

Danger used to be his middle name...

THE  
(EX) SPY  
WHO (MAYBE)  
LOVED  
ME



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**CHRISTI BARTH**









# Table of Contents

[Content Warning](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover more romance from Entangled...](#)

[A Cruise Fling](#)

[Breaking All The Rules](#)

[Back in the Burbs](#)

[Talk Flirty to Me](#)

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[rights@entangledpublishing.com](mailto:rights@entangledpublishing.com)

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*For my beloved husband, who makes everything we do  
together FUN. And to whom this title should sound cringingly  
familiar...*

# Chapter One

Airport bars, the world over, looked the same. Wyatt Keene knew, because he'd been in what felt like *all* of 'em. Sure, this one had a lobster café, since it was Portland, Maine, and a bagel place, since it was America. Windows that showed the solid wall of fog that had him socked in. And a u-shaped bar selling the local craft brew.

This particular one, though, looked different to Wyatt. Because he wasn't *looking* at every person who walked by as a potential problem. Or target. Or informant. Because, as of three days ago, he'd turned in his credentials as an undercover operative and, just like that, became another average man.

Trouble was? Turned out his brain didn't turn off fifteen years of carefully honed instinct.

So he was *trying* to be charmed by the lobster café across the concourse. Trying to not barely sip at his beer in case he had to suddenly sprint into action in a knife fight. Trying not to scan each face with suspicion, each lump under a winter coat as a gun.

Damn, it was hard.

Wyatt took a sip of his Shipyard Pumpkinhead from a glass rimmed with cinnamon and sugar. Not something he would've ordered, well, *ever*. This had been a deliberate choice, though, to turn his back on old habits. To embrace his new life. To be a normal guy, getting into the spirit of October.

Then he used his napkin to wipe off every speck of sugar from the rim. Some things were just too damned much to be borne.

Start again.

Normal (*aka* not a spy) guy's approach to being grounded by fog. Check out the women.

Solid plan. It'd give him a chance to flirt without an agenda. The pumpkin beer was a stretch, but Wyatt could definitely appreciate a beautiful woman without any second-guessing or

effort. He swiveled on his stool.

Couples.

Families.

Woman alone corralling four kids that looked as if she was about to lose it.

Then he target locked on a blonde. One that looked like central casting would've served up as a medieval princess. Eyes like the thin ice that'd slicked over the edges of the Neva River as he left St. Petersburg. High cheekbones. Thin nose straight as a ski jump and full pink lips. Hair that waved down to graze the tops of breasts barely visible beneath the cream turtleneck and matching long sweater.

Yeah, he'd be content to sit here, finish the beer, and keep sneaking glances at her. But that felt, well, creepy. Despite the fact that Wyatt was an expert at doing it without being noticed. Watching without engaging was a *spy's* approach, though.

So he leaned forward, reached his arm along the bar to get her attention from three stools away, then lifted his fingers. "Hey there."

She double-blinked, as if he'd startled her. "Are you talking to me?"

"If you want me to, yeah." Wow. Wyatt was *not* killing it with banter. He was in his head. Stuck in the persona of American airport bar guy. When he hadn't even been back to the States in, oh, three years?

Shit.

The whole point was to finally be himself. Even if he had no idea who that was...

He shook his head. "Sorry. Let me try again."

A single, delicate eyebrow pushed into an arch. "If you must."

Wyatt got up and moved to stand a polite single stool from her. "I'm Wyatt. I'm bored, and you look interesting. Would it be okay if I joined you? Bought you another drink?"

After an unsubtle up-and-down appraisal of him, she pursed her lips. “Interesting, hmm? That’s what you’re leading off with? Not pretty?”

“You’re beautiful, sure. Stunning, actually. But I could stare at you like a museum portrait from over there. Interesting’s the part that could fix my boredom.”

“That’s an excellent answer. You don’t even have to bribe me with another drink.” She extended her hand. “I’m Blake.”

“Nice to meet you.” After shaking, he retrieved his beer, slung his coat over the back of the stool and sat down next to her.

“I noticed you before you came over.” She tapped a pale pink nail against his glass. “When you wiped off the carefully paired cinnamon and sugar. Besmirching a local brewpub tradition.”

“Hey, I tried it first. Gave it a chance to win me over. It was either wipe it off or not drink the rest of the beer.”

She leaned close enough that he got a whiff of perfume—the sweetness of pears, patchouli, and some flower he couldn’t name. After putting a hand to her mouth, she whispered, “I won’t drink it, either.”

“So you’re a woman of taste. Not a stereotype.”

“You stereotype women as liking sugar?”

Whoops. “Uh, yeah?”

“And you admit it? To lumping my entire gender together under a single fact?”

Blake didn’t sound pissy. More amused. Wyatt appreciated that she’d called him on it. Many wouldn’t kick off a conversation with a confrontation. And he sure as hell wouldn’t back down from the challenge.

“I do. Stereotypes exist for a reason. They’re rooted in stacks and stacks of examples of people doing exactly that thing. They’re the norm. Easier to have a shared starting point when you’re cataloging people.”

“But you’re willing to make allowances that not everyone fits into that mental cookie-cutter mold?”

“Of course. Call it a shortcut. Men like football. Germans like soft pretzels. Women like sugar and shoes.” He risked a glance downward. Then Wyatt grinned, and pointed at her booties with their needle-thin, four-inch heels. “You can’t tell me you’re wearing those for comfort.”

One side of her mouth quirked up. “They are, in fact, relentlessly painful. Even more so because I walked around Manhattan in them all morning. I cede your point.” Blake lifted her glass in a toast.

He clinked, and they drank. There. They’d found their conversational stride. See? He was back on his game.

No need for probing questions, or sly, double-edged questions. No need to glance sideways to see if anyone was watching the two of them together with more than casual interest.

This attempt at being normal was working.

“Manhattan, huh? What were you doing there? And please give me credit for not glibly assuming the answer is shopping.”

Blake choked out a short laugh. “You actually get extra credit for being right about stereotypes existing for a reason. Because I did indeed make the trip to go shopping. Loaded up on new winter clothes.”

Hell. He’d have to do that, too. Wyatt had exactly two suitcases. More than enough wardrobe for a spy. Not nearly enough for an ex-spy trying to blend into a small Maine town, being seen by the same people every single day.

“All by yourself?”

That prompted a slow squint down her patrician nose. “I don’t need other people to weigh in on what looks right. I know what I like.”

“Agreed. If I had a dollar for every hovering sales clerk I’ve brushed off over the years, well, I’d be Richard Branson rich.”

She used those delicate fingers to mime a tip of a hat. “But to give you credit yet again for apparently reading me like a book, yes, I did meet up with a friend for a long lunch. Which means I apparently couldn’t be more of a stereotype if I showed you my designer handbag and admitted that I scored a box of Teuscher champagne truffles.”

“Nah. You’re clearly too self-aware to be written off as a caricature. Any chance you’ve got those truffles in your bag?” *That* kind of sugar Wyatt could get behind.

“Sadly, no. Packed away in the box I shipped everything back home in.”

“Home? Where’s that?”

“Why should I, a woman who just admitted to traveling alone, reveal that information to you? How do I know you’re not a stalker?”

Wyatt had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. He was the opposite of a stalker. Blake didn’t know it, but she’d just lucked into having an ultimate bodyguard. “Point to you. Although, to be clear, I wasn’t asking for your street address. Just a general city, Ms. I-don’t-even-know-your-last-name.”

“Blake’s not the most common female name. A dedicated pursuer might be able to track me down in a city.”

“Let me level the playing field, then.” Wyatt dug in the pocket of his coat. Laid his EpiPen on a cocktail napkin. “I’m deadly allergic to fire ants. Now you know my Achilles heel.”

“Fire ants? That seems an odd thing to discover.”

Oh, Wyatt had a story. Not the *true* story—how he’d sat through a four-hour session in his training to test for possible reactions to even the most obscure allergens. And he had been grateful to find out before being bitten by the damn things. Growing up in New York, it wasn’t like he had any chance to discover that. An EpiPen had saved his life in Australia and Taiwan.

“Some overachieving kid brought them to show and tell when I was little. Of course, he spilled open the box. Mass ant chaos. I got bit. Things went downhill fast. My teacher took a

chance and used an epi from another kid—peanut allergy. Saved my life.”

“That was brave. It’s illegal to share prescriptions.” She pursed lips that he couldn’t help but notice were plump and soft. Kissable. “Although I suppose, if you hadn’t survived, she would’ve been covered by the Good Samaritan law.”

Looks like Wyatt *had* been right. This woman was, indeed, interesting. “I was too little to hear chapter and verse on the legalities. But Miss Emma did get an award from the mayor for saving me.”

“What did you get?” There was a twinkle in her ice blue eyes that said she was having fun with their banter, too. “For almost dying and bravely soldiering on?”

Hell. What *would* be an appropriate present for that? He’d fallen into the classic trap of offering up a lie that he couldn’t follow through on.

But when in doubt? Stick with the truth. He’d had a go-to reward growing up. “A trip to Serendipity for a strawberry fields sundae. Cheesecake, strawberry ice cream, strawberry sauce and whipped cream.”

The side-eye Blake gave him was sharp enough to etch glass. “And yet you wiped off the rim of sugar from your beer? Trying to impress all the airport ladies with your manliness by hiding your sweet tooth?”

“Trying to respect all the hard work of my dentist.” Wyatt grasped the hem of the navy crew-neck sweater layered over his white Oxford. “But I can strip down and flex, if you want to be impressed.”

Blake ran a hand over his biceps. Squeezed. Then she squeezed out a cat-that-ate-the canary smile. “Clearly that’s a generous offer. It seems unwise these days to cause a riot in an airport, however. Which would be a very real consequence of unveiling these things. I’m going to make the difficult sacrifice and request that you leave on your shirt.”

“Beautiful, pragmatic, and unselfish,” he joked. “Who *are* you?”



She bit her lip. Her gaze shifted over and down. If Wyatt had to teach a new agent how to recognize signs of something shifty happening, he'd show a pic of this moment. "I...I don't want to say."

"Okay." Wyatt started to get up. Guess he'd read *everything* wrong. Wow. Three days off the job and he was already getting rusty.

Blake stopped him with a hand on his thigh as he rose halfway. "Wait. Don't go. I wasn't shutting you down."

Yeah, he stayed half standing. Wyatt didn't want to push himself in where he wasn't wanted. It wouldn't be worthwhile for either of them. "Then you faked it well."

"Sorry. I'd truly like to keep talking to you. I just don't want to, well, reveal anything personal."

Sitting back down, Wyatt cocked his head to the side. So he *had* read her right. The interest *was* mutual. His professional pride would remain intact—not that it mattered anymore. Without any comprehension of her request, he stuck to the teasing tone they'd been using.

"Even though I just told you the one surefire way to kill me?"

After an audible in-breath through slitted lips, Blake nodded. "The timing is regrettable, but yes."

"Gotta go with *why*?"

"Look around." She waved her arm at the few others along the bar, and the clumps of people in chairs and lined up against the wall, almost all with their faces glued to their phones. "In an airport? You're in between everything. Work, family, vacation, interview, funeral. You're in this weird bubble away from all of it."

"And that's what you need right now? To be away?"

"It'd be nice. To shrug off the impending stress and responsibilities for a bit longer, yes."

Talk about ironic. Here Wyatt was trying to be real for the first time in *years*, and she wanted him to keep pretending.

It was no skin off his nose. Probably easier for him, all things considered, to slip into one of his well-used personas. Like pulling on a fleece sweatshirt—comfortable. “No problem. I’ll play along. Who do you want to be?”

With that mysterious half smile/head tilt women seemed to master by puberty, she asked, “Who do you think I am?”

Ha! He’d learned before he could shave that any question like that spelled eight kinds of trouble. “That’s a loaded question. If I guess right, I spoil your last burst of freedom. If I guess wrong, well, I might insult you. Or embarrass you.”

“Hmm. You’re right. But I did want you to guess. How’s this?” Reaching forward, she nipped two cocktail napkins out of the plastic holder. “Write it down. Once we board our planes, we can read them. Get a final laugh from each other. But too late for the reveal to have any, well, real impact.”

“Sure.” Wyatt clicked back into work mode. And realized he hadn’t successfully clicked *out* of it yet. Because he’d been cataloging little things about her throughout the conversation.

Her dignified, expensive clothes. Pricey but not pretentious jewelry. That faint scent that made his balls tighten. Precise, educated, witty speech. No doubt at least a master’s degree under her belt, if not more.

Not a bored trophy wife, who’d slipped off her rings for some freedom and dalliance. Maybe...someone who owned her own business? She certainly knew her own mind.

Nah.

This was supposed to be fun.

So that’s what he’d give her. Quickly, he printed *I think you’re remarkable. And if we had the chance, I think you’re the woman I’d enjoy licking until you scream.*

It was tempting to keep going. To thank her for easing his transition into civilian life. To thank her for being twice as interesting as he’d hoped. For at least starting to distract him from the constant worry that someone might attack him, even now that he was out of the spy game and in a jetport (what even was that? A holdover name from the Pan Am era?) in

calm, quiet, bucolic Maine.

It'd require too much explanation that he wasn't allowed to divulge.

And it wouldn't fit on the cocktail napkin.

Wyatt folded it inside out, then into quarters. She tucked it in her wallet, and he did the same with the one she'd folded into...an origami fish? "Cute."

The stem of the wineglass bobbed between her fingers. "Trust me. It isn't revealing too much to say the one thing I've never been accused of is being 'cute.'"

Yeah. Blake was classy and elegant. Hard to picture with a bow in her hair, or in cutoff shorts.

Or maybe imagining those long legs in shorts would be a good way to go to sleep with a smile tonight...

Wiping his hands across the bar, as if clearing a slate, he asked, "So if money, talent, and time were no object, what would you want to be?"

"Oh, that's easy, if my talent or lack thereof isn't a factor. An athlete."

He ground out a harsh mimic of a buzzer. "Too vague."

"I wasn't done. Unspooling a good story takes time. Proper setup. Building anticipation." As she rolled her hands, Blake jerked her head toward the wall of fog out the window. "After all, we've got the time."

And he wasn't at all sad about it. Sketching an air bow, Wyatt said, "My bad. Go on."

"I'd want to be an athlete on the U.S. Olympic team. Not at the medal ceremony—although for the sake of this fantasy, it should be assumed that I win gold—" She tapped her sternum, right where a medal would dangle.

"Obviously. I thought that from the first moment I saw you."

Then Blake slowly extended her arms wide. "—but I'd belong to this throng of absolute kick-assery. Pride in country layered over with pride in accomplishment, in some sporty

Ralph Lauren uniform with a jaunty scarf. Knowing that I was sharing the experience with athletes from all those other countries, who'd suffered and worked the same as me, and that I was a part of the whole world coming together at once. And then, hopefully, there'd be confetti and fireworks."

Describing it had pinked up her cheeks. Put a sparkle in her blue eyes like they'd been refracted through a prism. Wyatt wanted her to keep going. Maybe a moment-by-moment walk-through of whatever race or routine earned her that gold.

Because then he wouldn't have to talk. He could just sit back, sip his beer, and enjoy watching her.

Instead, he gave a slow clap. "That is one hell of a well-thought out fantasy. Kudos."

"Thanks." Her lids lowered, revealing a light brown shadow that shimmered in the overhead fluorescents. "I *may* have been refining it since the first time I watched the Olympics."

"Mine's not as elaborate as yours, but yeah, it's something that's rolled around in my head since my first basketball game. Shooting guard for the Knicks. Standing at the center line of Madison Square Garden, arms still up, wrists flicked, watching my half-court shot swish through the net."

"Through the net...is that lacrosse?" Pale pink lips pursed to one side. "Or are the Knicks a hockey team?"

Ha! It didn't take any of his operative training to see right through her ploy. "Nope." Wyatt rubbed the nape of his neck, stiff from four airports in two days. "You're setting a trap to see if I'm an old-school sexist. Not gonna work. I'm guessing you've been insulted before by some idiot?"

"*Many* times before. The most recent was just last night." Blake crinkled her nose as if a skunk had just curled up in her lap. "A condescending Wall Street type of an idiot trying to impress me with a Monkey 47 gin martini. He saw me look at the baseball playoffs on the bar TV and thought he could score by offering to take me to an event with some 'real action.' At which point he launched into a five-minute monologue on the basics of basketball."

“Why didn’t you walk away?”

Outrage flared her eyes wide. “I was waiting for my French 75. It was exquisite, and worth the wait. Especially when he visibly deflated when I told him that I used to routinely beat my brother in Horse.”

Well handled. If he’d been there and seen it go down? Wyatt would’ve paid for her drink in appreciation. “Was that true? Guy got what he had coming to him. I’m just curious.”

“Oh, yes.” She leaned closer, wafting that perfume at him again. This time? He wondered if it was on purpose. If she was flirting without words. Which he’d be fine with... “What I *didn’t* mention is that I’m three years older than Fitz. So there was a while when I topped him by four or five inches. Once his growth spurt kicked in, I never won again.”

While Wyatt laughed, the bartender reappeared. “Last call. Can I get you folks anything else?”

Blake swiveled to look out the window. Or, more specifically, *at* the window, since the darkness and fog obliterated any chance of seeing even an inch past the glass. “That can’t be a good sign. The bar closing and still no update on the weather delay.”

“Probably not. I’m no fog expert, though.”

The bartender’s head jerked up as a glass shattered at the opposite end. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Blake’s hand loosely curled around the stem of her empty glass. Wyatt gave in to temptation. He had to know how her pale skin *felt*, even if only two inches of it. No secret agenda. No double speak. No using her. No split attention listening for suspicious chatter or even more suspicious silence.

Just the simple enjoyment of touching this beautiful woman.

Hell, he’d earned a moment of basic happiness, hadn’t he? Spending the last fifteen-plus years devoting himself to saving the world, one piece at a time. Putting any personal life completely on hold. Risking his life, getting shot, burned, stabbed...

That entitled a guy to seizing the moment to *almost* hold hands, right?

So Wyatt covered her fingers with her own. “Buy you another round?”

“Thank you, but I shouldn’t.”

“Need to keep a clear head to go nowhere and do nothing?” he teased to hide his disappointment.

“The opposite, I hope.” Blake laid her other hand on top of his. Then the speakers crackled again.

*All remaining flights are grounded until tomorrow morning. Please check with your gate agent about the possibility of accommodation vouchers.* A low grumble filled the jetport.

“That’s that.” Wyatt beckoned for the bartender. “I’m sure as hell fortifying myself with another before standing in line for an hour to be bussed to a fleabag.”

“What if you didn’t have to?”

“A fleabag’s better than scrunching myself across three molded plastic chairs.”

Blake leaned over again. This time, he *knew* the closeness was intentionally flirty. Because her warm breath puffed against his ear as she whispered, “I have a hotel room already.”

Surprise had him jerking away to look at her. “How?”

“As soon as they announced the fog delay. I popped onto Expedia and booked one, just to be safe.”

“Way to plan ahead.” Back in the old days—like, *four* days ago—Wyatt might’ve done the same, depending on the urgency of the particular mission. But tonight he’d been attempting to be Joe Average. A guy who didn’t anticipate the worst and plan for it.

Still in a breathy whisper, she asked, “How would you feel about sharing it with me?”

Wyatt didn’t know how to interpret her offer. They’d been talking for, what, all of ten minutes? Was she really taking pity

on a stranger and offering him the second bed?

Or...did she want him to share *her* bed?

Either way, his answer was yes. But the last thing he wanted to do was make the wrong assumption and end up making her feel uncomfortable, or worse, unsafe. "I'd like that. How about you lay out the ground rules, though, before we budge from these stools?"

Blake winced. Rubbed at her temple with two fingers. "The point of a fling is not to have ground rules. No real talking, no real information exchanged, simply no-strings sex."

Yeah, he was ready to freaking vault off that stool now. "I'm on board for no-strings sex. As long as that's what you want."

"Aren't you the perfect gentleman? Thank you, for the stipulation. It just proves that I made my choice wisely."

Wyatt threw a handful of bills on the bar.

Didn't count them.

Didn't care if he accidentally tipped a Franklin on two drinks. "We can get our updated flight information at the hotel. No need to wait in line."

"No need for a car, either. It's connected to the jetport by an underground walkway. One of those moving sidewalks that I could outpace even on crutches."

He stuffed his EpiPen back in his jacket. "Your foresight's impressing me more with every sentence. And I was already bowled over by your beauty the moment I laid eyes on you."

Blake tugged at the cuff of his sweater. "I was serious. No need for compliments or, well, wooing. I like you. I like sex. So let's take advantage of being stuck."

After slinging his backpack over his shoulder, Wyatt put a hand at the small of her back to usher her out of the bar. "I like sex, too. And I like telling my partner how great they look. How great they make me feel. Compliments are a part of the package. Suck it up."

"Oh, so we're on the same page already..." She fluttered her

lashes at him. Like the double entendre hadn't already crashed into Wyatt's head like a brick through plate glass.

Man, if this was what civilian life had in store? He should've left the agency *years* ago.



## Chapter Two

There'd been a list of things Blake Montgomery, PhD wanted to accomplish on her whirlwind trip to Manhattan. Shopping at the Louboutin store on Fifth Avenue. Stocking up on the frilly lingerie at La Perla that made her still feel feminine beneath her lab coat. Grabbing an essential piece for her Halloween costume, meeting her friend Zoe, seeing a show...

...and having a one-night stand.

Blake was uber Type A. If something went on her to-do list, then she did it. In a timely manner. But the planned hookup had eluded her. No man had caught her eye or given her zings.

Until Wyatt.

When he sat down next to her, she actually felt a frisson of heat from his nearness. Which, as a scientist? She knew to be biometrically impossible, given their layers of clothing.

But she did.

She'd swear to it.

It wasn't just the combination of a tall, lean frame and obvious muscles that strained against his sweater at the pecs... *and* shoulders...*and* biceps. Or the green eyes that had the muted depth of the needles on an Atlas cedar. The eyes that popped beneath the thick shock of black hair that was adorably, sexily mussed—even though that was probably just from travel and not on purpose.

All of those things were to be appreciated. But it was the aura of strength...solidity...confidence that cloaked Wyatt that most attracted her. Even though Blake also knew, as a scientist, that there was no such thing as an aura.

The man was yummy, okay? He pushed all her buttons when it came to looks. Easy to talk to, dry wit, funny, charming.

Wow.

Blake needed to get herself under control. Yes, he'd flicked on all of her lust that had spent the last *several* months tamped

down and hibernating.

Yes, she was in desperate need of some, ah, stress-relieving physical satisfaction.

But he was just a man who fit her needs. Nothing more. A tool to slake her frustration. Blake liked her wine in an appropriately shaped and sized glass. She relied on her Echo Revolution automated imaging microscope. Appropriate tools, and so would Wyatt be.

Because...Blake lived in Swan Cove, Maine. A tiny coastal burg whose numbers burgeoned from tourists and cruise shippers but was still, at its heart, a small town. With a small amount of single, handsome men who wouldn't blab about sleeping with the woman whose family name was on almost every square inch of the municipality.

Dating in Swan Cove was too complicated to bother with... as her recent breakup had proven. Blake *desperately* needed to cleanse her sexual palate of that louse.

Flings were impossible. So she simply, well, controlled herself until on one of her quarterly trips. After all, there were ways to get the job done herself. It just wasn't the same as having a smothering weight push against you. The scratches of stubble in highly erogenous places.

The heat generated by two bodies thrusting against and into each other.

The skin against skin glide and friction and slickness...

She was ready for this. Soooooo ready.

"Blake." Wyatt lightly cupped her elbow. "The door's open."

Goodness. She'd zoned out on the short ride up four floors. *Anticipating*. And, perhaps, justifying to herself a bit, as well. The whole sex-with-a-stranger thing. But it wasn't as if you actually got to know people on dating apps.

Hurrying between the doors already sliding shut, she said lightly, "Right. Well. You missed your chance at elevator sex then, didn't you? Gotta be quicker than that."

“Didn’t realize that speed was your goal. If that’s the case, you might’ve picked the wrong man for the job.”

“No.” Blake angled sideways. Pushed him back against the wall and pressed herself against him. With her stilettos on top of her five feet eight inches, he only topped her by a bit. In other words, everything lined up perfectly. “I’m fairly certain I chose well. Nor did I actually want elevator sex. You never know if there’s a camera in there.”

“There wasn’t.” The absoluteness in his tone surprised her.

With a tiny cant of her hips, Blake pushed off and resumed the walk down the gray and blue checked carpet. The hallway was quiet enough to hear the *swish* of their coats. It was disconcerting. “So you were looking for one? Which means you *were* thinking about hitting the stop button and doing it right there?”

“Just checking out options.” Wyatt sounded blasé. Like he looked for hidden cameras everywhere he went. “No handrail, though, to balance against. Not optimal for your pleasure.”

She snorted. “Aren’t you thoughtful?”

“We should talk about your expectations. In case there’s something like elevator sex on the table, I don’t want to skip over it.”

How was she supposed to choose? They hadn’t even kissed yet. Blake had zero clue what his sexual style would be. How it would mesh with hers. *Thinking* about it dulled the illicit excitement that had been building since they left the bar.

“You want me to present you with a menu of options? Doesn’t that strip away the spontaneity?”

Wyatt curled his fingers around hers right before she waved the keycard at the electronic lock pad. “Assume that I want what you want. That I want to make you tremble: first with desire, and then with utter satisfaction.”

Maybe Blake had waited too long. Because she was already trembling, just from his verbal preview. “There’s nothing you particularly want?”

“You mean like the standing wheelbarrow? The valedictorian?”

Those were things? *Known* things? She’d read the Kama Sutra. Once. “I...have no idea. Although I was valedictorian, so perhaps we should try that one?”

He keyed them in and held open the door for her. “Look at you, getting sloppy. Dribbling out another string of personal information.”

“Whoops.” She shrugged out of her coat and hung it up, needing to do something besides wait for what would happen next.

“Don’t expect me to slip up like that. Reveal the name of my first pet or the street I grew up on.”

Darn it. Why was he so funny? So sharp? Blake held out a hanger for his coat. “You got me. This was all a nefarious scheme to mine your data and sell it on the dark web.”

“Ah, but see, I *knew* that. I’m part of an internet fraud task force. Getting you is the tip of our spear.”

After dropping her bags, she stretched out her arms to her sides. “You’ve got me, indeed.”

“Good.” The word came out in a near-growl. Low. Deep. It scratched over her eardrums and raised goose bumps on her arms. And there was a sudden...intensity burning in Wyatt’s eyes.

For an instant, it made her want more from him. More time to figure out how to read him. To learn more personal snippets aside from how to kill him with an ant. To have more fun than they could share before the runways reopened tomorrow.

Blake fluffed her hair and huffed out a sigh. “Darn it, all I’d planned to do was ogle you. I didn’t expect to *like* you, too.”

“Same here.”

“It complicates things.”

“Doesn’t have to. If we stop thinking and just start feeling.” One corner of his mouth quirked up. “Not in an emotional

way, of course. Strictly physical.”

“Obviously.”

“How’s this?” With quick motions, he closed the blinds against the night and turned down one side of the king bed. “I’ve been traveling...well, for long enough that I should shower. When you’re ready, come join me. No pressure.”

It sounded like a perfect way to bridge the chasm between them right now. The gap between flirty strangers and naked lovers. “All right.”

Blake began unfastening the Elsa Peretti diamond tennis bracelet she wore every day.

“No pressure, but—” Wyatt surged toward her. His palms bracketed her cheeks with surprising gentleness.

His lips, though? *There* was pressure.

Firm, solid pressure as he kissed her with a steady, teasing repetition between nips and wide kisses that teased open her mouth and drew a moan from her that he swallowed, and then kept kissing some more.

Nothing else was touching below their necks. Just his hands on her cheeks and the facile mouth that moved across hers. Blake’s single brain cell not focused on pleasure drew a comparison to when her trainer made her do isolation exercises with weights. It was as if the rest of her body didn’t exist. It certainly didn’t matter.

Their tongues now twining around each other—*that* mattered.

Wyatt tasted faintly of the beer he hadn’t finished—mostly the sugar and cinnamon. It was such a juxtaposition with the utterly masculine feel of his big hands covering most of her face. Blake was all about female independence. And nobody would dare mansplain anything in her lab.

But there was something knee-melting about the way a big, strong man could make her revel in being ultra-womanly and delicate. When it came to sex, Blake preferred her men tall, muscled, and take-charge.

Wyatt checked all the boxes.

He broke off. Smoothed a hand down her hair so lightly that he didn't touch her head, then stepped back. "You know where to find me."

As he walked into the bathroom, he did that masculine move of grabbing the back of his collar to tug off his sweater.

It revealed skin that was unusually tan—for her corner of the world—for October. Tan skin stretched over rippling lats and deltoids and rhomboids. Wyatt looked...lickable.

Oh, he wouldn't be alone for long.

After a frustrating fight with the clasp, Blake simply left on all her jewelry. Her mental momentum had picked up. Her lust was primed. It was kind of Wyatt to give her space, but she didn't need it.

Her clothes did get hung—she'd have to wear them again tomorrow, after all. Tucked her shoes in the closet, too, so nobody stumbled over them in the dark. Wearing only the bracelet, two rings, and a necklace, Blake eased open the door.

Steam had already built up. Wisps of it softened the harsh, utilitarian un-style of the room. The beating spray kept the glass doors mostly clear, though. So she was able to ogle Wyatt. The tan that told her he'd at least spent part of his summer someplace warmer. Crisp black hair covered his limbs. The long muscles of his thighs were distinct and deserved to be sculpted in marble, like an ancient Greek.

His ass was taut and rounded and she couldn't wait to dig her fingers into it. Wyatt had already washed his hair. He gave three short shakes to remove the water, then slicked his hands over it. That was her cue.

"Need a hand sudsing up your back?" she offered as she glided the door along its track to join him.

At the first *snick* of the magnet disengaging, he'd stiffened. "I'll take your hands anywhere you want to put them. Can I get a look at you first?"

"No. I think we'll start with something tactile." Blake stood

right behind him. Slowly, she pressed close. Knees first, then thighs and her belly against that firm ass. As her torso made contact, she wrapped her arms around his chest.

Wyatt immediately crossed his hands over, grabbing her wrists. Locked in a backward embrace, they both just breathed in and out together a few times, absorbing the skin-on-skin change in status.

Their rhythms immediately synced up. Blake thought that boded well for how their eventual rhythm would be once they got into it. She turned her head to press her cheek in the hollow just to the side of his shoulder blade. Seeing his muscles had been one thing. *Feeling* them—forearms squeezing her, trapezius rippling against her—catapulted Blake’s desire into the stratosphere.

There was heat everywhere. The steam, the water sluicing past his body to hit her, pumping off of him in waves. All of her stress swirled right down the drain. The annoyance of what awaited her back at work tomorrow, the frustration of aborted travel, the energy it took just to survive in Manhattan—it was gone in an instant.

Her sole focus was on the large, strong man lined up in front of her. Blake tugged a wrist free and slid her hand down his abtastic stomach. Rather than aiming straight for the goods, she kept to a straight line that traveled down the hollow by his hip and onto his upper thigh, where she lightly scratched.

After a full-body shiver, he chuckled. “Whoa. How about I get to touch you before we jump into the main event?”

“Soon. Let me do your back first.” Because it was *fun* to touch his slick wetness. And Blake had learned that once a man had free rein over her body, all the fun usually concluded quickly.

As she rubbed soapy hands up and down his spine, it impressed her that Wyatt was listening, not just fumbling in a mad rush to completion. She *had* chosen well. And this was going to be *good*.

She knelt to do his calves. Noted a still-pink scar on his calf.

Tugged until he turned around. Then...there it was. Proudly jutting out from his body, fully erect and then some. A vein visibly throbbed on one side. Fascinated, Blake moved to trace it, but Wyatt stopped her.

“Save that for next time.”

“I thought we agreed this was a one-time thing?”

“One night, yeah. But we’re definitely doing this more than once tonight.” He drew her up. A low whistle came from between puckered lips. “You’re stunningly beautiful.”

Blake passed him the soap. “I told you. No wooing compliments are necessary. At this point”—she shimmied a little—“I am the ultimate sure thing.”

“And I told *you*, it’s going to happen. I call it like I see it.” Wyatt stroked the sides of her ribs, then higher to graze the outside of her breasts. “You want quiet? Use a vibrator. With me? You’re stuck with verbal interaction. I wouldn’t say no to a grade from you at the end, too.”

“Actually, I’m all in favor of that. Knowing there’s a rating coming will encourage you to a better performance.”

“Is that so? Gotta tell you, I’m plenty encouraged by what you’ve given me to work with.” With that, he cupped both of her breasts. Squeezed. And Blake moaned at the basic bliss of it.

Palms centered directly over her nipples, he wiped ever-growing circles. The friction zinged electricity straight down between her legs. Blake found herself moving her hips in matching circles.

Wyatt didn’t hurry. He hung out, kneading and stroking, pinching and rubbing. His eyes didn’t stay glued to the action, though. He kept glancing up, as if to check in with her that it was all good.

*Indeed, it was*, Blake thought. She throbbed: inside, at every pulse point, and everywhere he touched her.

He re-soaped his hands. Splayed them over her hips. Rounded them over her butt with a groan of appreciation.



Then those same hands slid down the inside of her thighs, making them quiver. And *then* one—just one, since his hands were so delightfully broad and long—came back to the front and cupped her.

Blake jerked at the purposeful touch. Put a hand out for extra support on the white tiles. Because yes, he'd applied extra pressure with the heel of his hand up top, over her clitoris. Simultaneously inserting a finger as she convulsed around it.

"We haven't kissed enough," Wyatt proclaimed. He gave a slight swirl of his finger that made her breath hitch.

"We haven't done *anything* enough," she pouted.

"True. But I've got a powerful need to taste you."

Blake closed her eyes. Parted her lips, tilted her head back to allow better access. Let out a tiny scream when his tongue hit a target considerably lower.

*Not* the kiss she'd expected. Especially not from an almost stranger. In her experience—and all of her friends' experience, too—men didn't often engage in oral sex unless or until they were in an actual relationship.

Which meant it had been quite some time since she'd last received that particular treat. Which didn't at all color her judgement of Wyatt's abilities. The man was *marvelously* talented with his tongue.

First off, he still had a finger plunging and circling inside her. Secondly, his tongue was making a thorough reconnaissance. Every time she shifted or moaned, he responded.

He lingered.

Reapplied himself with even more, ah, vigor. Licking and lapping and ohhhh, the super light flicking back and forth. Wyatt relentlessly built her pleasure. Blake added a visual layer by looking down at his dark head between her thighs, the bunched shoulder muscles just below.

God, it was a mental image she'd keep for the rest of her

life. Her left leg, somehow draped over his back to give him more room to do his work. That ass she couldn't wait to sink her teeth into. The steam blurring everything into a living fantasy.

When he stopped, she whimpered. Grinning with a level of smugness that, yes, she'd allow as *fully* justified, Wyatt said, "We're just getting started. But actual to-completion shower sex? That's just a stupid risk not worth taking. One of us could slip and get a concussion or worse."

"You seem to be extraordinarily clear-headed right now." Blake squeezed out her hair. "If I couldn't see proof to the contrary, I'd think I wasn't having enough of an effect on you."

"It's because I can't wait another minute to get inside you." He streaked a towel down her, front and back, that dried less than 10 percent. Did the same to himself. It bolstered his comment.

"Acceptable." She grabbed another towel for her hair, but Wyatt whisked it away.

"Don't bother." After glancing at the door, he shook his head. "No time." Then he grabbed her waist and lifted, circling to set her on the counter by the sink.

"You think *this* is safe? I'm no waif." Blake worked out. Kept up her tae kwon do black belt. Did meatless Mondays to reduce inflammation and her chances of Alzheimer's, ate salads for lunch. But it wasn't as if the counter came with an expectation of a fully grown, 130-pound woman being banged on top of it!

"A standard counter can easily hold a couple hundred pounds of dead weight." Wyatt's tone was brisk and factual as he rolled on a condom.

"How do you—never mind." She grabbed a washcloth off the rack and hurriedly wiped her hands. Blake wanted to be able to hang on for this ride and not slide right off. "I'm willing to trust you on that right now."

"Excellent." He flashed her a wide-mouthed, self-assured

smile. “Because you *can* trust me, Blake. Trust that I’m going to satisfy you. Here. On the chair. In the bed.”

“You’ve got quite the agenda. Are you quite certain *this*”—and she gestured to where he was lining up in the vee between her thighs—“is the moment to be making promises like that?”

“Oh, yeah.” After throwing her a wink, Wyatt slowly pushed inside her. He kept his gaze locked on hers the whole time. Which was disconcertingly intimate. Yet also reassuring, to have that connection with a man she barely knew. It provided Blake with a certainty that he was choosing to have sex with *her*, and not just any faceless, nameless woman.

The deliberateness of his entry both gave her time to adjust—and to appreciate the one-two punch of length *and* girth. He’d been quite accurate.

Once would *not* be enough.

Blake let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding and forced her muscles to relax.

*There.*

Now Wyatt was in all the way. He stayed still, buried deep, while dropping butterfly-light kisses along her neck. It gave both of them a minute to absorb being notched together.

Blake could tell he was waiting for her signal. Again, considerate and gentlemanly. “I’m good now. I’m ready for however far *past* good we can go.”

“Thank God.” After dropping a swift, hard kiss on her mouth, he said, “Hang on.”

Wyatt began pistoning into her before she even managed to wrap her legs around his waist. Hurriedly, she locked her ankles. He’d anchored his hands just underneath her butt. But he didn’t just *hold* her. Wyatt still managed to squeeze and caress with his thumbs while never letting up on his relentless rhythm.

The rhythm that jolted the breath from her body.

The rhythm that *more* than rid her of memories of the last, pallid sex with her horrible ex.

The rhythm that shut her brain up.

Blake splayed her hands across the smooth skin of his back, stretched so tight over the deltoids and rhomboids. Dug her nails in and dragged them down in a long, hard scratch. Yeah. She wanted to leave a mark. So that he'd be reminded tomorrow just how good tonight was.

It forced a grunt out of him. Wyatt jerked his head back to look down at her from half-lidded eyes. "Do whatever you like to me. I can take it."

"Ditto."

Those green eyes sort of hazed over. "Challenge accepted."

Next thing she knew, he'd lifted her off the sink. Three steps had Blake pressed to the wall. Held up entirely by her muscled and impressive as *hell* lover.

Wow.

*Wow.*

Tightening her crossed ankles shifted the angle just enough to bring her close to completion. That—and the scratch of the hair of his balls (was there *anything* more masculine) against her ass. Couldn't get *that* sensation from a vibrator!

Steam still swirled in the room. Sweat slicked everywhere their bodies touched. It was raw. It was urgent. And most of all, heat gushed through her veins, along her nerves, to coalesce into a pool of erotic lava at her core, about to erupt.

"Wyatt," she gasped. Okay, half-yelled in utter urgency.

"Yeah? This okay?" Still, as he spoke, he maintained that same driving thrust.

"It's perfect. I can't wait—"

"Don't. Let go."

Blake's thighs began to tremble. Her jaw fell open as every muscle in her body seized up as the orgasm exploded through her. The second the shriek of satisfaction burst from her throat, Wyatt—impossibly—picked up the pace even more.

His eyes squeezed shut as his hips jerked, hard. A guttural moan that went on and on signaled that he was right with her.

And she never once felt herself slip, even a centimeter, in his embrace. Blake didn't know how he'd managed it.

But...it would officially go down as one of her top three sexiest encounters.

Oh, why bother kidding herself? It was number one. By a landslide.

Panting a bit—who could blame him—Wyatt pivoted and carried her back to the counter. Once she was down, Blake unwound her legs. She was less eager to do the same with her arms, though. She just wasn't ready to stop touching him.

“You were—” He cut off. Shook his head. Kissed her with a long, deep tongue-tango of a kiss. “A hell of a lot more than I'd bargained for. That was...well...thank you.”

“For what? You did—*literally*—all the heavy lifting.”

Still in bedroom eye mode, the forest green glinted from between dark lashes. “You let me. You let yourself enjoy this, with no holding back. Do you even know how sexy that is?”

“No. I don't think that's been quantified.” Blake braced her hands behind her as he pulled out and disposed of the condom. “I am, however, willing to experiment. For the sake of science.”

“Then we'd better get back in the shower. Don't all experiments start by washing your hands...and whatever else may be dirty?”

Laughing, she hopped down.

And immediately grabbed for the sink, as her legs were a bit wobbly. “Well, before I forget, thank you, too.”

“My pleasure,” he said with a sweeping bow that somehow looked perfectly natural even in the nude.

She *had* let go. She'd been able to, because it was so freeing knowing that after tonight, she'd never see Wyatt again.

Freeing...

...and a teensy bit disappointing, now that she'd been on the receiving end of his *spectacular* skills.

## Chapter Three

The convenient thing about his temporary home of Swan Cove being a cruise ship stop meant that it had a rental car drop. Wyatt had rented a car as soon as the airport fully reopened instead of waiting for official tower clearance on being fog-free. After all, he'd driven in worse conditions.

In worse cars.

Once at gunpoint.

As he'd expected, the sun rising burned off the worst of it. And he'd been up. He'd crept out of Blake's room just before dawn. The key to a good one-night stand was not being around in the morning. Cut off the potential for any awkwardness.

Even though Wyatt didn't think it would have been awkward. Not a moment with Blake *had* been. She was, in fact, the kind of woman that would be interesting to pursue...

...if he weren't a man who hadn't had a relationship since college.

A man about to embark on a whole new life that he'd never asked for or wanted. All because some greedy asshole sold the names and covers of two dozen agents to a nefarious foreign government.

In an instant, the undercover intelligence work he'd done for fifteen years was over. The agency had officially declared it too risky to *ever* let him go back to it. Sitting behind a desk at HQ watching other people do his old job wasn't an option he could swallow.

Wyatt had never thought about retiring. Standard assumption was that he wouldn't make it that far, with the daily life-and-death-ed-ness of the job. After pretending to be so many different people? He had zero clue who he truly was—or who he wanted to be *next*.

So yeah, the hookup with Blake was as far as he could go with a woman. It wouldn't be fair to enter a relationship lying every day about his past.

Not to mention the whole *what if someone who bought his info decided to come gunning for him* possibility. There might be a target on his back. Right now.

Official word was no way, but hey, it wasn't their life. They could pretend to be certain. As for Wyatt? He'd stay sharp, stay on guard. For at least six months, maybe longer.

If he didn't fall asleep from the drone of the cab driver. In foreign countries, it was a gift to pretend not to speak the language and tune out the drivers. Because no matter what country, what region, what religion, or what language? There was always a yappy driver who wanted to tell you their life story.

Wyatt got it. It had to suck sitting all day, driving identical routes, fighting traffic. That was why he tipped 'em well. He just didn't want to hear about it.

Especially not today, with his head so full of Blake. There were a ton of memories he couldn't wait to have fade. Last night, though? He wanted that memory to stay as bright as a planet in the summer sky.

*What?*

Wyatt didn't have thoughts that...that...cheesy. That borderline poetic. That...Christ...as gooey as a jelly donut.

They eased to a halt at the five thousandth freaking stop sign since leaving the port. "Are you a new hire at Cygnet Labs? Or a visiting speaker?"

Both options almost surprised a snort out of him. "I'm no scientist. Not a speaker, either. Last thing I want is a crowd of people hanging on my every word."

The driver glanced back at him in the mirror. "Well, you aren't a tourist if you're headed out to Cygnet. They don't allow casual browsing. If that's what you'd expected, I can turn around. Take you back to our historic downtown."

"No, they're expecting me." The historic downtown appeared to have lasted exactly six blocks. Which reminded Wyatt that Swan Cove was *small*. Too small to blend in by being invisible. He needed to engage. Be nicer. "My aunt



recently died. She left me her house. I'm staying in it for a while. Figure out what to do with it, I suppose."

"Who was your aunt? I'm sure I knew her."

Sure he did. Beneath the folded-up edge of the red knit cap, there were deep creases in his forehead. The guy had probably been in Swan Cove his whole life. And the smile crinkles bracketing his eyes and mouth marked him as jovial.

Still, it took Wyatt a second to answer. What with the whole not having told anyone his aunt's name—or anything personal, for that matter—in his entire career. He was rusty at being open about the simplest things.

Looking out the window at the pine trees hemming in the road, he said, "My father's sister. Rebecca Keene."

"Aww, that was only a month ago. It was such a shame when she passed. She was a caring lady." Despite his bulky coat, he reached his arm through the seat gap to pat Wyatt's knee. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you." It was the first time anyone had shown him sympathy at the loss of his aunt.

Wyatt was oddly moved by the kindness of this total stranger. Nobody at the agency had even acknowledged her death when it happened. He'd been deep undercover. At first, he'd thought it was code for something when he got the notice. It'd been that surreal to learn about it while out in the field.

And to have it go essentially unacknowledged.

"It was a real nice funeral. Good turnout. Rebecca was the head judge of our annual chowder cook-off. For the wake, everyone brought their own versions, out of respect."

That was...weird? Or not at all? It definitely struck Wyatt as the most small-town thing he'd ever heard.

Aunt Bec probably would've gotten a kick out of it. He remembered her saying how much she enjoyed the annual event. How she liked to draw out the drama of the final award presentation. This two-minute story was making his whole day.

“Sorry I missed it. Saying goodbye to her, of course, but also the chowder.”

“Why didn’t you come?”

Nosy. And delivered in a far more pointed tone. But he’d prepared an answer, knowing he’d be barraged by it upon arrival. “I was the only family she had left. Whoever tried to notify me read her writing wrong. Messed up the digits. I didn’t find out until after it was over.”

In truth? The lawyer had contacted Wyatt’s lawyer, who then contacted the agency. He’d learned of her death right away. But there wasn’t any sense in abandoning his mission. Aunt Bec was gone. And the human trafficking ring he’d been trying to infiltrate wouldn’t trust him if he claimed he needed a week’s funeral leave back in the States.

“Well, welcome to Swan Cove.” And they crunched to yet another stop.

Wyatt glanced at his watch. Tech changed so fast, the agency didn’t want it back. It had a hidden camera and voice recorder. Newbie agents scoffed at it because they thought of their phone as the number one go-to. Well, it was easy to get your phone taken away. Stolen. Dropped. A watch stayed strapped to your wrist through almost anything.

“Can we make it there in five minutes? I’m expected at a ceremony.”

“Piece ’a cake. For what?”

It’d be nice if Wyatt *could* answer that—for himself, if not to satisfy his driver. “Apparently Aunt Bec entered me in an art contest up there. I’m a finalist.”

“Congrats! I wouldn’t have pegged you as an artist.”

*Ditto.* “I probably need to win this thing before calling myself one.”

“I’m confused.” This time they blew through the stop. No cars visible within two hundred yards, so Wyatt appreciated the guy’s initiative. “Cygnet Labs is doing an art contest? They do gene stuff and vaccine experiments.”

“Yeah. I was a little too busy getting here once I found out about this kick-off ceremony to dig into what the hell I’m expected to do.” There was a strong possibility this was a leaving-the-agency prank by his fellow spooks. Or that it was real—and he was about to be humiliated by his lack of talent or basic knowledge of what he was about to walk into.

But he couldn’t have a whole new life without trying new things, right?

A turn took them up a steep hill that opened up onto what looked like a resort complex from the nineteenth century. Gabled buildings, clapboard roofs, walking paths and a lake, and nothing that looked even remotely like a laboratory.

A dark-complexioned man in a lab coat anxiously rocked forward onto one foot, staring intently at the cab. “Guess they really are waiting for you. Good luck!”

“How much is the fare?”

“Nothing. You’re a local now. This was your free introductory trip to Swan Cove.” He reached back again, shook. “Name’s Randolph.”

“Wyatt. Good to meet you.”

By the time he got out of the car, a twig of a teenager had removed his bags from the trunk. “Mr. Keene? We’ve got to hustle, I’m afraid. Jordy will stow your bags.”

The bags went in a mint green golf cart manned by another teen. Wyatt was gestured to get into a blue one. Looked a lot like gondolas on an amusement park chair lift with the bright colors. “I can walk.”

Lab coat guy hopped into the driver’s seat. “Not as fast as this little baby can.”

“It’s a golf cart. I can probably outrun it.”

The thing started noiselessly. Had to be electric. “Ah, but you don’t know where to run, do you? And we’ve got over sixty-two acres. Hop in. I’m Mal.”

Was the size of the campus supposed to put him in awe? Because it wouldn’t work. Didn’t matter that every building

was bursting at the seams with super-smart scientists who could probably...calculate pi out to thirty digits. Wyatt had quickly learned how to make himself fit in any and everywhere. There was *always* a way to find a connection with a person. You just had to start poking.

“Are you an intern?”

“Are you an ageist?” The kid instantly looked abashed at smart-mouthing him. Nervously brushed back the cowlick of his black hair three times. “Sorry. We were warned that the artists might have a different mindset than we’re used to.”

Christ. He wasn’t an alien life-form. A different career didn’t make them incompatible on a human level.

Then Wyatt remembered he was cruising on *maybe* two hours sleep because he and Blake just couldn’t leave each other alone. Add a layer of adrenaline from driving in, yeah, thicker than comfortable fog. Dusted with a constant low-level concern about what the *hell* he was about to enter? There was a strong chance he was overreacting.

He reached for the top of the cart as they careened around a corner. Crushed oyster shells sprayed out from under their tires back onto the path. “It was only a question. You’re literally the only person I know on this entire campus. Just looking to break the ice.”

“My bad.” The kid, *no*, Mal scrunched up his entire face in a grimace that shut his eyes and almost had Wyatt grabbing for the steering wheel. “Artists intimidate me. I don’t understand them.”

Was this where Wyatt admitted he hadn’t thought of himself as an artist in fifteen years? Nah. This was where he shit or got off the pot. It was where he freaking *did* consider himself an artist—no matter how unlikely. Or how out of practice he was at it.

After all, there was nobody left alive who knew Wyatt, who knew his whole life story. Who could remind him who he was at his core. It was solely his responsibility now.

He shook off the depression of that realization by focusing

on the here and now of his new life. “How about we’re the same as anyone else? We get hungry, cranky when we’re tired, and like to start with an introduction.”

“Oh my goodness. My apologies.” Another three frantic head bobs. “I’m Dr. Mal Vundavalli. I’m on the liaison committee for the contest. I’m frazzled because stepping outside my comfort zone was primarily engineered to impress my boss. Instead, we’re almost late.”

“Not your fault. It was an act of God.”

They stopped so abruptly Wyatt had to lock his knees to stay in his seat. Mal hopped out—but still took an extra second to roll his eyes. “I’m a scientist. I can explain away any semblance of an almighty deity in five minutes.”

They were at the back of a building that required keycard entry. As his escort swiped the card from his lanyard, Wyatt said, “Figure of speech, Mal. Used by insurance agencies. It means the weather made me late. The heat’s off you.”

“Oh. Funny.” Not a soul was in the long hallway. “Would you be willing to jog?”

This—*doctor’s*—earnestness cracked him up. “Do you get an electric shock to your ’nads if we’re late?”

“I hope not. It’s just...well...there are hundreds of people in the auditorium. If you don’t walk on stage when your name is called, it’ll throw off the order of events.”

