by the billions. Her resources are going to run out, and by then we’ll have warmed the planet so much it’ll be uninhabitable and yeah, there’s Mars, but that’s not the point. We should treasure the world now and the last thing she needs is everyone popping out babies willy-nilly.”

She glanced up at Mitch. “Cat got your tongue?”

He shook his head as if clearing away cobwebs. “No, Lorian. I am just not accustomed to women being so forthright about their future plans.” He pursed his lips. “No, that’s not true. A few women at my old workplace weren’t planning on having children. Some because of their jobs, and others for more personal reasons. I never asked, because it’s none of my business. I honestly just thought you were good with the baby.”

Crap.

Sometimes her militancy overtook good common sense. “I think I’ve done everything here. Do you need anything else?”

His eyes crinkled when he smiled. “Have lunch with me?”

Instinctively she checked her watch. Yep, lunchtime. “Sure, where do you want to go? I only have half an hour.”

“Subway? My treat.”

The feminist in her bristled at the offer but she could counter. “You pay today—I pay Monday.”

“I might be finished by tonight. Mightn’t need to have to come back Monday.”

“So we’ll go to dinner. To celebrate the new computers.”

“Will Marnie be joining us?”

“I’ll ask her. We can have a night out.” She’d ask—and Marnie’d decline. Another pattern they’d established early on. Marnie never went out. With anyone. And Lorian’d keep

inviting her on the off-chance the woman might forget to be skittish and actually say yes.

Never going to happen.

She rose, and as Mitch did some last things with the workstation, she went to grab her coat and gloves.

The temperature was only slightly warmer today than it'd been last night, and the meteorologists were predicting snow for tonight's parade. The kids'd love it, but it'd be a pain for the adults.

She'd found it in the budget to buy wands with stars at the end and had the library logo embossed on each one. So the kids could make their own wishes. She hoped it went over well. Some years she got it right, and sometimes she missed the mark.

Marnie was returning to the circulation desk as Loriana left the back room, managing to put on her coat and walking at the same time. "Mitch and I are going to Subway. We'll be back in thirty."

"Take your time." Marnie gestured to the mostly empty library. "Everyone's getting ready for the parade tonight." She fingered a book. "Anything you need me to help you prep for?"

"I think I'm all set, but thanks for the offer. Johanna and I are good to go."

"Well, that's great."

Something in Marnie's tone caught her attention.

The younger woman would be pulling the wagon while Loriana and Johanna handed out gifts for the kids. Marnie could manage the interactions in the library, but the idea of being around hundreds of strangers made her pale and look like she was going to pass out.

Loriana hadn't even bothered to extend the invitation to hand out gifts this year.

Should I?

The invitation was on the tip of her tongue when Mitch arrived. He also put on his gloves, then offered Marnie a wide smile. "Sorry we're abandoning you. But we'll make it up to you on Monday night?"

Loriana cursed under her breath. The warning should've been the first thing out of her mouth when she'd spotted the younger woman.

"What's Monday?" A deep furrow of concern.

"We're going out to celebrate the installation of the computers." He gestured broadly. "The three of us. Unless either or both of you ladies have partners. Then we can—"

"We're both single," Loriana rushed to assure him. Assure him? No, inform him. Because it didn't matter one way or the other.

Right?

"I, uh, well..."

Marnie's struggle was so apparent, Loriana's heart ached. "We'll play it by ear. Monday's a long way off." She nudged Mitch. "We better get going."

"Sure." He said the words with an amiable smile.

Loriana didn't miss the flicker in his eyes. She gave one last wave to Marnie as they headed out. The automatic doors swished open, and they were hit with a wall of cold air. "I do love this time of year."

Mitch glanced down at her. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. Snow, Christmas, New Year's. A sense of renewal."

"Cold, slush, and ice."

She arched a brow. "Well, it's better than the dead of summer when it's too hot and humid to do anything."

"Yeah." He scrunched his nose. "Yeah, not so much. I love the heat."

"On that we'll have to agree to disagree."

They walked the two blocks to the restaurant in silence. Loriana made mental calculations about how the night would go, while enjoying the decorations on all the street lamps on Main Street.

Mission City council might scrimp on some things, but they went all-out with their Christmas decorations. All the parked cars would be replaced with families hunkered down ready to watch the parade—waiting for the mythical Santa Claus.

Loriana might've stopped believing decades ago, but she did still have faith in the magic of this season. She just hoped they made it through in one piece. Things were always crazy in so many ways.

Mitch held the door open for her, and she bestowed her warmest smile upon him. He wasn't classically handsome, but he cut a fine figure. Even in jeans and a button-down shirt, he made her heart do a little pitter patter.

Totally inappropriate.

He wasn't truly an employee, but her having any lascivious thoughts wasn't right. Plus, the man'd seen her break down last night. Oh, and she didn't date. Ever.

She ordered her veggie sub while Mitch went for the meatballs.

He gave her a sheepish shrug.

"You need sustenance," she assured him, scratching her itchy nose. Going into a warm space after being out in the cold always made her nose itch.

"But meat's bad for the environment."

She couldn't argue. "I've been known to eat meat on occasion, so no worries. No judgement here."

Mitch paid, and they made their way over to a table looking out over First Avenue.

Half of the meal was consumed in silence before she ventured a question. "How long have you been in town? I

mean, you might've grown up here, and I just didn't see you before but..." Was she blushing?

"Tall Black man. Kind of hard to miss." He offered a sheepish grin. "I grew up in Strathcona in East Vancouver. Went to BCIT and was poached by a computer firm out in California. Lived there for almost eight years before coming back here two months ago."

"So why not back to Vancouver?" She thought the question innocuous, but he winced.

"Have you seen Vancouver real estate prices?" He shook his head. "I wouldn't even be able to afford a studio, let alone a two bedroom with a good storage locker." He fingered his sandwich before putting it back down.

He looked almost broken.

"My dad and I are estranged, and that was my primary connection to Vancouver. I mean, I have a few friends, but I needed a fresh start. Mission City offered me that. I considered the interior or northern B.C., but I wanted to stay close to Vancouver. This town is the perfect solution."

Pretty words, but such pain beneath them. "I'm sorry about your dad." Always an awkward thing to say.

"Thanks." He swept a crumb off the table. "We weren't close. Now, my mom..." He winced. "We were much closer. Or at least that's how I remember it. She died when I was eight. She was pregnant, and something went wrong, and the baby didn't survive. She came home, but things were never the

same. She cried a lot and didn't start living again. My dad would yell at her, but she didn't care. She didn't care about any of it. Eventually I guess she'd had enough. She killed herself."

Oh Jesus.

"And I guess, well." He cleared his throat. "My dad wasn't the warmest of guys when I was growing up, but I think that loss broke him. He blamed the doctors, the system, the Man. And I think there was plenty of blame to go around. I didn't understand the specifics, but I did remember my mother pleading with her doctor on the phone when she was pregnant—telling the guy something was wrong. Eventually she went to the hospital, but by then it was too late. When she came home without a baby, I understood. I might've been eight, but I got it. We never talked about it. Only when I was clearing out my stuff for the move to California did I find out it'd been a baby girl."

Unbidden, pain ripped through her. She hadn't known anything like this kind of loss. Her loss had been bad enough, but she hadn't faced demons like these. On instinct, she reached out to place a hand on Mitch's. She hadn't asked permission, and it'd been within his rights to rebuff her, but he didn't.

He turned his hand so their palms touched. They locked gazes. His eyes shimmered, but he didn't cry. Not like she had last night, anyway.

“Again, I’m sorry for what you went through. That must’ve been traumatizing.”

“More than twenty-years ago now.” His smile was tentative—and a little watery—but it was there. “Life throws us some funny curveballs. We think we’re headed in one direction but then something changes, and we find ourselves starting over again.”

Circling back to why he was in Mission City. His logic for choosing the town was sound, but he wasn’t sharing everything.

Nosy. You’re being nosy. Look how much he’s already given you.

She wasn’t always good at backing off.

“You’re Mission City born and bred?”

She’d let him change the subject. “Yes. Went to the University of British Columbia for an undergrad degree in English literature and then did my Master of Library Sciences. I did a year at the Carnegie Library in downtown Vancouver before a position opened up here, and I moved home.”

His eyes nearly bugged out of his head. “You worked in the Downtown East Side? Seriously?”

“Uh, seriously.” She folded the paper wrapper. “I wanted to do some good, and I think I did, but—as you know—life is rough down there. I tried, but I was just one in a long line of do-gooders. Maybe if I’d stayed longer, I might’ve had an impact, but fighting that kind of poverty and deprivation is

exhausting. I was relieved when the opportunity to come home arose. I leapt at the chance and haven't looked back. I donate to several charities working down there, but I don't go back." Her cheeks heated. "I don't even drive down Hastings Street. I use First Avenue and cut up Québec Street."

"That's a bit of a detour."

"True. Some realities are harder to face than others."

"Now *that* I understand."

His expression assured her that he did. He wasn't judging her. That didn't stop her from judging herself. A year of working downtown had taught her a lot about life in a big city when survival was the only plan. She'd gotten to know one young woman who'd come in daily looking for shelter and to talk about her problems.

Then one day she hadn't come in.

A week later, Loriana found out the woman had overdosed alone in a room.

It'd taken three days to find her.

Irrationally, Loriana wondered if things would have been different if she'd said something that first morning, although the woman'd likely already been dead. And in those previous conversations? Could she've said something that made a difference? She'd been trained as a librarian, not a social worker. Hell, even social workers down there burned out.

Mitch squeezed her hand, and she jerked back to the present.

Still holding hands. Like the most natural thing in the world.

“What’re you thinking?”

She tucked her hair behind her ear. “That Mission City isn’t exempt. We have a homeless population. We have sharps containers in the bathrooms and locks on the doors to those bathrooms. We do regular sweeps to make sure no one’s passed out. Addiction permeates society, and I’ve been blessed to not have it touch me personally.” Except for the young woman from the DTES, but that hadn’t been personal. Loriana’s life course hadn’t altered because of those interactions. She’d just become more cognizant of taking each day as it came. She glanced at her watch. “I should be getting back.”

He smiled. “I enjoyed our lunch.” He relinquished her hand and folded up his wrapper as well. “I think we’ll have fun on Monday.”

She rose, and he followed.

“Will Marnie be joining us?” His concern appeared genuine.

“I’ll work at trying to persuade her.” She threw her waste away, cringing. She hated creating garbage. “You never know, she might join us.”

“But you’re not optimistic.” He also tossed his wrapper. “I didn’t mean to make her uncomfortable. I, uh...” He cleared his throat. “Is it me?”

She shook her head vehemently as they exited back onto First Avenue. “Unfortunately, she’s like that with strangers.”

And even people she knew, but revealing that'd be a step too far.

As Mitch put on his gloves, he gave her an odd look. "I know who I am."

"You..." *Oh*. "I honestly don't think she sees you in those terms—be it skin color or height. Gender? Yes, probably."

They crossed the street. She caught a glimpse of his expression. Resigned? Not upset, fortunately.

Marnie'd started as a volunteer.

Loriana had thought long and hard before offering her a paid position. The younger woman might be skittish, but she'd never once not done her job. Loriana could put nothing on paper that'd fault Marnie's work performance. Not that she was looking for a reason to criticize. Just sometimes she wished she could address the issues directly rather than letting Marnie keep those high walls up.

Just before they got to the library, she halted.

Mitch did as well.

"Marnie is an exceptional woman. She's amazing with patrons, the kids adore her, and she tries really hard. I don't know what happened to her and, obviously, I wouldn't tell you if I did know, but she's come a long way. I'm hopeful she'll continue to grow as an employee and as a person." She winced. "I've said too much."

His smile lit his eyes. "I can see how much you care about her. I'll never do anything to make her feel uncomfortable if I

can avoid it.”

She believed him. Pressing her hand to his arm, she smiled. “Thank you for understanding. Not everyone does.”

“They’re fools.”

So much said in such a simple statement. Loriana was appreciative of his understanding.

Mitch pointed to his van. “I’m going to grab the next computer and get started.”

She nodded. “If you finish today, that’ll be lovely. If not until Monday, that’s okay too.” She preferred Monday because that meant more time to spend with this intriguing man. She entered the library and was rounding the circulation desk when Marnie poked her head out of the back room.

“Have a pleasant lunch?”

“I did, thank you. Why don’t you head out?”

Marnie nodded but didn’t move.

“Is there something else?”

The younger woman glanced around before indicating Loriana follow her into the back room. From this vantage point, Marnie would’ve spotted Loriana and Mitch when they’d had their final chat.

“He seems like a nice man.” Marnie’s words were soft.

“He’s a very nice man.” Where was she going with this?

“And you said we would all go out Monday night?”

Ah.

“Yes, Mitch invited both of us. I’d love it if you would join us. To celebrate the new computers.”

Marnie’s brow furrowed. “Did he tell you why he’s inviting me?”

Huh? “He invited you because it’s a project the three of us have been working on. That’s all.”

The young woman’s expression lightened.

What the hell is going on?

“I’ll come.”

Loriana needed a moment. “You’ll join us? Really?”

Marnie cringed, likely because of Loriana’s overexuberance. An agreement to go for dinner shouldn’t be a big deal. But it was. And they both knew it.

Before her boss could utter another word, Marnie grabbed her coat and slipped out the door while Loriana hung hers on the coat rack. Glancing outside, she spotted Marnie and Mitch.

Marnie’s hands were stuffed in her pockets and she hunched, but she met Mitch’s gaze. And held it. She nodded once, cocked her head, said something, and then nodded again.

To be a fly on that wall.

Well, too cold for flies, thank God.

After another moment, Marnie nodded and Mitch headed into the library. Just before Marnie left, though, she looked up, meeting Loriana’s gaze through the library window.

Busted.

Not that she'd done anything wrong. She'd just been observing the door to see if any patrons were coming in.

Bull crap.

She'd been making sure her employee was okay.

Right.

Yeah, fair enough. She'd been voyeuristically observing. She was damn curious about what the two had discussed, but it was none of her business. Heading into the library, she planned to do a full sweep. If she happened to run into Mitch while he was working, and he happened to mention his conversation with Marnie, that wasn't crossing the line.

Sure.



CHAPTER SIX

By four o'clock Mitch was quite proud of himself. And exhausted. The manual labor had been minimal, but getting seven computer stations up and running was quite a feat. Oh, and he'd had lunch with the sexy librarian who apparently was clueless. Even when she held his hand, it'd been platonic.

You could've said something.

You should have said something.

About last night? Too many land mines. About today and whether their lunch was an actual date? Nope. Too chickenshit. He'd accepted her warmth and comfort and sternly told himself they were *not* on a date and she was *not* holding his hand out of some romantic gesture.

He wanted her. He really wanted her. And not just physically—although that factored into it—he wanted to know her better. He wanted to know what made her tick. What made

her happy. He'd already figured out some of what made her sad. Poverty. Drug addicts. But those were universal things.

He still had no idea what'd triggered her last night. And did he want to excavate those depths? Was he prepared for what might come out? And if she demanded reciprocity, would he come clean about what happened in California?

You're getting ahead of yourself.

And then there was Marnie.

She'd confronted him in front of the library, again demanding reassurances he hadn't told anyone about her donation. He hadn't. And perhaps confront and demand were the wrong words. She'd been upset, believing somehow he'd betrayed her confidence. Of course he never would. Not his place. If there was one thing he knew in this world, it was his place.

"I don't know what we're going to do."

Marnie's voice carried clear across to the computer he was finishing up on. Most of the time the woman was a mouse, but every once in a while, she showed some spirit. Too bad those times were few and far between.

And he was eavesdropping again. But that didn't stop him.

"It's no big deal. So Johanna's sick. We can manage." Lorian's calm and assured tone.

"With you walking on one side of the street and me on the other, we need someone to carry the cart with the extras. No way can we manage."

“I’m sure we can find a volunteer at the start. There’s bound to be someone.”

“We can’t count on that.” Desperation tinged Marnie’s voice.

After securing the workstation, he rose. As he sauntered over to the circulation desk, he stretched. Way too many kinks meant he’d spent way too much time sitting. A job well done was worth the pain, though. Although not coming back on Monday might wind up being a hardship. *Huh*. He hadn’t factored that into the plan. The plan was always get in and get out as quickly as possible. Now, because of his efficiency, he didn’t have an excuse to come by on Monday. Of course, this being the library, he could come by anyway, but that wasn’t the point. At least they were all going out on Monday night.

“Everything okay?” *Keep it casual.*

Marnie pivoted first. “Just a little logistical issue.”

Loriana turned next. “Nothing anyone needs to worry about.”

Marnie shot a glare her way.

Ah, so there was some spirit beneath the timidity. Good to know. “I’m pretty good at logistics.” Total bullshit. “Anything I can do to help?”

“No—”

“Maybe—”

Both women stopped and looked at each other. Marnie tilted her head.

“Right.” Loriana tore her gaze away from her employee. “Our part in the parade is a three-hander. Our third called in sick with a migraine. I was telling Marnie that we’ll find someone at the parade tonight to help.” She met Marnie’s gaze before turning back to him. “Marnie thinks I should ask you for help.”

Mitch glanced at Marnie, searching for some explanation. Because he was here and handy, or because she knew she could count on him? And she could, of course. “I’d be happy to help. What do you need me to do?”

He’d hoped for excitement, or even smiles of gratitude. Instead, awkward silence. More was going on here, but he couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

Finally, at length, Marnie spoke. “Normally Johanna and Loriana walk down each side of the street handing out whatever we’re giving away. This year it’s wood wands with stars on the end. You know, make a wish upon a star. The library’s name is embossed.”

And the problem? “I assume you need someone to carry the extras?”

Another glance between the women.

“Yes, we have a cart on wheels. Normally I pull it.”

“But I think Marnie should be giving away the wands instead of some stranger.”

Ah, that was the death glare he was witnessing. Hah, he knew the women well enough that he could quickly diagnose the problem. “Well, I’m good with pulling the cart.”

Marnie glowered.

“Or I can hand out wands.”

Her brow unfurrowed, and Loriana’s snapped together.

He was enjoying himself far too much and smothered his chuckle with a cough. “If one of you ladies could check out the last workstation for me, that’d be great. What time is the parade?”

“We gather at six-thirty.” Loriana gave him a long look. “You’ll need to dress warmly. It’s supposed to be cold and snowing tonight. We should be done by eight.” She shot Marnie a glance. “I’ll come and check the computer.”

“That’d be appreciated.”

“I have some books to shelve.” Marnie didn’t smile. She didn’t pout—but she definitely didn’t smile.

Loriana rounded the circulation desk and headed to the computer Mitch’d been working on. She dropped into the seat and started typing.

“I hope I didn’t speak out of turn.”

“You didn’t.” She didn’t look at him, instead concentrating on the keyboard. “I’m sorry you witnessed that. Unprofessional. We never quibble. About anything. Except the Christmas Parade. Every year. She’s always been able to hide

behind Johanna, and this year she can't, and you step up and offer to be Galahad and rescue her.”

Ah.

“Well, I didn't technically say I'd walk in the parade. I'm the newbie in town. I should be pulling the cart.”

She met his gaze.

“But if it's the difference between kids getting their gifts and not, I'll do whatever needs to be done.” Obviously a lot of effort and planning had gone into tonight, and if he could help make it happen, it was the least he could do.

She turned back to the computer. “Your offer is very generous, and I'll take you up on it. I won't order Marnie to walk and give out the wands, but I'm hoping she'll find the courage to do so. She's made progress over the past few years, but I think she can go further.” A few more keystrokes and she tapped the desk. “You've done an amazing job, and I can't thank you enough.” She rose and met his gaze directly. “Who paid for these?”

Crap.

He honestly hadn't anticipated this being an issue. Surely the head librarian would know who was donating thousands of dollars of computer equipment.

“I promised I wouldn't say.”

Her gaze was intense. No other word for it. If she could will an answer out of him, he was sure she'd do it. But he'd given his word to Marnie Jones, and for a reason he couldn't fathom,

he felt protective of the young woman. Obviously Loriana knowing she'd paid would change the dynamic—and that was something Marnie feared. Fair enough. And none of his business.

“I don't like it.” Quiet and steady.

“I can completely empathize with that feeling. You feel you owe someone, and you don't know how to even thank them.” He knew this, God, did he know this. Down to the marrow of his bones he understood. Someone out there'd been looking out for him. Had saved him. And now he owed them.

And he'd likely never know who it was.

The longer they locked gazes, the more the atmosphere in the room shifted. Memories of last night crashed down on him. and he remembered what she'd felt like in his arms. How he'd been turned on. How that'd waned. How he'd do anything to be able to touch her again that way.

This need—this attraction—was a tangible thing. A living entity arcing between the two of them.

Does she feel it too?

He wanted to know. Wanted to ask. Wanted to extract a promise they'd explore what might be between them.

But he wouldn't.

Because that'd mean admitting he was attracted to her and, as brave as he was, that was just as step too far.

“So I'm helping tonight, right?”

His words seemed to snap her out of her trance. “Yes, that’d be lovely. I’m hopeful Marnie’ll find the courage to hand out wands—”

“—but I’m here as back-up if you need me.” Handing anything to children wasn’t really his idea of fun, but he’d do it. He’d do just about anything she asked.

She offered one of those beautiful smiles she often bestowed upon people. “The library closes at five, but Marnie and I’ll be here. We head down to the marshalling area at six-fifteen. Don’t forget—it’s going to be cold. Might even snow.”

He smiled back, trying to exude warmth. “I bought a good winter coat when I got back. So very different from California. Don’t worry, I won’t wear the jacket from last night.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m going to go home and get ready. I’ll be back on time, I promise.”

“Yes, uh, thank you.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “And we’re on for Monday, right? Even though you’ve finished the installation? Early, no less.”

A small part of him regretted having accomplished so much as it gave him little excuse to linger. The other part of him was pleased with what he’d accomplished. And he hoped he’d get a glowing recommendation from the library to put on his website. “Oh, I almost forgot, I still have to show you the netbooks I secured. They’re all set up and ready to go.”

Loriana placed a hand on his arm.

The action startled him because it was so unexpected.

“Why don’t you come by a few minutes early on Monday? Johanna can watch the front desk while you take Marnie and me through everything we need to know. And if you’re here, it’ll be harder for my co-worker to back out.”

He placed his hand over hers and squeezed. “That’s very devious of you.” As they were mere inches apart, he caught a whiff of her scent. The berries again. Obviously not a perfume, but...shampoo? Did they make berry-scented shampoo?

“I need to get back.”

She met his gaze, tilting her head up.

He liked she was taller than many of the other women in his acquaintance. He liked the way her eyes lit when she spoke to him. He just plain enjoyed being in her presence. “I’ll return on time.” He gave her what he hoped was an upbeat smile. Then he tipped his imaginary hat, grabbed his gear, and headed out.

Bitter gusts of wind bit into him as he hurried back to his truck. Did he have long underwear? Because as unsexy as they were, they’d keep his legs warm. And he had thermal socks, heavy boots, good gloves and a festive hat. That’d been a gag gift from a co-worker, and although he considered disposing of it when he ridded himself of most of his memories, he’d held onto it. Fortuitous decision.

The ride home took little time, and he secured his van before heading up to his condo. He stowed the rest of his gear and headed into the kitchen. Grilled-cheese sandwiches with cream of mushroom soup was perfect on an afternoon like this.

He ate in the kitchen, then headed to the living room to gaze out his window toward the magnificent view.

His place overlooked the commercial part of Mission City's downtown, but he also could see clear across the Fraser River and into Abbotsford. Beyond was Mount Baker—the dormant volcano in Washington State.

Tonight, dusk tinged its snow-capped peaks. Purple, pink, and an odd blue streaked across the sky. The storm clouds gathered in the west. They'd have to hurry to bring snow tonight. Completely possible—weather in the Fraser Valley was often unpredictable.

As the sun's final rays hid behind the hills to the west, he made his way to the bedroom. He still felt pretty fresh from his shower this morning. A quick trim of his beard would help fill the few minutes before he needed to get ready.

And who are you trying to look good for?

He grunted. He could say he didn't want to frighten children with his beard. Or scare off their parents by looking too bushy and unkempt. None of that was true—people'd judge him primarily for the rest of his looks, and his beard barely factored into it. As he trimmed, he thought about the librarian he hoped to impress. Oh, Marnie was beautiful and, at times, showed tremendous strength. Truthfully, though, the feisty Lorianana called to him. He wanted to get to know her. To know what made her tick. To know why she was alone.

Are you sure she's alone?

He paused. Yes, they'd both said so. If she wasn't, why would she head to a cuddle party?

Maybe her partner doesn't like to cuddle.

More fool him.

Or her.

He rested his hands on the sink. Another assumption he made. That Lorian preferred men. Had she flirted with him or simply been considerate? Was he misreading the signals he believed he saw? She could be bisexual or pansexual. Two distinct possibilities these days. Younger folks, like himself, tended to be more open about new experiences and less likely to stick to the traditional model. Had he found himself attracted to other men?

Huh.

No, not really. A couple of men in his old life had struck him as people he could spend more time with. But not sexually. He could say objectively if he found a man attractive. And say another guy had a wonderful personality. He'd met men who'd make excellent partners. Yes, he could say all of those things. But the few times he ventured into thinking about a future for himself, it always involved a woman.

Back when you had dreams of the future.

Shut the fuck up.

Whether he'd listen to his own advice was debatable. His world hadn't come to an end. He still breathed. He still had a job, and he still had a life. Heck, he was meeting his new

friends tonight and having dinner on Monday with those gracious ladies—that had to count for something.

Beard trimmed and eyes bright, he scrubbed his cheeks vigorously.

You've got this.

Handing out wands to children. How difficult could that possibly be? As he layered his clothes, he contemplated. Even from a young age, he assumed he'd get married and would start a family. As an only child, he'd often wished for a sibling. So, for his own imaginary family, he envisioned at least two kids. The woman was often nebulous because he hadn't met someone he wanted to create a life with. He was a forever kind of guy—when he committed, he did so for the long haul.

Snagging his hat and gloves, he did one last survey of himself in the hall mirror. He looked like the Michelin Man with his big puffy coat, and he was already sweating. That wouldn't last, though. The temperature'd already dropped below freezing. He'd checked the weather app before deciding long johns were necessary.

Since he didn't need any gear, he opted to walk the few blocks to the library. He used Second Avenue and then ducked down to the marshalling area. He spotted Loriana easily. Even amongst several tall men, she stood out. Her light-auburn hair shone under the street lamp. Crappy lighting couldn't diminish her beauty.

And she's got brains too.

A definite bonus. Both librarians were whip-smart, and he appreciated that in a woman. He'd dated a few programmers over the years. Some were stereotypical geeks who spent the bulk of their time talking about code. Others wanted compliments on their prowess as innovators. A small handful just wanted to go out and talk about something other than work. He loved his job, but he also appreciated being away from it. So, for him, that last category of dates had been his favorite.

Loriana spotted him as he sauntered over. She beckoned to him.

He made his way through the thick crowd. Ah, Marnie stood by Loriana's side.

Make that, *cowered*.

Her face was drained of all color, and her gaze darted around continuously.

Uh-oh. She seemed terrified. She really did. The woman seemed perpetually on edge, and although he was dying of curiosity, he'd never flat-out ask her. Querying Loriana later was a distinct possibility. He didn't want to trigger the younger woman. Or do something that might upset her.

"You're here." Loriana snagged his arm and dragged him over to the wagon which overflowed with wands. "Marnie and I will hand them out while you pull the wagon."

"We will?" Marnie's voice caught.

Loriana glanced meaningfully down at her.

Mitch didn't miss the blunt message.

"I'm here to do whatever you ladies need." He was prepared to say more, but a young woman used a whistle to get everyone's attention.

Hello, every horrible gym teacher everywhere—the nineties are calling and they want their torture instrument back. He'd loathed gym class. Likely because he'd been the least coordinated of *everyone* in the class. His growth spurts always happened at the worst times, and he had few good memories of physical activities. These days, he opted to run and swim. Felt safer to do solo activities.

Loriana placed a hand on his arm. "We just walk along at a pace that hopefully matches the float in front of us. Santa's not far behind, so we might have a bunch of distracted kids on our hands."

"Well, you'll have them. I'm just pulling the wagon."

She glanced over at her co-worker. "Yes, pulling the wagon."

Marnie glared—almost bordering on insubordination.

Yet from what he knew of Loriana, she'd never force the younger woman to do anything. Likely cajole until she caved, but not order.

Right?

Maybe Loriana knew something he didn't. Maybe this was none of his business.

They took their appointed spot on the route.

Loriana leaned over.

She was going to whisper last-minute instructions into his ear, right?

No. She pressed a quick peck to his cheek.

Whoa. No time to respond. To reciprocate. To do anything but stare dumbly.

And then they were off.



CHAPTER SEVEN

As Lorianana handed out the first wands, her cheeks heated.
It's windburn. Because it's so cold.

Bullshit.

Did you have to kiss him?

Have to was such a strong phrase. Sure, she could've shook his hand. This, however, conveyed her genuine gratitude.

And probably about a dozen other things—some intended and some not so.

Hands empty, she hustled back to the wagon and snagged more wands.

Marnie did the same thing, and they exchanged glances. The younger woman offered a small smile, then headed back to her side of the street.

This went on until they reached the end of the parade. They had a whole eight wands left.

Impressive. Some years she got it right—like this year. Some years they had too many leftover items, while some years they ran out. Those were the worst.

Mitch pulled the wagon off to the side of the road, and the three of them stood and watched Santa pass. *Kids love this.* Perhaps. Still, she found the idea of sitting on a stranger’s lap oddly disquieting. No wonder some kids howled. That clearly wasn’t a job she could handle—whether as Santa, Mrs. Claus, or just an elf. Being around screaming and terrified children all day didn’t appeal. And yeah, some kids loved it. But not all did. Loriana didn’t like the odds.

“Everything okay?”

The question, asked quietly, yanked her back into the present. She offered Mitch a wide smile. “Yes, just basking in the atmosphere.”

He quirked an eyebrow.

Is he going to call me out?

Did he know her well enough to do that?

“What happens now?” He eyed the wagon.

“We take that back to the library, then we head to my place for hot chocolate. I’d love to go to Fifties or Timmies, but they’ll be packed.”

Marnie’s gaze shot to hers.

“Oh, did I forget to mention this?”

The glare informed her that she had.

“I really need to be going.”

“Loriana, Marnie, hi.”

A deep voice interrupted her thoughts. She pivoted to find a group of men, two strollers with toddlers, and a young boy standing behind them.

She might’ve squealed in delight.

Justin, the youngest of the men, gave her a grin. “Happy to see us?”

She clapped her hands. “My favorite guys? Yes, of course.”

Maddox, the most stalwart of the group, arched an eyebrow. “I thought you weren’t supposed to pick favorites.” He pivoted his gaze. “Nice to see you, Marnie.”

Marnie’s cheeks reddened, but she held her own.

“Oh, where are my manners?” Loriana placed a hand on Mitch’s arm. “This is Mitch, our handy computer specialist and wagoner.”

Did Mitch blush? Hard to tell with the crappy lighting and his dark skin.

“Mitch, this is Maddox.”

The men exchanged handshakes.

“Maddox is also into computers.”

“Cyber security.”

She waved her hand.

“And this is his husband, Ravi.”

Mitch shook Ravi's hand.

“And these are their twins, Violet and Victor. Happy participants in our Toddler and Books program.” Well, barely. The kids were the youngest attendees, but Maddox loved bringing them in. And most of the time the twins behaved. Most of the time.

Mitch crouched down to eye level with the twins.

Victor slept, but Violet's eyes were wide. She reached out her mittened hand.

After removing his glove, he held out a finger to the toddler.

She snagged it and yanked it toward her mouth.

He pulled back just in the nick of time.

Ravi laughed. “Sorry about that.”

Mitch's look lingered on the little one just a moment longer before he straightened. “She's amazing. They both are. They look so much like you.”

With their dark hair, dark eyes, and tanned skin, they really did.

Again, Ravi laughed. “They do. My sister Namita was the surrogate and Maddox is the father.”

“We're both the fathers.” Maddox. A little growly.

Ravi snickered. “Well, your genes weren't that strong. Nary a ginger to be found.”

Maddox's red hair shone in the light and little flecks of gold appeared in his red beard.

Justin, also a ginger, stuck out his hand. “I’m Justin. This is my husband Stanley and our son Angus.”

That bypassed a lot of their complicated history. Stanley, Angus’s uncle, took custody after the boy’s parents both died. Justin, who’d been counseling the bereaved child, had bonded with Stanley over caring for the young boy, and they’d fallen in love.

“Where’s Opal?” The men were fostering a young three-year-old girl.

Stanley frowned. “She’s got a cold. I wanted to stay home but...” His gaze briefly settled on Angus. “Rainbow Dixon offered to babysit tonight. We left the two with Liba. Our dog adores Rainbow almost as much as she adores Opal.”

“Well, I hope she’s feeling better. Kind of Rainbow to help out.”

Justin smiled. “She wouldn’t have come to the parade anyway.”

“Fair enough.” Loriana gazed down at Angus. “I’m glad you got a wand.”

He held it up with an ear-to-ear grin.

“Would you like to take ones for Victor and Violet? You can keep them safe until they’re older and can have them.” The young boy had a fondness for the twins. “Oh, and take one home for Opal as well. They’re safe for younger children.”

Mitch collected three and handed them to a beaming Angus. “Thanks, Loriana.” He nodded to Mitch and Marnie. “Thank

you so much.”

Stanley ruffled his son’s hair. “We should be going. I want to see how Opal’s doing.”

Ever the doting caregiver. All four men were amazing fathers. She was so happy for them.

“Yeah, I can’t wait to give her the wand.” Angus beamed. He made a good older brother to the foster child. Whether she’d remain with the family was an open question.

“Hey.” Another man stepped into their circle. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Loriana punched Rusty lightly on the shoulder. “Of course not.” She immediately bent to see Mira.

The toddler, squirming in her stroller, reached out to grab Loriana’s hair.

Glad to see some things never change.

She adored the little one—another faithful attendee of the Toddlers and Books program. As she rose, she hesitated.

“Hello, Marnie.” Rusty’s voice was quiet. Almost shy.

If he wasn’t a married man, Loriana’d be encouraging him to ask Marnie out.

“Hello, Rusty.” Her demeanor was as open with him as it was with any man. She guarded herself carefully, but opened up that façade just a crack.

She had with Mitch as well, much to Loriana’s delight.

Justin waved to Rusty and then to the entire group. “Time for us to be off.”

“Us as well,” Ravi chimed in. “Victor’s going to wake up cranky, and Violet’s going to want to go to sleep on the ride home, and that’ll be an unmitigated disaster.”

A disaster Loriana occasionally envied, but mostly found relief she didn’t have to deal with those problems herself. She waved as the four men took off, their children in tow.

“We’re parked at the library. Might we walk you back?” Rusty’s words were again quiet, and his attention mostly focused on Marnie.

“That’d be lovely.” Loriana patted him on the back. “Then we’re headed to my place for hot chocolate. Would you like to come with us?”

Rusty’s look of indecision, with the little *v* between his eyebrows, was adorable.

“We’d love to.” He glanced down at Mira. “But my wife’s not well tonight, and I don’t want to leave her alone too long.”

“Ah well, I understand.” She refrained from repeating Deanne’s concern.

None of my business.

Yes, but not sticking her nose into it proved difficult.

The four of them set off toward the library. Rusty, pushing the stroller, accompanied Marnie. Loriana, Mitch, and the

wagon took up the rear. She wanted to say something, but words weren't coming. Instead, she let the silence linger.

Marnie and Rusty spoke, but Loriana couldn't hear the words over the conversations others were having.

The crowd on First Avenue had dispersed, but many people had parked on Second, and the library lot was quite full as well.