“I’m not looking to get you fired today, Mal. You’re my second friend in Swan Cove.” Wyatt started to jog. Immediately realized that his jog would leave Mal in the dust, so he slowed to a long, loping stride.

“Oh, gracious. Friends with an artist. My boss will be so impressed.” He grabbed the back collar of Wyatt’s coat. It would’ve knocked anyone else off their feet. “Leave the coat with me. You can’t sweat on stage.”

He’d barely shrugged it off before Mal held a finger to his lips, opened a fire door, and shoved him into the darkness of the wings of an auditorium. Alone.

Great. How would he know—

The microphone screeched with feedback. “Our next finalist works in pencils and acrylics. Please welcome Wyatt Keene!”

Hustling up to the black velvet curtains, he paused, found the podium, and walked on, squinting against the bright stage lights. Yup, there was a guy in a lab coat with his hand outstretched...

...and right behind him, last seen naked and curled up in bed, was...Blake?!?!?

...

Things Blake hated: being the center of attention, being away from her lab, and being surprised. So being announced by her boss *on stage* as a participant in the art contest that was the new, pivotal piece to their annual global conference set her teeth on edge.

She thought the contest to be an absurd waste of time.

Pairing each artist with a scientist would only reduce lab time. Cygnet Labs was on the cutting edge of genomic experimentation. Literally saving the world with their bioinformatics and quantitative biology that had led to a vaccine which stopped the most recent pandemic in its tracks.

The contest committee had asked for volunteers. Blake was *certain* she had not so much as responded, let alone indicated a particle of interest. Dr. Nolan Peabody, however, evidently had decided she *should* do it. And she wasn't in the habit of telling her supervisor, *nah, no thanks*.

Maybe he was right. Maybe it would give her a spotlight during the conference to bring attention to her work. Get more backers interested enough to shovel additional funds at them. If her research benefited? Blake could suck up almost anything.

Her current situation was unfortunate. Bad. Undesirable. But doable.

*However...*

Coming face-to-face, in the literal spotlight, with her never-to-be-seen-again hookup in front of all her colleagues was much, much worse.

She curled her toes inside her sneakers (because she hadn't planned on being a public spectacle when dressing this morning) to keep from gasping.

What was Wyatt doing here?

No. The evidence clearly pointed to why he was here. As a finalist in the Cygnet Summit 'Science is Art' contest. Not only *a* finalist, but the one just announced that she'd be paired with.

Blake was flabbergasted.

And furious.

Oh, she went through the motions. Shook Wyatt's hand. Posed for a side-by-side picture. Smiled—but *not* with her eyes. And endured sitting next to him for an endless ten minutes while Dr. Peabody droned on with insipidly inspirational words.

Using the sleeves of her lab coat to hide the motion, Blake surreptitiously took her pulse. From her shallow, rapid breathing and the feeling like an entire herd of butterflies was fluttering just behind her breastbone? It seemed entirely likely that, like a Victorian debutante, she might be having a cardiac event.

Except...her pulse was steady and well within standard parameters. How could that be? Well, at least she could stop worrying about vasovagal syncope.

So the moment applause filled the room and Dr. Peabody left the podium, she arrowed out of her seat.

In the wings, she paused only long enough to ensure Wyatt was right behind her. "Come with me," she ordered.

Blake knew every inch of the campus. Including where each door without a label led. It was only a few steps to the unmarked door that led down to the trap room and the pit. No orchestra today—and no surprise visitor reveal from beneath

the stage. She knew they'd be undisturbed there.

The low-ceilinged room was full of bits and pieces that evidently had no home: an oversized rocking chair, a giant gong, the twisted helix of a seven-foot-tall DNA model. Faint footsteps overhead indicated the stage hadn't entirely cleared. That was the only reason Blake modulated her voice—and her fury—to something minisculely quieter than a full yodel.

“*Why* didn't you say you were on your way to Swan Cove?”

“You didn't ask.” Wyatt shoved his hands into the pockets of his dark jeans. They were paired today with a black turtleneck sweater that clung tightly to every muscle that she now knew so intimately. “Why didn't you say where you were going?”

“I shouldn't have to justify coming home.”

Both his shoulders shrugged. “There. That. I'm changing my answer to what you said.”

The man was infuriating. Could he not tell that she was furious? And barely holding herself together? His casual response was beyond unacceptable. “You can't. You don't live here.”

“I do as of half an hour ago.”

She'd been too busy goggling in utter surprise at him to fully register his last name when he arrived. Now, though, it popped back into her brain. “Keene—you're related to Rebecca Keene?”

“She was my aunt.”

Oh. It wasn't hard at all to put a pin in her current emotional state and pivot to sympathy. Blake had liked Rebecca. Had mourned her loss along with the rest of Swan Cove. And thought it strange that no family attended the service that her own Aunt Felicia had pulled together.

“I'm very sorry. We all miss her.”

A grimace drew down his mouth. “Me, too.”

Blake hurriedly connected the dots. And what it drew was not anything she wanted to see. “So you're moving into her



house?”

“For the time being. Until I figure out what to do permanently. I’m, ah, in a state of transition. This town seems as good a place as any to hunker down.”

No. No, it wasn’t. Not for *him*. Not for her perfect, no-strings, total-stranger one-night stand. Blake ground her back teeth in frustration. And, speaking of frustration? Why did he have to look so...so...*tantalizing*?

Crossing her arms, she asked, “It’s just some weird, enormous coincidence that you final in the contest *and* move to Swan Cove?”

“Not entirely. Aunt Bec was the one who entered me in it.” Another flash of a grimace. “Without telling me.”

Damn it. That provoked another flash of sympathy, when she was trying so hard to hold onto her anger. If anyone knew the annoyance of family doing ‘what they thought was best for you’, it was her. Well, and her brother, Fitz.

The Montgomerys had single-handedly built and run Swan Cove for generations. Her parents were chock full of expectations, duties, and responsibilities all revolving around the good of the town that they’d heaped onto their children. It’d resulted in Fitz being stuck as mayor—which he evidently had hated—for two terms. And it was currently resulting in them pressuring her about not moving up the ladder fast enough at Cygnet.

“She must’ve been very proud of you to put you in the running.” Although...strangely enough...Blake didn’t recall Rebecca ever mentioning a nephew. That struck her as unusual. Why hide—in a small town where everyone knew everything about everyone—a family member you adored?

Wyatt rubbed the back of his neck. “She always believed in me. Even after I stopped believing in myself.”

That was intriguing.

For a split second, Blake flashed back to how easily they’d chatted less than twenty-four hours ago. How nice it would be to slide back into that bubble and find out the full story about

his relationship with his aunt. And what this multifaceted man doubted about himself.

In the *next* second, Blake was triggered to remember her anger. Triggered by watching his pecs flex as he cracked his neck and stretched his torso.

She wanted him. Again.

They'd had sex four times last night. It hadn't been enough.

But it had to be. Because now he was here, in her town. In her sacred space at the lab. And Blake had *not* agreed to that.

She bit her lip. It was still hard to accept that Wyatt was truly in front of her. "How did you get here? You weren't on my flight."

Leaning against a whiteboard, he said, "I didn't trust that the tower would clear that puddle jumper. I rented a car. Got here in the nick of time."

His answer was aggravatingly matter-of-fact. Wyatt *really* wasn't reading the room at all. Letting more of her ire bleed through into her voice, Blake countered with, "Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

One jet-black eyebrow arched up. "Are you serious?"

"Yes."

The intensity in his eyes matched that of the flame in a Bunsen burner. "You're telling me that right after moving on you, a total stranger, I should've led with *hey, I'm related to Bec Keene of Swan Cove, Maine. Any chance you know her?* You think I should've been that annoying person who walks up to any American in the line for the Eiffel Tower or the Coliseum and says, *oh, do you know my cousin Jeb from Kansas?*"

Okay.

Wyatt was right. She was being ridiculous.

Leading with her emotions instead of her brain. Which was not something Blake ever did. Clearly, she blamed him. But she also owed Wyatt an apology for overstepping.

“You’re right. Sorry.” A grudging apology was all she’d give him. “But you didn’t tell me that you were an artist, of all things.”

He crossed the room to her in two long strides. And *glowered*. “You’re the one who set the rule that we weren’t divulging any personal facts. You didn’t announce you were a scientist, either. How about you dial back all this righteous anger? I don’t deserve any of it. And I’m not putting up with being chewed out any longer.”

Firstly? His glower was irritatingly sexy. His body almost vibrated with the control he’d used on his own, justified temper.

Secondly, Wyatt’s factual assessment tamped down *her* anger.

Blake was mad at the situation existing. It wasn’t Wyatt’s fault any more than it was hers for working at Cygnet and being paired with him.

“You’re right again. I’m not proud of how I just flipped out on you. I regret it. Suffice it to say that I sought out a *stranger* to have sex with quite purposefully.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not about to demand a repeat performance.”

Well.

That stung.

“Good.” Not the best comeback. Not even the best comeback for a tween.

He hitched up one leg to half sit on a folding table. “I’m not stalking you. I didn’t go through your purse while you slept and follow you here. Proof being that *your* lab is the one that chose *me*. It’s awkward, but we’ll get over that hump.”

Wyatt being agreeable was making this harder. It would’ve been easier if he were still mad at her.

“No.”

Smugness dripped off the corners of his smile. “Really?

Can't get enough of me, huh? I might be willing to share one more ni—"

"No!" Blake cut him off with a near screech. And a hand wave. "No, it isn't just awkward. I wouldn't be this freaked out if I were only concerned about knowing that your belly button's an innie."

"What's your issue, then?"

That scientists fast-tracking their way to the top didn't have hot hookups. That being discussed as a *woman* would be a distraction and pull focus from all her work. In her lowest, most sincere voice, she said, "Nobody can know what happened between us."

"Would this have anything to do with the seven businesses I passed on the way in with Montgomery in their name? You're a big deal here, aren't you?"

"My family is. Not me." At least, she didn't *want* to be considered the center of attention. Working endless hours at the lab gave her a much lower profile in town than the rest of her family. "The point is, I work quite hard to avoid people gossiping about my sex life. My family—"

This time, he cut her off with a smirk. "—doesn't have sex?"

Blake *almost* smiled. Her brother would choke if he'd heard that. But she didn't want to encourage any levity from Wyatt. "This isn't a joking matter. It is about my reputation. Not just with all of Swan Cove, but here at the lab. It'd be extremely bad for my job *and* look hinky for the contest what with us being a team."

"Who would care if we somehow engineered being teamed up for this contest? It isn't like betting against yourself in the Super Bowl."

The man was clueless. "Our conference gets considerable international attention. We're the preeminent gathering of scientific minds. This attempt to fuse art and science will be watched closely around the globe."

His Adam's apple convulsed. Twice. "That's...a big deal."

She'd swear that he paled beneath his two-day stubble. "You didn't know?"

"I told you, I didn't know anything about the contest until I got notice of being a finalist."

"We'll be on the news. We'll be all over social media. This isn't a small-town, feel-good contest with a ribbon. There's a significant amount of prize money. And notoriety. This is quite an honor for you."

"I'll need to let that sink in for a minute."

They didn't have a minute. Because she had an actual job to get back to rather than wasting any more time with this artist. A job, unlike his, with the potential to change people's lives.

"I need you to promise to keep what happened in Portland last night a secret. Pretend you don't know me. Treat me as a stranger in which you have zero interest. My lab coat may as well be a chastity belt to you. Only the minimum amount of courtesy and professional interest between us. Nothing more."

"Fine. I'll keep your secret." Abruptly, he beelined for the door. Grasping the handle, Wyatt spoke over his shoulder. "I guarantee that I'm an, ah, expert at keeping my mouth shut."

That should've reassured Blake.

Calmed her.

Instead? It spiked back into her brain images of all the things he'd done to her with his mouth *open*...

## Chapter Four

Being a spy meant not always staying in five-star lodging situations. Wyatt had trained himself to get shut-eye under just about any conditions. But right now? He really hoped that his aunt's house had a king-sized bed. It had been a hell of a day already—and it wasn't even four o'clock.

Or maybe that was just how bruised he was after being verbally smacked around by Blake.

*Dr. Blake.*

It wasn't often people surprised him down to his core. Blake had done that last night, when she was so open and real.

Or so he'd thought, anyway.

Then she'd done it again today with the reveal of her PhD persona. The whole thing confused and exhausted him. He was happy to wave goodbye as Mal sped away after dropping him off.

Aunt Bec's house looked like a Swiss chalet tucked among the pines. It was a log home, with a high, peaked green roof. Cozy. And best of all? Totally unknown and not a part of personal information America's enemies now had on him. He'd be safe here.

That's what he had to believe. That there was zero need to keep looking over his shoulder, expecting the worst.

Yeah, Wyatt in no way believed that. And he'd keep looking over his damn shoulder because staying sharp kept him safe.

He dropped all three bags on the porch. A thin layer of ice crackled underfoot. The email with the address had included instructions to swing by the lawyer's office to get the key. Wyatt wasn't in the mood to bother. He had his lockpicks in his duffel. Retired for three days didn't mean he'd lost his touch.

As Wyatt bent to unzip the bag, he shifted so his hand was at the ankle sheath for the knife. Because the edge of the porch

had just creaked.

“Hi there.” A man in a green sweater/sport coat combo—but no outer coat, making Wyatt feel like a wuss—raised a hand.

Assassins weren’t big on polite salutations. Wyatt straightened, forcing himself to leave the knife strapped to his calf. “Hello.”

“I’m Everett Reynolds. You must be Rebecca’s nephew. Eli told me you were rolling into town today and to keep a lookout for you.”

People knowing his plans. Keeping an eye out for him. That...wasn’t how Wyatt rolled. A shudder *almost* rolled through him at the concept.

“Eli?”

“Your aunt’s lawyer. Well, yours now, I guess.”

“Mr. Meecham. Yeah.” He winced. “I, ah, forgot to swing by his office and get the key. I was about to look for a fake rock with a key hidden in it.”

“Those are useless up here. Couple of good snowstorms, you won’t be digging that key up for five months.” Everett brandished a key. “I’ve got you covered. Least I can do as your neighbor.”

“Thanks.” Wyatt reached for it, but the neighbor was already unlocking the door. Now how would he get it from the man without looking like a jerk? Being neighborly, sharing emergency keys was small town *de rigueur*. But knowing this total stranger *could* walk in on him—or be pressured by foreign agents to let them walk in—put his teeth on edge.

“C’mon in and I’ll show you around.” Everett poked his wire-rimmed glasses higher up his nose as he gestured inside.

Ooooookay. Wyatt didn’t need a tour guide. It was a house. Nothing palatial. He’d guess three bedrooms, tops in the two-story abode. He’d once, ah, *made his way* into the Prince’s Palace of Monaco after hours to meet with an asylum-seeker chock-full of intel in the Mazarin Room.

If he could do that, he could find the kitchen in his aunt’s

house.

“What do you do, Everett? Home pretty early on a weekday.” That was a casual, standard, get-to-know-the-neighbor question. Not at all probing or interrogatory. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Everett Reynolds didn’t need to know that Wyatt would be doing a full background check on him before the moon rose tonight.

“I’m a high school teacher.” He shrugged out of his coat and hung it on a hook by the door, clearly at home. “Well, science teacher and vice principal.”

Before he could help himself, a hoot of laughter slipped out. Pointing, Wyatt said, “You’re the bad cop.”

“That’s a stereotype.”

“Aren’t stereotypes based on facts?” He piled his luggage along the wall of the cramped foyer.

“Yes. Fine. Part—a small part—of my job is to handle disciplinary measures. But I’m more than just the bad cop. That’s why I insisted on still teaching at least two sections once I got the job. Gotta be approachable for the kids.”

Wyatt had played the part of bad cop more than a few times over his career. It was easy to stay in that role. Commendable that Everett was trying not to be pigeonholed. “Both sides of your job are hard. And thankless. But you’re literally helping to create the future.” He shook his hand. “I wouldn’t have the stomach for it. Thanks.”

“I wouldn’t have the stomach for what you do.”

*Shit.*

What had Aunt Bec told her neighbor about him?

Striving for a casualness that belied all his senses being on high alert, he leaned around to look at the high-ceilinged living room with its glass walls overlooking the forest. “Really?”

“I mean, I have to mediate between angry teens sometimes—which can suck. But you have to keep the peace—literally



—all day, every day as a diplomat. Didn't you ever want to just burst out and say what you really felt?"

Ah. Good.

She'd stuck to his official cover of a low-level, generic diplomat. Although he'd cautioned her to tell as few people as possible that she even *had* a nephew. "Oh, I wasn't high-up enough to worry about that. Lots of paper shuffling and protocol. You wouldn't find me in any background shots of the G8, for example."

"Still. I can see why you wanted a change. Swan Cove—that's sure a change from zipping around Europe."

"It's what I want." Which was the absolute truth. Wyatt hadn't been ready to leave the Agency. Nowhere close, actually. But there'd always been a...fantasy, like a low-grade fever, about settling down if he did survive to retirement. "A real home base. A place I can belong. See the same faces every day. A...less complicated pace."

Everett chuckled. "That's Swan Cove, all right. And I know how to make you feel right at home. Follow me." He took the stairs two at a time. They came out in a loft area. It had a railing overlooking the two-story expanse of the great room.

But that quick flick of an assessment was pure habit on Wyatt's part. Because he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

The walls were *covered* with his artwork. All framed. Lots of pencil sketches. Wyatt did those while surveilling. Lingering alone over three cups of coffee in a café was a lot less suspicious with a pencil in hand.

A couple of watercolors he hadn't been able to resist trying when on vacation in Provence. The oils he'd done of the iconic onion domes in Red Square.

Rows and rows and rows. Years' worth of work. Going all the way back to college, and a construction paper and marker drawing of them holding hands he'd done as a joke for her to hang on the fridge after she'd become his only living relative.

He was floored.

“I...I didn’t know she kept them. Any of them,” Wyatt murmured. It was hard to get the words out through the thickness in his throat.

“Why wouldn’t she? They’re great.”

Swinging around, he saw Everett leaning against the rail with a bemused smile. “You’ve seen them? Before today?”

“Rebecca and I played canasta up here during blizzards. She’d go on and on about her talented nephew. How proud she was of you.”

“I had no idea. To me, they were just—handmade postcards. A way of showing her where I was. So she’d know I was thinking about her.” Even when he didn’t—or couldn’t—call. A fresh wave of grief tore through him, stronger than any since the day he’d learned of her death.

Not only for her. Seeing his art displayed like this reminded him of the way his long-gone parents used to make a fuss over every sketch and scribble. This made Wyatt feel more loved—and more alone—than ever.

“Oh, she knew. You mattered to her so much. Those trips she took to visit you? They were the highlight of each year.”

“For me, too.” It would’ve been too risky to fly home and visit her, in the same spot. He refused to put a target on her like that. So Wyatt had paid for her to join him in random locations. Or exotic ones, when it was her turn to pick. Like when they’d gone to New Zealand and toured the hobbit village.

On the credenza and coffee table were framed photos of them on all those trips. He sank with a sigh onto a squishy beige couch and picked one up. Then in the ugly-ass orange jumpsuits required to climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Next to it was his graduation day. Aunt Bec had been disappointed that he’d switched from his original art major. To make her smile, he’d used glitter pens to ‘paint’ the cover to *Oh, The Places You’ll Go!* On his grad cap. She’d given him the book for his high school graduation. It’d been impossible to say if there were more tears or smiles when she saw it.

“I’m surprised that you look, well, surprised.” Everett pointed at the largest work. It was a fanciful oil depicting his parents. Sort of. He’d made their faces into constellations, looking down from the night sky on this very house. It’d seemed less awkward than drawing them as angels. “Rebecca wouldn’t have told you to enter your work in the Cygnet contest unless she thought you were a contender.”

“That’s the catch. *She* entered me. I didn’t find out about it until a few days ago.”

Laughter bellowed out of his new friend. “Oh, man. That’s fantastic.”

Wyatt was not at all as on board with the idea as Everett. Mostly because yeah, he’d dabbled in his art consistently over the years. But not at what he considered a competitive level. This was supposed to be his time to figure out who he was—and he’d already been hung next to a label proclaiming him a Serious Artist.

Sure, he’d dreamed of being an artist.

Before his world turned upside down. When his parents were still here to help him believe he was good enough to make it.

Could he do it now by himself? With no support system? Because the one thing life as a spy was guaranteed to strip from you was any and all vestiges of connection.

So it wasn’t modesty that had Wyatt questioning all this. It was freaking *fear*. Of being held up and labeled...and not coming close to living up to the expectations.

“Is it? I really wasn’t prepared for all of this. Swan Cove may be small. But right now? To me? It’s a-fucking-*lot*.”

“Tell you what. I’ll stand by the good neighbor code. Be your new-home buddy. Show you around, introduce you to people. Tell you which bar is for the cruise ship crowd, and which ones are for locals. All the good stuff.”

It was a great offer. Exactly what Wyatt needed...

...if he hadn’t had a similar circumstance foisted on him a

few hours earlier. With a certain cold-shouldered scientist.

His knee-jerk reflex, honed over fifteen years of avoiding anything resembling relationships, platonic or otherwise, said to say no.

But—

This was his fresh start. His do-over at the path not chosen. Or the path originally chosen and then veered away from when his parents died and everything changed.

Man. One thing was for sure—he wasn't a poet. It'd be nice to have a friend, though. "Do you have five minutes? I'd offer you a beer if I knew what was in the fridge."

"Rebecca always kept a six-pack of my favorite on hand. I'm good to hang for a bit. No exams to grade tonight."

"Good." Yeah. It'd feel good to unload. Hypothetically. That's what everyone said, anyway. "Because it turns out that I'm *already* paired with someone. Another thing done without my knowledge or consent. And Dr. Montgomery's about as happy as I am with the match-up."

"Blake Montgomery? She's the sister of my best friend, Fitz. Unapproachable is one way to describe her. Addicted to work. I can't see Blake volunteering to do anything with art. It's not, uh, quantitative enough for her. Too much room for interpretation." Everett settled back in the leather chair with wide wooden arms. He grinned, crossing his ankle over his knee. "This is going to be *fun*. For me, anyway."

Clearly he'd have to find Everett's weak spot sooner rather than later. Not because he couldn't let go of his spy tendencies.

No, Wyatt needed to be able to turn the tables on him. It was obvious this story would end up with Everett making fun of him for weeks to come.

In his first half day here, he'd made friends with a taxi driver, a kind of weird doctor of—well, he'd have to ask Mal to explain what he did—and a teacher. All things in the plus column.

The negative of Blake freaking out on him? Basically asking

Wyatt to disown the fact that they'd had downright amazing sex—for hours on end?

Yeah. It stung. But Wyatt had been pepper-sprayed. Numerous times. Not to mention the three stabbings and two bullet wounds. He could handle a little sting and walk away without caring.

...

Blake had a secret addiction. Well, if you counted that she bought a bag of Brach's—and *only* Brach's—harvest candy corn and ate it all herself every Halloween, then she had two. But her real addiction was to old books.

Yes, she was a scientist to the core. She'd always pick numbers and formulas over words. Sometimes, though, the bare, clinical facts didn't go far enough. In a similar vein to her love of musicals.

Sometimes, feelings were so huge that talented people had to break out into song.

Sometimes, science was so breathtaking. The discovery of it, the journey to the discovery, the reaction, the vast effect by which it could change the world. It couldn't be contained in theorems.

Blake *guzzled* old books on science. New ones, too, but her love was of the original editions. Biographies, treatises, memoirs. The branch of science didn't matter. Copernicus to Darwin. Van Leeuwenhoek to Doudna.

Especially the leather-bound editions with gilt-edged pages and patterned endpieces.

Her colleagues at the lab would mock her mercilessly if they ever found out the thrill she got out of books. Last year, a lab assistant discovered a Dan Brown thriller in Dr. Rubin's office hidden beneath a six-pack of biohazard tape rolls. The ensuing photo had been posted in the cafeteria, surrounded by laughing emojis.

Luckily, there was someone she could confide in.

Someone who understood her addiction.

The unlikeliest friend she'd ever made—well, until Wyatt. Who wasn't a friend. Who wasn't anything but a gigantic complication that Blake definitely did not need.

Blake reached up to run her fingers through the fringe hanging from the domed green awning. It apparently was only held on by Velcro, so it could come down for the harsh winters. Still, she adored how it made her feel like she was going through a curtain into a different world when she entered the bookstore.

No Dan Brown books here. Montgomery Rare and Special Manuscripts only carried, well, what the name implied. And Blake rolled her eyes at her great-great-grandfather that had named the place so pretentiously.

A dainty bell tinkled as she entered. The space, lit by reading lamps instead of overheads, had an intimate feel. Leather wing chairs blocked the middle of the long, narrow space. A sleek black cat twined around her legs in greeting.

It was exactly how she imagined a London bookshop would've looked in the mid-1800s. Perhaps frequented by Ada Lovelace, the famous mathematician who published the first algorithm.

“Hi, Blake. Come for your fix? I swear, the way your eyes light up at a science book makes me feel like a drug pusher.” Ana was the manager of the store.

She did *not* fit the bookseller mold. She was, in fact, as anachronistic as that Starbucks cup that got left in that *Game of Thrones* scene. Thick, dark waves of hair cascaded down her back.

Over the black leather jacket.

That topped red and black snakeskin leggings and many-buckled motorcycle boots.

Blake would've adored her for that alone. But the woman never pulled any punches. And always chose facts over emotional folderal.

Ana would've made a *fantastic* scientist.

She scooped up the cat. "The only thing I need from you is a treat for Ahab. He won't let me take another step."

"Please. You're falling for that? That cat has your number." Ana snatched him away. Gave him a caring scratch across the neck and then tossed him farther into the shop. "He's already begged enough treats to last a week."

In a stage whisper, Blake asked, "Are we alone?"

Her eyebrows arched up. "Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"Is this a holdup?" She pulled out the lining to show that her jacket pockets were empty. "You do realize this is the twenty-first century. Even rare book collectors mostly pay by credit card."

"Please. If I was going to burgle you, I'd obviously hack into your system." Computers weren't Blake's area of expertise, but she could think of five people at Cygnet without even trying who probably had the skills to hack into the Pentagon.

If they were bored. Or wanted to impress a date.

"Then why the need for alone-ness? Are you hitting on me?" Ana batted her long eyelashes so pointedly it should've popped her contacts right out. "Don't I deserve a free martini before you make your move?"

Usually, chatting with Ana was stress relief. They had the sort of casual, *personal* conversations that could never happen up at work-centric Cygnet. She and the bookstore were an emotional palate cleanser for Blake. This visit, however, had a purpose. Having fun was not it.

"Ana, stop. This is serious."

Crossing to the chair, she threw her leg over the arm and perched. "Book or life emergency? I'm up for either. Just need to settle myself into the right context."

"Definitely life." Blake paced the perimeter of the oval

Oriental rug with its navy background and elaborate edge patterns in white.

After watching her make a complete circuit, Ana asked, “Did you finally turn down that promotion?”

“What? Nobody’s offered me a promotion. Not yet, thank God.” Blake didn’t have the emotional bandwidth to obsess about *that* alarming inevitability. “Don’t sidetrack me. I have a genuine, immediate problem.”

“Go on.”

Blake halted by a bookshelf. Put out a hand to stroke the ridged leather spine of a book. It looked old. If a book, with its fragile and flammable pages, could survive for decades in this world, she could survive six weeks of hell, right?

Hopefully?

“My trip over the weekend was...entirely successful.” There. It glossed over the details.

“Shoes, shows, champagne, and sex? Congrats. A solid plan, well executed.” Ana tossed her a two-fingered salute. “Kudos.”

“Not exactly. I mean yes, it was. Until it wasn’t. Until I got back today.” How had she lost the ability to string together a cohesive sentence?

“You had that stupid ceremony to attend, right? The kickoff for the art contest?” Ana leaned an elbow on a knee. “Did you finally figure out why they’re bothering to hogtie art and science together? It just sounds like a horrible Frankenstein’s monster of a mashup to me.”

No wonder they were friends. This was precisely the sort of validation Blake sought. “The marketing gurus say it is the hot new spin on science: to make it *approachable*. No, I’m not at all sold. They fit together as well as the molecular gastronomy marvel that is foie gras encased in mandarin jelly to look like an orange and...a sweaty weightlifter’s glove.”

“That’s a stretch. But I can tell you’re worked up, so I’ll just nod and let it pass.”



“It doesn’t matter what I think. I’m toeing the company line on this one.” She steepled her hands over her mouth, taking a steadying breath. Hearing it for the first time under the dizzying heat of the spotlight hadn’t felt entirely real. Saying it out loud, however, would make the hideous truth even *more* true. “Because Dr. Peabody blindsided me on stage with the news that I’m paired with an artist.”

Ana only managed to half swallow her laugh. At least she’d tried. “That’s hilarious. You think the whole idea is a train wreck, and they’re making you participate?”

“It gets worse. The artist is my weekend fling.”

Ana slid sideways into the chair. Her leg got wedged beneath her at an angle that looked anatomically impossible. And her jaw *dropped*. The quiet built in the room, broken only by the scrape of Ahab’s claws over the carpeted post in the corner.

“That is...wow. So many things. Highly unlikely. Ironic. Uncomfortable.”

“The word you’re looking for is ‘horrific.’” Blake sank into the opposite chair. Slid low onto her tailbone and let her limbs just splay. As though she’d been hit with a meteor. Which wasn’t far from the truth, emotionally.

It’d been good to get it off her chest. Now she was ready to receive an outpouring of sympathy.

“What’s his name?”

Talk about getting sidetracked? “How is that pertinent to my problem?”

Ana shrugged. The many zippers on her jacket tinkled. “Do you want me to call him Fling Man? Sex Guy? Orgasm One-off?”

“Stop. Eww.” Blake rolled her lips tightly as memories flashed through her brain. She resented Wyatt being back in her life. She could not, however, let his bedroom talent be maligned as merely average. “For the record, there were *several* more orgasms than just the one.”

Giving a high, polite clap, Ana said, “Like I said, a success.”

“We won’t speak of that again. His name is Wyatt.”

“So Wyatt the Wonder Penis—” Ana broke off as the ice of Blake’s glare hit her full force. “What? We’re alone. I can’t have fun with this?”

“No. You can’t. Like I said, this is a serious problem.”

“I get that it was a shock. And potentially awkward. But a full-fledged serious problem?” Ana shook her head. “Nope.”

Blake elbowed her way back upright. Did her friend not comprehend her role in the conversation? The job description of a girl friend in a time of need? “I came here for sympathy,” she said slowly, overenunciating to be certain of clarity. “To have my righteous outrage shared and validated.”

“Oh, I share. I validate.” Ana slapped a palm to her chest. “I even sympathize. But I still don’t call it a serious problem.”

“I’ll have to spend the next six weeks with the man basically attached to my hip. So that he can get flashes of inspiration from my lab work—no matter how improbable. We’ll be together all the time. Every day.” Blake narrowed her eyes. “I can’t *possibly* spend time with my *fling*.”

“It isn’t optimal, but it won’t kill you.”

“It is awkward as fuck,” she said succinctly. “And I was promised—we promised each other—no strings attached when we agreed to...do the thing. Now it’s messy.”

“For like a day, maybe. Suck it up.”

Any and every other time, Blake appreciated Ana’s bluntness. Not today, though. She’d come for some TLC. How was Ana not picking up on that? “You don’t understand. My colleagues can’t find out and think of me as...”

“Human?” Ana asked. She doubled down on the sarcasm with a ubiquitous eye roll. “I’m going to let you in on a secret. You’ve got a reputation around town. As an ice princess. Ever since you broke up with Rob. As a Type A workaholic, to the exclusion of everything else in life. It isn’t good for you to be seen as a caricature.”

Hard disagree. In scientific circles, that single-mindedness branded her as a serious contender for accolades, publication, and promotion. “I don’t mind being called a workaholic. I take it as a compliment. Especially from my colleagues.”

“You’re choosing to ignore my point.”

“You’re doing the same thing!” Blake let her head flop back, and her arms fall out to the sides. “If this gets out, I’ll be a laughingstock. Utterly humiliated. Every time I’d go on a trip, they’d assume it was a cover-up for another hookup. That’s a caricature I can *not* live with.”

“I’m surprised at you. You’re not a drama queen, like my friend Megan. This”—she circled her arm at Blake’s limp posture—“is a massive overreaction.”

“That’s subjective. And not at all helpful.”

“Hmm. Could that be because you don’t *need* help?”

Ana was a feminist. And she wore a shell of insouciance like armor. Blake realized that her friend wasn’t being purposefully obtuse or insensitive. She’d need to break it down for her.

“Science is still very much a man’s world. So no, I do not need anyone at Cygnet Labs picturing me as a three-dimensional human who enjoys sex. It’s unfortunate, but true—that could end up being a detriment to my work. I need to be seen only through the lens of the research I produce.”

Ana’s eyes closed for a few seconds as she absorbed that. “I’m sorry. Rob really did a number on you. Making you think your work made you a lesser girlfriend.”

Since he’d cheated on her to find a woman who evidently paid him enough attention, perhaps he’d been right. A good relationship required a certain level of attentiveness. Blake simply couldn’t split her focus like that at this point in her career.

“Of course, someday, I’ll find a partner. Get married. After I’ve secured a more tenured position. When I’m safe enough, strong enough in my authority that it won’t matter what others think of me.”

“I’m not saying you should marry Fling Man, for God’s sake. And I agree, now, that you should keep what already happened on the DL. But there’s no reason you can’t have a few more...intimate exchanges, secretly, while you’re stuck together. Make the best of a bad situation.”

Taking the easy way out wasn’t ever an option for Blake. The Montgomery name stood for excellence. Not shortcuts. “Absolutely not. The risk of being discovered is too great.”

“Even for a man capable of multiple orgasms in one night? That doesn’t come along very often. You’re basically looking a gift horse in the mouth right now. Plus, sneaking around’s *hot*.”

That part was true—if the consequence of discovery weren’t the tanking of her entire career. Not to mention that she didn’t even like him. She *liked* the mysterious stranger in the airport.

Would she have still liked him if she’d known he was an artist? Or known...anything about him? “We made a game of not sharing any personal information, which is what led to today’s disaster. I know nothing real about Wyatt.”

“Ugh. That could be bad. He could...drink celery juice. Chew tobacco. Enjoy curling.”

If only those were Wyatt’s most objectionable traits. “The only thing I know for sure about him is that he’s an artist.” Blake crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue. Juvenile? Yes. Satisfying? Very. “That makes him the worst possible match for me. There’s no middle ground between art and science. We couldn’t be more wrong for each other. I’m sure we’ll drive each other crazy in a matter of hours.”

“Yikes. Then I guess you get what you came for. I have no words of advice. Only massive sympathy.” She uncurled from the chair, giving a quick stroke to Blake’s arm as she strode past. “And a bottle of honey whiskey I keep for emergencies behind the Poe. You’re right. This *is* an emergency.”

# Chapter Five

After being stationed in Europe for so long, Wyatt had gotten used to tiny cars. To being scrunched up with his knees at his ears and his head brushing the roof. So today was a good day. A great day. Because he was in his aunt's vehicle. One that left no chance of getting stuck in Maine's massive snowdrifts.

He was in the biggest car he'd ever driven. Literally. It welcomed him back to America with all its gas-guzzling, giant tires, heated seats glory. Plus a sun roof he'd opened despite the frigid temperature simply because he could.

Music blared from the speakers. He had a travel mug of coffee that was more than decent. He'd slept for almost ten hours. It was a new day. Wyatt was hoping for a new perspective, too, on this clusterfuck of a situation with Blake.

Yesterday had been a transition. Today was, officially, the first full day of his new life. It was going to be great.

His Bluetooth engaged. And the console didn't display a number. Or a name. Just the very, very stupid title of *Exiteer*.

Christ.

There went his good day.

When agents left, it was expected that their reentry to so-called normal life would be bumpy, at best. A complete shit show, at worst. It was why so many fell back into jobs as contractors. Mercenaries. Spies-for-hire, not for the government to help keep the world safe, but for corporations. Mostly to keep their bankrolls safe. It was the lifestyle they knew.

It was all Wyatt had out there as an option. If being an artist didn't work out. But to him, that option felt like a half-assed, pale version of his job. It wouldn't satisfy him. Putting his life on the line to keep America secure was worthwhile. Doing it for money? Felt decidedly unworthy.

People thought that a job where you risked death or torture on a weekly basis was scary. Nah. That carried a known set of

expectations. Training made it second nature.

What he was lacking was training in being an ordinary guy. Sure, his life had been the same as everyone else's up until that fateful day in 2001. But to Wyatt? That was someone else's life. Not even a memory. More like a film he'd blearily watched on a long flight.

So this was his case manager calling. With the spiffy, perky, Disney-esque title of *Exiteer* so anyone in regular life wouldn't catch wind of who he really was.

After a slurp of coffee, he answered. "Hey, Craig."

"You're not supposed to use my name. You know that, Wyatt. Do you really want to start this process off on the wrong foot?" The scratch of irritation in Craig's voice was almost visible.

"I don't want any part of this process. Feels like you're my parole officer. Except I didn't do anything wrong. You people are the ones who forced an exit."

"We find that long-term field agents don't do well in mandated desk duty, historically. Unhappy agents get sloppy. They make mistakes. 74 percent dabble in depression."

"I can assure you I don't dabble. In anything." And talk about an understatement. Wyatt knew it was a euphemism for suicide. He knew some of the faces of those who felt so useless that they gave up.

"But if you've changed your mind, you can come back. Anytime. We wouldn't let all your experience go to waste."

It had been less than a week since they'd offered him a choice between a substantial severance package or spending the rest of his career parked at HQ. Wyatt's answer would've been different six months earlier. When he hadn't known he was about to be all alone in the world. But he'd felt the loss of his aunt deeply.

Wyatt was truly alone now. A ghost, drifting through the world. No family left. Nobody to share *his* stories. To share *his* dreams. Nobody left who truly knew him.

Including himself.

If he had to do a U-turn with his career? He wanted to go big. To take a swing at what he'd originally planned before those Twin Towers and his whole life crumbled. To try and be happy.

Would it work? Wyatt put his chances at 50 percent, at best.

Especially if his damn *Exiteer* was already trying to soft-sell him on a return.

“This sounds suspiciously like you’re wooing me back? What the hell, Craig? Are you calling to check on me? Or to pick my brain about something we can’t even discuss over this unsecured line?”

“I am merely checking on you. Did your travel up to BFE Maine go okay?”

He'd dropped it fast. But Wyatt wasn't fooled. Something was going on.

The GPS told him to turn up ahead, where he saw a low-slung brick building with lots of playground equipment and a half-sized baseball field. Must be the elementary—

Then it hit him.

Shit. Craig was testing him. To see if he'd *actually* psychologically embraced leaving the agency behind.

Like he'd give them any real glimpse into his brain.

He was done with their mandated psych evals. He was free of all that now, as an *ex-spy*. Not by choice, for damn sure. Some fellow agent had sold them all out. All the psych evals and checkups hadn't targeted *that* dirtbag as a danger for turning. *That* was where the Agency had let Wyatt down, with all its precautions in place that did jack shit to protect him from being burned.

So he wouldn't put up with any of its useless veiled probing now.

Tersely, Wyatt spit out, “Trip was fine. New place is fine. Already made some friends. No trouble.”

“Good to hear. And there’s, ah, no trouble on this side, either. No chatter about anyone on that list that got sold, including you. No indication anyone knows or cares you’re back in the States, either.”

A little tension eased from his shoulders. Or maybe it was just the heated seats doing their thing. “Maybe that list never made it to the intended buyer.”

That’d be a best case scenario. It’d remove the almost certain death that came with having your cover blown. The only silver lining of the shit show that had been the rushed extrication and end to life as he knew it.

Kind of like the first time his life changed on a dime.

After less than a week, though? Wyatt wasn’t making any assumptions about his safety.

Craig made a low, throaty rumble that made it clear he wasn’t on board with assuming the best, either. “More likely someone’s done a thorough vetting and realized that we wouldn’t leave burned agents in the field.”

He paused at a stop sign. Across the road was the blocky silver sign identifying the entrance to Cygnet Labs. A woman walking a dog the size of a shoe waved at him. Wyatt waved back. And wondered if he should report that completely *normal* interaction to Craig...

“Well, I for one, feel damn good about knowing I was a small part of wasting a large amount of cash belonging to a terrorist. I hope it keeps him up at night that he doesn’t get to do anything with that list of names.”

There was a lot of throat-clearing on the other end of the line. Broadway-level *I’m changing the subject now* throat-clearing. “Speaking of names, yours did come up in one alert. In the press release for an art contest? What is that about?”

Did he not read the press release? “Feel free to offer your congrats any time, Craig.”

“You haven’t won yet. And frankly, the idea of it concerns me. ‘Artist’,” and hell if Wyatt couldn’t *hear* the air quotes the guy put around the word, “isn’t an obvious choice for an ex-



agent. It isn't...reliable. It isn't normal."

"Worried I'm going to cut off my ear?" He parked and turned the car to idle. Took another swig of coffee. Wondered how soon he could hang up without being labeled as unable to communicate.

"Don't be glib. I'm worried your transition will fail. Worrying about these things is literally my job. Which I take seriously. I wish you would, too, Wyatt. Just want a good, healthy trajectory for you."

Wyatt's high school counselors tried to insist that fine art wasn't a stable career path. But taking the easy way out wasn't his M.O. "I don't recall seeing anything in the paperwork that said you get a vote on where I live or what I do. Pretty sure there's a wordy document in the National Archives from, oh, 1787 that guarantees me free will, as a citizen."

"It is my job to help you make informed decisions that will help you integrate into society in an optimal manner."

Oh, great. They were into the repetition portion of the lecture. Like he wasn't smart enough to catch it the first time? "No, thanks. I've got this."

Maybe.

But he sure as hell wouldn't let somebody else pick his life. Especially not someone still employed by the agency. *Aka* still putting the agency's priorities first. Not what might actually be best for Wyatt.

"It is understandable that you don't trust me. That you think I'm ticking off boxes on a checklist to decide whether you're a loose cannon and a danger to the agency."

"You nailed it. It's like you set up a camp stool on top of my brain."

If he lost points for sarcasm? Well, Wyatt would be dragged back to the agency by the end of their second conversation. Sarcasm was one personality trait he he'd kept from his old life. No amount of training and reminders that it didn't go over well with people who spoke English as a second or third language, and thus could jeopardize a mission, had given him

any reason to give it up.

“Wyatt.”

“Craig,” he echoed mockingly.

“I don’t believe you’re serious about this artist thing.”

“Then you clearly haven’t done your homework.” Wyatt had been annoyed for this whole commute. Now? He’d ramped up to *pissed*. “How about you flip to the front of my file? All the way back to the art contests I won in high school. The fact that art was my original major in college. I didn’t pick this profession with a dart throw after seven shots of Polish vodka.”

“I know.” Craig’s voice turned soothing. He was being fucking *handled*. There were few things Wyatt hated more. “I’m sure the idea excited you. There must be an inherent comfort, as well, in reliving your younger years.”

Comfortable? What an insult.

Creating art was never comfortable. It challenged you. Stretched you. Scared you. It was a roller coaster. Wyatt was terrified.

Craig continued after Wyatt was silent. “My guess is that you’re playing a character again. Pretending to be an artist. You’ve got to stop doing that. It’s time to commit to being yourself.”

Wyatt white-knuckled the steering wheel. It seemed smarter than giving in to impulse and punching the dashboard. “I’m doing exactly that. And I don’t care if you believe it or not. What matters is if *I* believe I’m an artist. Which I do.” For now, anyway. Mostly. “I have to go or I’ll be late. Which would make a bad impression on my partner. You wouldn’t want that. It wouldn’t be...in *character*.”

Jackass.

He disconnected the call.

Now he’d have to find some way to turn the day back around. And hanging out with the woman who wanted to pretend he didn’t exist wouldn’t make it easy.

It would, in fact, be easier to set up the timers on blocks of C4 and blast open a prison door with both wrists in handcuffs.

You know, for instance...

...

Blake looked at her microscope. Usually it made her as relaxed as a bubble bath with a glass of viognier.

Not today.

Today? She was overwhelmingly distracted by the man a few feet to her right. In front of the giant sketch pad set up on an easel.

How was she supposed to get any work done with him... *thinking* so loudly next to her?

With him looking so...big and masculine and rugged in that charcoal heathered Henley that clung to his chest and shoulders?

Wyatt Keene was not a presence that could be ignored.

No matter how hard she tried.

Her talk with Ana yesterday hadn't helped. Hadn't given her any easy fix for the situation. The plan still remained to pretend that nothing had happened between them. And to avoid engaging with him.

Except for the whole *the scientist and the artist must share space* rule. They were supposed to be inspiring each other. Ha! As if anything he drew would make a difference to her trying to isolate a genomic marker that could be manipulated to resist cancer cells.

Blake resented his intrusion. Resented that Dr. Peabody had saddled her with this for six endless weeks. Resented that he would slow down her potentially life-changing research.

She resented that she couldn't stop sneaking glances at him. At the dramatic slash of his dark brows. At the tuft of hair revealed by the vee of his collar. At remembering how that chest hair had felt rubbing against her own skin...

It was only Tuesday, and this was already the worst week ever.

Which reminded her of the further indignities and distractions he would foist on her for the rest of the week. “Ah, are you interruptable?”

“Depends. Are you about to offer me a snack? I’m on board for that.” He dropped his pencil and turned the full force of those intense green eyes on her. “If you’re going to rail at me again for daring to live my life and accidentally sleep with you before invading your lab? Yeah, I don’t have time for that.”

Somewhere around dawn, Blake had—grudgingly—acknowledged that Wyatt hadn’t masterminded this whole thing. That he hadn’t deliberately held back his personal information solely to put her in an awkward situation when they met officially here at Cygnet. And that she’d probably been a raging bitch to him yesterday.

Even if people—many people, according to Ana—saw her as cold and unfeeling? Well, for one, it wasn’t true, and secondly, she knew that basic courtesy kept the world running smoothly.

She had to fix this. Now.

“I’m sorry. *Again*. I took out my frustration on you. I was mad at being blindsided, not at *you*. I mean, I was mad at you, but I shouldn’t have been. I apologize for misplacing my anger and using you as a verbal punching bag.”

His eyes narrowed. “Did your boss tell you to apologize to me?”

“What? No. Nobody knows about us.” Well. She couldn’t compound biting his head off with a lie. “Almost nobody,” she amended in a low voice.

Wyatt swiveled the rest of the way to fully face her. Hooked his heels over the rung of the stool and crossed his arms. “There’s a lot to unpack here. That’s a genuine apology? Not guilted out of you by anyone?”

“Correct.” There were days when being an adult rankled. This was definitely one of them.

“Then thank you. However”—he raised one eyebrow so effectively it made him look like a Disney villain—“it was only half an apology. You still insist on pretending we’ve never met? Like you’re ashamed of the night we spent?”

Oh. *Oh*. Blake hadn’t even thought of it from that perspective. That was incredibly insulting. No wonder he’d been so terse all day. “Yes and no.”

She got up and closed the office door she’d left open for hours in the hopes that someone, anyone, would wander in and relieve some of the suffocating tension in the room. Then Blake stayed by the door, because it seemed wise to keep as much distance from him as possible.

“We’re going to talk about this only once. It appears I’ve doubly wronged you. I’m in no way ashamed about having sex with you.”

He held up a finger. Then, one by one, added three more. “Multiple times.”

“Indeed.” Men and their egos. But Wyatt had more than earned a compliment. As a scientist, Blake couldn’t refute a solid fact. “You were masterful. I enjoyed myself tremendously. You snuck out before I could thank you. So, no regrets, no shame. I’m sorry if I led you to believe otherwise.”

Whew. Apologetic and courteous. That earned her a trip past the bakery on the way home for a slice of chocolate mousse cake.

“But you’re still treating me like I’m a virus you’d prefer to lock up in that deep freeze down the hall.”

Darn it. Apparently Wyatt wouldn’t let her off the hook. Things were so much simpler when they’d agreed to not share anything personal.

“It isn’t conducive to my standing here at the lab to be seen as a person who has flings. My reputation as a dedicated scientist must be above reproach.”

Wyatt laughed. “There are, what, fifteen hundred employees on this campus? You think none of them have sex?”

If she'd made that statement to a woman, there wouldn't have been a peep of laughter. "The truly determined ones don't broadcast it. Right or wrong, as a woman, I have to work three times as hard to be taken half as seriously. The scientific community is rife with stories about a woman's personal life interfering with her advancement. It happened to my mentor. I'm supposed to be on a certain track here."

"Supposed to be?"

Why was he so pugnacious? And how was he so good at catching every nuance in a sentence—even the unintended ones? "Yes. There are expectations for me. As a member of the leading family in Swan Cove."

"Interesting that you aren't saying they're *your* hopes and dreams."

Annoying man.

This wasn't a therapy session. She didn't owe him chapter and verse on how both her family *and* her supervisors were pressuring her. "And, as I said previously, it could look as if we'd been colluding. That could taint the entire contest."

He prowled around her workspace. It made Blake twitchy at the possibility he might touch something. "Were the other scientists allowed to pick their artists?"

"No. Obviously I did not, either. But the optics would be hinky."

"Mmm. Nothing more nefarious than hinky optics." Wyatt stroked his chin. "Just how cutthroat is this place?"

"Very. You wouldn't understand."

"Why not?" He gave her desk sign a flick. "I may not have three letters after my name, but I do have a college degree. Keep up with the news. I'm not uninformed."

Blake hustled over to move her nameplate back a centimeter to its original spot. He was so big and...disruptive. "You're an artist."

"So?"

Was he trying to pick another fight? “Your chosen profession, as a whole, doesn’t relate to the concept of responsibility and maneuvering for recognition. Your work is motivated by mythical muses and whims.”

The glower he shot at her warned that Wyatt did, indeed, plan to dig in his heels and argue. “You’re the one painting with a broad brush here, doc. Ever think that might be an over-generalization? Or a stereotype?”

In other circumstances, Blake would’ve conceded his point. To smooth things over. But 1) she wasn’t ready to concede to him again, and 2) she had *proof*.

She crossed to his easel. Picked up his utterly blank page and flapped it. If he could touch her things, she could touch his.

“You’ve been here for six hours. You’ve produced *nothing*.”

“Just because it isn’t on paper doesn’t mean ideas haven’t been circling in here.” He tapped his temple. “Also? My lack of output is your fault.”

The nerve of this man! “How?”

“We’re supposed to be a team for this contest, remember? Your job is to inspire me with scientific details. But you’ve spent the day focused on your work. Not helping me.”

That was...*precisely* the worst possible button for Wyatt to have pushed. A very sore spot left over from Rob accusing her of choosing her work over him.

Blake ground her teeth together. She would not yell. It might be overheard by someone walking down the hall. Word would spread that the conditions in her lab were volatile. Volatility could lead to sloppy science.

“I get a paycheck from Cygnet for producing scientific results. That is my priority.”

“The way it was explained to me?” Wyatt closed the distance between them. Reaching behind her, he gave a soft tug to her low ponytail. “Your paycheck for the next six weeks is also dependent on sharing with me all the things in that big

brain of yours.”

“My brain has zero information on how to inspire you. On how to be your ‘muse,’” she said mockingly.

“I’ve got an idea.” Wyatt tugged her hair again. Slowly, this time, more of an adjustment to the angle of her head.

Then he covered her cheek with his big, warm palm. And *then* he kissed her.

Blake already knew he excelled at kissing. She had a solid seven hours of irrefutable data from their previous encounter.

This time felt different, though. Maybe because of the strangeness of making out in her workplace. Maybe because the filter of anonymity was gone.

It felt better. More...incendiary.

His lips moved over hers with a familiarity. Wyatt was aware of exactly what made her whimper. What made her moan. How sensitive the inside of her bottom lip was, and so he made sure to stroke over it repeatedly.

The heat of his palm might as well have been an electric blanket on her cheek. It was nothing, however, compared to how his mouth *scorched* her. The way his tongue was thrusting and swooping kicked up her pulse rate. Those firm lips fired a river of heat that shot straight down to Blake’s core.

Her hips canted forward—to discover his were doing the same. They’d both unconsciously moved into an intimate embrace. At least, she’d swear to her dying day that *her* movement had been unconscious. The way her calf twined around his. How her hand splayed across the marvelous mountain of his pecs.

How gratifying it was to feel the jackhammer of *his* heartbeat beneath her fingers...

Wyatt’s other hand curved around her breast.

Blake’s breath caught in her throat. So much easier to dispel it on a low moan. One that he echoed as he nuzzled along the side of her throat, nipping and licking. Then the only sound in the room was that of their mutual panting.



And the stiff rustle of her lab coat as he kneaded her breast.

And the clink of the button on his jeans against her belt buckle.

And the rasp of his late afternoon scruff along her jaw.

Wyatt picked her up—with one arm!—and set her on her desk. Her nameplate clattered as it fell to the floor.

It didn't matter, this time, that he'd touched it.

But the noise did make him pull back.

Blake didn't know what to say. What to think. She should be mad at him, for making such a blatant move in her office.

Hang on...

It wasn't *fair* to be mad at him, though, when she'd responded unconditionally. When she hadn't even considered asking him to stop.

When she'd been a willing and enthusiastic participant.

When it was obvious that bickering with him had turned her on. Tremendously.

The anger burbling up at, well, being caught unawares and out of control, was hypocritical.

And then she opened her eyes. Wyatt's face was a locked-down mask. No expression. No lingering openness to his mouth.

Except for his eyes. Which burned with the green fire of the aurora borealis.

"Are you inspired now?" Blake asked. Not in a flirty way. Not coyly. Nope, she was cool and professionally courteous. Simply an inquiry to the man who shared her space.

He stepped back. Untucked his shirt so it covered the obvious erection. "I'm inspired to go home and get in a cold shower. See you tomorrow, doc."

Very belatedly, Blake remembered why she'd originally interrupted him and set this whole weirdness in motion. "I'm required to take you on a tour of the town. I'll text you a spot

to meet.”

“Fine.”

Wyatt didn't leave *actual* skid marks on the linoleum with the speed he departed the room. But if this had been a cartoon, they would've been there. Along with a *whoosh* of everything in her office getting caught in the draft.

Good.

It was best that he'd left.

Better than staying and talking about what had just happened.

*Far* better than staying and them following their lust to its inevitable conclusion.

Blake honestly didn't think she'd ever been so confused. Including that horrible semester she'd spent trying to understand string theory.

This interlude had underlined one key point: she wanted Wyatt. She'd never stopped wanting him.

She did not, however, *want* to want him.

Why didn't that count for more?

# Chapter Six

“Dr. Montgomery, would you step into my office, please?”

A shiver of warning straightened Blake’s spine. Her brain kicked into analysis mode.

The casual, feels-like-a-requested-chat drop-in. Anyone who knew even a smidgen about office politics knew to fear this scenario almost as much as a meeting invite from HR. It was invariably a way to deliver a low-key yet pointed rebuke.

She had no idea why Dr. Peabody would be peeved with her.

Maybe he was going to apologize for blindsiding her with the whole artist pair-up thing. Two days too late, but she’d still be gracious about it.

Adjusting her ponytail as if that had been the reason she’d paused, rather than a frantic skim through a mental flipbook of what could be wrong, she entered with a calm semi-smile.

“Good morning.”

“Not so much. We’re down a microplate spectrophotometer.” With a scowl as dark as the North Atlantic, he continued. “Dr. Stamings. He tripped. Well, he fell over.”

“Is he all right?”

“He was attempting to hop on one foot while patting his head and rubbing his tummy, so clearly no, he’s not all right. He’s lost his mind. And my \$15,000 spectrophotometer.”

“Why would he—”

“His artist asked him to prove it was possible.”

Any further inquiry into the state of, say, Stamings’s ankles or knees would be better farmed out to the department’s assistant.

Dr. Peabody, unlike her original mentor Dr. Hauser, was *not* a people person. If Stamings was wrapped in plaster from toe to wrist, Dr. Peabody still wouldn’t include it in the story.

Unless it was tied to 1) exposure for Cygnet or 2) money for Cygnet.

“That’s unfortunate,” was all Blake said.

“Yes, well, I need you to take it as a cautionary tale.” He shook a stylus at her.

The warning was unnecessary. The events of yesterday were an aberration. Blake did *science* in her lab. Not games, not circus tricks. “I’m not a pogo stick, Dr. Peabody. I have no intention of recreating that experiment.”

“The point is that Stamings was playing around. Not affording his pairing sufficient gravitas. This isn’t just a publicity stunt. You must remember at all times that you’re representing Cygnet.”

Uh, Dr. *Stamings* was the one who screwed up. Why was she the one getting the lecture? Also? It absolutely was a publicity stunt.

Blake stuffed her hands into the pockets of her lab coat. “I’m well aware.”

“The point is for it to be a team effort. That partnership is what you need to take seriously. Innovation is what keeps the money coming in the door.”

She’d been about to use this opportunity to ask to be swapped out for a different scientist. But once Dr. Peabody target-locked on the money? It was impossible to shift his focus. Nowadays, the only way science made leaps forward was with vast amounts of funding. Every scientist knew their secondary job was to drop everything and make nice to donors when called upon.

Not to mention that he liked to show her off as the daughter of the town scion at every opportunity...

“It can’t be disputed that your idea for this contest *is* innovative,” she said with solemn deference.

It had been highlighted in grad school that ass-kissing was an important stepping stone on the road to advancement. Her former mentor had also driven that home—but with negative

reinforcement. Telling Blake stories of times she wished she'd just gone along and not caused ripples.

As a Montgomery, it had been instilled in Blake since childhood to give the impression of making nice with everyone. Any actual disagreement was to be handled behind closed doors. That was a big part of what made Swan Cove appear so idyllic.

What did that all add up to? Blake spending her entire life pretending to say and think things she didn't believe. Pretending to be a person she really wasn't.

It. Was. Exhausting.

She *wanted* to spend her time head down in her lab. *Not* going to committee meetings. *Not* doing extracurricular projects like this contest.

"A lot is on the line for you, if you cooperate. If you spend more time with your artist." Dr. Peabody leaned his knuckles on the desk to rise. "Mr. Keene left before you last night."

She was—they were—being watched?!?! That was so very not okay. "Nobody stipulated that we were to arrive and depart together. It was distracting, getting him fully settled. I stayed late to remain on schedule with my experiments."

"He left before you, and he's not with you now. That raises eyebrows. Makes us wonder if your pairing works. If he'll be able to make great art inspired by your science."

The quality of the art Wyatt would produce from yesterday's 'inspiration' session probably fell under the label NSFW.

"He's not here yet because we're meeting in town. For the mandated scientist/artist tour of Swan Cove. I came in early to accomplish a few things before having to take this, ah, pause."

"Oh. Well." Dr. Peabody cleared his throat, all bluster and quivering jowls. "Didn't expect you to have that done before the end of the week. Glad you're checking it off early. It'll make him feel comfortable here. Be a bonding experience for you two."

"I'm sure you're right."

Blake was sure of quite the opposite. The last thing she needed was to get any more ‘bonded’ with Wyatt Keene.

The only good thing about being forced to leave the lab for half a day? She and Wyatt would be in public. In the cold. Ergo, no chance of a repeat kiss.

No chance of the confusion of even a possibility of one.

“There’s a buzz around you, Dr. Montgomery. We expect you to be promoted out of the lab soon into a full-time leadership role.”

“Soon?” she echoed weakly. Wow, it did suddenly feel like she was being punished.

The advancement track she was on *should’ve* given Blake at least another year or two splitting time between supervising and actual research. ‘Soon’ sounded like far less than that. ‘Soon’ was the death knell to finishing her research.

“*If* you do well with handling the conference and the contest. Keep that in mind. Glad we talked.” Peabody’s return to staring at his tablet was a clear dismissal.

So...Blake had to inspire Wyatt, *and* make nice with the donors interested in the contest...*and* complete her research in an indeterminate amount of time before she’d be forced to abandon it altogether for a prestigious promotion.

*Not* accomplishing all of those things would simply not be acceptable to Peabody. Or her parents, once they got wind of her sped-up timeline. And while Cygnet wasn’t technically part of the Montgomery empire? She didn’t have a doubt in her mind they’d find out somehow.

It would necessitate a massive rearranging of her to-do list.

Number one would now be making sure there were no more, ah, intimate incursions with Wyatt. He was the wild card she could not control and did not need. Blake needed to walk the narrow tightrope between professionally friendly and physically standoffish.

The horse was already out of the barn on that one. Made it a hard sell for Wyatt to believe that she didn’t want him.

*Couldn't want him...*

Maybe he'd meet a pretty Swan Cove resident on their tour who could be his actual muse.

Why didn't that feel right to her?

...

Mindful of Ana's description of her as an ice princess, Blake made sure to give an extra-warm wave goodbye as they exited the confectionary shop. Even though being friendly to the person who supplied her with maple pecan fudge was a no-brainer.

Wyatt stayed planted, eyeing her until the muted tinkle of the bell indicated the door had shut. "Do you know *everyone* in this town?"

Here it came. The classic shocked take at life in a small town. "More or less."

"How is that possible?"

Everyone had esoteric stores of knowledge. Wyatt probably knew all the Pantone colors by number and name. Whereas when Blake had been confronted with no less than twenty-seven swatches of purportedly different shades of white to paint her apartment? She'd plugged all the numbers into a computer randomizer and let it pick for her. Sooo much simpler.

She broke off a piece of fudge. "Most of us who grew up here know all the other Swan Cove natives. The laboratory crowd isn't as universally known, but since I work there, I know all of them, too."

"Does your family own this entire town? Like wealthy, baronial land owners?" Wyatt craned his neck around. "Is there a flag with your crest flying somewhere?"

"We started out that way. Rolled the dice on our chances in America just like everyone else back in the day who disagreed with the king."

“So...no title?”

Blake popped in her bite. Relished it. It wasn't nearly as difficult to resist the urge to kiss Wyatt when she had melting sugar in her mouth. “Just ‘Doctor.’”

“Seriously. Swan Cove businesses appear to be practically incestuous. I don't need to file for a peek at the incorporation papers at City Hall to figure out that everything with MI in front of it also is a Montgomery business.”

“Montgomery Industries. And we don't own them all. What we don't own, we may have helped with start-up funds—whether this year or three generations ago. It's our duty, our very great privilege, to help Swan Cove.”

“Is that in the fine print on your birth certificate?”

“Tattoo.” She lifted her left wrist as if to flash him with it.

“Nice try.” Wyatt smirked. “You forget, I performed a search for tattoos on your body. A thorough one. Inch by inch.”

His voice had turned warm and oozy. Like he was drizzling maple syrup over her with each word. Blake worked hard to suppress a shiver. “We are not discussing that. Very much so not in public, and also, generally, not at all.”

“You started it.”

Indeed, she had. Just...not on purpose. Simply because it was so *easy* to banter with Wyatt.

Damn it.

“Finish your fudge. The next place we're going doesn't allow chocolate inside.”

“What sort of hellscape are you running in this town?”

“A dog-grooming establishment. Chocolate makes them sick, you know.” Blake was thrilled she'd remembered her promise to stop in and visit with Randall. It crossed an errand off her list *and* provided an additional buffer against being alone with Wyatt.

Because, while she did literally know everyone in town,



walking around with him felt surprisingly intimate. They stopped and chatted at each store, bar, and restaurant. Newly aware that they were being watched? It made Blake deliberately introduce Wyatt to anyone who crossed their path.

And yet they'd fallen into a comfortable conversational flow. Just like at the airport. No bickering. No idiotic discussion of her being his muse. Simply acquaintances strolling the streets.

They could be starring in a Hallmark movie, it was so wholesome. Blake had no doubt they were putting on a good show for...whomever.

But she expected them to run out of conversation any second. Artist. Scientist. They had zero in common. Was that a wholly superficial, simplistic judgment? Oh, yes.

Was it based in fear of what they'd do if they *did* run out of conversation?

Oh, yes. They were already on the thinnest of ice. Stomping around town in silence wouldn't just be noticeable.

It'd be awkward.

Blake wiped her sticky fingers on her jeans. "You do like dogs, don't you? No phobia about them?"

"Are you trying to scare me off?"

"I'm trying to prevent any discomfort on behalf of my precious, sensitive artist friend," she mocked. "Can't have you running back to Cygnet claiming that I sicced vicious animals on you."

Wyatt stopped in front of a planter full of miniature pumpkins and gourds painted with varying degrees of scary faces. "What's up with you? Why are you treating me so... carefully? Why do you think I'd rat you out?"

"It doesn't matter." Blake started to walk on, but Wyatt grabbed her wrist. Which reminded her of when he'd held her wrists overhead in one hand as he drove into her...

"It does matter," he insisted in a low voice. "If there's a problem, I should be read in on it."

“Read in’? You’ve been watching too many Bond movies.”

“Maybe.” His gaze shifted sideways, then snapped back to her with a self-conscious smile. “Big fan. I like the gadgets. I want a car key that also injects antivenin *and* shoots a poison dart *and* is a magnet strong enough to wipe clean a hard drive.”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

Wyatt let go. Shoved his hands in his pockets. “We got off to a rocky start. Well, we got off to an incredibly great start, followed by a rocky reboot. God knows what would happen if we have to start over a third time. Just tell me what’s going on.”

He was very persuasive. Something about the combo of his smooth tone and intense eyes. “As I mentioned right after the announcement—”

“Our pit fight?”

Blake winced. Hopefully whoever was watching them couldn’t also *hear* them. “No. We’re not calling it that. Sounds like we were both oiled up and slipping in a vat of Jell-O.”

Wyatt straightened. Pretended to stroke a long beard as he cleared his throat. “Our deeply adversarial conversation.”

“Better.” She’d tell him. It might make this whole thing smoother, the more he realized how closely they were being scrutinized. “The leadership at Cygnet is extraordinarily hyped up about this contest. About how it will bring additional funders out of the woodwork. This morning, it was reinforced to me that my enthusiastic support is expected in order to guarantee my promotion.”

The downturn to his mouth showed his disapproval. “That feels very *1984*.”

His reference caught her by surprise. “You read Orwell?”

“Even artists usually graduate from high school. Hell, Blake. Cut me some slack.” He popped the last of his fudge and tossed the crumpled bag into a can a good fifteen feet away.

Whoops. She'd definitely crossed a line.

How to express that she wasn't *intentionally* being a bitch? The art of pleasant, meaningless small talk had been drilled into her as soon as she'd begun to use full sentences. But Wyatt threw her off. Made her uncertain of what might come next.

The beauty of science was that it was so exact. Pure. Centered on facts, not reliant on interpretation. Blake had no context in which to relate to Wyatt, no facts to fall back on that she knew about artists as a personality type.

That was lazy of her. And unfair. Unforgivably judgmental. "Sorry. I don't know what to expect from an artist, so I'm expecting the worst."

"For fuck's sake. Stop thinking of me as an artist. Start treating me like just a man."

"There's nothing 'just' about you."

Whoops, again.

That had slipped out. Blake had been aiming to keep their truce, not escalate to something...incendiary.

But the creases around his eyes relaxed. "Thanks. Yeah. Keep rolling out the compliments."

"You'll have to earn them," she replied tartly. "Oh, and *your* enthusiasm would be appreciated, too. Since they're watching us."

"They're *what*?" Wyatt stiffened, like he'd stepped onto a frozen lake and seen a jagged crack underfoot.

"Someone told Dr. Peabody you left before me last night. They're watching to be sure we're working well together."

"That's bullshit." He spun on one heel, all coiled energy as he semi-crouched and looked around. The speed and concentration alarmed Blake a bit. His reaction seemed wildly overblown.

The street was full of businesses, with a few apartments above. There were a solid twenty people strolling. A shuttle

from the pier was unloading cruise ship passengers in front of the Irish pub. This was peak leaf-peeping season, so tourists were rampant.

“What do you expect to see? A guy in a trench coat on top of his lab coat with binoculars, hiding behind the gazebo?”

“Thanks for telling me where to look.” And just like that, Wyatt relaxed. “Sorry you’re getting so much heat. I’ll amp up my enthusiasm. Starting now. What’s with the dog-groomer visit? You have a pup there?”

“Possibly.” Blake walked them past one more planter, this one with deep purple ornamental cabbages and tilted tiny haunted houses half buried in the dirt. When she reached for the door, Wyatt beat her to it.

That would be her first pro in the man vs. artist column for Wyatt. He struck her as quite the gentleman.

After all, he’d brought her to orgasm *first*, every time...

The cacophony of barking greeted them a split second before Randall nipped from behind the desk. He shoved the giant noise-canceling headphones down to hang around his neck. “Blake, you are the sweetest. It isn’t even my birthday.”

“Okaaaay,” she dragged out. Ana had only introduced her to the man a few months ago. She didn’t even know when his birthday was. “I didn’t come in singing or with balloons?”

“But you brought me such a delicious-looking present.” He outright *leered* at Wyatt before thrusting out his hand. “I’m Randall. I’m single. Dog lover, obviously, like 52 percent of Americans. But I can be open to cats. Not a dealbreaker if you’ve got one. Curiously, only 21 percent of people prefer cats, and the other 27 percent don’t have the balls to pick a side.”

“Wyatt.” They shook. “I’m all in for dogs. Cats ignore you. What’s the point of paying to feed them and not get anything back in return?”

“I like you already.” Randall winked. Leaned in. “Did you know that cats were created—or so the Hebrew legend goes—after Noah asked God to do something about the rats on the

ark? A lion coughed. Two cats popped out.”

Unbelievable. Blake barely bit back a snort.

Wyatt looked back and forth between Blake and him. “That’s...probably a story that Dr. Montgomery here would refute.”

“Randall likes passing on interesting bits of trivia.”

He tapped the headphones. “I listen to podcasts all day. Gotta block out the noise, you know? Plus, there are a crazy amount of interesting things not even touched on by schools.”

After a long moment, Wyatt said, “Vincent Van Gogh had an older brother. He died at birth. Do you know his name?” When Randall shook his head no, he continued. “Vincent.”

Randall burst out laughing. “How did you know that?”

“Wyatt’s an artist. He’s the one I’m paired with for the Cygnet contest.”

“Lucky you.” Another leer.

Randall could be...over-the-top. If there was a summit to over-the-top, he was *over* it. But he was also sweet and kind and one of the most positive people she’d ever met. So that made Blake temper her sharp words with an only slightly chiding tone.

“That’s enough. Wyatt’s new to town. You don’t want him to feel like he’s being sexually harassed, do you?”

“I had to take my shot, didn’t I? Besides, it’s harmless fun.” Randall flicked his wrist at Blake. “He’s obviously into you.”

“No.”

“Definitely not.” Wyatt and Blake talked over each other in their hurry to spit out denials.

Giving them a look of utter disdain, Randall said, “Straight people can be so obtuse.” He turned away and beckoned for them to follow. “Come on in. Your prospects await.”

The deep back room held giant sinks and grooming tables. They went past those, down a hall filled with kennels, and out

to a very brown grassy area. Five dogs cavorted with two teens.

“Sallie and Robyn are doing their best to wear them out. Dog walking is fine. But dog roughhousing and ball chasing is even better. Plus, it gives the kids something to put on their college applications,” Randall explained.

“Wow.” Wyatt was grinning from ear to ear. “I did bike delivery to earn money in school. This would’ve been so much more fun.”

He looked enthralled.

He looked adorably young, all lit up from the inside. Huh. Blake didn’t even know how old he was. She’d eyeballed him at having a few years on her own thirty-four. There was a deep seriousness to him that gave the impression of experience, maturity.

Not now, though. Now she could picture the kid he’d been, with his eyes sparkling and the perma-smile not budging from his face.

Crouching, Randall shouted, “Lady Thiang!”

The dog that came running looked like a chihuahua...that had been electrocuted, but only so that the fur on its ears stood out like dandelion poofs.

Wyatt immediately plopped down on the frozen ground and intercepted the dog. Scratching it behind the white, static-ed out ears, he said, “Weird name.”

“She’s a character in *The King And I*.” And yes, Blake felt smug for being able to catch him out. “Guess you’re not as up on your Rodgers and Hammerstein as you are on your Orwell.”

He lay back, letting the little dog scramble all over his belly and chest. “I’m surprised you are. There’s nothing science related in a musical. Pure art.”

“Pure *emotion*,” Blake corrected.

She’d always been embarrassed by her addiction to musicals. They didn’t seem like anything a true, avid scientist

would waste time on. She'd been hooked, however, since the auditorium downtown had hosted the tour of *Brigadoon*. Talk about improbable. A town that disappeared for a century at a time. People who fall so deeply in love in a single day that magic happens.

“You fall for that?”

Embarrassed—but ready to defend her addiction stringently. “When people feel so strongly that they have to burst into song or dance? Of *course* that moves me. We all have emotions. No matter how we may try to deny them. Musicals are beautiful expressions, interpretations, of what each of us feels at some point.”

Wyatt twisted his face away as the dog licked at him. “You could say the same thing about a painting. That it interprets, expresses what we can't quite find the words to describe.”

Huh.

Blake had never thought to make that comparison.

She only knew how bored she got, staring at shards of pottery from ancient Egypt, when her parents had dragged her through the Met. The ridiculousness of Pollock splattering paint, or Rothko calling two broad swatches of color ‘art.’

Had she been too dismissive?

Some patrons loathed *Oklahoma!* and loved *Hamilton* or *Rent*.

Had she missed out on the chance to appreciate art from her knee-jerk reaction?

Darn it. Self-discovery wasn't best conducted in thirty-degree temps with a bulldog snuffling at her shoe.

Seemingly oblivious to the revelation roiling through her, Randall picked up Lady Thiang and handed her to Blake. “This is the one. Closest I could come to a chihuahua. The owner loves the movie and is on board for a one-day loan as long as you make sure the pup doesn't go near any alcohol.”

“What movie?” Wyatt rolled back up to lean against the tree trunk. He looked relaxed and rugged with a day's worth of

dark stubble. The thick Irish fisherman's sweater bulked up his already more than sufficiently muscled build. He could be in a commercial with pumpkins and leaf piles and spiked coffee. "Someone clue me in."

Blake cuddled the soft, furry head just beneath her chin. The little lady in her hands was a sweetheart. "Cygnet throws a massive Halloween party every year. Attendance is mandatory. No cutting corners on costumes, either. Everyone takes the tradition very seriously."

"And you're going as..."

Randall huffed out a breath. "So handsome, and yet so bad at pop culture. I'm afraid you're not the man for me after all."

"I'll be crying into my beer about that all night," Wyatt said drily. He plucked the bulldog away from Blake and started a tug-of-war with it using a nearby hank of rope.

"Elle Woods. From *Legally Blonde*. Who carries her pet chihuahua with her even into the courtroom. Because—" Blake fluffed at her blond hair. "She's blond. And everyone overlooks how smart she is simply because she's pretty and bubbly."

Laughter rolled out of Wyatt. So much of it that the bulldog began barking back at him. "You're beautiful, doc. I'm assuming you're smart as fuck. But you're about as bubbly as tap water."

Blake took zero umbrage at his assessment. No point being insulted by the facts. "I'm not auditioning for the reboot. Simply the *look*."

"You'll nail it," Randall reassured her. "Especially with Lady Thiang tucked into your purse."

"I've got a hot pink leash."

"Even better. Oh!" Randall bumped Wyatt's shoulder. "You know what would take the whole thing up a notch? Turn it into a couples costume."

"No." Wyatt's refusal was immediate and short.

The brush-off didn't dim Randall's enthusiasm. "Don't



worry, Emmett's a law student, a TA. Scruffy sport coat over khakis and you're good to go."

"No."

Now his refusal seemed odd. Some people weren't into dressing up. But he wouldn't have to wear anything weird, or exposing, or spandex.

"You don't have to go as Emmett, but you *do* have to attend the party. And you *must* be in costume. Your participation, or lack thereof, will be a reflection on me." Trying for a teasing tone, she cajoled, "If you're scared of vampires, I promise they can't get into the building. We do a temp scan at the security portal."

Wyatt still wouldn't meet her gaze. Instead, he mumbled, "I don't want to pretend to be someone I'm not."

This stubbornness was annoying. "This isn't cosplay, for goodness' sake. You throw on the sport coat and make the rounds with me. Drink all the spiked punch you want and eat a bunch of pumpkin brownies. I won't even ask you to watch the movie as homework. Although it is hilarious. And inspiring."

Rubbing his forehead against the dog's, he mumbled, "Fine. I'll do it for you. But know that I'm not comfortable with it."

That in no way bothered Blake. "Aren't artists supposed to be tortured souls?"

He dropped the slobbery rope on her foot in response.

## Chapter Seven

Wyatt tossed a match onto the wrapped log. The kind that required zero kindling or effort. Probably easy to handle for his Aunt Bec, but something that offended him deep in his soul. He'd have to find out where he could buy firewood.

Or maybe chop it himself? Nah, that'd be overkill on his new identity as a Mainer. Maine-ian? He'd have to find out what they called themselves.

But with the fire burning already, a beer on the coffee table, and a fuzzy blanket conveniently preset on the back of the squishy sofa, he had no further way to put off the call he dreaded.

His tablet connected after the first ring with the Exiteer.

"Are you in danger?" Craig asked, with a furrow between his sandy brows.

Easy to tell this guy had spent his career on desk duty. A real field agent would never have betrayed that level of obvious concern.

"No." But then Wyatt paused. Considered. Redirected. "Or, I don't know, *am I?*"

"You made it clear you don't think you need any handling during this transition. So for *you* to call *me*"—he shot finger guns at Wyatt, then cocked them back at himself—"yeah, something's up."

"I'm fine." He could prove it, too. With daily minutiae that should thrill Craig to no end. "I, uh, settled on my Halloween costume today. Very big deal. Made another new friend. A dog groomer. As normal as, well, what is Maine famous for besides lobster rolls?"

Craig shrugged. "Hell if I know. Logging?"

"Fine. I'm as normal as a logger." Wyatt lifted his beer in a wordless toast. "Fitting in well."

The suspicious furrow didn't smooth out at all. "Then why'd

you call?”

Wyatt leaned back. Crossed an ankle over his knee. The picture of non-concern. “I need you to do a standard rundown on this big conference coming up at Cygnet.”

“I’ve seen your file. Your sole reason for being there is to paint. Draw. Whatever you do.” Craig scowled, clearly onto him. “What’s with this request?”

Should’ve known Craig wouldn’t be that easy to pull one over on.

Giving up all pretense, he leaned forward, letting his wrists dangle off his knees. “Look, the scope of the conference that the contest’s anchoring. I get the impression it’s huge. TEDx huge.”

“So?”

Why did he have to hold his hand and walk him to the obvious conclusion? “So, if it’s that big a deal—if the people at Cygnet aren’t blowing smoke about the level of its import? The thing’s clearly a recipe for disaster.”

“Not your monkeys, not your circus.”

“Huh?” That was the problem with living in Europe for fifteen years. You missed out on some Americanisms that came and went.

“Not your problem,” Craig said succinctly. “Unless you’ve given up on art already and want a job in Cygnet’s communications department?”

Hell, no. Office jobs would never be on his radar. If this art thing didn’t work, he’d be back out in the field as a contractor. “I’m telling you, it could be my *type* of problem.” Wyatt even put ‘type’ in finger quotes to be sure Craig followed along.

“You’ve got to give me more to go on.”

For fuck’s sake. If only Wyatt could contact his old handler. The one in charge of field ops. The one who *knew* that if Wyatt sensed something was off? Then the shit was *no doubt* about to hit the fan.

But now he was on the outside. Having to spoon-feed intel to his Exiteer.

Christ.

Slowly, he said, “With all the global superstar scientists coming in, the conference is set up to basically be a target for espionage.”

Not even an eyebrow twitch of interest from the guy. “Yeah, and when the General Assembly’s in session at the U.N. and a bunch of world leaders get a hankering for baseball? Then Yankee Stadium’s suddenly a target for espionage.”

Craig’s lack of buy-in was disturbing. Number one rule of surviving as a spy? To bastardize *Catch 22*, *just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean you’re not being followed*.

“I’m not asking you to send in a damn strike team. I just want you to run a check on the big-name attendees.”

“Have you seen anything suspicious occur that’s tipped you off?”

For the love of— “Yeah. The posters proclaiming the big-ass conference of the greatest minds of our time from all over the world, descending on my little hidey-hole in Nowheresville.”

“What’s there to buy or sell at a genomics lab?”

Was this a test? Well, Wyatt had the answers. “Where they make vaccines, they make drugs. There was a big sale that we stopped at a lab in Stockholm a couple of years ago. Plus, vaccines aren’t cheap, and aren’t always widely distributed. Some lowlife could be planning to profit off of them to third-world countries.”

“Perhaps...” Craig’s voice trailed off. He clearly wasn’t convinced.

That was fine. Wyatt had tons more. “There could be a high-profile defector.”

“That would involve the State Department. Not us.”

“Only if all the right parties were contacted. Not if a

random, scared scientist reached out to someone who published a kick-ass article in their journal, *Genomics*, and asked for help.”

Craig rolled his eyes. “*Genomics*? They couldn’t come up with a better title?”

“Right there with you.”

He scrubbed a palm across his chin. “I’ll give you the possibility of a defector. That’s a strong enough reason to run the attendees.”

Even though he’d won, Wyatt wasn’t done. “*And* they have diseases, locked up in freezers. We could be talking bioweapons.”

“If they were developing those, we’d know. Never would’ve let you get near the place.”

He stared into the weirdly blue-green flames. For a good three sentences, he and Craig had been in sync. Now the Exiteer was back to using his title as a shield against anything that could be dangerous.

Stipulating that a place was safe didn’t keep it that way.

Hell, this room felt safe. Cozy. Warm. Smelled great, from a candle he’d lit in case Craig wanted more proof that he wasn’t living out of a suitcase. Like apples and eucalyptus and pine—a scent the candle labeled as ‘Autumn’.

There could be a sniper five hundred yards away with his sights trained on Wyatt right now.

‘Safe’ was an aspiration. Never a status fully reached.

He dug deep into his patience reserve to explain espionage to a man who still sat down the hall from hundreds of active-duty agents. WTF.

“Cygnet isn’t developing bioweapons, for Christ’s sake. I’m saying they have the raw materials that an evil mastermind could turn *into* a bioweapon. Plus, there’s gene therapy. Something else to be bought and sold on the dark web.”

Craig made a time-out sign with his hands. “Enough

already! I said I'd run them. But you have to do something for me."

"Sure." Finally. An assignment.

Wyatt had access. Probably restricted, but he could get Blake's swipe card and get in anywhere. Should be simple to copy files or nose around. Or both.

"You're spooking at shadows. You've got to stop seeing everything through the lens of a spy. Take that lens and smash it with your heel. We managed to keep the world in one piece before you joined the Agency. We can keep that streak going now even without you."

Was that what this was about? Craig was worried he had a savior complex? "Everyone's replaceable. I know. But this is a special situation."

"You can't move forward when you're looking behind you."

"Hope you didn't get a paper cut on your tongue spitting out that motivational poster."

"I'm serious, Wyatt. I'll do some due diligence. As long as *you* stand down."

"Sure thing. Thanks for hearing me out."

Wyatt flipped the cover over his tablet. And wondered what mission Craig had screwed up so thoroughly that he'd be punished with this job as Exiteer. No way was the guy even halfway decent at this job.

Not if he actually believed Wyatt would drop this bone...

...

The tour of the Cygnet campus was astonishing. Blake had off-loaded—she called it delegating, but either way, it showed Wyatt exactly where he stood on her priority list—the tour to Mal. Everything was impressive. Plaques lined the walls. Framed articles detailing their accomplishments from discoveries to implementation, with vaccines and drugs and so many other things Wyatt didn't exactly understand.

Google got all the press for their campus with its free gourmet dining halls and scooters and foosball. Cygnet had the free gourmet meals, too. Dry cleaners. Bowling alley. They'd passed at least five green walls, but more impressive was Prime Park—an indoor, windowless courtyard area completely covered in real grass and flower beds.

Plus, Mal had shown him a dizzying array of expensive-looking equipment. This place was basically Disneyland for scientists—where they could make their wildest dreams come true. While simultaneously getting all-you-can-eat gelato.

“I can see why you chose Cygnet. Great place to work.”

Mal stopped dead in his tracks. Let his mouth drop open. “You think I came here for the perks?”

“Um, yeah? And the salary. Guessing it's above the government GSA standard, or whatever the nonprofit CDC offers.”

He slapped a hand to his chest. The guy was dramatic, for sure. If Swan Cove had a community theater, he should join. “I would've killed to work at Cygnet if it was a cubicle farm twenty stories underground without even a water cooler. The things we're accomplishing here will change lives. Will change *humankind*. How many people can say that about their job?”

Wyatt was tempted to raise his hand.

He'd lived that already. And, yeah, it made it a lot easier to get out of bed each morning when you knew showing up and doing the job would make a life-and-death impact.

But reaching people on a smaller scale mattered, too. Could a painting of his make someone smile as they passed it in their hallway? Even if it lifted their mood for two seconds each day, that daily joy—that's what he wanted to give now. After all, that was Wyatt's original goal with his art, two decades ago.

“Saving lives is a hell of a thing.” He pointed to Mal's phone, sticking out of the lab coat pocket. “Do you listen to music on there?”

“All the time.” Mal started to bust a Bollywood move—

elbows and hands going opposite ways, knees bending deep. The clomp of his shoes echoed down the hallway.

Hell. Maybe Mal should *start* a community theater. In his spare time. After improving humankind, of course.

Wyatt waved a flat hand back and forth as a signal for him to simmer down. “We’ll get into what you listen to another time. Point is, a good song makes you feel great for maybe three minutes, yeah?”

“Of course. Music is *life*, man.”

Okay. You’d have to have a heart made of solid Kevlar not to appreciate Mal’s enthusiasm. Wyatt bit back a smile. “The artist who wrote that, the one who performed it—they’re changing the world three minutes at a time. That’s enough reason to get out of bed, too.”

A thick shock of black hair flopped onto Mal’s forehead as he nodded vigorously. “Indeed. My father’s a concert violinist. My first thesis was on the effect of music on the brain. The way neuroplasticity can be encouraged, supplemented with music is a key therapy with cognitive issues.”

“But that’s not what you’re working on now?”

“No.” They turned down another hallway. Painted lines on the floor were too 2000s for Cygnet. Instead, they had video display screens on the walls with arrows leading to various departments, each in its own color. It felt like a spaceship. “Classic story. Sister miscarries, turned out to be caused by a genetic anomaly, and that was enough to make me switch my field of study.”

Ouch.

Guess he and Mal had something in common. A family tragedy changed their lives’ trajectory. “I’m sorry about that.”

Mal scanned his badge to get them through the next set of double doors. “Sanvi’s resilient. She has two little ones that are perfectly healthy. And I’m working on the gene that was isolated as the cause. If we identify it in prenatal testing, someday we’ll be able to correct it.”



“Operate on a gene in a fetus? That sounds like science fiction.”

“More like helping it along. Injecting a virus loaded with a gene that can help the affected gene heal itself. Kick-start it into the proper shape. The result is a healthy child with no chromosomal damage.”

The dancing scientist must have one hell of a brain under all that hair. Wyatt’s socks were knocked off and blown about two hallways back. Hard to believe he lived in a world where that was already possible.

“Wow. Still sounds a little sci-fi to me, but completely awesome.”

“It is.” They stopped in front of Blake’s lab. “But I appreciate the reminder. My father will enjoy hearing me explain how one of our artists put me in my place.” With a half grimace/half smile, and a pulse of his arms in some unknown bunch of choreographed moves, Mal left.

Wyatt still didn’t know what Mal did on an hour-by-hour basis. Stare into a microscope? Inject mice? Work on equations?

He liked hearing the end goal, though. It made him proud to be a part of this cutting-edge facility, even if only for a short time. It *also* made him realize that he had no idea what Blake did, either. Genomics was a broad subject—as he’d discovered in his quick and dirty research session.

The whole point of this drawn-out contest was for artists and scientists to work together. To enhance each other’s projects. He’d stalled out on getting information from Blake because they’d been too busy pissing each other off.

Their kiss had changed all of that. For him, anyway. It proved that they still had one hell of a connection. He was mad she hadn’t been honest, and vice versa. That was a stupid thing to hang onto.

Wyatt still couldn’t be completely honest with her—or anyone, for that matter. Which was a lot harder pill to swallow now that he was trying to live a normal life. He could,

however, get all up on a high horse about how his art was his truth. It sounded pretentious, but it was true.

The contest hadn't been his idea. So what? It was a good challenge. If this couldn't jump-start his creativity to do something beyond portraits and landscapes, then nothing would. It'd be proof this was just a pipe dream.

Wyatt opened the door. Hard enough that it banged against the rubber stopper that made a twanging noise.

Oh well. He was pumped up.

He took a second to notice how pretty Blake was today. Well, every day, so far. Today she wore a turtleneck the color of raspberry sorbet beneath her lab coat. It looked softly fuzzy. A long chain with what looked like a cluster of gold sticks bobbed just below her breasts. If he tried to hug her the thing would probably stab him.

Had that been her intention? He stole one extra kiss and now she'd pulled on body armor?

No. He would *not* get distracted looking at her. Or thinking about her smoking hot body, and how it had felt curled up along his back...

"What do you do?"

Blake didn't bother to look up from her monitor. "Cutting-edge research in the field of genomics. What do you do?"

Look at him, about to answer that question with the whole truth and nothing but the truth. For the first time in for *freaking* ever. His Exiteer would be so proud. "Hopefully, interpret that research into something gasp-worthy."

"Glad we've cleared that up." If she was any cooler, they could make an ice luge down to her keyboard.

Hell with that. Wyatt planted his palms on her desk and bent down to peer over the monitor, mere inches from her face. Looming. That was it. "We're not doing this. Dancing around, poking at each other."

She clicked her mouse furiously. Banged her whole finger on it, over and over. And Blake still wouldn't look up. "You

started it.”

Each word clipped off with the sharpness of a Glock Perfection 6.5” phosphate treated carbon steel clip-point blade.

Wyatt leaned in another inch. Close enough that she ought to be able to feel his breath on her forehead. “By kissing you? Yeah. I take full responsibility. You pissed me off—again—and that made me want to kiss you.”

“You realize that shouldn’t make sense?” More frantic mouse clicks. Either Blake was trying to wrap up some spurious online shopping or—far more likely—she wasn’t doing jack shit with that mouse besides letting out her temper.

“Are you denying that it does anyway?”

“No. I was annoyed as well. The kiss didn’t so much solve my annoyance as distract me from it.”

Finally. Same action/reaction combo Wyatt had experienced. With that out of the way, they could move past it. “Fight over. On to the next thing.”

*That* yanked her gaze up. And her chin to point all her significant amount of attitude right at him. “You shouldn’t expect to come over here and kiss me whenever you like.”

“Same right back at ya, Doc,” he said with an easy drawl.

She pushed at her desk, sending her chair rolling backward so fast that it almost slammed into the glass-doored fridge full of vials. Blake let out a tiny yelp and scrabbled with her feet to stop.

“We need to establish boundaries.”

“Useless. We already blew through them.” Wyatt stepped back, hitched one ass cheek onto the corner of her desk. And realized he was having a hell of a lot of fun sparring with her. “Now, if you’ll stop thinking for a minute about how thoroughly I kissed you, I’d like to talk about the actual science you do.”

Her eyes brightened. The corners of her mouth lifted faintly with interest. “What do you want to know?”

“The version of everything you’d give to your grandmother. Or a morning show anchor.”

“Truly?” She leaned in, lips parted. Funny how it was an identical facial expression to when they were on the brink of kissing...

“Yes.”

“Then let’s walk.” Blake slid her phone into her lab coat. Her keys into the opposite pocket, and her ID lanyard around her neck. Then there was a period of what appeared to be *authentic* mouse clicks to save things, before stepping away from the desk.

He, of all people, understood how easy it was for confidential things to be...misappropriated. But it took way longer than tv and movies wanted you to believe in order to slip in somewhere you didn’t belong, unnoticed, find the exact file necessary, and copy it and get out without being spotted. It must be strange working in an office where you had to lock it all down just to, say, stroll to the bathroom. Maybe it became second nature after a while?

Wyatt had learned over the years that humans could adapt to any routine, no matter how good or bad, mundane or terrifying.

Once the door was locked behind them—and double checked—Blake led him in the direction of the elevator bank at the core of the building. All four were glass, quieter than an electric car, and fast.

“If I over-explain something, I promise I’m not talking down to you. We’re so used to being submerged in our specialized jargon. I’m unsure how much to assume you know. While genomics is mentioned in the news, that doesn’t mean you watched those reports.”

God, no. “Arts and politics yes, science not so much.”

“Politics, huh?” Blake pressed the elevator button. “Isn’t that the third rail of the art world?”

“I’m more than my pencils and brushes. Your musical theater addiction doesn’t make you the poster child for an MIT

grad.”

“I should hope not. My doctorate’s from Johns Hopkins.” She sniffed, then giggled. In the elevator, Blake scanned her card to select a floor.

“I went to Bard College. In a small town like this, but on the Hudson River.” Wyatt put a hand on the glass to steady himself, hardly believing he’d offered that up. He hadn’t mentioned his alma mater to anyone since...well, since graduating.

“This must bring back some nice memories for you, then.” Once they stopped, Blake had to scan her card again for the doors to open. “Short answer to your original question? My research will reverse blindness.”

Wyatt was stupefied. “That’s huge.”

“It sure is.” They only made it twenty feet before she had to give a retinal scan for the next door to open. “Before you tweet that and get the Nobel Committee all excited, we’re not even to human trials yet.”

“I don’t tweet.” Technically true. Wyatt Keene didn’t do social media. His various undercover personas did. “I don’t do that stuff at all.”

“You have to. I mean, I assume that as an artist, you have to self-promote.”

*That* was a whole thing Wyatt knew, but had decided not to worry about yet. No need to set up a website and attract a following if he ditched this plan in six weeks and went back to fighting bad guys for the rest of his life.

He had to have a *purpose*. For years, it’d been keeping his country safe. For now, it was making people happy with his art. Bringing beauty to their lives. But if he couldn’t make that fly, he wouldn’t keep pounding at it for years aimlessly.

The last two decades had very much proved to Wyatt that you really only had one shot at most things in life. He’d had one shot at being part of a perfect family. The chances of finding that again were miniscule. All of his missions had been one shot. No do-overs, no apologies for screw-ups. Literally

do or die.

So he was pinning all his hopes on this contest. Life had, shockingly, given him a do-over on being an artist. On the improbable dream he'd never given up. It sure as hell wouldn't give him a third chance.

If he did have to go back to a version of his old career, *aka* a mercenary? No way could he have an Insta reel with selfies all over Swan Cove. Wyatt refused to put his neighbors at risk like that. And he didn't want to police for whoever paid the highest. Protecting his country had mattered. Had, indeed, been worth dying for. Not so with a merc. Being an artist resonated to his core.

Even if success at it meant, God help him, eventually getting on 'the socials', as Mal called them.

He'd have to lightly brush off Blake's totally reasonable suggestion. "This place has seventeen layers of security clearance. I can't do a daily post from your lab."

"True. Don't even try," she warned with a frown. "Swan Cove's massively picturesque, however. We should at least set you up with an Instagram account when we get back. It's the most visual medium."

Blake wasn't just being chatty. She was being *helpful*. It was...unlikely. "Why do you suddenly want to advance my career?"

"I told you. Dr. Peabody wants full, enthusiastic compliance around this contest. We're making you successful, whether you want it or not."

*That* motivation he bought. "Then describe the thing that I can draw but not tweet."

"It's gene therapy." She paused at a three-way intersection of hallways. "We wrap a gene—one for a green light receptor—inside a virus." Blake mimicked it with her hands. "Think of that as the booster rocket, for the shuttle. The virus gets injected into the eye and zips to the ganglion cells. Then the gene gets into those cells and makes them light sensitive. The signals sent from them to the brain become sight."

The explanation was simple enough. Wyatt just couldn't *believe* it. "This is hypothetical."

"No. It's solid. Reproduceable." Her eyes sparkled, her whole demeanor lit up with passion. "We've done this transformation on mice. Over and over again. The vision lasts a lifetime. Now, a mouse lifetime doesn't equate to the length of a human's. That's part of why we have so much left to discover."

"But it could happen in, say, fifty years?"

"We're living the future people dreamed of a few generations ago. Discoveries and progress aren't happening incrementally—they're happening in big bounds." Her head whipped back and forth. "FDA trials are nothing to be raced through. But we'll get to those trials in the next *three* years, I'm certain."

"Blake, that's astonishing." Wyatt had to physically share her excitement. He wanted to hug her. Caution won out. He gripped her shoulder and squeezed.

Immediately, Blake stiffened.

Hell. He didn't think such a casual touch would piss her off. And then Wyatt realized her gaze, cold as a glacier, was fixed over his shoulder.

Wyatt stuck with instinct—and his partner. He kept their connection while he slowly turned to confront whatever or whoever had snuffed out Blake's light.

# Chapter Eight

Damn it.

This happened—well, if not *all* the time, then far too often on a campus filled with two thousand other people. Blake shouldn't have to run into her lying cockroach of an ex on a regular basis.

But, of course, here he was. Just when she and Wyatt were in sync again, utterly comfortable. The way he'd reacted to her research was tremendously satisfying.

And then...there was Horrible Rob.

Wyatt, of course, had no idea what was running through her mind. But he'd kept his reassuring hand on her shoulder. Moved to her side, albeit slightly in front, as if ready to defend her from a rattlesnake.

Which, come to think of it, was a decent enough descriptor for Horrible Rob.

Rob slid his hands into his pockets, hooking his thumbs over the edge as if to be cool. "Hey, Blake."

"*Dr.* Sandiford." She had no desire to call him by his first name. Was, in fact, grateful to work in a profession where titles were encouraged over names much of the time.

A lecherous sneer lifted one corner of his thin mouth. "Getting cozy with your artist, I see."

"Don't be an ass, Rob." So much for staying professional. Blake inhaled sharply. "Wyatt Keene, this is Dr. Robert Sandiford."

Wyatt nodded. Didn't extend his hand. Guess he could feel the loathing roiling off her. Whereas if Rob had bothered to read the room, he would've kept walking with no more than a nod in her general direction.

"What are you working on, Doctor?" Wyatt asked.

"My thrust is creating an mRNA vaccine for HIV."



“Now. That’s your thrust *now*,” Blake said pointedly.

Yes, it was petty. Yes, it would only lengthen this painful conversation. But it felt oh-so-good to poke at the man who’d used her.

“Yes.” He smoothed his watered silk tie. Appearance was very important to Rob. He’d had more face creams in his bathroom than Blake. All his shirts were bespoke, despite them being covered up by a lab coat daily. And, of course, most important of all was the appearance that he was on the best team of any at Cygnet. “We’re starting human trials in the new year. Unlike you, stuck with the rodents. It’s gratifying to be on the cusp of something.”

Blake was on the cusp of kicking him in the kneecap. “You’re on the cusp of finishing what other people started decades ago. Putting on the final touches like the gift-wraper at the mall at Christmas.”

There. She knew she’d struck a chord with that jab.

“Are you part of a contest team, Dr. Sandiford?” Wyatt was diffusing the situation. She’d owe him for that.

“Indeed. I wouldn’t want to miss out on this inaugural opportunity to add to Cygnet’s preeminence.” Rob jerked a thumb at Wyatt, but directed his statement at Blake. “You lucked out. Got someone to play with.”

So. Rude.

Wyatt’s thumb dug into her shoulder. Oh yes. He’d *gotten* the insult. But she did appreciate that he wasn’t jumping in. That she was still the one driving the conversation. “We’re so busy, I haven’t even had the chance to show Wyatt my subjects until now. That’s where we’re headed.”

“Ah, yes. Your petting zoo.” Rob smoothed back his perfectly gelled and styled sandy hair. It was a split-second reminder of how she’d initially been attracted to his looks. In Rob’s case, they were the only worthwhile thing about him. “Funny how little that project’s progressed since I left the team.”

The nerve! He knew exactly how long it took to shepherd an

idea to a breakthrough to testing to human trials. Rob was trying to make her look—or feel—small and worthless.

No chance of that.

Blake knew exactly how cutting-edge her research was. How successful it was. How perfectly on track she was.

On top of all that? She *wasn't* a lying, cheating jerk, unlike a certain other person in the conversation.

“Better to progress slowly than hitchhike on someone else’s innovation.”

He ignored that one, turning back to Wyatt. “My artist guy, he’s old. Not one for chit-chat, which suits me fine. I’m too swamped to waste time on holding his hand. Peter doesn’t need it, anyway. His idea’s brilliant. We’ll win. Without seeing any of the other designs, I’m sure of it.”

Wyatt dropped his hand from Blake’s shoulder. She missed its steadying warmth immediately. He angled sideways, to prop against the wall and cross the tip of one foot over the other. With the sleeves of his baby blue sweater shoved halfway up his forearms, he was the picture of casualness.

“Aren’t assumptions the dumbest thing you can do in science? Not bothering to collect the facts leaves you in ignorance.”

*Whoa.*

Wyatt’s two sentences were akin to a slash of a lion’s paw. He’d been stalking his prey, silent and watchful, until Rob revealed his vulnerable underbelly—his ego and his idiocy.

Rob spluttered.

No actual words, just his mouth moving and incomprehensible attempts at syllables. It was fascinating, really, watching him try to come up with a cutting response and reject each attempt before it formed into words.

*It. Was. Glorious.*

Then Wyatt delivered the coup de grace. He turned his back on Rob. Didn’t even offer a polite goodbye. “Dr. Montgomery,

I can't wait to meet your mice."

"Right this way." She led him onto the offshoot corridor. It was easy to hear Rob's irate clomps as he headed the opposite direction.

Once they were through another set of doors, Wyatt stopped her with a light touch at her elbow. "Are you going to explain what went down back there?"

Her first instinct was to leap up, wrap her legs around his waist, and kiss him until they sank to the ground. That was the heroic level of gratitude he'd earned.

Reason, as always, won out over emotion, however. Blake took both his hands and squeezed with all her might as she stared into those evergreen eyes. "You proved yourself to be my personal hero. Thank you."

...

Son of a bitch. Wyatt *hated* being labeled a hero. Because he wasn't. Because he stepped up and did what was right, nothing more. Every field agent he'd worked with felt the same way. Their job wasn't one where you collected *any* glory. Getting the job done was all the glory necessary.