When they arrived at the library, Rusty bade them farewell and headed to his SUV.

After Loriana unlocked the door, she, Mitch, and Marnie made their way inside.

Although the heat was lower at night when the library was empty, it was still much warmer than outside.

Marnie stomped her boots. "Okay, it's cold out." She gazed out the window. "I'm glad the snow didn't come, because it'd make the roads messy, but it would've been nice for the kids."

Loriana agreed—with both sentiments. "I'm going to put this wagon in the storage room." She pivoted to Marnie and Mitch. "Use the facilities if you need to, or you can at my house." Probably a little too bossy, but sometimes she couldn't help herself. She disappeared with the wagon and returned five minutes later to find Marnie alone. She cocked her head.

Her co-worker shrugged. "He said something about removing his long johns and asked if I had a bag. I gave him one of the cloth ones."

Even as she finished speaking, Mitch reappeared. Carrying a cloth bag.

Loriana nudged him. “I think I would’ve liked to see your long johns.”

This time, without question, he blushed. His dark skin pinkened, then he cleared his throat and held up the bag. “Really nothing to see. Stereotypically Canadian—red thermal.”

Adorable.

“Well, you’ll have to show them to me some other time.” She indicated to Marnie. “You ready to go?”

After a long moment, Marnie shook her head. Her gaze shot back and forth between Mitch and Loriana. “I can’t. I...need to get home. You know, to, uh, take care of things.”

Loriana’s heart sank. *I pushed too hard.*

“I don’t have to go.” Mitch’s offer.

“No.” Marnie said the word forcefully. She gulped. “It’s not you. I promise, it’s not you. I’m just really tired—long day and all. But we’re seeing you on Monday, right?”

Mitch nodded. “Yes, of course. Looking forward to it.”

“Great.” Marnie offered a quick wave and then scurried out of the library as if the hounds of Hell were at her feet.

Loriana responded to Mitch’s expression of alarm. “It’s not you. Honestly. I think she might’ve backed out even if Rusty had agreed to come.”

“But he didn’t.”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure I expected him to. Seemed like the polite thing to do. To offer,” she quickly clarified. “He’s always so solemn.”

“Having a sick wife would do that.”

“True. And he’s all smiles when he’s around his daughter. But I catch him sometimes—when he thinks no one is watching—and he’s so serious. Weight of the world on weary shoulders.”

Mitch nodded. “I get that.”

And he did. Lorianana couldn’t say how she knew—but she did. He carried around his own burdens. Wanting to push aside these thoughts, she clapped her hands. “Did you walk?”

He nodded. “My condo’s just a few blocks from here.”

“Great, well you can hop in my car with me, and we can head back to my place. We can have hot chocolate, chat, and then I can drive you home.”

“I can walk just fine—it’s not that far—and when a lady says *talk*, I begin to panic.”

She laughed.

Adorable.

“Well, you’ll love Plato. He’s the strong, silent type.”

Mitch’s eyebrows shot almost to his hairline.

She laughed. “My cat. Been with me twelve years.” She indicated they head out of the library. “Great hat, by the way.”

He put his red toque with reindeer antlers back on. “Gag gift. A keeper.”

She stuffed her blue toque over her hair. “The unexpected ones are the best. People are forever giving me stuff with cute saying for librarians and book lovers. So sweet.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“What doesn’t?” She armed the alarm, and they scooted outside so she could lock the door.

“That people give you things. You’re that kind of person. Heck, if I saw something cute, I’d consider buying it for you.”

She flipped her keys in her hand as they descended the stairs toward her car. “Don’t ever feel obliged to buy me anything.” She disarmed the car alarm with her remote. “You gave me ten new computers and several new netbooks—I think that’s above and beyond.”

He stopped at the passenger door, hand hovering above the handle. “I didn’t give you those things, Lorian. They were paid for. Was that person generous? Absolutely. Did I make a profit on the sale? Yes, I did.”

“As you should,” she grouched. “Get in the car, Mitch, it’s fricking freezing.”

Chuckling, he did just that.

She got in as well and watched with amusement as he fiddled with the controls. Marnie’d been the last one to sit in the passenger seat—they’d attended a symposium together—and the seat was definitely set for the petite woman.

Since Mitch was still struggling, Loriana reached over to hit the handle under the passenger seat.

He shot back with a snap and jerked his head to look at her.

They both laughed.

As she moved her hand back, she made certain to brush his thigh lightly. Enough of a touch to be memorable—but not enough to be seen as a come-on. No, if she was to make a move, he'd be left in no doubt.

The engine purred to life, and she hit the defrost button so the windshield would clear. She leaned over the steering wheel and peered up at the sky. “They say snow.”

“Yes.” Mitch stowed the bag by his feet and clapped his hands. “These are good gloves, but not quite as warm as promised.”

She wiggled her fingers. “I bought this pair after the first Santa Parade—many moons ago. They’ve stood me in good stead for all these years.” She eyed the stitching. “And they might need to be laid to rest soon. That’ll break my heart.”

“Surely you can get another pair.”

“I’m sure I could...*if* I could remember where I bought them and *if* they’re still manufactured.”

“Fair enough.” He chuckled again.

The windshield was clear enough, and she verified her passenger had secured his seat belt then she pulled out of the

spot and out of the parking lot. She waited while a group of stragglers crossed the sidewalk.

One of the younger women spotted her and waved frantically.

Loriana waved back with enthusiasm.

“A fan?”

She snickered. “Not really. I helped her with her application to get into college. She’s in her second year of mechanical engineering at the University of British Columbia.”

Mitch whistled.

After she pulled safely onto the street, she shot him a look.

He held up his hands. “I’d be just as impressed if she was a he. UBC engineering is a tough program to get into. One of my friends in high school tried. Couldn’t make it. He wound up studying at the British Columbia Institute of Technology and landed a great job in an architecture firm. He was always better with practical rather than theoretical anyway.”

“Sounds like a good job. Do you see him often?”

Her question was met with resounding silence.

She turned right onto James Street and they headed up the hill, then she took a quick glance at her companion.

Stone.

Well, then.

Did that mean all his friends were off-limits or just that one? And he’d yet to say anything revelatory about his family. He

revealed a pinch of personal things at the cuddle party—and had shared a few more details over their lunch, including about his mother’s death—but that’d been about it.

She turned right onto Fourth Avenue, drove to her house, and pulled into the driveway. She cut the engine, but she didn’t move.

“Are we not going in?”

She met Mitch’s gaze. “Are you going to talk?”

“About my friend? No, we didn’t keep in touch. I didn’t keep in touch with any of my friends from high school. I moved to California, and they moved on with their lives.”

They continued to hold gazes.

He’s lying.

She wasn’t sure how she knew, but she knew with absolute certainty that part or all of that statement was false.

What was she supposed to do? Call him out? Wasn’t that a little forthright? Should she ignore it and invite him in any way? How would she know he was telling her the truth? And part of her should probably be worried that she was inviting a man into her house after only a brief acquaintance.

Even as she had the thought, her phone buzzed.

Reluctantly, she tore her gaze away from him. When she checked her phone, she chuckled. “Hello, Mom.”

“It’s not your mom.”

“I know it’s not. What’s up, Marnie? You must’ve just walked in the door.”

A brief pause. “Is he there?”

“Yes, he’s here.” She met his gaze.

“Right, well, um, maybe call me when he leaves?”

“All right. Sure.”

“You won’t forget?” The younger woman sounded frantic.

“I won’t forget. I apologized about the other night.”

“Yes, you did.” She exhaled. “Just call me.”

“Will do. Later.” She waited until Marnie cut the connection. Then she laughed.

“What’s funny?”

She gazed up at him. “Mother hen is checking in to make sure her chicks are all okay.”

He arched an eyebrow. “She cares about your safety, Lorian. Probably more than you do.”

“Well, are you talking the cuddle party or inviting you in tonight? Marnie knew about both events, so you needn’t worry.”

“Knowing so she can tell the police when you turn up missing or dead isn’t all that helpful if you’re doing reckless things.”

His words hit her with the force of a bullet to the chest.

Don't think about Todd. He's not talking about Todd. He doesn't know about Todd.

Mitch might not, but she did. Well, she thought she did. Even after twenty years, it still hurt her heart. Still had the power to impale her soul. Could still take her back to that dreaded day all those years ago.

“Loriana?”

The concern in Mitch's voice pierced through the fog of pain. She glanced at her bright porch light, then she waved him off. “Sorry, just a lapse.”

He snagged her hand and held on tight. “No, it's not just a lapse. You're sheet-white. And not in a good way. Something I said triggered you. I'm sorry. I mean, I don't know what I said, and I wished you'd tell me, but I am so sorry.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

What am I supposed to do?

She wasn't going to tell him what he'd said. What had he said? Something flippant about being missing or dead.

Oh God.

What if she'd lost someone? What if someone had died a violent death, and he'd made a joke about it? He couldn't have known, of course, but that didn't change—

“I'm fine.” She squeezed his hand. “Just thinking about all the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. How they'll likely never be found.”

Which was a national Canadian tragedy, to be sure...and not what she'd been thinking about. She'd just lied to him. So easy to tell because she rarely, if ever, lied. And how did he know that after such a brief acquaintance? He just *knew*.

She offered him her megawatt smile. “You still up for hot chocolate?”

“Are you sure? I can go. It’s just a short walk—”

“Don’t be silly. I make a mean hot chocolate. Plus, you can’t leave until you’ve met Plato.” She pointed to the front window where a very fat cat stared at them.

“He looks...” *How do I say this diplomatically?*

“Fat.” She happily supplied the pejorative. “And my vet is forever lecturing me about it. Except he’s twelve years old without a single health problem. And given how sickly and scrawny he was when I got him...”

The cat in the window looked about as far from sickly and scrawny as Mitch could imagine. “When did you get him?”

Loriana unbuckled her seat belt, so Mitch did the same.

“About twelve years ago.” She exited the car.

He followed suit.

“A litter of kittens was found down by the railway tracks. All of them in rough shape. Dickens, the teenager who found them, struck a deal with our local vet—if he could collect enough money to pay for the medications the kittens needed, then she’d donate her veterinary services.” Loriana armed the car alarm and then moved to the side door where she unlocked it. “Now, I’m ninety-nine percent sure she’d have done it anyway, but it proved an excellent lesson for Dickens. He cajoled everyone he knew into baking stuff for his bake sale, and then he convinced them to buy the questionable results.” She snickered.

“I take it you partook?”

“I was new in the head librarian job and wanting to make a good first impression. I made my grandmother’s chocolate mousse pie, and then I bought several pies, several loaves of bread, and dozens of cookies. My freezer was packed with enough calories to last me for months.” She opened the door and stepped inside, holding it open for him.

He followed suit and stepped inside.

The cat, who’d been twining in between Lorianana’s legs, paused and stared up at Mitch unblinkingly.

It’s just a cat. You’re a human. Stay strong.

He still remembered his neighbor’s vicious cat who attacked him regularly when he was a kid. Definitely traumatic memories.

“You’ve never had a cat.”

Her perceptiveness should’ve startled him, but it didn’t. “Uh, no.” He winced as the cat stepped toward him, but he held his ground. “So, uh, bake sale...?”

Lorianana hung her coat on a peg and indicated he should remove his, which he did. She hung that one up as well. “Dickens raised the money. He also called dibs on the littlest one. He named her Aristotle—Ari—and she’s almost as big as Plato. If you’re ever wandering down First Avenue and happen by The Owl’s Nest, Dickens’s bookstore, you’ll probably spot Ari in the window.” She bent over to scratch her cat. “I wasn’t going to adopt a cat—I’d only just taken on the head job. The

place was a bit of a mess, and I was putting in lots of hours to bring it up to speed. Like into the twenty-first century.”

“Ah.” He followed her example and removed his boots.

“I adored Mr. McPhee, but even convincing him to use a computer was a challenge. He preferred to write out lists by hand. I worked under him for several years after I arrived in town, and I struggled. When he retired, I was the only one who wanted the job. Now, I was young—just twenty-seven—but I was ambitious. We had a progressive city council, and they gave me a chance. Not so sure they’d do the same thing again.” She wandered into the kitchen. She held her hand by a cupboard door, suspended in mid-air.

The cat meowed, spun, and went up on his hind legs.

Cats can do that?

“Such a good boy,” Loriana crooned. She opened a container of wet food, dumped it onto a plate, and set it on the ground—off to the side.

Plato’s rumbling purrs reached Mitch who was clear across the room. “That’s enthusiasm.”

Loriana rolled her eyes. “Don’t ever let him fool you. He is *not* hard done by. He’s got a full bowl of kibble he can graze on whenever he likes. His preference, however, is wet food.” Her mouth twisted in a wry smile. “And I might give him the occasional treat.”

“He’s spoiled.”

She arched an eyebrow.

“In a good way.”

Her lips twitched. After a moment, her full-on smile was back. “Now, hot chocolate? Or would you prefer something alcoholic? I’ve got beer around here somewhere.” She opened another cupboard. “And a bottle of red—although I’m not sure that’d be a good choice.” She closed the cupboard. “Sorry, I don’t drink a lot. Don’t have many friends over who do.”

“Well, hot chocolate sounds delicious.” Mitch enjoyed the occasional beer, but tonight was a night for hunkering down with a warm drink. Preferably by the fire. With a willing woman.

Okay, keep it in your pants.

She hadn’t invited him for anything more than a hot chocolate—a way to thank him for helping out at the last minute. She certainly wasn’t waiting for him to put the moves on her.

Right?

Or had he read this wrong? Maybe she’d known Marnie’d bail from the beginning and that the two of them would end up back here alone. With only the cat to chaperone.

Loriana poured milk into a pot and set it on the stove. She retrieved a container of chocolate powder from her pantry and held it up. “I know purists would melt real chocolate. I have neither the patience nor the chocolate.”

Mitch laughed. “Oh, that’s totally fine. My mom used to make me that kind when I was a kid.”

Crap.

Her head tilt told him everything he needed to know. At least he was prepared for the question.

“Will you tell me about her?”

“Wow, you don’t hold back.”

She shrugged. “I suppose I could ease into it. Or just pass over the comment entirely and bring up the weather for the umpteenth time today.” She stirred the milk. “But I heard a lot of pain in your voice when you mentioned your mom.”

Well, she’s not wrong.

“I loved my mom. We had a really tight bond. My dad was...I don’t want to say absent—because he was there every night. I don’t want to say abusive—because he never laid a finger on me. We just...weren’t close.”

Loriana continued stirring. “We both know a parent can be both absent and present at the same time. Mine were. And I think we both know abuse can take many forms. Some words wound as deep, if not deeper, than physical violence.”

She gets it.

“Your parents?”

“Never abusive.” She apportioned the powder and stirred it into the pot. “Rich. Self-centered. Egotistical. Very much believed in having a perfect child who perfectly reflected their perfect vision of themselves.”

He shuddered. “Why do I think that was as bad as it sounded?”

“Because you’d be right.” She stopped her stirring while she grabbed two mugs from the cupboard. Then she resumed her work. “They were as misogynistic as you could get. Wanted a son to carry on the family name. Well, they had one daughter. My mother developed a life-threatening infection after I was born, and she had to have a hysterectomy.” She eyed the milk and kept stirring. “I eventually intuited she was willing to take the risk because she wanted a baby boy so badly, but the doctors put their feet down. As it was, she was within hours of dying from septicemia.” She met his gaze. “I think my father would’ve preferred she die so he could legitimately remarry and have an heir with a second wife.”

“Jesus.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, if you believe in Him.” She tore her gaze away and looked back at the pot. “Okay, that’s hot enough.” She shut off the burner and then—very carefully—poured the brown liquid into each of the mugs.

Steam rose.

“Initially they considered sending me to boarding school. Then they realized they could dress me up in fancy dresses and shiny shoes and show me off like a doll.” She shuddered. “They were nightmare parents. If I didn’t get the top grade at school, they were there to challenge the teacher. If I tried out for the play and didn’t get the lead role, they threatened to withhold a donation they promised. If I expressed an interest

in playing a sport, they hired a tutor so that I'd be the best, and by the time I was ready to make my *debut*, I'd be so sick of the sport, I'd quit."

His chest constricted and his heart ached for the little girl so lost. "Sorry sounds so inadequate. Yet you survived."

"I did." She pointed to the mug. "It's still scalding, so be careful." She took a breath. "I was barely surviving until Miss Edna in the third grade. She stood up to my bully parents. She encouraged me to try all kinds of different things. Then, as if those weren't big enough gifts, she gave me Narnia."

"*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.*" A gift he could respect and understand.

"Yep. I devoured those books in just a couple of weeks. *Harry Potter* hadn't yet been conceived. I gobbled up Tolkien, L'Engle, and Canadian classics like *Anne of Green Gables*. I read voraciously, worried my parents might take the books away from me." She snickered. "Needlessly. They found if I stayed in my room and read, then I wasn't a nuisance. I was left in peace."

"And that led you to wanting to be a librarian."

"To share my love of books? Yes, absolutely. I considered teaching—Miss Edna was a great example of what a superb teacher can do—but I couldn't see myself in a classroom all day. I liked the idea of variety. And kids are great, but I like adults just as much." She pointed to her living room. "Why don't we sit?"

Great idea. He snagged his mug and followed her in.

She sat on the couch and immediately curled her legs under her.

He hesitated.

She laughed. “Sorry. I’m so comfortable in my home that I’m not a good host. Feel free to sit wherever.”

Wherever consisted of choosing between a wicker chair whose cushion was covered in fur, a rocking chair, or the other end of the couch. Stealing the cat’s seat didn’t appeal. Neither did sitting at the end of the couch where they wouldn’t be facing. He opted for the traditional wood rocker and sank into the cushions.

The smile she bestowed upon him assured him that he’d made the right choice. That being said, he’d have to watch not to spill the hot liquid. He blew on the top and took a tentative sip.

Yeah, okay, hot. But also delicious. “This is really good.”

“That’s very kind of you to say. Oh, cookies.”

Before he could respond, she placed her mug on the side table, and popped up.

“Really, I’m—”

“I baked these last night. I meant to take them to work to share, but I totally forgot.” She hummed. “I made gingersnaps and ginger bread. Frosted with icing, of course.” She returned with a plate of cookies.

He snagged a cute-looking gingerbread man.

Gingerbread person?

Which made him think of the gender unicorn from his LGBTQ Positive Space Training at his old job. For all the company's faults—and there were many—inclusivity had been a big issue. Many tech companies were composed of swathes of white men. His former company didn't have diversity quotas per se, but they endeavored to hire a broad spectrum of people from various ethnic, religious, and gender backgrounds. He'd liked that. He hadn't been a token—he'd been part of a large group of people who were often considered *other*. Too bad that hadn't saved him in the end.

Water under the bridge.

How often did he say that? Not often enough because the words hadn't stuck. The betrayal ran so very deep that it felt like nothing would exorcise that pain.

“Are you okay?” Loriana'd retaken her seat with a gingersnap cookie held in her delicate fingers.

“Sorry. Momentarily caught in the past.”

“Not a pleasant place to be?”

“Uh...” He considered. “I was contemplating your gingerbread cookies. Whether they're a man, a woman, a person, or gender-neutral.”

She grinned. “I like your thinking.”

“So then I thought about the gender unicorn we learned about at my old job.”

“Back in California?”

“Yeah.”

She cocked her head. “We did something with the positive space training as well that the government put out. The city council wasn’t pleased, but I was adamant the library staff needed to be current—or as current as we can be. Sexuality and gender can be so complicated—and people don’t often get the support they need. Kids in particular.”

This time, he cocked his head.

“There’s a young woman named Blake. When she first started coming into the library...well, I just knew. Everyone referred to her as a *he*, but clearly that didn’t fit her reality. She went through a lot of grief growing up in a very repressive household.” She tapped her mug. “But a good guidance counselor intervened with her parents. Explained not just about the psychological trauma of the bullying, but laid out the statistics about trans kids. How Blake was likely to wind up homeless, abused, and more likely to commit suicide.”

His breath caught.

She kept right on going. “That wasn’t to say any of those things would happen to Blake—she’s strong—but the statistics weren’t in her favor. Anyway, that changed her mother’s mind immediately. For all that she didn’t believe Blake, she didn’t want her son to live a horrible life and/or choose to kill

himself.” She took a sip. “Now, Blake’s father never did come around—and he always was a grade-A asshole—so the parents split. Blake’s nineteen now and transitioning. She works at Starbucks and goes to the university. She plans to become a social worker. To give back, as it were.”

“You’re proud of her.”

After a moment, she smiled. “I’m proud of Marnie figuring out the issue and speaking to Blake. My employee has made a real impact in Blake’s life, and that means everything. We try to be a safe space at the library. Hence the training.”

Impressive. “We had a group for gay kids at my high school. Hardly anyone joined. I wish I’d been braver and stepped up as an ally. But I had my own crap to deal with.”

She inclined her head.

“The color of my skin, my home situation—”

Crap.

“Yes, we started talking about your family and somehow we veered onto mine.”

“Sounds like you had spectacularly negligent parents.”

“I did. But they paid for my education and didn’t contest the inheritance I received from my grandmother when I turned twenty-five.” She swept her hand around her modest-but-very-cozy home. “Down payment on this place. Just a couple of years left on the mortgage.”

“Good for you.”

“Well, I don’t spend my money on much else—a few donations and always something coming up at work.”

“Like needing new computers.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t pay for those—a bit beyond my reach in generosity. I still want to know who did.”

He met her gaze. “Does it really matter? In the end, I guess, think of how many people will be helped.”

Another huff. “I don’t like being beholden.”

“True. But the computers weren’t a gift for you—they were for the entire community.” Truly, Marnie’s role should be revealed—she deserved the credit—but he’d given his word, and he wasn’t going back on it now. “Why not accept them with grace and move on?”

“I’m not known for being gracious.”

He wagged his finger. “See, I don’t believe you. I suspect you can be phenomenally gracious. I think you can be a wonderful person who loves with her whole heart.”

What are you saying?

“But, uh, I don’t really know you. Maybe you’re a green-eyed monster who eats children for breakfast and spits out the bones.”

Without warning, Plato launched himself onto Mitch’s lap.

He nearly spilled the hot chocolate. Had it still been full, he’d have done just that. He glanced at Lorian, silently pleading for help.

She merely grinned. “I think he likes you.”

And I think I like you.



CHAPTER NINE

Loriana *knew* she should rescue him. Poor Mitch looked desperately uncomfortable, and he'd said he'd never had a cat in his life. As such, having one land on his lap was likely disconcerting. Yet even as she contemplated rescuing her guest, he placed his mug on the side table and tentatively petted the cat.

Her rotund feline wasn't known for leaping into the laps of strangers. Marnie'd been over several times before Plato'd paid the woman any attention. And since clearly the younger woman'd never been around cats, things hadn't gone well. Of course, just the fact Loriana convinced her co-worker to come home with her was a big deal.

The darling furball's purrs carried clear across the room. "Oh, he really likes you."

Mitch arched an eyebrow. "We had an open policy at my old job—anyone could bring their well-behaved dog. A couple of people grouched about not being able to bring their cats—but

given the potentially contentious relationship between cats and dogs, upper management nixed that idea.”

“Have you ever considered getting a pet?”

“I...uh...” He scratched the cat’s ears. “They like this, right?”

“Oh, he’s an attention guy—he’ll take whatever he can get.” She grinned. “And you were saying...”

“I never really considered it. Growing up, my home was completely unstable, and even when I was settled in California, I never felt secure. Didn’t seem fair to bring an animal into that kind of environment, and it turns out I was right.”

He glanced up and Lorian met his gaze. “There’s a lot to unpack in those short few sentences.” The look of panic on his face would’ve been priceless if it hadn’t been so serious. “Unstable home?”

“Mom died when I was eight—in childbirth. My dad wasn’t a great guy before that, and his disposition certainly didn’t improve. I stayed out of his way and under the radar until I graduated from high school. A bunch of us rented a house while we went to college. I was recruited to go down to the States and...well...”

“You never felt secure.”

“I was a stranger in a strange land. Their rules felt foreign. Yes, I spoke the language, but I didn’t understand the culture. People looked at me and made certain assumptions. Now, I’m

not saying that didn't happen in Canada—it did. But things were amped up where I lived. All I've ever wanted is to work hard, be good at my job, and to stay under the radar."

She inclined her head. "What happened?"

"Nothing I'm comfortable talking about." He gently placed the cat on the floor.

In return, Plato gave him the evil eye. Then the beast leapt onto his wicker chair. He spun twice before dropping to his butt, then lifted his leg and started cleaning his balls.

Mitch's eyes widened.

She couldn't help herself—she laughed. "He's not subtle."

"No, he's not. And I need to be going."

Damn. Me and my big mouth.

"You don't have to leave. We can talk about something else. About anything else."

Still, he rose. "I've had a lovely time, but I need to be going. I've had a long day."

She put her mug on the side table and started to rise.

He held up his hand. "I can see myself out."

"But I'll drive you."

"Loriana, it's six blocks."

She liked how he said her name. Way too much. Still, she wasn't going to let her guest leave without escorting him to the door. She rose and followed him back to the door.

He bent to put on his boots. Next, he grabbed his coat and slipped it on. Finally, he donned his hat and pulled on his gloves.

“I can’t thank you enough for your help tonight.”

He chuckled. “I pulled a wagon.”

“You ensured Marnie and I were able to give all the kids something special. That means everything.” She snagged his hand.

His eyes widened.

Too forward? Oh well.

She wasn’t known for holding back. She tugged him toward her and placed a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you, Mitch Alexander.” She whispered words into his ear.

His hand slid around her waist, and he pulled her flush against him. “My pleasure, Loriana.”

Gazing into those nearly black orbs kicked her libido into gear—something that hadn’t happened in a very long time. She still had his right hand clasped in her left. With her free hand, she cupped his cheek.

He leaned into the touch.

“I’d like to kiss you.”

His lips twitched. “It’s nice to be asked.”

She managed a shrug. “Consent’s a thing.”

“Yes, yes it is.” He smiled. “I’d like it very much if you kissed me.”

The height difference meant she had to angle her face up while he lowered his. Their mouths met. Just a light brushing of lips. She applied more pressure to the next touching, but he didn't reciprocate. A third time, and still nothing.

Well, hell.

She nipped his lower lip, and when he opened his mouth in surprise, she thrust her tongue in. She was tired of waiting. After all, she'd had this desire almost from the first time she set eyes on him. Yes, he was handsome. But he also called to her in a way men rarely did.

A growl tore from his chest as he seemed to fall into the kiss. His tongue mated with hers—and then demanded its own admittance. He slid his hand lower still and grasped her ass. Again, he dragged her closer.

Damn coat.

She wanted to rip it off him. So she could get to his sweater. So she could get *under* his sweater. She wanted to touch bare skin. She wanted to make him feel good. She wanted him to make her feel good.

So goddamn long.

He pulled back.

She groaned.

He pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose.

She opened her eyes to see a rueful smile.

“I think that's enough for tonight.”

“You realize I’m about to ask you to come to my bed.”

He inclined his head. “And part of me is tempted. The rest of me needs to be way more secure in the relationship before I can take it to the next level.”

“I think that’s supposed to be my line.”

“Hardly.” He laughed. “Men are allowed to be cautious, and women are allowed to be open and honest. Trust me, I want to go to your bed. To explore this—to see where it’ll take us. But it’s too soon. I’m a traditional guy—closer to the tenth date than the third—and we haven’t even had one.”

Sometimes logical people annoyed Lorian. When she was trying to be a free spirit. Which, admittedly, wasn’t often.

Why am I feeling reckless tonight?

Something she’d have to consider.

Later.

She pressed another kiss to Mitch’s lips. “Well, Monday isn’t really a date because Marnie will be there. How about Tuesday?” Yet even as she asked, she remembered the little question niggling—might there be something between Mitch and Marnie? She didn’t think so, but Marnie’d been more comfortable with him than she had with any man. Completely understandable—the man could make even the most skittish person comfortable. She glanced over at her cat. He could even turn cats into traitors.

Plato glanced up and gave her a *what’s your problem* look.

She'd have words with him later.

Mitch cleared his throat. "How about we see how Monday goes before we make plans? I'm open on Tuesday and—dare I admit this—every day subsequent. I'm looking into opportunities to volunteer, but nothing has come up yet."

"Well, those computer skills will be handy. But I can see not wanting to give away something you need to earn a living with."

His smile ensured her that she'd hit the nail on the head.

"We can talk about volunteer options when we see you on Monday. I'm sure we'll find something that'll interest you."

"I look forward to it." He took her bare hand in his gloved one and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "I wish I didn't have to go, but I really do need to. See you Monday." With one last look, he opened the door and stepped out.

She closed it behind him and dashed to the living room so she could watch as he sauntered down the driveway and onto the street. She hadn't asked him to check in when he got home. Heck, she didn't even have his personal phone number. Just his work number.

Flighty woman.

Which she wasn't normally. Perhaps because she knew she'd be seeing him again shortly?

Marnie.

Damn.

She yanked her phone out of her back pocket. She pulled the drapes shut and checked Plato's dry food bowl as she made her way to the master bedroom. Full. Oh, well. He wasn't getting any more wet food tonight, so he could eat the expensive kibble or he could starve.

He wouldn't, of course. Starve. He'd nibble on the kibble and go after her full force come morning. He followed her as she headed to her bedroom.

Knowing Marnie was waiting, yet still wanting to settle, she opted to undress and brush her teeth before laying on the bed with her head propped on the pillows. She dialed.

Marnie answered on the third ring. Breathless. "You're okay?"

"I'm fine." She sighed inwardly. "I hope you weren't worried this whole time." Marnie, dear soul of a woman, showed more care for Loriana than her mother had for her entire life.

"No."

The younger woman drew out the word and Loriana instantly knew she was lying. Marnie might keep everything close to the chest—and be secretive about so much—but she wasn't a great liar.

"Well, if you weren't worrying, what were you doing?"

A huff. "I was on the treadmill."

"At this time of night?" Loriana couldn't fathom doing anything but getting into bed at—she checked the time—9:50

p.m.

“I needed the exercise.”

Marnie was in excellent physical health and used her treadmill every day.

Loriana’d once made the mistake of suggesting Marnie might want to walk outside. She’d even gone so far to suggest they meet up and walk around Heritage Park. The younger woman’s panic had been so palpable that Loriana’d felt it deep into her soul. That kind of panic didn’t exist in a vacuum. Whoever had hurt Marnie—and Loriana had no doubt someone had—the damage was long-lasting. Perhaps even lifelong. And that made her sad. She wanted her colleague to get out and experience life. Not live locked away in her lovely house. Or at least Loriana assumed it was a lovely house. She’d never been invited over. Did that smart a little? Sometimes. Perhaps.

“Loriana?”

“Mm, sorry?”

“I asked if you had a nice evening.”

“Oh, yeah, lovely.”

“Mitch seems like a really nice guy.”

Is that interest?

“He’s a great guy. So nice of him to help us out tonight.”

A small sigh. “Yes, very true. And nice he worked so fast with the computers. That’ll be great for the kids on Monday.”

“Also true.” She drew a breath. “Marnie, do you know who bought the computers?”

The younger woman sputtered. Then started coughing.

“Are you okay? Are you choking?”

“Water,” she managed to croak. “Swallowed some. Wrong pipe.” She continued coughing. “Glad you’re okay.” *Cough.* “Need to go.” *Cough.* “Bye.” *Cough.*

The line disconnected.

Well shit.

She’d had her suspicions, but now she was one hundred percent certain Marnie knew who the anonymous donor was. *Could it be her?* She knew so little about her employee. Just that she’d moved to Mission City almost four years ago, and had come into the library practically her first day in town. Loriana’d lost two volunteers the week before—two young women who’d left for university out of town. She took one look at the terrified newcomer who was astoundingly knowledgeable about literature for someone so young and had offered her a volunteer position.

It soon became clear Marnie wasn’t satisfied with a few hours a week. Loriana felt guilty scheduling the woman for more, but then the younger woman would show up earlier and earlier for her shifts and leave later and later. Pretty soon, Loriana acknowledged Marnie wanted to spend all her time in the library. When a junior librarian quit to attend teacher’s college, offering the job to Marnie was a no-brainer. By then,

in those mere few months, the woman'd become indispensable.

The past four years had flown by. Marnie Jones, however, remained an enigma. Cajoling, pleading, and sometimes ordering, did little to pull the woman out of her shell. And although she was clearly an introvert, Loriana sensed far more going on. Her skittishness around strangers was something the younger woman strove to hide. To conquer, even. And she'd started to interact with some people.

Tristan at the Starbucks might even be considered Marnie's friend, as was Seth Jacobs, a constable with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. She seemed to cope around Corporal Colton Pritchard—although that relationship was on shakier ground. Finally, she'd been almost friendly with constable Malachy Corcoran before he'd moved with his lovely wife Abby and their son Matthew to Montréal.

Marnie's reaction to Mitch was measured.

Loriana cursed having missed the initial meeting. Of all the times to take a lunch break... Still, Marnie had a level of comfort with Mitch. Truly, the man engendered loyalty. He brought a sense of calm.

He's got your number.

Yeah, he kind of did. He'd petted her cat, asked her probing open-ended questions, and been completely relaxed in her space.

Except when you asked him about his past.

Yes, that'd been quite a reaction. Whatever happened in California, it'd likely driven him back to Canada. And, interestingly, he hadn't reconnected with his high school or university friends. Instead he'd moved to a smaller town, farther from the city, and quietly established a business. Hell, if he hadn't been hired to upgrade their computers, he'd likely have skirted her notice entirely. Of course, she didn't know *everyone* who lived in town. But she did her level best to get to know as many as possible.

All that being said, if she'd encountered him at one of the pharmacies, grocery stores, or gas stations, she'd have noticed him. Not just because of his height and skin color—although both made him stand out. No, he possessed something almost ethereal.

You're being ridiculous.

Yeah, she really was.

Scooting under the covers, she gazed at the novel on her nightstand and considered. Ten o'clock had come and gone. Despite the hour, she was still wired. Sure, her time at the parade'd been fun. But the time after had been electrifying.

That kiss.

Yeah, that kiss.

She flipped off the lights then punched her pillow.

Her feline companion leapt onto the bed. He settled on the empty pillow next to hers.

For just an instant, she flashed to Todd.

Then she did what she always did when she thought of her fiancé—she shut down that line of thought and forced herself to clear her mind.

Sleep, however, was a long time coming.



CHAPTER TEN

The insistent ringing of his phone pulled Mitch out of a very pleasant dream. Lorian, him, and a nice bottle of chardonnay. On a picnic in a meadow with wildflowers. She was lying resplendent on the blanket, and he was feeding her grapes.

Fuck.

He yanked the phone off the nightstand. “This is Mitch.” Perhaps a touch snippy.

“Hey, Mitch, it’s Justin. Did I wake you up?”

“I’m awake now.”

Watch your tone.

Yeah, but fuck it was early. He glanced quickly at the phone.

Nine fifteen.

Holy shit. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept so late.

“Okay, now I really feel guilty.” The man’s tone clearly indicated such.

Mitch rubbed his face. “Look, Justin, it’s completely fine. Most sane people are awake by now.” Most sane people hadn’t lain awake all night wondering why the fuck they were in their own bed and not that of a beautiful woman just six blocks away.

A little sigh carried across the line.

“Seriously. What can I do for you?” He wracked his brain as he tried to place the name. Oh, right, one of the guys last night. Which one? They’d all been cute, gay, and married. Was he the younger one? Obviously not the Indian guy with the Indian name.

Focus.

“We met last night. At the parade?”

“I remember.” Sort of.

“I was there with my husband Stanley and our son Angus.”

“Right. And your foster daughter was home sick, how’s she doing?”

See? Not a complete asshat.

“Opal’s much better this morning, thanks for asking. She’s home with Stan and Angus—just a quiet day.”