Because he wasn't superhuman in any capacity. The stuff Ethan Hunt in the *Mission: Impossible* franchise pulled off was thanks to good editing and stunt work—oh, and not *actually* having anyone trying to kill the lead actor. It wasn't real.

And because Wyatt didn't need thanks. It made him itchy.

Aunt Rebecca used to call him a hero. As did that senator's daughter he'd rescued in Dubai. And the supervisor who'd given him a challenge coin after he'd stolen back a nerve gas and delivered it to their own scientists.

But he did *not* hate the way Blake looked at him, all big-eyed and dewy with a softness that made him want to pick her up and carry her back to his house.

"No thanks required." The brush-off words popped out

automatically. He'd better keep going to not come off as rude. "I consider it a necessary service to humanity to cut someone off when they're being a total dick."

Blake burst into laughter. Then more laughter. Until she was wheezing and leaning against the wall, half bent over with her hands braced on her thighs.

Clearly there was a story here.

Given all the layers of security they'd passed through, Wyatt automatically looked up to see if this was being caught on any cameras. There were two obvious ones, but they were just trained on the doors.

So he waited for her to get it all out of her system.

"Oh. Oh my goodness." Blake wiped at the wetness on her cheeks. "I haven't laughed that hard in I don't know how long. Thank you."

"Enough with the thanks. Unnecessary and unaccepted. Instead, how about you clue me in?"

She slid the rest of the way down the wall into a crouch. Hugged her knees. "It's a long and sordid story."

"I've got time."

"That was my ex."

Wow. Even he, as a card-carrying male who didn't share personal stuff *ever*, didn't find that sufficient. Or satisfying. "You call that a long and sordid story?"

A snort-laugh popped out this time. "I'm not used to, ah, divulging these sorts of details. I'm a Montgomery."

For fuck's sake. He'd been here less than a week, and he'd heard from basically everyone he interacted with on the greatness of the founding family. Basically, a combination of Washington, Constantine the Great, and Jesus.

"Yeah, yeah. This entire town sprang from the Montgomerys like Athena popping out of Zeus's skull."

More laughter bubbled out. "You have to stop making me laugh."

“Really not something I’ve ever been told before.” Wyatt slid down to sit next to her. The floors here were probably cleaner than his toothbrush.

“My family doesn’t complain publicly. Not so much in private, either. We’re not big on sharing. And we never air our dirty laundry. We’re above it, and have to be good role models.”

“Well, not to me. I’m an outsider.” He cupped his fingers in a *gimme more* gesture. “So let it rip.”

“I don’t want anyone to think that I got the job at Cygnet *because* I’m a Montgomery.”

“Wait. Your family funded all *this*?”

Her hair swung in her face as she shook, trying not to laugh yet again. “My dad’s financial advisor got the ball rolling, actually. Told him that genomics were the next big thing. Of course, that translated to my father that we had to be in on it. Prestige plus economic success made it a no-brainer. He pulled together financial backers, led the charge to cherry-pick/steal the best scientists from every other lab out there, and furnished it with the best of everything.”

“Including his own daughter?”

“No. My employment was not contingent on closing the deal. It’s important to me that my peers know I earned the spot here on my own merit.”

Wyatt couldn’t imagine *anyone* thinking that Blake would knowingly participate in nepotism. Her dad might have wanted to wrap the job up like a present. But Blake wouldn’t have taken it unless she’d earned it.

“From the description of your research, that shouldn’t be an issue.”

“People like to believe the worst. It’s usually more interesting than the truth. So I held myself to the highest standard once I got the job. First in, last out, model employee. Part of that was not dating. Especially not dating anyone at Cygnet.”

“That’s rough.” Not much different from his own life.

“I stayed too busy to mind it. A few years went by. Rob came on board. He started flirting with me. And it was fun. He understood if I stayed late to double-check an experiment. We became...involved.” Blake gave him a sideways glance that obviously urged him to fill in the blanks.

Not a problem. He had no desire to hear the dark and dirty details of her with another man. “Good to hear you at least had fun before things went south.”

“He was on a project similar to mine, also trying to cure blindness. They were, ultimately, not as successful with their approach. Long story short, Rob engineered the whole relationship—to steal my research.”

“What?” Wyatt knew—better than most—that people could be evil. Selfish. Greedy. But cutting corners on attempting a cure for blindness? That was a whole new low.

Plus...he definitely wanted to punch the guy in the nuts for hurting and using Blake.

This time, when Blake tossed her hair back, it revealed a tightness around her eyes and mouth. “He flirted with me because he assumed my last name made me useful to his career. When it became clear that I only care about science, and not any politicking, he cooled off.”

Wyatt didn’t know her that well. Still, he couldn’t imagine Blake going along with this gamesmanship willingly. “In hindsight, I assume?”

“Yes. I pieced it together after we ended things.”

“Better to identify his asshole tendencies rather than be hurt.”

“Oh, it still hurt. But yes, in general.” She waved her hand. “At any rate, I thought we were on the verge of breaking up. That I’d bored him, or driven him away by not being attentive enough. Then my team had some breakthroughs. Suddenly our relationship zoomed forward again. Things were hot and heavy. He’d visit me in my lab all the time, push to stay over at my apartment.”

Wyatt wanted to hear the rest of the story. He also wanted to fucking sprint down the hall after Rob and give him a solid kidney punch. “Did you suspect he had an agenda?”

“No. My single-minded devotion to my studies and then work meant that my experience was with, well, hookups, not relationships.”

Just like him. The similarity caught him off-guard. It was clearly time to lighten the mood. He tapped his knee against hers. “For the record? You give A-plus hookup.”

“Thank you.” Her lips quirked. “I appreciate that both as a woman and as a grade-chasing overachiever.”

“So he doubled down on chasing you. What happened?”

Blake looked down at the floor. Off-white tile with blue caulk. Slight Greek vibe, but nothing worth staring at. “I enjoyed the attention. Of course, the more time we spent together, the more his true colors began to show. Rob is charming. Smart. But he’s also a raging egomaniac. Uber-competitive. Not a, ah, pleasant long-term partner.”

Yeah. Wyatt had taken several courses in behavior and personality identification during his agency training. He needed none of them to back up her statement. “I could’ve told you that based on our three-minute conversation back there.”

“He’s far less careful about our interactions now. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“I’m not. I like knowing up front who’s worth my time, and who isn’t.”

“I discovered an email in my sent folder, from me to him. Files on my research. He’d stolen them, clearly one night while he was over. I was probably taking a bath, or making dinner, and he went onto my computer and just took everything and sent it to himself.”

“He’s scum.” Wyatt could say more. But that summed it up in a nutshell.

“Agreed. And when I confronted him about it, he dumped me.”

“He lied to you. Used you. Stole from you. And his defensive move was to say he didn’t want to sleep with you anymore?”

“Essentially.”

Wyatt looked back down the hall in the direction the low-ass, lying snake had slithered. “Why does he still work here?”

“Like I said, Rob is smart. Since he used my email to send the files, it’d be my word against his. He was on my team. His plan was to publish early and take sole credit. He would’ve gotten away with it. If I’d made a fuss, he would claim I was overreacting to being dumped.”

“You let him walk? Zero consequences?” There was forgiveness. And then there was letting something stupid ride so as not to rock the boat. This felt like the latter. *And* like it’d come back to bite her in the ass someday.

She crinkled her nose. “I’m no good at being emotional. I was worried I might overdo it. He did not get my research. I made sure he was transferred to another team. His current project won’t garner him any glory. And I learned the important lesson that few can be trusted. That was useful.”

Ouch.

As a fellow human, Wyatt didn’t like that was Blake’s takeaway.

As the man sitting here, lying by omission every second he pretended to be an artist and didn’t tell her about his past? It might as well be a bullet to his twisting gut.

“Don’t judge the entirety of my gender by that piece of trash.”

“Oh, I’m not blaming men. I’m very, very cautious now. About everything and everyone. It’ll take a lot for me to trust a man again for more than a fling. And I’ll never be okay with a man who lies to me, even a little.”

Shit.

Talk about drawing a line in the sand that he was already fifty feet across.



“Don’t give Rob power over your entire future.”

“My work is more than enough to keep me busy.” A satisfied smirk played up the corners of her mouth. “Rob, on the other hand, will have to scramble to come up with a reason for his contract to be renewed.”

“Plus, he’s missing out on your company. That’s a harsh punishment.”

“And you made him look small. Another slap in the face. I guarantee you that’ll have Rob stewing the entire time you’re here.”

“Excellent.” With any luck, another chance to make the man feel like an idiot would present itself to Wyatt before the contest ended. He’d be ready.

“It felt really, really good that you had my back. I owe you.”

It was tempting to collect. Right then and there.

That’d be taking advantage of Blake, though. When she was riled up from the verbal slap fight.

“Okay. Then answer this burning question for me.” He needed to get any trace of Rob out of her headspace. “What’s that?” Wyatt pointed at the gold pendant that looked like an exploded jack.

“An astrocyte.”

He rolled a hand in the air in a *gimme more* gesture. “Consider this your green light to talk down to me as much as you want.”

“It’s a type of cell.” Blake lifted it up. “Star shaped, if you squint, hence the name. Found in the spinal cord and the brain. It was a graduation present from my brother, Fitz. Trust me, he doesn’t know what an astrocyte is, either. But he asked my roommate what would be meaningful to me.”

“That’s a good brother.”

“He is. We’re not as close as we could be. My parents—it isn’t that they pitted us against each other. More that we were locked into disparate boxes.”

“That sounds regrettable. You’re ruining my dream, as an only child, of the awesomeness of a sibling.”

“We turned a corner recently. Fitz did, anyway. I’m working to catch up.” She bit that luscious lower lip. “It sounds silly. I haven’t told anyone else here.”

He braced a hand on the glass. Spread his feet wide. “Lay it on me.”

“Fitz fell in love and discovered who he’s truly meant to be. True story. Also depicted in cheesy films on cable.”

Bullshit. “I thought love wasn’t supposed to change you. Not if you fall in love with the right person.”

“It didn’t change him. It, um, *revealed* him. To himself. Like Hallie scraped the barnacles off of Fitz so he could shine.”

“That’s exceedingly cheesy and romantic.” Wyatt took a chance. Tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Another tick in the non-cliché scientist column for you.”

“I’ve no choice but to believe it. That it happened to him. Doesn’t mean I believe it would happen to me. Regardless, we’re both putting in the effort to be better siblings. I’m learning I really like my brother.” Blake rolled the astrocyte between her fingers.

“Nice to hear.”

“You don’t need the boring details on my family soap opera.” She pushed up to her feet. “Thanks for listening, though. I’d appreciate it if you kept everything I’ve divulged just between us. A secret.”

“Sure. You bet.” He’d add it to the vault along with the name of the agent who’d assassinated Kim Jong-un and the real reason the last pope had stepped down.

“Then let’s go meet my test patients. Prepare to be both amazed and astonished.”

Wyatt would have to concentrate hard to be either of those things. He was a little busy trying not to think about the entire life he was hiding from her...and how Blake would react if she ever found out...

# Chapter Nine

Wandering the stacks at the library was not Blake's preferred way to wind down after work on a Friday night. She preferred yoga. It sharpened the mind.

And a Cynar and soda, to dull the stress.

But when she did find herself at the library, a more targeted approach was her way. Because it was efficient.

Until tonight. Because Blake didn't *have* a target.

Oh, she'd tried. She'd looked up the syllabus online for a humanities course. Strolled through that general swamp of somewhat correct knowledge, Wikipedia. Typing in *help me appreciate art*, however, had not yielded any worthwhile results.

So here she was. A single, thirty-five-year-old woman spending her Friday night trying to be inconspicuous while shuffling up and down the aisles. Someone who didn't want to be caught attempting to fix this yawning chasm of a gap in her education.

Right now? Blake was *not* a walking advertisement for young girls to go into STEM and still live a full and satisfying life.

She was more of a cautionary tale. Like the scary spinster woman in a fairy tale with forty-seven cats in a Gothic horror show of a house.

"Dr. Montgomery, hi!"

Blake wished she could put a name to the freckled face. It showed how stressed and distracted she was that she couldn't bring it to mind. She'd seen the boy around town, but, well, that was true of just about every inhabitant of Swan Cove. But all of them knew the members of the Montgomery family.

"Hello. What are you doing here on a Friday night? Why aren't you at the high school football game?"

"I screwed up. I'm volunteering here as penance." His face

was as droopy as a basset hound's.

"I'm guessing it's more that you were voluntold to show up?"

"Yeah." His overly prominent Adam's apple juddered up and down.

Okay. Blake was curious. Also, eager to procrastinate pawing through the art books. "What did you do that will be fixed by extra hours in the library?"

"I squished the cow eyeball in bio to see what would squirt out."

Ah. A budding scientist. This boy should be encouraged, not punished. "I assume you were about to dissect it. That doesn't sound so very bad."

"I squished it with a book. My copy of *The Scarlet Letter* for American Lit."

Oh my goodness. Laughter could *not* be allowed to escape. So she turned to the side and coughed behind her hand. "Why couldn't you use the scalpel? Or your hand?"

"I didn't want to touch it. Super gross." He squinched his eyes shut and stuck out his tongue.

Blake was always relieved to wear gloves when handling anything that involved bodily fluids. But the book desecration had to be nipped in the bud. "In case nobody else enumerated it, let me tell you, from the perspective of a scientist who has dissected many a thing. Books are for reading. Not for squishing. Not spiders or grasshoppers or, well, eyeballs."

"I know. It won't happen again. Honest." Tapping a riff on the book cart, he asked, "Do you need help finding something? Ms. Scott's making me memorize the Dewey Decimal system, but I've only memorized through the 200s so far."

"Hmm. That's 200s more than me."

"There's a whole section on demonology. I didn't know spell books would be in the Swan Cove library!"

Blake doubted there were many. And she didn't love the

eyeball squisher talking about demonology with quite so much glee.

“Dylan. When I said you should use your library voice, it meant I shouldn’t be able to hear you from the back room.” A woman with a dark brown ponytail bobbing as she approached sounded as stern as every librarian cliché in the books.

“Sorry, Ms. Scott. Bye, Dr. Montgomery.” He zoomed away with one foot on the leg of the cart.

“This is a nice surprise.” Hallie’s demeanor transformed into warmth and a smile that brightened her eyes. “How’d you get on with my latest juvenile delinquent?”

“He’s polite. And seems...repentant.”

“Most people are, while being punished. But Dylan’s not a real troublemaker. Merely thoughtless.”

“Which goes hand in hand with being fourteen and having a Y chromosome.”

“There you go. He’s excused by science.” Hallie laughed softly.

Blake hadn’t intended for this to be a social visit. It was a fact-finding mission. But Hallie was her brother’s girlfriend. For some time now. She needed to make an effort. “How are you doing, Madam Mayor?”

“No. Stop.” Hallie waved her hands like windshield wipers. “Did you ever call your brother Mr. Mayor while he held the office?”

“Possibly the night he was first elected. Otherwise, definitely not.”

“I’d far rather be called Madam Librarian.” Turning her head, Hallie cast a quick look around the octagonal room full of shelves, the glass-walled conference and meeting rooms jutting behind. “Mayor’s just a side gig that I’m still trying to get used to after only five months.”

“I voted for you,” Blake blurted out. It felt like the reasonable metaphorical friendly hand to extend. “Not to spite Fitz. I knew he wasn’t happy as mayor. You talked sense and

didn't want to do the same thing that's been done for generations. That's good for Swan Cove."

Putting a hand to her heart, Hallie said, "My second endorsement by a member of the Montgomery family. I'm honored."

"Wait—second? Fitz voted for you? Even with his own name on the ballot?" Despite his unhappiness in the role, she was genuinely surprised her brother's ego would've allowed for that.

"Like you said, he didn't want it. I figure I can be candid. Your father steamrolled him into running. Voting for me was his ticket to freedom."

Yeah. Blake was more than familiar with her parents' propensity for getting everyone in Swan Cove to go along with what they wanted. The pressure of the expectations that went along with being a Montgomery was probably akin to what Atlas felt with the entire heavens on his shoulders.

"With a side helping of love."

"Well, yes." Hallie grinned. So obviously secure and blissful in the love she shared with Fitz. "Not available to every voter, though. Don't hold your breath for the next election cycle."

"I'm happy for you two. Truly."

"Prove it." Hallie bit her lip. "Come to dinner. Look, I know you and Fitz are working on things. On being closer."

"We're trying." Their parents leaving town had breached the walls between them. There wasn't an automatic distance from them both avoiding the elder Montgomerys. Good intentions weren't enough to fix anything, though. "Starting a new habit takes time."

"I hear you're texting every day now. Is that helping?"

So much. Blake and Fitz, despite shared DNA, were slowly getting to know each other. Becoming real friends. "We set up a theme for every week, so we wouldn't get stuck with nothing to talk about. This week is favorite monsters."

"Timely, with Halloween right around the corner. It also

explains why Fitz made me watch *Creature From the Black Lagoon* last night.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. It was campy and hilarious. Not an arthouse flick, but—” Hallie cut herself off, brown eyes twinkling. “Oh! Bring your artist with you to dinner!”

“No.”

“C’mon. As mayor, I’m supposed to mingle with the contest artists. You’d be helping me check off a box on my to-do list.” She paused. Looked around. Then she leaned closer. “Unless he’s weird. Reeking of incense and constantly talking about his muse. Do you not like him?”

“Oh, that’s not the issue at all. Trust me. Wyatt’s very likeable. Easy to be with. Fun. Annoyingly handsome.” Blake was immediately horrified she’d let so much slip. She barely knew Hallie. A Montgomery didn’t just *unload*. “Can you imagine a worse combination than artist and scientist? We’re more opposite than protons and neutrons.”

After a long, X-ray type look that made Blake wonder what she was looking *for*, Hallie said, “Opposites attract.”

It occurred to Blake that perhaps her subconscious had been worrying over this issue since her talk with Ana. And it turned out she had *many* thoughts to articulate.

“Yes. They also fight. Annoy each other. And, in Wyatt’s case, might very well be leaving for good once the contest ends, so why bother investing the energy into making anything work? Then there’s the complication of the contest itself. How we have to be aboveboard and not give any indication he’s getting...you know...‘special treatment.’” Blake finished with air quotes to make sure Hallie got her euphemism.

“I can’t wait to tell Fitz that you call sex ‘special treatment.’ He’ll guffaw for hours.”

“Don’t.”

“I won’t—as long as you two come for dinner tomorrow night.”

“Oh, for crying—” Apparently Fitz had been coaching Hallie on his legendary negotiating skills. She liked Hallie more and more with every encounter, and wouldn’t hurt her feelings with an automatic dismissal with work as an excuse. *This* was what she and Fitz were working toward—casual dinners, not out of obligation, but actual interest. “Fine.”

“Now that’s settled...” Hallie brushed her hand across the books. “You didn’t answer Dylan’s question. Do you need help finding something?”

This was worse than revealing her attraction to Wyatt. “I have—*had*—nothing but disdain for art. Artists. Things that look like a toddler used crayons selling for millions. Money that could have funded extraordinary research to save lives.”

“Some consider art to *be* life. To be a reason to go on living it.”

“I’m realizing that a trip to MOMA at far too young and impressionable an age set me up with a serious prejudice. I don’t want to be unfair to Wyatt. And I don’t want to miss out. I want to learn how to appreciate art. Artists. What they do as a career. Not being dismissive of it as something that can be doodled while on hold with the cable company.”

Hallie gave her a long, considering look out of those brown eyes. “You *do* like him.”

That wasn’t the point at all. Blake smoothed her hair back. “I’m attempting to become well-rounded.”

“You like him.”

She didn’t do things *because* of a man. “I’m correcting an obvious gap in my education. A woman with a PhD shouldn’t have any obvious gaps.”

“You *like* him,” Hallie insisted with a wide grin.

Damn it. “Yes. I do. Not that it needs to be public knowledge. Or even any knowledge to, you know, Wyatt. Or my brother.”

“Dinner is going to be *so* much fun. I’ll help you. But we need to get out of the travel section.”



• • •

Wyatt hadn't ever expected to come to a tiny coastal town to create art. But he'd *definitely* never expected to be dining with the current and the ex-mayor of said town. And a woman who seemed to alternately want to kiss him or punch him without any warning as to her shift of mood.

He also hadn't expected to watch Blake get determinedly tipsy.

Being a professional, practiced observer didn't just melt away from his personality once he signed his separation papers from the agency.

Nobody else in the apartment probably noticed. But Wyatt had absolutely taken note of Blake stating she was headed to the bathroom, doubling back in the hall, and sneaking into the kitchen to chug an entire glass of wine.

He didn't care if she felt she needed it. He cared *why*.

Was she that uncomfortable bringing him along to a family dinner? Worse—was he screwing it all up in some way? Would he have to admit to the Exiteer that he'd failed at 'average family dinner' night?

To give her cover to get back into the living room unnoticed, Wyatt shifted the conversation. To his neighbor, and Fitz's best friend. "I'm glad you're here, Everett. One less stranger in the room for me to keep straight."

Everett shoved his horn-rimmed glasses back up his nose. "Gotta wonder why I'd crash what looks like a couples dinner?"

Blake had mentioned that she and her brother weren't close, but were trying to improve that. Had Everett been invited as a buffer?

"Blake and I are not a couple."

"Fitz and Hallie wouldn't be one without me," he laughed. "This time my fee for cooking was staying for the fun."

Sounded like there was a story there. "*This* time?"

“The fun?” Blake snorted as she sat back down. “Nobody has ever described a dinner with me as fun. Formal. Perfunctory. Pleasant. Not fun.”

“Guess your brother forgot to forewarn me,” Everett said with a straight face. Then he guffawed and poked Blake in the knee. “If you were one of my students, you’d get detention for saying something so self-defeating.”

“I have a PhD in molecular biology. I’m nobody’s ideal dinner party guest.” She pressed her knuckles into her temple. Either stress—or the wine—must’ve given her a headache. “That isn’t self-defeating. It is self-acceptance,” she said in a wistful tone.

Fitz settled back into the cushions, dropping his arm around Hallie’s shoulders. “Blake, if you were truly that boring, believe me, we wouldn’t have invited you over.”

Wyatt swallowed a snort at that brotherly logic.

“You didn’t,” Blake shot back. Lips barely moving, she said in a very small voice, “Hallie did.”

That was pointed enough you could practically see a stick protruding from Wyatt’s back. Okay. She was going off the rails. Wyatt jumped back in. “What did you mean by this time, Everett?”

His neighbor crossed his arms, smugness radiating from him like the stench around a cartoon skunk. “I cooked for Fitz and Hallie’s first date. Did all the work and got shown the door before she arrived so he could make his move on the librarian.”

Fitz abruptly hinged forward. His loosened tie flapped at his knees. “I’m grateful. But, to set the record straight, Ev didn’t do everything. I peeled *all* the shrimp. A personal horror that will never be forgotten. Or relived. As God is my witness.”

Wyatt bit back a chuckle. The guy didn’t like the feel of raw shrimp? He should try sticking his hand in 98.6 degree intestines, feeling around for a swallowed microchip. *Then* the ex-mayor would have something to complain about.

Wyatt was still trying to work out the connective strings

between them all. He *had* done a background check on Everett. It hadn't revealed anything out of the ordinary. Or anything cooking-related. "I thought you worked at the high school. Do you moonlight as a chef?"

"Apparently only for my hapless, helpless friend Fitz here. It's just a hobby. One that he conveniently takes advantage of."

"No complaints here. Those short ribs were outstanding." Their small talk hadn't diffused the tension in the room one bit. The other three were stiffly silent. Wyatt didn't have a clue how to fix it.

Or what was going on.

Or if, as supposedly nothing more than Blake's paired contest partner, he *should* do anything about it.

"Blake." Hallie came over to perch on the arm of the sofa next to Blake. "I'm not trying to perfunctorily make nice with my boyfriend's family. I wanted to get to know you better. That's it. No other reason for the invite than I hoped we'd all have fun. Plus check off meeting one of Cygnet's guest artists. And Everett," she added belatedly. She gave a one-armed hug, then sat back down next to Fitz.

The smile Blake shone on her was a tad trembly, but warm. "I've been so worried that you wouldn't like me ever since you and Fitz began dating. The prospect of tonight terrified me. Not many people enjoy slogging through conversations with scientists, in my experience."

Wyatt didn't think he had much of a heart to break. But it certainly felt scratched, hearing Blake cast herself in such a shitty light.

He wouldn't stand for it.

"I did. Enjoy talking to you. When we met at the airport. Still do."

Four sets of eyes flipped to stare at Wyatt. Blake's were wide with shock.

Hell.

Talk about a rookie mistake. Volunteering info without being directly asked for it. This whole being himself, not being careful thing? It'd just created a disaster. Especially since Blake had made him promise not to reveal the actual timeline of their meeting.

If she reamed him a new one, he'd deserve it.

"You two met before the contest?" Everett shook his head, clearing the previous half-of-a-story that Wyatt had told him like a mental Etch-a-Sketch. "You said you got matched up with her on stage. Not that you matched yourself *to* her beforehand."

"No, well—" Before Wyatt could hustle to explain, Fitz cut him off with a guffaw, pointing at Blake, who didn't even feel like she was still breathing next to Wyatt.

"Did you bring in a ringer, Blake?"

Hallie elbowed Fitz in the ribs. Hard. "How could you ask your sister such a thing?"

"It'd be a smart, competitive strategy. How is that an insult?"

Everett picked up the corkscrew and another bottle of Shiraz. "Because Blake doesn't cheat. She's a rule-follower to the nth degree. Can we get back to whatever did or did not occur at the airport?"

"There is no such thing, scientifically, as a cone of silence. And I can't ask you to hop in the cars and drive to Cygnet to have this conversation in the Faraday cage there." Blake tapped her index finger against her lips. Gave each of them a ferocious stare-down.

Blake was adorable when she went off on a scientist tangent. Although now would clearly be an inappropriate time to share that thought. Wyatt had—unintentionally—shared more than enough already. In a night already full of weirdly personal reveals.

At least she didn't sound pissed.

Fitz held up three fingers. "Scout's honor, sis."

She threw back a giant slug of wine. “Then, yes. Wyatt and I met at the Portland airport. Got socked in by weather together. And then we chose to, well, have copious amounts of spectacular sex.”

Hallie squeaked. Wyatt groaned and scrubbed his palm across his eyes. Everett whipped off his glasses and frantically polished them with the tail of his blue flannel shirt.

Holy fuck.

It was one thing for Wyatt to admit they’d met sooner than anyone knew. It was entirely another thing to give an orgasm recap before dessert. She really had plowed through the wine in worry over—what—being an entertaining guest for her brother?

Wyatt gave a hearty chuckle as he swiped the glass out of her hand. “You’ve definitely had enough. I thought that was our secret?”

“It was. Or rather, it was *supposed* to be.” There must be a glacier missing from Antarctica to account for all the ice coating Blake’s words. “You, however, just opened the vault and invited everyone in for story time.”

Oh, he *knew* he’d screwed up. Had earned a slap-down.

But Wyatt disagreed with her claim. Maybe he’d let a little slip. Little enough, though, that it was easily explained away with a simple lie. Obfuscation. A reimagining of the truth. *Nobody*, however, would’ve guessed about their sharing a room from his casual mention of their meeting.

But he wasn’t idiot enough to argue with Blake about it either here or now.

If he’d thought the vibe was awkward before? It was ten times worse. The awkwardness didn’t just fill the air. It coalesced into a human shape and sat down between Wyatt and Blake.

“For the record? This is the least bored I’ve *ever* been at a dinner party.” And then Hallie burst into rippling rounds of giggles.

At first, nobody else joined in. But when shit spiraled this far out of control, what else was there to do *but* laugh? Especially when Blake was the first to join in.

As the wave of laughter subsided, everyone gasped and caught their breath. Everett refilled their glasses. Then he lifted the bottle high to get their attention.

“So—to recap—Wyatt and Blake did the nasty. A lot. But had no idea they were about to be paired up for this internationally known contest. And now you don’t want anyone but us—the few, the trusted, the accidentally confessed-to—to ever find out that happened, because it looks hinky as fuck.”

After glancing at Blake first to be sure he had her go-ahead, Wyatt nodded. “That’s the gist of it.”

“Technically, it isn’t all of it,” Blake corrected. “There are additional reasons to keep it under wraps.”

“Like Wyatt should’ve kept his dick,” Fitz murmured.

He was too much of a gentleman to point out that Fitz’s sainted sister was the one who’d suggested the hookup. Plus, although an only child, Wyatt understood the instinctual code Fitz was following to protect his sister.

His older, fully adult sister that didn’t need his permission for diddly squat.

“No blame,” Blake ordered. “No blame, no excuses, no regrets. As long as you all keep this to yourselves.”

“Can we talk about it some more, first? Before we lock it away for good? Can we get details and a minute-by-minute recap? Over the cranberry apple crisp I can smell in the oven?” Hallie chuckled softly. The librarian evidently got a kick out of the dull red of discomfort creeping up her boyfriend’s neck.

There was no chance in hell that Wyatt would leave that question to be answered by more-than-a-little drunk Doc Montgomery. Instead, he unleashed a considerable dose of charm on Hallie. “I don’t kiss and tell. What kind of man would that make me? Not one you respected enough to share dessert with, that’s for sure.”

“Thank you.” Fitz didn’t run into the kitchen. But he didn’t take his time getting away from the living room, either. Hallie followed him, offering to make coffee.

Everett crouched behind the coffee table. Looked at Wyatt. “You’re clearly a man in need of my particular skill set.”

The last time someone said that to Wyatt, it was in regards to hacking into a biometric security system. Blinking away the déjà vu, Wyatt asked, “Which of your many skill sets would that be?”

“Cooking. A nice romantic meal. You and Blake have, frankly, given so much of yourselves to entertain the fuck out of us tonight. I owe you. Let me give the lovebirds a delicious date night at home.”

“We’re not dating.”

After putting a finger alongside his nose, Everett gave an elaborate wink. “Right. We all agreed on that.”

“No. I mean we’re truly not dating. That was the understanding from the start. One night, no more.” Although he was starting to wish they hadn’t drawn that line in the sand...

Everett looked back and forth between Wyatt and Blake. Then crossed his arms, pointing at both of them. “You’re here tonight. Together.”

Huh. So the guy had watched them interacting all night and assumed they were a thing? That was interesting.

“I brought along the artist I was paired with, without my knowledge or consent, might I add, so that he could meet with Swan Cove’s mayor. At her request.” Blake had pulled herself together to make that sound convincingly stern. As if she’d put up with no more discussion of the topic.

Everett, however, had to be at least semi-decent at reading people, as an assistant principal. The steady assessment he leveled at them said he wasn’t buying it. Then he grinned and rubbed his hands together with glee. “I’m not a fifth wheel on a double date? This night is getting better and better.”

He headed for the kitchen. It left Wyatt and Blake momentarily alone.

That was a dangerous situation.

Wyatt didn't *have* to stay in a dangerous situation in this new life. But he only rose halfway before Blake stalled him with a soft hand on his thigh.

"Why'd you reveal that we'd met before Swan Cove?"

"Well, you know, we've all been drinking. Just relaxed my brain too much, I guess."

"Untrue. *I've* been drinking. A lot. Because I was nervous about not boring Hallie to tears. You hardly had anything to drink. You tried to hide it. Kept sipping from your glass, but the level didn't change. You've had maybe one full drink all night."

The doc kept up that scientific level of observation even with a wine-fuzzed head. Good to know. Wyatt would have to be more careful around her.

"Didn't want to risk embarrassing myself around the mayors, is all."

"Truth, then. Why'd you let it slip?"

"Truth?" He'd spent most of his life working hard at *not* sharing that. He excelled at non-truths in any and every situation.

"Please. Always."

Shit. There was the truth Wyatt had started to realize just how much he enjoyed his time with Blake. Couldn't tell her that. But he could share the precisely targeted truth of the moment.

"I hated seeing the hurt on your beautiful face when you talked about believing people thought you were boring. Needed you to know that wasn't the case." He tucked a silky strand of hair behind her ear, allowing his thumb to graze along the sharp edge of her cheekbone.

Hell if Blake didn't angle her head toward the touch.



“Thank you.” Her eyes blinked, triple fast, then zipped toward the hardwood floor. “I enjoy talking with you, too.” Then she fluidly rose to join the others.

Wyatt didn't even need his helping of the delicious-smelling crisp. That compliment had been all the sweet dessert he needed for the night.

Until a sourness twisted his gut.

What he'd just said had been a Band-Aid, at best. It was more of a neon-freaking-flashing reminder that he couldn't be truthful with Blake.

Not the way she wanted.

Not the way she deserved.

Which was becoming more of a problem for Wyatt... because he was realizing just how attracted to her he was.

## Chapter Ten

Turned out that Dr. Montgomery was a little bit sneaky.

Which Wyatt appreciated.

She'd walked him through a few departments, ostensibly doing introductions. Felt strange doing it so late. Many people were shutting down for the day. Her slow amble had ended at the cafeteria. Where she triumphantly raced to the bakery area.

"They put out whatever's left from lunch right at five." Glee rushed her words out. "You can take as much as you want, so they don't have to throw it away."

Wyatt eyeballed the trays of cookies, individual pies, and donuts. Then he gave an up and down to Blake. She was sleek and stylish in a black cashmere turtleneck tucked into slim black pants with a silver chain link belt.

"You do this every day? How are you not the size of Rhode Island?"

"Of course not," she huffed. "It's about quality over quantity. The bakers are seasonally inspired. And this week—and this week only—they're doing their famous pumpkin fudge brownies. Sort of a pumpkin cheesecake wrapped in two layers of brownie."

Wyatt grabbed a slice—there weren't many, next to the assortment of cookies. Devoured it in two bites. "Yeah. This is amazing."

"I noticed them yesterday. Trust me, these are gold. There won't be any leftovers by tomorrow once word spreads. They're too dense and heavy to safely carry all the way to the parking lot in the bags, so I even brought containers...drat. I left them in my car."

"I'll go." To be a gentleman—and to be sure he scored a few, too. "Where are your keys?"

"In my car. My space has my name on it. Second row on the left, first slot."

“Hilarious. Where are they actually?”

Blake circled the tongs at him. “In my car,” she repeated in exaggerated slo-mo. “How is that hilarious?”

There was no possible way that was the case. “You lock your desk and your office just to walk down to the bathroom.”

“Right. That’s Cygnet protocol, for insurance purposes. Plenty here that an enterprising ne’er-do-well could steal and sell on the dark web. Can’t risk an animal testing protestor somehow getting in and grabbing the keys to the lab, either. Everything inside is maintained at the highest security levels.”

He’d observed that to be the case. Tested it on numerous occasions. In fact, Wyatt had spent the last two days investigating every inch of the campus (camouflaged discreetly as ‘seeking inspiration’), looking for any sign of trouble.

The thing about trouble, though? It often stayed unseen, until it was too late to do anything but sweep up the shrapnel.

Not on his watch—unofficial as it might be.

Trying not to explode himself, he watched Blake finish stuffing paper bags. “But not your car.”

“There’s nothing belonging to Cygnet to steal in my car. There’s nothing to steal, period.”

“Of course there fucking is!” Wyatt yelled the first two words, then immediately regained control and locked down his volume to finish the sentence.

Shit.

So much for not exploding. Good thing the enormous room with its green glass partitions was almost empty this late. Or that any outburst of his would probably be written off as ‘artistic temperament’.

Coolly, Blake asked, “Have you been snooping? Taken an inventory of the contents of my car? That’s creepy.”

Snooping, sure.

Always. *Aka* taking every precaution to keep himself alive.

Just not around her car. Yet. “No need. I can name two things, right off the bat.”

“If this is a gender-based slam, assuming I leave, oh, diamond tennis bracelets in the console, I’m withholding your share of the brownies.”

Good. She wasn’t all the way pissed, yet.

Wyatt, however, was more than all the way...*concerned* for her. Time for a slap of reality.

“The first thing that could be stolen is *you*, Doc. You could be kidnapped.” He tapped the side of her head. “Cygnet’s intellectual property is all in here. You could be flown to a fully-kitted out lab in Dubai and forced to finish your work there. Except it’d never reach the world. Just the single family rich enough to orchestrate the whole thing.”

Her mouth, slicked a deep, glossy red today, gaped open. “You watch too many movies.”

“Maybe. But I also read the news. Stories like this aren’t just for summer blockbusters. They happen. In real life.” Those cases weren’t publicized. Were, in fact, hushed up more often than not. So that average citizens could feel safe. In a world that often was quite the opposite.

Wyatt *knew* the stats. Knew the facts. And he knew he’d do anything to keep Blake from becoming one of them.

“That’s horrifying.”

“Yeah.” Wyatt took her hand. Took a split second to register its softness—and the way it immediately curled around his. “That’s the perfect word. I’ll bet Fitz would be horrified if anything happened to you. Along with everyone here at Cygnet.” He took a deep breath. And decided to risk sharing another sliver of truth. “Me, too,” he finished softly.

Their eyes locked. If Wyatt was a romantic at heart? He’d say he’d wordlessly poured out his deep-seated need for her to be safe, and she took it all in.

Good thing he wasn’t a romantic.

Two excited scientists reached across them for brownies,

murmuring apologies. Blake picked up their bags, holding them from below, and passed one over as they left the bakery display.

“I never thought that I was a commodity worth taking. Honestly? This makes me want to have a chat with Cygnet’s head of security. I’ll bet none of the other scientists have looked at it from this vantage point, either. We should all do a basic self-defense course.”

“That’d be a good idea.”

Blake led him out of the dining hall toward a lounge area. It was lit with enormous blown-glass bulbs in light blues and greens. The effect was similar to being underwater. And Wyatt was certain the lights were Chihuly sculptures. Cygnet definitely had spared no expense, using priceless artwork in the room full of bean bags and ping-pong tables.

“Okay. Now I can see why you freaked out about leaving my keys in the car.” Hand over her heart, she gave an apologetic nod. “But you’ve got my curiosity piqued. What’s the other thing that could be stolen that you just happen to know about?”

Really? This wasn’t an *I’m a paranoid ex-spy* thing. It was obvious. “Your car!”

“No.” A giggle tinkled out from her. “Oh, no, that wouldn’t happen. That’s a very cute, big-city attitude. Swan Cove is tiny. People come here because they want the safety of *not* locking their doors, of knowing all their neighbors.”

Sure they did.

Believing only people with good intentions shared the streets, though, was blind idiocy. The sort that could get her robbed, raped, or killed. That hadn’t been true in villages in medieval times or during the Renaissance. And it sure as hell wasn’t true today.

If you only saw what you wanted to see? You missed a lot. Including whatever would undoubtedly bite you in the ass.

He wouldn’t, couldn’t let that happen to Blake. Wyatt didn’t need to win the contest. Or have it proven that he could make

a living as an artist.

As of right now? The one thing he needed to accomplish in his six weeks in Swan Cove was to make sure Blake was capable of handling her personal safety.

Wyatt put his hands a scant inch apart. “The voting population of the town is small.” Then he spread them to shoulder width. “It swells all the time, though. Tourism is your main industry. The cruise ships, the leaf-peepers—you’ve got non-residents in and out of here in huge numbers, all the time. I just want you to be safe.”

Blake patted his arm. In the same tone his mom used to promise him the closet held no monsters, she said, “Swan Cove is very, very safe.”

Damn it. He wasn’t getting through to her. Her persistent naivete wasn’t something Wyatt could ignore.

Making sure people were at least aware of the dangers of life was a personal crusade of his. Most days, he didn’t get to do anything more meaningful than pointing out that a house needed another smoke alarm. But occasionally an opportunity like this presented itself.

He would make damn sure Blake’s eyes were wide open.

Planting his palm high above her head, caging her against the wall, he growled, “*Nowhere* is safe. Ever. Trust me.”

An urge swept through him. One he hadn’t experienced in decades. It caught Wyatt off-guard. This urge to talk about his parents.

He *never* did that.

But he very much wanted Blake to absorb the need for caution.

And he very much, in this attempt at a whole new life, wanted to share what little he could of his old one.

• • •

Blake blinked at the menacing man Wyatt had transformed

into. His brows had contracted into a thick, dark line. His eyes had deepened with a noticeable intensity. The words he'd forced out sounded coated in pebbles. And he held himself with a rigidity that scared her.

She'd been naked—and intimate—with this man after knowing him less than an hour. They'd spent hours cooped up together in her office. Wyatt had never once scared her.

Until now.

Suddenly, he dropped his arm. Stepped out of her personal space. His whole body jerked. Almost like waking up from a dream. Blake was still scared. But not for herself.

For whatever had put Wyatt in that state.

In his ordinary, smooth tone, he asked, “Do you have time to sit for a while?”

With no hesitation, she said, “Of course.” Obviously, Wyatt needed someone, something right now. Blake didn't know what, exactly, but she wanted to help him. “Why?”

“I want to tell you a story. One that will impress upon you how you can't ever assume that something evil won't hijack your day.” His tone was serious and insistent.

*That* lecture was one that she did not particularly want to stick around for.

Once her overbearing, interfering parents had shipped off to Florida over the summer, Blake had the first full respite in her life from being told what to do. From being lectured at.

About why fast-paced promotions were all-important. About why the Montgomery name needed to be kept free of scandal and drama and, worse yet, any hint of lackluster-ness. About how to schmooze donors and be warm but impersonal with her neighbors. About the ‘right’ way to do everything, the ‘right’ people to know, the ‘right’ ones to hire.

While she wanted to help Wyatt, she did *not* want to put up with any patriarchal bullshit from him.

“I'll listen. But there's no need to lecture me,” she snipped.

“Not a lecture. Something it’d be...good for me to get off my chest.” He dipped his head, looked at the floor. “You’d be doing me a favor by letting me share it.”

Her heart instantly softened. Wyatt didn’t ask for anything from her.

Blake looked for the emptiest corner. There were only three other people in the large lounge, so it wasn’t hard to find a spot where no one could overhear. Once they were seated on the seafoam green velvet pouf of a couch, Blake folded her hands in her lap.

Even though she really wanted to grab his and squeeze.

“We shouldn’t be interrupted here. What’s your story?” No point beating around the bush, or easing into it. Neither of them were the cautious, touchy-feely type.

He leaned forward slightly, letting his hands dangle between his legs. “My parents wanted to celebrate their wedding anniversary in style. It was their twentieth.”

“That’s a milestone,” Blake agreed. But her mind raced. Where on earth was he going with this?

“Dad thought it’d be a ‘grand gesture’ to go back to the scene of their engagement. Not at night—they weren’t rolling in it. His plan was to make up for that with a big champagne, blow-out dinner someplace less pricey. So the engagement recreation—with a bigger, shinier ring he was surprising Mom with—had to be in the morning. First thing, to cut down on crowds. Dad greased a few palms to get in before the place officially opened.”

“Even my science-shriveled heart says that hits all the feels.”

“It did. He told me the whole plan ahead of time. They were so early that the express elevators weren’t running yet. They had to go to the 105th floor and walk the last two flights with the security guard.”

Oh no.

Blake’s hand flew to her mouth.



Everyone of her generation had an automatic touchpoint for stories about buildings that tall—which there weren't many. Wyatt had said he was from New York. She didn't need him to say anything more to know that his parents had been caught in the 9/11 attacks.

She didn't *want* to hear more.

But she did want him to unburden himself. "Oh, Wyatt," she murmured.

He continued as if she hadn't said a word. "It was a beautiful day. Clear sky. They could see everything from the observation deck. Including the smoke from One World Trade Center. But the guard got on his walkie, was told to stay put. He assured them they were safe. That they should enjoy the moment Dad had engineered and bribed to get."

His words came in fits and starts. There was no swiftness of a practiced story told over and over again. It was slow. Raw. Blake laid a hand on his thigh. "You don't have to go on."

"I think I really do."

She glanced around the all but empty room again. To hell with being careful. "Then get over here." Blake patted the cushion. Wyatt didn't hesitate to snuggle next to her, legs touching. She wrapped her arms around his biceps and rested her head just below his shoulder.

Wyatt let out a slow sigh. Her touch did seem to ease him. He rested his cheek on the top of her head, like he was letting her hold him up emotionally and physically. Blake would stay all night in the position, if it helped.

"Mom loved the ring. Dad told her I'd helped pick it out. She insisted on calling me, to thank me. I was already in my studio, trying to finish a painting before my first class of the day. They left a message."

"You didn't hear right away about the plane?"

"No. Classes were interrupted. But people like me, in studios and practice rooms—well, no one really knew what was happening. When I came out to head to class, the second plane had hit."

Words weren't really Blake's milieu. Even if they were, though? If she was poet laureate? What was there to say that hadn't been said by an entire nation over the past twenty years? What new, fresh take on solace could she possibly offer?

The intensity, the depth of the feeling in her words—that was all Blake could convey. In her tone, in her touch. “I’m so sorry.” She didn’t want to push. Part of her didn’t want to know. Still, after an internal deliberation, Blake asked, “Did they leave you another message?”

“No. All the circuits were busy by then. I guess it’s good that the last thing I heard was both of them as happy as they’d ever been.” He shifted to wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her closer.

Blake helped, putting her legs across his and surrendering to the full cuddle. They were both squeezing hard. As if suspended in midair and needing to hang on to each other with all their might.

Their breathing fell into sync. Well, mostly in sync, and partly in rhythm to the bells and ocean waves coming through the speakers.

“It was a final gift. Having their pure joy to play and replay.”

“Yeah. Except that...I know...I imagine...” Wyatt broke off. Swallowed so hard that Blake heard his Adam’s apple work up and down. “We all saw the footage. Read the timeline. They didn’t end happily or easily. They had to be scared witless.”

This was definitely one of those times where the not knowing was just as bad as the knowing. It was far too simple for imagination to fill in the gaps after all the hours of constant replay and commentating on every minute detail.

Blake wouldn’t, couldn’t try to minimize it. Or pretend that time had healed over his emotional wounds. “You’re right. There’s nothing that could possibly dilute that truth. Or make it more palatable.”

His head tipped back to rest on the edge of the cushion.

Wyatt stared up at the clouds painted on the ceiling. “It was one of the happiest moments of their lives. A celebration. In this famous city, in a landmark—they should’ve been safe. There’s no way my dad would’ve gone if he’d thought there was any risk. But danger found them.”

Oh.

*Ohhhhhh.*

Blake got it now. The traumatic loss of his parents didn’t just imbue Wyatt with grief. It layered fear and vigilance on him in thick, ropy scars.

Her heart ached for him. She concentrated on breathing in slowly through her nose, eyes shut. It was a trick her mom had taught her to prevent tears from falling in public. One that had been barely utilized since leaving puberty and its raging hormonal mood swings behind. But Blake absolutely needed it now.

Because she wanted to cradle Wyatt in her arms and *weep* with him for his loss.

Which wasn’t her, at all.

Blake didn’t do big emotional gestures. She kept everything buttoned up. That was the Montgomery way. And also played well in the scientific community.

And she certainly hadn’t seen Wyatt be dramatic at all in their time together. For all that he was an artist? He seemed very fact-oriented. Like her.

So she went to her comfort zone—the facts.

“You’re not actually concerned that someone is hiding in the back seat of my car, waiting to kidnap me. You’re simply concerned that some unknown danger is hanging out there, waiting to strike.”

“Not quite. Yeah, I’m more attuned to the possibility of a shit cloud dumping on someone with zero warning or reason. But I do definitely think that all the biggest brainiacs at Cygnet should be about 1000 percent more cautious.”

She agreed. But it physically hurt her to see the scarred

torture in his eyes. To hear the thickness of his speech. She had to try and snap him out of the moment, out of the deep sadness. Tongue in cheek, she said, “I’m sure we can rustle someone up to write an algorithm to predict oncoming danger.”

He continued with his thought as if Blake hadn’t spoken. “My parents didn’t see the possibility of the attack coming at them. You, though—you’re aware now that your brain itself is a commodity. You’ve got to protect it.”

His embrace hadn’t loosened at all. Beneath her legs, his thighs were corded steel. How could she get him to relax? This wasn’t her wheelhouse. Yet she was desperate to do *something*. If she couldn’t ease his pain, maybe she could pivot him away from it?

“I wear a helmet when I go bike riding. Eat lots of salmon and turmeric and, well, dark chocolate to ward off mental decline. My brain’s all good.”

Wyatt’s arms fell to his sides. “You’re brushing me off.”

“No. Honestly. Just trying to give you a mini-break to catch your breath.” Blake angled out and straightened up to look at him. His eyes weren’t damp. They were...empty. All the light and heat was gone. She cupped his stubbled cheek. “I hear you, Wyatt. Truly. Your story got through to me that danger does, indeed, lurk everywhere.”

“Good.” He let out a low, hollow laugh. “Because that was not fucking easy. Needed to be worth it.”

For many, that would’ve been an oft-repeated story. At least the bare-bones facts of it. Every indication, however, was that this was an extremely rare walk down this memory’s lane. “You don’t share that piece of your life often, do you?”

“Try never. I’m not big on sharing any personal details.” His nose crinkled. Like the very idea of it smelled worse than autoclaved cell culture waste. “With anyone. Especially not a pain that leaves me feeling like I want to sleep for a week from the effort of spitting it out.”

Maybe knowing *why* it happened would help him deal with

the aftereffects. Knowing the rational explanation behind things always helped Blake to be able to take them in stride.

“Well, a traumatic event releases cortisol and norepinephrine. That combo strengthens the negative memories. They’re locked in, steel reinforced, concrete encased. Plus, you have a greater fear response due to changes in your amygdala.”

“It sounds almost...reasonable when you break down the science of how shitty I feel right now.”

“I’m sorry my thoughtlessness forced you to relive it.”

“No.” Wyatt pressed his lips to her forehead. That small gesture whisked away her guilt. “It was right. The right time. The right person. Thanks for listening.”

But...they couldn’t be done already. Blake needed to hear the rest. Needed, it turned out, to know everything she could about this enigmatic man. “What happened next? Did you stay in school?”

“Um, yeah. Ultimately, I mean. Aunt Bec drove down to be with me after a few days. I wouldn’t let her come before then. Too scared it wouldn’t be safe, that there’d be another attack and she’d be caught in it.”

“Even up here, we felt the same thing. My first trip to Manhattan after it happened—well, we used to go two or three times a year. I didn’t return for a solid eighteen months. The fear of what might happen was too strong.”

“The service had to wait. We knew they were gone, but the funeral homes were booked up. We held onto each other through the memorial.” He huffed out a breath that was half surprise, half laugh. As though after all these years, he still couldn’t believe it. “And then I went back to school and changed my major.”

“To what?”

“Well, it’d been art. On a full-ride scholarship, even. But I couldn’t see the point of it any more. I had to do something with my life that would be retribution for my parents.” Wyatt winced. “That sounds wrong. I didn’t go on a vengeance

streak. Just changed my major to poli sci. I went into the foreign service. To try and at least do everything possible to prevent the next attack. Because there's *always* a next attack."

Blake had expended so much energy—wasted, really—on disliking Wyatt for being an artist. Even though he'd told her it was a new attempt at the career, she'd never contemplated what else he'd done.

"That's noble. To give up your dream. One you were obviously good at. Not to mention changing the thrust of your life when everything else was changing, too. That takes amazing strength."

"Not really. Not when you feel like there's no choice."