“And you’re at work?”

See? Deductive reasoning isn’t so hard.

“Yes.” The man’s voice had a decidedly pleasant tone. “Anyway, you mentioned you worked in computers and, well, we need help. I called Lorian, and she confirmed you do repairs. To machines,” he clarified.

Mitch again scrubbed his face. “Lorian’s right. Fixing computers is my specialty.” As was writing code, but he didn’t need to share that fact.

“That’s great. Well, it’ll be great if you can help.”

“What’s going on?”

“The computer in our office quit. Like it just gave up. And we kind of need it to, you know, not give up...”

Mitch refrained from chuckling. There might be technical terms for what Justin was describing, but giving up gave him a place to start. “You’ve tried rebooting the machine?”

“Oh yes. And every other trick I know—which admittedly isn’t much. I’m a counselor, not a computer programmer. Or fix-it guy. Or...whatever it is that you do.”

“How old is the computer?”

He hesitated. “Uh, well it’s been here longer than me, and I’ve been here almost five years.”

“Nine years,” came a disembodied voice in the background. A woman? Hard to tell.

“I can try to get it working, but you’re likely better off getting a new machine and having the data ported over.”

Justin sighed. “I was afraid you were going to say that. Well, Kennedy says *whatever it takes*, so you do whatever you need to do.”

Was Kennedy the boss?

“Can you give me the specs?” He fumbled around in the drawer until he came up with a notepad and pencil.

A laugh. A hearty laugh. That ended with a painful sigh. “Kennedy can’t even find the user’s manual.”

“Fair enough. What do you use it for?”

“Scheduling, appointments, client files...and a bunch of other stuff. Our accountant has her own computer that isn’t hooked up to this one.”

“Do you have a backup?”

“Like an external hard drive?”

“Yes.” At least they were able to have a dialogue.

“Sure. Just we haven’t used it in a while. I know everyone backs up to the cloud these days, but we prefer not to do that.”

“Do you have a server?”

“No.” A little wobblier. “Do we need one?”

God help me.

“Why don’t I come and see your set-up? We can go from there.”

“Great.” Another momentary pause. “Do you have snow tires?”

“Snow what?” His mind was still muddled.

“There’s almost a foot of snow, and it’s still falling. The ranch is north of Mission City. The roads should be plowed.”

Mitch slid out of bed and stalked to the window. He pulled back the curtain to reveal a winter wonderland. Snow. Everywhere. Lots of it. “Yes, I have snow tires. Are you able to text me your location? Also, can you take a picture of the back of the computer? Anything with text or numbers?”

“Sure, of course. You don’t mind working on a Saturday?”

“Not at all.” *Because I literally had nothing else to do.* “I’m glad Loriana gave you my number. This is what I do. I’ll take care of you.”

“That’d be great. Thank you.”

“I need to grab breakfast, but I can be out there in an hour. It’s not too far from downtown Mission City, right?”

“Twenty minutes. Rainbow just made an enormous stack of egg sandwiches, and the coffee’s fresh, so just come. We’ll feed you.”

Rainbow? Her name had come up last night as well. Ah, right, the babysitter. “Okay, I’ll shower, dress, and head out.”

“Perfect. I’ll text you everything I can. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Justin signed off and Mitch wandered over to the bed. No way was he going to waste time making it. He stripped off his sleep pants and yanked his old T-shirt over his head, letting

that drop to the floor as well. He hopped into the shower and cleaned himself as quickly as possible.

By the time he was out and dried off, Justin'd texted an address as well as several photos of the computer. Decent make, good model, and also seriously old. He had a potential replacement in inventory that was far more powerful, had better memory, and was Wi-Fi enabled. This beast was so old, it still required a cable to the modem. At least the modem was modern. Likely recently upgraded by their internet service provider.

Finally, although the monitor looked serviceable, it also was way past its prime. He added curved monitor to the growing list of items he'd take. He wouldn't foist it on them, but he'd explain the benefits. Also, they hadn't discussed pricing. Hopefully Justin'd have some idea of how expensive this endeavor was going to be. Mitch wasn't charging overtime—even though he could. No, he'd decided early on to just charge a standard rate. People were likely to be even more panicked during evenings or weekends when often help desks were shuttered. Plus, he worked for himself—he could always schedule time off when he wasn't actively working.

He loaded his dolly with everything he thought he might need and headed down to the van. Loading took little time, and he tucked the dolly away in his storage locker. Soon, he was on his way. He eyed the Tim Horton's, then remember the food Rainbow had prepared. Seemed rude to turn down such a generous gift, and the few extra bucks he'd save would help. He had two gigs on the books this week and neither looked

particularly lucrative. No, he'd have to find a way to drum up business. This close to Christmas, surely he could find a way to do that.

The snow was thick, fat flakes. It stuck to the road. Enough people'd been out this morning, however, that the road had distinct tire tracks. He stayed in those. The journey up the very steep James Street had him clutching the steering wheel. He had a small reprieve across Seventh Avenue, but then another climb up Cedar Street. At least they plowed this road. Since it connected to the street that'd lead him to Healing Horses Ranch, he hoped that one would be plowed as well.

No such luck. The plow must've turned around and headed back into town. He could see the logic as these streets weren't used nearly as much as the streets in town. Still, as he maneuvered on the slick roads, he clutched the wheel tighter.

Thank God for snow tires.

He still had to go slowly, but he'd make it. What life would look like after several hours was anyone's guess. After a bit, he turned right onto the street where the ranch was. Too bad he hadn't had a chance to do research. Healing Horses Ranch sounded intriguing. What exactly did they do? He wracked his brain. Counselor. Justin was some kind of counselor.

The GPS directed him to make the left turn, and he spotted what was likely the ranch sign. Covered in snow.

Interesting that the drive'd been plowed recently. The steady climb up wasn't nearly as nerve-wracking as it could've been.

The tall trees lessened the snowfall here, and the lack of wind gave him some breathing room.

Should've checked the weather forecast.

He could've done it on the way up, but he'd focused on driving. When he pulled into a clearing and what was clearly the parking lot, he selected the spot closest to the ranch house and backed in. He cut the engine and hopped out. Even in the snow, he spotted a barn and a stable. No horses in sight, but suddenly a large dog bounded over. It came right up to him, sat, and offered its paw.

Mitch's eyebrows rose. *Hadn't expected this.* Very carefully he crouched, then he shook the dog's paw.

The dog leaned forward and gave him a swipe of its tongue across his cheek.

Something inside him opened, warmed, and expanded. He gazed into dark-brown eyes and saw...depth? Understanding?

From a dog?

“Tiffany.”

The dog held his gaze a moment longer before turning and bounding back the way she came.

Justin rounded the corner and offered a rueful smile.

Mitch rose and offered his hand.

They shook.

“Do you need a hand?”

“Sure. I have a couple of things I know we’ll need and a couple of things we might need.”

Justin glanced up at the sky. His red hair was already dusted with snow. “Let’s bring it all in and we’ll sort out everything from there.”

“Great.” Mitch opened the back of the van and handed several items to Justin. Heavy, sure, but he kept the heaviest for himself.

“I see you met Tiffany.” Justin’s grin was wry.

“Uh, yes. She’s...” He wasn’t quite sure what to say.

“She is.” Justin indicated over his shoulder after Mitch closed the van door. “She’s the ranch’s comfort dog. Except she’s off the clock right now and therefore feels she can just go after anyone she wants.”

Mitch didn’t feel the dog had *gone after* him. Greeted him? Sure. Taken his measure? Yeah, he was pretty sure she’d done that as well.

As they hit the back deck, the sliding glass door opened. A lovely woman with black hair held open her arms and beckoned them in. “It’s way too early for this much snow.”

Justin chuckled. “You know you love the snow, Rainbow. Don’t mislead our guest.”

When both men were inside, she closed the door.

After placing his bundles on the kitchen table, Justin removed his boots.

Mitch laid his supplies down and then removed his as well.

“Your coat too.” Rainbow gestured in the general vicinity of his coat.

Since the ranch was a nice warm temperature, he followed her instructions.

The woman had the palest-blue eyes he ever remembered seeing.

She also offered a wide and welcoming smile. “We’re so glad you’re here.”

“Well, lead the way.” He started to pick up the boxed computer.

“No way.” She laid her hand upon his. “Food and coffee first. Work stuff later.”

The smell of eggs and bacon wafted in the air along with the distinct scent of coffee.

His stomach rumbled.

Rainbow laughed. She pointed to the chairs and, to Mitch’s relief, Justin sat as well.

“I’ve already eaten.” He eyed the snow. “I was scheduled to see several clients today, but I was able to reach all but one to cancel. The family doesn’t have reliable cell service and I didn’t want them making the trek and not finding me here.”

“He’s a good man.” Rainbow poked her head around the corner. “And we could’ve explained it to them.”

“Sure. Except when Kennedy discovered the computer had broken, she panicked.”

“I didn’t panic.”

Mitch pivoted to find a woman heading down the stairs. His breath caught. Stunning. No other word for it.

With long, brown hair and deep-brown eyes, her stature was regal as she descended the stairs. When she made her way to the table, she extended her hand. “Kennedy Dixon.”

He made to rise, but she waved him back down. He took her hand. Firm handshake, to be sure.

“Thank you for coming.”

Indicating the computer equipment, he then offered a smile. “It’s what I do. I’m just glad Justin remembered me.”

“Not likely to forget.”

Mitch’s gaze shot to Justin.

The young man’s eyes widened. “You were hanging with Lorian and Marnie. Angus has a serious crush on both librarians—but Marnie in particular. He talked nonstop all the way home about their new friend. He wondered if you worked at the library—because you pulled the wagon. I said you worked in computers, and no offense, his interest died. He’s into books.” He glanced at Kennedy with a fond smile. “Lots and lots of books.”

Overreact much?

“Well, no offense taken on the computers. If everyone loved them as much as me, then I wouldn’t have a job.”

Rainbow placed a plate before him with two English muffins stuffed full of egg and bacon. She also set down a steaming mug of coffee. “Everything’s hot. Would you like cream and sugar? Ketchup?”

“Ma’am, ketchup would be sacrilege. A bit of milk would be appreciated.”

She offered him a wide smile. “I think I like you.” She disappeared into the kitchen and returned a moment later with the milk.

Mitch poured a small amount into his coffee and eyed his food.

No one else was eating.

“Oh, I’m going to grab another coffee.” Justin leapt from the table. “Kennedy? Another tea?”

“Sounds lovely.” She glanced around. “Where’s Tiffany?”

Rainbow snickered. “Drying out by the fireplace. She bounded out to greet our guest and came back soaked.”

Kennedy stepped toward the sliding glass door. “Wow, it’s really coming down. Justin, were you able to reach the Dhaliwals?”

“No, although I can’t imagine they’d try in this weather.”

“Yes. On that note, I think you should head out. Bad enough we’re keeping Mr. Alexander here.”

“It’s Mitch.”

She met his gaze. “Then it’s Kennedy, Rainbow, and Justin. We don’t stand on ceremony around here.”

“Unless she’s trying to impress someone,” Justin quipped.

Kennedy glared.

“Well, if I had a PhD and could call myself doctor, I’d trot it out once in a while to make an impression.”

“And I’ll pay for you to go back to school, Justin.”

The man with the green eyes broke away from gazing at the woman who was clearly the boss around here. With some determination, he looked back. “I’ve applied to the program at Simon Fraser University for the fall semester.”

Rainbow squealed and shook her hands. She threw herself into Justin’s arms.

Huh. Looked like welcome news.

Kennedy’s smile was broad.

“Hey, enough.” Even as he said the words, though, Justin wasn’t trying to escape Rainbow’s enthusiastic embrace. “I haven’t been accepted yet.”

“Well, I better get to writing that letter of recommendation.” Kennedy tapped the computer. “As soon as I have a working machine.” She held Justin’s gaze for a long moment.

“Stan and I have the money to pay for the program. Your offer is generous, but we’re all good. I’ve applied to take the

program part-time. I'll need to cut back my hours here, but not quit entirely."

"Take a sabbatical," Kennedy corrected. "You're never allowed to leave."

"I'm okay with that."

Finally, Rainbow pulled back.

Only to be replaced by Kennedy who pulled Justin in for a hug.

Friendly place.

Apparently Tiffany, not wanting to miss out, had heard the noise and made her way over to see what all the fuss was about.

Justin obligingly petted her.

She preened. If that was even the right word.

Mitch finished inhaling his food and offered a smile to Rainbow. "That was delicious. Thank you so much. Now, where might we find the computer?" He wiped his hand on the cloth napkin.

"My office." Kennedy indicated an area through the kitchen.

Mitch spied several doors. He rose and, with Justin, grabbed all the equipment.

Three hours later, Mitch left with a feeling of deep satisfaction in his chest.

Kennedy had a new computer system up and running. Justin had stopped fretting about his boss. Rainbow had ingratiated

herself as Mitch's new buddy, and Tiffany had offered more kisses.

Answering Justin's call had been a smart move, because Mitch had also secured a contract to upgrade all the laptops of the counselors as well as install a new system for their accountant and a server to connect everything. Oh, and a contract to regularly service the equipment and run the network. Apparently the ranch had obtained a grant in the summer and hadn't spent all the funds. Mitch felt guilty that the money was being spent on him, but he'd also worked in a discount for his services. Bulk, he'd said.

Kennedy hadn't appeared pleased, but she'd digitally signed the work order.

Mitch headed home to order the new laptops. Phew, the plows had cleared the snow from the back roads, and the drive home was smooth. Hey, he hadn't thought of Lorianana all day.

Tomorrow. He had tomorrow to mentally prepare for his date-not-date on Monday night.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

As quitting time approached on Monday, Loriana kept a close eye on Marnie for any signs of heightened agitation or distress.

She spotted nothing.

That's good, right?

Of course it was.

Although...she'd yet to bring up their plans. Marnie likely remembered. Yes, she would. Maybe she was accepting of the idea of going out to dinner. That'd be a refreshing change. Loriana'd lost track of the number of times she'd invited Marnie only to be turned down. Now, as she sat at the circulation desk, she spotted Marnie at the computer helping a young man whose dyslexia was particularly bad.

The younger librarian spent hours with him as he struggled to complete his writing assignments.

During moments like these, Loriana knew hiring Marnie'd been the right thing.

When the woman cowered from strangers—especially men—Loriana had to question her decision.

“Hey, you.”

She pivoted on her seat and beamed at the new arrival.

Constable Seth Jacobs had become a handsome man. His singular aim, even during high school, had been joining the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and the day he graduated with his criminology degree, he’d headed off to Depot for training. After his six months of training, he’d been assigned to several postings in remote areas—mostly in Canada’s north. He’d returned to Mission City around the same time Marnie’d moved to town.

Loriana didn’t know the story, but the two had met and now had a connection. “Are you looking for Marnie?”

The constable’s hazel eyes flashed. Wariness? He scratched his close-cropped blond hair. “I thought I might say *hi*. Seeing as I was in the neighbourhood.”

“You’re not on duty?” Pretty obvious since he wasn’t wearing the standard khaki uniform, but she liked clarity.

“Soon.” He spotted Marnie. “Oh, she looks busy. I’ll drop by another time.”

“Don’t be silly.” She hopped off her stool. “We’re off in a few minutes anyway. I’m going to get Johanna to take over so Marnie can leave on time. We’re going out for dinner.” *I hope*. “You should join us.”

He squinted. “You and Marnie?”

“And Mitch.”

“Mitch?”

“Mitch Alexander. He’s new in town. He installed all our new computers, and the three of us are going out tonight to celebrate. You should join us—would make an even four. We’re headed to Fifties. I plan to nab a booth in the back.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Let me grab Johanna, and we’ll liberate Marnie.” Before he could respond, she made a beeline for the back of the library where Johanna was shelving books.

Locating the vibrant woman wasn’t difficult. Today’s canary-yellow and fuchsia sundress was paired with white ballet flats. Never let it be said the woman didn’t have her own unique style. Went well with the blue streaks in her black hair.

“Hey, can you replace Marnie? She’s helping Jari.”

Johanna tucked the book into its allotted slot. “Of course.” She tapped the carrel. “I’ll get it done before closing.”

“You know I’m not worried.”

“Yeah, but I still like to pull my weight.” She lightly punched Loriana in the arm. “Have to do a good job.”

The woman did a great job—and they both knew it.

Together, they headed over to the computers.

Marnie sat next to Jari, pointing to the screen.

“Hey, my turn.” Johanna tapped Marnie lightly on the shoulder. “It’s quitting time.”

“And Seth came by to say hi.” Loriana glanced toward the front where Seth stood.

Talking to Mitch.

Had he introduced himself as a police officer, or was he keeping it casual?

Marnie rose, a little unsteady. “Sorry Jari. You’re going to do great, and Johanna will help you.” Without waiting for a reply, she hurried toward the men.

Loriana exchanged a quick glance with Johanna and followed Marnie who was hotfooting it.

What’s this about?

She caught up just as Marnie met the men.

To Loriana’s shock, she placed her hand on each of the men’s arms. *What the hell?*

“Seth, so glad you met Mitch. He’s been so helpful to us. With the new computers and everything. And everything. You know. Like, helpful. And friendly. Right? So friendly.”

Both men gazed down at the petite woman in evident surprise. Seth was about six feet tall and Mitch several inches taller than that.

Both towered over Marnie, yet she clearly held her own. Which was quite unlike her.

Seth placed his hand over hers and squeezed. “I’m so happy to see you. And yes, Mitch and I were just getting acquainted. You know I like to meet everyone who’s new in town.”

Marnie gripped his jacket. “He’s not...that is, I’m not...” She let out a huff of frustration.

Again, Seth offered a reassuring smile. “Mitch let me know he didn’t know anyone in Mission City before coming here. And although he’s been enchanted by you and Lorian, I can tell he’s not here to hurt anyone. He’s good people.” He met Mitch’s gaze. “Right?”

What the hell is going on? Is Seth vetting Mitch?

God, she hoped the process was just because Mitch was new to town and not because of his skin color. Because that’d be all kinds of wrong—and out of character from what she knew of Seth.

“Everyone’s a stranger to me,” Mitch confirmed. “But everyone has also been incredibly welcoming.”

His gaze went from Seth to Marnie and then to her.

“We love accepting everyone.” Was that the right thing to say?

Finally, after what felt like forever, Marnie loosened her grip on Mitch’s arm.

Seth, however, still held her hand tight.

“Mitch, I just wanted you to check something with this monitor.” Lorian pointed. “Want to make sure it’s not glitchy.”

At first, the man frowned. Then, understanding clearly dawned as he nodded. “Yes, of course. Lead the way.” He even

managed a tentative smile.

She did, selecting the closest computer. Close enough so she could see Marnie and Seth, but far enough away she couldn't hear their conversation. As much as she was dying to know, she'd respect her co-worker's privacy. She sat at the computer and Mitch took the seat next to her.

"It's not really glitchy, is it?" His low voice rumbled through her.

"No, it's not." She met his gaze. "What did Seth say to you?"

Mitch held her gaze, clearly sizing up the situation and deciding what to reveal. "That he's a cop. He was particularly interested in how I knew Marnie. Had I known her from before? What was my relationship to her now?"

"I'm so sorry."

"What for?" He nudged her with his shoulders. "I'm used to scrutiny."

"It's not right."

He shrugged. "Maybe. But I'll be honest—I don't think it's because I'm Black. Or at least that's only part of the reason. His focus was on Marnie. No offense, but he didn't even mention you."

Confirmation that something was afoot. Seth's relationship to Marnie always struck her as odd.

The constable was overly protective of her. The woman with no past. She'd never revealed a single detail to Loriana about her life previous to arriving in Mission City. Nothing. And she hadn't provided a copy of her high school diploma or any references.

Loriana'd been cautious those first few days, but the twenty-year-old woman, although clearly hiding something, was of no threat to the people Loriana saw herself as responsible for.

Marnie'd never done a single thing to cause her boss a moment's concern. She'd provided a social insurance number—so she was legally allowed to work in Canada. She'd also shown her newly minted British Columbia driver's license as identification. Had she come from another province? Needed replacement ID? Or had she just passed her license? Curious as Loriana was, she'd never asked.

She glanced back at the two figures standing just off to the side from the front entrance. She was quite sure an earthquake could rattle the place and they wouldn't notice. In fact, several patrons came and went, and they didn't stir.

Carly'd arrived and had taken up her position at the circulation desk.

Five o'clock.

Loriana placed her hand on Mitch's thigh. "I promised you dinner."

"And we'll get there. If everything is okay."

At that moment, Marnie glanced their way. From the angle of the table, she wouldn't be able to see Loriana's hand. Marnie gave a brief nod before turning back to Seth.

He also glanced over. Although he couldn't see either, Loriana had the distinct impression he'd intuited the location of her hand.

"I won't ask," Mitch whispered. "I know there's a story, but it's none of my business."

"I respect that." Loriana turned toward him. His brown eyes radiated compassion. "If I knew the story, then you're right—it wouldn't be mine to tell. The thing is...I don't know the story."

"Yet I'm sure you've tried to find out."

She rolled her eyes. "See? You know me."

"I'd like to get to know you better." Softly spoken words for her ears only.

"I'd like that too." She'd sworn she'd wait to see if there might be the possibility of something between Mitch and Marnie, but clearly that wasn't happening. And although Marnie was still in a deep discussion with Seth, Loriana didn't foresee anything romantic there either. She could still push Marnie toward Tristan, but that'd been mostly a dead-end as well, although they saw each other when Marnie patronized Starbucks.

Or you could stop meddling in your employee's life altogether.

Sure she could. Weirdly, she honestly believed Marnie'd be happier in a relationship. Despite the fact the woman'd made it clear she was happy as she was. Jumpy, paranoid, and panicky around strangers—but content with her life. Lorianana returned her attention to Mitch. “So are you up for Fifties?”

“I'm intrigued. I've heard it's a diner, but not much else.”

“Well, they have the best burgers in Mission City. And milkshakes to die for.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He nodded subtly toward the other couple. “Are they coming?”

Lorianana followed his gaze. “I honestly don't know.”

Yet even as she said the words, Seth squeezed Marnie's hand once more, and she let go of his sleeve. Funny that she'd been holding it this whole time. So unlike her. She who cowered from any and all physical contact.

Seth sought out Lorianana. He gave her a slight nod of acknowledgement before turning and exiting the library.

“Well, that answers one question.” Lorianana rose and headed to Marnie.

Mitch followed, although more slowly.

Clearly he was giving the women space to talk if they needed it.

“Everything okay?” *Aim for casual.*

Slowly, Marnie nodded. “You know Seth, just protecting the citizens of Mission City.”

Protecting one in particular. Because Loriana wasn't convinced Mitch would've pinged Seth's radar if Marnie hadn't been here. Or maybe he would've. Loriana hadn't noticed, but maybe the officer was suspicious of all newcomers. Certainly didn't make their town feel welcoming.

"Being protective is good." Mitch's contribution.

Marnie's gaze shot to his. "It's not because—"

"I know." His voice was low and soothing. "I get it."

She twisted her lips in a way that told Loriana she wasn't convinced.

"Are you still up for Fifties?"

The indecision was writ large across Marnie's face.

Loriana could will the younger woman to accept, but she couldn't force her. The decision had to come from Marnie.

"We'd love for you to join us." Mitch offering quiet support. "It is a celebration, after all."

A look passed between the two that Loriana struggled to interpret. She disliked being in the dark—clearly something was going on—and, just as clearly, she wasn't part of it.

"Let me grab my coat." Marnie turned to her. "You'll need yours as well. Are we taking separate cars?"

That idea made sense.

"I didn't drive." Mitch winced. "I should have, but it's so close and..."

Marnie, of all people, rescued him. “I’m sure you can catch a ride with one of us.” The look she gave Loriana couldn’t be misinterpreted. *Please take him.*

“Mitch has been in my lovely sedan. It’s a tight fit, but he manages.”

The relief on Marnie’s face would’ve been comical if Loriana wasn’t concerned. Marnie’d agreed to this, and she was completely uncomfortable with the idea.

Am I pushing too hard?

She’s able to say no.

Loriana held fast to that truth—Marnie’d said *no* plenty of times over the past four years. She pivoted to Mitch and placed a hand on his arm. “We’ll grab our stuff and meet you at the door.”

“Great. I’m going to step outside—this coat is heavy, and I’m overheating.”

She almost made an inappropriate comment about a strip show, but caught herself at the last moment. “Sounds perfect. We won’t be long.”

With that, Mitch took off toward the front door while she and her co-worker headed for the back room. Carly waved at them as they passed the circulation desk and headed out of sight.

As they were putting on their coats, Loriana caught Marnie’s gaze. “Are you really okay with this? I feel like I might’ve pushed.”

“Pushy? You?” Marnie rolled her eyes.

Loriana reveled in the temerity of the act. “I think you might, dare I say it, enjoy yourself tonight.”

And just like she’d flipped a switch, Marnie’s grin dropped. “I...” She glanced out the window where Mitch stood.

He gazed toward Second Avenue and the bus passing. As if sensing their attention, he turned. He tilted his head in question.

Loriana waved, plastering on a huge smile. Then she held up one finger as if asking him for just one moment.

He waved back and returned his attention to the street.

Marnie sighed. “I’m trying, Loriana.”

“I know you are.” *I’m a heel.* “Look, I’m sorry I said anything. I just thought you were loosening up.”

“There are...” Marnie swallowed. “There are reasons for the vigilance, Loriana. I’ve never explained—”

“And you don’t have to.”

“—but there’s stuff you don’t know.”

Well, duh. “You don’t have to tell me, Marnie. That’s a given. It’s none of my business.”

The look of relief on her employee’s face intensified Loriana’s guilt. “But I’d like to think if circumstances changed—for whatever reason—that you’d feel comfortable sharing with me.”

Marnie's green eyes remained unblinking. "If I could... I promise you'd be the one."

Loriana flashed back to Marnie's tête-à-tête with Seth. She'd bet her last dollar that the cop knew. How much was debatable, but she was sure he knew more than she did. And that shouldn't rankle, but it did. She offered a smile. "That's all I can ask for. Now, I think we've made that beautiful man wait long enough."

"I think..." Marnie buttoned her coat. "I think he likes you." Her gaze narrowed. "And I know you like him."

"He's a nice guy."

"You're flirting with him."

She shouldn't have been surprised—Marnie was an observant woman—but Loriana was still caught off-guard. "I thought I was being subtle."

Marnie guffawed. "You don't know the meaning of the word." Then, as if stunned by her impudence, she pressed her fingers to her mouth. "I shouldn't have said that."

"You know you're free to say whatever you want." Truthfully, she preferred when Marnie said what was on her mind. Those moments didn't happen nearly enough.

She grabbed her knapsack while Marnie grabbed her purse. They passed the circulation desk and headed out the door with a last wave to Carly.

Johanna was still helping Jari. In other words—all was well.

Mitch's grin was wide when he greeted the women. He held up his phone. "I checked the menu. I think there are at least ten different things I'd be interested in trying."

Loriana linked her arm in his as they, as a group, descended the stairs to the parking lot. "Like what?"

"Deep-fried pickles to start."

"Oh, Lord." She shuddered. "Well, you can share with Marnie."

The younger woman flashed a tentative smile at Mitch as she disarmed her car alarm. "We can split the appetizer."

"Which means I still have to select a main course."

"Well, you can ask my opinion on different items while we drive over. I can say pretty confidently I've eaten everything on their menu."

"The veal cutlets?"

Marnie gasped. "Little calves?"

Loriana snickered. "Yes, even little calves." She disarmed her car alarm and used the remote to unlock the doors.

Mitch gave Marnie a dazzling smile. "I support your conviction that little calves shouldn't be eaten."

"No animals should be."

Loriana barked out a laugh.

Mitch glanced at her.

“She is *not* a vegetarian. Don’t be fooled for even one moment.”

“I might be.”

Marnie’s mouth set in a hard line, but Loriana spotted the twinkle in her eyes. “Since we had burgers on Wednesday? That was quick.”

Mitch laughed, and Marnie joined in. “See you over there.” She ducked into her car, and by the time Loriana and Mitch had their seatbelts on, Marnie was turning her car onto Second Avenue.

“Why am I under the distinct impression she doesn’t laugh very often?”

Loriana turned on the engine. “Because she doesn’t. She has a wicked sense of humor, but you’d never know it.” She checked over her shoulder before backing out of her spot. “On the one hand, I want to wrap her up and protect her from whatever has her so scared. On the other hand, I want to force her to confront her fears head-on and start living her life to the fullest.” She turned onto Second Avenue and headed toward the diner.

Mitch was silent for so long, she snuck a peek at him. His jaw was clenched.

Sore spot?

Likely the nerve she’d hit the other day—his reasons for leaving California and coming back to Canada. His reasons for not going back to Vancouver to see his friends.

Marnie won't share her secrets with me.

Will you?

That remained to be seen.



CHAPTER TWELVE

***H**ow hard could it possibly be to say the words? To explain what happened?*

Apparently too hard, because as Loriana turned into Fifties' parking lot, the words weren't coming. Mitch waited until she'd cut the engine before undoing his seat belt. "I'll do my best to ensure Marnie feels comfortable."

"It's not you." Loriana unclipped her belt as well. "I'm sure it's not you." She clapped her hands. "Okay."

They exited the car to a blast of icy wind tunneling down the Fraser Valley. Not wanting to be hit again, they hustled into the diner.

The smell, combined with the warmth, hit Mitch first. Grease, ketchup, frying meat, and some kind of spice. Warm air enveloped him from a heater blasting the front door. He unzipped his jacket quickly, not wanting to overheat.

Loriana was slower to unbutton her coat as she was scanning the restaurant. Soon, she spotted Marnie and waved

to her.

Marnie waved back.

To Mitch's surprise, Lorianana snagged his hand and held it as she guided them to the back of the restaurant. She shoved him into the booth and climbed in next to him. He pulled off his coat and stuffed it beside him. She removed hers at a more sedate pace and hung it on the peg by the booth's entrance.

I could've done that too.

Ah, his coat was fine where it was. Took up a bit of space, though, and that meant he was crammed pretty tightly next to his lovely companion.

Oh. Yeah, she'd likely planned it this way. Her thigh brushed his, and she bumped shoulders with him. He was ninety-nine percent certain it hadn't been an accident.

He glanced up to catch Marnie's green eyes incisively watching the byplay.

The woman might be reserved, and often very quiet, but she missed nothing. She held his gaze for another moment before looking down at the menu.

Taking the hint, he replicated her actions.

"Marnie's having the burger," Lorianana explained to him—as if the woman in question, the adult in question—couldn't tell him that herself. "I'm having the BBQ chicken wrap. And you?"

He cleared his throat as he scanned. “Either the Breakfast Skillet or the Beef Dip.”

Loriana licked her lips. “Can’t go wrong with either.”

After a moment, he closed the menu. “I’m going to grab the skillet—it’s not every day you can have breakfast for dinner.”

“Well, they’re open twenty-four hours a day.” Loriana stacked their menus and placed them at the outer edge of the table. “I’ve been known to drop by in the middle of the night when I can’t sleep.”

Marnie’s eyes widened in surprise. “You never told me that. Is it safe for you to be out at night?”

Loriana laughed that deep-throated husky sound that he’d come to associate with her. “Honestly, Marnie, nothing to worry about. I hustle from my house to my car—all of two steps. Then, when I get down here, I hustle from the car to the diner—all of two steps. This is Mission City, for crying out loud.”

“Nowhere is completely safe, Loriana. There’s crime in Mission City.”

And why was he convinced Marnie knew of every incident and every statistic she could get her hands on? *Is this level of vigilance healthy? Does she ever take a break?* He could ask, but he was pretty sure he already knew the answer.

And yes, he worried about people finding him here. But that was more because he didn’t want to face his failure rather than

any concern for his safety. He just didn't want to be perceived as a loser.

"I know, Marnie. Contrary to what you think, I don't take unnecessary risks."

"You and I have very different views of what is *unnecessary*. Take the cuddle party."

Mitch's ears perked.

"What about it?" Loriana let out a little puff that was likely exasperation.

"You didn't know anyone."

"Mitch was there."

"You didn't know he was going." Marnie turned to him. "And I appreciate you went. Did you plan on attending?"

Those eyes assured him that she already knew the answer. "Spur of the moment."

"Uh-huh."

Wow, she really is paranoid.

There appeared to be no room in Marnie's life for trust—either of her boss or of anyone else.

"How's everyone doing this evening?"

The server had stunning blue eyes, her blonde hair in a ponytail, and barely looked old enough to be working here.

"We're doing great, Sarabeth." Loriana offered her patented wide and friendly smile.

“Lovely to see you and Marnie.” Sarabeth nodded encouragingly at Marnie, as if knowing the woman would need prodding.

Marnie managed a smile. “How are Ranger and Paul?”

Sarabeth rolled her eyes. “Ranger’s moved into teenagerhood and Paul’s not far behind. Both pains in my ass, if you know what I mean.”

“And your mom?” Asked quietly.

“She’s doing okay. Some days are better than others, you know? Today was a bad one, but Ranger’s watching her now and I’m here to ask you what I can get you.”

Even Mitch recognized obvious discomfort and evasion.

“I’ll have the cheeseburger.”

“And would you like a chocolate shake with that?”

Marnie’s cheeks pinkened. She cast surreptitious glances at her two tablemates. “Uh, sure. Thanks for reminding me.” She didn’t look grateful, but she seemed to have survived.

“I’m going with the BBQ chicken wrap. Fries, of course.” Loriana propped her elbows on the table and her chin on her hands, batting her eyelashes.

Sarabeth smiled. She turned to him. “And you?”

“Mitch is thinking about the Breakfast Skillet.”

“Oh, good choice. Hash browns?”

He nodded.

“Drinks?”

“I’ll have a root beer.” Mitch loved the tart taste.

“I’ll have an herbal tea.” Loriana tapped the table with her index finger.

Sarabeth scooped up the menus. “I’ll get those orders placed right away. Nice to meet you, Mitch. Hope you’ll make us a regular stop.” She headed back toward the kitchen, her ample hips swaying.

Loriana snagged his hand and squeezed. “I hope you don’t mind that I introduced you. Sarabeth likes to know everyone who comes in.”

“She’s young.” He kept his voice lower.

“She’s been working here a long time. Her mom used to, back in the day. The woman’s multiple sclerosis is too severe now for her to work. She gets a disability pension and monthly payments from the government for the two younger boys, but it’s not enough. Sarabeth started working here when she turned sixteen. At least she managed to finish high school.”

“Although she almost didn’t.” Marnie’s contribution. “She’s had a rough go. We’re hoping once the boys are older and settled that she’ll be able to go to college. Like online classes or something. Right now, she works all the time.”

“And Paul has behavioral issues—which just complicates life more for poor Sarabeth. How she copes, I’m not sure.”

“Whenever one of us comes here, we try to always sit in her section and leave a big tip.” Marnie blew at her ebony bangs.

“I’d love to give her more money, but she’d never take it. She’s proud, you know? I understand pride, but I also believe it’s okay to ask for help.”

Loriana turned her attention to her co-worker. “And when was the last time you asked for help?”

Marnie sat a little straighter. “I’m self-sufficient.”

“You are.” Loriana picked at a chip in the table. “But it’s okay to ask for help. It’s not a sign of weakness.”

“Which reminds me.” Mitch sensed Marnie’s disquiet and desperately wanted to draw Loriana’s attention away from the young woman. He glanced at Loriana—who still held his hand. “Thank you for giving Justin my number. I really appreciate it.”

“Oh, I’m so glad.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “I wouldn’t normally just hand out people’s numbers, but I figured since it was your business line, you wouldn’t mind.”

“I didn’t mind. At all.”

Marnie cleared her throat.

Loriana flashed a grin. “Justin Bridges called me Saturday morning because his work computer crashed. He’s a level-headed guy, but I think he was panicked. I gave him Mitch’s number.”

“Which was great. I fixed the computer and have a contract to upgrade everything.” He squeezed. “So thank you for that.”

She traced a hand down his cheek. “You’re most welcome.”

The gesture was oddly intimate. And yet felt right. Her berry scent enveloped him when she was this close. Not perfume. Just...shampoo? Body wash? A light scent he only caught when she was in his personal space.

And he liked when she was in his personal space.

Marnie cleared her throat, and about three seconds later, Sarabeth arrived with their food.

With clear ease born of experience, she placed their plates.

Steam rose from his plate, and Sarabeth's admonishment of, "Careful, it's hot," was appreciated but unnecessary.

She pointed to the ketchup. "You need anything else?"

Marnie shook her head, while Loriana said, "Nope, we're good."

Sarabeth met Mitch's eye, silently asking for confirmation.

He nodded in agreement.

"Well, enjoy." And the woman left.

Marnie took a sip of her milkshake.

And sighed in what Mitch assumed was pure bliss. He'd considered ordering a shake—he'd spotted over twenty flavors—but he'd opted for the soda. Of which he now took a sip.

Loriana blew on her tea. "It's hot, but the sandwich is hotter."

"Yes, the food's always steaming." Marnie eyed her burger, then picked up a fry and popped it into her mouth. "Hot."

“Sip your milkshake.” Finally, Loriana withdrew her hand from Mitch’s. “We’ll have to come back so you can try a milkshake.”

“I’d like that.” He almost added he’d have to watch the number of times he came—neither his wallet nor his waistline would appreciate repeat visits—but he held his tongue. Talking about money was tactless, and discussing how much food he could or couldn’t consume wasn’t much better. He was a big guy who ate a decent amount, but the food on his plate was guaranteed to fill his belly.

As the meal progressed, discussion pattered through the moans of delight. Mitch got a lesson about Mission City and heard about many of its inhabitants.

A striking couple sat in a booth nearby.

Loriana leaned in. “That’s Rielle and Gage Clayton. He’s been the high school principal for years. His wife was the guidance counselor there for years before she passed tragically.” She tapped her nose. “We weren’t sure he’d ever find love again. Look at them now.”

The blonde woman with stunning amber eyes gazed lovingly at the man whose back was turned to them. His black hair was liberally streaked with gray.

“And two young ones at home.”

Mitch didn’t miss the wistfulness in Marnie’s tone.

Interesting.

Sarabeth returned as Mitch was placing his knife and fork at five o'clock. "Dessert?"

He held up a hand. "Truly, that was amazing. And I don't think I can eat another bite."

She scooped Loriana and Marnie's plates onto her tray and gratefully accepted Mitch's when he handed it to her. "Separate or together?"

All three chimed, "Together," at the same time.

"Well, that was easy. Back in a jiffy."

Okay. *Somehow I don't think it's going to be easy.*

"I'm paying." He angled himself so he could grab his wallet from his back pocket. If that happened to put him in Loriana's personal space, he wasn't going to complain—and he hoped she didn't mind either.

Loriana waved her hand. "I invited, therefore I pay."

Marnie scowled. "It's my turn."

"Turn...?" Loriana's brow furrowed.

"You had us over to your place for dinner."

The older woman laughed. "I bought a frozen lasagne. Cost me nothing."

"Still, you invited us over. And you served garlic bread and cheesecake."

Loriana's furrowed brow didn't ease. "Marnie, that was just a little dinner with friends." She pointed to their table. "This was far more expensive."

“Which is why I should pay.” Maybe he could end the tension. “I was, after all, the one who made money on the contract.”

“Not as much as you probably should have.” Loriana still looked seriously displeased.

We should've opted for separate checks. Who knew taking two beautiful women to dinner would prove so complicated?

The staredown continued, and when Sarabeth returned, holding the check and payment machine, nothing had changed.

She held them aloft.

Loriana was quickest on the draw. She took the machine and entered the tip.

But Mitch swiped his card before she had a chance.

The head librarian scowled.

Marnie hooted with laughter.

All three of the other people pivoted to her.

Mitch was positive he'd never heard her make such a sound, and judging by the expressions Sarabeth and Loriana made, they'd never heard it either.

Realizing all eyes were on her, Marnie desisted. Then she placed her fingers over her mouth. Behind them, she said, “I have to go.” She scooted out of the booth, nearly knocked into Sarabeth, and beat a hasty retreat.

“Well, that didn't go as expected.” Loriana looked back and forth between Mitch and their server. “But one for the record

books.”

Sarabeth handed Mitch the receipt. “I liked that she laughed.” She eyed Mitch. “Maybe you can make her do it more often.” Then she glanced at Loriana, as if belatedly seeing how close they sat. “Well, you know...”

Loriana grinned. “I do know. You take care, okay? My best to Ranger and Paul and your mom.”

For a moment, Sarabeth went very still. Then she put on a smile. “Yes, thank you. Have a great night.”

Mitch sought to judge the sincerity of her response but couldn't. He just didn't know her that well. And as their server walked away, he met Loriana's gaze.

“I wish I could find something to do.” She sighed. “Some things are beyond my control. I'll support her however I can, but I'm not a miracle worker.”

After a moment, Mitch twirled a lock of her hair in his fingers. “Oh, I think you're pretty incredible.”

Where he hoped for happiness, he spotted only a flash of pain.

What's she hiding?

Whatever it was, she hid it well.

She offered what he thought of as a shy smile. “You ready to leave?”

“I am.” She slid from the booth and put on her coat.

He slid from the booth with his coat in his hands and slipped into it as well. He glanced outside. Hey, frost on the window pane. He put on his gloves.

As they wended their way back to the front, he put his hand to her lower back. An instinctual gesture, and one he didn't necessarily recognize. He'd never done it before, but it felt right in this circumstance. He wasn't laying claim to her—but he was putting her under his protection.

Except Loriana was possibly the woman least in need of his help.

And yet, for all her tough exterior, he sensed a vulnerability.

They waved to Sarabeth as they exited the restaurant. Loriana unlocked her car with the remote and they both hopped in as a blast of frigid air blew through.

“I haven't checked—is there more snow expected in the forecast?” Mitch pulled his seat belt across his chest and buckled it.

Loriana blew a little puff of air. “I haven't checked either.” She slanted him a glance. “I've been preoccupied.”

No missing what that look was for. He swallowed. “Thinking about me that much?”

She turned the engine on. “It'll take just a moment to warm up.” While the car idled, she fluffed her hair, and then tapped the tip of her nose. “Are you coming over to my place, or am I going to yours?”

Bold.

But not unexpected. The entire night had been little touches. Light brushes. Sly glances.

Pretty remarkable that Marnie hadn't picked up on it— hadn't commented. Maybe she'd thought it impertinent to say something. On the other hand, he didn't doubt for a moment that Loriana'd get an earful later. The younger librarian was reticent about expressing some things, yet had no problem speaking up on other occasions.

At least her skittishness around me is lessening.

Yes, there was that. He'd take that as a win.

Uh, I haven't answered her.

"My place isn't nearly as charming as yours. Think utilitarian. Plus, won't Plato have missed you?"

She snorted. "He'll be pissed at having missed dinner. Other than that? No, he's good."

Note, that hadn't actually resolved the issue. "Seriously, my place is boring. Your place holds charm."

"It's cluttered."

He thought back to the nice little house. "It's where I'd choose to live, if I had a choice."

She eyed him. "Mission City real estate prices are getting ridiculous. We used to be a cheaper alternative, but not anymore. My place has shot up in value. Not that I ever plan to sell. No, I did nicely."

“You have a great place. Cozy.” It held many of the same attributes as his childhood home when his mother’d been alive.

“Cozy it is, I guess.” She put the car in gear, checked over her shoulder, and backed out of the space. Soon she turned onto Railway Avenue. Within moments, she was climbing the James Street hill to take them to her house.

He glanced at his condo as they passed it. Would it ever feel like home?

Eventually.

Right?

God, he hoped so. Fifty years was a long time to live in a place and not feel like he belonged.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bringing a man home was bold—and not something she did often.

Mitch?

He made her feel all kinds of wonderful things, and she reveled in those emotions. When he looked at her, a spark lit a flame low in her belly. And sure, sexual attraction played a part in this. But a bigger part was the intellectual component. He challenged her mind—and she loved that.

As she pulled into the driveway, she spotted her fat cat perched in the window and waiting for her.

“Plato looks happy to see you.”

She cut her guest a glance. “He’s excited to get his food.”

“You do spoil him.”

Instead of being insulted, she grinned. “He’s a good boy. Kept me company on a lot of long, lonely nights.”

This time, Mitch cut her a glance as he undid his seat belt.

She felt heat rush to her cheeks. “That was revealing more than I intended.”

He snagged her hand. “Loriana, you’re a beautiful woman. I wouldn’t be surprised if men had come courting. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’d let the odd one into your bed. Or more—I don’t judge.”

“There’ve been a few.” She met his gaze, and his pupils were wide in the dim light of the porch. “A few. Yes, I’ve enjoyed company. But I’m just as happy on my own. I’ve made a good life for myself.”

“And so you have. Are you going to invite me in? My feet are going numb.”

“Undoubtedly your balls are freezing as well. Isn’t that a common phrase?”

He guffawed. “Yes, men have been known to say that when complaining about the cold. That sensitive part of our anatomy doesn’t receive the same care as other important parts.” He quirked an eyebrow.

Quite unexpectedly, she placed her free hand against his heart. “You’re a good man, Mitch Alexander. Now, we can’t have your toes or your balls freezing.” She glanced toward the window. “Or have my kitty-cat starve.”

She leaned over to place a chaste kiss on his cheek before exiting the vehicle.

He followed suit, and when they were both clear, she used her remote to lock the car. She used her key to open the door

and, as expected, Plato made a beeline for her. She ignored him as she removed her boots and coat.

Mitch did the same, although he eyed the cat.

Plato eyed him back.

Loriana whistled as she stepped into the kitchen

Plato was right on her heels.

“Hey, do you want to feed him?”

Mitch followed her. “Sure.” His eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Well, I have to run to the bathroom, and I want you two to bond.”

He snickered, but took the tin she offered.

She made a quick exit, heading for the bathroom. She really did need to use the facilities, and she honestly didn't think it'd be a bad thing for the two males in her life to bond. In the past, when she shut Plato out of the bedroom, he'd become downright hostile to the men. Smart cat assumed they were the reason he lost his treasured spot on her bed.

Mitch is different.

He was. He really was. But putting her finger on the difference wasn't quite as easy. Yes, he was handsome. Yes, he was intelligent. Yes, he pressed all of her buttons. But she'd been with attractive and smart men before. Some had stayed a few weeks. A couple had stayed a few months. None more than about nine months and certainly none had moved in.

Todd.

Why did her mind keep going back to him? Twenty years was a long time. He wasn't just her past—he was her long-distant past. Another lifetime. Yet his face kept flashing in her mind. Why, goddammit? Todd and Mitch were as opposite as two men could be. And not just in looks. Todd had been a free spirit. Never tethered to the earth. He claimed he'd change his ways to be with her—that she made him want to settle down. And he'd done it.

Until the day he'd disappeared.

He left you.

God.

She blinked several times. After flushing the toilet, she washed her hands, studiously avoiding the mirror.

Get your head in the game.

Except was this a game? One of those things men and women did when they were attracted to each other? She didn't want to look at it like that. Mitch said he was making Mission City his new home. She still saw red flags in all kinds of places, but wasn't she the same? She had things she didn't share with anyone.

Everyone has secrets.

Her favorite employee was proof of that.

Crap. Did Marnie know Mitch was coming here? Would Loriana owe her friend a phone call when he left? Oh, and what if he didn't leave? Was she okay with that?

After drying her hands on a towel, she headed back down the hall and halted at the entryway to the kitchen.

Mitch sat on the floor with Plato on his lap. The cat purred while Mitch stroked his fur in long strokes.

The food dish was empty.

Likely catching her movement, Mitch glanced up. He offered a half-shrug. “He tried crawling up my leg. In a move of self-preservation, I sat on the ground. Those claws are sharp.”

She moved fully into the room. “Did he hurt you? Did he damage your jeans?”

He waved her off. “All good. I think we’ve reached an understanding. Right?”

Plato gazed up at him with unblinking yellow eyes.

Loriana laughed. “Well, okay, then. Can I offer you something to drink? Or a snack?”

Mitch’s eyes went wide. “After all that food? I don’t think I’ll be able to eat for a week. Fifties have...generous portions.”

That they did.

“I’d love water.”

“Ice?”

“Sure.” He continued to pet Plato.

“You’re going to spoil him.”

“Sometimes a little spoiling is good.” He accepted the water she handed him. “Everyone deserves to be spoiled once in a while.”

Oh, what the hell.

Loriana plopped down onto the kitchen floor.

Mitch arched an eyebrow.

“I did a thorough cleaning yesterday. I mean, I did like a spring cleaning. Probably the fall cleaning I should’ve done months ago.” She eyed the floor under the fridge, pleased not to see any dust bunnies. She’d pulled it out, cleaned behind it, cleaned under it, and then cleaned in it. It shone. Too bad it wouldn’t stay that way. It never did.

“My place was immaculate when I moved in. The previous owners hired a professional cleaning company—which I really appreciated. I try to clean regularly, but I admit I might procrastinate.”

“How long have you been in town?”

“Not long.”

More evasion.

“And how long were you in California?”

“Too long.”

Whatever that means.

Go for simple.

“How old are you?”

Now she was rewarded with a wry grin. “A gentleman should never tell his age. Especially if he’s younger than the lady doing the questioning.”

She slapped his thigh. “That’s total bullshit. You just made that up.”

He cracked a smile. “So I did.” He grabbed her hand and rested it on his thigh. “I’m twenty-nine. But there are days I feel a whole lot older.”

“Well, seeing as I know you’re not going to ask...” She gave him *that* look and he shrugged sheepishly. “I’m thirty-nine, and most days I feel a whole lot younger.”

“You are.” He ran his other hand down her cheek. “You don’t have any wrinkles. You’re flawless.”

“Hardly.” She scoffed. “And I have wrinkles around my eyes.”

“When you laugh, sure. But those are from joy, not from sorrow.”

She met his gaze. “There’s been sorrow.”

“Your parents? What they put you through?”

“A bit. But I grew up and no longer need their approval. Plus, when my father retired, they moved to Costa Rica. Cheaper than living in Canada.”

“Didn’t you...well...aren’t they rich?”

“Ah, yes. But they want to be *more* rich. They pulled up stakes, sold everything up here, and moved south. Truth is, I

don't even miss them. And they never write. Heck, I'm not even sure I'd hear if one or both died."

His stricken expression caught her up short. "Oh, I'm sure someone will get it touch. But I'm pretty sure they'll try to take their wealth with them. I'm not expecting to inherit anything."

He stroked his finger down her arm, and it did all kinds of wonderful things to her insides.

"Yeah, I'm assuming someone will call me when my father dies. We...haven't kept in touch."

And she spotted Mitch's. She had no regrets. She didn't miss her parents, and likely they never gave her a second thought.

Plato, clearly having enjoyed as much attention as he needed, rose, stretched, then hopped off Mitch's lap and headed into the living room. Within moments, he was up on his chair.

At least this time he's not licking his balls.

Her cat didn't know the meaning of the word discreet.

Mitch released her hand. He pushed himself off the floor and, once righted, held out his hand for her.

She took it gratefully and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet.

He did everything with such ease and grace. For such a tall man, he carried himself with surety.

Once they were both standing, however, he didn't release her hand. Instead, he drew it to his lips, and he pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

A chivalrous gesture that fit so perfectly with what she knew of him. A gentle man with a gentle soul.

He tugged her lightly, and she moved into his arms.

Their gazes caught and held—he looking down and she up. A moment suspended in time as she tried to figure out what he was thinking. Yes, she'd invited him in. But they hadn't talked specifics. Hadn't set parameters. Hadn't defined this—whatever this was.

In other words, she had to make the first move. She cupped his chin with both her hands and drew him to her.

His arms twined around her waist as he allowed himself to be pulled in. His eyes drifted shut as their lips touched.

No tentativeness this time—she nipped his bottom lip, and he opened for her. She thrust her tongue inside and demanded admittance. Demanded reciprocity. Demanded surrender. And while she made these demands, she began to yield. When he pulled her closer, she melted against him. When his hands roamed up and down her back, she pressed her breasts against his chest. When he ground his cock against her, she arched into the pressure.

God, I want him. Like, now.

Logistics came to mind. Make out on the sofa? Drag him to her bed? Was that being too forward or prudent? She had a box

of condoms in her nightstand. She didn't have many male companions over, but she enjoyed being prepared. Heck, had the condoms expired? It'd been a while since she checked.

Mitch pulled back and pressed a kiss to her forehead. His harsh breathing seeped into her as it matched her own. "I want you."

"And I want you." Seemed simple enough. "Will you come to my bed?" *Bold enough?*

He pulled back and tipped her chin up so their gazes met. "I'd like that. But..."

"But...?"

"Maybe not all the way on the first date?"

That level of chivalry startled her. She rarely made calculations like that. Sometimes she went to bed on the first date, sometimes it was the sixth, and sometimes it was never.

"If you're not ready, there's no hurry."

He winced. "I didn't bring a condom."

"Well, then it's a good thing I have some."

His pupils dilated.

"We twenty-first century women have learned to keep up with the times."

"And I'm grateful—not all women would have the foresight."

Yes, she doubted Marnie kept condoms in her nightstand.

She grasped his hand. “Come with me.” She gave Plato one long look. “Stay.”

The cat stuck his nose in the air.

Mitch chuckled. “Do cats actually obey commands?”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out.” She tugged him toward her bedroom. “Because he’s a dead kitty if he scratches my door.” She needn’t worry on that score. Plato simply sat outside the door and yowled like the world was coming to an end. Well, to some cats, the feeling of hunger meant the end of the world.

As they passed the bathroom, Mitch pointed.

She nodded, releasing his hand. As soon as he disappeared, she scurried into the bedroom.

Undress? Under the covers? Tactfully nude like a Rubenesque painting? She had a toned body, and didn’t mind showing it off, but was that appropriate?

First condoms, then the shedding of clothes. She had no idea how long she had, but she planned to make the most of that time. She retrieved the box and placed it where Mitch couldn’t miss it. Then she unbuttoned her shirt and stripped it off. Next came jeans, socks, bra, and underwear.

Hurry.

She left everything in a pile on the floor that she shoved to the side.

As she was pulling back the covers, Mitch stepped across her threshold.

He held himself very still as their gazes locked.

She resisted the urge to cover herself. Something about this man had her trembling—in a good way. He awakened her long-dormant yearnings. She wanted him in her and she wanted it now. So she pulled back the rest of the covers, climbed to the middle of the bed, and lay there. She offered what she believed was a coy smile. “You can undress any time now.”

He slowly nodded, never breaking eye contact. He yanked his navy-blue sweater over his head. His gaze sought hers. He undid his jeans and let them gently fall to the ground so as not to damage his phone, obviously. His cock strained against his tight, black briefs. Yet he removed his socks first, never breaking eye contact. Finally, he hooked his fingers in his briefs and drew them down over his hips.

Loriana wasn't a size-queen. She'd been with small guys, big guys, a guy with a crook to the left, and one stubby guy who grew impressively when aroused.

Mitch? On the big side. Nothing she couldn't handle, and didn't that thought set off butterflies in her belly.

His dark skin, bathed in the light of her lamp, shone. And as he advanced, she scooted aside to give him space. He crawled up to her—looking—but not touching. He sat back on his heels and gazed down at her. His cock stood proud and leaking.

She held her hand up and, at his nod, rubbed her thumb across it.

A rumble of approval emanated from his chest.

In response, she grasped him intimately.

He pressed up into the touch. In return, he lightly grazed her knee. As he trailed his finger lazily down the inside of her thigh, she opened for him.

She was on full display for him, and his look of appreciation warmed her from the inside.

When his finger passed over her clit, she bucked.

She also tightened her grip on him and he moaned.

He delved two fingers into her and her breath caught.

This. She'd been missing this. She loved sex. Didn't do it frequently, but enjoyed it when the opportunity arose.

As his fingers continued to do all those wonderful things, she found herself climbing higher and higher. She wanted him inside her when she climaxed, but if he kept this up, she might go over the cliff without him. "You. Inside me. Now."

His smile warmed her. "I always try to do what the lady asks."

Except let her pay.

Good God, where had that come from? She was still upset about who picked up the check? Now? At this moment? Lord, she needed her head examined.

He leaned closer to her, gazing at her with a penetrating stare. "Come for me, Loriana."

And she did. Her eyes drifted shut. She contracted around his fingers as the force of her orgasm slammed her. Her body bowed, as if seeking even more pleasure.

He pressed a kiss to her cheeks, then rubbed his stubble lightly against her. “That was spectacular. Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

She didn’t know the veracity of the statement, but she’d take it. As she melted, boneless, into the bed, she still gripped him. She looked up at him. “Please?”

He chuckled. “All in good time.”

Her eyes drifted shut, and she fell into a deep slumber.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Either he'd just given her an amazing climax or she was truly exhausted. Likely both, but he chose to believe the former was a big part of her drifting off.

He eyed his erection with skepticism. He had various options, but letting it die a natural death felt more respectful. Going into the bathroom and finishing himself off was an option—but it held little appeal. He snagged a tissue from the box, wiped down his fingers, and tossed the tissue in the trash. Then he coaxed Loriana to lie on her side. He snuggled up behind her and yanked the covers over them. Finally, he pulled her close. His front to her back. His thighs cradling hers. His arm around her waist. He breathed in the scent of her shampoo as he let himself go.

Sometime later, he floated back into consciousness.

A very delectable ass was pressing against his cock. Said appendage had sat up and taken notice.

Loriana reached behind and grabbed his thigh. “Are you awake?”

He rumbled a chuckle. “I am now.”

“Cool.”

Cool?

She raked her fingernails down his thigh, then nudged his hip.

Assuming she wanted him to lie flat, he followed her guidance.

She turned over so she faced him. “Sorry.” Her grin was sheepish and lit her face.

“For what?”

“Falling asleep on you.” She poked him in the ribs.

He shrugged. “I’m a pretty easygoing guy. I assumed you didn’t fall asleep because you were bored.”

“Uh, no. Definitely not. I think that orgasm lulled me right into sleep. You’re pretty talented.”

You haven’t seen anything yet.

But he didn’t utter those words. He didn’t want to appear arrogant. And just because a couple of lovers had complimented his technique, didn’t mean he’d get it right this time.

Loriana traced indiscriminate patterns on his chest. She seemed to enjoy the feel of his chest hair—which was sparse

—and beamed when his nipples puckered under her ministrations. She met his gaze. “You ready for more?”

More? He’d leave happy enough for what they’d done. But as her she trailed her fingers down his abs and lower still, he sat up to attention. She grasped him intimately, and he sucked in a breath.

“I think you’re intrigued.”

“Oh, I’m that, all right. And a whole lot more.” He gazed into fathomless brown eyes. “So only one question remains—who’s on top?”

She grinned, released him, and stretched over him to grab a condom. “You this time and me the next. I like to mix things up.”

He liked the sound of that. He snagged the condom and lowered the sheet so he could sheathe himself.

Loriana lay back and lazily traced her hands all over her body.

He grew painfully hard. After dropping the condom wrapper on the nightstand, he rolled over so he lay above her. He balanced on his elbows and gazed into her eyes.

She nodded and opened her thighs.

He lowered himself. Then, ever so slowly, he pressed inside her. She was tight, so he took his time—enjoying every inch of heat.

Grasping his biceps, she continued to hold his gaze. Her pupils were blown wide, and when she gave the subtlest nod, he took his cue. He withdrew then pressed back. Pulled almost out and thrust back in. Keeping up the rhythm was easy—this was a ritual as old as time. And as he increased the tempo, her breath came in short, sharp pants.

He wanted to say something, but the situation felt too tenuous. So he continued his relentless pursuit of her orgasm. He was known for his dedication, and he intended to live up to that reputation tonight.

As she clawed at his back, her muscles strained and tightened.

“Please, now.” He wasn’t above begging.

In response, her eyes closed and her breathing hitched.

As he felt her spasm around him, he let go as well—falling into the wonderful abyss.

In a bit, he tried to catch his breath as he gently rolled away from her. He’d love to stay wrapped in her arms forever, but his weight was likely crushing her. He pulled her with him and she came, a tangle of limbs.

“Condom.” He didn’t want to, but it needed to be taken care of.

She disentangled herself enough to let him roll the condom off and tie a knot. Reaching her trash can was a stretch, but he managed. Then he yanked the covers back over them and pulled her close. He appreciated that she kept a cooler house.

He'd had enough heat to last him a lifetime down in California.

"That was..." She swallowed.

"Yeah." The only coherent response he could manage.

She laid her head upon his chest, her chin resting on his sternum.

He propped his head up with a pillow so he could stare back.

"Stay the night?"

Her question caught him off-guard. It wasn't something he did often. Yet, in this moment, the answer seemed obvious. "Of course."

"Great." She snuggled up against him. "Now, sleep."

"Yes, ma'am."

She placed her hand on his abdomen and nestled into his side.

His eyes drifted shut, and he was almost asleep when the most unexpected and hair-raising sound came from just beyond the door. He sat bolt upright.

Loriana snickered. She slid from bed and padded—naked—over to the bedroom door. She opened it, and a flash of fur darted in.

Moments later, Plato landed on the bed. He eyed Mitch warily.

Hold steady.

He was the human. Showing weakness was likely to only lead to bad things.

After an interminable amount of time, Plato broke their stare.

Ha.

Loriana slid back into bed. “Lie down. He’ll figure it out.”

Mitch wasn’t sure he wanted to know what that meant. So he scooted back down and drew Loriana to his side as she dragged the covers back over them.

She curled into his side—much as she had before—and tucked her head into the crook of his neck.

Plato crawled up her blanket-covered legs and plopped onto her hip.

Mitch would’ve sworn she grunted. But she was already drifting back to sleep. He envied her—being able to drop into sleep so easily.

La-la-land was much slower in coming for him, and when he cracked an eye open, sunlight streamed into the room through a slit in the drapes.

He sat bolt upright, tossing Plato right off his chest where, apparently, the cat’d been contentedly napping.

Plato shot a nasty look over his shoulder and headed out of the room—undoubtedly in search of food.

Loriana breezed in moments later. “Oh, good, you’re up.”

Mitch was in the process of throwing the covers off when she blocked him and put them back up.

“Relax.”

He pointed to the window. “What time is it?”

“Eight-thirty. I have to be at work soon. I considered waking you, but you looked so peaceful. Hopefully I haven’t made you late.”

“Uh, no. Nothing on the books this morning.”

“Great.” Her smile radiated and her brown eyes shone. Then she snagged his hand. She flipped it so his palm faced up.

To his shock, she dropped a key.

“You can lock up when you go. If you want, you can bring the key around to the library. If you really want, you can hang on to it. Just in case, you know, you want a repeat of last night.”

“Repeat?” He shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs.

She tried to snatch the key back.

He snagged her wrist with his other hand. “Sorry, morning brain fog. I’m someone who needs to wake up slowly with multiple alarms.”

Her expression lightened. Then she knelt on the bed to kiss him. “Text me later, and we’ll make plans. If you’re amenable. I don’t want to be pushy.”

“Sometimes pushy’s okay.” He yanked her in for another kiss. To hell with morning breath. “Have a great day.”

“I will.” She eased off the bed and headed out of the room. Her dark-blue jeans were paired with a mint-green turtleneck sweater.

She looked prim and proper, but as he remembered how she’d come apart in his arms last night, he felt a modicum of pride.

A disembodied, “Can you feed the cat?” carried through the house just before the side door slammed shut.

Moments later, Plato leapt onto the bed and eyed him.

Mitch sighed, threw off the covers, and eased off the bed. He headed to the bathroom, casting a caustic look at the cat. “I’m doing my business first. Then you get fed.”

Plato leapt off the bed and left the room.

See? You can handle—

The yowl of indignation carried all the way from the kitchen to the master bedroom.

Oh my God, the neighbors are going to report me for animal abuse.

Heedless of the consequences, he sprinted down the hall—buck naked—and stopped when he got to the kitchen.

Apparently Plato hadn’t expected such expediency because he ceased the caterwauling.

Mitch snagged a plate from the cupboard and quickly upended the container of food. He placed it on the floor and took a small measure of pleasure when the cat gave him one

last look before pouncing on the food. The purrs followed him quite a ways as he backtracked. Quickly, he located the key he'd dropped in his haste to get to the kitchen.

Do I put it on my keyring? That's too presumptuous. Right?

He had no experience in this area. He'd never been given a key and, in turn, he'd never given a key. Never even come close. He'd dated Marjorie for seven months and had never spent the night. And she'd never deigned to come back to his place. That hadn't been a hardship—her salary was easily twenty times his. Her home had been luxurious while his had been...utilitarian. Much as the way he lived now.

You could hang a picture or painting or something.

True. But those things spoke of permanence, and even though he was convinced he was staying in Mission City, he couldn't help thinking that hanging something would jinx that notion. Which was positively ridiculous.

He palmed the key. What harm could come of putting it on the ring? Sliding it off would be easy enough, and if he left it loose in his pocket, he might drop it.

That's quite the cock-and-bull story you're telling yourself.

Whatever.

He was sliding the key onto his keyring when his phone rang. He jerked and fumbled the keys. He lay them on the nightstand and snagged his jeans, scrambling for his phone.

Unknown caller.

Since many potential clients would be unknown, he swiped to accept the call. “This is Mitch Alexander, how may I help you?”

“Mr. Alexander, this is Corporal Colton Pritchard from the Mission City RCMP detachment. Where are you currently?”

Mitch pulled the phone away from his ear and looked at it. Was this a prank? Why would a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer call him? Or someone pretending to be RCMP. Was this a fraud call?

“I’m not interested. Thank you anyway.” He was pulling the phone away when the man spoke again.

“This is not a crank call. I can give you my badge number and a phone number you can call to verify it.”

“Okay, but how do I know they’re not fraudsters as well?”

“You can look up the RCMP Mission City detachment phone number and call them. They’ll confirm my identity.”

The man’s confidence bordered on arrogance, but something niggled. “So you know Seth.”

“Constable Seth Jacobs? Of course.” A noise traveled through the phone. A pen clicking? “How do you know Seth?”

“I met him the other day at the Mission City library. I just...”

“You wanted to verify my credentials.”

“Well, that would be logical. These days anyone can call up claiming to be anyone else. I don’t feel like being scammed

today.”

“Great. Now we’ve verified my bona fides, where are you?”
No missing the stern and exasperated tone.

Mitch wanted to tell the man off, but he’d never do that. Not in a million years. “I’m in Mission City. If you want, I can come down to the detachment. Where is it?”

“The edge of town. But I’m at your condo complex right now. Perhaps you could buzz me up?”

Goddammit.

“I’m not home, but if you give me twenty minutes—”

“Mr. Alexander.” He cleared his throat. “I’m not a patient man. Tell me where you are, and I will come to you.”

What the hell?

“Can you at least tell me what this is about?”

“That’s confidential. But I have to speak to you. Right now.”

Something in his tone caught Mitch’s attention. “Will you tell me what this is about?”

“No. Where are you?”

He could continue to stall for time—or just hang up the phone and power it down. But his phone had been on all night. They’d find him. They might need to get a search warrant or something, or they might just decide to do it.

He sighed. “33939 Fourth Avenue.”

A long pause. “You’re at Loriana Harper’s home?”

Small town. Or had he been here before? Had he been one of Loriana’s lovers? That thought didn’t sit well. Loriana didn’t seem the type to like rude people. *Maybe he’s only rude with you.* “Yes, Loriana Harper’s home.”

“I’ll be there in five.”

“Please make it fifteen.” He hung up the phone and sprinted to the shower. Yes, being freshly showered would be indicative of what they’d done last night. So would not showering and smelling like sex. So, given the less-than-ideal circumstances, he chose cleanliness.

Four minutes later, in what was likely his shortest shower ever, he emerged from the stall. He toweled himself off as best he could, having foregone washing his hair. He sorted his clothes and put them on as fast as he could.

Still not fast enough, if the pounding on the door was any indication.

Socks or no socks?

More pounding.

Okay, no socks.

He dropped them as he bolted for the front door.

“Open up, Alexander.”

Ah, the authoritative voice of an angry cop. Not something Mitch’d ever hoped to hear. In fact, he spent his life coloring

within the lines at all times in order to avoid police. Wasn't worth the risk.

He opened the side door to find the cop with his fist raised, apparently ready to pound again. "I'm here."

The cop gave him the once-over. To be expected. But the man didn't seem too surprised, so obviously he'd seen Mitch's ID or been briefed.

Or both.

That thought was disconcerting. There should be no one to consult with. He'd never encountered a cop in a professional capacity. There'd been a few Vancouver cops in his neighborhood while he'd grown up. But they wouldn't remember him—of that he was quite sure. Under the radar.

"You going to let me in?"

The cold air was already seeping into Lorian's house. The furnace kicked on and, to top it off, Mitch's feet were freezing. So, reluctantly, he stepped aside.

Colton Pritchard stepped into the room, offering his police ID to Mitch.

As Mitch closed the door, he examined the ID. It appeared genuine. But, again, he had no frame of reference.

The corporal stood as tall as Mitch. Maybe an inch or two shorter than his six-foot-four frame. Whatever the difference might be, the cop more than made up for it with his rigid stance.

Mitch'd spent a lifetime hunching—trying to make himself appear shorter. He didn't want to stand out in a crowd. Now, though, he pulled himself up to his full height. He wasn't going to let the other man get the better of him. He handed back the badge.

The man took it and then held out his hand. "ID."

Wanting to utter *please* under his breath, and actually doing it, were two different things. With the minutest of reluctance, Mitch fished his wallet from his back pocket. He yanked out his British Columbia license, grateful he'd gotten it changed almost as soon as he came back to the province. Likely, the California ID would raise suspicions, and he didn't need that.

"This is a new license."

Okay, well so much for that thought. "I'm newly returned."

"To Canada."

"To Canada." *Where is he going with this?*

"You going to offer me a seat? Maybe a drink of that coffee I smell?"

Mitch hadn't noticed the smell, but he glanced over to see coffee warming in the machine. It'd still be fresh as Lorian'a'd barely been gone any time at all. "No." He turned back to the cop. "Because you're going to state your business, I'll tell you I'm innocent, and then you'll be on your way. Shouldn't take more than two minutes."

Please let it be two minutes. Please let it be two minutes.

Colton pointed to the sofa.

Mitch, sensing the inevitable—and not wanting a fight—moved to the living room. After a long moment, he sat.

“You want to put on socks?” The cop eyed Mitch’s feet.

“You won’t be here long enough for them to get cold.” A bald-faced lie—his feet were already blocks of ice. Still a minor discomfort to move this thing along—whatever it was—was a small price to pay.

Colton eyed the rocking chair, Plato’s chair, and the other end of the couch. After clearly dismissing all three, he headed to the fireplace where he stood leaning against the mantel. A man without a care in the world.

Mitch waited.

Suddenly Plato strolled into the room. As he passed Colton, he arched his back and hissed. Then he leapt onto his chair and glared. Finally, as if suddenly remembering his manners, he glanced over at Mitch. He appeared to give a subtle nod. *I’ve got your back*. Which was patently absurd. Except obviously some animosity existed between the cop and the feline. Had Colton been here before? Was that the reason the cat was pissed? Or did he simply not like strangers in the house.

He liked me.

Well, so maybe the cat had good taste.

After a long moment, Colton’s lips twitched. “Nice to see you again, Plato.”

Okay, so staking his territory. He'd been here before. As a lover? As a friend?