The stubborn on this man was as thick as frosting on a fudge cake. "For goodness' sake, Wyatt. Take the compliment!"

"Not really my nature."

Blake gave him a swift kiss. "Do it anyway. Doctor's orders."

He laughed. Blake curled back into him, enjoying the deep rumble vibrating his chest. His arms encircled her once more. "Became a diplomat. Got posted all around the world."

"The foreign service." Wasn't that what James Bond did? Or was he import/export? Blake shook her hands and rounded her mouth in an *O* of fake fear. "I thought that was a euphemism for spies."

"I started as a courier. Constant travel has been healing for me. To move around the world and meet people in so many different countries who were...peaceful. Interesting. Wonderful." He waggled those thick, dark brows comically. "And don't get me started on the food. So good. Everywhere."

Hmm. Was that a heavy-handed attempt to remind her that his stay in Swan Cove could be temporary? That he'd rather travel the world than be stuck here? Disappointment zinged through Blake. As lightly as possible, she said, "Here's hoping our coastal Maine food isn't a disappointment."

"*Nothing* about Swan Cove disappoints." All that light and

heat rushed back into his face. Emerald fire burned in his eyes. Blake actually felt a rush of heat over her skin.

Physiologically impossible. She knew better.

Oh. It was her *own* flush of heat, stoked by Wyatt's lustful look.

They'd shared this deeply painful connection and Blake had a deeper understanding of who Wyatt was...which was a man she very much admired.

Respected.

Liked.

Wanted to know everything about.

Wanted...

# Chapter Eleven

There were certain common mistakes that Blake never made. She always stayed to the right on an escalator. She never sampled a grape in the grocery store—that was stealing. And she was never, ever late.

Not even with that fog that had so delayed her flight the day after meeting Wyatt.

Until today.

And the reason? The utterly implausible reason? She'd stayed up far too late taking virtual tours of museums. It turned out there was much more to Monet than that single ubiquitous poster that hung in every other female dorm room.

Tiepolo? His ornate works, so colorful and full of detail, *mesmerized* Blake. Romanticism? She shouldn't like it. Overblown. Over-the-top.

Overwhelmingly stunning.

Her next trip would have to be to London. The National Gallery, to see the Turner exhibit. Or possibly D.C. to see the Thomas Coles.

Regardless, Blake had overslept. Embarrassingly.

No, she didn't punch a time clock at Cygnet. But she was a Montgomery, which meant holding herself to a higher standard, in and out of work.

So she was flustered as she approached her office. Guilty. Frazzled. Huffing from the half jog/half walk she'd used to get there a whopping two minutes faster. And thus sweating in her wool coat, scarf, hat, turtleneck and sweater.

Obviously the perfect moment to be accosted by Dr. Peabody. Her key was in the freaking door. Two more seconds and she would've been in. Able to strip off layers. Catch her breath. Not feel like she'd been caught sneaking in.

“Dr. Montgomery. We have a problem.”



Seriously? He planned to ding her for being late for the first time ever? “I doubt it deserves a label as negative as a ‘problem.’”

Shockingly, he patted her arm. “That’s the spirit!”

Blake was no longer certain they were talking about her tardiness. Especially since her boss was *not* a toucher. “Would you care to expound?” That sounded much more professional than *am I in trouble or are you on a whole different thing*.

“Dr. Yang has been put on bed rest for the rest of her, well, gestation.”

She didn’t know which horrified her more—that Peabody couldn’t say ‘pregnancy’, or that Nari’s baby was in danger. “Is she hospitalized? What’s the prognosis?”

“Those are really questions for HR. Ergo, not questions we should be bandying about.”

Blake hoped that unwinding her mohair scarf hid her automatic eye roll. Peabody often got fixated on doing his role at Cygnet more than being an actual person.

“I’m not asking for her amnio results. Just trying to suss out how stable she is. If I should be arranging for food to be delivered. Flowers. Standard measures of expected care from coworkers.”

“Ah. She’s home. Of course, obstetrics is a guessing game of a field.” Peabody snorted, polishing his glasses in his habitual gesture of disdain. “You might as well toss a handful of runes on the ground to determine when labor will happen. But I believe she is forecast to be fine, as long as she adheres to the bed rest.”

“Good.” Nari was the public face of Cygnet. But her warmth and passion weren’t just words on every press release. She made routine tours through every department, checking in, listening to grievances, and giving pep talks. Everyone liked—

Oh.

Oh nonono.

Nari was the public face of Cygnet—and thus the contest.

The pieces slammed into place in Blake's brain as loudly as a cell door slamming shut.

*This* was the problem.

Peabody stalking Blake in the hallway could only mean that he expected her to help him solve it.

She opened the door a crack and tossed her scarf inside. She was suddenly sweating twice as much and couldn't bear the extra warmth on her arm.

"Dr. Montgomery, Nari personally put forward your name as her stand-in." Peabody extended his arm and gave a quarter-bow.

Even worse. She'd been dreading a day wasted in meetings to debate a replacement. *Being* the replacement was unthinkable.

"That was kind of her. But I'm sure she was more focused on her medical emergency than thinking through the most appropriate candidates. We can put our heads together, pull in Dr. McCavity and the entire communications team—they deserve a say."

"Everyone already signed off on you."

Not *everyone*. Blake was 100 percent against the idea.

She shifted her computer bag to her other shoulder. It bought her maybe three extra seconds to try and think of some way out of this. Unfortunately, when she looked down at the floor tiles, they provided no inspiration. Shouldn't there be some complex pattern hidden in the streaks of color that her scientifically honed brain could translate into an escape plan?

"Again, I appreciate the show of support." Which was, technically true. It was a compliment that everyone thought she was capable.

Or...it was that everyone thought her the perfect fall guy to prevent one of them from being roped into it...

Blake schooled her features to make sure her boss wouldn't be aware of how *appalled* she was at the suggestion. Then she let a too-fast smile out, to indicate her supposed reluctance at

turning him down. “Nevertheless, it’s best if I refuse. My time is already stretched thin enough between research and helping Mr. Keene navigate through lab life and hone his inspiration.”

Peabody’s eyes narrowed beneath his bushy brows. “This is not a negotiation. Although you will, of course, receive a commensurate bonus for doing the videos, the press.”

Her heart suddenly thudded so hard that the noise dosimeters down in the sub-basement probably picked up the spike. Sure, she’d done plenty of public appearances with her family over the years. Waving from a parade car. Waving from behind a ribbon cutting. Waving from a boat.

*That was her comfort level.*

No words. No camera six inches from her face, recording every twitch and eye dart. Nothing that could be posted on a website commemorating for all time how often she licked her lips or wandered from the cue cards in a panic while saying ‘um.’

In a near whisper, Blake said, “Videos?”

“This is the tenth year of our Expanding Human Potential Summit. That alone requires video clips of what’s next on the horizon. Adding in the SciArt contest necessitates a strong marketing push. We can’t wait for the world to notice what we’re doing here. They must be told.” Peabody made a fist. Slashed it through the air for emphasis.

Oh, she got the message. Loud and clear.

There was no escaping this.

There was also, suddenly, no ability to catch her breath.

“I understand.”

“Good. No doubt you’ll rise to the occasion. Think of it as a test run for once you’re promoted. We’ll be using you a lot for these sorts of things.” He flapped a hand at her. “You’re not only a capable scientist, but a woman. Attractive. Those things are important to show that Cygnet doesn’t have any old-school hang-ups. That we embrace STEM as a concentration for all genders, and we want them to look to us as the most

aspirational landing site once they've completed their training.”

If she'd been sweating before? Now Blake was as hot under the collar as if she'd been huddled in a sauna. Was it dripping down from her hairline?

They wanted her to be a figurehead? The token pretty blond woman that oh-so-handily had a PhD at the end of her name?

She'd worked tirelessly to make sure that her science was taken seriously, evaluated equally *despite* having ovaries. And now they wanted to parade her out solely for her boobs and not her brains?

Obviously, she needed to respond.

Blake couldn't do it. Couldn't come up with anything that wouldn't get her fired for insubordination. Rudeness. Swearing. Or quite possibly slapping him across his jowly face.

Peabody glanced at his watch. “My assistant sent you a schedule. You'd best get right in and figure out how to make it work. Good god, this thing with Nari is creating layers upon layers of extra work for all of us. What a mess.”

Shaking his head, he strode away.

What a mess.

Nari was trying to successfully grow a human *and* keep herself healthy, and all he could think about was the extra work?

Blake couldn't move.

She couldn't go into her office and dutifully read the schedule of what was being dumped in her lap.

She couldn't run after her boss and tell him that he was a soulless jerk.

She couldn't...just couldn't handle the swirl of anger and frustration and helplessness. The continued inability to do anything more than gasp far too quickly. Which was complicated by the way her throat had locked down to prevent

choking tears from erupting. So Blake stayed, hunched over, hands clenched into fists.

“Hey.” Wyatt stuck his head out, then eased open the door the rest of the way. Then he slid her computer bag off her shoulder and set it inside the office. “Let’s go.”

Oh, God, was she late for something else? Panic jolted through and pushed the words out of her. “Go where? I’m already late. I have to—”

“You have to come with me right now.”

That was when she noticed he was wearing his coat. “Did inspiration just strike? You don’t need me to tag along for that.”

With a firm hand at the small of her back, Wyatt pushed her down the hallway to the stairs. “Yeah. Inspiration that you need to get the hell out of here.”

“I don’t understand.” She was, however, intensely grateful that he’d intuited her need to regroup.

“I heard the whole thing between you and your boss. He’s a dick.”

“Shhh!” Blake spun in a frantic circle, checking to see if anyone was within hearing distance.

“Nope. He doesn’t pay my salary. I get to say what I want.” Wyatt jabbed two fingers up and behind them. “Plus, we passed the only two security cameras in this hall seven steps ago. There aren’t any more until we turn the corner and hit the stairs.”

That was a strangely specific thing for him to have observed. Maybe it was a holdover from his years spent traveling the globe in places with more oppressive governments—always knowing where the exits and the cameras were?

“You heard *everything*?”

He bared his teeth in a grimace that looked decidedly antagonistic. “You mean the part where he doesn’t give two shits about Nari except for how it’s messing with his schedule?”

Or the part where he railroaded you into taking over for her because your boobs look great under a sweater?”

Relief at not having to rehash the conversation washed over her, like the cool breeze her skin had been seeking this whole time. “All of it, then.”

Wyatt paused with his hand on the crash bar of the stairway door. “You want to check on Nari first? Give yourself some peace of mind that she’s really okay?”

Look at that. Wyatt had three times the compassion of Dr. Peabody, and he’d never even met Nari. “Thanks, but it isn’t necessary. If they let her do home bed rest, she must be stable.”

“Then we’re out.” Their footsteps echoed on the concrete. They didn’t encounter another soul as they clattered down three flights.

They pushed through into a gray day tinged with only slivers of sunlight reflecting off the snow. Blake had sussed out that Wyatt took her outside so she could vent at will. But he didn’t stop under the overhang of the building. He led them down a winding path between rows of towering pines. Their branches drooped with dollops of snow from last night’s storm.

“You pissed?” He yanked on his gloves with short, sharp movements.

Blake almost giggled at how little that scratched the surface of her actual mood. “That would be an understatement of epic proportions.”

“Believe me, I get why.” He gave the top of her shoulder an *I’m on your side* squeeze. Something that could be overseen by a colleague and not in any way construed as romantic. In other words, it wasn’t nearly enough. “Still think you should say it out loud. Best way to get it off your chest. Well, either yell it at me, or, I don’t know, are you a journal writing type?”

“Definitely not.” There’d been a half-assed attempt at it for ten days while in therapy in college after a string of walloping nightmares. Therapy that had helped her put labels to why she

felt or acted a certain way, but did nothing to fix the fact that she didn't like her over-controlling, uninterested-in-her parents, didn't know how to relax, and measured her entire self-worth in her scientific and academic accomplishments. "I'm the emotionless, calculating, science-worshipping sibling. Fitz is the charming, people-pleasing wordsmith."

"You're not emotionless. Choosing when to share feelings instead of spraying them like pesticide from an airplane is a positive trait." Little clouds of air puffed out and hung warmly in front of Wyatt's face.

"I agree. But you and I are in the minority on that."

"Or you could say that we're unanimous."

Blake liked that perspective very much, indeed.

Something had shifted between them.

To be clear, their status had never been static since day one. It shifted on an almost daily basis, from the initial attraction and lust to immediate horror and loathing to grudging respect to intolerance to of course lust again to warming friendship on top of all that lust.

But after he'd shared with her the story of his parents' tragic deaths a few nights ago, their connection had deepened. Changed all the way down to a cellular level. No longer were they two people, forced to share space, who constantly snarked at each other.

They'd learned more about who they were deep down, not just the labels of their professions. Or rather, *despite* their professions. They truly had become a team.

They'd become friends. And so often teetered on the edge of something more than friends. Which *terrified* Blake.

This summit already came with extra roles and responsibilities—including a private dinner with donors where she was to pitch her current research. Adding on the artist pairing had topped her out at what could be reasonably handled.

Stepping in for Nari—there wasn't enough time in the day.

This would pull time away from her research. And the research was what mattered most. It wasn't hypothetical, like physics. They were reversing blindness. How was *that* not a bigger priority to Cygnet than her being a figurehead?

Emotions were a clutter of chaos. Emotions were the number one cause of lab missteps—aside from actual clumsiness. Or, thinking of Stamings breaking the spectrophotometer, dares from artists. Giving in to her burgeoning emotions for Wyatt would be reckless. Dangerous. Ill-advised.

He was a distraction. Worse, he was a temporary distraction. He'd made it clear that he wasn't committed to staying in Swan Cove.

And after her disaster with Rob? Blake would have to wholly trust and feel an ocean of commitment vibes from her next potential boyfriend before risking her heart again.

They stopped by a blue bench made of folded and formed metal slats. "I use discretion when letting out my emotions. Too much makes a mess. Like unscrewing the lid from a bottle of club soda. A little at a time, to relieve the pent-up tension."

"I can't think of anything I'd like to do more than relieve your tension." Wyatt grinned. And that grin did *not* have friend vibes. It carried a hint of a growl. Enough sexy suggestion to melt all the snow on the bench. And it was topped off with half-lidded bedroom eyes the color of the pines surrounding them.

Good thing she had her righteous fury to distract her from the freaking *current* of need his words crested through her body.

"You're talented, I'll give you that," she said with forced airiness. "But I don't think anything could relieve the tension I'm going to have for the next few weeks. Not after this bombshell Peabody just dropped."

Wyatt brushed off the bench and gestured for her to sit. "Do you like speaking on camera?"

"It terrifies me." Even talking about it had her stomach



clenching. “In person, even from a stage and spotlights, I can find a face in the crowd to talk to, connect with. Still uncomfortable, but doable. Videos have no connection. It almost...blanks my mind.”

Everyone at Cygnet had been required to do video stories for their site and social media during the pandemic. Repeatedly. Not a single one had gone smoothly for Blake.

“It’s shitty of your boss to force you to do it.”

“Agreed.” And oh, it felt so good to have Wyatt on her side!

Blake was used to being an island. Someone who had to be both above reproach and, more importantly, above whining.

Wyatt was a true partner. He listened, he held her up. Like she’d done for him.

It was remarkable.

Still holding his wet glove, he slapped it against his thigh. “Feels like Peabody’s using you. As a woman. And because he doesn’t want to do it himself. So, doubly shitty.”

Blake hadn’t felt this much gratitude since a logger changed her tire in a blizzard two years ago. “Thank you. Thank you for saying it to support me, and for understanding that this isn’t right.”

“Say no.” Then he dusted off his hands, as though the matter were actually settled.

Simply hearing those words taunted her with what couldn’t be. Blake pinched the bridge of her nose. “I can’t.”

One dark eyebrow shot skyward. “You think your job would be in jeopardy from saying no, once?”

“No. I think my *future* job would be.” This was where Blake would feel awkward trying to explain corporate culture to an artist. But surely as a government worker he’d witnessed, if not been strangled by, the tangled vines of bureaucracy. “Everyone expects me to take the leap into leadership.”

He angled more sideways. Took her cashmere-gloved hands in his. “You know I’m listening. But I’m not hearing you say

you *want* to do that.”

“It’s what’s expected,” she forced out between gritted teeth.

“For God’s sake, Blake. I know you’re a science geek, but you surely had to pass your verbal SAT on the way to PhDrville. ‘Expect’ and ‘want’ are not synonymous.”

“If you’re a Montgomery, what’s expected of you is the only thing that matters.” It was why her brother had been forced into taking the reins of the town as mayor as soon as he finished grad school.

“Did your parents expect you to be a...ballerina? Or a lawyer?”

“No. Just immensely successful. I chose science.”

Snow squeaked under his boots as he twisted up from the bench like a corkscrew. “Now you’re going to make me drill down into the difference between successful and satisfied? How old are you?”

“That’s a delicate question to ask a woman.” Blake didn’t actually care. She just was prickling at how Wyatt was pushing her.

“Since when are you sensitive about your goddamned gorgeous looks? Answer the question.”

The way he’d wrapped a compliment inside his irritation prompted her to answer. “Thirty-five.”

Wyatt threw his arms up in the air, startling some chickadees out of the branches with frantic chirps of displeasure. “There you go. Old enough to know the difference inside and fucking out.”

She didn’t have to sit here and be lectured. But before she flounced off in a righteous huff, Blake needed an explanation. “I thought you were on my side. Why do you sound mad at me now?”

“Because *you’re* not on your side, sweetness.” Wyatt lightly cradled her elbows. “Because I can’t stand by and watch you be bullied into doing something you dislike. And that takes you away from your research, which a blind pig could see how

passionate you are about.”

Well.

She couldn't flounce off after *that*. “Just to be clear—you are the blind pig in this analogy?”

“Sure.”

Blake didn't think about her movements. She just sort of tipped forward until her cheek hit his red-checked scarf. And when his arms went around her so naturally? It was the most settled she'd felt in ages.

He moved his top hand in a soothing circle. “We can talk about this another time. You're already riled from the run-in with Peabody. I didn't bring you out here to make things worse.”

“You haven't.” But he had picked at the corners of the carefully bolted-down lid she'd placed on her secret, unfulfillable desire to *not* move into leadership. To simply revel in doing the work of discovery and proof and execution. To turn science into life-changing miracles.

How was that not a good enough expectation?

“Still, I'm sticking with my original plan. You helped me the other day. My turn to even the score.” Wyatt dropped a light kiss on her forehead, then spun her ninety degrees. “Follow me. Do what I do. Or—you know—do it better.”

He leaped onto a boulder camouflaging a speaker. Then he jumped *across* the path to land with one foot on the bench, and one on its back.

The pose highlighted his long and lean physique. Blake tried—tried *hard*—not to stare directly at where his pants drew tautly at his crotch.

“What...are you doing?”

“Parkour,” he shouted like a loon while beating his chest.

“How is that an explanation?”

“It's moving from one point to the next, ah, as the crow flies. Using obstacles instead of avoiding them.” He looked at

her over his shoulder. “It’s believing there are no obstacles that can’t be overcome.”

Her artist had morphed into a combination of a philosopher and a mountain goat. “You’re trying to teach me a life lesson by climbing on outdoor furniture?”

“I’m trying to get you out of your head. Do, instead of think.”

Blake looked down at her houndstooth pants. “That’s not my forte. Especially not in work clothes.”

“Think of your clothes as just another obstacle. C’mon.” Wyatt pointed at the boulder, then held out his hand. “Don’t wuss out on me, Doc.”

“You’re *daring* me?”

“Daring. Shaming. Asking. Whatever works.”

Well.

She had to get close enough to him at least to wipe that challenging grin off his face with a gloveful of snow. Blake cautiously stepped onto the boulder. It didn’t so much as wiggle. She did a little quick physics in her head to calculate the distance and the velocity needed—bet Wyatt hadn’t bothered with the general thrust equation, which meant he was just winging it—and leaped to the bench.

“You forgot a step. There’s rules to this game, Doc.” Wyatt threw back his head and screamed again. “Parkour!”

“That’s—do I have—” One look at his set jaw cut her off. Cupping her hands around her mouth, Blake yelled, “Parkour!”

By the time the sound died away, he was off already. Swinging from a pine branch as if it were the monkey bars.

And by the time Blake hollered “Parkour!” for the fifth time, laughing and panting while trying to balance atop a sculpture of the eponymous cygnet, she realized that Wyatt’s plan had worked after all.

Brilliantly.

## Chapter Twelve

Dressing up for Halloween—even in just an oversized corduroy blazer that Randall had forced on him to ‘complete the look’—felt like lying in Wyatt’s new life. He’d thrown that bone of discomfort to the Exiteer on their weekly phone call. Figured it was good to give him some small nugget to chew on.

Craig had laughed. Then told him to take his head out of his ass.

So much for honestly sharing his feelings. Wouldn’t make *that* mistake again!

So here he was. Pretending to be the hero in a rom-com movie. Pretending to be an artist by having a pad and pencil overtly sticking out of his pocket ‘in case inspiration struck.’

The one thing he didn’t have to pretend? Being absolutely leveled by Blake in her tight pink leather skirt and jacket. Not to mention the lacy shell that had her breasts—

Well, it wasn’t as obvious as the sexy vampire, sexy Maid Marian, and the three sexy devils. Apparently the Cygnet crew really, really wanted to up the hotness ante on the one night lab coats weren’t required.

But for Wyatt? None of them came close to Blake’s innate sensuality. It freaking dripped off her. He could barely draw a full breath from watching her blond curls bounce on the breasts framed by all that pink leather. Yeah, his gaze kept target-locking at one spot on her anatomy. Deliberately, he looked down—and was confronted by the lithe length of legs revealed by her miniskirt.

There had to be an explanation for why he’d been in a state of semi-arousal since picking her up. “Are you wearing perfume? Something different, I mean?”

“I’m so glad you asked. Perfume,” she yelled into his ear. Then she grimaced at the scrum around the punch bowl and drew him back out into the relatively quieter hallway. Its walls

were draped floor to ceiling with cobwebs. The right side held a spider with a bulging red belly, at least three feet wide. The opposite wall had something far scarier—a row of spider babies. “Wyatt, you’ve got to stay away from everyone who works on Dr. Stevens’s project.”

He could put a face to the name. Lanky. Shock of sandy blond hair. Thin lips that were quick to smile. But that was it. “How would I know who’s on his team? Nobody’s got name tags on.”

“Sorry. You’ve been amazing at keeping everyone straight.” Blake beamed up at him. Tiny crystals winked at the corner of each eye. “I’ve got all the faith in the world in your abilities.”

It might’ve been a tossed-off line in the middle of a party, but man, her praise rang a bell deep within him. He’d crawl over barbed wire to get another look from her like that one. “I make an effort,” he said modestly.

It was better than the truth—that he’d trained extensively and practiced every day for years to be able to remember the broad strokes of a person’s appearance after a mere split-second glance.

That didn’t include knowing if they split DNA for a living or did something else Wyatt both couldn’t pronounce and didn’t understand.

“We’ll have a signal. If I see anyone from Matt’s team, I’ll hand you Lady Thiang. For protection.”

The dog? The one that practically fit in the pocket of his overcoat? “Against what? Are they working on germ warfare? Have you seen them leave a bathroom without washing their hands?”

“Worse.” She waved a hand in front of her nose as if a skunk had just sprayed. “They’re all wearing pheromones they created in their lab tonight. The men and the women.”

It took him a minute to put the pieces together. Then Wyatt had to choke back a laugh. “You think if I get within sniffing distance of Matt or his minions, I’ll want to fuck them?”

“I would’ve said ravish, but yes. Your word or mine—both

true. For the women, in your case. It won't attract you to the men." Blake stood on tiptoe to whisper in his ear. "I'm quite certain of which team you play for."

Her hand slid beneath his blazer. Her body undulated against his side. So much for not letting on at Cygnet that they'd seen each other naked before officially 'meeting' here. Blake's inhibitions seemed to be clocked out for the night. It killed Wyatt not to be able to share that mindset with her.

But he had a job to do tonight. He eased away, ducking under a hanging pinata of a witch on a broomstick. Since this was Cygnet, Wyatt guessed that the thing wasn't full of SweeTarts and Tootsie Rolls. Probably something much cooler like noise-canceling earbuds.

Tapping the side of the orange cup in her hand, Wyatt asked her, "How many glasses of punch have *you* had?"

"One. Oh. I should've warned you about that, too." Blake pointed at the longneck dangling between his fingers. "Good call. The punch is Long Island iced tea, with a splash of festive cranberry."

"Christ." At least he knew why Blake had loosened up so much. Not that he was complaining, on a personal level. But to see an entire building of people get wasted? Well, hilarious, sure, but... "That's a recipe for disaster."

"Why do you think the Cygnet party's so famous?"

Wyatt had mostly been hoping there'd be an open bar, more of those pumpkin brownies, and something more significant than sliders for food. "A good band later?"

"Definitely." Blake shuffled in a loose circle and did something fancy and fast with her feet while her arms moved to an unhearable rhythm. "The leading rumor's that it's either Ed Sheeran or Kacey Musgraves. We always get the big names. But also? We just blow it out."

"That's surprising." Wyatt could picture maybe 15 percent of the Cygnet employees he'd met as the type to let loose outside of work.

He'd tried a couple of different personas, seeing what felt

most comfortable as just *him*, as he roamed the halls. Folksy, charming, affable, fast-talking, jokester—all he'd gotten in return? A mess of unblinking stares, followed by a gap of silence before they jumped back into describing their current research.

Blake picked up Lady Thiang and cuddled her while still moving as though in a mosh pit. “Our daily lives are a constant stream of following rules, protocols, exacting step-by-step experiments we've already done fifty times. This is our chance to toss all of that out the window.”

Wyatt was *thrilled*.

He'd already made arrangements (*aka* looped the video feeds on a sequential timer) to have unfettered access to offices. This party was his best chance to look for something strange. Better yet, incriminating.

The biggest stumbling block in discovering if there might, indeed, be bad shit going down during the summit? Nobody had handed him a mission. Pointed him in the right direction.

He'd spent long nights doing a basic run on finances, but was limited without the backdoor access the agency provided. It could be scientists, lab assistants, back office workers on the take—or just a crime of opportunity to grab a bunch of test tubes and hope they were worth something.

Too many suspects. And motives. And potential crimes.

But drunk employees? That was a whole different ball game. Whether a fun drunk, a flirty drunk, or an angry one? Universally, drunks *talked*.

Thanks to this once-a-year punch, he'd probably get some answers.

“Hey, guys.” Everett waved as the elevator doors finished opening. A wolf howl came from inside it, and a flash of red light. He stayed in the elevator to brandish an enormous whip and crack it against the floor.

The last time Wyatt had seen a whip that big, it'd been looped at the waist of a UAE sheik. Rumor had it that he didn't hesitate to use it. And that it was only the tip of his



human rights violations. Wyatt had been happy to be a part of the team that emptied his bank accounts.

“Why are you armed?”

“I’m a vice principal at a high school. I deserve this.”

“Who are you supposed to be?”

Everett tipped his top hat. Gestured at his long red coat over a gold vest. “I’m P.T. Barnum. From *The Greatest Showman*.”

Blake *tsked*. And did a windshield wiper move with her index finger. “He didn’t carry a whip.”

“I repeat, I’m a vice principal. Any excuse to crack a whip? No matter how thin? I take it for one night.”

Wyatt liked Everett. Would normally enjoy hanging out with him at a let-it-all-hang-out party. But for his casual interrogation to work? He specifically did *not* need a sober audience of one clueing to the fact that he was asking randomly strange questions. “Are you on a date?”

“Yeah. Couples costume with Chu. Doctor Chu Li. She’s the bearded lady. She talked me into this getup by promising to do a career day talk in November for my sophomores.”

Blake wrapped her index fingers together. Wide-eyed, she asked, “Are you two a thing?”

Christ. She was adorable. Relaxed. And funny. Wyatt knew he couldn’t leave her alone. Especially not near the punch. She’d have to come on the fact-finding mission with him.

Everett’s faint smile coupled with the confused squint behind his horn rims showed that he was as amused—and confused—by her behavior as Wyatt. “Are you drunk? Since when do you care about gossip?”

“Ana told me I have a reputation as an ice princess. I’m trying to engage more. Notice things beyond science. Participate in, well, sure, gossip.”

“Hey.” He cracked his whip against the floor again for emphasis. It made the cobwebs flutter. “You’re fine however you want to be. It’s the advice I give my students, and it’s just

as true for adults.”

“Thank you.” She crouched to put Lady Thiang down. It put Blake in the same position she’d been in when giving Wyatt a blowjob a couple of weeks ago. The flashback made him regret even more not getting to enjoy his girlfriend—

*Fuck.*

That’d been a slip of epic proportions. What was his subconscious trying to do to him? Sabotage his off-the-books mission? Wyatt didn’t have girlfriends. Period.

Their whole situation was confusing.

Spending all day, every day together. Doing non-work things together. Becoming friends. Becoming...well, Blake was becoming *important* to him.

That scared the hell out of Wyatt.

The lesson life had shoved down his throat, repeatedly? Was that *anything* could be ripped away at any minute. Just like he’d impressed upon Blake. That people, good people, died. It was safer, easier, and yet again, fucking safer to not care. To not get attached. His career as a spy had made that almost simple.

Then he’d barely survived the pain of losing his aunt a few months ago. The single attachment he had left. Wyatt had realized that he hated knowing he was entirely alone in the world.

It’d been the impetus that made him accept the Agency’s offer of retirement instead of a desk job when burned. It’d been the reason to toss away his almost twenty-year career to chase a crazy dream. It’d been the reason he’d come to this middle-of-nowhere speck on the map.

And it’d been the reason his insomnia had returned.

Aunt Rebecca had been old. Man, she was probably turning over in her grave that he’d even *thought* that. So, not old, but significantly past middle age. She’d been young enough that the fatal stroke had been a shock, but old enough for people to accept it and credit her for a life well lived.

Wyatt had known, categorically, that every year she outlived her brother—his father—she crept closer to death. He'd even worked with a therapist during a long mission in London to accept that Aunt Bec would, someday, leave him.

Yet her death had still rocked him to his core. Turned his life inside out. The nights he didn't have insomnia, he had nightmares.

Except for the night he'd spent with Blake.

Long story short? He couldn't have a girlfriend. Definitely no woman deserved to take on the hollowed-out mess that he was. And, oh yeah, the whole part where he'd have to lie to her about how he'd spent his entire adult life. Talk about a relationship *not* having a foundation of trust and honesty.

It'd been a fluke. A mental slip. File it under the daily struggle to adjust to life as wholly himself.

The Exiteer had warned him that issues would arise. Things average people took for granted, that Wyatt would have to teach himself to take in stride.

So...yeah.

Nothing to worry about.

Lady Thiang sat on his foot. Barked twice. Guess she didn't like the cold ground. Plus, everything was so hermetically sealed and sanitized at Cygnet, she probably had nothing good to sniff down there.

“What is that, anyway?” Everett gestured his whip toward the pup. “Whatever was left over when they made a real dog?”

“She's a loan,” Wyatt said with a grin. “Part of Blake's costume. I'd better pick her up. Don't want her all scared in this loud, strange environment.” His reward was exuberant licking along his jaw. “Maybe I should get a dog,” he mused.

That was normal, right?

Everett hocked up a laugh, even as he scooped his hand around her fluffy ears. “Not this one. I'd have to make fun of you every time I saw you guys out my window. That'd eat up a good portion of my life.”

“Shouldn’t you go find your date? A couples costume loses impact when standing about solo.” Blake leaned against Wyatt, as if to prove her point, and then snapped a selfie.

Uh-oh.

Wyatt did *not* need his photo out in the world. That might have been a rule from his old life. But in his new life? He still didn’t want to take any chances. While watching Everett disappear into the crowd, he said, “Hey, please don’t post that anywhere.”

“I wouldn’t,” she said haughtily. Blake’s wide emotional swings were cracking him up. “What about the parts of my life you’ve seen leads you to believe I’ve got time to waste on social media?”

“You said you’re crazy about musicals. Figured you might have an account to fangirl ’em.”

“You think you’re such a good judge of character?”

You bet. That’s what the government had paid him for.

That, and being wily, unobtrusive, observant, good with his hands whether on the handle of a knife or diffusing a bomb, and a general *save the world or bust* attitude.

“I’d say I see through a facade pretty quickly.” Wyatt was prepared to needle her all night. But it only took a couple of seconds before Blake wilted under his stare.

“Damn it. Fine. Yes, I have an account on Instagram.”

“Ha!”

Lady Thiang barked right after him, clearly siding with Wyatt.

“Not in my name, of course,” Blake hurried to clarify. “And I only follow and comment. I never post. Neither Cygnet nor my family would be pleased if I put my real self out there to be torn apart by trolls.”

Huh. Here he was, no longer worried at all about how others might see him. Or if they’d care a flying fuck about his actions. Wyatt wasn’t exactly giddy with that freedom. More

like he didn't know what to do with it.

And Blake seemed absolutely *chained* by the expectations heaped on her. Not happy about it. Just...accepting. They were both stuck, at weirdly opposite ends of the spectrum.

Wyatt elbowed her. "You owe me, Doc. For guessing your secret."

"Stick around all night. Who knows what you might collect?" The look she gave him from beneath half-drooped lids was a sultry promise.

Whoa.

The safety of everyone in this building *might* be at stake. And he was the only one with the unique skill set—and availability—to make that determination.

Wyatt took a deep breath, then repeated the thought again. Stick to tonight's mission. It was his absolute best chance to collect intel.

*Don't blow it on wanting to back Blake into the nearest office and kiss that hot pink gloss right off her lips.*

"Let's check off more boxes on our costume bingo cards," he said, handing over the dog. No sense risking a drunken scientist tripping over her. Wyatt thanked the party-planning demi-gods (because what full-fledged god had time to waste on petty things like parties?) for providing the bingo. It was a great excuse to talk to *everyone*.

With a hand in the small of her back, Wyatt led Blake around the corner. It was all of ten steps before they joined a cluster. A Christopher Lloyd mad scientist homage, a black swan, a Waldo, and...

...oh wow. Talk about someone who, more than Wyatt, should make sure he wasn't photographed at *all* tonight.

"Mal? I, ah, don't think you're allowed to wear that sort of costume anymore." His friend was in a full black Catholic bishop's cassock, along with its red cape, sash and mitre. "That's cultural, or at least religious appropriation."

"Pantheism, dude." He tapped the anachronistic red *bindi* on

his forehead. “The Vatican and India come together in a beautiful union on my body this Halloween.”

Blake frowned. “I thought you were from Illinois?”

“Yes. Cubs forever. But look at me.” Mal used both hands to open the black shirt to reveal his chest. It was very dark brown, and covered in a veritable carpet of hair tangled with beaded necklaces. Wyatt didn’t think he’d ever be able to unsee it. “This skin harkens back to the state of Gujarat, birthplace of Gandhi and Lord Krishna.”

“*Lord Krishna?*” Waldo snickered. “Dude, you’re in the choir at the Methodist church with me.”

This was awesome on two fronts. One, it was hilarious watching the overachieving, overly serious Mal let loose. And two, it proved to Wyatt that the employees of Cygnet had indeed hit the punch bowl hard enough that he could ask questions without arousing any suspicions.

“Hey, I watched this show on Netflix last night. About a lab assistant who was kidnapped and taken to a lair to make cutting-edge drugs—well, impotency drugs—for a crime lord. The bad guys didn’t think he’d be looked for as just a lowly assistant.”

“Of course, there’d be a rescue mission. Impotency drugs?” The black swan fluttered her eyelids in triple time. “They’re a bigger cash cow than the cure for the common cold!”

Blake hip-checked her. Hard. Hard enough that Lady Thiang got jostled on her perch and yelped. “Bixby, you can’t go saying things like that. There is no cure for a cold.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry, I thought Wyatt counted as one of us. In the know. You know?”

Oh, man.

Part of him really, *really* wanted to follow that trail and find out if there was a secret stash of cold cures in the vault in the sub-basement. The common cold had almost ruined three of his missions. It was hard to be sneaky with the sniffles.

Focus.

Wyatt swapped out his almost full beer for a full one from a passing waiter. Easier to maintain the illusion he was partying as hard as the rest of 'em. "So if a badass crime boss was going to kidnap someone at Cygnet, who'd he take?"

Bixby went up on point, did a pirouette with arms overhead, and then stayed in that position while pinning him with a pointed stink eye. An eye that had tiny feathers glued onto the lashes and silver glitter for shadow. "A badass crime boss? Is absolutely female."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to be gender specific."

Blake *tsked* at him. "Do better, Wyatt."

"I could narrow it down to a top five," Mal mused, popping up his fingers.

"Sure. Easy," Waldo said dismissively. "But really, it's only a top four, because number five's obviously Dr. Perez, and he's a frigging nightmare. They'd pay Cygnet ransom after a day to give him back to us."

All the Cygnet employees winced simultaneously. "True," Blake said.

The problem with extracting intel from happy, wasted people? They didn't stay on track. Wyatt loosened his tie. "Just, you know, the best project. Most game-changing for results. Blow your mind big."

"Mortenson has those gold nanoparticles delivering drugs to tumors," Mal said.

"Yeah, but what about the poly (ADP-ribose) polymerase inhibitors that Barlowe's working on?" The swan floated her arms up and down every time she spoke. Had to give her mad props for the committed cosplay. "Those could stop prostate cancer in its tracks."

"You're all wrong." The crazy-haired scientist spoke for the first time. While shaking his head so vigorously that his white wig turned around halfway on his forehead and dipped onto his eyebrows. "There's no comparison. It's Ngam."

Waldo did an elaborate wrist twist and half bow. "Oh, yeah."

Blake nodded. “You’re right, of course. I can’t believe it took all of us this long to circle around to him.”

Wyatt couldn’t believe they’d all agreed. He’d mentally filed away all the names, but it was nice to have a clear winner.

Mal chugged half his drink, then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. “Ngam’s got this plant he found in the Amazon. On a two-month trek. He contracted malaria that still reoccurs.” The fringe on the side of his pants rustled as he shook his entire leg. “To top it off? He almost lost a leg to a python.”

Right.

Sure he did.

Right after being set upon by a pygmy tribe and getting a toe nibbled off by piranhas. This crew had watched too many jungle horror flicks. And they were naive as *fuck*.

Tongue in cheek, Wyatt drawled, “Any chance that story’s grown over the years?”

Mal seemingly sobered up in an instant. His concentration face was on: squinted eyes, pinched mouth, and a deep line cutting the narrow space between his brows. Clearly Ngam and his discovery were not topics open to any sort of teasing.

“This was only fifteen months ago. He’s distilling two separate enzymes from it.” The words *flooded* from him in rapid admiration. “One makes antibiotics, mRNA drugs, look as effective as pure saline. Knocks out every bad bug there is. And the other one? Restores the libido. Revs you up from zero to sixty. Here’s the kicker—it works in men *and* women.”

The monetary implications were obvious. Whoever manufactured either of those enzymes—turned them into drugs—would be astronomically rich. The two-pronged goodness of this plant would equally appeal to the selfless and self-serving. It was one-stop shopping.

Wyatt knew that it didn’t equate to a guarantee that anyone *did* plan to infiltrate Cygnet during the conference. Or that Ngam would be the target.



His intuition said that it was sure as hell likely, though.

“You know what else works on both genders?” Waldo lifted his cup overhead. “Cygnet Halloween punch!” The four hooted and toasted and headed toward the nearest bar. Wyatt had counted eight so far, and they’d only been on two floors.

He decided to press his luck. “Hey, let’s go see it.”

“What?”

“The Amazonian plant.” Ngam’s lab didn’t sound like something he’d be able to pull up on any schematic. The labs weren’t listed under the names of their scientists, but rather whatever mystical form of science that occurred in them. Wyatt couldn’t make heads or tails of how to match the person or a project to a door number and a floor.

Blake slowly set down the dog. Since she’d forced him to watch the movie with her to prep for the party, Wyatt could identify that she was doing the bend and snap motion.

“What’s going on with you?” Maybe he’d given the punch too much credit. Maybe the scientists just really knew how to enjoy the moment. Because, just like Mal, Blake appeared all too suddenly and seriously sober. “Why are you probing for information on Cygnet projects?”

Shit.

He’d been attracted to her quick wit and obvious smarts from the get-go. Tonight, though? It’d be handier if Blake were simply no more than the pink-clad blond bombshell she resembled.

“Just curious,” he tossed off, as he encircled her waist and yanked her close. It surprised a gasp out of her. Blake’s head fell back, exposing her throat. Wyatt knew not to ignore a golden opportunity.

Just the wrong side of gently, Wyatt scraped his teeth across the delicate cords of her neck.

“I’m out of my depth here. But a plant that knocks out bacteria and makes your dick hard? Even I can see those benefits.” He made sure his warm breath puffed just below her

lobe. Goose bumps popped out above the wrist she'd already draped over his shoulder. "I just wondered what it looked like. Big red flower, or candy-cane striped, or bulging."

Did he grind his hips against hers on that last word? Yeah.

Was he proud of it? Hell, no.

There was barely any blue showing from beneath Blake's long lashes. She was putty in his arms.

It felt like crap. That *shouldn't* be a tool he pulled out of his box of tricks anymore. *Especially* not with Blake.

"You know, I've never seen it myself," Blake said.

The elevator dinged a warning it was about to open, no doubt dislodging more partiers. Wyatt stepped back to a distance more socially acceptable. Far enough that he couldn't smell her perfume anymore. Which really sucked for him.

Flashing a deliberately lopsided smile, he said, "Sorry. Hard to play by the rules at a party like this one."

"Right. Um, thanks. Yes. We should go look for that rumored top-your-own-brownie bar. Harder to accidentally kiss with a mouth full of frosting."

Wyatt clenched his teeth so hard he almost felt a crown jostle under the pressure. The mental image Blake had just gifted him...well, she'd never been so wrong. All he could think of was licking a mouthful of frosting off of her.

Couldn't someone else be responsible for possibly saving the world?

Just for tonight?

# Chapter Thirteen

Blake wasn't a snob. Yes, her family had oodles of money—even though she never touched what was in her trust fund. Yes, she'd led a privileged life with vacations all around the world and the best universities.

But she didn't see any point in buying name-brand...canned corn. It didn't taste any different from the store brand, despite the cachet.

She appreciated the lobster rolls at the dive shack thirty miles down the coast as much as the lobster fusilloni at the Four Seasons in Milan.

Right now, though? Blake felt like a through and through snob...and yet she still needed to register her protest at being dragged to the local salon, no matter how bitchy it made her sound. As a Montgomery, with an image to uphold every single day in Swan Cove, her mom had harped for years on the fact that nobody on the east coast could cut hair like a Manhattan stylist. Less than perfection would be noted. Judged. Snarked upon.

“Ana, hang on. Stop a second.” She backed up against the window to the gastropub, still painted with beer foaming out the top of pumpkins. It was two days past Halloween. How were there not already two snowmen painted up there, clinking ice steins?

The numerous buckles on her friend's motorcycle boots jangled as she crunched her way into one of the few remaining piles of leaves. “There's no time. Megan's already sticking around the salon after closing as a personal favor. And that cuts into her time flirting with the cast of that touring show before they have to hit the theater. You may not realize it, but that's a huge sacrifice on Megan's part.”

Blake wasn't sure if Ana was making a dig at Megan or herself.

Knowing Ana, it was probably *both*.

She tightened the loop of her orange and gold mohair scarf. “Look, if you’d told me earlier that we were going out tonight to get a makeover, I would’ve stopped this. I’m sure Megan’s talented. But I’ve had my color palette chosen by the best cosmetician in Manhattan.” She hadn’t strayed from it since her mother took her there as part of her eighteenth birthday. So she would ‘look like an appropriately tasteful representative of the Montgomery family.’

“You’re being obtuse.” Ana tossed back her long, dark waves. “You’re friendly with Hallie now, right?”

Well. That was direct.

Arguably intrusive. Or it just felt that way because so few people ever poked into Blake’s personal business.

“Yeeees?” she strung out slowly.

Hmm. Blake wanted it to be true.

But Ana was quite close with Hallie. Was she making too much of an assumption? “If *she* says so...” Yikes. Or was she simply making much too much out of the simple question? Firmly, this time, Blake stated, “Yes.”

Her brother’s girlfriend was pretty great. Great for Fitz, sure, but Swan Cove’s first non-Montgomery mayor was great on her own merits, too. Blake was enjoying their more frequent text exchanges.

It’d been Wyatt who’d convinced her to do so. He’d gone and used science to trick her into it. Inferred that if she followed Newtonian time, she was an old-fashioned stick-in-the-mud. That Blake *had* to be a proficient enough scientist to deftly manipulate Einstein’s dynamic view of time to squeeze in a few friendly texts.

She’d always dismissed extraneous friendships—anyone not a scientist, network possibility for grants, or her sole undergrad friend who loved musicals as much as she did—as a distraction from work.

Ana was her lone exception to that rule. She’d sort of wormed her way beneath Blake’s armor of reserve and insinuated herself into Blake’s life. She couldn’t entirely

explain it or fight it.

Holding up four fingers with her thumb folded under, Ana said, “We’ve got a solid quartet going: me, Hallie, Randall, and Megan.”

“Okay. Good.” What did this have to do with her makeup?

“There’s always room for one more. Which means you need to meet Megan. Officially. Not as the smile-and-wave Montgomery princess-of-the-town shtick you do, but on a person-to-person level.”

That was...not a calculation she’d made. Ana seemed to be jumping ahead in leaps and bounds.

Blake’s knee-jerk reaction was, obviously, about work. It was the same one she’d used all her life, when invited to parties or games.

“That’s kind of you. Thank you. But I’m so busy. I really don’t have time to socialize very much.”

Ana kicked the leaves into a flurry of crisp color. “Bullshit.”

“Things at Cygnet are, well, I’m being pressured. Quite a bit. I can’t afford to lose focus for a second.”

“You can’t afford *not* to.” Ana scowled. “This whole working-nonstop lifestyle isn’t sustainable. You’re headed for burnout. In my line of work? I lose focus? I get a papercut from a first edition *Treasure Island*. But when you lose focus because your brain hasn’t had a chance to switch off and reboot?”

Blake had, actually, given this quite a bit of thought recently. Too much stress and caffeine and the ever-present unsettlingness of Wyatt had her hands shaky. She’d dropped a slide. A pencil. And seven peanut M&Ms.

“My hand with the hypodermic slips and I push it too far past the eye *into* the brain and the mouse dies.”

Ana’s mouth gaped open. “Jesus, Blake? I was going to mumble something about you not winning the Nobel. I didn’t think you could actually kill something.”

That made her sound like a mad scientist in a Bond movie. Blake put a hand to her heart. “I try very hard *not* to, believe me. Not just because it invalidates the data sets. They’re soft and sweet and helping cure people. The last thing I want to do is hurt the mice.”

A cluster of women forced them to line up against the wall as they rushed by with their cruise ship-branded totes and lots of bags hanging from elbows. This ship, or next week’s, would be the last until spring. The tourists would still come for cozy, snow-bound coastal weekends, but in far smaller numbers.

Would Wyatt be one of those people who appreciated the slower pace, the feeling of being almost on an island? Or would it push him to leave?

If he decided to stay in the first place. And even if he did, Blake couldn’t afford to take the time for the distraction of a full relationship.

Funny how she repeated that at least seven...to ten...to fifteen times a day, and yet it never fully sank in...

Once they could stand face to face again, Ana held up three fingers, each with a different delicate silver ring. “To recap: avoid potential burnout, expand friend circle by getting to know Megan, fun makeover, be happier.”

If only it were that cut-and-dried. Blake looked across the street to the park with the eponymous swan pond. The swans had migrated over a month ago. They’d turn the pond into an ice rink soon. One that Blake hadn’t skated on since high school because she was always too busy.

She rubbed the back of her hand across her forehead. “This upcoming summit is consuming all my time.”

“That...and Wyatt,” Ana said slyly. The added open-mouthed wink was an unnecessary exclamation point to her innuendo. “He’s gone over a few times to help Randall exercise the pups. You can’t let an outsider get woven into our quartet before *you* do.”

“Wyatt can do what he wants.” That was what Blake said, anyway.

Her thoughts? Were avalanching toward this being a clue he might stay after the contest.

Not that she'd have any more time to spend with him then (*see her thought from a whopping thirty-five seconds prior: Sheesh*). He wouldn't be hanging out in her lab anymore. And Blake would be even more consumed with the damn promotion being foisted upon her.

"Humor me. Give Megan a chance." Ana linked arms and pulled her along the sidewalk. The wrought iron street lamps put a sparkle in the snow dusting the concrete. "Oh, and this little jaunt is a two-fer. You really do need your makeup fixed. It's all tasteful and understated and classic."

"You say that like it's a bad thing. Not everyone has the coloring or the chutzpah to pull off your goth biker chick look."

"Did you just burn me?"

Yep. And Ana had deserved it. "Merely a scorch around the edges."

They entered the salon, which already had glittery snowflakes hanging from the ceiling. Twinkle lights draped up and over every station.

Ana led her right past the check-in desk to the woman with a bright orange pixie cut wearing a cold-shoulder black top over zebra-stripe leggings. "We're finally here. She's nervous. Is there wine?" she asked peremptorily.

"Of course. I just opened a bottle of viognier." Megan used both hands to shoo her toward the black granite bar area in the back corner. "Go pour for both of you while I get started."

Blake almost shrank into her skin from the X-ray like scan Megan subjected her to. "Um, hello. It's nice to meet you."

"Ana and Hallie have told me you're good people, so we can zip right past the obligatory greeting and sniffing." She patted the rounded plastic back of the chair to indicate for Blake to sit. "You're beautiful."

"Thank you."

Cupping her hand beneath her opposite elbow, Megan continued, eyes squinted in assessment. “You take your features for granted. You don’t play them up because you’re so naturally beautiful.”

Why ever would she? Blake shifted. Rubbed the tip of her perfect ski-jump slope of a nose self-consciously. “I’m a scientist. I want my face to blend into the background and let my work speak for itself.”

“That’s shortsighted.”

“Excuse me?” Blake was fine skipping past pleasantries. But she hadn’t expected to be insulted before her purse strap hit the floor.

Megan picked up an egg-shaped sponge. Dabbed it over the tip of a tube of foundation at least a shade darker than Blake’s usual. “Use everything at your disposal. If your face makes someone stare, they’re also listening to you. Your looks are just another wedge holding the door open long enough for you to wow ’em.”

Why did she have to keep explaining this to people? That her femininity was, if anything, a liability? “That’s not how the science world works.”

“Ha! That’s how the whole world works. People look at you and judge. If men want to be with you, women want to *be* you? Either way, you’ve got their attention.” She swiped the sponge in gentle strokes all over Blake’s face.

It was as if she were wiping away layers upon layers of Blake tamping down so much: the pleasure she’d taken in her appearance once the horrors of puberty abated, the natural ebullience she tamped down for her parents, her colleagues, her few closest friends...and Wyatt.

Megan was right.

Maybe it was true that stylists were armchair psychiatrists, spending every day talking to their clients about often surprisingly intimate things. Because the woman had just forced Blake to do a one-eighty pivot in her thinking.

Just because it was obvious and insulting to be the face of



Cygnets on these videos purely because of her looks? Didn't mean that she couldn't turn that focus to her advantage.

"I'm glad Ana made me come to you."

"Hang on to that thought. Because we're about to slap on three times as much makeup as you're used to."

Twitching away, Blake said, "No. I think not." Halloween was over. She didn't want to look like a clown—or even Elle Woods.

"That's *why* Ana brought you to me. Tasteful, classic, understated makeup? Doesn't read on video. You'd look like crap. I'm giving you a camera-ready look."

Ah. Blake had actually heard that before. She just hadn't *thought* about it. Because she was generally avoiding thinking about all those PR spots as much as possible.

Ana came back carrying overpoured wineglasses. Blake didn't care how good or bad it was. She just wanted the diversion of swirling and sipping. "You'll write it down for me?"

"Of course." Megan picked up a paper with a face drawn on it. "You have to be able to do it yourself. Even when you're massively excited to do the interview."

"I won't be," she murmured.

"What?"

"Excited. I'm dreading these interviews. I don't like being in the spotlight. It makes me a combination of queasy and desperately needing to pee." And she'd be forced to do them more often after the dreaded promotion.

Wielding an eyeshadow brush, Megan said, "Then you shouldn't do it. Life's too short. Don't put yourself in the position to be miserable. Plenty of things out of your control will shower shit down on you. The stuff you can control? Put up a damn umbrella against the shit."

"She's right," Ana seconded. "If someone was pressuring me to do what I loathed? You'd tell me to stand up to them. You'd tell me to walk away after a few pithy words of how

inappropriate it was for them to push me at all.”

Blake looked in the mirror. She barely recognized herself in the woman with the deep, smokey eyes and highlighted cheekbones.

That very different version of herself thought, *what if they're right?*

...

It'd been a decent morning. The latest in a string of 'em. Wyatt made French toast because it was lightly snowing and Aunt Bec had an entire shelf of different brands of Canadian maple syrup. Guess there were some perks in living this close to the border. But said decency was gone to hell when he recognized the caller ID on his phone.

Why was the Exiteer working on a Sunday? Craig had already texted that Dr. Ngam had been cleared as a lead. The doc was on a plane back to the Amazon for another three months *aka* out of harm's way.

If he ignored it, the guy would only keep calling. Or very possibly worry enough to send a drone to check out his house. Ex-agents were a stability risk. At least, that was what three different Agency shrinks had told him throughout his exit process.

Wyatt was, yeah, pissed on principle that *he* hadn't been the one to decide when it was time to leave the field. But he wasn't depressed. He wasn't holed up on the couch mainlining booze or pills.

He was having *fun*. At least, until his emotional watchdog rang.

Might as well bite the proverbial bullet. Yanking off a glove with his teeth, he lifted the phone to his ear. “Hey, Craig. Why are you interrupting my weekend? Shouldn't that kind of thing have stopped once I wasn't on duty 24/7 anymore?”

“Why are you panting? What's wrong?”

Seriously? The question bothered Wyatt almost as much as

the reason for it. The panting had crept on, unnoticed. Clearly he needed to increase his cardio in that surprisingly sweet—and usually empty—gym at Cygnet.

Then he figured messing with Craig would at least turn the tables. “What if I said I was having sex?”

“You wouldn’t have answered the phone.”

True.

Maybe Craig wasn’t as much of a stick-in-the-mud as he’d thought. “I’m finishing a two-mile hike. Had to find a place to do target practice. Far from home, deep in the woods, nobody but hibernating bears to witness. Can’t let my skills get rusty.”

A sigh gusty enough to at least wobble the Brooklyn Bridge whooshed over the line. “Here’s a thought. How about you don’t *do* target practice, Keene? Since you shouldn’t be bothering to keep up your very specific skill set in that regard?”

And be a sitting duck? He plucked a pinecone and sent it whizzing toward a dollop of snow on a higher branch. Bull’s-eye. “You said yourself—if anyone comes after me, it’d happen in the first three months after I was burned. I refuse to get lazy and take my safety for granted until passing that milestone. That’d be bad for me, not to mention a reckless attitude for the safety of everyone around me.”

Wyatt knew he’d knuckled the right pressure point. Especially on native soil, the Agency bent over backward to minimize collateral damage to civilians.

“That’s the only reason? No chance you’re still looking for trouble in every shadow you pass?”

He wouldn’t outright lie. Not after what he’d learned on Halloween about the remarkable research going down at Cygnet. “Indeterminate. Did you run the attendee list for the summit?”

“Yes.”

“Anyone pop out at you?”

There was a long silence, broken only by the crunch of snow

underfoot. And a low, deep, wheezing rumble that Wyatt hoped was the wind but was probably a moose.

He picked up his pace.

“Craig?”

Finally, there was a sound. A muted *thump* that Wyatt would bet a fifty on being Craig hitting his forehead on a desk. “A few attendees have been on our watch list for some time.”

A fist pump shot out from his shoulder with enough force to lay out a boxer. He *knew* it. He wasn’t ‘looking for trouble.’ Or trying to hold on the last vestiges of his career.

Wyatt had followed his gut. The one that had kept him alive and steered him to barely visible trails over and over again. “I found something. A few projects—well, the people running them—that several people with lots of money, selfishness, and zero compassion would consider worth kidnapping.”

“Likely targets.”

He also knew when to hedge his bets. “*Possible* targets. It’d take more time, manpower, and access to determine likelihood.”

“Hmm. Send me the list.”

It didn’t matter how grudging Craig’s tone was. The fact he’d asked for it was enough.

Well, if not enough, a solid start. Then Wyatt heard the now-unmistakable sound of an axe chopping wood. And he saw the peaked roof of Aunt Bec’s house through the break in the trees.

“Gotta go. It’s football Sunday in America. I’m doing some bonding with my neighbor. Wholesome relaxing.”

“I doubt that you know how. Hope it’s true, though.”

Wyatt re-pocketed the phone. Triple checked that his weapon was tucked at the small of his back. Didn’t want to risk Everett asking why he’d armed himself for a hike through the woods.

Although—former spy or not—he wasn’t sure how safe he

felt wandering through them yet without a weapon. Bears were no joke. None of them owned calendars. Just because experts *claimed* they should be hibernating by now? Didn't mean they'd all punched out for the season.

"Hey there," he hollered. Didn't really want to sneak up on a guy with an axe in motion.

"'Bout time you got back." Everett rested the wooden handle on his shoulder. The shoulder covered in thick green flannel. Navy cords were tucked into snow boots. A red fleece ear band completed what looked like an ad for a modern lumberjack. "This wood doesn't chop itself."

"You're doing a fine job of it. You don't need some city hack like me disturbing your flow."

"True. But watching me won't get your fireplace stocked. I split logs for your aunt to be neighborly."

"Feel free to continue the tradition."

"Of neighborliness? I did." Everett jerked his chin over to the side. "Got you an axe." The blade gleamed against the dull bark of the pine trunk.

Hell. Wyatt hadn't thought about it at all, really. Figured somebody came out and restocked the wood pile, and he'd get a monthly bill.

*Welcome to Maine.*

"Thanks." He sauntered over. Hefted the axe. Easy to feel that gravity would aid burying that weighted end in the wood. Yanking it out, though? Didn't strike Wyatt as easy at all. "But, uh, wouldn't a chainsaw be faster? And, you know, easier?"

"Didn't you say you were going on a four-mile hike this morning? Don't be a wuss. You're not allergic to exercise."

"Nope. Just thinking about protecting my moneymakers." He flexed his fingers. "Need all the digits in order to paint."

"Then don't be an idiot. It's a lot harder to cut off a finger with an axe than a knife."

If he was going to act like a local? Try to fit in? This was as much a place to start as the lobster chowder he'd slurped down last night. Wyatt started to shrug out of his coat, then remembered his gun tucked into his waistband. "Lemme go throw this inside."

There weren't a lot of places in the mudroom to hide a gun. He ended up slipping it into his coat pocket for quick access.

Not that he'd need it to defend himself, now that he had his very own lumberjack axe. Wyatt considered that he'd just leveled up in living like a local.

Craig would be thrilled.

There was a discarded fleece jacket hanging off a nearby branch. That and the pile of a dozen logs indicated that Everett had been at it for a while. Which was enough to flip the switch on Wyatt's competitive streak.

"This is one of those things I never pictured myself doing. Got a throwback vibe going on. Pioneer days. No, Revolutionary War. Washington's army hunkered down at Valley Forge for the winter."

"I recommend *not* wearing a tricorn hat to split logs," Everett drawled. "It'll just get in the way of your swing."

Wyatt tried out a few different spots to grip the handle.

Man, he felt like a badass. Even without the Continental Army bivouacked behind him.

"I used to be a hard-core history nerd. Let me at least imagine for these first few that my trusty steed is nickering behind me. Tents all around, muskets propped near the fires."

Everett's steady rhythm didn't so much as falter. "And everyone in the encampment suffering from a massive lack of food, clothing. Smallpox and typhoid running rampant. Remember, you're talking to a teacher."

Talk about a buzzkill. "A *science* teacher," Wyatt nitpicked.

"One who still had to take history to finish high school. Can't you picture yourself as something less death-drenched to get a rhythm going?"

The first *whack* did split the knotted length of pine almost completely in half. “I’m drawing a blank. Smallpox and typhus made the rounds throughout history. In the Gold Rush camps, throughout the Civil War.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to talk about *anythingthefuck* else.”

That surprised a laugh out of Wyatt. A belly laugh that threw off his center of gravity and his next stroke missed the mark entirely. Although it did come frighteningly close to the toe of his boot.

It was a safe bet that if he did somehow lop off a toe? Everett would matter-of-factly get him to the hospital...where he’d call him an idiot for not being more careful.

“Okay. New topic that had damn well better not have ended in death. How’d it go with your date from the Halloween party?”

Everett planted the long edge of the blade in the snow and leaned over it. “How’d it go with *yours*?”

Smart-ass. “A partner costume does not automatically equate to a date.”

“A fast-talking non-answer means you’re trying to hide something. If I can see through sulky sophomores lying their asses off to me, I can see through you.”

Christ, that had better not be true. “Dr. Montgomery enjoyed herself—and the infamous Cygnet punch—very much. I drove her home, found the ibuprofen and put it on her nightstand with some water, then left so she could sleep it off.”

“So you were in her bedroom...?”

“Did you just morph into one of your high school sophomores? I swear, if you keep going, your voice’ll start squeaking, acne’ll pop out, and you’ll lose what little game you’ve got.”

“Another attempt at a misdirect. Intriguing. You want the lady. Think you can’t have her. But still think *about* having her...”

“I’m gonna echo your ‘can we talk about *anythingthefuck* else’ request.” At least his reaction of emotional ants down his shirt to Everett’s probing had made him chop faster. He’d suddenly amassed a decent stack of split hunks of wood. Not quite picture-perfect logs yet, but close enough?

“We should get these stacked and get inside for the last bit of pre-game. Give ourselves time to prioritize beers and chips.”

“I was thinking potato chips first. Save the tortilla chips and salsa to go with the chili.”

Everett gave an approving nod. “You *did* strategize. You’re turning out to be an excellent neighbor.” He rolled out a canvas contraption and started loading wood on top of it.

A couple of bushy-tailed squirrels ran laps in front of them, like they’d pulled sentry duty for the closest nut trove.

Wyatt had never really been homesick in all of his tours of duty. With his parents gone, that pretty much wiped out everything that symbolized home for him. He’d kept busy. That was mostly enough.

But every so often, he’d wanted to feel what he heard others describe. A connection. A groundedness. A sense of belonging that went beyond four walls, a job, your closest friends, your routine. It was all of those things, mixed up with satisfaction. Happiness. Normalcy.

That’s what he’d hoped to find someday.

This right here? Today? It felt normal.

Exercising in the freaking stunning winter landscape. Working up a sweat with manual labor to benefit his own house. Hanging with a guy who was fast becoming a good friend. Thinking about the three good pieces he’d started for the contest, as well as *the one* he knew was the piece he needed to paint out of his system. Knowing he’d have the fun of texting Blake later. Of teasing her, of laughing with her.

In Swan Cove, he felt like he belonged, finally.

Which was terrifying.



Because Wyatt knew better than most that no matter how comfortable, or worse yet, important this place, these people became to him? It could all be ripped away in an instant.

# Chapter Fourteen

Blake shouldn't *be* nervous at the prospect of doing an interview. Then again, she also shouldn't be away from her lab first thing in the morning.

And she *really* shouldn't be thinking about Wyatt every spare moment. Wondering when they'd next be alone together. In a dark room.

Wondering what it would take to get him to do more than just kiss her.

Yes, it was the twenty-first century. Yes, she was an independent woman (except for when it came to changing a tire in the snow. It was just *hard*, and she was more than happy to pay and exorbitantly tip the mechanic in Crow Harbor to do it for her) who should be able to make a move on a man.

Except there was more swirling between them than *just* sex. They'd been there and done that already. In theory, it'd be easy to have another no-strings night with him.

The problem was that Blake felt all kinds of strings between them. Thick, messy, emotional ones. Undeniable ones.

So there was the guilt thing holding her back.

Guilt at even noticing Wyatt's broad shoulders. The little crinkles around his eyes when he bestowed one of those long, slow smiles. His quick wit, even when they were texting at midnight. How he appreciated her dry humor. How he noticed *everything* and opened her eyes to more interesting daily tidbits in their shared world. The way his arm muscles bunched as he painted.

Blake knew every one of those things she noticed pulled her focus away from her work. Her mentor had emphasized the need for focus, as much as the need for a clean set of results. Dr. Hauser shared the stories of how she'd missed out on being included in an important publication.

The other scientists who'd helped had practically lived at the lab 24/7. Dr. Hauser had worked hard, but went home for

dinner and definitely didn't clock in on weekends. Not once she'd begun dating Jason.

All the others were included as co-authors on the article.

All the others were promoted within six months or awarded bigger projects.

All while Dr. Hauser stagnated...*and* watched her relationship fall apart, too.

Science was a demanding field. It didn't allow for cozy walks and funny chats that all felt like a natural evolution into a relationship...

"Is one of those for me?" Wyatt asked as he joined her on the wooden pier. A green scarf was tightly knotted against the relentless breeze off the water. It both matched and brought out his eyes. That was her clinical assessment. The emotional one would be more *yowza he's a bundle of hotness*. "Or are you truly double-fisting the caffeine this morning?"

"It is." Blake handed over a tall cardboard cup. "Caffeine Boost rolled out their holiday coffees today."

Those stunning green eyes rolled in a pairing with the one-sided snide curl on his lips. "It's five days past Halloween. The porch pumpkins haven't even rotted yet."

"Lovely imagery. And I know you've been overseas for, well, forever, but you must be aware that stores put up aisles of holiday decorations and candy back in August. You can't fight the Christmas juggernaut."

"You mean ruining a decent coffee with whipped cream and gingerbread?"

Ugh. That attitude. Why tear down what makes someone else happy?

Blake's favorite—currently in her other hand—was a peppermint mocha. She felt zero shame for it. There were men who painted team-colored stripes on their chest and sat in snowy stadiums *because they enjoyed it*.

She enjoyed a festive coffee. She didn't mumble her order to keep from being overheard. She'd even been known to slurp

the whipped cream off the top before having a sip. What was the point of all the hard adult things if you couldn't indulge in peppermint lattes?

That was when Blake realized she'd had an entire internal rant going against all festive coffee-deniers, without bothering to let Wyatt in on her thoughts. Unproductive. And just as knee-jerk as his comment.

So instead of biting off his head, she inhaled deeply of her peppermint steam. And smiled serenely.

"I had a hunch that would be your response. I got you a plain coffee. The lone nod to the holidays is the way Mitzi hand-lettered the 't's in your name on the cup to look like candy canes."

"Aww. Artistically decorated coffee." His lopsided grin was all she needed. "Thanks for the quasi-festiveness."

"Now keep your Grinch-like rants to yourself while I enjoy mine." Blake popped the top. Used her tongue like a spoon to lift off some whipped cream.

"If you're going to drink it like that?" With the edge of his thumb, Wyatt wiped off a last fleck of cream from her bottom lip. "I'll bring you one five times a day."

Whoops. It'd escaped her notice that her attack on the latte was basically foreplay. Or at the least, sexual taunting. Which he didn't deserve.

How was *not* thinking about sex with him more dangerous than pondering it nonstop?

Blake recapped her troublemaking latte. Then she tapped his cup with a freshly manicured burgundy nail. Not her usual color at all, but she'd abandoned herself to Megan's capable hands and her strictures that *more* was imperative when it came to cameras.

"Well, don't drink it down too far. It's a bit of a prop. Something for you to do with your hands."

"I can think of thirty-three things to do with my hands—with you next to me—that don't involve a coffee cup."

Now who was the one taunting?

“Fitz has a disgusting amount of experience with interviews. He taught me that if you have something in your hands, it keeps you from fidgeting if there’s an uncomfortable question.”

His boots thudded dully on the weathered boards as she meandered them over to the railing “An interview? That’s why you wanted me to meet you here? Mal didn’t send me an updated schedule. That’s unlike him to have a misstep. He even allocates bathroom breaks in the schedule.”

Wow. Dr. Vishneratu sounded like he’d be a fantastic addition to her team—

—the one the powers-that-be were about to yank her away from...

Which brought her right back around to admitting this was a plea for help.

Shaking her head, Blake said, “Not Mal’s fault. This isn’t official.” After taking one last moment to second-guess this decision, she abruptly sat on the closest bench. “I, ah, am co-opting you. As moral support. For *my* interview with the *Gazette*. I *may* have intimated to the paper that we’d only give an interview as, well, a team.”

To her surprise, Wyatt didn’t readily agree to assuage her fears. To calm her nerves. But he did twist the coffee collar around the cup a full three times before responding. “You know that saying about how a picture’s worth a thousand words?”

“Obviously.”

Rather than sitting next to her, Wyatt bent his knee and propped his foot on the curled edge of the bench. “I’m the artist. All about the pictures. You can do all the words yourself.”

His reticence was unexpected.

But Blake was used to doing experiments dozens, sometimes hundreds of times in a row. She would not be

deterred by a single weak pushback. “I could. I’m capable. I choose not to. I chose you to help me. For two reasons, in fact.”

“How about I wait until you come up with three?”

“Not even a teensy bit funny,” Blake said in a tone as dry as Martian soil. “We are a team. You can talk about the experience of being partnered with a scientist. How it’s impacting your creative process. Every extra bit of exposure strengthens your chances of winning.”

“That’s a nice speech. I’m not buying any of it.” He swished a slug of coffee around in his cheeks before asking, “What’s the real reason you suckered me into joining you?”

Did he have to be *so* perceptive? *All* of the stinking time?

This was a perfect example of why Blake preferred the cold, hard facts of science to the messiness of emotions. Now she had to be vulnerable. Expose her insecurity. The certainty that Wyatt would say yes mitigated the risk, but it didn’t in any way mitigate her discomfort.

And why was her turtleneck suddenly like a boa constrictor around her neck?

Swallowing hard, Blake said, “You know how much I don’t want to do this. You got angry on my behalf at my being coerced into the rounds of interviews. It proved that you’re on my side. Or that you’ve got my back. Possibly both.”

“Definitely both,” he murmured. And that low rumble of confirmation warmed her infinitely more than the peppermint latte.

Blake locked onto his eyes that were as green as a barium nitrate infused flame. “I need, no, I’d very much *like* to feel that support today for this first one. It’s a selfish request. A worthless time-suck for you. But there we are nonetheless.”

The cardboard cup rotated a few more times in his grasp. Look at him using her advice. She’d be tickled...if Wyatt wasn’t using it *on* her. “If you really think my presence will buck you up? I’ll do it.”

“Thank you.” The Gordian knot tying up her stomach fell away at his words.

Not just her stomach, Blake realized. All her muscles relaxed, from her shoulders to her thighs in their brown plaid pants down to where her toes had been tightly curled in chocolate suede booties.

“Just...no pictures, okay?” Jutting out his chin, skimming the backs of his knuckles along the sharp cut of his jaw, he continued, “I don’t want this mug in competition for column space with my actual art.”

Wonderful. His teasing tone meant they didn’t have to talk about it anymore. “Oh, well, you have a point.” Blake made sure both of her hands encircled the coffee cup, to resist the urge to stroke the other side of his jaw. Which was pointless. It would only exacerbate the problem of how hard she worked every day to *not* remember the scratch of the dark stubble on his jaw against her thighs... “Your face is exceedingly well-proportioned.”

He snorted. “That’s what you think of it? Makes my face sound as interesting as a well-stacked hamburger.”

“I think you’re *quite* handsome, young man. If only my niece would introduce us...” A woman with a gray Princess Diana shag cut and an actual fur jacket appeared next to Wyatt. Her eyebrows were raised in a look of expectancy above eyes that matched Blake’s in a textbook show of familial genetics.

Fur. Really? It was barely November. What would Aunt Felicia do once the icebox of January hit—wear *two* fur coats?

“Hi, Auntie Fe.” Yes, even with an entire doctorate tucked under her belt, when around a family member older than her? Blake turned back into the toddler she’d been who preferred to shorten all names. Dutifully, she said, “This is Wyatt Keene.”

“I know *who* he is, dear. Everyone in town’s talking about the intriguing artists up at the lab. What I wanted from you was a proper introduction so that I’d have a reason—an excuse—to have my arthritis-riddled bones enveloped by his large,

warm hand.”

Aunt Felicia held, well, nothing back. Ever. Blake loved that about her. You never had to guess where you stood with Aunt Fe.

In stark contrast to her parents, who were all about maintaining appearances and making sure every step, every word, every action reflected correctly on the hallowed Montgomery legacy.

*However*, it was oddly uncomfortable to have her aunt flirt with the man Blake had herself picked up in a bar. Rising to give her a one-armed hug, Blake remonstrated, “You can’t say that about someone you just met. Not to his face.”

Wyatt was quite literally choking on his coffee. He’d made the classic and classically unavoidable move of inhaling while trying to swallow *and* laugh. Coughing in between every word, he spat out, “I’ll warm your hands.”

“Bless you.” Blake’s aunt had thrust her hand out before Wyatt finished his sentence.

That was when Blake saw that Aunt Fe wasn’t wearing gloves. *Again*. The woman was smart as could be, practical, organized—and couldn’t keep track of things like glasses or gloves or keys. She claimed it was because she preferred to use that brain space on poems. Years ago, she’d read that memorizing a poem a week could stave off loss of mental acuity.

Blake thought she’d keep her mind just as sharp by remembering to stuff gloves in her coat pockets, but it was entertaining to have Felicia whip off a few phrases from a random poem that fit a situation.

“Here’s your official introduction. Wyatt Keene’s assigned as my partner for the Cygnet Summit art contest. Wyatt, this is my aunt, Felicia Montgomery, the, well, sort of fairy godmother of Swan Cove.”

“That’s one heck of a job title.” Wyatt rubbed his palms briskly over Felicia’s hands. Then Blake handed him her own gloves. She had more. Better to prevent her aunt’s frostbite.



“I’ve no official capacity, you see. Fitz and his uncle before him ran Swan Cove. My other brother, Preston, keeps up all the family businesses. Or rather, he tries. He dabbles. Oh, hell, he doesn’t do anything but strut around glad-handing. The businesses run themselves.”

Blake swallowed a chuckle. It was a piercingly correct description of her father. And since he’d relocated a few months ago, Swan Cove had *somehow* kept chugging along smoothly.

“So what are the unofficial duties of a fairy godmother?”

“I stick my nose into everything. Whether it’s wanted or not.” She tossed her head as she stuffed her now-gloved hands into her pockets. The floof of her hair revealed fat diamond studs. Felicia was unashamedly over-the-top. She loved to spend her fortune—but she also loved to spend it on *other* people. “I’m quite observant. I’ve the freedom, the objectivity to notice when people act off. Trouble doesn’t always announce itself with a trumpet blast. It creeps up on you, insidiously.”

Wyatt nodded slowly. “That’s an insightful comment. I, ah, couldn’t agree more.”

“People, businesses, get mired in everyday life. Can’t see the forest for the eighteen thousand spruce. I can smooth things over.”

“That sounds rewarding.”

“Ha! He’s a smart one, your artist,” Felicia said with a gleam in her eyes.

Oh no.

No gleam. The thing Felicia loved almost as much as fixing problems? Matchmaking.

“He’s not *my* artist,” Blake rushed to clarify. The last thing she needed was Felicia wandering around town seeding the idea that she and Wyatt were a ‘thing’. Or even had the potential to be. Better nip it in the bud. “This contest is a professional pairing, nothing more. Anything more might influence or invalidate the spirit of the contest. That would be

*disastrous.*”

Felicia waved away her comment as she plunked down next to Blake. “Don’t listen to her, Wyatt. My niece is always laser-focused on the lookout for what *could* go wrong, no matter how small the odds.”

Blake might have gotten her aunt’s eyes and long legs, but she certainly hadn’t been passed down the proverbial rose-colored glasses.

“Caution’s a good quality.” Wyatt did the circling of the coffee cup thing again. Twice. Now that she saw it as a tell? Blake wondered what it meant was going on behind that strongly handsome facade. “One that I share with her.”

There they were. On the same page again. That...kept happening.

Like they were *true* partners.

It warmed Blake’s heart—and other places.

It also alarmed her. The deeper in sync they fell? The harder it was to resist him. The more...*complicated* everything became between them. Blake didn’t have the time or energy for any further complications.

“Aunt Fe, it is literally my job to look for every possible bad outcome in an experiment and ward against them all.”

“Pish tosh. Have a little fun, Blake. And Mr. Keene here looks like he could be quite a bit of fun.”

Her mind leapfrogged back to the hour they’d spent running around the Cygnet campus. Or rather, parkour-ing around. Which had been the most fun she’d had in ages.

Aunt Fe could talk anyone into anything—which would make her an ally in Blake’s current predicament. “You want fun? How about you convince Wyatt how much fun it is to have his picture in the paper? He’s about to do an interview with me, but he’s kiboshing photos.”

“Nonsense. Nobody’s got time for false modesty. I’m certain you know you’ve got the rugged, handsome male thing down to a T. What possible reason do you have for going

incognito?”

“I’m an artist, Ms. Montgomery. I prefer to let my art speak for itself.”

“Such a diva,” Blake scolded teasingly.

“Hey, you know that I’m still trying to figure out who I am. This artist thing—it may not fit or last.”

“Well, you showed kindness to an old lady, Mr. Keene, so I think you know exactly who you are, deep down. It was lovely running into you two today. Because unlike you, I’ve had my photo in the paper more times than I care to count, so I’ll be off before I’m snapped at less than my best.” She patted her artfully tousled hair, then blew an air kiss to Blake as she left.

Wyatt’s last comment niggled at Blake, though. “I think my aunt’s correct. Your career isn’t who you are. It’s only what you do.”

He let out a hoot of laughter so loud that it startled away the trio of gulls scavenging from a piece of bread bowl. “I’d buy that—coming from anyone but you, Doc.”

“Why?”

“Your identity’s so wrapped up in your career you might as well have a microscope grafted to your head. Your expected career ‘trajectory,’” he set off the words with air quotes, “is giving you sleepless nights and stress-filled days. You can’t see through the forest of your predicted career to realize that the only part you care about, the single tree you should be nurturing, is your passion for the actual research in your lab.”

Well. That was quite the analytic dump on her head. One she’d neither asked for nor appreciated. “Been holding that in for a while?” Blake asked in a tone as cold as the breakers beneath them.

“Yup.” He bared his teeth in more of a predatory grimace than a grin. “Out of an abundance of *caution*. Didn’t want you taking my head off when I laid out what’s obvious to everyone but you.”

Was...was he actually mansplaining her personality *to* her?

An entirely different kind of heat swept through her. “Everyone? You gleaned this knowledge from your few weeks here and a few scattered conversations with my friends?”

He clasped his hands behind his back. “You’d be amazed how much you can pick up from listening and observing. As an outsider, like your aunt said.”

A tiny portion of her wondered just what Randall and Everett and even Fitz might be saying about her behind her back. The same things that Megan and Ana had said to her mirrored face in the salon? That, however, was a topic to worry over in the dead of night, tucked under a pile of comforting blankets.

Now was the time to make it clear to Wyatt just how little she enjoyed being armchair psychoanalyzed without equal time to do the same to him. “If you’re expecting me to pitch a fit at being pigeonholed and analyzed, I’d hate to disappoint you.”

“Ooh—artistic spat?” The smarmy, oily *ooze* of her ex’s voice stiffened Blake’s spine. “Things not going so great for Team Montgomery?”

What a perfectly horrible time for Horrible Rob to show up. On the other hand, there wasn’t ever a good time to run into him. But since she was already riled up, it would be harder to keep her professional composure and not bite his head off.

Before Blake could say anything, Wyatt faced off with him. “Eavesdroppers rarely get the correct picture. You’d be wise to just walk away.”

“Don’t presume to tell me what to do.”

It was laughable to watch Rob posturing, squaring off his shoulders with Wyatt. Both men were roughly the same height. But Wyatt had much more breadth to his frame. All the muscles she remembered so vividly filled out his charcoal peacoat. His attitude, also, was one of calm detachment.

There was zero chance they’d actually come to blows. But if they did? Blake would put all her money on Wyatt. Rob would dance around, taunting and jabbing, and Wyatt would probably

just wait for the right moment and knock him out with a single punch.

Odd how much she relished imagining that...

Blake stood. She needed to be at his level to shoo him away. "Feel free to move along, Rob. We're not at Cygnet. I don't have to be polite to you on my own time. And I can't stress how much I never want to talk to you again, outside the bare minimum interaction required by our employer."

"I'm not here for fun." The side of his mouth drew down. "You were never that much fun to begin with."

That was an unnecessarily low blow. What a petty man. *He* was the one in the wrong, but he felt the need to insult her? She knew Rob wasn't a good person once he tried to steal from her, but at least he'd had greed motivating him to do so. His only motivation to lash out at her now was being a jerk.

"I'm warning you, Dr. Sandiford. Be civil to Dr. Montgomery. At all times. Or I'll do something very uncivil to you. I'm not constrained by any working relationship." Wyatt shrugged. "Plus, I've got this unstable artistic temperament. There's no telling how out of control I might get when pushed."

Blake wanted to cover him in kisses for issuing that threat. It was *delightful* watching the color drain from Rob's face. Even more delightful to see him scuttle back a few steps. When his heel landed in the bread bowl the seagulls had abandoned and splashed day-old chowder onto his ridiculously slim-cut dress pants? A choked-off laugh erupted from her.

Sullenly, he said, "I'm here for the interview with the *Gazette*, same as you."

Son of a bitch. Blake was enormously relieved she'd coerced Wyatt into joining her. It'd be safer avoiding Rob's verbal jabs with Wyatt next to her. "Sorry. I didn't realize."

"We're the only pairs they're interviewing. They must think our artists are the ones to beat." Rob looked down the pier. Bronson Shepherd, the *Gazette's* editor, was trundling toward them. "They're wrong. My artist has this in the bag. You'll

lose, Keene. You'll have to skulk out of here under a cloud of shame."

"There's no shame in losing if he did his best," she said hotly. Blake intended to defend Wyatt as robustly as he did for her. "Art's so subjective. There's no clear winner like in a football game."

"Making excuses already?"

Ignoring Rob, Wyatt looked straight into Blake's eyes. "It is and it isn't subjective. When I finish a piece, I feel it's right. But if it doesn't land with other people, if it doesn't make them feel something..." Wyatt's voice trailed off as he shook his head. "Hell, if they don't want to buy it? Then yeah, I've failed. No way of knowing until you try, though. If the contest goes badly for me, it won't be a wasted effort. I'll know, one way or the other. Then I'll leave and leave behind what might have been a crazy-ass dream from the start."

His calm declaration about possibly leaving—not to mention closing the door forever on his dream—hit Blake *hard*.

How could he so calmly envision no longer doing this thing that brought him joy?

How could he so dispassionately mention leaving Swan Cove for good? He'd been upfront about it as a possibility from the start. But at the start? Blake had only seen him as a massive complication. She'd been eager to have him disappear post-contest.

Her reaction now, after spending all this time with him, was decidedly different. She *should* still want Wyatt to leave. She'd be far less distracted. Less tempted to do something completely stupid like fall for him.

Except...Blake knew, deep down, that she'd already been reckless. Stupid.

That she'd fallen quite hard for the man so blithely willing to walk away from her, from this town.

Bronson waved at them, pulling a notebook from his coat pocket. The interview was about to start.

Horrible Rob—who'd backed away a few paces when they stopped paying attention to him—was no longer the hardest thing about this interview. Nor was her general anxiety about *doing* an interview.

How was she supposed to be professional and pleasant and a charming representative of Cygnet Labs when all she could think about was Wyatt leaving and how very, very much she didn't want him to?

## Chapter Fifteen

“This is a very retro bad date. I feel like I should apologize in advance.” Wyatt hung up their coats in Aunt Bec’s closet.

Yeah, he still thought of the house as hers, even though he’d inherited it and everything in it. He needed that layer of separation.

If he admitted how comfortable he was in the house, how much he liked the cozy furniture, and the fire, and the way his art was displayed, and the big windows looking out on the peaceful forest...

...well, it’d be a hell of a lot harder to leave. But he would, in a heartbeat, if it meant keeping Blake—and the rest of Swan Cove—safe.

“You mean the clichéd move of ‘come up and see my etchings’?” Blake’s voice dropped to something low and sultry that she probably meant as a joke, but the sound spiked heat through his veins. “I’m the one who asked to come and see what you’ve drawn over the years. You didn’t talk me into it.”

“Can I talk you out of it?”

Nerves had kicked in.

Nerves about showing Blake his work.

Nerves about being alone with her. In a house. With a bed... and the last vestiges of his self-control crumbling away with every additional hour he spent with the beautiful blonde.

“Wyatt. We’re here already.” Bright laughter gurgled out of her as she spun around, arms extended. “It’s snowing out, you’ve got a fireplace and a person eager to see your work. How is this something you want to avoid?”

He couldn’t stall with the coats any longer. Moving at a snail’s pace, he followed her into the living room. “I’m, ah, not wild about showing people what I’ve drawn. Or painted. Or in any way made art.” Wyatt was used to working hard at not revealing *anything* about himself. That was his comfort zone.



Blake unwound her scarf and dropped it on the couch. “But you’re throwing your whole self at becoming a professional artist this month?”

“Yes.” Go big or go home. Well, go away forever. It was probably a stupid plan, but it was what he had. It was what he *used* to have. The plan his parents had supported. Encouraged. They’d believed in his talent. They’d never tried talking him into a backup major. They’d celebrated his full-ride art scholarship. In a small way, Wyatt figured he was finally honoring their dreams for him.

He knew he couldn’t go back to being that innocent boy. Couldn’t go back to a life with a loving family who remembered every second of his life, his progress.

The one thing he could do was go back to being an artist. Man, he wanted it.

“You know it’s a three-step process, right?” Blake slowly raised three fingers. “You make the art, you show it to people, and then they buy it?”

That thought kept him awake at night.

When he wasn’t tossing and turning trying to figure out if someone really did plan to infiltrate Cygnet during the Summit.

And *that* was when he wasn’t wide awake, thinking about Blake. Thinking about how much fun it was to verbally spar with her. How much he hated lying to her about his past.

How extremely much he *wanted* her...

“Remember, none of this was my idea. Aunt Bec signed me up. I’m taking it one step at a time.”

She wandered to the wall of windows. They let the cold in, being uncovered overnight. But Wyatt could never resist leaving the drapes open so he wouldn’t miss a speck of that stunning view once the sun came up.

Blake peered into the solid darkness. “How, exactly?”

“Figured I’d concentrate on getting step one really honed and polished. I’ve got loads of sketches, and what I’m sure

will be the final piece. I'll worry about the rest of the steps when they come up."

She laughed again. She did that with him a lot more, every day. The sound was addictive to Wyatt—and becoming more necessary than caffeine. "You mean in a week? When your art is shown on a live feed to hundreds of thousands of people across the world?"

"You're not helping, Doc." Wyatt gritted his teeth. "You're actively making things worse."

Those long legs ate up the space between them. "I'm sorry. You were so nice about my anxiety with the interviews. I owe you the same courtesy. I just genuinely thought you were pulling my leg."

"Nope. I'm nervous as hell." At least this topic he could share with her. Total honesty—even if mildly humiliating. "I was nervous when I realized Everett had been in here and seen my drawings. Got a clutch in my belly when you said you wanted to come over tonight. And the thought of the actual judging of the contest? Well, I'm sure there's some fancy drug lying around at Cygnet that'll put me in a walking, talking coma to get through it, right?"

"No. I'll get right on that once I'm finished curing blindness, though." Blake folded both of her hands around his. "But I'll be next to you. Supporting you. And I'm ready to lavish you with praise tonight, if that helps."

"Only if you mean it."

"I'm sure I will."

Wyatt pulled out of her grasp. Stalked across the room to toss a log into the fireplace. "Seriously. I don't want a patronizing pat on the head." He thought about Blake. Her wealthy background, a childhood spent traveling the world on vacations. "You *know* art. Good art. You've been to Italy?"

"Yes. But I found excuses to skip the museums. In France, I did tour Versailles, which is a work of art in and of itself. I just —" She cut off, biting her lip.

"What?"

“I thought I hated art. I closed myself off from it. Avoided it. Until you. Until you made me want to, I don’t know, see why everyone else raves about it. I had Hallie start me on a crash course of why it’s awesome.” Blake scrunched up her face. “This is so embarrassing.”

“No. My putting my whole self on canvas and letting the world look at it? *That’s* embarrassing. Besides, you’re not saying that you hated *my* art.”

“I’ve discovered that I really like some of it. The pretty ones. Monet, of course. Maxfield Parrish is like a waking dream. The modern stuff is a complete no-go for me, though. I’m worried that I don’t know enough to say if your art is good.”

“I get it.” Wyatt had been to all of the world’s famous museums. Spending more than a decade traveling across Europe’s cities had given him numerous chances to stare at the world’s greatest art treasures. To say his pieces could measure up to the old masters was like saying a T-ball game compared to game seven of the World Series. It actually helped that Blake didn’t *know* great art. Her reaction would be true, visceral, rather than measured.

“I’m sorry. I’m so curious, but I don’t want to say the wrong thing and insult you.”

“Nope. I promise you won’t. Don’t worry, my style’s not like Picasso or Pollock. So just let me know if what I do is at least decent.”

“Well, art is, truly, in the eye of the beholder, but...” She trailed off, staring at him. Wyatt hadn’t been comfortable being stared at in his previous life, and apparently he wasn’t any better at it now. He turned away to light the fire. “Yes. I’ll tell you if you suck. Or not.”

“Thank you.”

“Want to put five dollars on it? A bet that I’ll be blown away by whatever you’re hiding in here?”

Talk about a loaded question. Seeing as how he was hiding so damn much from her. “How about I give you five dollars to

not feed me platitudes?”

“Wyatt. You’re really wound up, aren’t you?” Blake took the matchbook from his hand. “Let’s go do this. Now. Before I have to literally watch you crawl out of your skin.”

“Yeah. Okay.” He contemplated stalling, pouring a drink while she headed upstairs so he wouldn’t have to watch her initial reaction.

But if it was *good*? He didn’t want to miss it. “It’s all upstairs.” After drawing the mesh screen across the fireplace, Wyatt led the way.

He waited to flick on the lights in the loft until she was standing right beside him. And then Wyatt inhaled so slowly, so cautiously, like when he sighted down a sniper rifle, that there was no sound.

The faint plastic *click* of the switch seemed to reverberate through the open space. He was so locked onto Blake’s face that he swore he could hear the flutter of her lashes as she rapidly triple-blinked.

Aside from that, though, she didn’t move. Didn’t give him any clue. She just stared at the walls, covered floor to ceiling with years of his progression as an artist.

When Wyatt looked at the collection, he saw an inexorable path to this day. He saw the determination to never lose the creative part of him, no matter how much ugliness and violence he’d waded through.

On postcards.

Napkins.

The backs of train tickets and paper menus from different countries.

Cardstock and canvas and drawing paper and thickly textured recycled handmade paper.

Would Blake see nothing more than a collection of scraps?

Would she be able to see how much they mattered to him, when he couldn’t tell her the whole story of *why*?

“Wyatt.” She barely released his name on a sigh.

Blood pumped so hard through his veins that every inch of his skin was about to pop off. “This was presumptuous. I shouldn’t have asked you for an opinion. No need to say anything.”

She gripped his arm, practically clawed at it, while keeping her gaze running up and down the rows of frames. “They’re stunning.”

Well.

That was better than a kick to the nuts. Wyatt almost, *almost* got dizzy as his blood pressure dropped back down to normal. “Thanks.”

“They’re not just your life. They’re snapshots of how you *see* life. Exquisitely rendered.” Blake surged away from him, getting so close to each frame that her breath fogged wetly on a few.

Suddenly, it wasn’t hard to explain to her. Even with leaving out the part about how his art was an escape, a measure of sanity, a touchstone.

“That’s what I try and capture. The whole moment. The setting, the mood of the passers-by. Fatigue and elation. Scents and temperature. How I felt as I watched.”

Blake had only made it along one wall when she paused. Crouched to sift through a stack of papers on an end table. Her neck cracked audibly, she looked up at him so fast. “These... are me.”

He usually kept them in the bedroom, where he sketched before falling asleep. Totally forgot they were out here where she’d stumble across them. “I said within two minutes of our meeting that you’re beautiful. Shouldn’t be a shock that I’ve been drawing you.”

She flipped past portraits where she squinted into the microscope. The tenderness on her face as she held a mouse. A full-body portrayal of her mid-leap off a trash can in parkour, with joy brimming off her like foam off an overpoured Guinness. “All the different ways you’ve captured me—” Her

voice trailed off. "I feel exposed. And seen."

It was hard to tell if Blake considered that a plus or a minus. With a casualness he 100 percent did not feel, Wyatt said, "You're supposed to be my inspiration for the contest piece."

"My *work*, my *research* is supposed to be the inspiration," she chided with a laugh.

"Semantics, Doc. There's no room for negotiation when inspiration strikes." He moved to stand behind her. It was impossible to be so far away from her touching what he'd made, *because* of her.

"I'll negotiate with you," she said slowly.

"For what?"

Blake restacked the papers in a way that expressed her tidy, scientific personality, lining up not one, but all four corners with each new addition. "I want a drawing. Of my own. To keep."

"Sure." Guess he could interpret all this to mean she was pleased with what he'd done. "You don't need to haggle with me. Take your pick." He could always draw more. Hell, he was certain he'd be able to draw her with perfect recall in forty years.

Still crouched, she twisted the top half of her body to look at him.

"No. I want a new...study? Is that the word?" Blake untwisted languorously until she stood so close that he heard the slither of her pendant against the peach silk of her blouse. "I want you to draw me. Naked. The way I looked in the rumpled sheets of that airport bed before you snuck out, pre-dawn. I want to see what you saw when you looked at me then."

Wyatt had dealt with a whole lot of next-to-impossible requests.

There'd been the rebel fighter holding a curved knife to his throat, demanding that Wyatt hand over the entire truck full of weapons he'd just liberated from a *different*, purportedly

worse, rebel group.

The tense showdown in the secret Vatican archives—with the steps of the Swiss Guard racing closer with every second—while an agent from a pseudo-ally country insisted that Wyatt hand over the key to the infamously missing treasure of the Knights Templar.

Of *course* the treasure was only a myth. The key was real, but who knew what it was for? Wyatt's mission was solely to sneak it back into the Vatican. Into a room full of unlabeled keys, where it would stay, unnoticed. Of *course* he didn't give it to the double-crossing agent or the Guards.

Of *course* he always wondered what it really opened...

But those tasks were as simple as shaving with a fresh blade compared to what Blake asked.

Her perfume wafted over him. The scent put him in mind of hot beaches and slick suntan oil.

God almighty, his mouth was dry.

And *her* mouth was right there.

He couldn't. He shouldn't. He wouldn't.

Wyatt took a step back. Then another, for good measure. "I'm a man first. Being an artist is a distant second. What you're asking—I *should* be able to do it. To give you this gift. To draw you and keep my objectivity. But I can't."

Her tongue slipped out to moisten her parted lips. "I'm not asking you to be objective. Just to draw me...and whatever else happens, happens."

"We laid it all out, Blake," he said. Was there a desperate urgency in his voice? Hell, yes. "What happened at the airport was great. But now we're all mixed up with each other. We can't do it again."

There were reasons. Big ones. They'd stipulated to them. They'd agreed to only be partners as required by Cygnet.

Except that they were also friends now. Really good friends. Who worked together well and laughed together often. Friends

who enjoyed each other, who cared for each other.

And on a snowy night, with the crackle of the fire below, Wyatt couldn't remember a single one of those all-important reasons.

"Tomorrow, we might decide it was wrong. But tonight, right here, right now? It feels like the most right thing we could do." Blake undid the top button. The vee neck was already low, and now it gaped enough to tease at the silk bra beneath.

Of *course* it was the same color as her top. Because Dr. Montgomery never missed a step.

They both watched as her fingers popped another button through its hole.

"I'm a scientist. I never go with my gut. I go with the facts. Irrefutable, stacked by the multitudes, facts. The facts are, we're good together. The contest is for everyone else. Let's do something for us."

It had literally been Wyatt's job, his driving mission, to be 'the good guy' for *years*. To do the right thing when others refused. To always make the hard choice, stay on the right side of the line in the sand.

He didn't want to be good. Not anymore. Not tonight.

Wyatt grabbed his pad, an eraser, and the case that held his favorite sketching pencils. "Bedroom's down the hall."

In the ten steps it took her to exit the loft space, Blake had her shirt hanging from one wrist, dragging along the carpet.

He wanted to rip off his clothes, rip the rest of hers off, pick her up and drive into her against the wall with its wood paneling.

But what he wanted more? Was the opportunity to do exactly what she'd offered. To make this memory, of them, for them.

To draw the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Well, maybe not *more*. Probably wanted both things equally.



No reasons he couldn't do both.

Moonlight had shown Blake the way to the bed. While she undressed, he turned on the light in the walk-in closet and closed the door halfway. It threw an equal mix of light and shadows across the bedroom. Wyatt dragged the wing chair from the window to the corner of the bed, at an angle to where she was stretching out.

“You sure about this? It was no pressure, no complications, no regrets last time. This time—well, it could be different.”

She added her bra to the pile of clothes by the nightstand. Wiggled out of her panties. “I expect the quality will be the same, if not even better. And I promise the only regret I'll have is if we don't do this.”

There it was. The acknowledgment that this would end up being more than just a drawing session.

Wyatt began with long strokes to form the outline of her body. He worked fast, wanting to capture two or three different looks. The pencil rasped loudly over the paper. This was the fastest he'd ever put an image down. Like the connection between his eyes and his fingers was electrified.

By her.

For her.

“How do you want me?” Blake curled her arm up by her ear. Flipped her hand back and forth.

“Whatever position you're relaxed in. Flat on your back, or on your side. I'll take whatever you're handing out.”

“Have you done this before? Drawn a woman naked?”

She needed him to keep talking. Even though this was Blake's idea, it was a *lot* to lie there and let someone stare. And Wyatt definitely wanted her comfortable.

He tapped at his phone, turning on Joss Ware. Soothing yet sexy. Ought to help distract her.

“No. They save the nude figure studies for upper level college courses. Prevents some undecided freshman hopping

in and treating it like a peep show. I changed my major before I had the chance.”

“But never with a...friend?” This time she scissored her legs a little.

Didn’t matter. He was getting the lines, the exquisite shape. The hollows, the rounding into deep valleys of pale perfection.

“It’s different with a professional model. But between friends? This takes a whole hell of a lot of intimacy. Of trust.”

Guilt burned acid up his throat as soon as he said it. Because it was true. Blake was offering him all her trust on a goddamned platter. While he kept an enormous truth from her. It wasn’t right.

It wasn’t fair.

Wyatt let each swish of the pencil push the guilt away. He’d have to figure something out. A way to fix it.

Later.

They’d damn well have tonight.

He ripped off a page from the pad and started another one.

“Oh, I forgot.” She reached to take off the gold astrocyte pendant worn most days.

“Leave it.” Wyatt rose, repositioned it in the center of her chest. Let his fingers graze the top of her breast with the motion. “It’s *you*, Blake. You’ve got this outer uniform of scientist, and underneath is all the softness and passion. This is exactly how I’ll always remember you.”

Long legs slightly bent and separated. Her toenails still painted hot pink from matching her Halloween costume. Each rib was visible, but then her torso bloomed into generous breasts tipped with nipples already in hard points at his gaze.

It was getting harder to separate the two parts of his brain. The artist—and the man. That knife’s edge balance between them was about as thin as a single strand of a paintbrush.

“That’s funny. This, right now, is you being the most *you*.” Blake licked her lips. “Not the most frequent. Most of the time

you're almost...detached. Once someone engages you, you're funny and charming and vibrant. But until then, you're more of an observer. Unless you're making art."

"What happens then?"

"Um, you're a volcano of banked heat. Still on the outside, but uncontrollably boiling on the inside, about to erupt."

His teeth snapped together as he jerked up his head. "Don't say erupt."

She smirked at him. And it carried more of a wallop delivered naked. "Free speech is a thing, Wyatt. I've been drilled in my rights."

"Are you seriously sassing me right now?"

Blake tapped her index finger on her chin. "If it hurries you along." That same finger trailed slowly, deliberately, down her chest and around each breast. "I didn't realize it would be such a lengthy process."

"It's been ten minutes, at the most."

"Well, you're not painting a basilica ceiling." Now her whole hand spread wide, and continued down her torso to splay *exactly* where Wyatt wanted to be. "You're constrained by a nine by twelve sketch pad."

There it was.

His breaking point.

"You're baiting me. You think a lot can't be crammed into one hundred and eight inches?" In what felt like a single motion, Wyatt tossed aside the pad and pulled the sweater over his head. His knees hit the mattress. He fisted his hands at her hips. "How about one inch? Let's see if you think I can make a single inch of your body a big deal."

A single blond eyebrow arched up. With so damn much haughtiness. There was a glimpse of the woman whose family owned the whole town. Along with the rock-solid core of strength he admired about her. "My stubbornness will enable me to hold out against your scheme, you realize."

“You’re a scientist. I’ve picked up a few tricks, sharing your lab. I’ll follow your lead, repeat the experiment as many times as it takes, until I get the desired result.” Wyatt lowered his head. Barely touched the tip of his tongue to her nipple.

Blake arched so abruptly her collarbone nearly broke his nose.

Then he did it again. Blew across the wetness he’d left behind, to watch her delicate pink skin pucker even more.

After a full-body shiver, she stilled. Blake was, indeed, stubborn. Not that he minded. He could stay here with his mouth around her breast all night.

Wyatt had thought he’d never get to touch her like this again. To taste her. Couldn’t believe he’d gotten so lucky a second time.

He swirled the flat of his tongue in a slow circle. Like he was licking the most delicious scoop of gelato. Thoroughness mattered.

Did it a few times, while also noting the smoothness of her skin against his wrists. The challenge sparkling in her blue eyes, and the soft curve to her lips that said she was enjoying this teasing as much as him.

But he wasn’t touching enough of her.

“Hold that thought.” Wyatt crawled off the bed to shuck the rest of his clothes in record time. When he resumed his spot, all their skin touched. Everywhere. Blake immediately moved, legs, arms, as if reassuring herself that he was really there. Her ankle up his calf. Her knees against his haunches. One arm softly grazed his flank.