Or, most disturbingly, as a cop?

I probably don't want to know.

No, he probably didn't.

“Why are you here? Clearly it's not a social call.”

The cop's dark-brown eyes flashed. They matched his dark-brown hair and gave him the look of tall, dark, and dangerous.

Illusion or reality. Hard to say.

“Does the name Marjorie Dawes mean anything to you?”

Playing dumb would get him nowhere. Would likely make things worse. “You know it does.”

“And where were you this weekend?”

“What is this about?”

“I ask the questions.” Sharp. Rude. Succinct.

And enough to intimidate him. “Friday night I was at the parade. Saturday I was at Healing Horses Ranch fixing their computer system. Sunday was a day off. Yesterday evening I was at Fifties with Loriana and Marnie.”

“And you came back here with Loriana?”

“As you can see.” *Don't antagonize him.*

“Between Saturday evening and last night, did anyone see you?”

His stomach dropped. “No. I was online placing orders for equipment, working on my website, and arranging some advertising.”

“Which you could have done from anywhere.”

“True. But I didn’t. And my computer will show I did all that from the comfort of my home.”

“But you’re a computer guy. You could fake all that.”

Careful. “I suppose. Although if I can do it, there’s likely someone who can undo it.” He tapped his finger on his thigh. “And I think I’ve been patient enough—what’s going on? Why are you asking about Marjorie? Has she said something about me? Leveled some kind of accusation?”

“Why would she do that?”

Mitch let out a quick exhalation of breath. “Why does Marjorie do anything? She’s a liar.” He hesitated. “I hate to speak ill of anyone—anyone at all—but she lied about me, and she cost me everything I’d worked for.” He glanced around the homey space. “And maybe, in the end, I might be better off. But it doesn’t hurt any less.”

“So you feel animosity toward Ms. Dawes?”

“I don’t feel anything toward Ms. Dawes. She’s in the past. I’ve moved on. Heck, I’m pretty sure she has too.”

“So you had a relationship?” The cop’s dark eyes were incisive.

“If you want to call it that.”

Colton's eyebrow cocked. "What would you call it?"

"Well, I thought we were serious. Turns out she didn't feel the same way. She betrayed me with someone I thought of as a friend. Someone I trusted. Then she stabbed me in the back at work."

"You worked together."

"Yes. She was a vice-president, and I was a lowly cog. Our relationship wasn't strictly forbidden—I wasn't a direct report—but it was ill-advised. For many reasons." *God, please let this be enough.*

"You regret the seven-month affair?"

"Absolutely and..." Mitch scratched his jaw. "How did you know it lasted seven months?" He wracked his brain. "I didn't tell you that."

"You didn't."

Mitch waited for elucidation. Nothing. "So who've you been talking to? And I wasn't charged with any crime down there, so why are you here now? What's happened?"

"I was contacted by a Mountain View police sergeant. Asked me to see if you had an alibi."

"An alibi? An alibi for what?" Suddenly, puzzle pieces clicked into place. "What's happened to Marjorie?" Hopefully nothing bad. Because for all the animosity he held toward her, he didn't wish her ill.

Colton held his gaze.

What does he see?

Hopefully not a guilty man. Whatever accusation might be launched at him, he wasn't guilty. Whatever'd been done, he hadn't done it. Except the cop obviously wasn't here to share good news. No, this wasn't a social call.

“Ms. Dawes has disappeared.”

So what? But Mitch knew better than to utter his first caustic thought. “Disappeared? Okay, so what does this have to do with me?”

Colton was saved from answering as the side door flew open and Lorianana blew in like a hurricane.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Nosy Norma was usually a pain in Loriana's ass. The neighbor'd often commented slyly if she spotted a man leaving Loriana's in the morning. Implied something was wrong with enjoying company. Old prudish shrew.

Yet, on this formerly lovely Tuesday morning, Loriana was never so grateful for the old meddlesome spinster. Loriana tried to be charitable to everyone—even succeeded most occasions—but Norma strained all her nerves.

As she'd raced home from the library, however, she'd mentally said a little thanks to the tiresome old nag. Apparently Colton'd been loud enough to rouse even those with hearing aids turned too low and who watched television way too loud. Norma'd also made a cutting remark about the *Black* man. Okay, so maybe that thanks was a little too soon.

Her car was barely in park and off before she hopped out and barreled toward the house. Thank God the door was unlocked. Having to slow down to unlock it would've mitigated some of her obvious fury. She threw herself in the

house and came up short, finding Colton and Mitch all cozy in her living room.

Mitch rose while Colton pivoted from his spot at the mantel.

Neither moved toward her.

She slammed the door shut. In her race to get home, she hadn't bothered with a coat. Given the temperature was well below freezing, that might not've been the best idea. But she couldn't bear the thought of Mitch alone in her house facing a classic Colton interrogation. Not her idea of a pleasant way to spend the morning.

"Ms. Harper." Colton's eyes were flinty.

"I told you to call me Loriana." She snapped it. They'd known each other all their lives. He'd always been six years behind her in school, but she'd known he was there. She'd helped tutor his younger sister, Mallory. She'd watched how he cared for Mallory when both their parents died when he was in his late teens. As soon as the girl had graduated from high school, he'd left for Depot—determined to be an RCMP officer. And he'd succeeded. Like Seth, he'd served in various remote posts in Canada, but had eventually made his way back home.

And now he stood in her living room, calling her *Ms. Harper*, and that really pissed her off.

"Loriana." Said quietly as Mitch moved to her.

"Stay where you are."

He halted at Colton's words.

So she went to Mitch. He appeared none the worse for wear except... “Where are your socks?”

“Didn’t get a chance to put them on.”

“I keep this house quite cold. Go get them.” She held Mitch’s gaze for another moment before spinning to Colton. “You should’ve given him a chance to put on socks, for Christ’s sake.”

The cop appeared slightly ruffled by her profanity. “I offered to let him.”

“I’m sure you did.” A sneer. “I can just imagine how accommodating you were. Offer to follow him? To see my bedroom?” Somewhere he’d never seen and somewhere she had no intention of letting him see now. No way could Mitch have had enough time to make the bed. No, signs of their lovemaking would be everywhere.

“Go get your socks. I’ll be waiting.” Implacable Colton.

Mitch headed toward the master bedroom.

“We’ll be waiting.” She put her hands on her hips. “I want to know what the hell is going on, Colton. You come to my house when I’m not here—”

“How did you know about that? Did he call you? Or do you have some kind of surveillance?”

“I do have surveillance.”

The cop looked around.

“In the form of Norma.”

Understanding dawned as his eyebrows shot up.

“Yes, so now I’ll be the talk of Mission City. Lorianana had a man stay overnight, and the cops showed up the next morning. Do you know the level of scrutiny I’m facing?”

His now furrowed brow assured her that, although he hadn’t thought about it before, he certainly was now.

Mitch re-entered the room.

Plato, who’d been lying on his chair in a sliver of sunlight, meowed. Whether in delight the big man was back, or annoyance at the disruption to his normally placid life, she wasn’t sure.

“Why don’t we sit?”

Mitch’s voice was smooth and, if she wasn’t coming to know him so well, she would’ve said calm. But she knew him. And she heard the edge.

“Lorianana’s not staying.” The cop pointed. “This has nothing to do with you.”

“My house. My rules. I stay.” In defiance, she plopped down in the middle of the couch. *Mitch has to sit next to me. Unless he takes the rocking chair.* But the rocking chair would diminish his power—that much was plain to see.

After a moment, he sat.

“I could run you down to the station.” The damn cop again.

“Whatever for? I’m still not clear what he’s done. He’s not trespassing, if that’s what you’re thinking. I gave him full

permission to be here. In fact, I gave him a key.” *So stick that in your goose and cook it.*

“I’m not certain that was wise.”

She sliced the air in frustration, all the while fighting the sinking feeling in her stomach. The police didn’t just show up for no reason, did they? God, let this not be about Mitch’s skin color. She’d never peg Colton as a racist, but who knew what his years on the police force had taught him? Speaking of which... “Where’s Dorrie? I thought you were an inseparable team.”

Dorrie Duhamel was another hometown girl who’d headed off to Depot—after she finished her undergraduate degree in criminology at the Justice Institute. The petite blonde woman with pretty blue eyes was the antithesis of her partner. But they worked well together.

“She’s briefing Zach Finnegan in the prosecutor’s office about a perp we captured last night. Been chasing this guy for a while, and we finally nailed him. She’s going over everything to ensure we nail the bastard.”

Loriana silently harrumphed. She was allowed to swear in her own home—Colton was not. Still, she felt a certain respect. Colton and Dorrie worked in sex crimes. That meant dealing with traumatized victims and sick criminals. In fact...

“Are you here in some kind of formal capacity? Has Mr. Alexander been accused of a crime?” *God, please let me not have misjudged him.* He’d been nothing but solicitous and

kind with her—but she, of all people, knew appearances could be deceiving.

“He’s a person of interest.”

Her breath caught at Colton’s words. “What does that mean?”

“A woman has gone missing in California. Mr. Alexander was well-acquainted with her.”

Loriana was smart enough to catch the nuance. “So he *knew* a woman in California. Did she go missing in California?”

Colton nodded.

“When?”

“Between late Saturday night and early Sunday morning.”

“Well obviously Mitch didn’t do it.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, it’s not like he just went down to California, made a woman disappear, and came back to Canada. I mean, there’d be travel records and stuff, right? He can’t just leave the country without immigration noting it. So there’d be records by US Customs and records by Canada Customs.”

“He might’ve used an alias.”

“Oh, good God, Colton. That mind of yours. Why would Mitch do that? He’s got a good life in Canada. Why would he risk that for the sake of some woman?”

In her heart, though, she knew the answer. She’d have done anything for Todd. All he’d needed to do was ask.

“Mr. Alexander admits she ruined his life.”

Loriana shot a glance to Mitch.

“I’m not certain I said *ruined my life*. She made it so staying in California was impossible.” He held Loriana’s gaze. “But I can’t say I regret coming back to Canada.”

She grasped his hand. Then she pivoted her gaze to Colton. “He was at Healing Horses on Saturday and with us yesterday. Hardly enough time to do...whatever it is you’re accusing him of doing.”

“You’ve only been in town a short time.” Colton’s stare at Mitch was intense.

Cocky. That was the word she’d searched for. The cocky cop. The man who’d burst into her home and was bringing shame and attention to it. Now, apparently all her neighbors knew.

Colton’d been here before—as a guest on New Year’s three years ago. Or had it been four? She’d felt sorry knowing he’d be spending the holiday alone after some relationship had ended. She’d later discovered he hadn’t been serious about the woman, and that’d colored her feelings about having opened her house. Which reminded her—she hadn’t started planning this year’s celebration.

Time to get on that.

Focus.

Yes, well there was that. “I think you can leave, Colton. It’s clear Mitch couldn’t have done the things you said. There’d be

records. Of him crossing the border. Of him flying—because obviously he couldn't drive to California and back.”

“He might have fake ID.”

“Now you're just pulling stuff out of your ass. Making stuff up. Truthfully, it's beneath you. You know he didn't do these things. You're just being a prick.”

Those flinty dark-brown eyes didn't give anything away. “I'll be back.”

“Well, you'll need a warrant and probable cause. You can't just harass someone because they *might* have done something. And, for what it's worth, Mitch isn't like that. He's not vengeful. He wouldn't fly down to California just to hurt someone.”

“You've known him what, ten minutes?”

She released Mitch's hand and rose. “Fuck off and get out of my house. You don't want me calling Greg to report your harassment, do you?” Sergeant Gregory Wilder was well known in Mission City—as Colton's boss and as a man who didn't tolerate bullshit.

She wasn't sure this qualified as harassment. She wasn't sure about the criteria for warrants and what probable cause really was. She wasn't a lawyer—she just watched a lot of *Law and Order*. Every single episode since the beginning. A few on reruns as well. Jesse L. Martin was a hell of a lot sexier than Colton Pritchard.

He pushed off the mantel to straighten. “Don’t leave town. Or if you do, check in with the department. We need to keep tabs on you until this is resolved.”

Mitch rose slowly. “What if it’s never resolved? What if Marjorie decided to take off and is never heard from again?”

“Why would she do that?”

Loriana glanced at Mitch who went eerily still. “Why does anyone do anything?”

Colton cocked his head. “I’d never consider leaving town without informing someone—my sister, my partner—someone. It’s not something that’s usually done.”

“Marjorie is...” He scrubbed his hands over his face. “I don’t want to speak ill of her, but she was volatile.”

“Was?” Colton’s gaze narrowed.

“Is.” Mitch made the correction quickly. “I meant she was when I knew her. And maybe she’s changed over the past few months.” He met Loriana’s gaze. “But I don’t think so. When someone tells you who they are, you need to believe them. She was ambitious to the core. Willing to step on anyone who got in her way.”

Colton scratched his nose. “Might that have pissed someone off so much that they wanted her out of the way? Wanted her dead?”

“I don’t know.” Mitch shifted from foot to foot. At least he wore socks now. “I didn’t wish her ill—despite what she did to me. But might everyone be so forgiving? I don’t know.”

“And people do disappear.” Loriana wracked her brain. “Alessandra Soriano. Well, Alessandra MacLean now. She walked away from her life. Tragic circumstances.” *Crap.*

“What do you know?” Colton’s interest was clearly piqued. “Because those circumstances were supposed to be kept private.”

Bluster or bluff? Or both? “You know there are very few secrets in Mission City, Colton. I heard through the grapevine and, of course, I’d never pass along such information. Allie is settled now—back in the community where she belongs. She brought that nice guy from Vancouver and they’re married and everything’s good now. Didn’t she have a baby last month? I think they named him Raphael.”

Colton scratched his stubble-free jaw. “They did.”

“So, see?”

“See what?” The scowl was back.

“This Marjorie woman may yet turn up. Regardless, Mitch had nothing to do with it. So, again, I’m inviting you to leave my home.”

His eyes tracked between the two of them. “This isn’t over.”

Loriana stalked to the door and held it open. “Yes, it is. It really is.”

With one final glare, Colton nodded and headed out.

She slammed the door behind him. “Insufferable man.”

Mitch dropped back to the couch. “He’s not wrong. I can see why I’d be a suspect.”

“There’s a vast difference between being a suspect and being guilty.” She crossed to him and dropped to her haunches, looking up into his bleak eyes. “Unless you did it. And although you’re clever, I don’t think even you’d be able to pull that off.”

With great gentleness, he ghosted his thumb down her cheek. “Your faith in me is breath-taking. I’m not sure you should be so trusting.”

“Did you do it?” *Will you tell me the truth?*

“No, I didn’t. Could I have found someone to give me a fake ID? These days? People like that exist, but it’s damn hard. But there are surveillance cameras everywhere. So whether I flew to California out of Vancouver International, or took a car down to Bellingham or Seattle and flew out of there, tons of footage would be hanging around. And, let’s be honest, I’m pretty easy to spot.”

She wouldn’t argue with that.

“Have you had breakfast?”

“I...uh...” He appeared momentarily confused. “No. I was barely out of bed when the cop called. Is he always like that?”

She considered. “Nope, sometimes he’s worse.” She pressed a hand to Mitch’s arm. “But he’s not all bad. He and his partner, Dorrie, take some of the toughest cases. I’ve heard he’s good with victims. Part of me believes that, and part of

me wants to snort in derision.” She glanced back at the door.
“Today I choose to snort.”

That made Mitch smile.

“Let’s go to Fifties.”

“Don’t you have to go back to work?”

She shook her head. “The joy of being the boss—I get to take a personal day when I want. Plus, it’s good for Marnie to run the place now and again. I won’t be around forever.”

His brow knit. “You’re still young.”

“Well, Marnie’s younger. Hopefully by the time I’m ready to retire, she’ll be ready to take over. Of course that means she’ll have to get over her innate shyness. Something to strive for.”

“Does she want to get over it? Some people aren’t geared toward others. Like introverts and extroverts.”

Loriana laughed. “Well, I’m an extrovert. She’s an introvert.” Her brown eyes sparkled. “What are you?”

“You can’t guess?” Now his dark-brown eyes sparkled.

It warmed her heart. “Introvert who pushes himself when working with the public.”

“Much like your Marnie. I’ll do it—but I’m thrilled when I get to go home at the end of the day and relax with a good book.”

She squinted. “Are you saying that just to make a good impression?”

“Is it working?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, sure. Although there are a few shows I like to watch.” He glanced at the door, then back down at her. “Police procedurals are my favorite. I love *Endeavour*.”

“Ah, the Brits. I’m a fan of the good old Americans. *Law and Order* as well as the old *CSI* series.”

Mitch winced. “Yeah, I’m not a huge fan of American police. I mean, I respect them and I’m sure most of them are great people...”

She tapped his thigh. “I get it. Now, Fifties?”

“Sure.” He leaned forward until their faces were centimeters apart. “You shouldn’t have come home, and you shouldn’t have defended me so vigorously. You barely know me.”

“You think that I think because we had sex that we have a special bond. It’s not like that.”

“Maybe it’s like that for me.”

Really? Wow.

He grasped her cheeks and eased her toward him.

Their lips touched, and she opened, ready for a fierce kiss. She twined her hands around his neck to tug him closer. Their tongues tangled as each fought for dominance. On the one hand, she wanted this—wanted him. Would be happy to drag him back to her bed. On the other hand, she’d barely started her morning protein shake before Nosy Norma called, and

Mitch hadn't eaten anything in over sixteen hours. Time to feed him.

With reluctance, she pulled back.

He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. A gesture she was coming to like—a lot. “You grab your coat. Do you have everything?”

“I haven't...the bedroom...”

She snickered. “Can wait until tonight. I assume you fed Plato, because he didn't leap on me the moment I walked through the door.”

Mitch eyed the cat who dozed in his chair without a care in the world. “Yes, he's been fed. Not overly appreciative.”

Another snicker escaped. “No, my cat isn't known for being generous. I think he's becoming cantankerous in his old age.”

“Becoming?” He laughed. “I'd say he's already there.”

Plato opened one eye, gave Mitch a good once-over, then closed the eye and went back to sleep.

Both humans in the room laughed.

Mitch moved to the door where he donned his boots, coat, and gloves.

“I miss the reindeer hat.”

He might've just blushed. Hard to tell with his dark skin.

“There'll be more times before Christmas.”

She clapped her hands. “Oh, yes, Christmas. Do you have plans? I have a celebration for close single friends on Christmas Eve, and then my house is open for most of Christmas Day for anyone who wants to drop in. You’ve got to come.”

His hand on the doorknob, he stilled. “That’s very generous of you.”

“So you’ll come?”

“That’s still almost three weeks away. A lot can happen in three weeks.”

Fucking Colton. She’d no doubt the cocky cop was the reason Mitch hesitated.

“Well, the offer stands.” She motioned for him to open the door—which he did. She followed and locked up. She’d been forced to park on the street, as Colton’d used her driveway.

The morning shone brilliantly—unusual for this time of year. She could see clear across to Mount Baker as well as the entire Fraser Valley. The air was crisp and fresh—although still a little cold for her liking.

Mitch slid into the passenger seat as she hustled into the driver’s. She turned on the engine and was just about to pull away when movement caught her eye. Sighing, she put the car in park and rolled down her window. Cold air from outside warred with the heat pushing through the vents.

“Miss Harper.”

“Hello, Norma.”

She could use the woman's last name, but she liked to try to keep things informal. Especially when she was about to get a dressing-down.

Norma leaned over to peer in the car. She didn't have far to stoop since she was well under five feet.

Loriana towered over her. She enjoyed that feeling of power. The petite woman clearly didn't.

“What was Corporal Pritchard doing here?”

Loriana's first instinct was to claim it a social call. Colton no longer wore the uniform while working and he hadn't been in a police cruiser. But she also had no doubt Norma'd ferret out the real reason. No secrets and all that.

“He wanted to meet Mitch.” She gestured to her passenger. “Mitch, this is Norma. Norma, this is Mitch.” *Now that we're done with the pleasantries, can we please leave?*

Norma's gaze narrowed. “What are you doing at Loriana's at this hour of the day?”

Ah. So the woman wasn't one hundred percent certain Mitch'd stayed the night. Apparently watching television had been more important last night than spying on her neighbors.

“Mitch was feeding Plato and now I'm feeding him. We're off to Fifties. Would you like me to grab you something?”

Norma's face scrunched. “Greasy food? Disgusting. You need to watch what you eat. You can't stay young forever, and time will catch up with you.”

Loriana was quite sure it would. Until that moment, she'd enjoy indulging once in a while. Okay, twice in two days might be a little much. But Mitch needed to be seen in public. He needed to be accepted into the community and treated as one of their own. That wouldn't happen if he was holed up in his condo and afraid of his own shadow.

“Have a good day, Norma.” She rolled up the window and quickly checked to ensure she wouldn't run over the old woman's foot as she drove off.

“Small town.” Mitch's bewildered comment.

“Small town,” she confirmed.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Fifties was much as he remembered from the night before except everything felt different. Everything felt ominous.

Marjorie's missing. They think I did something to her.

Which truly was patently ridiculous. Even if he somehow snuck across the border, found her, and did something to her... what? What could he possibly gain? His old job back? Wouldn't want it. Clearing his name? This would be the least productive way to try to do that. No, he'd left his old life behind. As he sat across from the delightful woman with the huge smile, he couldn't come up with a single regret.

Getting your good name back would be nice.

Okay, yeah, that was a thing. He worried the accusations from California would follow him up here. That people like Kennedy Dixon might hesitate to hire him if she heard the rumors. And they were just rumors. He hadn't done anything wrong, and although Marjorie had attempted to frame him,

that'd ultimately failed. But the damage'd been done, and coming back to Canada had seemed his only solution.

“Those are pretty deep thoughts.” Loriana glanced at him over their menus. “It’s not even eleven o’clock. And they serve breakfast all day.”

He placed his menu on the Formica tabletop. “Eggs Benedict.” He glanced back down quickly then back up. “With fried tomato slices and chunky hash browns.”

“Sounds great. Juice or coffee?”

Both he and Loriana turned in surprise to find Sarabeth standing there. Apparently she'd snuck up on both of them.

“Uh...small OJ, large coffee.” He needed all the caffeine he could get.

Loriana offered Sarabeth a wide smile. “French Toast with strawberries and extra-crispy bacon.”

Sarabeth snagged the menus. “Coffee? Tea?”

“Earl Grey tea, thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

Just before she stepped away, Loriana snagged her arm. “Everything okay?”

Something flashed in Sarabeth's blue eyes. “I was offered an extra shift. The boys are in school, so I figured why not.”

“It must be hard—standing all the time.”

Sarabeth offered a small smile. “I'm used to it. I soak my feet in Epsom salts when I get home. I got a good night's

sleep, and that's all that matters." She carefully extracted herself and headed back toward the front of the restaurant.

Loriana sighed. "It's hard when someone lies to you."

"What else can you do?"

"Nothing." She tapped the table with her index finger. "But that doesn't stop me from wishing I could." She snagged a packet of sweetener from the container. Then she turned her incisive gaze on him. "Now, what about you?"

An icy dread of fear snaked up and down his spine. He cleared his throat. "Really nothing to see here. Honestly."

"Well, we have to find a way to prove your innocence."

God, she was an amazing woman. Her eyes lit fire and her stance was that of a warrior—poised for battle.

"I don't have innocence to prove." *That sounds wrong.* "I didn't do it. I know that. There won't be any evidence because I haven't been in Cali in two months."

"But you used to be. You used to spend a lot of time with her."

Mitch winced. "Not my finest moments."

"One OJ, one coffee, and one tea." Sarabeth laid the drinks on the table. "And the food order's placed. We're pretty quiet, so it shouldn't be long."

"Thank you." Here, at least, Mitch could offer gratitude.

She gave them a smile before heading to another table where a patron was signalling.

“How much time?”

In other words—what was the level of intimacy between the two of them?

“Enough that I thought I knew her. She certainly knew everything about me.”

This time, Loriana cringed. “So there might be evidence of you. Of your presence.”

Here, he could reassure. “She’s, uh, anal retentive. Like massive obsessive. She’s not diagnosed—and I would never venture such—but she hired an entire cleaning crew to do her house once a week. Everything—and I mean everything—was done. Unless she kept something of mine, and I can’t think what it might be, there’d be no proof of me in her house.”

“Fair enough.”

“Look, I appreciate you wanting to help—”

“To stick my nose in things.”

“—but I really should be okay. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

She opened the metal teapot and stirred the tea bag. “The prisons have plenty of innocent people in them.”

That he couldn’t argue with. He added a dollop of milk to his coffee and stirred contemplatively. “So you’re planning a Christmas thing.”

She narrowed her gaze. “I see what you’re doing.”

He held up his hands in an *I mean you no harm* gesture. “I’m just curious.”

“Because you’ll come?” Her face lit with eager anticipation.

“I’ll think about it.”

“You going to see your dad?”

Awkward. “No. He’s not interested in me, and I don’t see why I’d put myself out there.”

“That’s really sad.”

He reached across the table to place his hand on hers. “Will you be in contact with your parents?”

She rotated her hand so their palms met and their fingers could intertwine.

“Point made.”

A look flashed in her eyes that he almost missed. “What is it?”

She waved her other hand as if swatting a fly. “Nothing. It’s really nothing.”

He didn’t believe that. Not for a single second. He’d hit a nerve. No idea which, but something nonetheless.

“So you’ll spend Christmas with me?”

Her earnestness shone through. No deviousness or subterfuge. Just an honest desire to have him attend.

“Yeah, I’m in.”

She smacked the table with her other hand. “That means I might be able to get Marnie to come.”

He grinned. “And now I know your actual intention.”

Another wave. “You know that’s not the only reason.” Her words were dismissive, but her eyes blazed fire.

Oh yes, he knew.

“Got your food.” Sarabeth arrived and placed their dishes in front of them. “I’ll be right back with the syrup.” And she was. “All good?”

Both Mitch and Loriana grinned up at her.

“Well, then, wave me down or holler if you need me.” She pivoted and headed back to the front.

Mitch inhaled. Everything looked amazing. He poked his fork over toward Loriana’s food.

She batted it back. Then, after lifting her chin in the air, she dumped a small piece of French toast on his plate. He, in turn, gave her a slice of tomato.

They consumed the meal in silence. Mitch enjoyed the food, but the prices were a little high for his budget. Well worth every penny—just something he needed to watch.

This time, when Sarabeth approached with the machine, he let Loriana pay.

Her grin was triumphant.

He was happy to give her this.

When they left the restaurant, the brilliant sunshine almost hurt his eyes.

“I can drop you off at your place.”

“I appreciate the offer, Lorian, but it’s not that far of a walk, and I need the exercise. A chance to clear my head.”

She poked his chest. “Just don’t think about Colton.”

And yet, they both knew he’d do exactly that.

They stared awkwardly at each other.

Am I supposed to kiss her?

They hadn’t discussed this. What happened last night was still so new. He didn’t want to be presumptuous. And he’d never been big on PDA—especially with Marjorie. Given the improper nature of their relationship, discretion’d been a necessity.

Lorian took the debate right out of his hands when she grasped his cheeks and yanked his mouth toward hers.

Taking his cues from her, he kept the kiss chaste. Part of him—a part he wasn’t ready to explore—wanted more. Wanted to claim her so no one would look at her and think she was still available. He wanted to pull her flush against him and remind her of what they’d done last night.

“You have the key I gave you?” Her voice was breathy.

“Yeah.”

“Great. Use it. I’m home at five-thirty. Come early, come late, just...plan to come.”

No mistaking her meaning with the twinkle in her eye.

“Yeah.”

With that, she pulled away.

“I’m at the ranch this afternoon.”

She gave him a little wave. “So later. No problem. I’ll serve meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and asparagus.”

“Sounds amazing.” He didn’t necessarily like the idea of her cooking after working all day, and he planned to do some of his own. He was pretty proficient, and he hatched a plan to sneak into her house tomorrow afternoon and prepare dinner for her. He could do that.

As she drove away, he sauntered up the road and back to his condo. He’d received a text from his supplier that everything he needed had arrived. He needed to call Kennedy to confirm she could make room for him, but he suspected she would.

She did, and an hour later, he pulled the van into the ranch parking lot.

A grinning Labrador retriever greeted him with a wagging tail.

Rainbow soon followed—her black hair shiny in the sun. “Kennedy said fifteen minutes. Mind if I give you the two-cent tour?”

“I suspect it’ll be worth more than that. Yes, I’d be happy for a tour.”

To his shock, she linked her arm in his.

As she guided them toward the barn, she grinned. “This place is Kennedy’s pride and joy. I have to say I love it as well.”

“You’ve helped a lot of people.”

She glanced up, eyeing him curiously.

He shrugged sheepishly. “I do my research. Although many of the glowing reviews are by anonymous people—which makes sense—some are from people willing to put their names out there.”

“True. Mission City is a small community. We’re protective of our own. If someone needs to come out here, we take good care of them. If they choose to share their experience, we leave that to them. It’s not all sunshine and roses. Some patients deal with chronic mental illness—curing the disease isn’t possible. But we work to make their lives manageable.” She released her grasp on him to open the barn door. “Personally, I think Kennedy, Justin, Denise, and Avery are miracle workers.”

Mitch couldn’t disagree. This was work he could respect but have no interest in being part of. The idea of dealing with other people’s problems all day overwhelmed him.

Rainbow beckoned him inside. “This is where Tiffany hangs out when she has a litter of puppies.” She petted the dog on the head. “Dad Monty comes around, once a year or so, when she’s in heat. Many of her puppies wind up as service or search-and-rescue dogs.”

“You trying to sell me one?”

She looked mock offended, but he caught the glint in her pale blue eyes.

“I’d never. Do I think most people who own pets have better lives? Sure. There’s something enriching about having a pet. Being responsible for caring for another can be the impetus to care for oneself.”

Now she sounded a bit like a brochure. Yet he couldn’t question her sincerity. “My building only allows small dogs.”

She tisked. “That’s a real shame. Still, little dogs are pretty darn cute.”

“I work unpredictable hours.”

“That’s why finding a reliable dog walker is important. Plenty of teenagers around who’d love the job. Or you can find someone who wants a dog but can’t have one.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“Life is only as complex as you make it.” She beckoned him out, and he followed. After she closed the door, she pointed to the stable at the far side of the massive riding ring. “There are always cats.”

“Like Plato,” he joked.

She glanced up at him with amusement. “Yes, he’s a little scamp.”

“Not so little.”

“True. And you’ve heard about Ari, the cat who resides at The Owl’s Nest.”

“The bookstore. Yes, I’ve heard.”

“Well, one of my sisters works there. Sunshine. You, uh, won’t have any problems recognizing her.”

Mitch slowed his steps. “You, Kennedy, and Sunshine? That sounds like a lot.”

She laughed. A genuine belly laugh. “Oh, that’s nothing. There’s Zephyra the vet, Torah the dog trainer, Spring the aspiring journalist, as well as Autumn and Summer—the twins. They’re still in high school, but a force to be reckoned with. Graduating soon. I think Autumn *might* go into social work. Summer’s a free spirit like Spring, so hard to say which direction she’ll take.”

Mitch cocked his head. “Eight sisters? There are...eight sisters.” He whistled. “I was an only child, so that thought overwhelms me.”

Another laugh as she opened the stable door. “Family gatherings are chaos. My dad’s a long-haul pilot. I swear he takes extra shifts for the peace of flying. My mother, Moonshine, has taken on the eight of us with gusto. That being said, I think she’s about ready to retire parenting duties. They’ve got a property up near 100 Mile House. Once the twins graduate, my parents plan on escaping the city once and for all. I’m not sure their cabin has internet.”

He couldn’t tell if she was teasing or not.

“These are our horses.”

The smell hit him. Hay, he assumed. He was taken aback for a moment.

“You okay?”

He met Rainbow’s gaze. “I’ve, uh, never been in a stable before. Or been this close to a horse.”

And he was still a good ten feet away.

Again, she looped her arm through his. “Well, come meet our girls.” She pointed as she went. “Sienna, Briar, Fallon, and Sugar. They’re all retired show horses.” She approached one horse. “They’re all incredibly docile, but Sugar here is the smallest.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a sugar cube. “For her name’s sake. You want to try?”

He stared at the object. If he took it, the horse’s mouth would be near his hand. Rainbow engendered trust—and no one had ever sued the ranch—but he still wondered about the sanity of doing this.

In for a penny... It’d make a good anecdote to tell Loriana tonight over dinner. He took the cube.

“Hold it on your palm.”

He did. A moment later, a giant mouth pressed to his hand, and a tongue swiped the cube. He should’ve been grossed out, but he was fascinated. “Can I do that again?”

Rainbow laughed. “Sure, all the girls can have one. Let’s go see Briar.”

Just before he stepped away, Sugar nuzzled against him.

Startled, he almost stepped back. Then, in a moment of pure insanity, he stepped toward her. Gently, he ran his hand down

her snout.

She nudged him gently.

“That girl senses a kindred spirit.”

He met Rainbow’s gaze.

She shrugged. “They’re empathetic. They sense when someone’s hurting.” She held up her hands. “Now, I’m not saying you’re hurting. Just that you might have something on your mind and here’s a good place to work that out. Being around the horses sort of soothes. As does Tiffany.” Again, she petted the comfort dog. “Shall we feed the others?”

Is my turmoil that obvious?

“I, uh...”

She held his gaze.

“I met a cop today. It didn’t go well.”

“Colton?”

He didn’t try to hide his shock.

She laughed. “There are few cops in town. Now, Dorrie and Seth, they’re good people.”

“I’ve met Seth.”

“Yeah. He went to school with us.” She placed a cube on his hand and nudged him toward the next horse. “Colton, though, he’s a whole other breed.”

This horse was a bit more enthusiastic about her treat, but no less gentle.

“Dare I ask?”

“Well, I’ll admit to being biased.”

Another cube, another horse.

“And?”

“He and my sister Sunshine used to be married. For, like, a hot minute.”

Ah. So likely Rainbow wasn’t unbiased. Good to know.

“But that’s water under the bridge. He turned out to be a jerk. Much like her first husband, Logan.” She turned to him. “Why couldn’t she meet a nice man like you?”

“You don’t know me.”

“Oh, you think that. But I’ve a pretty good sense for people. And Kennedy would never have asked you back if she had doubts. And Justin wouldn’t have recommended you in the first place.”

“People can hide their true natures. I might be a monster. Hell, I just told you that I had a run-in with a police officer.”
Why exactly are you arguing this?

She appeared to consider. “Right. That’s true. And if you turn out to be a serial killer, I’ll be disappointed in you.” She handed him another cube. “Did you do what they accused you of?”

“No.”

“Well, then, I don’t need to worry.”

Fallon snagged the cube, and Mitch swore he caught a glint in the horse's deep brown eyes.

“There you are.”

Kennedy's husky voice caught Mitch off-guard.

Rainbow plunked the last cube in his hand.

Without needing encouragement, he stepped to Briar. She was the most delicate of the four, nibbling very gently.

He smiled. He petted the horse's snout and leaned in.

Somehow, maybe everything would be okay.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mitch arrived for dinner right on time.

Dinner was delicious. Dessert was even better. After-hours fun? To die for.

And he stayed the night. Again.

And the next and the next.

Loriana liked that. Most of the men she dated tended to take off after sex. Mitch's consideration knew no bounds as he was often up before her, making her coffee and egg-white omelets.

On Friday morning, she gave him a wide smile as he presented her with the food. "What are your weekend plans?"

"Well, with Nosy Norma's permission, I planned to spend the time with you."

Loriana clucked her tongue. "She giving you a hard time?"

"Just making sure I see her every morning when I leave. I'm sullyng your excellent reputation."

She wanted to think he was kidding, but she sensed the truth behind his words. Or his perception, anyway. She didn't give a flying fuck what her neighbours thought. And Colton hadn't darkened her doorstep again, so she considered that a win.