Then he scraped his teeth over the curve of her breast and off the tip of her nipple.

“Oh, hell,” she said breathlessly. “You win. A single inch can be an entire world.”

“I don’t care about winning. Just about getting *more*.”

“In that case, I’d like to request that you concentrate on putting a solid nine inches inside me, please.”

“What about the drawing?”

“You’ll finish it. Later. Much, much later.”

Wyatt lunged for the nightstand and the box of condoms. By the time he was protected, Blake had repositioned her legs beneath the covers. And spread them wide in invitation.

A sliver of his brain said he should stop. That they couldn’t go back to pretending to be nothing more than contest partners if they had sex now.

That was tomorrow’s problem.

“You’re so damn beautiful, Blake.”

“Thanks. And, just for the record, your body makes my knees tremble. Looking at it. Feeling it over me. You’re—” She broke off, licked her lips. Then canted her hips up as he positioned the tip right at her opening. “—so handsome that you make me dizzy. And so, so wet. Feel for yourself. Please, Wyatt.”

Who needed words to respond? He simply slid inside her. After they both moaned, in sync, he kept sliding. In and out in an immediately steady rhythm while kissing her deeply.

It was so different. Last time had been hot and sexy as fuck, sure. But they’d been strangers. This time, Wyatt *knew* her.

Cared for her.

*A lot.*

A hell of a lot more than he should.

And it made the sex freaking incendiary.

Blake was writhing and moaning and digging her nails into his ass trying to get him closer. As if his balls weren’t already slapping against her with every stroke. As if he didn’t have the rest of his body pressed so tightly against hers that there was barely room for the sweat building up to escape.

All their panting and guttural praise blurred together into a single, primal sound. Wyatt sped up his pace as Blake convulsed around him. Each minute squeeze she gave milked the orgasm out of him.

When his hips finally shuddered to a stop, Wyatt gave one final, deep kiss.

No, not just one.

Because he couldn't stop himself. He trailed kisses across her cheek, down her neck, and kept going over her shoulder to her elbow.

"Wyatt." She laughed. "What are you doing?"

"Drawing you with my lips."

"That's one I've never heard before. Gold star for inventiveness. Any chance two can play that game?" Blake pushed at him to shift his weight off. Then she flipped on top and kissed her way down his ribs.

"Sure. We can call it an all play. Or we could be strategic. You could let me finish a sketch while I catch my breath first."

"I do like the effect drawing me has on you. But you forget—we've done this before. I know for a fact it takes you very little time to recover. So I'd rather plow ahead with round two right this second."

With a sultry promising chuckle that immediately re-hardened his dick, Blake rolled over and opened the nightstand drawer.

From the way her whole body stiffened, Wyatt knew what had happened.

She hadn't opened the drawer with the condoms.

She'd opened the one with his gun.

"Wyatt? What's with the weapon?"

He had to lie. Diplomatic couriers didn't carry weapons. Artists, on the whole, probably didn't, either. Best not to arouse any suspicion. Even though lying to her after what they'd just shared felt like a massive betrayal.

"Oh, it was Aunt Rebecca's. Found it in there my first night here."

"Huh. That must've given you pause." She shut the drawer

and opened the other one, rummaging for the condoms. Blake piled a handful on the mattress between them. She looked accepting of his explanation, but Wyatt felt the need to keep going. Just to be sure.

“I should probably hand it over to the sheriff.” He could do that. Because this gun wasn’t his only one. And, in fact, his aunt had kept one. Wyatt had taught her to shoot it himself. So that she could protect herself on the infinitesimal chance that someone from his world did find her. Now he found himself wishing he could do the same for Blake. “Maybe you could introduce us?”

“I’d be happy to. I wonder why she had it?” Blake tucked the sheet around her. All that mass of hair cascaded down to cover her breasts. That was the next pose he wanted to draw.

“Not sure if it was for bears or burglars, but hopefully it brought her a measure of reassurance.” The lie rolled smoothly off his tongue. Just like every other lie he’d told over the years to protect his cover. His mission.

His country.

Wyatt had sworn a vow to keep his country safe, to continue to lie to everyone about his past. A promise that could land him in jail if he broke it. The Agency’s confidentiality agreements were airtight, and full of punitive warnings. It was what he’d signed up for. It had never given him pause before.

Until Blake. Until he started worrying about the potential danger he brought by sharing her lab every day. Until his repeated lies to her.

*It sucked.*

# Chapter Sixteen

Blake should never have agreed to a team meeting in her office, on a *Monday* morning, before coffee. Not after the weekend she'd put in.

She'd done strings of interviews with TV and radio and podcasts all around the world. Answered numerous written interviews or forwarded them after much consideration to other Cygnet employees who were better versed on different aspects of the summit. It was as much being on camera as it was behind-the-scenes organization and juggling.

It was exhausting.

And yet, her energy had stayed up—because when she wasn't being the face and voice of Cygnet Labs and the Expanding Human Potential Summit? Blake was with Wyatt.

*With* Wyatt. In every possible way.

In front of the fire. On his kitchen island after making waffles to refuel. At her apartment, when she went to get multiple outfits for the interviews. Even in the soundproofed studio where she recorded the interviews (after covering the laptop camera, turning it off, and Wyatt draping his pants on top of it for good measure).

He never pressured her, though, to *not* work. No competition for her time. No demand for her attention—just appreciation when it was given.

It all evolved so smoothly, worked so seamlessly, that it made Blake wonder if...*if* a relationship would be possible. If it simply had never worked before because there hadn't been a man who respected her commitment to her science.

They hadn't talked about it, of course. Adding sex on top of their friendship was enough of a leap. There'd be time to deal with the technicalities of all the fluttery things she was feeling for him after the summit.

Until then? It was amazing how much her stress decreased when she *shared* it with Wyatt. When he listened in that



absolutely focused way of his to whatever came out, whether rantings about the next summit snafu, or a complex reaction her mice had after the latest injection.

He listened.

He engaged.

He distracted her when things got too overwhelming.

He made her laugh.

He made her feel...*everything*.

“Dr. Montgomery?” Satya set down her tablet on the counter. “I know you’ve been busy prepping for the summit, but we really need an answer.”

Yikes. *That* was why Blake needed caffeine. Even the most amazing sex of her life could only sustain a woman for so long. Today was the first time in years that she’d still been asleep when her alarm sounded.

Although, to be honest, it wasn’t so much exhaustion that had spaced her out, as it was thinking about Wyatt.

That was unacceptable.

Blake smoothed the lapels of her lab coat. Straightened her lanyard to precisely center over the wide brown stripe bisecting her white blouse. And gave her brain one heck of a mental slap.

“Sorry, Satya. I appreciate that you’ve all been flexible with my pushing this meeting twice. The summit is in three days, so it’ll probably get worse before it gets better.”

“We’re all excited for it. Getting to meet these pioneers, these innovators—it’s one of the main reasons I wanted to work at Cygnet. To get access to the most amazing minds in the world once a year.”

“That—*plus* the Halloween party,” her assistant Japeth joked.

“We all know you won the costume contest. But it’s practically Thanksgiving. Stop gloating,” Satya snarked.

That wasn't good, either. Her team needed to be a cohesive unit. Not scratching at each other over something so trifling. Were they falling apart because she'd been spending less time with them?

"Technically, J gets to gloat until the next winner is announced, in eleven months," Blake said with a pointed down-the-nose look at Satya. Then she turned to the gangly man with his shock of red hair. "Gloating, however, is never a good look. Why not channel that energy into coming up with next year's winning costume instead?"

"Sorry. I've probably been annoying about it. I've never won anything before. Not a gift card, not a radio call-in trip, not even a scratcher."

"Not everyone needs the fickle hand of Fate bestowing things upon them. You can make your own good fortune." Hopefully Japeth would get the message.

Blake would have to be sure to double down on her time with her team after the summit. Clearly they needed a bit more of her guiding hand. They were all whip-smart and driven. Excelled at the science. The actual work of maneuvering through a cutthroat career, not so much. It was her job to mentor them.

Now, anyway.

It *had* been Horrible Rob's job when he was still on her team. For all that he wasn't the best researcher, kicking him off had left a hole that she didn't have the time or energy to fill. Blake needed to replace him.

Or should she hold off and let whoever took over her project do it?

How had the mere promise—or threat, as she felt—of an unwanted promotion managed to so interfere with the job she already had?

Wyatt shouldered through the door, a coffee in each hand. "You sound like a long-winded fortune cookie. They'd have to print all that on both sides of that tiny strip of paper."

Satya snapped her head around, long ebony hair flying in a

nimbus. “Oh. We didn’t realize you were here yet.”

“Contest judging’s in three days.” Wyatt gestured to his easel, then handed Blake a cup. The aroma told her that he’d bypassed his own preference and brought her a hazelnut mocha. So thoughtful of him. “I’m painting nonstop. Don’t worry, brush strokes are quiet. It won’t disturb your meeting.”

“No.” Satya looked at Japeth, and then over at Louis, who had yet to say a word. Which was par for the course with him. “Well. Maybe we should wait and come back...” Her voice trailed off as she grabbed her tablet and edged toward the door.

As much as she’d love the next few minutes back, Blake knew this couldn’t be pushed off again. “There’s no waiting, unless you wait until *after* the summit. This is the only time I’ve got for you, I’m afraid, thanks to Dr. Peabody appointing me as Nari’s stand-in. So ask your burning questions.”

This time it was Japeth doing the meaningful glances at the rest of the team. “In front of Mr. Keene?”

“Yes. He’s not a spy,” she said with a laugh. From behind her, Blake heard Wyatt gurgle and choke on his coffee at the ridiculousness, along with her. “Kuang Laboratories didn’t send him here undercover to steal our research.”

Satya looked down at the thoroughly unremarkable floor tiles. “It’s not that. It’s just—well—” She cleared her throat. Dull pink darkened her sand-colored cheeks. “—we’ve been waiting for your results. The ones you put on the schedule to be finalized over a week ago. If those tests weren’t finished on time, it trickles down and affects everything we’re doing.”

Japeth nodded. “We waited as long as we could, but we’re at a stopping point until we get them from you.”

*Shit.*

She’d never missed a deadline, ever. Not even returned a library book a day late.

Now Blake knew why they’d been hesitant to continue in front of Wyatt. From her team’s downcast eyes and hands jammed into the pockets of their lab coats, they were uncomfortable poking her on this.

They shouldn't be. She deserved to be called out for letting them down.

Science was exact. Precise. No room for sloppiness or taking your own sweet time. Luckily, Blake hadn't screwed up the science—just the delivery of the information.

Standing, she circled around her desk to join their cluster. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have put you in this position. I apologize both as the lead researcher, and as simply a person who let you down."

Louis jerked a shoulder. Shoved the thick black frames higher on his nose. "It's not that big a deal."

Aww. He might not speak up often, but when he did, it was always worth the wait. "It *is* a big deal. And while I can promise you that this will never happen again, if it does with me or any other scientist at Cygnet, don't wait a week. Nudge after a day. It was kind of you all to give me a window to redeem myself, but the science is more important than any ruffled feathers."

"Okay. Wow." Satya nervously finger-combed her hair. "I didn't expect that to go so well."

"I screwed up. There's no sugarcoating it. Everyone can, and does—which is why we've got layers to teams to prevent one screw-up from holding others up." Blake crossed back to her laptop and quickly sent the files. "The good news is I did the work. I just blanked on passing it along to all of you. That's done now."

"Thanks, Dr. Montgomery."

"I'm going to make this up to you, too. After all, there's got to be some perk for all the extra work I'm doing, right? Each of you send me the name of the visiting scientist you most want to engage with. I'll get you seated next to them at the Saturday breakfast."

"Oh. Okay. Wow," Staya repeated. "Really?"

"You work at Cygnet. The premier genomics lab in the world. Those scientists should count themselves lucky to be sitting next to *you*." Blake beamed at her team. "And clear

your calendars for next week. We'll hit it hard, I promise."

They filed out, full of thanks and smiles. When the door shut, Blake sagged against it. That wasn't enough. Knees bent, her back slid all the way down it until her butt touched the heels of her platform brown plaid loafers. She let the shame that she'd locked down uncurl inside her, filling her with greasy self-loathing.

She'd let them down. Worse yet? She'd let down the people this new gene therapy would help.

Sure, full FDA approval was still a couple of years away. But in Blake's mind, it'd always be a couple of years *plus one week* that she'd held up their progress. That some patient had to remain blind for an extra week because she couldn't keep on top of things.

"That's bullshit," Wyatt said.

Self-recrimination was supposed to be a solo activity. Blake hadn't realized she'd said any of it *aloud*. Blinking hard—there was no crying in a lab unless you needed an eye wash!—she said, "I'm wallowing over here. Totally normal. You just keep on painting."

"I can't. Not when you're beating yourself up so badly." He tossed his brush onto the wooden palette, wiped his hands, and came over to her. "You're not responsible for someone's blindness lasting an extra week, for Christ's sake."

"That is potentially correct." She looked up at him. Mmm. Her emotional misery didn't prevent her from admiring his Cary Grant cat burglar-esque look of the day. The black wool turtleneck hugged every muscle—every pec, ab, biceps, and delt. It gave Blake a particular satisfaction to be able to name each one of his spectacular physical attributes. "However, there's an outside chance I'm right. Self-pity sends you to emotional extremes. Let me sip my coffee and feel like crap for now. I'll be logical about it by tomorrow."

Wyatt fisted his hands at the waistband of his black jeans. His scowl was as dark as the smear of black paint across his wrist. "I won't let anyone hurt you, Blake. Including yourself."

Men.

They really didn't understand the emotional roller coaster of a good wallow. How cleansing it could be in the long run.

"But I *did* it to myself." She curled her fingers in until the nails bit into her palm. "I brought it on. I was frazzled. I didn't prioritize correctly. You're sweet to worry about me, but I need to feel the feels about this."

He hunkered down next to her. Let his wrists dangle off of his knees. "I'll admit that feelings aren't my strong suit. I'm great at ignoring them. When they do crop up, they're like a pimple: unasked for and annoying."

That supposed revelation was enough to jolt Blake momentarily out of her guilt and self-pity. "That sentence? That's the most utterly masculine you've ever been. Whipping out your penis wouldn't be half as much of a clichéd male move as that sentence."

He bumped her shoulder. "Hey, I'm being honest. Doesn't that count for anything?"

She tipped her head to rest against his. "I suppose so." It counted *so* much. Blake just wasn't ready to give him that credit when he'd interrupted her sulk.

Wyatt stroked a single finger over her knee. "For the record, I read the room and it didn't feel like sex was the correct thing to offer right now. But if whipping it out *would* make you feel better, I'm here for you."

"Duly noted. And you were correct with your initial assumption." She moved his hand aside, but still held tight to it. "Sex would compound my guilt while simultaneously putting me more behind."

"My point is that you should have your feelings. I won't try and stop you while you work through them." Wyatt stood, pulling her up with him. Then he loosely bracketed her waist. It was amazing how much comfort Blake got from merely knowing that he was there to lean on. That he understood. "Just wanted to be sure that you were having the *right* feelings."

Ah. So he didn't understand at all... "Have you ever been to a therapist?"

After two long beats, like he was deciding how much to tell her, Wyatt nodded. "Yes."

"Then you should know that there is no right or wrong with feelings. They simply *are*."

"Mmm, I disagree." His fir-green eyes narrowed as though he was scanning for her true feelings. "You're feeling like seven sacks of shit because you think you failed your team, your whole lab, and every prospective patient yet-to-be out there in the world, am I right?"

Ouch. But accurate. "That's correct."

"You're gulping down guilt like it's Gatorade after a marathon. That makes you a good leader. Ready and willing to accept your mistakes. Except—here's a radical thought—it wasn't your fault."

It was sweet of him to let her off the hook. Blake couldn't take that easy way out, though. "I missed the deadline by a week, Wyatt."

He angled his gaze over her shoulder, clearly thinking of how to combat her insistence on taking the wholly due blame. "It's like a coroner's report. You read the mechanism of death, and it's extreme blood loss."

Well, that randomness came out of nowhere. "Is this leading to a vampire metaphor? I'll warn you now that it won't go over well with me. The whole twinkle-in-the-daylight vampire craze turned me off of them."

"What have I ever said that makes you think I care two shits about vampires?"

He looked offended. It was more than a little hilarious. Or maybe Blake was a little punch-drunk at this point. "Sorry."

Still scowling, Wyatt continued. "So the *mechanism* was the blood loss, but the cause of death was a gunshot wound."

"Right. Mechanism could be asphyxiation, but the cause could be carbon monoxide poisoning from a garage suicide, or

strangulation by a murderer.” Both things were easier to talk about than letting her team down.

“You missing the deadline is the mechanism of the fuck-up. But the cause—that’s not on you. That’s on your boss.”

Hardly. “I guarantee you that Dr. Peabody is not the reason I forgot to send the results on time.”

“Counterargument: he is.” Wyatt dropped his arms, leaned against the high counter with the microscope, and crossed his ankles. “He’s the one who made you sub in for Nari. You *knew* you didn’t have the bandwidth with your research and what you were already assigned to handle for the summit. He steamrolled right over you and made you do it anyway.”

It was...all true.

It was as if Wyatt had flicked a light switch on in her brain, illuminating all that truth.

Blake dropped onto the stool. And then rolled backward until the wall stopped her abruptly, because she’d used zero caution in plopping down.

Rubbing the back of her head, she said, “You’re right.”

“Yeah. You can feel maybe 10 percent guilt at not doing the thing on time. But 90 percent of your feelings should be anger at your boss using you.”

It was amazing how quickly she was getting there. Her rage was near-incandescent. “Can I scale that back to 80 percent anger, so I have 10 percent left to be grateful to you for opening my eyes?”

“Nah. I’d rather see you in a righteous fury at Peabody. Your cheeks get all red and you look like a Valkyrie, bent on revenge.”

Blake tucked away that compliment to savor later. “I am definitely furious. He set in motion all these things that gave me sleepless nights and stress-filled days. He should never have put me in that position.”

“Damn straight.”



For a moment, she sat and absorbed the hurricane of emotions. Then she whooshed out a long sigh. Except—there was nothing to be done. “With the summit in three days, it’s sort of useless to get worked up about it. It’s far too late to ask anyone else to take over. I’m stuck with it. Ergo, useless to get worked up.”

Wyatt arched a dark brow. It gave him a very evil cartoon villain vibe. “Aren’t you the one who asked if I’d ever seen a shrink? I’ll volley that question right back at ya.”

“Of course. I told you my family is dysfunctional in all sorts of ways. Day one of college was about buying books, mapping out the best routes between classes, and signing up for counseling services.”

“Then you ought to know that feelings aren’t useless.” Wyatt smirked as she crinkled her nose at his annoying rightness. “In this case? Being mad and staying mad is a good thing. It shows you what matters most. You’re upset about your team and your research getting short shrift.”

“Of course.”

“*That’s* what you care most about, Blake. I hear your passion for doing the actual science come through in every interview you give. Anything even tangentially connected to this promotion they’re foisting on you is a time suck from what’s really important. You want to stay here, in this lab, doing work that will change people’s lives. Not sitting up on the admin floor keeping your hands clean.”

That was an unexpected attack of perceptivity.

Blake enjoyed it about as much as her last gyno checkup. Felt it to be equally invasive, too. “That’s a blunt accusation.”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

He wasn’t.

Blake had been dreading the end goal of the promotional track ever since stepping foot on it. A life of running summits and finding donors and hiring smart people was worthy. It just wasn’t what she wanted.

She *did* want to stay in the lab. Making discoveries, honing them, making *cures*.

Doing what you wanted was childish. The adult choice was to *be* responsible. “It isn’t that easy. There are expectations—”

“Because of your last name?”

“Yes. It carries a legacy of stewardship, of leadership. And the very real fact that my last name can help open doors and pockets. Dr. Peabody is counting on my stepping up.”

Wyatt crossed his arms. “It doesn’t take a PhD to see that doing something you *aren’t* passionate about won’t result in your best work. Putting someone in the position who wants to be there will ultimately result in more funding.”

“Maybe,” she said grudgingly. She didn’t love the implicit hint that she wouldn’t give it 100 percent.

On the other hand...Blake gave things she truly cared about at least 110 percent...

“You’re letting your life be decided by other people. By what they want for you. Shouldn’t *you* be the only one calling the shots on your life?”

How *dare* he? Blake wasn’t supposed to listen to other people, but she was supposed to listen to him? To step out from under an avalanche of expectations because it’d be more *enjoyable*?

So was eating gelato in a bikini on the Italian Riviera. Which was about as realistic a prospect for her.

Frustration popped her off the stool to pace. To gesticulate. And yes, to raise her voice. “My whole life, I’ve been told that it’s selfish to focus on my own dreams. My responsibility, my duty is to Swan Cove. The way I fulfill that is by doing everything I can to make its largest employer, Cygnet Labs, shine and succeed.”

“Screw selfish.” Wyatt grabbed her shoulders, stopping her. Then he gave two sharp squeezes. “Screw whoever put that in your brain. You’re the only one who knows what makes you happy. Life can be cut short before you know it. Wouldn’t you

rather do what you love than do what's expected?"

That very question didn't just haunt her at the dark searching-of-the-soul hours past midnight. No, it popped up continually, day and night, since her promotion became more of a looming reality than a distant threat.

But how did you just thumb your nose at all those piled-on expectations? Wouldn't she be letting everyone down?

Now she was mad at Wyatt—although not nearly on the scale she was at Dr. Peabody—for poking at those emotional blisters. What gave him the right to ask her the hard questions when he'd been dancing around sticking to his dream since the day he arrived?

Blake twisted out of his grip. "If it's so cut and dry to you, then let me turn the tables. What matters most to you—will you choose your art? Because it makes you happy? Regardless if you win or lose? Or give up and leave?"

Wyatt rubbed the back of his neck.

Pushed off the counter and now he was the one pacing the length of her lab.

Didn't feel so good to have their roles reversed, did it?

"Do you really want to know?" he asked in a gruff tone.

Odd. "Of course."

"*You're* what matters to me, Blake."

"What?"

Wyatt turned to face her, but stayed on the opposite end of the lab, one hand on his easel. "I've got no right to put that on your shoulders, especially before the summit when your plate's so full, but it's true."

She was unprepared for that bombshell.

Not *that* he cared for her. Every indication had been there that their growing feelings were mutual. The surprise was that Wyatt thought they were at the talking-about-it stage.

When they weren't even supposed to be anything more than

friends so the contest validity didn't come into question.

When she'd made it clear that her work and the damned promotion required all of her attention, leaving no room for a relationship.

When *he'd* made it clear he'd be leaving Swan Cove—oh, God, in a week.

“We don't—you don't have to—” Blake stuttered.

He cut her off with a swish of his brush through the air. “The basic answer to your question, the first thing that comes to mind when asked what matters most to me, is you. It's awkward and complicated. Not in my plans. But it's a truth I can't ignore. And one I thought you should know.”

His words were punctuated by her phone's alarm going off, signaling the first of seven meetings of the day, all related to the summit.

Blake was torn.

Her knee-jerk instinct was to respond in kind, with how much he mattered to her.

Because, damn it, he did.

Because the list of reasons she'd made of why they weren't supposed to be together didn't in any way stop Blake from desperately *wanting* to be with Wyatt.

Wasn't that ironic? She wanted to keep a job about to be torn away from her. She wanted a man who might walk away from her, no matter how much he cared.

Knowing that, her heart still pulled her forward, as if on a string connected to his heart. Her boots clicked across the floor until she was at the corner of her desk—and an arm's length away from the handsome man who wanted her to be happy.

The constant blaring of a taxi horn—very effective as an alarm, due to the annoyance factor being so high—continued. Wyatt grabbed her phone, but wasn't able to turn it off due to her fingerprint lock. He shoved it at her.

This could wait, right?

It had to. They were at Cygnet. The lab was her priority. They could talk about this tonight.

Instead of muting the alarm, Blake waved the phone at him. “I have a meeting.”

Without saying anything resembling an actual response, *aka* the most cowardly thing she’d ever done, Blake dashed out the door.

# Chapter Seventeen

In Wyatt's old career? His injuries garnered in a day of work covered a wide range of possibilities.

A sprained ankle from running over cobblestones.

Cracked ribs from being kicked by an assassin in steel-toed boots.

Dislocated finger thanks to preventing a thief from grabbing a Fabergé egg out of his hand.

Torn knee ligament from jumping out of a third-story window and landing wrong (although Wyatt considered it landing *right*, since he'd still been able to run away before the building exploded).

In his current job? He was massaging out a hand cramp from gripping the brush too long. Probably too tightly, too. Should've worked up to these long days to slowly increase his hand's stamina.

Still, he'd take it.

No, there wasn't the thrill of outsmarting ill-intentioned idiots. Or the adrenaline rush of a successful chase or fight.

But Wyatt was happy down to his *core*. Not satisfied at a job well done—which had been enough for him for so long. No, he was deeply content and happy for every minute he spent with a brush or his pencils in hand.

Not to mention how happy he was in the minutes he spent with Blake...

She'd left to do another summit-related something. He missed her already.

They were both snowed under in quiet, focused work. But Wyatt could feel her presence in the room, the same way he used to be able to tell when a person was hiding behind curtains. Always knew they were there.

A cookie would help. Not his hand cramp, so much, but the

walk down to the cafeteria to snare a pecan pie shortbread cookie would give it a chance to rest.

As he slipped the semi-access lanyard around his neck, the door opened.

And his old life came crashing into his new one.

Because it was a man with another ten years on Wyatt. Silver hair, thinned at the temples. Crewneck navy sweater over a blue checked button-down tucked into jeans. Nothing remarkable about him at all—until you watched his nearly black eyes and realized they were seeing everything.

There were two possibilities for Craig's visit.

Wyatt was being extracted due to extreme danger. In other words, he had a target on his back. Which meant no saying goodbye to Blake. No explanation about why he disappeared. Or:

Wyatt was being recalled for a mission that only he could fulfill. Which meant, yep, extreme danger, since his covers were all blown, and very probable death. Which again, meant not telling Blake jack shit. Eradicating the trust she'd shown him. Hurting her.

Both options were wholly unacceptable.

The Exiteer raised one hand in greeting. "Hey, Wyatt."

"Craig." His brain wasn't processing another *agent* being at Cygnet. "How'd you get in here? Modify RNA-DNA complexes with cholesterol so they could travel across the blood/brain border and knock down target genes?" Yeah. He paid attention to the chatter around him in the cafeteria.

"You know exactly how I got my credentials. I had Jean fake 'em."

There was an entire department at the agency specializing in forging anything—from documents to Van Goghs. Jean was an artist above and beyond the rest. Holograms, fingerprints—nothing was too secure for her to manipulate and replicate.

The door was still wide open. Wyatt gestured at it. "You want the whole lab to know that? Lock us down."

“Nah. If someone comes in, it’d be suspicious. Stays open, there’s nothing going on. Besides, most employees won’t clock in for another hour.”

“Then say what you came here to say. And please don’t bore either of us with small talk. We both suck at it.”

“You’re overly hostile this morning.”

Because dread at Craig’s unannounced appearance spiked through his bloodstream. “I’m not a parolee, for God’s sake. No need for an eyes-on status check.”

“Not pleased to see me?”

“Life in a small town has smoothed down some of my rude edges. So I’ll say that your presence is indicative of something negative. Aka trouble just walked in my door.”

“The opposite, actually. It’s a spot check to be sure the platitudes you’re handing me on the phone about doing fine with reintegration are true.”

So they trusted him to pass on intel to keep the world safe, but not to tell the truth about his own well-being? “Well, I’ve got a hand cramp”—Wyatt ostentatiously flexed his wrist—“but otherwise you can mark me down as doing just fine as a civilian.”

“Let me finish. If I’m satisfied with your answers, it’s graduation day. You’ll be rid of me and the looming shadow of the Agency for good.”

That was more than worth missing out on a cookie. “Bring it on.”

Craig flipped his lanyard back and forth. “First, there is one other reason I’m here. To help.”

“With what?”

“After sifting through the data you sent, I agree there’s a better than 50 percent chance that the summit will be a target.” He held up a restraining hand. “But that’s not enough hard evidence to get the go-ahead for a team, as you well know. This is off the books. You’ve got tonight to narrow down to a single target.”



He'd hoped Craig was listening, but he hadn't so much *expected* it. What a relief. "Then what?"

"I ran this by your branch chief."

The one who'd yanked him back to America in military transport to be sure he stayed alive. "Ken? He's up to speed?"

"Yeah. He agrees with me. You've only been out of the field for a month. Fairly certain you haven't gone soft, lost any of your instincts yet."

His ego flared in a knee-jerk reaction to even the hint that he'd lost any of his skills. It didn't matter, though. This would be a one-time thing.

Uh-oh. *Hopefully* a one-time thing. "You're reinstating me?"

"No." Craig cocked his head. "Unless you want me to..."

Although it surprised him a bit, Wyatt didn't hesitate. Not with his hand still shaped to hold a brush. He didn't want to give that up ever again. And Blake...well, he still didn't see how he could stay with her, but he sure as hell didn't want to walk away.

"No."

"You know the drill. Anything goes wrong—"

Yeah, yeah. Wyatt sat in Blake's big, cushy leather chair. Propped his feet on the desk. Albeit with care not to touch her laptop, her *other* laptop, or her tablet. "You don't know me and you won't help me. I got it."

"We'll get to all that in a minute." Craig settled onto Wyatt's stool. And took a long gander at the painting. Longer than Wyatt was comfortable with. Finally, he swiveled to look at Wyatt—with an equally searching gaze. "Would you classify yourself as stable, now that you've rooted in this particular environment?"

"Yes. I made friends with the mayor, and the ex-mayor. Who are a thing, but it's a long story. That's how life is in Swan Cove—everything comes with its own long story."

"How do you like living in your aunt's house?"

“*My* house,” he swiftly corrected. “No matter what I end up doing or where I go, that house will remain mine. It’d make Aunt Bec happy to know that I enjoy living with pieces of her life.”

“No matter what, hmm? Excellent segue to the next question. Are you staying in Swan Cove after the contest?”

It was oh-so-tempting to lie. To get Craig off his back. Number one rule about lying, though? Don’t do it unless you absolutely have to. The truth’s a hundred times easier in the long run.

“I flirted with the idea for a while. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Woman trouble?” When Wyatt’s eyebrows shot to his hairline, Craig smirked. “I’ve seen the file on Dr. Montgomery. She’s quite impressive. And, said objectively so please don’t hit me, quite beautiful. You’ve been glued to her side for a month. Master spycraft isn’t required to assume the obvious.”

Fine. He’d bare his soul to be free of the Exiteer. Oversharing should guarantee his graduation papers signed off today.

Blake’s lipstick was on the end of a pen right by his shin. She tapped it against her lips when she was thinking. Wyatt could never stop from watching while she did it.

He was a goner. “*Maybe* there’s woman trouble? No, *I’m* the one in trouble.”

“Because you like her too much?” Craig laughed as Wyatt’s face must’ve somehow revealed his further surprise. “I told you, Keene, I know what I’m doing. You fighting me tooth and nail from day one doesn’t stop me from trying to help you. I’ve helped hundreds of agents with their transition back to normal life. You think you’re the only one whose realized life is more worth living with a woman sharing it?”

Clearly he should’ve given Craig more credit. All his experience with watching agents embrace their old lives—or make new ones—might actually be helpful in this situation.

Because Wyatt didn’t know if he was more scared of

committing to living a normal life with Blake, or walking away to be sure she stayed safe.

“You’re saying it’s an automatic next step? Part of the process, like using my real ID again? I don’t buy it.”

“No.” Craig wavered his hand back and forth. “Sort of. Almost every agent closes themselves off from relationships. They’re convinced it’s too dangerous. Now you’ve opened the floodgates. I promise you, it’s all good.”

Then why was his gut tightening at the *idea* of getting to be with Blake for the long haul? “Turns out there can be too much of a good thing. All that goodness leads to next steps.”

“So take them.”

This was a surreal conversation to be having with his Exiteer. But Craig was the only one who knew exactly the demons Wyatt was battling. Trying to talk this through with Everett wouldn’t get to the root of it. Since his new friend would be missing an entire, deep layer of Wyatt’s mental contortions.

“It’s not like I have experience in making a relationship work. I wouldn’t know how to get it right. Especially with all the lying about who I really am. What I’ve done.”

Craig steepled his fingers. Tapped the tips together, one by one. “What if you put that to the side? The real question is, do you think she’s in the same place as you?”

“I thought I was making headway.” He remembered laying it all out for Blake—and how she’d run out the door without responding. And how they’d both been too busy in the two days since to be in the same room for more than five minutes. *Why* hadn’t Blake said anything? “I...I don’t know.”

“Deciphering a partner’s emotions is a million times more complex compared to the simplicity of shaking down an asset in the field.”

“Easier to trick a terrorist into giving up his target than to pry out what’s going on in Blake’s head,” he muttered.

“Remember that idiot in Beirut? The one who bragged about

having a stash of weapons-grade uranium for sale?”

Huh. Wonder how he'd heard that story? “Yeah.” Wyatt shrugged. “Crisis averted, Middle East peace maintained, on to the next mission.”

“How many times have you saved the world?”

He wouldn't say countless. Wyatt did, indeed keep count. Remembering each time he'd done so helped him to sleep on the nights things didn't work out so well. How guilty he felt for not being truthful with Blake. Craig thought he was encouraging him, but it was just a reminder of how useless he felt trying to safeguard Cygnet against an unidentifiable enemy.

“It doesn't matter. There's always a next time, a fresh danger, and now I can't help.” Wyatt stood, restless with frustration. “To quote an old and forgettable movie, this time it's personal. If all my years as a spy, away from friends and family and risking my life, don't give me the ability to protect this place, these brilliant people, what was the point?”

Craig joined him at the doorway. “Like I said, we've got tonight. I promise we'll run out the clock on this. And, for the record, I know your file. You've done more than your fair share of saving the world. Be glad you got out while you still have a life left to live. Many don't.”

“Some life-giving coffee, first.” Wyatt straight-armed the door open the rest of the way—

—to discover Blake standing in the hallway.

*Fuck.*

• • •

Showing emotions—your real, barely-acknowledged-to-yourself-in-the-dead-of-night emotions—was not the Montgomery way. Blake kept herself contained. Aware that there was always someone in this small town watching. Aware that there was always someone in Cygnet, or the greater scientific community, watching. Aware that revealing your

emotions often revealed your weaknesses.

She did not fucking care.

Not now.

Not upon discovering that Wyatt was...James Bond incarnate?!?!?

Holding back was simply not possible.

“Who. Are. You?” she asked with a stare that hopefully all but shot flames of anger at him.

The stranger looked back and forth between them, then hustled her into the office. “Dr. Montgomery, you need to stay calm.” Wyatt shut and locked the door behind him.

How did men not realize that asking a woman to stay calm was both patronizing and inherently egged them on to a far greater blow-up? “I don’t know you. But *you* should know that is exactly the wrong button to push at this moment. And, seeing as how this is a secure scientific facility, why don’t you get the hell out of my office?”

“Craig’s a friend of mine,” Wyatt explained. “He’s a surprisingly good guy. If you’re going to bite anyone’s head off, it should be mine.”

She bared her teeth. A kind person might call it a smile. Wyatt would know better. “No need to state the obvious.”

“How much, exactly, did you hear?” Craig shifted to stand next to Wyatt. It did not escape her notice that they formed a wall, blocking her from the locked door.

Blake was shocked. Stunned. Reeling.

But not so much so that she’d be intimidated by a couple of sneaky, low-down liars. “This is *my* lab. I don’t to answer to you. But you two should start talking if you have any chance of me *not* having security toss you out in five minutes flat.”

Wyatt used his thumb and forefinger to squeeze his temples. “She heard enough, Craig—can’t you tell? Blake knows what I am. My cover’s blown. *Again.*”

Slight overstatement. She had an inkling. That he’d flat out

lied about being a diplomat.

On the one hand, you could lie at a dinner party about being a mayor or the biggest car dealer in a three-county area and get away with it. Wyatt's talent, however? It was undeniable. Unfakeable. That's where Blake got stuck unraveling the truth from the rest.

"You're *really* not an artist?"

"I said I was *trying* to be. Seeing if it fit."

Wow. He was so not reading the mood of the room. "You really want to argue over semantics?"

"You bet." Wyatt shoved his hands in his pants pockets and gave her a sheepish, one-sided grin. "One way's a full-blown lie. The other's a lie of omission. Far smaller and, hopefully, more forgivable."

No. This wasn't like shading the truth about who nabbed the last slice of pie at Thanksgiving. This was a lie he'd perpetrated every single day with her. One that bordered on unbelievable.

"You're *really* a spy?"

After a glance at Craig, he nodded. "I was. Not anymore. Also key to the whole lesser-lie clarification."

Blake turned to Mr. Average. "And if you know all about him, then you must be one, too."

"I can neither confirm nor deny," he said smoothly.

A sigh huffed out of Wyatt. "Craig, don't bullshit her. The lady's smart. It's insulting to ignore that."

"Thank you." Although Blake certainly didn't know everything. She probably had *not* overheard the quantitative sum of things they didn't want her to know about.

Wyatt stepped away from the door, and Craig, and into Blake's circle of bitter anger. "I thought you had a meeting?"

"I did. I do. I left my tablet—" She turned and spotted it on the desk. Huh. Who knew a tablet could implode your entire life? "—and again, I remind you I'm not beholden to giving

you an agenda of my whereabouts.”

“Look, I know you’re upset. The more upset you get, the stuffier your speech gets. Please, Blake, let me explain.”

“Fine. Right after you open the door.”

She didn’t think for a second that Wyatt would let the other man hurt her. But Blake also didn’t want to know whatever awful confidential mess they were willing to share behind closed doors. Asking for it to be opened was the equivalent of a toddler sticking their fingers in their ears. And she was fine with that.

“Let’s clear the air in privacy,” Craig said with a pleasant smile. Everything about him screamed unassuming, from the suburban dad haircut to the just-casual-enough clothes and his calm voice.

Not the cinematic model for a super-spy.

He set her teeth on edge with his overt blandness.

“Or else what?”

“Dr. Montgomery, I’m not going to threaten you. I will state, however, that any and everything you heard me discussing with Wyatt falls under national security. It is confidential, and it is your duty as a citizen to keep it that way.”

Said the man who undoubtedly faked the credentials to get that Cygnet lanyard around his neck. “Oh. Okay. Is that the same rulebook that says Wyatt’s duty is to lie to me?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t expected that blunt of an answer.

“It isn’t personal. It’s a legal requirement to keep his *former*,” and he stressed the word as much as an elephant would stress a balloon by standing on it, “employment a secret. He swore an oath. One which the government holds him to quite rigorously.”

Blake was well-versed in nondisclosure agreements and confidentiality clauses.

That didn’t excuse what Wyatt had done. Even if his biggest

mistake had been in getting caught in the lie. “You’re telling me I’m not *allowed* to be mad at him?”

Craig’s eyes shifted to Wyatt, then back to her. “I was trying to. I get the feeling it would be unwise on my part to continue that particular path of reasoning.”

See? *He* could read the room.

But Blake was done with having a total stranger witness her emotional meltdown. She cut her gaze to the uncharacteristically stiff man she *thought* she knew. “Wyatt, I’d like to talk to you alone, please.”

Another sidelong exchange of glances between the two men. Geez, their eyeballs might as well be mounted on boomerangs.

“Like I said, I’m a *former* spy. I don’t have the authority to toss Craig out on his ear. He’s obligated to stay and make sure that you promise to keep quiet about all this. And then make sure you sign affidavits to that effect later.”

Well, it wasn’t as if her humiliation could get any worse with an audience.

But Blake did back up to his easel, giving them the illusion of a few feet of privacy from his...handler? “Why, Wyatt? Why did you come to Cygnet under false pretenses?”

“That part was the truth. Aunt Rebecca really did enter me in the contest without telling me.”

Having known Rebecca Keene, she could believe it. It still didn’t make sense, though. Blake knew that the moment her anger burned off, the pain would eat into her heart. The only way to mitigate it was to understand how it all happened.

How she’d gotten taken in by a man. *Again*. “So you took a sabbatical to randomly sample another career?”

Craig choked off a laugh.

“No. The timing was a weird coincidence. My job with the Agency ended, ah, abruptly. Suddenly I had the chance for a do-over. To live the life I’d dreamed of before my parents were killed.” Words were tumbling out of him in a rush. “All of that was true, too. I *did* switch my major after their deaths. I



just didn't go into the diplomatic corps. The Agency recruited me. It seemed like the best way to honor their memory—spending my life working to make sure another attack like that never happened. And I had nothing left to lose.”

Fine. It was a noble choice. When she calmed down in, oh, a year or so, Blake would be in awe of the strength it must've taken for him to abandon his entire life to protect everyone else's.

That, however, was not the point currently under discussion.

The way he'd kicked Blake's emotional legs out from under her was the issue.

The way he'd knowingly withheld oh, an entire *life* from her.

“You said you're out now. You could've told me the truth. At any point in the last month. For example, before the second time you slept with me.” In a low, dangerous voice, she added, “Or the third time. Or the tenth.”

A cord along the side of his neck spasmed. “It's protocol, Blake. I couldn't. It'd put you in danger if you knew anything about my former life. *Not* a risk I'm willing to take. Even if it makes you hate me, it keeps you safe.”

“Bullshit,” she spat. Blake's heart pounded as if she'd just finished a cardio class. “Two reasons: unless you tell me that your house is bugged, your ex-employers would never, ever find out if you told me who you really were. Because that is the kind of secret that people who truly care about each other keep locked down tight. You did say you care about me, didn't you?”

“Yes, but—”

“The second reason's that I don't for a second believe they intended for you to keep this gigantic secret from people you *truly* trust for the rest of your life. I'll bet there's a loophole. An exception.”

His Adam's apple bobbed three times before he responded. “I'm telling you, I didn't have a choice.”

“While you were actively collecting a paycheck? Sure. I believe that. Now, though? Not so much.” Whirling so fast that her hair snapped at her cheek, Blake turned to Craig. “Why don’t we let your *ex*-colleague weigh in?”

He didn’t look so affable now. He circled a finger to loosen the collar of his shirt as the skin around his eyes tightened. “I’d prefer to remain on the outskirts of this argument.”

“Craig, for God’s sake, tell her,” Wyatt ordered gruffly.

“You don’t want that,” he stated flatly. “Your case is different than, say, an agent rolling into retirement by choice.”

“I really do.”

He sucked in a long reverse-whistle of a breath. “It’s uncomfortable and unusual, but with your cover blown? With your name and status as an agent on the dark web—and even the normal web—in all sorts of places? Yes. You could have told Dr. Montgomery the truth. It isn’t a secret anymore. You can tell a *selective*,” and his emphasis on the word was as heavy as the makeup on the front man for KISS, “few people your history. If you feel certain they will respect that it is not information to be shared.”

In a mumble in which his lips barely moved, Wyatt asked, “Why wasn’t I told about that loophole?”

“It isn’t standard practice. Most agents don’t have their cover blown so spectacularly. Once you graduated from my watch, I would have told you. That reveal had to wait, however, until we were sure you were stable and handling the transition well.”

All the color had drained from Wyatt’s face. He reached out to her with an arm that wasn’t entirely steady. “Blake, I didn’t know. I’ve spent my whole life protecting my identity. Not just because the government told me to, but to keep Aunt Rebecca safe.”

Viable excuses—that predated his meeting Blake. “I’m sorry you struggled with this before. Truly. I can’t fathom how hard it must’ve been to be so isolated. But *I’m* the one that’s here with the rug pulled out from under me.”

Green eyes wide and unblinking, he said, “It was killing me to lie to you. You have to believe me.”

“Killing you, huh?” Another piece snicked into place in her mind. “That was *your* gun I found in the nightstand, wasn’t it?”

His eyelids slammed shut with a wince. “Yes.”

“You lied when you didn’t even have to. When you could’ve just told me that you keep it for protection, *aka* the damn truth.” It was proof that he was *so* used to lying, it was his go-to. Even when the situation *didn’t* call for it. It was a habit, baked into his nature from years of necessity. One that she could not tolerate.

Wyatt’s hands thudded against his thighs. “I’m sorry, Blake.”

Plenty of that to go around.

Blake picked up her tablet and nestled it in the crook of her arm, too furious and shaking to trust that her fingers alone would keep a hold of it. “I’m sorry, too. I’m sorry I didn’t follow Dr. Hauser’s advice and not become distracted by a relationship. I’m sorry I fell for another man who couldn’t be trusted. I’m sorry I believed it when you said I mattered the most to you.”

“You do, Blake. Aside from the blurring of the truth on my previous profession, *everything* I’ve said to you was true.”

“It doesn’t matter if the president himself wrote me an affidavit certifying that. Don’t you see, Wyatt? You’ve irrevocably broken my trust. I told you from the start that my only request was that you not lie to me. I explained why honesty was so important to me.”

“I remember.”

“Then you shouldn’t need my microscope to see that every cell in my body recoils from you now. Whatever this ephemeral thing was we had going? It is over. We are *through*.” She marched to the door. Didn’t even reach for the handle. Just stared down Craig until he both unlocked it and opened it for her.

As Blake headed for the elevator—with a placid mask in place should she cross paths with anyone—she knew her course of action.

Go to the meeting.

Bury herself in work. Like she should've done all along.

Maybe give herself tonight to be utterly shattered, to get it all out of the way at once. Then she'd put Wyatt behind her. With gratitude. That he'd shown her with blinding clarity that Dr. Hauser had been right all along.

That relationships were a waste of time.

# Chapter Eighteen

Craig tugged on a fleece ear band. “I’d like to recommend, for the fourth time, that you not carry through with this idiotic plan.”

Wyatt didn’t even close his coat against the icy wind circling the high school track like a ghostly sprinter. He welcomed the cold. Maybe it’d numb him. “I’d like to recommend, for what will be nowhere close to the last time, that since you caused the total annihilation of my working partnership and a relationship I was just starting to figure out mattered a whole hell of a lot to me, that you shut the fuck up.”

It felt good to yell at the Exiteer.

He’d rather drive his fist into Craig’s nose. Dislocate a knee with a strong kick. A few kidney punches for good measure. That all seemed like solid retribution for Craig being careless enough to implode what was *supposed* to be Wyatt’s new life.

However, he’d never beat up someone for personal reasons. Only ever in the line of duty. His parents had raised him to believe that fighting wasn’t a way to maturely resolve things. And everything he did, how he lived his life, was all about honoring his parents.

It was just...Wyatt had all this training in how to seriously hurt people. And he’d never been more tempted.

Settling for yelling at the man was cold comfort.

“You know I’m working, right? Middle of the school day,” Everett said as he appeared between the bleachers. “I don’t dance to the tune of a muse like you artists. I tap dance to stay ahead of the school bell and crowds of fickle, hormonal teenagers.”

Wyatt hadn’t done a nine-to-five office job since he finished his initial six months of training. He still respected the constraints of them. This...this just couldn’t wait.

“I know. That’s why we’re meeting here at the school. To

make it less awkward for you.”

“Make what? Is everything okay? Who’s this?” he asked, hooking a thumb at Craig. “Did you find someone to donate to the booster club? Fancy rich scientist in for the summit?”

“He’s someone I used to work with.”

Everett stuck out his hand with an easy smile. “Oh, hey. Any friend of Wyatt’s is a friend of—”

Wyatt cut him off. “I didn’t say he was a friend.” He’d started to accept that Craig wasn’t strictly a thorn in his ass—until half an hour ago—but a friend? No.

“Okay,” he drawled slowly. “What’s going on? Because this is weird. And, as I mentioned, I’m busy actually working at shaping the leaders of tomorrow. And choosing a color for the new bank of lockers in the east hallway.”

This was as uncomfortable as the rash from when he’d brushed against a stinging hydroid while reef diving in Singapore. He had to come clean before he left, though, with one person in the place he’d thought could be his home.

“I’m practicing honesty. You’re the first real friend I made here, and because of that, you deserve the truth. I brought Craig along—”

Groaning, Craig arched away as if he’d been hit. “For God’s sake, Wyatt. You had to use my real name? Again?”

This coming from the man who’d left the damn door open while discussing Wyatt’s career?!? “Little late in the day for you to be cautious. And I’m certain Everett here won’t be able to cull you on Google from all the other Craigs in the U.S.”

“Fake names? Honesty? You’re all over the place. Get to your point.” Everett had the vice principal stern voice down to a tee. Surprisingly, it worked to focus Wyatt.

“Until I came here a month ago, I was an agent for a government intelligence agency.”

Unlike Blake’s shock and fury, Everett’s expression was pure awe. His jaw dropped as he sucked in a long breath. “You’re a *spy*?”

“Past tense. My identity was discovered, brokered to basically all the bad guys, and I was given the choice of a desk job in the States or early retirement.” Wyatt shook out his arms, remembering the crawling dread at the thought of being a behind-the-scenes, actionless puppet master. And that was the best case scenario. Worst case? He’d be an Exiteer, like Craig.

The absolute, God-awful *horror*.

Everett bounced twice on the balls of his feet. “This is—this is huge. You’re officially the coolest person I’ve ever known.”

“Maybe you should get out more,” Craig muttered.

“I brought Craig along to verify my story, in case it was hard for you to believe. Looks like that won’t be necessary?”

“Why would you lie about that? Also, I’m a high school teacher. I’ve got a highly refined sixth sense to know when someone’s...” His words trailed off.

There it was. Well, it’d been fun to bask in his admiration for 2.5 seconds. “Yes. I’ve been lying to you since we met. I’m sorry.”

“Good. Now he knows. And he knows you feel bad about it.” Craig gave an impatient jerk of his head toward the parking lot. “Can we get back to work?”

Jesus. “Here we go again. You just fucking blew up my new life. You can hang on for twenty minutes while I try to make sure I can keep one friend in this town. If you’re cold, go sit in the car.”

“You know I can’t do that.” Craig’s chin was sunk deep in the high collar of his parka. And his teeth chattered. Clearly not an outdoorsy dude. “You’re volatile right now. My fault, I get that, but I’m not leaving you alone to say God knows what to this guy.”

Everett flung out an arm to point at Wyatt. “So you trusted him for years to risk his life for the safety of our country, but you won’t take his word *now* that he won’t say anything inappropriate? You can listen to our conversation, but you don’t get to be a dick about it.”

Wyatt. Was. *Pumped*. Everett took down the Exiteer the same way he'd take down a teenaged bully—by pointing out the rude illogic of his behavior.

It didn't lessen the pain of what happened with Blake. But it was a fine distraction.

To his shock, Craig stepped back a few paces. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'm, ah, caught up in a deadline situation. Can't imagine that twenty minutes would make a difference, though."

"Work. A deadline. Are you on a secret mission?" Behind his horn-rimmed glasses, Everett's eyes were wide with wonder.

Craig finger-gunned at Wyatt. "You're calling the shots in this conversation, Keene. Up to you how much to divulge. And Mr. Reynolds? There will be an email waiting in your inbox when you return to your office. You will sign every nondisclosure form in it, without any delay or negotiation. You will be bound to secrecy on this topic for the rest of your life."