“How about we do a movie tonight?”

“Here?”

She poked him. “No. The Cineplex down at the Junction.”

He nodded, obviously having spotted the megaplex cinema while grocery shopping. “You sure you want to be seen with me?”

Again, she saw the doubt behind the teasing. She went up on her toes to give him a kiss. “Of course. You're like, my boyfriend. Right?”

Too soon? Please let it not be too soon.

He snagged her around the waist and pulled her in for a deep kiss. When he finally ended it—leaving them both breathless—he said simply, “I'd be honored.”

So they saw the movie. And spent the weekend lazing around. Except when they went to the Christmas Bazaar. Then they spent every night the next week together. And the next weekend. Loriana even dragged him to the Christmas party thrown by Dickens down at The Owl's Nest.

Slowly, bit by bit, Mitch was opening up. He shared more about his childhood. He relayed antics from his time at the university. He even ventured—a bit—into his life in

California. How he wound up there, what life was like, the struggles...each story a bit more of himself.

She, in turn, offered all kinds of stories of the people who'd come into the library over the last fifteen-plus years. Sometimes it took her a back to realize how long she'd been at this. And how, aside from her time in Vancouver at UBC, she'd barely left this corner of the province. Her parents had jetted around the world but had rarely thought to bring her. She stayed either with a grandparent or a babysitter. Heck, one time they forgot to secure someone to watch her, and she'd come home from school on a Friday to an empty house. All of eleven, she'd hunkered down until school on Monday. Her parents had come home that night, and she hadn't said anything. Even then, she knew better.

She still knew better—she didn't share that anecdote with Mitch. She didn't want his pity—never that. If the story made her look awkward or funny, she could handle that. But something that might prompt empathy? Not touching it.

And so they continued on. Each evening a journey of emotional exploration and each night filled with carnal exploits.

Mitch, for all his pleadings of limited experience, was actually pretty talented.

Loriana, for her part, had a few tricks up her sleeves.

Another thing happened—Marnie started to loosen up a bit.

Just a bit.

But Lorianana'd take it as a win.

From day to day, her petite co-worker didn't appear changed. But when Mitch was around, the woman smiled more. She even ventured a couple of jokes in the bigger man's presence.

Why? Why him?

Lorianana was happy for Marnie's minute change in demeanor...and desperately curious. Part of her—a very small and insecure part—wondered if Mitch and Marnie might be better suited. Both introverts. Both self-contained. Neither prone to gaffes. And part of her—a very small and selfless part—wondered if she should be pushing Mitch and Marnie together. What if Mitch was Marnie's chance at a happily ever after? What if Lorianana, by clinging to him, was preventing her friend from finding her soulmate?

You're nuts. If Mitch wanted Marnie, he'd say something.

Would he really, though?

And if Marnie wanted Mitch, she'd speak up.

Would she really, though?

Lorianana didn't have suitable answers to either question, and since Mitch kept showing up at her place every night, she decided she wasn't going to question it. She might as well enjoy herself. And if she did some sneaky things during her lunch hours at the library, that wasn't so bad.

Right?

Except Marnie was about to foil her plans.

“I was thinking of having an early night.”

Loriana glared at Marnie. “On December twenty-fourth? I’m letting you off work at two so you can go home and get ready for my party. Which starts at five, don’t be late.” She snagged a pile of books and headed for the stacks.

Marnie followed, hot on her heels. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea for me to come.”

Lord, give me strength. “You told Mitch you’d come.” Loriana gave her the imperious stare she reserved for patrons who didn’t use their indoor voices.

To her regret, Marnie took a step back.

Damn.

“I just...it’s not...” The young librarian couldn’t seem to form words.

Loriana longed to reach out and soothe, but that was something Marnie wouldn’t welcome. In fact, she’d withdraw further. Loriana offered her most reassuring smile. “Look, just come and stay for a few minutes. Be friendly to Mitch—he’s as liable to be nervous as you are.”

Marnie narrowed her eyes. “Oh, I think he’s doing just fine on his own.”

What does that mean?

“He’s still new in town and I’ve invited a few people he doesn’t know.”

“Do I know them?”

“For sure.” Fingers crossed behind her back. Marnie knew some of them. A few were strangers, but all were really nice people.

Deep-green eyes held way more suspicion and wariness than any twenty-four-year-old should have. It hurt Loriana’s heart. Marnie’d never been truly free. Whatever shackled her—figuratively—kept her from relaxing. Loriana’d had a crappy childhood, but she’d embarked on her twenties with enthusiasm.

And then I met Todd.

Okay, wrong track. So not the way to go.

“So you’ll come?”

Those eyes were damning. “For a few minutes.” Marnie looked around them, ensuring no one was within hearing range. “This is hard for me.”

“I know it is.” And she did. She knew enough about the differences between introverts and extroverts. “Well, you can leave a little early so you’re all rested up for my Christmas social the next day.” Without waiting for a response, Loriana disappeared into the stacks to shelve books.

Marnie’s distinctive huff reached her, and she smiled to herself.

The library closed early on Christmas Eve Day, and Loriana had everyone out the door and the building shuttered by two-fifteen. She’d done all her shopping the night before. All that

was left was picking up Mitch at his condo and then heading home.

He stood at the appointed spot, hunched over in the cold.

When she pulled up, he hopped into the car.

“I could’ve come to the library. It’s all of three blocks.”

She pursed her lips as she turned up James Street. “Sure, but Marnie would’ve spotted you and might’ve tried to weasel out of coming tonight and you, being the gentleman, would’ve accepted those regrets.”

A significant amount of time passed as she made her way up the hill and then turned right onto Fourth Avenue.

She glanced at him.

His jaw ticced.

“What?”

“You know I don’t like being used. If Marnie doesn’t want to come to the party, that’s okay. Or at least it is with me.”

Loriana pulled into her driveway. She put the car in park and cut the engine. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. *Damn.* “I get that you’re sympathetic to Marnie. I really do. But she’s never going to progress in her job if she doesn’t tackle her fears head-on.”

“What are you, her therapist?”

She shot him a cutting glance.

He held his ground.

“Obviously not. I just...I want her to have everything.”

“Define everything.”

Without responding, Loriana got out of the car and headed to the house.

To her relief, Mitch followed.

Are we fighting? She had so little experience. The few men she'd dated hadn't stayed long enough for there to be a fight. They usually took off, or she ushered them out the door if things started to look serious.

She unlocked the door and stepped into her home, greeted by the most tantalizing scent. As she shucked her outerwear, Mitch followed her inside.

He inhaled deeply and sighed. “Oh, my God, what is that smell?”

Inside, she did a little happy dance. “My grandmother's famous beef stew. It's been simmering in the crock-pot all day.” She clapped her hands, pleased to see Mitch'd removed his jacket and boots as well. “I need to bake several dozen chicken wings, cookies, some hors d'oeuvres and...” She waved her hand in the air. “Oh, it'll come to me.”

Mitch cocked his head. “You've been baking cookies every night this week. Along with a bunch of other stuff.”

“And I'll serve those, but I want the smell of fresh cookies.”

“It'll compete with the stew.”

“I can have more than one aroma. Now, how do you want to help? Or do you want to hang out with Plato?”

Her feline twined his way around Mitch’s legs. The little traitor had figured out who was likely to sneak him treats when her back was turned.

“How does he handle crowds?”

“He doesn’t. If it’s only Marnie, he’s fine. Once the others show up, though, he’ll hightail it to my bedroom and hunker down. Oh, that reminds me. Just before six, we need to remove his cushions from his chair. We’re going to need all the seating we can get tonight.”

Mitch arched an eyebrow. “And how many are we expecting?”

“Well...” She did a quick mental calculation. “I’ve invited eight and said they’re welcome to bring someone. Plus, you, me, Marnie and...” She tapped her index finger to her lips. “Johanna’s with her brother tonight, and as long as they don’t fight, she won’t show up here. Another blow-up like two years ago, and she’ll be seeking refuge. She’ll be here tomorrow night. Same with Carly. Her family celebrates Christmas tonight, so she’ll make an appearance at tomorrow’s gathering.”

“Sounds complicated.”

She waved him off. “There are about forty people with standing invitations for tomorrow, but they all show up at

different times. Tomorrow's more of a snacking event while tonight's a buffet. So, can I get you to slice cheese?"

He grinned. "Put me to work."

And she did. They spent the next three hours preparing everything. Loriana could've done it on her own—had for the last fifteen or so years, in fact. Having company and an extra set of hands proved delightful, and as Christmas music played softly in the background, the rightness settled within her. Most years she'd done this alone—and she'd been perfectly fine with that. This was for the guests—often many of the single people in town. A chance to be a little less lonely during the holiday season.

This year, she'd decorated her home with Mitch's help instead of Plato's.

In the early years, the cat played with many of the decorations. As he matured, his thrill of getting into mischief waned.

He's getting older.

So are you.

"Okay." Mitch clapped his hands as he surveyed the spread on her dining room table. "I honestly think you can feed an army."

"Well, they might feel like an army."

His startled gaze met hers. "How many men did you invite?"

A knock on her door saved her from answering. She hustled over to find Marnie waiting. She ushered the younger woman in.

“Bean salad.” Marnie presented her with the dish. “You didn’t specify what kind of salad, and although this is often associated with summer, it’s much easier to eat and takes up less space on a plate than a Caesar or another leafy, green salad might.” Her furrowed brow eased slightly. “Hello, Mitch. Glad you’re here.” Truthfully, her relief was clearly palpable.

“As I promised I would be. May I take your coat?”

Loriana carried the salad over to the table while Mitch took Marnie’s coat, and she removed her boots.

“I know you don’t drink alcohol, but would you like something warm? Tea? Hot chocolate? Warmed eggnog?” Loriana grinned.

Marnie nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, please.”

Loriana laughed. “To which?”

“Any.”

“Well, my friend, you have to pick.”

Marnie smiled. “I’ll take the warmed eggnog.”

“Great, you have a seat while I prepare that. Mitch?”

Indecision warred on his face. He wasn’t a drinker either, but he enjoyed the odd beer.

“Your choice.”

“Warmed-up eggnog sounds perfect. Do you want me to put the coffee on?”

She snapped her fingers. “I knew I was forgetting something. But I didn’t want the smell to override the others.”

“Loriana, your house is a scent dream.”

Marnie’s green eyes shone with what Loriana chose to interpret as delight.

The young woman’s lips hadn’t curved up yet, but they hadn’t turned down either.

Loriana’d take that as a win. She made her way to the kitchen and organized the coffee while heating two mugs of eggnog and sprinkling nutmeg on top. When she returned to the living room, Plato nestled on Marnie’s lap, and Mitch sat next to her—but keeping a decorous distance.

While debating what comment to make, a knock on the door pulled Loriana from her musings.

Plato, having rightly determined that all the people he trusted were in that room, bolted, and Mitch rose and scooped up the cat’s cushions.

Marnie accepted the eggnog Loriana handed her and ducked her head.

Loriana placed Mitch’s drink on the coffee table and headed to the door.

Marcus Brannigan stood on her doorstep looking lost. He often did, in his moments of silence.

That's why she'd invited him. And he was kind. "Please come in. Lovely to see you."

"I can't stay long." He removed his coat and brushed snow from his brown hair. "I'm visiting with Casey, Shannon, and Jaelynne later tonight."

His twin sisters and their best friend were all women Loriana'd known when they were younger. All now virtual shut-ins after a devastating accident when they were seventeen. "How're they doing?"

Marcus offered his typical shrug. "It'll be nice to see them. My parents are down from the interior, so that's bound to brighten things up, right?" He didn't meet her gaze as he offered a container of salsa and some nacho chips.

"Lovely. I'll set these out. Can I get you something to drink?"

He sniffed. "Coffee'd be great. I had an early start."

"At your physio clinic?"

A nod. And another ducked head. When he worked as a physiotherapist, he was bold and assertive. Sometimes, in social gatherings, he was reticent.

"Well, go ahead and join Marnie in the living room while I get your coffee. Oh, Mitch."

He'd just returned from dumping the cushions somewhere. Likely her bedroom.

"This is Marcus. Marcus this is..."

Oh, shit.

They'd never discussed this—never defined their relationship. She didn't want to be presumptuous and—

Mitch lightly put his arm around her waist and drew her close. "I'm Loriana's boyfriend, Mitchell Alexander. Most people call me Mitch." He offered his hand.

Marcus shook it and offered a wide smile. "Ah, so you've snagged one of Mission City's most eligible residents. You're new in town, right? Good work."

This time, Mitch ducked his head a little, and Loriana's cheeks heated.

And what did you expect?

"Well, why don't you come in? Mitch will take you in to the living room while I grab your coffee."

"Am I the first to arrive?"

"Oh, no. Marnie's here."

Casual enough?

Marcus frowned for a moment, then his expression lightened. "She works with you. Great." He let himself be led away by Mitch who gave her a hard stare.

She gave him a *nothing to see here* look and headed off for coffee.

Dr. Owen McCauley arrived next.

Loriana'd just given Marcus his coffee and made a beeline for the door when she heard the knock.

The family physician was newer to Mission City and was jovial. “So glad you invited me.” He added his coat to the pile. “Blustery night.”

“I hope the worst of the snow holds off until everyone’s here,” Loriana returned. “You drink brandy, right?”

Owen grinned sheepishly, running a hand through his light-brown hair. “Yes, that’d be lovely.”

“I’ll get it.”

Mitch headed off to the kitchen, leaving Loriana to guide Owen into the living room. She discovered Marcus sat in a chair near Marnie and was studiously staring at his coffee.

He leapt up when he noticed Owen and extended his hand. “Hey, Doc, how’s it going?”

“Quite well. I’m covering at the hospital tomorrow, but I get tonight off. Busy these days. And you?”

“Plenty of people falling in these icy conditions. Also a few people with aches from sitting at computers so long. With so many people working from home these days, they don’t get the exercise they used to when they commuted.”

“But they’re spending less time in their cars.”

“Which can be good.” Marcus grinned when Mitch handed Owen the glass of amber liquid. “Glad to see you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Just the one.”

“Owen.” Loriana placed a hand on his arm. “Have you met Marnie before?”

“I’ve not had the pleasure.”

He moved toward her, and she visibly shrank in her seat.

Loriana was about to comment when another knock came. She went to the door and found Noel, Tristan, and Xavier waiting for her.

Noel, the shortest of the three—and no slouch himself—pointed to the other two. “Three wise men seeking shelter.”

Loriana laughed. Tristan was a barista at Starbucks, Xavier was a solicitor with a thriving law practice, and Noel... She wracked her brain. Oh, something to do with marketing. She stood aside to usher them in as Darius presented himself.

“Nice to see you, Loriana.”

She returned the smile. Their one date had been pleasant, but both realized they were better off as friends. As well, she was happy to get the accountant to do her yearly taxes. He presented her with a paper plate of butter tarts, and she smiled. “Thanks for this.”

“No one told me we were expected to bring things.”

Declan’s Irish brogue was unmistakable and, as Loriana gazed at the man, she remembered why she’d fancied him so much. Black-as-night longish hair with piercing blue eyes gave him a roguish look. They’d had fun, but hadn’t found true compatibility. Again, parting as friends seemed logical. But she could remember his talented tongue.

In her fantasies.

“Loriana?”

She spun to see Mitch.

“Yes?”

“Can I have a word?”

His scowl didn’t portend a friendly chat. “Uh, sure.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“**W**hat do you think you’re doing?” Mitch’d all but dragged Loriana into the kitchen and now glared down on the woman he cared for. The woman he *might* just be falling in love with.

My girlfriend.

He’d staked that claim when the first good-looking man had arrived. The physiotherapist. Now seven men were congregated in the living room. Seven tall, handsome men ranging in ages—if he had to guess—between twenty-five and forty. And gut instinct told him they were all eligible bachelors.

“Did you think how this would feel for Marnie?”

Loriana’s eyes widened in apparent surprise, but Mitch wasn’t fooled for an instant. No, he knew her too well.

“Well, you should’ve at least invited some women. It’s so blatantly obvious what you’re trying to do. What if all of them

want to go out with her? And what if she, in turn, doesn't want to go out with any of them?"

"She knows Tristan." Loriana sniffed, tilting her chin up. "He's her barista."

"And yet they've never gone out."

"I'm not sure they've ever seen each other in a social situation."

"And you don't think two capable adults could've figured out how to do that on their own? If they wanted, of course."

"A little nudge—"

"Loriana, sweetheart, a bulldozer would be less conspicuous."

A clearing throat brought them up from their whispered confab.

"Sorry to disturb." Xavier's dark-brown eyes sparkled, and his dark skin glowed in the light of the kitchen.

Mitch felt a kinship to the other Black man—something he planned to explore later.

"I'm feeling a little peckish, but didn't—"

"Of course."

Loriana's response was a little too bright for Mitch's liking. Yet when she gave him a pointed look, he stepped back.

"If you'll grab the brie from the fridge, I can bring the deviled eggs, and we're good."

Mitch watched wordlessly as Xavier assisted Loriana taking the last two trays to the dining room.

She announced the food was ready and headed into the living room as several men headed out.

Hope she's apologizing to Marnie.

He was pleased to see none of the men was overly enthusiastic and most were genially waiting their turn at the buffet. The aroma in the house was truly amazing. He could remember his mother cooking like this a few times, and that pang of longing hit him hard. When most of the men had cycled through, he grabbed a plate because, despite everything, he was starving.

“Does this feel like matchmaking to you?”

One of the blond men was whispering to Marcus.

Mitch could remember Marcus's name because he'd arrived first. A few names were starting to stick, but seven new people at once while he worried about Marnie was a little much.

Marcus's brow furrowed. “Matchmaking?”

“With Marnie.” The other man nudged. “I mean, did Loriana forget I'm gay?”

“Gay? Who said I was gay? I'm not gay.” Marcus's face darkened. Pure panic overtook his features as his eyes widened.

The other guy...Noel, the guy's name was Noel. Like Christmas. Anyway, he looked taken aback with his blue eyes

widening. “I didn’t say *you* were gay. I said, *I* was gay.”

Marcus’s look of panic didn’t diminish.

And Mitch had the distinct impression the physiotherapist might just be gay, but in the closet.

Oh dear, things were getting complicated.

“I’m gay as well.” Xavier snickered. “Guess Loriana didn’t get that message. Well, I should say bi, so maybe it’s okay.” He glanced over at Mitch. Not in an *I’m attracted to you way*. No, in a *let’s get to know each other better way*.

Loriana arrived, practically dragging Marnie with her. She thrust a plate in the petite woman’s hands and propelled her toward the food.

Marnie looked like a cottontail rabbit who’d just spotted a hunter.

Seven hunters, to be exact.

Well, five, if you removed the two gay men. But she didn’t know that.

And although Mitch was keenly aware of just how short Marnie was—barely over five feet—he was also aware of how tall the men in the room were. He was the tallest, his six-foot-four frame giving him the trophy, but most of the men were just over or just under six feet. Loriana held her own, but poor Marnie was completely overwhelmed.

She’d put a few things on her plate and was scurrying back to the living room when the side door opened. Her look of

unadulterated panic assured Mitch that Lorianas little matchmaking scheme was destined to be an utter failure. In fact, he suspected if Marnie could've bolted right now without making a scene, she'd be out the door.

A newcomer stepped into the house as Mitch made his way to greet the man. Another six-footer with dark-brown hair and brown eyes. The snow he brushed off his head was much thicker. He glanced up to see Mitch.

"Sorry, I knocked, but no one answered. I figured since this was a party, it'd be okay to wander in."

Mitch smiled. "Of course. I'm Mitch Alexander, Lorianas boyfriend. And you are..."

The man held out his hand. "Zach Finnegan. Sorry I'm late—got caught up with work." He removed his coat. "Kind of nice to have somewhere welcoming to go. Wasn't looking forward to my empty condo. My sister Anikas with her best friend getting up to God-knows-what trouble."

So, in other words, another bachelor.

Great.

"Well, Loriana will be thrilled to see you. As will the other guys. I'm sure."

Zach arched an eyebrow at that.

"It's a long story." One Mitch wouldn't offer. Zach seemed like a pretty smart guy—he could likely piece together this clusterfuck for himself.

As they entered the dining room, Zach stiffened.

All the men except the barista and the accountant were standing around talking.

“Brannigan,” Zach growled. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Mitch glanced at Marcus who appeared just as shocked.

“I didn’t know,” the man began weakly.

“Well, you know now.” Zach’s tone bit.

“Okay, so here’s the trifle.” Loriana breezed into the room from the kitchen.

Marcus carefully laid his plate on the table. “I’m so glad you invited me, Loriana.” Mitch didn’t miss the emphasis on *invited*. “But I need to be going.”

“I’m just serving dessert and...” Her voice trailed off as she registered the palpable tension in the room. She looked back and forth between Zach and Marcus and the color drained from her face. Her rosy cheeks went blanch-white. “Oh, my God. I’m so sorry. I forgot...”

“It’s been a long time,” Marcus tried.

“Not long enough,” Zach snapped back. “Your sister killed my sister. I’ll never forgive you for that.”

Oh shit.

Judging by the looks on various other faces, no one else seemed to have any idea what was going on. Whatever

happened, either memories had failed or most of the others had forgotten.

No, Noel knew.

Mitch couldn't peg how that knowledge came to him with such certainty, but it did.

"Not here," Marcus spoke low. "This is Lorianana's party. I'm leaving."

"I'll see you out," Zach offered.

"You are not brawling in front of my house," Lorianana spat. "I forgot, and that's on me, but you're going to act like mature adults. There'll be no fighting here."

"Why would there be fighting?"

Mitch was pretty sure his groan was audible.

The cop. The fucking cop was back. And apparently the guy just wandered into people's homes without an invitation.

Should've seen that coming.

The tall, dark man was accompanied by a much-shorter woman with wary blue eyes and her blonde hair pulled into a ponytail.

Lorianana set the trifle on the table and hurried over to Colton. "I didn't hear you knock."

"Well, we did. Several times."

As if seeking confirmation, Lorianana looked to the woman. "Nice to see you, Dorrie. Would you like some coffee?"

“This isn’t a social call.”

The fucking cop again. What was his name? Colton. Corporal Colton Pritchard.

Loriana pivoted to him. “Are you here to harass Mitch?”

“I didn’t harass him—”

“But you are here to see him.” She looked back and forth between the two cops.

Or at least Mitch assumed the other woman was a cop. Her entire demeanor screamed law enforcement.

“There’s been a break in the case we discussed the last time I was here. We need to speak to Mr. Alexander.”

“On Christmas Eve? You chose Christmas Eve? You couldn’t wait until, I don’t know, Boxing Day?”

Loriana’s glare might’ve cowed a lesser man.

Unfortunately, it had no effect on the cop.

“We’re just doing our job.”

“I’m pretty sure you can’t just come into someone’s house and interrogate their guests.”

Here, the pretty blonde woman looked a tad uncomfortable.

“We were concerned about your safety when no one answered the door.”

“Jesus, Colton, there are like ten cars in front of the house. You didn’t think maybe we were having a party? Are you mad because I didn’t invite you?”

“What break in the case?” As much as Mitch loved Loriana taking on the dumbass cop, if they could clarify things, he might be able to get the police officers on their way.

All the other men in the room were motionless. Even Zach and Marcus—who’d seemed ready to come to blows—had gone very still.

“Marjorie Dawes is dead.”

That statement really should only have had an impact on Mitch, but Loriana appeared to take a body blow. She staggered back a step.

Zach caught her by the arm. “You okay?”

She waved him off. Then she moved to Mitch’s side. “What does that have to do with anything? Mitch wasn’t responsible for her disappearance, and he certainly didn’t cause her death. So you can just be on your way.” She made a shooing motion. “I’d invite you to take some food with you, but I’m not feeling generous.”

“Loriana?”

All nine people in the room pivoted.

Marnie stood in the entryway to the dining room, her face ashen. She cleared her throat. “I heard yelling. Or raised voices.” She scanned the room, obviously taking in the appearance of each person. Finally, she settled on Colton. “What’s going on?”

“Lovely to see you, Miss Jones. You’re looking well.”

God, could the cop spout any more bullshit? Marnie was clearly terrified.

“We’re just here to bring Mr. Alexander in for questioning,” the man continued. “And we’re asking him to provide fingerprints.”

“Do you have a warrant?”

Now everyone pivoted back to Zach.

Colton cleared his throat. “Voluntary request. On behalf of the police in Mountain View.”

Zach put himself between Colton and Mitch, leaning in toward the latter. “You don’t have to give fingerprints voluntarily.”

“Counselor, this isn’t your jurisdiction.” Colton glared at Zach. “And I thought you were on the side of justice.”

“I might be a crown prosecutor,” Zach countered, “But I’m also a lawyer who can see where someone might need legal counsel.” He pivoted back to Mitch. “They can’t compel you without a warrant.”

“Not helping,” Colton grumbled.

“Tough shit,” Zach countered. He held up his hands. “I’m just offering advice.” He turned back to Mitch. “Don’t talk to the police without a lawyer present. I don’t care how innocent you are—get a lawyer.”

Jesus Christ.

Panic threatened to overwhelm Mitch. Marjorie was dead. That vivacious woman who was always the life of the party was dead. And someone thought he'd done it. That he was somehow capable of snuffing out another person's life. The thought was so ridiculous, he almost laughed out loud. He rehomed spiders, for crying out loud. He wasn't capable of killing anyone.

On second thought... No, he wouldn't kill the cocky cop. He might clock him one in the face, but even he didn't wish this asshole dead.

Yet, as he looked around the room, he didn't see himself reflected in anyone else. He was the outsider to this group. And yes, he was Lorian's boyfriend, but that afforded him no special consideration.

"Marnie."

Marcus's alarm yanked Mitch from his momentary loss of concentration. He turned to see the young woman swaying. He moved instinctively, but the physiotherapist was there faster.

That she made no protest as he grasped her under her arms spoke volumes.

"Marcus?"

Lorian's alarm was clear.

"I got it." He was already guiding Marnie into the living room and away from the horrific tension. "And Owen's here too," was his last comment.

Owen? Right. The doctor. Another eminently suitable single guy. This house was full of them.

Dorrie stepped around Zach and gazed up at Mitch. “We can’t compel you to come without a warrant. But we’re requesting voluntary compliance at this time. It’s a murder investigation, and you might be able to shed some light on the circumstances surrounding Ms. Dawes’s death.”

The woman’s demeanor was open, and Mitch found himself wanting to believe her. “I want to help. I think it’s horrible that Marjorie is dead. But I didn’t do it, and I have no idea who did. I can’t help.”

“Well, if we can take your fingerprints, then we can eliminate you as a suspect.”

“They found prints at the scene? Like if you match them, then you’ll know who killed her?” That seemed way too easy. And how many times had people been railroaded? How many false confessions had there been over the years? Sure, this lady seemed nice...but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t nail him for something he didn’t do. She was a cop. His father, for all his lack of parenting abilities, had instilled this one lesson—be wary of law enforcement.

What’s the right thing to do?

Obviously helping the cops find Marjorie’s killer. If he even had something to contribute—which he was quite sure he didn’t.

He did one sweeping glance of the room. He had no idea who'd come to his rescue if he needed it. These men all seemed like stand-up guys, but that didn't mean anything.

Loriana still watched him with her fathomless brown eyes. Pleading with him. To stay? To go? To fight? To flee?

He just didn't know.

Yet, in a moment of clarity, the answer hit him. He met Dorrie's gaze. "I'll come with you—to answer questions. No fingerprints. None. I didn't do it, but I'm not going to give you something that you could use to frame me."

"We would never—"

"Dorrie."

This time the warning came from Zach.

She met his gaze. They held stares for another few seconds before she returned her attention to Mitch. "Of course. Whatever you can offer. Will you follow me?"

"I don't want to ride in the back of a police cruiser." He mightn't have done anything wrong, but even the thought gave him chills.

"I'll drive you." The Irish university professor put down his plate. "Happy to help."

"Thank you."

Zach yanked out his cell phone. "I'm calling you a defense attorney. His name's Arnav Sankar. Don't say a word until he shows up." He looked back and forth between the two

corporals. “I don’t care if that means you wait all night—he doesn’t speak until he has representation.”

Dorrie nodded subtly.

“Don’t go.” Loriana stepped up to him. “They can’t make you. If you go...” Tears shimmered in her eyes.

“I’ll be back.”

“Will you?”

Her eyes damned him. And even as he wanted to defend himself, the words wouldn’t come.

Declan slapped him on the back. “Come on, mate. I’ll sit with you at the station until your lawyer arrives. You can tell me your impressions of Mission City, and I’ll tell you all the things to avoid.” He glanced at the cops. “And who to give a wide berth to.”

Did the man know something, or was he just being protective? Didn’t matter. Mitch had a savior, and he’d take the offered assistance.

He reached for Loriana, but she stepped back. He wasn’t surprised. “Please tell Marnie I’m sorry for the upset I’ve caused. I hope she has a good Christmas.” He nodded to all the other men in the room. “Nice to have met you all.” He pivoted to the cops. “We’ll meet you down at the station.” Finally, to Declan, he said, “thank you.”

Without another word, he walked out of the dining room.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

What the fuck just happened?

As Loriana watched Colton, Dorrie, Declan, and Mitch leave, panic continued to swirl in her chest. Mitch was leaving. He didn't *have* to leave. According to Zach, he didn't have to go with the cops. Or, at least, that's what she understood. And he was innocent. Why wasn't he protesting his innocence?

A woman is dead.

Mitch didn't do it.

Well, okay then. So what next? The men seemed to have everything in hand. Zach was in the kitchen on his cell phone talking to a lawyer. Xavier, Darius, and Noel were organizing the food and putting it into containers. Marcus and Owen were caring for Marnie.

Marnie.

Okay, so that was something Loriana could do. She moved swiftly into the living room. Marnie sat on the sofa with Owen

next to her. Marcus and Tristan stood off to the side. Clearly they didn't want to crowd.

Although Marnie was fragile, Loriana'd never seen her like this. The woman shook visibly and was clearly distraught.

Owen, as the doctor, was the most logical choice to care for her.

But her eyes were fixed on Tristan. Unsurprising, since, as far as Loriana could determine, he was the only man she knew.

What had she been thinking? Inviting eight single men to a party. She should've at least added some women.

Or maybe not done it at all.

Yes, this was looking like one of her more ill-advised matchmaking schemes. Even when she was single, she wanted to pair everyone. Now that she had Mitch, she was doubly enthusiastic to match the whole world.

She advanced slowly and crouched before her friend. "Are you okay?"

Marnie fluttered the hand Owen wasn't holding. "The cops and...a woman was murdered? And they think Mitch did it?"

Her voice was rising just a touch on every word.

Loriana longed to take her other hand, but experience had taught her that touching Marnie was a no-no. The fact she was letting Owen hold her hand spoke volumes. Either she didn't realize, or she needed the doctor's reassurance. The very kind, gentle, and young doctor. Handsome to boot.

Stop it.

“I want to go home.” Marnie’s words were tremulous.

“Okay.” Loriana didn’t want her to go, but she wouldn’t force her to stay. “But I don’t think you’re fit to drive home.”

The woman’s green eyes widened. “I’ll be okay.”

“I’d prefer to be safe,” Owen said, interjecting. “Why don’t I drive you in your car? One of these young men can follow me and drive me back here to pick up mine.”

Both Tristan and Marcus nodded vigorously.

Loriana knew she should offer. But leaving here seemed like the wrong thing to do. Party guests excluded, she still felt the need to hunker down. She’d go to the detachment of the Mission City RCMP if she thought it’d do any good, but her mind told her it wouldn’t. Listening to that over her heart was proving a challenge.

Marnie, with Owen’s guidance, rose. Loriana went ahead of them, sorting through the coats until she came to her friend’s. She held it out while Owen snagged his. Tristan did the same.

“What’s your address?” Tristan’s question to Marnie.

“34597 Hawthorne Street.”

Owen took the keys Marnie fished from her pocket. “Do you have a purse?”

She shook her head.

“Great. Let’s get going.”

Tristan exited first and held the door open for the doctor and the younger woman.

The woman who, Loriana noted, didn't look back. That hurt. No matter how far Marnie withdrew into her shell, on occasion, she always managed to connect with Loriana. "I'll have to call her later and check up." She said this to no one in particular, but Marcus nodded in agreement.

He was reaching for his coat as Zach entered the room. He muttered, "fuck" under his breath.

Zach put his hands on his hips.

Marcus yanked on his coat. He reached for Loriana's hand.

His felt cold in comparison to hers.

"Thank you. I enjoyed tonight." Then he went out the door.

Loriana doubted his statement, but wasn't going to argue. She owed him an apology. Pretty much, at this point, she owed everyone an apology.

Zach held up his phone. "Arnav was just settling in for the night with a hot toddy. He hadn't sipped it yet, so he put it in the fridge and has headed out for the detachment." He tucked his phone into his back pocket. "I have no idea how long it'll take."

"But he'll advise Mitch?"

"Yeah."

"How much is that going to cost?"

Zach set his jaw. “Tonight’s a favor he owes me. If Mitch needs more, he’ll have to cough up some cash.”

Loriana didn’t know the specifics of Mitch’s current financial situation, but she knew he preferred to eat in so he could save money. That didn’t bode well for finding money to pay an attorney. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Are you an alibi?”

“I tried to be.”

His eyes narrowed. “You didn’t lie, did you?”

“No, Mr. Prosecutor, I didn’t. Was tempted to, but didn’t.” She sighed. “I mean, maybe there’s video from his condo. I don’t think he left the whole time.”

“But undoubtedly there are ways to sneak in and out without being seen. Mission City isn’t a high-crime area. Even if there are cameras, chances are they don’t cover everything.”

“You’re not helping.”

“Do you want me to be anything less than brutally honest?”

God, he knows me well. They’d never gone out—he was around ten years her junior, and she’d been his librarian—but they’d interacted a few times since he’d come back from law school with a shiny degree and a driving need to put criminals behind bars. Whether that was driven by losing his sister at such a young age, or because he wanted to see justice done, his drive was formidable.

I hope he never turns on me.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming call.

Zach indicated she should answer.

“Hello?”

“Loriana? It’s Tristan. I just wanted to let you know Marnie is home safe. I’m going to drive Owen back. Should we come in, or just go home?”

Weariness and fatigue hit her—and hit her hard. “It’s up to you.”

“Well, I think everyone’s had enough excitement for one night. We’ll just head home.”

She gave out a little laugh. “You’re right, Tristan. Thanks for coming tonight. Thank Owen as well.”

“Yeah. Come by the store and I’ll give you a drink. Take care.”

“You too, Tristan.”

She disconnected the call and gave Zach a long, level look. “Ten years is a long time.”

Zach growled, low in his throat.

“Seriously. And Marcus wasn’t even driving.”

“No, but he took his sister’s side.”

“What side? Tragic accidents happen.” She wracked her brain for the details. “I’m sure Casey apologized, and she served time. Isn’t that enough? Is forgiveness really so hard?”

“Both my parents died within a short time after the crash. She didn’t just kill my sister—her actions hastened their demise as well.”

Loriana was not going to point out that Mrs. Finnegan’d been a terrible drunk who was well on her way to taking herself out. She didn’t enjoy gossip, but Zach’s mom’s problems were so profound that even Loriana’d heard about it. She remembered being most concerned about the youngest child.

“How is Anika these days?”

Finally—finally—Zach smiled. “Precocious. She’s started university and plans to get into all kinds of mischief. Naturally I’ve put my foot down, and naturally she’s not going to listen to a word I say.”

“She’s lucky to have you.”

His eyes flashed. “Yes, she is. We got each other through the past few years. And part of me is happy she’s starting to make her way in the world and part of me is terrified what that means. If something goes wrong. What that’ll do to me.”

Loriana wanted to assure him that nothing was going to go wrong. That the odds said Anika would be just fine. But she didn’t have the right to say that, and so she wouldn’t.

“I’ll head out. I think Xavier, Darius, and Noel are still hanging out in the kitchen. If you need me to encourage them to leave, I’m happy to do it.”

“No need.” Noel clapped Zach on the back as he and the other men appeared. His blue eyes sparkled as he pivoted to Lorian. “I had a great time tonight. Despite everything.” He glanced around at the men. “Sometimes it’s nice to just hang out with people and not stress about my little sister.”

“Trouble?” Part of Lorian wanted everyone to leave, and part of her was happy for the distraction.

Noel shrugged. “Nothing much. Just that she’s a menace on the Harley she bought herself. Kendra’s all of twenty-one and insanely independent. I worry, though.”

Zach nodded. “My sister is just a bit younger, and I get the stress.”

“I’m an only child.” Darius grinned. “No stress.”

Xavier tapped his chin. “I’m also an only child. I wonder what the odds of that are?”

Silence descended on the group. Apparently no one was willing to step forward to tackle a math problem.

“Okay, I think it’s time for us to take our leave.” Zach glanced around the group of men, and general agreements abounded.

“Let me put together leftovers for you. You can each take a care package.”

“We’re fine, really.” Xavier offered a grin. “I think I did well tonight.”

But Lorianana'd seen the sheer volume of food they'd stuffed back into her freezer. "Seriously, there's no way Mitch and I can eat it all." *If Mitch even comes back.*

A moment's lull set over the group before finally Noel spoke. "I wouldn't mind a deviled egg to take home to Kendra."

"Great. Let me put together four care packages." She'd planned on eight, but she'd cope. She moved to the kitchen with four gorgeous, tall men following her. With a little coaxing, she managed to get each to take a container.

Ten minutes later, she was completely alone.

With tremendous fatigue dogging her, she made her way to the couch. She sprawled and let out a bone-deep breath.

What the fuck just happened? All of it. Mitch. The men. The horrific matchmaking miscalculation—all of it. She'd call Marnie in the morning. Keep it casual and light. Hopefully her friend'd forgive her. Although what seemed to upset Marnie the most was Mitch's situation. There had to be something in the woman's past, and Lorianana was determined to ferret it out. Sure, she should respect her co-worker's right to privacy. But curiosity was going to be the death of her.

Just as she was curious what was going on down at the police detachment. Were Colton and Dorrie interrogating Mitch? Had Zach's friend the lawyer showed up? Part of her wanted to get online to look up all the details about the woman Mitch used to be involved in. The woman he allegedly had some part in killing. Of course, maybe they thought he hired

someone to do it. He hadn't, of course. She was one hundred percent confident that he had nothing to do with it.

Okay, maybe ninety-nine-point-nine percent.

Plato jumped on her lap, and she jerked, heart racing. She petted him as he began to purr. "Hey, big guy."

He butted against her chin.

"No, you're not getting treats."

He cocked his head.

She laughed. For the first time in what felt like forever.

The laptop in her den was a siren's call. How easy would it be to go and do some digging? Heck, she could do so on her phone, if she wanted to get it from the kitchen where it was charging.

And while she was searching Marjorie Dawes, she could also search Todd Eldridge.

Her breath caught on the notion. She'd barely thought of him in years, yet this was the third time she'd conjured him this month. Even before she'd heard of Marjorie's disappearance, she'd been reminded of her former fiancé. The man of her dreams. The man she planned to marry. The man who vanished.

Except people didn't just *vanish*. They had to leave a trace. One didn't just wander out into the world and never be heard from again.

And yet, she knew they did. Canada'd had a reckoning with that with the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Commission. About people vanishing and never being heard from again. The Highway of Tears held more stories like that.

But a grown, healthy, vital man?

His body'd never turned up. At least not in Vancouver or the lower mainland. She'd filed a missing persons report. She'd checked the hospitals and morgues. She'd asked all their friends. To her regret, there were two things she hadn't done. She hadn't asked her parents for help, and she hadn't gone to Todd's ailing aunt.

He'd been an orphan. His parents died in a gondola accident when he was just a toddler. His spinster great-aunt had taken him in. Life'd been rough, but he'd come out of it okay.

Or so Loriana believed. They'd met at the University of British Columbia—she an English major and he an engineering student. It'd been love at first sight, and they'd become secretly engaged within three months. They planned to graduate and then elope. Todd didn't think his aunt would understand, and Loriana was absolutely certain her parents wouldn't. Her fiancé was from the wrong side of the tracks. He'd grown up poor. He had no lineage. Nothing differentiated him from the hundreds of thousands of other men his age.

She wasn't a snob. Her parents'd been.

Still are.

And although it galled her to think it—she was glad they hadn't met Mitch. For a million reasons, they wouldn't approve. At thirty-nine she didn't need their fucking approval, of course. But she also didn't need their censure or bigotry. She had enough to deal with already.

Now what?

She wouldn't search Marjorie Dawes. And she wouldn't search Todd Eldridge. He'd known she'd grown up in Mission City and planned to return. She'd been in the phone book for almost two decades. She was on social media—although mostly to do with the library. He could find her, if he wanted.

Not if he's dead.

Which was the thought she always circled back to. At first, she'd been convinced of the fact. He'd never voluntarily leave her—therefore, he must be dead.

Slowly, as time passed, that thinking evolved. Or, more like doubts crept in. What if he'd tired of her, and didn't want to let her down? What if he'd tired of his life, and decided to set off in search of adventure? Vancouver had a huge port system. Hopping a freighter wasn't impossible. Or riding the rails clear across the country? Or, as Colton intimated, there were ways to sneak into the United States. Getting lost there would be pretty easy, right?

Some days she told herself he was married in Wichita with a wife and six kids. Other times she told herself he was living in Wales with a husband and a flock of sheep. Now, she wouldn't

have pegged him as either a farmer nor gay, but anything felt possible.

Most days, when she let herself go there, she admitted there was a good likelihood he was dead. That his body had either never been found, or never been identified. The realist in her understood she'd never get answers to the questions that burned within her.

She held a throw pillow against her face and screamed.

Sure, she probably didn't need to muffle the sound. No one in the house to hear it. But she also had Nosy Norma to contend with. Even in the dead of night, she'd swear the woman lurked. Since Loriana had few secrets, she didn't worry about herself. But she did worry about her neighbors. She'd ferreted out a few unknowns over the past years. Things people thought they'd hidden. Things people believed buried. She'd never tell, of course.

She glanced at the mantel clock. Might as well call it a night. She could always read in bed if sleep was slow in coming. In the morning, she'd deal with Mitch and Marnie.

Or at least she hoped.



CHAPTER TWENTY

The only reason Mitch knew the longest night of his life was over was because the sun had crested the dawn horizon twenty minutes ago. Beautiful pink streaked the sky, covering the odd puffy clouds in a rosy embrace.

The grit in his eyes from lack of sleep felt like sandpaper, and his nose was running from the walk home in the cold. Oh, he could've taken the proffered ride. Both his lawyer and Corporal Dorrie Duhamel'd offered. Even Declan'd left his card and said to call, no matter what time.

But Mitch hadn't. Seven a.m. on Christmas morning was not the time to be calling in favors. And he could've roused one of the cab drivers in town. Again, wouldn't make any friends that way. Plus, he needed to clear his head, and a walk through the nearly deserted town while the dawn was still an hour away'd felt like a good idea. The trek was just over a mile, and his long strides had covered the distance in no time.

As he walked past Fifties, he considered going in. The diner was twenty-four/seven and open three hundred and sixty-five

days a year. Maybe Sarabeth was working. Maybe he could give the poor woman a big tip.

Maybe his computer consulting business would dry up if the good folks of Mission City heard he was a murder suspect.

Or so Corporal Colton had intimated. The truth was, they had no proof. They had no evidence.

Because he hadn't done it.

Still, on advice of legal counsel, he hadn't provided fingerprints. Although he was sure Marjorie's cleaning staff was thorough—and he couldn't imagine anywhere else he'd been that would still have his prints—he agreed with his lawyer the risk was too great. And what if they tried to use the prints against him later? He didn't want to think the cops capable. But then he wouldn't have predicted being dragged down on Christmas Eve for a long interrogation.

And when he tried to discuss money, Mr. Sankar said the first time was free.

Mitch didn't believe that for a second. Time cost money and no way could the lawyer be able to give it away for free. Although, maybe he assumed Mitch'd need further counsel and that would make it worth his while. Hell, Mitch didn't even know how much the man made.

He'd have to ask.

Now, as he stood on the balcony and gazed out over the mighty Fraser River, the feeling of disquiet settled. He needed sleep, but he also needed answers. If flying to California and

investigating was even a remote possibility, he'd do it in a heartbeat. Not just because he wanted to clear his name—that was a given. No, he wanted someone competent looking into the murder of the woman he once fancied himself in love with. Anyone who believed he had anything to do with it was delusional and clearly lacked the mental capacity to tie their own shoes, let alone lead a homicide investigation.

Homicide.

Who'd hated Marjorie so much they wanted her dead? Or might it've been work-related? That idea kept percolating in his mind. She'd screwed him over in business to get ahead. What if she'd done the same thing to someone who hadn't been willing to sit back and meekly accept it? What if she'd crossed the wrong person?

He knew many of the players. He'd been at the company long enough that he had a grasp of senior management, as well as many of the line managers and team leaders. Most of his fellow employees'd been happy to do their jobs. A few, though, coveted upper management. Where the real bucks were made. He'd never had those aspirations.

Sighing, he moved away from the glorious view and headed to the kitchen. He'd completely missed dinner last night and had been offered coffee of questionable origin at the station. He planned a nice bowl of cereal and then a long nap.

Loriana's party.

Damn. He promised he'd go. He didn't want to. Not just because he didn't feel like socializing with a large group of

people he didn't know, but because he didn't want to taint Lorianana with the clouds of suspicion hanging over his head.

After pouring a bowl of cereal, he sat at the table to eat. Again, he looked around his condo and winced. He still hadn't hung anything. Not that he had much to hang. But he'd found a nice gallery-type store on First Avenue that had some lovely pieces in the window. Maybe he could find something in there he could afford. And it'd be a way to support a local artist.

If you're staying.

Word hadn't gotten out yet about his potential connection to Marjorie's death, but after last night, the possibility existed. All the guys from the party seemed like decent folks, but it only took one blabbermouth to spread the word. If Nosy Norma got hold of that nugget of gossip, his goose was cooked. The possibility of remaining anonymous was impossible.

Having finished his cereal, he rose and moved into the kitchen. He put the bowl and spoon into the dishwasher and headed to the bathroom. Thirty minutes later, after a scalding shower, he climbed into bed. He didn't set the alarm. He just closed his eyes and prayed for oblivion.

Oblivion came in the way of strange dreams and nightmares. When his ringing phone woke him, he had to push away the horrific images and focus on answering the phone. "Hello?"

"Are you all right?"

He struggled through the brain fog. “Loriana?”

“Of course, Loriana. Unless you have some other woman who’d be calling to check up on you.”

“There isn’t—and you know it. I’m just fuzzy from lack of sleep.”

A long pause. “So they kept you late?”

“All night.”

“And you didn’t think to call?”

Ah. Despite the fuzziness, he couldn’t miss the hurt. “I didn’t get out until after six, and I didn’t have access to my phone during the night.”

She made an indeterminate sound that he pegged as a harrumph.

“I could’ve called early this morning.” A minor concession. “But I assumed you’d be asleep, and you have a big day today.”

“I’m planning to call it off. I’m going to send out a social media post shortly.”

Crap. “You shouldn’t do that. This is a big event for you.”

“There’ll be other big events. I mean, a few stragglers who didn’t see the message might drop by, but I can send them gently on their way. I want to focus on you today.”

Double crap. “I’m not fit company. I need sleep and time to regroup. A lot of shit went down last night.” He winced. Not

because he'd sworn in front of her—that'd happened before—
but because he'd revealed so much.

“So you're not coming over?”

Was that hurt in her voice? God, he hoped not.

“I don't think it's a good idea. I need some time to myself
—”

“Fine.” She hung up.

He pulled the phone away from his ear. The length of the
call flashed for a few seconds, and then the screen went dark.

Fine?

One of the least productive words in the English Language
—*fine, nice*—or his favorite, *nothing's wrong*.

Had he blown it? Whatever *this* was? Surely not. They
weren't arguing, right? No heated words'd been exchanged.
Nothing substantial had happened. He was just begging out of
her party. A party, admittedly, he'd been looking forward to.
Although he really hoped it'd not be a repeat of last night.
Poor Marnie. Lorianana'd been out of line. Obviously her heart
was in the right place—wanting to find a partner for Marnie.
Just as obviously, Marnie wanted to be left alone. And the
conversation between the three gay men last night'd amused
him.

He'd also felt a kinship to Xavier. Another Black man in
town. And he'd glimpsed one at the grocery store. As well as
several women. And, aside from Ravi, he'd spotted plenty of
brown people as well. Some were Indian while others

appeared Indigenous. He disliked noticing people's races, but after having worked for a company that claimed to embrace diversity but was very white, he enjoyed seeing himself reflected in the world around him. Yes, as a tall man he stood out—but he'd dealt with that his entire life.

What if I had a child? He'd never felt the compulsion. He and Loriana were religious about birth control. Far too early in the relationship to contemplate children. But condoms weren't foolproof. He and Marjorie'd had a scare. She'd been almost a month late. He'd never gotten a read on what would've happened if she had been pregnant. Would she have stayed with him? Raised a mixed-race child? He had the distinct impression the answer would've been no.

A knock on his door pulled him from musings into full consciousness.

Loriana?

No. In his heart, he knew not.

Slowly, he dragged himself from bed. Sentimentally, he'd chosen to wear his flannel pajamas last night.

The knock came again.

“Mr. Alexander, please open the door.”

He knew that voice. The higher pitch resonated through him just as much as the lower pitch of her partner's. He shoved his feet into his slippers, grabbed his robe, and hotfooted it to the door. Wouldn't do to leave police officers waiting. They might

get tired of being polite and start pounding and demanding entrance.

As he opened the door, he spotted both Corporal Dorrie Duhamel and her asshole partner Pritchard. He looked irritated, a little furrow in his brow, while Dorrie had a smile. Tired, but there nonetheless.

“May we come in?” Softly spoken. A definite request.

What would refusing get him? Having the discussion in the hallway was just asking for trouble. If today were a Sunday, his neighbors might be sleeping in.

Scratch that. Many of them were early-going churchgoers.

And Christmas morning? Kids abounded on this floor, so likely just about everyone was up. And despite the fact they cops were in plain clothes, he doubted anyone in town didn't know Colton was a cop. So he held the door open.

Dorrie stepped in first with Colton hot on her heels.

Was the guy worried Mitch'd slam the door in his face? He'd been tempted.

Dorrie began to remove her shoes, but Mitch waylaid her. “No, please don't worry about it.” He caught Colton's stare. “You won't be staying long.” *At least I hope they won't be.*

Thus far, they hadn't asked him to put on clothes so they could take him down to the station. In fact, they didn't appear to have slept at all. Dorrie had mauve bruises, indicative of missed sleep, under her eyes, and Colton's jaw flexed as if he was staving off a yawn.

The blonde cop yanked on her ponytail. Little tendrils'd escaped during the long night and, in the crappy light of his hallway, she had an almost angelic look.

And she'd hate him for thinking it. If he'd learned anything about the woman in the last twelve hours, it was that she wanted to be treated as one of the guys. She was tough as nails. In fact, in a more candid moment Mitch was quite sure would never be repeated, she admitted Colton was better with victims and she was better with perpetrators. Mitch couldn't see it. But then his experience with the hulking cop was only in the capacity of an accused perpetrator. Could that man express empathy toward someone in distress? Someone like Marnie? His mind rejected the image, but a little niggle of doubt crept in.

“Do you want to have a seat? We can sit at the kitchen table or in the living room.”

Dorrie indicated the file folder she held in her hands that Mitch'd somehow missed. “Table would be great.”

He guided them toward the space and was more than a little distressed when the cops removed their jackets. Apparently not a quick visit.

Fuck.

“I should go put on some clothes.” He didn't want to leave them alone to snoop, but he also believed himself at a disadvantage being so informally attired.

“You do whatever you want.” Colton’s dark eyes were inscrutable.

Stay.

They might try to collect fingerprints or DNA when he stepped away. Might not be admissible in court, but could certainly be used to frame him.

I’m being paranoid.

No, I’m being prudent.

He indicated the cops should sit, and they did. After suppressing the urge to offer them a drink, he sat as well.

Dorrie opened the folder and extracted a pile of photos. “I’m going to show these to you one at a time. You indicate to me if you know the person, and from where you remember seeing them.”

“Person? You mean there are women as well?”

She glanced at Colton who gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“Yes.”

“Okay.” *What is going on?*

He didn’t recognize the first three, and said as much.

Dorrie flashed the fourth one and Mitch hovered a finger over the photo.

“You’ve seen him before?”

“Sure. He was the vice-president of product development. My boss’s boss. Ronnie Lee.”

Dorrie nodded, but gave no indication if his information was helpful.

He doubted it was.

She flipped the next card.

Mitch again tapped the table. “Sure, that’s Vicki Lau. I think she worked in accounting.”

Another photograph.

Another tap. “I don’t remember his name. He worked in customer relations. He’d give us seminars in providing excellent customer experience. Damn, what was his name?”

Dorrie held his gaze, but gave nothing away. After a moment, she flipped the next card.

He shook his head, but frowned. “Is there a reason you’re only showing me people of color? You don’t believe a white person could’ve killed Marjorie? Because I assume that’s why you’re here—you think one of these people killed her.” He laughed. “Vicki is about a hundred pounds soaking wet. Ronnie has a bad knee.” He snapped his finger. “And Vikram is about fifty years old. One of the oldest people on staff. And yeah, I suppose a fifty-year-old is as capable of killing someone, but I honestly feel you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

Colton arched an eyebrow. Then, subtly, he gestured for Dorrie to continue.

The next photo was, in fact, of a white guy.

“Okay, that’s Charles...something. God, what was his name?” After having spent two months trying to forget, now bringing forth those memories was giving him a headache. Pretty soon, he’d need a painkiller.

“What do you remember about him?”

“Ambitious little prick. And I mean that with all due respect. He came in after graduating from MIT and thought he was hot shit. And maybe he was. But his arrogance is what I remember the most. Oh, and his treatment of the rest of us.” He glanced between the two cops. “I’ll let you figure out what I mean.”

Colton gave a shake of the head. “We don’t make assumptions or try to fill in the blanks ourselves. We need you to tell us.”

“Okay fine.” Irrational anger rose within Mitch at being forced to relive his experiences. “Tactfully, I’d say he was racist. At first he tried to hide it, but once he saw few consequences for his actions, he let his bigotry shine through. He was producing some good work, so HR turned a blind eye.” Mitch rubbed his forehead. “After one terrible incident I witnessed between him and Vicki, I lodged a formal complaint.” He laughed, but it contained no humor. “When it became clear I was the one who would lose anything—and when Vicki begged me to withdraw the complaint—I did.

“Charles became insufferable after that.” He winced. “But Marjorie loved him. I tried to get her to see, but she accused

me of being too sensitive. At the time, I wondered if she was right.”

“And now?”

“With the gift of hindsight? No question—the guy was a bigot. And Marjorie tried to gaslight me and the other employees. Tried to convince us what we were seeing wasn’t really there. That it was in our minds.” Mitch tapped the photo again. “He was a real piece of work.”

“I’ll share something with you that won’t be made public until the arraignment this afternoon.” Dorrie met Mitch’s gaze and her clear blue eyes showed...compassion? Empathy? Understanding? “He was arrested early this morning. The police believe they have enough evidence to charge him with Marjorie’s murder.”

A murderous rage rose within Mitch. He turned on Colton. “How often? How many times did I tell you that I had nothing to do with her—at all? Yet you kept poking. Kept insinuating. Kept raising doubts in people’s minds.”

“I never said anything.”

“But you implied it with your every word and gesture.” Mitch pounded the table. “You dragged me out of a party last night. Almost a dozen witnesses. You think people in this small town won’t talk?”

Dorrie collected the photographs and put them back into the folder. “We’ll pass along what you’ve said to the police officer who contacted us.”

“And say what? I thought the guy was a bigot? How does that implicate him?”

“I shouldn’t say anything—”

“Oh, don’t stop now.”

The woman nodded. “Apparently Ms. Dawes had initiated termination procedures. But, again, that isn’t common knowledge.”

Which meant she was going out on a limb to tell him. He offered a nod. “Thank you. Again, I won’t say anything.”

“You’re not in contact with your other colleagues?”

He shook his head. “Marjorie had me marched out—accused of spying for a competitor. Total bullshit, but what was the point of arguing? She always held the upper hand in our relationship. Her *turning me in* made her look good with the higher-ups. A few weeks later, the trade papers announced they’d given her a promotion. I was, at best, collateral damage. At worst, I was the trash to be taken out. I blew town the next week.”

Dorrie tilted her head. “And you wound up here. That’s a good thing, I think.”

“If my reputation hasn’t been destroyed.” He leveled a long look at Colton.

The man merely lifted one shoulder.

Dorrie closed the folder. “We’ll let you get on with your day. Are you heading to Lorian’s?”

Mitch shook his head.

“That’s too bad. My brother, sister, and I always make an appearance. I think we’ll be there in an hour or so.”

“Aren’t you too tired?”

“For Lorian’s mincemeat pie? Never.” She offered a genuine smile. “And I’ll let her know you’re in the clear.”

“I think it’s too late to make any difference.” He tried to keep the venom from his words, but Colton’s darkened expression assured him he hadn’t succeeded. The male officer rose and put on his jacket. “I’ll see if I can convince my sister Mallory to make an appearance. She’s pretty wrapped up in Darius these days.”

Mitch, in the process of rising, plopped back down. “Wasn’t Darius at the party last night?”

Colton rolled his eyes. “Yes. Whether Lorian forgot about my sister and her boyfriend or he was just there to fill out the numbers, I’m not sure.”

“So you figured it out.”

A snicker. “Lorian’s as subtle as a freight train. She’s been leading up to this for quite some time. I’m curious how things played out.”

Mitch glared. “Since I was dragged away, I have no idea.”
And even if I knew, I’d never tell you.

“I thought you might’ve spoken to Lorian this morning.”
Deceptively casual.

Not going there. Mitch wasn't fooled for even a moment. "We had other things to discuss."

Dorrie rose. "Well, hopefully we'll see you there."

Finally, Mitch managed to rise as well. He trailed behind the two cops and after they crossed the threshold, slammed the door.

Dorrie'd looked like she was about to say something, but he honestly didn't care. He was done—with cops, with investigations, with innuendoes—with all of it.

As he wandered back into the kitchen, he spotted a business card on his table.

What...?

He hadn't caught either cop leaving it. He picked it up.

Dorothy Anne Duhamel.

And on the back, in handwriting—*if you ever need anything.*

His first instinct was to toss it. On second thought, having a cop's card was never a bad thing. He tucked it into his junk drawer.

The display on the microwave informed him that noon had come and gone. Lorianana's party would be starting soon.

He could wait until Dorrie and her family had made an appearance and then show up. Except he might run into Colton and his sister. No, the entire situation was too fraught. So he wandered over to his living room and plopped down on the

couch. He cued up a Christmas movie and settled in for the long haul.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tuesday morning dawned gray and threatening snow.
Bring it on.

Maybe there'd be enough to close the library early. Send everyone home. Loriana could go wallow in her little house and continue to graze on leftovers. She'd done her level best to ensure every guest left with something, but she'd had fewer people than previous years and had way overdone things.

As she entered the library, she uttered yet another curse at Colton Pritchard. He'd had the temerity to show up at her party. With Mallory—lovely woman—and her boyfriend Darius. The man'd looked distinctly sheepish.

Damn.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she'd known those two had hooked up. She'd wasted a spot at the party. She should've invited the new guidance counsellor. Gifford? Griffiths? No, Griffin. He needed to get out and meet people, and this

would've been the perfect opportunity. And he was close to Marnie's age.

Ah, Marnie. Loriana wasn't exactly looking forward to this morning. Her friend hadn't made an appearance on Christmas Day—hardly surprising given the events of the night before—but also hadn't answered Loriana's three calls. She'd teetered on concern. But Marnie often kept radio silence for a few days at a time. The woman was prone to leaving her phone in another room and promptly forgetting about it. For someone who was so safety conscious, the oversight niggled Loriana. People Marnie's age had grown up attached to their cell phones, but Marnie often forgot hers. Like the thing was an afterthought.

Loriana jacked up the heat, hoping the space would warm soon. They'd only been gone four days, but she'd turned down the heat. Although she wasn't directly responsible for paying the electricity bill, Regan on the city council was constantly reminding her of the line item.

And I still don't know who bought the computers.

Flipping on the computer in the back room, she waited for it to boot up. Now that her patrons had good computers, maybe she could look at upgrading this one.

Good excuse to call Mitch.

Hell, no.

He'd made his position clear when he refused to show up at the party. That pain'd been compounded when Dorrie let slip

—on purpose, she was sure—that the police in California’d arrested a man who they were certain was responsible for that Marjorie woman’s death.

So all that fuss for nothing.

I want to kill Colton Pritchard.

But she wouldn’t. Aside from the whole illegal thing, the guy was a good cop. He arrested bad guys. He was good with people in distress. He took his position in Mission City seriously and, over the years, Lorianana’d spotted a few cops who didn’t want to work in a sleepy little town. Mission wasn’t a hotbed of criminal activity. Arrests had gone down since the federal government had legalized marijuana. Far fewer illegal grow ops.

A knock on the front door caught her attention, and she looked up to see Marnie standing there, hopping from foot to foot. Surely this cold snap was going to end soon. It’d started before Christmas and the Fraser Valley was still in the grips of a deep freeze.

She opened the door and her co-worker scurried past her.

Marnie tossed out a *thank you* as she made a beeline for the back room.

Lorianana followed at a more sedate pace. They still had twelve minutes before the library opened and no one was outside waiting. Honestly, Lorianana would’ve let them in early on a day like this. She found Marnie plugging in the kettle.

“I need tea.” She didn’t meet Lorianana’s gaze.

“How was your Christmas?”

“Fine.”

Truly unhelpful.

“Did you speak to your family?”

Marnie shot her an indecipherable look. The question was a gamble—Loriana’d never confirmed whether Marnie had family or not. Most people did. Yet, she knew from personal experience, that estrangements existed. Or people could be orphans. Her co-worker’d never mentioned family, yet Loriana persisted in asking.

I’m as bad as Nosy Norma.

Well, she had better intentions. She wasn’t going to spread word of Marnie’s personal life to the whole town—Norma’d do it in a heartbeat.

Finally, Marnie broke the gaze and removed her coat. She hung it on the rack, but kept her hand on it for longer than necessary. “I know what you were doing.”

Chickens coming home to roost. Mitch’d warned her, but she hadn’t listened. Yet she could try. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Marnie pivoted and her expression darkened. “The men? Seriously?” She pulled her lower lip through her teeth. “I’m not that person, Loriana. I’m meant to be alone. All those men were perfectly nice, I’m sure, but I’ll never go out with any of them. Don’t you see?”

“See what?”

The expression on Marnie’s face morphed to anguish.

Loriana felt a punch to the gut. She’d caused this distress—and she was the only one who could fix it. “I was wrong.” She broke the eye contact and moved to the sink. “Darius is dating Mallory Pritchard. I totally forgot.”

“And the other men?”

She waved her hand in the air. “I chose the wrong time.” She winced. “And I probably went a little heavy on the numbers.”

Marnie laughed, but the sound was completely devoid of humor.

Loriana turned.

“You need to promise you’ll never do that again.”

Uh...

“I’ll quit.”

Talk about a punch to the gut. “You would?” Panic encroached. “You can’t. I mean...well, I don’t know what I mean. I rely on you. People here love you. You can’t just leave.”

“I will if you don’t stop trying to set me up with every available—and apparently unavailable—man in town.” She scowled. “Heck, I think you even considered pushing me toward Mitch.”

Guilty as charged.

“Well, he’s single now.”

Marnie’s eyes widened in horror. “No. He didn’t...I mean Colton and Dorrie...but—”

“Oh, no, nothing like that.” She should’ve foreseen Marnie’s panic—the woman didn’t know about the exoneration. “Dorrie let me know on Christmas Day that they’ve arrested someone. Mitch is in the clear.”

“But you’re not together anymore? How did that happen?” Her voice was higher than normal. As if she were still on the verge of panic.

“We fought. Or I think we did.”

“You *think* you fought? So this is something that can be fixed, right? Do you want me to call him? I mean, I have no idea what I’d say but, like, I’d try. For you...I’d try.”

Loriana wasn’t sure she’d ever been so touched. That Marnie—little mousy Marnie—was willing to intervene. That either she didn’t fear Mitch or, just as likely, was willing to tamp down that fear, spoke volumes. Maybe Marnie’s threat to quit had been an empty one—born more from exasperation than any genuine desire to leave. And if that meant Loriana had to give up her matchmaking attempts, then she’d do it.

For now, at least.

The kettle whistled.

Marnie poured the water into a pot with several tea bags already in while Loriana pulled the milk she’d bought this morning out of the fridge and snagged the sugar.

As they set about making their tea, she dropped her little bombshell. “I’m going to a cuddle party on New Year’s Eve.”

Her co-worker spilled the milk.

Yes, it’d be a good day.

And it was. Toddler and Books was well-attended. With many parents being off work, and therefore not having their kids in daycare, they brought their little rambunctious ones in. Marnie read while Loriana attempted to corral the little tykes—some of whom seemed to still be on sugar highs. All the kids wanted to share what Santa had brought for them. Loriana spotted a smaller girl who kept to herself. She gave Marnie a nod.

The younger librarian snagged a book from the sale shelf and presented it to the little girl.

The little girl hugged it to her chest.

Her frazzled grandmother offered a humble smile.

Loriana made a note to have a care package ready for the next time they attended.

Rusty’s daughter, Mira, seemed extra ebullient.

Calleigh, Deanne’s daughter, became so entranced with the play blocks that the entire chaotic scene around her evidently disappeared.

Just Loriana’s idea of a perfect day.

The rest of the week went much the same. The cold snap broke, but was replaced with another atmospheric river that

dumped almost a month's worth of rain in three days—just in case anyone believed climate change was a hoax. She'd lived here for her entire life and these things were far more frequent than they'd ever been before. At least this time, no landslides occurred. A relief to be sure.

All that meant, though, that the world was soaked by the time Loriana showed up at Patsy and Vance's party on Friday night. Usually the party was the first Thursday of the month, but apparently they'd moved January's party to December 31st.

Loriana couldn't think of a better way to spend New Year's Eve.

Liar.

Okay, making out with Mitch on the couch while waiting for the ball to drop in Times Square would've been fun. She loved that on the west coast she could watch it at nine and be in bed by ten. Naturally a morning person, she rarely stayed up until midnight.

You're getting old.

Mature. She'd matured from her college days when all-nighters'd been a regular thing.

The display of Christmas paraphernalia still covered the lawn of the house she'd always think of as the cuddle house.

Interestingly, she was more nervous tonight than a month ago. That'd been excitement—something new and all that. Tonight was nerves tinged with sadness.

Mitch hadn't called.

And, to be fair, she hadn't either.

About a dozen times a day, she picked up the phone.

A text. How hard was it to send a quick text? *Hey, how are you? Heard you didn't kill anyone. The computer is broken...* That one tempted the most. She knew enough about computers to *break* one just enough to require a technician, but not so much that she caused permanent damage. But she hadn't, of course. She wasn't manipulative like that. Set Marnie up with eight men? Sure.

And look how well that turned out.

Well, yeah. Darius was still with Mallory. Apparently Noel was gay. Had she known that? She couldn't remember. And, after speaking with Tristan at Starbucks, she learned he was pretty sure Xavier was and maybe even Marcus? Although maybe he'd misunderstood and Marcus was just in a relationship with someone that he preferred to keep quiet.

At least Marcus and Zach hadn't actually come to blows. That would've just made everything so much worse.

Tristan had also, gently, let her know that although he cared for Marnie deeply, he was aware the other woman didn't return any of the affection. They were friends—nothing more.

At least my matchmaking attempts didn't ruin the friendship.

Yeah, that'd been a bang-up job. She hadn't heard back from Marcus, Xavier, Owen, Zach, or Declan either. She was still grateful Declan'd offered to drive Mitch to the police detachment.

Should call and thank him.

Actually, there were plenty of things she needed to do.

A knock on her car window startled her. Once the momentary panic receded, she picked out Geoff in the dim light. She smiled and held up one finger.

Decision made, she snagged her bag, and exited the car.

Geoff held an umbrella over her. “I saw it was you. I don’t know if you were waiting for the rain to clear or just debating whether to come in, but I knew I had to coax you out of the car.” He indicated the umbrella. “Just glad you decided to come. I saw you on the RSVP list and I was thrilled. I didn’t see that other guy, though. Mitch?”

“No, Mitch won’t be here tonight.”

“Ah, too bad. That cuddle with the three of us was awesome.”

She appreciated he didn’t mention her breakdown. Tears were so unlike her that she was still a little surprised it’d happened at all.

They scurried over to the house as he held the umbrella over her.

He’s such a gentleman.

Much as Mitch was.

Don’t think about him.

Yeah, right. If she truly wanted to put the man out of her mind, she would’ve gone skating or something. In their time

together, they hadn't managed that dating ritual. Her house? He was everywhere. Although he'd only left a toothbrush, his presence filled her space. Plato still gave her the side-eye, as if demanding to know what she'd done with his other favorite human.

Vance spotted them coming and held the door open as they scooted inside. He laughed as Geoff closed the umbrella. "Crazy weather. We considered calling tonight off, but so many people said they'd come...well, we didn't want to disappoint anyone. How many will actually show is a whole other question." He spotted Lorian's bag and indicated the stairs. "You know the way."

She nodded and headed upstairs. Now she was here, the trepidation was easing. This place felt familiar, even though she'd only been here once before. Like coming home. Which gave her a pang because she'd never felt that way in her parents' home. There'd been no love—certainly no affection or hugs.

Mitch gives the best hugs.

Yeah, he really did. Ones she could sink into. She could rest her head across his broad chest and just let him enfold her. All her cares would melt away.

Well, Mitch wasn't here. And Geoff gave pretty wonderful hugs. Perhaps tonight she'd let him snuggle her from behind. Like Mitch'd done that first night. Or maybe she'd meet someone else.

I don't want anyone else.

Christ, you sound like a petulant five-year-old.

Get a grip.

And so she would.

When she finished getting into her pajamas, she tucked the bag under her coat and headed out of the room and back downstairs.

Patsy stood in the foyer, and when she spotted Lorian, she squealed. Then she held her arms open wide, and Lorian stepped into the embrace.

Tears pricked the back of her eyes as she acknowledged just how tough of a week she'd had. She hadn't let herself admit the truth—Mitch wasn't coming back. And she was to blame. She never should've hung up on him after he, rightly, declined to attend her party.

A fucking party.

And she should've texted him. And kept texting him until she got a reply.

Okay, that might've made her look like a stalker, but it would've been worth it if he finally responded.

Or she should've driven over and simply camped out on his doorstep until he granted her admittance.

Yet she'd done none of these things, and now the only solace she had was from a gentle woman.

Redemption's not coming.

Geoff appeared by her side and offered an arm.

With gratitude, she took it.

He led her down the stairs and guided her to the middle where the circle was already forming. Soon the doors would close, and the night of cuddles would begin.

At least I have this.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Y*ou're a fool .
True.

But he was here now, so he might as well go in and face his fate.

He'd donned his coat over his pajamas and shoved his feet into boots that offered a modicum of protection from the rain. It'd eased on his drive up, but puddles were everywhere.

She might not even be here.

Except she'd RSVP'd and, yep, there was her car.

The display on the dash informed him that he had about three minutes before the doors closed and the circle began.

I've left it too late.

All that hemming and hawing and serious debating about whether this was the right move. Maybe Monday at the library would've been a better choice. With Marnie there for moral support.

Another minute ticked by.

He gathered his courage as he yanked his hood over his head. He opened the door and was hit by a lash of rain. He hopped out, slammed the door, and armed the alarm as he sprinted across to the house. As he held up his hand to knock, Vance opened the door.

“Perfect timing, young man. You’ve got about thirty seconds—Patsy likes to start things on time. Now, run upstairs, dump your coat, and come downstairs with me.”

Mitch, known for obedience and an ability to move quickly, hustled upstairs, dropped the coat, and was back within moments. He followed Vance down the several sets of stairs until they were at the basement door.

The group had already formed a circle, and Patsy turned upon hearing the men’s footsteps. “Well, just on time. You know how I like punctuality.”

Vance advanced toward her, and settled into his place at her right.

Mitch stood stock still.

Loriana met his gaze, her deep-brown eyes going wide in surprise.

Patsy glanced over her shoulder. “Well, come here, young man. Join us, and we can begin with our explanation of the evening. We have a newcomer.” She pointed to an older gentleman with white hair and two spots of color rising on his cheeks.

Despite noticing all the little details of the room and the people in the circle—he spotted both Geoff and Ardelle—he really only had eyes for one woman. The woman who'd come to mean everything to him in the last month. Had it only been a month? Possibly the most intense of his life. And he couldn't regret a single moment except where he'd declined.

He cleared his throat. "I should've come to your Christmas party."

Patsy's brow knit. "Uh, we didn't invite you. I mean, if I'd known..." Understanding dawned as she looked between Mitch and Lorian. "Oh, well, isn't this an interesting turn of events. Are you joining us so we can get started, or are the two of you going to stare at each other all night? As much as I find this byplay endlessly fascinating, people came for hugs. Not a soap opera." She added that last bit on a chuckle.

This didn't feel like a joke to Mitch—this felt like the most important moment of his life.

With more courage than he believed possible, he extended his hand.

It felt like forever, but eventually Lorian rose. She skirted the circle as she made her way over to him. She took his outstretched hand.

He pulled her close.

She looked up at him. The smile was tentative—but it was there.

He bent to kiss her.

She rose to meet him.

As their lips touched, Geoff let out a whoop, and everyone burst into spontaneous applause. They might not've known what the couple had gone through in the past week, but they obviously recognized a passionate reunion.

“Come home with me?” Mitch’s voice was rough.

She shook her head.

His gut clenched.

“Oh, no, not that.” She ran her finger down his frown line. “It’s just that Plato’s home alone and since I plan to keep you captive all night—or, for that matter, all weekend—we need to go to my place. Plus,” she eyed him. “You’re already wearing your pajamas. What else could you possibly need?”

Thank God he had a spare set of clothes in the van for emergencies. Whenever she decided he was allowed to leave her lair, being in street clothes rather than pajamas might set a few less tongues wagging. Nosy Norma’d have less fodder for the rumor mill.

Vance pointed to the stairs, and Mitch tugged Lorianana with him. He forgot to duck, and banged his head on the slanted ceiling.

“You okay?” Her voice was laced with concern.

He rubbed his forehead. “I’m fine. I’ll always be fine—as long as you’re with me.”

Patsy sighed loudly.

The couple retrieved their jackets and Loriana snagged her bag. Apparently she wasn't going to change as she said, "ready" about ten seconds after they had their coats on.

Vance escorted them to the door. "It's still wet out there."

"We'll find a creative way to dry off." Loriana winked.

Mitch felt his cheeks heat.

Vance chuckled. "I bet you will. Now, you'll have to come back in February and tell us how it all goes. And if there's a wedding, we expect an invitation."

Mitch nearly tripped over his feet.

Loriana chuckled. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. We've got lots to discuss first." She gazed up at Mitch. "And some truths to share."

Was she referring to herself or to him? He couldn't think of anything he hadn't shared, but he'd wrack his brain during the drive to her place. Whatever she wanted to know, he was willing to share.

"Well, off you kids go. I'd say this party's one for the record books."

Loriana followed Vance's suggestion and stepped out into the rain. Mitch was hard on her heels as she sprinted to the car. She disarmed the alarm when she drew close, and he was there to hold the door open for her. She flashed him a smile as he shut the door. Then she waited until he hustled over to his van and hopped in.

He turned the van on and sent the vents to full as the windshield fogged up. After a good minute, it'd cleared. He waved to her, and she pulled out. He followed, staying a close distance. He really hated being out on New Year's Eve. Drunk driving wasn't as much of a thing as when he'd been a kid, but people still did stupid things. He also didn't want to come across a group of cops doing sobriety checks. No, he'd had his fill of cops for quite some time.

As Loriana pulled into her driveway, he pulled a couple of houses ahead. He used someone's driveway so he could pull in, back up, and drive forward, neatly parking in the spot in front of Loriana's house.

Predictably, Nosy Norma's nose stuck out between her drapes.

He waved.

She shut them with a violent movement.

Old bat.

The thought made him an uncharitable asshole. The woman was alone in the world. And she kept a close eye out for Loriana. Nosy was one perspective. Concerned would be another.

No, he wasn't feeling charitable. Interfering nosy old woman was as far as he was willing to go.

Loriana held the door open for him as he scooted inside.

She'd barely shut the door before Plato wound his way around Mitch's legs.

He bent over to scratch the feline. “Yeah, buddy, I’ve missed you too.”

Plato headbutted him.

“Let me take your coat.”

Loriana’s husky voice hit him low in the gut. God, how he’d missed her. The last seven days felt like an eternity. “Sure.”

She hung up their coats and turned to him. She looked adorable in her pale-lavender-and-white snowflake pajamas.

And somehow he wasn’t embarrassed to be in his flannel ones. That being said, the legs were damp. “Uh, not to be presumptuous, but is it okay if I take my pants off?”

“Well, that’s blunt.” Her eyes sparkled. “You can take everything off, if you want.”

A tempting offer.

“Will you reciprocate?” *Please*. They had so much to talk about, and yet he wanted action even more than he wanted words.

She twirled a lock of her hair in her hands, and he noticed how damp it was. “How about a shower to warm up?”

He wasn’t particularly cold, but he’d take that kind of intimacy over sitting around chatting any day. “That sounds great.”

“Cool.” She extended her hand.

Taking it was a no-brainer.

When she led him to the laundry room, he cocked his head.

She opened the dryer door, and everything became clear. And because his top was just the tiniest bit damp—and so were his underwear—he stripped. She reciprocated. Her movements were efficient, but Mitch reveled in every inch of creamy skin she uncovered. He had plans for worshiping every spot on her body. If it took all night, he was game. If it took a lifetime? Yeah, that'd be okay too.

They scurried to the bathroom, and soon Loriana had the water turned on. Within moments, she dragged him under the hot spray.

He stood with the water pounding on his back as he gazed into the eyes of the woman he could now admit he loved. Her vivacity, her spirit, her zest for life—they all made her perfect. Well, she had a few flaws. But those endeared her to him further.

When his hair was wet enough, he reversed their positions. Soon the water cascaded over her. Her light-auburn hair darkened under the spray.

“Let me wash your hair?”

She winked. “I’d rather you wash other parts of me.”

He grinned. “All in due time.”

With a pout, she turned her back to him.

Pouring out a large dollop of shampoo, he set about cleaning the tresses he so loved. When he scraped his fingernails against her scalp, she moaned.

The sound went straight to his cock. Yet he managed to focus on her. He used the excess shampoo to wash down her back to her ass.

She giggled.

“I always wondered if you were a breast or an ass man.”

“I’m a Lorianan man.”

Another sigh.

With reluctance, he turned her so he could rinse her hair—mindful of not getting soap in her eyes.

Those trusting eyes continued to gaze up at him. What did she see? A man besotted? A man conflicted? A man still struggling to find his place in the world?

Or did she simply see a man who adored her, and who’d fight every demon and slay every dragon to keep her safe?

“So serious.” Her eyes lit with mischief. “And now I get to wash your hair.”

He chuckled. “There isn’t much of it.” And he’d have to bend down to give her access.

Might be fun.

So they switched places, him facing away from her. He bent his knees as she lathered him up. She repeated the fingernail action, and that sent more bursts of lust through his veins. When she nudged him, he turned and leaned back into the spray so the shampoo could wash out.

In a bold move, he cupped her cheek and moved in for a kiss.

A moment before their lips touched, her eyes drifted shut.

Okay, permission then.

He pressed their lips together and, unsurprisingly, she opened for him immediately. As he thrust his tongue into her mouth and began a mating ritual with hers, he let his other hand wander. Down her arm and back up her side. Then down to cup a breast. He tweaked her nipple just the way she liked.

She moaned.

With renewed passion, he meandered his hand lower still. Her abdomen, her belly button, and lower still. As he insinuated his finger between her thighs, she widened her stance, opening for him. He slid his fingers through her wet folds to search for—and successfully locate—her clit. He rubbed, he flicked, he gently massaged.

She moaned, she bucked, she ground her teeth.

Then, quite suddenly, she orgasmed.

As her body spasmed, he thrust two fingers into her. The contractions around his hand were strong, but he continued to milk her through the waves of pleasure.

She pulled back and gasped for air. “Jesus.”

“Good, eh?”

She smacked him lightly on the arm. “Fucking amazing. I’d missed this.”

Their gazes clashed.

Both uttered, "I'm sorry," at the same time.

She went up on her toes to press a kiss to his lips. When she pulled back, she blinked several times. "No regrets."

"Right, no regrets."

"And as much as I want to drop to my knees and give you a blow job, this tub isn't really designed for that, and I'm not sure how long the water tank will hold out."

Just the thought of cold water was enough to propel him out of the shower.

Loriana turned off the water and took the hand he offered to help her out.

He grabbed one of the fluffy bath towels and wound it around her. Using the ends, he tugged her close for another kiss. "I'll hold you to that promise."

She grinned back. "Count on it."

After releasing her, he snagged a towel for himself. The drying process took several minutes, and when she offered the hair dryer, he declined. His hair was short, and he could towel dry it while she blew out her locks. As she did just that, he took a moment to admire. Sure, he'd seen her naked several times before, but he'd never had a moment where he could gaze without feeling like a voyeur. She was lean, with a lithe body. She enjoyed walking around Mission City in the evenings after work. When she couldn't do that, she had an exercise program she followed, sweating away in her living

room. Plus, Mitch intended to keep her busy in the bedroom. He wanted more to their relationship than that, but he'd take whatever he could get.

Loriana shut off the hair dryer, placed it on the counter, and turned to face him. She wasn't shy. At all.

As she raked her gaze up and down his body, his cock stirred awake. When she licked her lips, his libido kicked into high gear.

She snagged his hand and led him out of the bathroom.

He managed to turn off the light before she yanked him into the bedroom.

She pressed against his body, cupped his cheeks, and dragged him down for a drugging kiss. She thrust her tongue into his mouth, and demanded reciprocity. Apparently she wasn't willing to wait, or even to take things slow. She grazed her fingers down his neck to his collarbone. Inching lower still, she unerringly found his nipple and tweaked it.

Minx.

His body always reacted to that simple action, and tonight was no exception.

After raking her fingernails down his abs, she went lower still. And lower still. Until she came to his erect cock. She encircled him with her fingers, and hummed her approval when he thrust into her hand.

Friction. He needed goddamn friction.

Just as suddenly, she released him. And bestowed a Cheshire cat grin upon him. “Go lie on the bed.”

He cocked an eyebrow and moved to comply.

She snagged the comforter and top sheet and dragged them down.

He crawled onto the bed and lay down in the center, resting his head against a pillow.

She climbed onto the bed and crawled her way to him. First, she moved in for another toe-curling kiss.

As he tried to grasp her hair, she scooted out of the way.

Damn.

He loved her hair. The texture, the feel, the way his hand tingled when he ran his fingers through it—just one of the many sensual experiences he enjoyed in this bed.

When she put her hands between his thighs, he followed her unspoken request and opened them.

She scooted up between them until she met the junction of his thighs. The wink was the only warning she offered up. She grasped his cock and, without preliminaries, enveloped him in her wet, warm heat. Swirling her tongue around his head, she sucked as she drew him farther into her mouth.

The woman was clever, with a very talented tongue, and soon need coursed through him. Need that'd likely drive him right over the edge if he wasn't careful. And as much as he

wanted to climax in her mouth, he'd rather do it in another place.

“I’m going to come.”

She sucked harder.

“I don’t want to.”

She met his gaze and, after a long moment, pulled off. She sat back on her haunches. “And what exactly do you want?”

He snagged her arm and pulled her atop him. Then, in a move he was particularly proud of, he managed to reverse their positions.

Her brown eyes flashed up at him—pupils dilated in the dim light and blown from passion.

Those eyes drifted shut when he lowered his hand to cup her intimately. She was so ready for him and he was so ready to go.

Leaning over, he tried to open the nightstand.

She stilled his hand.

He pulled back and quirked an eyebrow.

“I got tested. Back when we first started seeing each other. And there hadn’t been many guys in the year before that.” She swallowed hard. “I’m clean.”

Her meaning registered through the haze of lust strumming through his veins. “Well, I always used condoms before, but I opted to get tested after...” Yeah, best to leave that alone. “I did it in California before I left, and I also did a few weeks

ago.” He held her gaze. “When things started to get serious. No way was I going to risk your health.”

She cupped his cheek. “I believe you.”

“So what are you saying? Because, you know, sex can lead to, you know, kids.”

She winced. “Yeah, a discussion for another time.”

Interesting. They hadn’t progressed far enough in the relationship, he hadn’t thought, to have that conversation. Apparently that needed to be rectified—just not at this precise moment.

“I have an IUD. I’m big on back-up protection. I used condoms with all my partners. But with you...”

The sentence hung in the air. He wracked his mind for IUD stats and came up with highly unlikely that a pregnancy would result. He’d never gone bare with a woman. And she’d never gone bare with a man. In other words, this was a monumental moment for both of them—and perhaps life-altering.

He closed the drawer.

“Yeah, I’m all-in.”

Her grin lit his soul.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The heat in Mitch's dark-brown eyes ignited an inferno inside her. She wanted him and, damn it, she wanted him now. Determined to show him how much this meant to her, she seized his cock and gave it a decent squeeze.

Those eyes widened, and he growled. He levered himself over her as she spread her thighs for him.

She guided him to her entrance.

He tilted his head.

She nodded.

He thrust into her.

The action didn't hurt, but it did rob her of breath. And as he gazed down into her eyes, she flexed her hips to draw him in deeper.

In turn, he leaned in for a kiss. He apparently wanted lazy—she didn't.

She grasped the back of his head and pulled him toward her. Then she arched her body up to meet his, brushing her breasts against his chest.

He shifted, seating himself farther into her.

“Please.” She wasn’t above begging.

His knowing grin warmed her as he shifted.

Her insides reveled in the feeling.

From there, things went as they always did. He’d thrust. She’d meet the thrust. He’d pull back. She’d wait for him to push back in fully. This was what they did. And she couldn’t have been happier. The thought she might’ve lost this forever was unbearable—she’d do everything in her power to make sure that never happened again.

Sweat broke out across Mitch’s brow as he continued to push her higher and higher.

“Come for me. Please.”

His plea hit something deep within her. She gave up the battle to hold back and let the climax wash over her. Pleasure sang through her veins as the orgasm seized her.

And still he continued his thrusts. His look of concentration furrowed his brow as he kept up his relentless pace.

Just as she began to question how long he could continue, he held himself still.

In that moment, he saw into her soul.

And she let him.

No barriers. Nothing between them—in the physical or the spiritual. Just two people lost in the throes of passion who saw things clearly.

I have to tell him.

But tell him what? That she loved him? That she'd only loved one other and how disastrously that'd ended? How she never wanted to let him go? The temptation to demand he move in and stay forever was enticing. Even as she had the thought it might be too soon, she knew it wasn't.

“Stay.”

Slowly, with exquisite care, he eased out of her. Then he levered onto his back and encouraged her to come into his arms. They were a tangle of limbs and sweaty bodies. Knowing the chill would set in quickly, she yanked the comforter over them.

He thrust it back off his chest. “Good Lord, woman.”

She laughed as she snuggled in. “Cold winter nights.”

“Long winter nights.” His arm encircled her as he pulled her close so he could place a kiss to her head. “Yeah, that was okay.”

Gazing up at him, she gave him a look of mock horror. “Okay? Just okay? I thought that was fucking amazing.”

He tweaked her nose. “You're right. I'm just teasing you.”

She tried to pout, but couldn't pull it off. Her grin was wide. “Oh.”

Not giving him a chance to respond, she pulled back the cover and leapt out of bed. She opened the bedroom door she'd closed earlier.

A very irritated cat sat there. He blinked up at her, stuck his nose in the air, and sauntered into the room. He then leapt onto the bed and nosed his way over to Mitch's side. He threw Lorian a caustic look before lying down on his side so he could clean his paw.

She scooted back under the covers. "Always good to know where I stand with my little fiend."

Mitch chuckled, coaxing her back into the circle of his arms. This time, when she pulled up the blankets, he allowed her to cover them both. He reached over to scratch the cat's ears.

A loud purr emanated from the rotund beast.

Lorian snorted. Then, as she rested her head on Mitch's chest, her own constricted. "I need to tell you something."

"That sounds rather ominous."

"Not really. Just...something from my past. Something that'll likely never come up, but something I think it's fair you know"

"You don't have to—"

She pressed her hand to his abdomen. "Yeah, I kind of do."

"Then I'm all ears." Said in a kind and gentle manner.

"I was engaged."

To her surprise, he didn't stiffen. He couldn't have known what to expect, but he also didn't seem perturbed by the news. He held his silence—giving her permission to tell the story in her own time.

“University sweethearts. God, I loved him. He was an engineering student, and I was an English major who planned on becoming a librarian. We were just the perfect match of right brain and left brain. Plus, I was decent at chemistry and he loved Shakespeare. We were happy. So happy.” She ruthlessly thrust down the memories, but they continued to resurface. “He came from a lower class. I mean borderline poverty. His aunt took care of him the best she could, but she was getting on in years and wasn't able to hold down a job because of a disability. He was at UBC on a full scholarship, and worked part-time. All while dating me. I felt honored to be part of his life.”

“And your parents?”

God, he knows me so well.

“Never knew. Wouldn't have approved. He understood that. Said it didn't bother him. Once he had his engineering ring, he planned to buy me an engagement ring. When I finished my MLS the next year, we were going to make it official.”

Mitch rubbed his fingers up and down her arm—encouraging, but not demanding. “I take it things didn't end well.”

She wanted to snicker. To make some offhand comment. To laugh it off. Yet she couldn't, because even after almost twenty

years, emotion clogged her throat. “One ordinary Sunday night I was waiting for him at my dorm. Sunday nights were our night—no work, no school—just a chance for us to reconnect before the craziness of the week ahead.” She swallowed. Hard. “He didn’t show. He just...never showed up. At first, I figured he was delayed. Then I worried. By midnight, I panicked. I considered calling around but didn’t want to look like the needy girlfriend. I didn’t sleep, and the next morning I showed up at his class. His best friend was there, and he was surprised as well. We reconnected at the end of the day, and Todd still hadn’t appeared. Understand, he never missed classes. He once had walking pneumonia, and he didn’t miss. In retrospect, going to school while contagious wasn’t the best thing to do, but...well, we didn’t really know better.”

“What happened?” Gentle again. A way to pull her back from the vortex of memories.

“I went to the campus police. They did a welfare check in his dorm room. Keys and wallet were missing, but everything else looked to be in place. No signs of anything amiss.” She blinked rapidly, although Mitch couldn’t see. She was essentially looking at their blanket-clad feet. “I went to the Vancouver Police Department. I called all the hospitals and all the morgues. He must’ve been somewhere, right? But injured...or dead.”

Mitch pulled her even tighter. As if he sensed what was coming.

“He never turned up. Just disappeared. And yeah, we’re talking the early two-thousands. No cell phones with GPS. No Wi-Fi.”

“Did his aunt know where he was?”

“He’d never invited me to meet her. Something about her disability and not being capable of handling strangers in her home. I never understood fully, but it didn’t matter. We had each other, and that was good enough. Him walking away didn’t seem plausible—but it looked like that’s what happened. I call the VPD every year on the anniversary of his disappearance. He’s still in the missing-persons database, but I’ve been assured he’ll likely never turn up. They’re sure he walked away.”

“But you’re not so sure?”

“He was a semester away from finishing an engineering degree. To walk away from all that work? I mean, if he tired of me, we could’ve just broken up. I’d have been heartbroken, but I wouldn’t have been mean about it. I, of all people, wouldn’t have wanted to be in a loveless marriage.” She rubbed her forehead. “Not that I’m saying my parents don’t love each other. Perhaps they do. But ambition always comes first.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Nothing to say. They’re shitty parents.”

A rumble in his chest. “I meant about Todd. I have plenty to say about your parents—and none of it complimentary. I hope

they stay in Costa Rica and let you live your life in peace. Except that their silence hurts you.”

“It doesn’t,” she protested.

“Well, if you say so.”

Clearly, he didn’t believe her.

“Todd’s gone. He’s just gone. He’s never coming back, and I’m never going to see him again.”

“Does that make you sad?” Again, no judgment. Just curiosity.

“It used to. Especially around the anniversaries—birthdays, engagement, or his disappearance. Now it’s just an ache deep in my chest. And when I heard that woman was missing...”

He tensed.

“I knew. I knew what her family was going through. I’d never wish that on anyone. Then when Colton came and said she was dead.” She shook her head viciously. “Part of me was really angry.”

His movement on her arm stilled.

“Oh, I knew you didn’t have anything to do with it. But a small part of me—a part I’m not proud of—envied her family. At least they had answers. Yes, that she died was horrific—and they’d have to learn to live with that pain—but at least they knew. In that moment, I think I acknowledged I’d never know. Whatever happened to Todd will forever be a mystery. And, I also think—in that moment—I accepted that fact.”

His rhythmic stroking started up again. “I’m sorry you went through that.”

“Shit happens, right? Most of my crappy stuff was over by my early twenties. I graduated with my MLS, and I moved back to Mission City. I bought this place, started my great job, and have built a life for myself.” She sighed. “No regrets.”

“Except that Irishman.”

She snapped her head to face him and scowled.

He grinned impishly. “I saw the way you looked at him. Like you wanted to devour him.”

After poking his ribs, she stuck her nose in the air. “I’ll have you know I don’t regret Declan. We had a great time while together, but neither of us wanted something more serious. We parted as friends.”

“So, no great love affair.”

She shook her head.

He appeared vaguely relieved. “Do you think...might I persuade you...?”

She cocked her head.

“You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

“Oh, hell yes.”

“Fair enough. I love you. From the moment I met you, I saw you were special. And each moment I spend in your company, I fall a little deeper in love. But you might not feel that way. Or you might need time—”

“I don’t.”

“Or you might not.” He grinned. “So you’ll consider it?”

“Consider what?” She was confused.

“Making a life with me.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

“You’re talking marriage.”

His grin was soft. “Yeah, I’d like that to be on the table. But we can wait. There’s no rush.”

“And you’ll move in.” She said the words with more surety than she felt.

“If that’s what you want. This is your house, Loriana.”

She nodded. “And you’ll always feel like an interloper.”

He held her gaze. “Not if you welcome me.” He tilted his chin toward Plato. “At least I have one ally in the house.”

“I have the sewing room, which I’ve used precisely once. You could turn that into a storage room for your equipment.”

“Well...” He scratched his nose. “If I’m renting out my place, that’ll cover the mortgage. Of course I’ll help out with all expenses around here. More, because, let’s be honest, I eat a lot.”

She giggled. Likely as he expected.

“I have a storage locker to keep the excess equipment in. Maybe, eventually, I can even get a storefront.” He winced.

“No, probably not. I like getting into the weeds with network issues and programming stuff. Fixing computers in a store would take me away from that.”

“You could always hire someone else to run it.”

He tapped her nose. “You’re moving way too fast.”

She snickered. “But moving in together—marriage and all—that isn’t?”

“Plus, you might want the sewing room to become a nursery.”

Well, crap. Should’ve seen this coming. “Kids?” She turned her head away and faced back toward their feet. “You want kids.” The words weighed heavy on her heart.

Mitch placed his index finger under her chin and gently guided her back so she faced him. “I don’t have a burning need for children. Hell, I’m not even sure I’d make a good parent—God knows, I didn’t have the best example.”

“I, uh, feel the same way.” She blinked. “And I suppose I could learn, but...”

“It’s okay to not want kids.”

She blinked again.

“You spend a good part of your day dealing with children. I can understand not wanting to come home and deal with your own.”

“I feel like that makes me selfish.”

“No, it makes you human. Having a child is a lifelong responsibility—not everyone is up for that challenge. And plenty of people have children who shouldn’t. Also, the earth has enough inhabitants. We don’t need to add to it.” He tapped the frown line on her forehead. “If you change your mind, we can always adopt, or foster.”

“I won’t.”

“Then you’ll enjoy the kids you see at work, and that’ll be an end to it.” He tilted his head. “And you never know, your employees might surprise you and start families of their own.”

She honestly hadn’t considered that. Carly was too young. Johanna was too flighty. Marnie was...too terrified of her own shadow.

“Speaking of Marnie.”

“We were?”

He gave her *that* look.

She grinned sheepishly.

“No more setting her up with eligible men.”

She puckered her lips.

“Loriana.” No missing the warning tone. When she didn’t respond, he prompted, “Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“You don’t have your fingers crossed or something, do you?”

Damn.

“Why wouldn’t I want her to be happy?”

“Did you ever consider she might be single and happy? You were. Or at least I think you were.”

She moved her head in a so-so gesture. “I don’t regret any of my choices—because they led me to you—but I prefer to have someone to share my life with.”

“Well, then, I guess it’s a good thing you have me.” He coaxed her up so they could seal the deal with a kiss. And another bout of lovemaking.

Poor Plato gave up his search for peace and quiet in the bedroom, and instead chose to head to his favorite chair in the living room where the newly engaged couple found him the next morning.

Mitch, much to Lorian’s amusement, gave the fat cat extra wet food. A nice gesture, but one that’d need to be curbed. The last thing she needed was more scolding from Dr. Zephyra Dixon.

Her fiancé wrapped his arms around her from behind, tugging her tight against him and resting his chin on her shoulder. “I can totally see this being my life for the next fifty or sixty years.”

She turned, still tight in the embrace, and looked up at him. “Yeah, I can too.”

“Happy New Year.”

Her eyes widened. “I missed the ball dropping.”

He snickered. “We got engaged last night, and *that’s* your first thought?”

“Actually, my first thought is we have to invite Patsy and Vance to the wedding.”

His laughter burst forth from his chest. “Uh, I’m sure they’ll understand.” Then he sobered. “You want a big wedding?”

Horror overtook her. “Christ no. You, me, city hall, a couple of witnesses, and we’re good.”

“Well, I’d like something a little bit more public. I want to show everyone how much you mean to me, and that doesn’t mean scurrying off to city hall.”

“We can talk about it.” She eyed him warily.

“A discussion for another day,” he agreed. “Now, I need food. I haven’t been eating well the past few days.”

The days they’d been apart.

“Well, I’ve eaten too much.” Emotional eating wasn’t something she did often, but she excelled at it when she put in the effort.

He cupped her ass and drew her close. “You’re fucking perfect to me.”

Words she’d never tire of hearing.

“Is there anyone you want to share the news with?”

She considered. Her parents? Never. Mitch was the exact opposite of what they wanted for their daughter. She wasn’t picking him because of her need for defiance. She simply

loved the man to death and couldn't see herself spending another day without him. Going up on her tiptoes, she planted a kiss to his cheek. "I want to tell everyone in person."

He chuckled. "You're going to startle her to death."

"Nah. She's a smart woman." She adored Marnie, and she wondered how the woman would take the news.

"What's that pink light?"

She spun toward the living room. Pulling away from his arms, she wandered over to the drapes. She threw them open to find the most glorious sunrise.

Mitch came behind her and again pulled her close.

"You're not wearing a shirt."

"I'm aware. And yes, it's a little chilly, but I intend to coax you back to bed as soon as we're fed."

"Oh you do, do you?" She laughed. She wore her skimpy silk dressing gown, and he wore only sleep pants. And, she was certain, they looked debauched.

Yet the rising sun meant everything. The rain was gone, and the world was starting fresh.

"I love you." Emotion clogged her throat. "I just need you to know that."

He pressed his lips to her ear, his beard scratching her neck. "And I'll always love you too." He spun her to face him. "Breakfast. Then more sex."

"Yes, please."

And they did just that.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Epilogue

Mitch knew Loriana loved to make grand pronouncements of future plans so she wouldn't back out of them. She didn't like to be perceived as a chickenshit.

So when she breezed into the library Monday morning, he following just behind, and announced, "I'm getting married," no one batted an eyelash.

Marnie glanced up from the computer. "Aren't you off today?"

Loriana straightened. "Well, yes."

"And you love the place so much, you just had to come?"

She faltered.

Mitch smothered a grin.

Marnie broke into a huge smile. "I'm so happy for you. For you both," she added, quickly encompassing Mitch.

Loriana sagged a little.

Relief, he judged.

“We don’t have champagne.” Marnie frowned. “I think there’s some hot chocolate. We could celebrate.

This time, Mitch didn’t attempt to smother the grin. This was Marnie letting them know she approved. She wasn’t offering up physical affection—he would’ve been shocked if she had—but she was giving them her blessing.

That meant a lot. Even more than he could’ve predicted.

The woman snuck into the back room to make the hot chocolate.

Johanna poked her head out from the stacks. “Did I hear congratulations are in order?”

He cleared his throat. “Uh, yeah, I guess so.”

The woman, whose hair was green today, offered up a grin. “About damn time someone put a ring on that woman’s finger. She does okay on her own, but she needs companionship.” She eyed him up and down. “You’ll do.”

He accepted the compliment.

Marnie and Lorian returned a moment later with four mugs of hot chocolate.

Johanna joined them to make an even number.

“It’s hot.” Lorian’s warning was appreciated, but unnecessary as he spotted the steam rising.

“A toast.” Johanna held up her mug. “To the perfect couple.”

Murmured agreements abounded and, after blowing on the drink, each member of the group took a sip.

“So, who’s next?”

Marnie choked on her drink.

Johanna cackled.

Loriana gave her trademark secret smile.

Oh, this was going to be so much fun.

Want to know how it all began? Grab your copy of *The Absolution of Abigail Reardon*, a second-chance small-town prequel for the *Love in Cedar Valley* series.

Grab it here!

Thank you for reading Loriana and Mitch’s story. I hope you loved it. I would be appreciative if you could leave a review where you purchased it or on Goodreads or Bookbub.

Thanks so much!

And then...

Will Loriana be able to resist matchmaking again for her favorite employee? Stay tuned for a preview of *The Making of Marnie Jones*, and read the book to find out!

Chapter One

“Laura Derks?”

Despite the heat of a summer Mission City day, the sound of the deep male voice made the blood in her veins run cold. This day had been inevitable, but four years didn't feel long enough.

Maybe she could pretend... “My name is Marnie Jones.”

“It used to be Laura Derks.” A statement, not a question.

“I don't know who you're talking about.” She pressed her lips together, struggling to stay on her course. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm late for an appointment.” Without waiting for a response, she turned and walked to her car as quickly as she could without breaking into a run. Her heart pounded.

Brain whirling, she fought to steady her knees.

Her hands shook as she opened the lock with the remote. It gave, and she yanked open the door, launching herself inside. Only when she secured the lock did she take a breath. The air in the car was oppressive but, unwilling to roll down her window, she turned the ignition. The air-conditioning would take a minute to work, but she didn't care. Slamming the car into gear, she tore out of the parking lot, leaving skid marks.

Checking the rearview mirror, she saw the stranger, leaning against his car.

Watching her.

Marnie checked her mirror as many times as she dared, traveling from the library where she worked to her favorite

Starbucks. She doubled back, pulled into a convenience store's lot and waited, then she circled three different blocks.

Can't risk going inside.

Her hands still shook, and even with the AC blasting, she sweated that stinky, gross adrenaline sweat that had nothing to do with the godawful heat wave engulfing southwestern British Columbia.

She'd let her guard down. Four long years. Sticking to a compulsive routine, she'd relaxed into her boring life. Stupid. The casually dressed guy leaning against the car hadn't tripped her radar, except...wasn't it a little hot to be leaning against a hunk of metal?

But she hadn't reacted. She strolled past him, focused on whether to binge on a J.T. Ellison thriller, a vintage Nora Roberts romance, or a Grace Burrowes regency. Then Mr. Sunglasses and Khaki Pants muttered the two words guaranteed to wreck her life.

Laura Derks.

The guy maintained his posture against the silver Nissan that had rental written all over its spotless framework.

She managed to see him and raise him a few syllables. *My name is Marnie Jones.* Take pride in having stated the name so clearly, right? Futile, just like trying to hide from her past.

She drove around aimlessly for two hours, suppressing two near panic attacks.

Finally, she finally headed home.

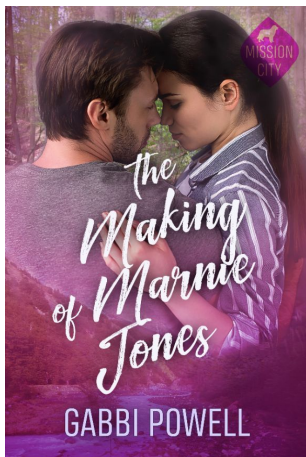
No, no, no.

The same long, lean bastard lounged on the front steps of her house. Her *sanctuary*—her home.

Anger, sweet and sincere, cut through her anxiety. She gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white, and a low-grade headache built in the base of her skull. How dare he? How in the Sam Damn Hill dare he? She hit the speed-dial button for her RCMP contact. Fine, let her unwelcome guest swelter in the heat while she figured out how to handle the trespasser. Anger propelled her out of the car.

“I’ve called the police, so you have about five minutes before they get here and haul your ass off to jail.” She was bluffing on both counts, but he had no way of knowing that.

He removed his sunglasses.



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[The Making of Marnie Jones](#)

Librarian Marnie Jones has reinvented herself. After horrors that changed her forever, she's built a new life and has found what she believes to be safety and quiet happiness. She hopes she's outrun her past, but all that changes when a stranger comes to the small town of Mission City, British Columbia.

Jake McGrath has expended considerable resources to find Marnie Jones. His niece, Olivia, is spiraling out of control, and Jake thinks Marnie—who understands what his traumatized relative's going through—is the one person who might help save her. . He needs to convince the skittish woman to return to Toronto with him. She's his only hope.

Marnie reluctantly agrees to speak to Olivia, and each conversation shines a new light on her own life. Can she help Olivia and herself as well? If she can let her walls down enough to let one person in, perhaps she can admit her feelings for Jake and live the life she's always dreamed of. But those walls are thick and well-reinforced. Can Jake be patient enough to wait until Marnie's ready to confront her past and forge a future—hopefully with him?

The Making of Marnie Jones is a slow-burn, hurt/comfort, enemies-to-lovers romance with a touch of angst and a therapy dog named Tiffany. There is mention of previous sexual assault. The book is the second in the Love in Cedar Valley series set in a small town in British Columbia, Canada.

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Gabbi Powell has been a lover of romance since she first put pen to paper in the eighth grade to write her first romance. She writes her novels while living in Beautiful British Columbia with her trusty ChinPoo dog as a companion. She also writes gay romances as Gabbi Grey and contemporary dark erotic BDSM novels as Gabbi Black.

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