"That's fantastic." Everett rubbed his gloved hands together. "Once I sign the NDAs, can you tell me about *all* of your missions? Start with the ones in exotic locales. No, start with the ones where you saved the world. No, I'm overthinking. Start with the mission where you rescued a beautiful kidnapped woman and she couldn't wait to show you her gratitude." He gave a wide-mouthed wink.

"It's not like that." Not all the time, anyway. "My job's about as glamorous as yours half the time."

"Then tell me about the other half."

A bemused chuckle slid out of Wyatt. Everett was making this so easy for him.

Unlike Blake's reaction.

Which brought reality crashing back into his still twisted gut. Along with the reminder that he needed to get his ass in gear to maximize the time searching for a possible target with Craig.



In the old days? A whopping five weeks ago? He wouldn't have needed the reminder that the mission always came first.

Craig might have a million questions for him, but to Wyatt? Choosing to put his personal life ahead of the mission was the thing that proved how stable and dedicated to this new life he truly was.

Still, he'd better make it quick. "Reliving my glory days would be fun under different circumstances. I do have some, obviously redacted," he added with a sidelong glance at Craig, "stories I can share. Something I almost never get the opportunity to do."

"Now's good. I'll clear my calendar. Tell 'em I've got food poisoning from the seriously underbaked muffins the home ec class brought around."

"Another time. All that matters now"—his unknowing choice of words pricked at him. The words he'd used to Blake about how he felt about her. The words that hadn't seemed to make a difference at all once she learned the truth about him—"is that Blake was my shot at happiness, at normalcy, and that's gone now. I...I could use a friend."

"You and Blake seemed to be humming along great. What happened?"

"I did." Craig angled forward. "I'll own it. I came to check on Wyatt. Made an amateur mistake and Dr. Montgomery overheard our conversation about his time at the Agency."

"She knows you're a spy?"

"*Was* a spy," he corrected again. "And yeah. Finding that out made her aware I've lied to her since we met. Blake's biggest thing is trust."

"But, duh, you couldn't tell her." His earnest certainty cracked Wyatt up. "Didn't you sign all the same forms I'm about to, swearing that you'd never divulge your spy status?"

Everett had clearly put in some time as a fan of thrillers. It'd be fun to hang with him and share stories.

If Wyatt was staying.

Which he didn't see how he could anymore. Even if they ran a successful mission tomorrow and nobody at Cygnet knew how close they'd skated to international disaster.

"He signed considerably more forms, Mr. Reynolds. And could we please stop using the term 'spy'?" Craig actually made finger quotes. See, he'd be zero fun to swap stories with. Too much of a rule follower. "We're agents. Not cartoon characters in trench coats."

Leaning sideways, Everett murmured, "*Do* you have a trench coat, though?"

This time a full-blown laugh rolled out of his belly. "Yeah." Wyatt decided to give the guy a little something. Because he *was* proud of the work he'd done, and some it *was* pretty kick-ass. "A shoe with a secret compartment, too."

A sigh rolled out of Craig at that disclosure, as thick as the fog that came in off the Atlantic in the mornings.

"So Blake found out you've had this whole secret life and she's pissed."

"That's the understatement of the century." Wyatt realized the bigger problem. "The mad she'll get over. I hurt her, Everett. I honest to God didn't think I had a choice. Also never thought she'd find out. Every damn day, though, *I* knew I was lying to her. And I hated it."

"Course you did. You're decent. No way would you have hurt her on purpose."

He ambled to the bleachers and sat on the wood, frosted with a thin layer of ice and snow. "Accidental or not, it's done. We're done."

"Ah." Everett sat next to him. "That's why you called me out here. Partly to come clean on the spy stuff, but mostly? You're miserable."

His motivation had entirely been to tell Everett the truth about his past. To be wholly honest with his friend. But now? Having a friend to unload on about the Blake situation was just what he needed. Something he'd gone without for so many years. Everett's friendship was a luxury, like heated bathroom

floors.

“Yeah, I’m miserable. Heartbroken. Guilty.” Wyatt flicked his gaze to the Exiteer, who had not deigned to freeze his ass with them. “With a little bit of space left to be mad at Craig, of course.”

Everett nodded. “Of course.”

Craig’s entire face pinched together in a scowl. “Look, Wyatt, curating your love life isn’t in my job description. I’m sorry things went to shit, but we have more immediate problems.” And he tapped his watch to grind home the point.

“You think there are bigger problems than heartbreak?” Everett pointed at the red brick of the school, across the field. “Come hang out in my office for an hour. Listen in while a series of fifteen-year-olds wail about how life is ending because so and so didn’t swing by their locker to say hi. It’s worse than fingernails down a chalkboard. Because it’s *real*. Pure, undiluted heartbreak packs a wallop.”

Wyatt scanned through his symptoms. Gut twisted. Jaw clenched. Shoulders held up by his ears. Raging headache. All in all? Heartbreak was similar to the dengue fever he’d caught in Singapore.

It *sucked*.

Elbows braced on his thighs, Wyatt dropped his head into his hands. “She’ll never forgive me. She shouldn’t. We agreed not to date.”

“Cause you’re trying to figure out how to be a normal citizen again?”

“More or less.”

“That was the right call. Too bad you both ignored it,” Craig said.

Everett shot off the bleachers. “Hey! Remember back to, oh, three minutes ago when I said you don’t get to be a dick to Wyatt? You’re on my turf still. What I say, goes. Stand there and be quiet and/or supportive, or go wait in the car.”

Man, he owed Everett for the way he kept taking down

Craig. “I am going to buy you the biggest steak in all of Swan Cove before I go. And a bottle of Macallan to wash it down.”

“Before you go? Where?”

“I can’t stay in Swan Cove. That wouldn’t be fair to Blake. It’s her family’s town—literally.”

“Yours, too. You’ve got a house, and friends. Randall’s been keeping an eye out for a dog you might like. And Fitz was going to ask if you wanted to come to Florida in January for the Disney World marathon.”

How was that a good thing? “I’m miserable enough without running a marathon.” He’d spent too many years staying fit for the moment he had to run from a terrorist. It was good exercise, so he’d still run. Just not twenty-six freaking miles at a time.

“I don’t run it. I just enjoy a fun guy’s weekend in the sun. Which you’ll realize you need after a month into a Maine winter. Fitz does all the sweat equity. We cheer him on.”

It felt damn good to know that Fitz wanted to include him. Swan Cove *had* become his home. Exactly what he needed—even if he hadn’t realized what that was when he moved here.

Wyatt genuinely liked the friends he’d made.

Liked taking hikes through the snowy woods.

And after a lifetime of never staying in one place, of making sure he was never recognized? The way Alyssa at the coffee cart remembered his order and greeted him every morning was as cozy as a fleece blanket.

Then there was his art.

“I love painting. I love that I get to throw all my energy into it, every day. It really is my dream come true. But...I don’t know if I can keep doing it after this. Whether I win the contest or not.” God, just saying that out loud stabbed at him.

“Why?”

“It’ll remind me of how I hurt Blake. That my painting is what caused all of this...disruption to her life. I’ll feel guilty

every time I pick up a brush.”

Everett laced his gloved fingers together. “Remember, I’ve seen your work. I’m no critic, but I will say it’d be a damn shame to ignore that kind of talent. The world doesn’t just need soldiers or protectors. We need artists, too. Very much.”

“That’s kind of you. Maybe after fifteen years of always looking for trouble in every shadow, always planning for the worst, that’s a part of me I can’t turn off. I don’t know if I can make it as an artist. Mercenary work I can do in my sleep. Go back to no ties, no complications.”

It sounded...like shit. It’d been a good backup plan when he first left the Agency and had no idea how he’d take to life in Swan Cove. Now, though, he knew it suited him right down to the ground. He didn’t want to go back to that lonely life.

All of a sudden, Craig surged forward, clapping his hands right in front of Wyatt’s face. “Snap out of it. You can wallow in self-pity as much as you want. *After* we finish tonight’s, ah, project.”

The bleachers squeaked as Everett angled around to face Wyatt. “I was right! You do have a secret mission! Can I help? Wait. Scratch that. Of course I can’t. Unless you do need me.” He thumped his chest. “I’m here, I’m willing and ready.”

“Mr. Reynolds, your help will not be needed. And Mr. Keene will *not* share with you anything about our activities tonight.” His steely glare was full of both warnings and threats. “However, I have a solution to stop your wallowing and get us back on track.”

“Tequila shots?” It was early, but Wyatt could get on board with that after how shitty a morning it had been.

“As your Exiteer, in order to graduate from my oversight, I am assigning you one last mission.”

No way. The last thing he needed were more hoops to jump through. Probably stupid ones, too, like writing an essay on how absolutely fine he was with his post-Agency life. “You can’t do that.”

“I can and I will—if you want me to stay and help you for

the next twenty-four hours.”

Ah. Craig must’ve been a decent agent in his time. The leveraging/threat sandwich was a tried and true tactic. “Fine. What is it?”

“Stop whining. You can’t change what’s happened. You *can* control what happens next, however.”

Already figured that out. Shrugging, Wyatt said, “I quit and leave.”

“No. Nothing in your file indicates you even know the meaning of the word ‘quit’. Your mission is to get the girl back.” Craig started ticking off points on his fingers. “You can stay in Swan Cove. You can paint. And you can stare at the sunsets over the ocean with the woman you love. This isn’t as impossible as you make it out to be. Although I recall that impossible missions were kind of your wheelhouse.”

“That’s the least dick-ish thing you’ve said so far.” Everett spread his arms low and wide. “He’s right, Wyatt. You’re still processing what just went down.”

“Do not talk to me in teenager lingo.”

“You can’t give up without trying to get her back. Blake needs to take a minute and wrap her head around this enormous revelation. She may be an incredibly smart scientist, able to ingest and understand lots of data. She’s also a woman. One with a big heart that’s been trampled today.”

“She may cool down, but I don’t think she’ll forgive me.”

“You don’t *know*. Fight for her, man.”

Craig was right. He always followed through on a mission, no matter how low the chances of it working. And Everett was right—he had to fight for her.

Wyatt didn’t have much experience with romance.

He did, however, happen to be excellent at fighting for what was right...

# Chapter Nineteen

When some people got their hearts broken, they pouted. Ate gallons of ice cream. Got a new haircut.

Blake had every intention of working through all those crucial steps.

First?

She was going to get *revenge*.

She centered her lanyard. Smoothed the labels of her lab coat. Took a long, steady breath. Not a hint of this morning's emotional blow showed on her face. She was certain—after a lengthy stare into the bathroom mirror and a lipstick touch-up—that she radiated nothing more than calm professionalism.

*Fake it 'til you make it.*

The director of HR's door was open. Blake gave a perfunctory rap on it, then entered.

“Dr. Montgomery.” Kelly waved for her to take a seat on the mulberry sofa. Rather like a therapist's office, it had the usual guest chairs in front of her desk. It *also* had a long couch with throw pillows that had tissue boxes at each end. Clearly drama went down on a regular basis in there. “Your costume at the Halloween party was inspired. The fact that you went all the way and brought a dog—what a great touch.”

“Thank you.” Blake tried to come up with a platitude about Kelly's costume. Her brain was bulging with tamped-down emotions, though, and she couldn't cut through all that to come up with anything but the memory of Wyatt on Halloween. How good he'd looked. How they'd played at being a couple, and how easy it had been.

Turned out it wasn't because she was special. Because they actually worked so well together.

No, it was just because playing at being someone else was Wyatt's specialty.

“Are you in here to finally tell me who you want to replace Dr. Sandiford with on your team?”

That was a problem to solve after the summit. When she focused all her attention on work, all the time. “Not quite. But this meeting is about him.”

“Oh?” Kelly rose from her desk and casually closed the door. Guess she’d tuned in from Blake’s tone that this wasn’t going to be a chat full of plaudits for the man. She settled on the sofa next to her. “Dr. Vishwanath recruited him off your team several months ago. Are you wanting to get him back?”

“No. And, for the record, Dr. Vishwanath requested the transfer as a favor to me. I asked him to get Rob off my team.” All it had cost her was a made-up story about how Rob didn’t work well under a female supervisor (*aka* her pride) and a promise that Vishwanath’s family would be put to the top of the wait list for membership at the golf club (*aka* her pride mixed with a healthy dose of self-loathing for using her family connections).

“I’m sorry to hear you had to back-channel that.” Her brown eyes were wide and sympathetic. Kelly tucked her bob behind her ears. “Why didn’t you come to me if you were having an issue with him?”

Awkward. Because she’d wanted to avoid precisely this conversation. This admission that her sexuality had interfered with her abilities as a scientist. This admission of weakness.

Blake rolled her hands in a circle. “It felt...messy. I didn’t want any gossip to spread. I handled it.”

“All right. Your story, your choice. I’m compelled to remind you, though, that you should encourage those you supervise to come to HR if they encounter uncomfortable working conditions. We can provide support—even if that ends up being no more than a listening ear.”

“I know. Do as I say, not as I do.” Blake crinkled her nose. The bowl of rose potpourri on the end table didn’t negate the bitter mental stench of conceding failure. “I’ll admit, I made the wrong choice by handling it myself.”



Kelly interlaced her fingers and settled them on the navy cords tucked into Bean boots with their fleece cuffs rolled down. “What would you like me to handle for you now?”

Without a breath of hesitation, Blake said, “I’d like him fired. *That’s* what I should’ve told you three months ago.”

Ohhh, the relief of saying it was palpable. Better than any of the orgasms she’d had with Rob. It was a *truthgasm*.

“Goodness. That’s direct.” Still, her tone and expression remained placid. Classic HR—roll with the drama.

“As a scientist at Cygnet, I can affirm that Dr. Sandiford is a danger to keep on staff.” Blake removed a flash drive from her pocket. Slid it across the cushions. “He tried to steal my research and pass it off as his own. The corroborating, or rather, the *damning* email is on there.”

The placidity vanished. Kelly snatched up the flash drive. “That’s an extremely serious charge. If the evidence bears out your statement, it would absolutely result in immediate termination. Thank you for bringing it to me.”

“I wrote up a statement to go with the evidence. It...doesn’t paint me in the best light, but that doesn’t matter.” Well, it did matter to Blake. It was a lesson hard learned. “We were involved. The only reason Dr. Sandiford had the access to compromise my research is because of that level of relationship.”

There. Everything was out in the open. It wasn’t empowering to reveal it. Nor did it have the cleansing power of a good cry.

She would, however, be plenty empowered and healed when Rob was shown the door by security.

“*You* didn’t compromise your research, Dr. Montgomery. After all, he was a team member, which automatically affords a level of trust. I’ll need to read your statement and review the evidence, of course, as director of H.R. But as a woman? You should know better than to blame yourself when you’re the victim.”

Partially true. And yet, partially not. Dr. Hauser had warned

her. It'd been as much a part of her teaching as instructing how to split a stem cell. Blake simply had ignored it. Then doubled down on that ferociously stupid mistake with Wyatt.

There would *not* be a third time.

Quietly, she said, "I need to bear some responsibility."

"No, you do not." Kelly leaned over to squeeze her wrist. "The challenges to success in this field are Herculean in general. You're literally starting from nothing. Making educated guesses that, if you're lucky, after two hundred revisions may pan out into a possibility that will then require rounds of further testing. The challenge of doing that as a woman is even harder."

"You are preaching to the choir, you know."

"You should be able to trust, to find companionship without constantly being on guard. To do your work and still live a full life. The heart is a muscle that needs to be exercised as much as the quadriceps."

"That's unusual advice." Not to mention it ascribed physicality to emotions that simply weren't quantifiable. Falling in love would, in no way, reduce a person's cholesterol levels. It was basic science.

"I've watched others bury themselves in work to the exclusion of everything else. It isn't healthy. It isn't fulfilling. Frankly, it isn't smart." Kelly leaned back again. "You strike me as a very smart woman, Dr. Montgomery."

Blake was smart enough to know that she'd never let a man get away with lying to her ever again.

...

"You know, when you run away a whopping three blocks as a little kid, with a squishy PB&J smearing all over your backpack, it is because you truly believe it will work. That your parents will relent on whatever silly request you've made. Or some brat with perfect braids will forget that she said you had a pig nose." Ana stood with a glass of wine in

one hand and a cookie the size of a plate in the other. “As an adult, however, I would’ve thought you were aware the three-block run away does not, indeed, work.”

Blake finished tying the waist of her yoga pants. “You’re saying I should’ve gone to stay with Hallie? Because her apartment’s a good half mile from mine?”

“I’m saying you can’t run away from your troubles. Hiding in my house is not a solution.”

“I know that.” She nipped the wine from her friend’s hand and took a long swallow. Mmm. An oaky chardonnay that wouldn’t go with the cookie at all, but it did not matter. “It’s not why I came—to hide. I came for breathing space. So I can process what happened with Wyatt. If I went home, he might try to come over and apologize. Or explain. Or rationalize.”

“And that’d be a bad thing?” Ana pulled a plush fleece blanket off the back of a deeply squishy chair and tucked it around her. “Have you ever been on the receiving end of a handsome man apologizing profusely? There’s nothing quite so satisfying. Also makes you feel powerful.”

Ana didn’t understand. She wasn’t *there* yet. This morning’s discovery had been traumatic. Then her session at HR had been cleansing, but also a bit traumatic. Each of those situations would’ve been enough to fill an entire day.

Not for Blake, though. She still went to every summit meeting, gave another interview to the local news, and welcomed two of their distinguished guests with cocktails and cheese. She smiled, cajoled, and talked about her *own* research just as much as she talked about the summit.

All she wanted to do was *finish* the feelings that had erupted this morning, and then been resolutely tamped down and locked away. “I don’t want any of that. Wyatt hurt me. Deeply. No matter what the reason, that was the effect. It...it doesn’t sting. It *aches*.”

“Oh, Blake.” Ana perched on the arm of the chair and stroked her hair. “I’m really sorry. That’s the only thing you want to hear tonight, right?”

“Yes.” There were mini peanut butter cups in the cookie. They didn’t actually help. But they didn’t suck, either.

“You don’t want advice? Maybe take a poll of other people’s opinions on what happened?”

“Definitely not.”

“Whoops. My bad. Then you’re not going to like this.”

The triple knock on the door had Blake almost upending her wine. “Do *not* tell me you told Wyatt where I was?”

“Of course not.” Ana rushed to the door. “I did, however, call for reinforcements. Your brother plus one of the most caring people I know sounded like just the right way to round out this night. You need as many people as possible telling that you’re going to be okay.”

Fitz and Hallie came in. There was a flurry of stomping off snow and hanging of winter accoutrements. Blake used the time to snuggle deeper under her blanket while considering throwing it overhead and constructing a fort to hide from her brother.

Pathetic.

This wholly pathetic attitude was yet another reason to avoid the many downsides of getting distracted by the opposite sex. She never wanted to hide in a fort about *work*.

Hallie leaned down to give her a one-armed hug. “It may not feel like it now, but you’ll be fine. Eventually. I promise.”

Blake had to admit that the hug was quite comforting. “I know. And I concur. I refuse to let anyone else derail my happiness.” She was quite capable of doing that herself.

Oh my goodness. So *resolutely* pathetic.

Fitz tousled her hair. It was the first time he’d done it in over a decade. Blake disliked it as much as ever, but she appreciated the expression of consolation he was trying to extend. “Sorry you had a shitty day, sis.”

“Me, too.” Blake thought about Ana calling them—and what she must’ve said to elicit a come-right-over reaction.

No.

Noooooooo. It was humiliating.

It was also potentially a gigantic breach of government confidentiality.

Hallie sat at Blake's feet, patting her knee. "How are you doing?"

Blake wiggled fully upright. "I'm freaking out more than a little about why you're here. Ana, what did you tell them?"

Ana looked a good five miles away from contrite. Her chocolate eyes met Blake's accusing stare with an evenness that matched the final wand battle between Harry and Voldemort. "That you needed them. That Wyatt—who has been completely awesome up to this point, or so we thought—turns out to have been lying to you about his, well, entire life."

"Did you *tell* them the lie?"

"That he's a spy?" She tossed her long waves. "Of course. It's the root of the problem. The foundation to his fuck-up. The core of his crappy behavior."

Just when Blake thought nothing about the day could get worse...her best friend went and did something that could get them both jailed. Gasping, she said, "That's a highly classified government secret. You weren't supposed to tell *anyone*."

"You told *me*."

"Yes. That's one person. Now? There are three people who know. This is already spiraling out of control."

Fitz batted away her concern with a lazy swipe of his arm as he settled into the red plaid wing chair. "Remember, I was mayor for eight years. That's got to count toward security clearance."

"And I'm the current mayor. See?" Hallie gestured between the two of them. "We're keeping it to government employees. So, so very safe. Still very much a secret."

Mayor of Swan Cove was a very big deal...*in* Swan Cove. Nowhere else. And as someone who had once actually

received Interim Secret security clearance for a postdoc fellowship? Blake knew they were blowing smoke.

Comforting smoke, nonetheless.

And she was glad to see them. This was what she'd been working toward with all the texts and conversations with Fitz. Knowing he'd be there for support when a personal problem hit. This was her silver lining to the whole thing, a gift, really.

Except for how she really, really didn't want Fitz or Hallie tossed in jail for...what would it be? Treason?

Ana simply hooked her thumb, with its triple-stacked silver rings, at Fitz. "He's your brother. It isn't plausible to expect that you'd keep a secret this big from your brother."

"I've kept loads of things from Fitz over the years." She'd be harder pressed to think of a secret she *had* shared with him—aside from how she and Wyatt had, um, gotten to know each other.

"Thanks for rubbing salt in that particular wound." Fitz salted on the sarcasm as thickly as salt on movie popcorn.

Blake was supposed to be the one receiving comfort. Not having to dish it out to salve her brother's bruised feelings. "Please. I'm sure you've done the same. I'm incredibly grateful for how much closer we've become in the last six months, but I respect Wyatt's choice, not to mention his vow of secrecy. Especially with that current spy here to enforce it. I can't stress this enough. *Nobody* else is supposed to know."

"Then you shouldn't have told me." Ana passed the plate of cookies to Hallie.

Probably true. No, undoubtedly true. But desperate times called for desperate confidences being shared. "You're like my one phone call from jail. You're my one emotional support..."

Ana's eyes narrowed dangerously. "If you in any way equate me to a pot-bellied pig, you'll have a far bigger problem than spilling state secrets."

There were getting nowhere. If she shared more, wasn't it like condoning that they now knew? It'd be smartest to send

them on their way. Not share any more details. “Fitz, Hallie, I appreciate you dropping by, but I won’t be good company. I’m going to sit here and stew for a while, with breaks to marinate myself in this chardonnay.”

“What if you try going a different way?” Fitz asked.

“You think a whiskey would be a better choice? Wouldn’t really go with the cookies.”

He hiked one ankle up onto the opposite knee. A faint dusting of snow sprinkled to the carpet. “I was thinking more that this doesn’t have to be the end of you and Wyatt.”

Had Fitz forgotten the entire conversation at his own dinner party? Explaining that they would not, could not date? “There was never supposed to be a beginning for us!”

“Whatever. Best-laid plans. Fate. Blah blah blah. You *were* together. What’s more, you were good together. What he did wasn’t a personal affront. He didn’t lie to *you*, Blake. Wyatt lied to everyone.”

How was compounding his breach in trust a *plus*? “That is in no way an improvement in viewpoint.”

“Ugh. Fitz, you’re butchering this,” Hallie said. “Let me try.”

“She’s not your sister.”

“Which is precisely why I might have a more effective approach.” Hallie shifted to prop her chin atop the crossed hands on Blake’s knee. “You weren’t supposed to be together. You weren’t supposed to date at all. You agreed. No time, bad optics, etc.”

Ah, the relief of talking to someone who appreciated *facts*. “Correct.”

“And yet you ended up in bed together again, anyway.”

Blake startled enough to bounce Hallie off of her. Yes, her friendship with the librarian was growing every day. But she knew she hadn’t spilled the development of sleeping with Wyatt. *Again*.

Guessing who *had* was simple. Blake threw aside the blanket and stormed across the room. Okay, in yoga pants, it was more of a sashay, but the intent was to be a Category 2 hurricane of wrath. “Ana, did you synopsise my sex life into a text to these two?”

“No. I only send episodic recaps of my *own* sex life to my group chat. Get a grip.”

Hallie followed her across the room. They stood toe to toe in front of the fireplace. Snow was starting to build up in swoops along the window frame. The similarity to a very special holiday episode of a sitcom would tickle Blake—if her life weren’t the thing her friends were laughing at.

“Please. I didn’t need Ana to say anything.” Hallie twitched her head—and thus her long ponytail—back and forth. “You’ve been downright buoyant for about a week. That gave it away enough. Also? You wouldn’t be this upset unless you’d slept together again. I planned to coax the admission out of you as soon as the summit was over. Because we’re friends now, and friends share the things that are making them happy.”

If she’d been this transparent about her feelings to her friends and family...did her colleagues suspect, too?

And then they’d be laughing at her, too, when Wyatt left?

The wine and cookies wouldn’t be enough once that happened. Maybe not even a full hypo of the ketamine they used in the lab for anesthetic would make her forget that level of humiliation.

Blake crossed her feet and dropped to the carpet. She didn’t have the energy to make it back to the chair. And, if she was lucky, the heat of the fire would give an excuse for the red in her cheeks.

“Yes. Things had progressed with Wyatt. They were going great, as a matter of fact. I was...head over heels wild about him. That’s why this hurts so much.”

She’d been so careful after Rob’s betrayal. Made sure to keep her flings casual and non-emotional.

And yet here she was. Lied to—*again*—by a man she



thought she knew. A man she respected. Trusted. It made Blake feel immensely stupid to have been taken in a second time. And, obviously, heartbroken that she'd lost the man who made her so very happy.

Oh, *and* now aware that she had zero ability to tell the good ones from the bad ones and she was doomed to a sad, solitary life.

“Okay.” Hallie crawled over to kneel next to her. “Hold that thought. I’ll circle back around to sympathy in a minute. First, though, my point was that you continued to do things with him that you swore you wouldn’t. Because you couldn’t resist him.”

“Yes. I was a fool to give in to temptation,” she said in a hollow voice. Blake *knew* better. Did it anyway. And the consequences were just as bad as she’d initially imagined.

Throwing an arm around her shoulders, Hallie said, “Don’t you see? Wyatt did the same thing. He knew he had to keep this huge secret. He knew he couldn’t be in a relationship with a woman and lie to her. But he couldn’t resist you, either. So you can’t be mad at him for following his heart the same way you did.”

“Well done,” Fitz said in a voice deep with warm approval.

Blake had been ready to poke at Hallie for such a convoluted rationale. Her brother was an easier target, however. This was what he got for infiltrating his way into her life. She’d share the good—and she’d also rip him a new one when he was an idiot.

Plus, attacking Fitz meant she could keep wallowing in the comfort of Hallie’s hug.

“No. Uh-uh. Do not say or think that was well done, brother o’ mine. *That* was a justification. Of the man who broke my heart eight hours ago.”

“Yes, but—”

“I said *no*. No buts. No trying to act as a go-between to smooth things over. Even if it is only for tonight—although I’d prefer it last longer than that—I insist that you take my side.

*Actual* brotherhood should trump any beer-and-braggadocio-based brotherhood with a friend.”

Fitz’s head arced in a lazy swing of a no. “See, that’s a fallacy you embraced decades ago.”

“What is?”

“That you’re always in the right in our arguments just because you’re older.”

“Fairly certain I stopped claiming that when I hit thirty. No woman likes to harp on being older after that point.”

Fitz joined them in front of the crackling fire. “The thing is, you’re wrong. If we were still mostly distant, polite siblings, I’d be on your side. But that’s not the case anymore. I *like* you. I care about you. Not out of duty, but because we finally got around to knowing and appreciating each other as people.”

“You’re winding up for a big ol’ ‘but’, aren’t you?” Ana smirked from across the room.

“I was going with because. *Because* I do care, I’ll tell you that I’m on Wyatt’s side. *Because* the man humanized you, Blake.”

The implied insult wholly negated the compliment. It stung as much as if an ember had landed on her. “I’ve always been human.”

“Meh.” He wagged his hand back and forth. “You’ve been a...what’s that thing, Hallie? That you called Wall-E when we watched it last month?”

She grimaced—probably aware that she was enabling yet another insult—and slowly said, “An automaton.”

“That. Mechanical and unemotional, going through a predetermined set of instructions.” Fitz winked at his girlfriend. “See, I pay attention when my librarian expands my knowledge.”

This...*this* was what she got for fostering a closer relationship with her brother? Nothing about this day was going right.

Hallie planted her palm on his cheek and pushed his head away with a crinkle of her nose. Then she turned back to Blake. “I think a nicer way to put it would be that you have, ah, workaholic tendencies.”

“Oh, stop being gentle. The only way to get through to her is with a harsh slap of reality. Not to be mean, but to help you in the long run.”

“Great.” Blake knew that none of them intended to hurt her. Still felt lousy, though. “Like the three-day chills and fever and misery of a covid vaccine to protect long-term?”

“Exactly. We’re vaxxing you against potential future stumbles. The point is, Wyatt got you out of the lab and out of your head.”

“Agreed.” She braced her face in her hands. “And my work has suffered as a result.”

“There will always be more work. There will always be more mountains of science to be climbed. You could program a robot to work 24/7 and it still wouldn’t begin to accomplish everything. So why think that *you* can if you lock yourself in your lab?”

The heat of the fire, being under their interrogation—it was all too much. Blake pushed up and leaned against the cool glass of the window. “It’s expected.”

“So what? Expectations can’t be enforced.”

Easy for Ana to say. She didn’t have the crushing weight of generations of family history to uphold. Or the equally crushing weight of forging a path in a field that wasn’t exactly awash in her gender. “I have to succeed. As a woman, as a scientist, as a Montgomery.”

“You have to succeed at being happy,” Hallie said. “And being the best version of yourself.”

Wyatt had said something similar. But then, why should she believe anything Wyatt said?

Fitz came up behind her, encircling her in a bear hug. “I really like that version of my sister who pulls her head out of

the scientific sand and lives a little. The version that was more well-rounded. Fun. I don't want that version to disappear.”

It *was* nice to hear. Even nicer to feel his support.

But...Blake was convinced that the cliché was a lie. She *couldn't* have it all. The evidence was incontrovertible. Success, satisfaction, love—those things butted up against each other. At least for her.

So at least one of them had to go.

“Thank you for the sideways compliment.” She leaned back against him, resting her head against his chin. “I, however, want nothing more than to bury myself back in my lab.”

That was the one thing she could do for herself.

Because it turned out that Wyatt was right. She had discovered what really mattered, because of him.

Just the science.

*That*, she could trust.

## Chapter Twenty

The barista carefully placed a coffee in front of him. “Check it out, Wyatt—I drew a *W* in the foam.”

Huh. Foam meant he wasn’t getting the unadulterated coffee he’d ordered. And after staying up *literally* all night, Wyatt didn’t want a millimeter of space that could be taken up by caffeine wasted on milk foam. “Thanks, Joe, but you didn’t have to label it. I watched you make it, and there’s no one else in line.”

“The *W*’s not for your name. It’s for *winner*.” Next to him, Craig snorted. “The whole coffee cart team is pulling for you and Dr. Montgomery to take home the prize today.”

“Appreciate it. Hope I don’t let you down.” He tipped a lazy salute—and five dollars for the effort—before leading Craig to the elevator.

Turned out the caffeine wasn’t what he’d needed the most this morning.

The un-asked for support was pretty damn great. Wyatt wasn’t used to fanfare, for people pulling for him while he did his job. And that’s what life in Swan Cove was all about.

Community.

How fucking great was that?

“Guess you weren’t exaggerating. You really have made a place for yourself here. Become a part of it.” Craig set down the painting wrapped in brown paper. Threw his arms wide and gave a half bow. “Congratulations. You graduated. The Agency won’t be a part of your life anymore, in any capacity.”

He’d vomited out all his innermost feelings to get there—but it had been the approbation of a barista that proved to Craig he was solid? “That was all it took?”

“Hardly. We’ll call it the last straw. You’ve done well, Wyatt.”

Wow. That accolade actually settled deep. Because he hadn’t

been at all sure, at thirty thousand feet with nothing more than a backpack of his belongings during his extraction, that he'd succeed at this new idea of a life he'd cobbled together.

“Thanks.”

“Except for one last thing. A favor.”

This happened every time. Just when he started liking Craig, the guy did something to get under his skin again. “I got you a seat in the sold-out awards ceremony already. What do you want—to be in the front row?”

“Neither one of us will be at it.”

“Very funny. Being at that ceremony is the only way I'll get Blake back. I have to be there for her.”

“For her? Not to find out if you won?”

“That, too.” But getting Blake back was the first priority.

“Mr. Keene, is that your submission?” A short scientist he hadn't officially met yet pointed at Craig's armful.

“Yep. Ready to be judged.”

“I'll take it to the auditorium for you.” She scowled at him from over the thick frames as black as her hair. “We've been waiting. You cut it very close, you know.”

Well, yeah. Because while he'd been putting on the finishing touches, he and Craig had spent the whole night doing a deep dive into everyone at Cygnet that he thought might be a target. Using the Agency's computer resources and contacts, they'd made enough progress to narrow it down to five possibilities.

And it was why they'd arrived so close to the deadline. The whole saving-the-world thing, rather than a clichéd artist-losing-track-of-time thing.

“Sorry. Thanks for keeping an eye out for me.”

With a sniff, she departed with his painting. The one that could be—*no*, was the start of the next chapter of his life.

No matter what.

Everett pointing out that the world needed artists...that had

really stuck in his craw. Wyatt had spent a long time protecting what was good in the world.

Now he wanted to *make* it.

Craig grabbed at his coat sleeve. Pulled him past the glass elevator bank behind a cluster of ficuses. “You were right.”

“Why didn’t you start all of our conversations like that? And why are we hiding behind potted plants like cartoon spies?”

“While you were getting your very special coffee, I got a text.” He yanked off his gloves. Stuffed them in his coat pocket. And kept his voice low enough that Wyatt had to lean in to hear. “We got chatter. There *is* something going down here today. HQ even narrowed it down to a single suspect. A Dr. Lipinski is selling, ah, single dose gene therapy that gives lifelong protection against coronary disease. There’s a very rich conglomerate of Russians on the black market who want it.”

“Yes!” Wyatt pumped his fist. Then quickly dropped it. “I mean, yeah, obviously, too bad there might be danger. But I knew I could still trust my gut.”

“Here’s the problem.” He made an inordinately big deal of unzipping the coat, unwinding the scarf. Trying to give a reason to any who noticed them *why* they were parked behind greenery. “It’s too late to get anyone else up here to BFE Maine in the next two hours. Consider yourself conscripted. Deputized. Whatever you want to call it. We need you to help me stop this.”

It was what he’d always planned to do, if the opportunity arose.

Until now.

Until Wyatt had figured out, in his final frenzy of painting, that he had to be there for Blake, above all else.

But now? Craig was forcing him to choose between being there on stage for Blake, and possibly stopping a sale of classified secrets. A choice between his old life and what he’d tried to make his new one.

There was only one way he'd agree. "I have to tell her."

"No."

Wyatt gripped the ends of the scarf. Pulled it taut. "This isn't up for discussion. I'm not disappearing on her without a heads-up. Blake already knows what we do. There's no reason *not* to tell her."

"Of course there is. Dr. Montgomery might panic. She might tell others and start a panic."

About as much likelihood of that as the doc flying out before the summit today to audition for Disney on Ice. "Not Blake. She's as cool as they come. Plus, this is non-negotiable."

Craig stared him down. Well, he *tried*. Clearly he hadn't been out in the field for a while. His intimidation glare got to maybe a four out of ten.

Wyatt's rocked a ten-plus.

After a frown and a sigh, Craig nodded. Wyatt held up a finger. "One more non-negotiable point. I'm not going through the whole exit process again."

Rolling laughter burst out of the Exiteer. "*That*, we can agree on." They shook. "The exchange will be in Lipinski's office. Everyone else will be in the auditorium for the summit opening and the announcement of the contest winners."

"Yeah. I can't believe I have to miss it."

"Last time." There was, maybe, a tinge of sympathy in the older man's voice. "Did you bring your gun?"

"No. Figured you had one."

"I do." Craig rubbed the back of his neck. Then he slipped the revolver out from under his coat and passed it to Wyatt. "I haven't been in the field in a long time. You should take it."

"Nah. I'll be fine. You can wave it threateningly at the scientist. It'll scare the piss out of him. He's greedy, sure, but probably not violent. If you get into trouble, holler. I'll take the foreign agent."



Five minutes later, they were approaching Blake's office. Two voices carried down the hallway through the open door.

It was an ironic reversal from yesterday. And he'd take a page from her book and listen from behind the door.

He was a desperate man.

Desperate to get back with her. He'd use whatever tool jumped into his arsenal. So he straight-armed Craig to a halt. It earned him an eye roll. The agent leaned against the wall and zipped his thumbs over his phone, hopefully getting even more intel on the two suspects.

"This isn't a great time for a meeting. We've both got duties with the summit kicking off. Can't it wait?" The annoyed voice belonged to her insensitive jerk of a boss.

"No. Well, it could wait. But I'm choosing to take charge of my future. There's no waiting for that."

Wyatt had no idea where Blake was going with that. But he sure liked the sound of it.

Peabody's heels clipped sharply across the floor. "You want me to announce your promotion a few days early? In front of all of Cygnet? I never took you for someone who needed to take a bow, but sure. We can do it tomorrow after the lunch keynote."

She laughed. Wyatt knew that laugh. It was short but effective in its *you're being an idiot* tone. "I do not want to take a bow. I want the promotion even less. In fact, I'm preemptively turning it down."

Peabody drew a sharp breath. "That would be...unwise."

"On the contrary. It would be one of the wisest moves I've ever made. You see, the contest did its job. You wanted scientists and artists to open each other's eyes to a different way of looking at the world. Being paired with Mr. Keene definitely made me see what I do in a new light."

Wyatt felt a grin stretch across his face. He'd gotten through to her. And Blake sure as heck had gotten through to him. Made him see what mattered most in the one very short life he

had.

He wished he had popcorn for the rest of her speech. Or at least a few gulps of coffee left.

“Damn it, that’s all nonsense. For show.” Peabody slapped his hand against some hard surface. “What I wanted was for this contest to raise the visibility and notoriety of the summit. Not to distract one of my top scientists from a carefully curated path to eventually run Cygnet.”

“*Your* path, Dr. Peabody. Not mine. I’m officially recusing myself from the administrative track.”

“That’s nonsense. We need you.”

“I disagree. Top scientists should put the science first. My plan is to stay right here, in my lab. It’s where I can do the most good.”

“You’re disappointing me, Dr. Montgomery.” Peabody stormed out without even noticing Wyatt—or noticing how Blake softly responded.

“But I’m not disappointing myself.”

He should wait. Let her have her moment.

He couldn’t wait.

Wyatt barged in, slamming the door behind him to prevent Craig from hovering. Took a heartbeat to gulp down how beautiful Blake looked.

Without a lab coat, for once, she wore an apricot cashmere sweater atop cream pants. So elegant, understated, professional. So very *Blake*. Her hair was pulled back on one side, cascading in golden waves.

He wanted nothing more than to nibble up and down her body.

There were a lot of hoops to jump through first. If he even got the chance.

Hands outstretched in a *hear me out* pose, he said, “I know you’re pissed at me. We’ll get to that.”

She barely blinked in acknowledgement of his arrival. “You have an agenda?”

“I do.” Sure, she’d challenged him in that snooty voice that made him hard. What she hadn’t done was immediately toss him back out. So Wyatt plowed ahead. “For now, though? I heard what you said to Peabody. I’m so proud that you clued in to what makes you happy. Way to go, Blake. You probably don’t want me to hug you. Can I at least give you a high-five?”

It was corny. He just *so* needed to touch her in congratulations.

“Damn it.”

The swearing caught him off-guard. Couldn’t she tell his praise was sincere? That it had nothing to do with what had transpired—good or bad—between them?

“Virtual high-five?” he offered with a weak half grin.

Her hand curled around the astrocyte pendant. “You have the worst timing, Wyatt.”

“Not usually.” Might as well confront the elephant in the room head-on. “In my old job, my timing was perfect. I wouldn’t be alive otherwise. Guess I’ve misplaced my timing mojo. Thing is—I’m willing to work at it until I get in the groove again. After you do a victory dance for telling Peabody to shove it.”

“I’m holding off on the dance for now. Too much to do.”

“Ah.” That was an obvious brush-off. Super obvious. It wouldn’t stop him, though. “I just need a minute. I have to tell you something.”

Blake nibbled at her glossy pink bottom lip. “No, I have to tell *you* something. Several things, actually.”

That couldn’t be good.

He truly did intend for her to verbally whale on him. For as long as it took. Wyatt knew he deserved it.

Knew it’d be a part of the process necessary to work

through before they could—hopefully—start over and move forward. He'd happily take it. Because Blake yelling at him was a million times better than Blake never talking to him again.

Spending all night painting and narrowing down the suspect list hadn't left time for crafting an elaborate plan to get her back. Mostly because Wyatt had no idea what sort of elaborate plan would work.

His very, very basic plan was to keep apologizing for as long as it took. Hopefully interspersed with explanations about why secrecy was so important as he'd negotiated this first month after having his status as an agent sold to the highest bidder.

And *that'd* be interspersed with lots of begging for forgiveness.

He just didn't have time for it right this second.

"This is going to sound selfish—especially when you're already pissed at me—but I really need to go first."

• • •

Blake clearly held the moral high ground from their last argument. *She* was the one who'd been lied to. Wyatt was the one who should be bending over backward to make it up to her. Didn't he know that was how these things worked?

Oh.

Maybe he didn't.

Due to the whole spending his life as a spy and probably not being in a committed relationship ever.

So she just blurted out her news. "I turned in Horrible Rob to HR. Got him fired. Not quietly, either. I doubt he'll ever have the chance to attempt to steal someone else's work."

That same pride she'd just watched warm his green eyes lit up again. "Good for you."

Turns out Blake *was* the type of person who wanted to take

a bow—for the right audience. Hearing the approval in his voice charged her up. “I did it for me, and for science, but also because of you.”

“All this went down before we even met. How’d I have anything to do with it?”

Because from the moment they’d met, he’d changed her life. Opened her eyes. Opened her heart—as Ana pointed out—despite how hard she fought to resist. Because when Wyatt looked at her? He didn’t see a scientist. Or a Montgomery of Swan Cove. He simply saw Blake...which allowed her to *finally* do the same.

She took a single, cautious step closer. “You...you did the hard things. Every day. For years. Because it was the *right* thing to do, even if it sucked for you personally. Even if it meant risking your life. Giving up accolades and comfort and money to stand up for what was right. If you could do that? I could stand up for myself and get through a little embarrassment with an understanding HR director.”

It hadn’t been nearly as hard, or as humiliating, as she’d built it up to be in her mind. The only thing Blake regretted was waiting so long to do it.

Yes, discovering Wyatt had lied to her had sprouted the seed in her mind.

But the strength to do it had, indeed, come from the immense respect she had for his sacrifice and strength—even while still being furious at him.

Wyatt ran his hand over his thick, dark hair that her fingers itched to touch. “Well, if I helped in any way—which I doubt because you’re plenty determined and strong enough on your own—I’m glad. I know it can’t possibly balance out how much I hurt you, though.”

“No. You hurt me deeply, Wyatt.” That couldn’t be glossed over.

“Look, I know. I swear I understand. I’m more sorry than I can ever say, but I’m damn well going to keep saying it as long as it takes. The thing is—”

Blake cut him off. “You know how you hurt me so deeply?”

“Yes. 100 percent. And I will get down on my knees to beg forgiveness. It’s just that—”

“You hurt me because I *allowed* it. Because I allowed myself to fall for you. To drop my defenses, ignore what I’d always held up as common sense, and fall for you. You see, I should’ve told you before—” This was harder than going to HR.

This was a whole different level of vulnerability.

But she was now certain, *almost* certain, that Dr. Hauser had been wrong all those years ago. A life devoted to science wasn’t a life. It was just a career.

Blake wanted both.

She’d sat in front of Ana’s fireplace until it smoldered. Thinking. Once the sting of the moment had passed, the words of her brother and her friends really sank in.

She’d spent the past month evolving. Becoming that new version of herself that Fitz liked so much. That allowed her to grow her friendship with Hallie. That allowed her space to start falling in love with an interesting, handsome, complex man.

Turned out, Blake wanted it *all*. Not the promotion, for sure. Just devoting herself to what she loved—both the research and the people.

Exactly what Wyatt was attempting with his fresh start.

It’d be so much better if they did it *together*.

He shifted from one black dress shoe to the other. She’d never seen him so snazzy before—black sport coat, dark gray tie. He’d really made an effort for the contest announcement. “Gotta say, I’m intrigued where this is heading, but there’s no time.”

It was sweet of him to worry about her being late to the start of the summit. Wyatt was always thoughtful with her. It was part of what made their relationship special.

Worth fighting for.

Blake didn't want to let anyone else define her life. Not anymore. Not with their presumptions or expectations. She was going to grab what she wanted with both hands.

Literally.

In her nervous haste, she lurched forward to take his hands.

"I did 'clue in', as you put it, to what makes me happy. Sticking with research, yes. And that *you* make me happy."

"That's...that's terrific." He squeezed back once, then released her hands. "But when I said essentially the same thing to you? You ran out on me. With zero response."

"There wasn't time to get into it all. And...I was scared. I wasn't ready."

"Funny you should put it like that. Because there's no time to get into it *now*. If you let me run out on you, it'll be for a good reason. To keep you and Cygnet and everyone in it safe. But I promise this is the last time I'll ever pull this. I'll come back, for as long as you'll have me."

"You're leaving? In the middle of maybe the most important discussion we'll ever have?"

The door opened so fast it slammed into the spongy rubber door stopper. "Gotta go, Keene," Craig announced. Impatience radiated off him like heat off of sunbaked asphalt. "Whatever this is can wait."

Wyatt sloughed off his overcoat, dumped it on the chair. "Will you? Wait for me?"

Blake scrambled to catch up. Wyatt talking about keeping the lab safe. Craig rushing him out. They...had an assignment. A mission. Something bad was on the verge of happening in her lab.

Fear slicked ice down her spine.

Not for herself.

Not for her colleagues.

For Wyatt.

But he didn't need someone sniffing and wailing. He needed to focus, not be worrying about how she was doing. Blake held up a warning index finger. "You've got about ten straight hours of apologizing you owe me. Don't think the U.S. government can shield you from it. You bet I'll be waiting."

"Quickest way to Dr. Lipinski's office?"

Oh. Hearing the name of her colleague made it so much more real. Was he in danger? "Um, fourth floor, east wing. Don't take the elevators—they'll be jammed with everyone heading to the summit opening."

"Thanks." Wyatt flashed that super-confident grin. "We've got a lot more to say to each other, Doc. Just give me an hour."

"If you promise to make it worth my while."

Craig groaned. "Hell. Flirting is *not* how we kick off a covert action. Let's go, Keene."

It was amazing how silently they moved down the hall in mere seconds. Blake was left alone.

To worry. And to wonder. But mostly worry.

Until the alarm on her phone went off. The summit was about to start. She and her artist partner were expected on stage.

The man she'd done her level best not to get involved with. The man who'd told her that she held his heart—after which she'd oh-so-stupidly chosen her career over telling him how *she* felt. The man she'd soundly rejected after discovering how much he'd kept from her.

The man she absolutely wanted back with her whole heart.

What if he *didn't* come back? Flashes of every thriller she'd read, every Bourne and *Mission: Impossible* movie barraged her brain.

Then her logic kicked in reassuringly. Obviously, Dr. Lipinski was selling proprietary medicine.

Lipinski was shorter than Blake, with a pot belly. Wyatt



could take him down with a stern glare.

But what about the operative doing the purchasing? Or worse, was it a kidnapping? How many bad guys were infiltrating Cygnet right now?

The only thing that banished her worries was when she walked onto the stage. A row of easels were set up in the center. Blake caught her first full look at Wyatt's completed painting.

The title was *First Sight*.

It was a woman's face, partially in profile, with wide-open eyes. Her expression was a mix of shock and elation. Her exquisitely rendered blue eyes looked across the black canvas to where a single spot of pure white expanded into a rainbow of astrocytes.

He'd imagined what her first successful patient might see after treatment with Blake's research. It was beautiful. No, it was breathtaking. The mix of raw emotion and painstaking craftsmanship of things only seen under a microscope was the ultimate combination of art and science as the contest had challenged.

Mal sat beside her, as Wyatt's liaison. "What do you think?" he whispered as Dr. Peabody droned through the bios of all involved.

"I think it is extraordinary."

"Me, too. I didn't know what to expect from him."

"Join the club," she murmured.

It had been more than an hour since Wyatt left her office. Seventy-seven minutes, exactly. Blake wanted to pace. Wanted to bolt off the stage, grab every security officer at Cygnet and race to Lipinski's office.

Instead, she sat under the scorching spotlight with a fixed smile. The same one she used when the Montgomery family sat on the dais at Swan Cove events. Dug her fingernails into her palms. Spared two seconds from all the worrying to smirk at the empty chair where Horrible Rob would've sat with his

artist.

*What if Wyatt didn't come back?*

“Esteemed colleagues and guests, the winning team for the inaugural ‘Science *is* Art’ contest of the Expanding Human Potential Summit is that of Dr. Blake Montgomery and artist Wyatt Keene!”

All the oxygen evaporated from the room. Or at least from Blake’s lungs.

He’d *won*.

She was so proud of him. So thrilled for him. As the applause swelled, she went to stand next to his painting.

Videographers and photographers yelled for Wyatt.

Blake very much wanted to do the same. Just yell and yell until he came back safely to her.

But she needed to protect him while he finished his other job. Keep him safe. Blake remembered how he actively worked to avoid having his picture taken. Was that to keep him safe?

Raising her arms for quiet, she said, “Thank you to the committee. Exploring where and how art and science meet was truly a joy for me. And as for Mr. Keene, well, he prefers that his art speak for him.”

In the silence, broken only by the clicking of cameras, a door slammed. Footsteps thudded in the wings.

And Wyatt appeared between the black velvet curtains.

He was in one piece. Thank God. As she raked her gaze up and down, she noted bloodied knuckles. A slight hitch in his step as though his knee hurt. And at his hairline—the side away from the audience—a cut bloomed droplets of red.

Blake rushed over, shielding him from the cameras. “You’re here.”

“I said I’d be back. That I’d never lie to you again.”

“You don’t have to come out here. You’ll be exposed.”

“That’s fine. I’m permanently out of the shadows now.” He took her hand and crossed over to his painting. Another round of applause started. Leaning to murmur in her ear, Wyatt said, “I want nothing more than to have our picture taken, together. A photo of the moment we start fresh, with no secrets. That’s worth commemorating.”

Her heart—despite it being a physiological impossibility—had migrated to her throat. “I concur.”

“Then let’s go big.” After raising their joined hands and waving at the camera, Wyatt swept her into his arms. Lifted Blake off her feet and kissed her.

They’d kissed a lot since that first time at the airport hotel. Blake knew the shape and feel of his lips. This time felt different, though. Better.

Was it actually any new and different melding of lips? Probably not. But—putting all science aside—Blake could *feel* the emotions coursing between them. All the things still to be said. There was an electric heat to his lips. And, of course, a bit of possessiveness on both sides.

It was spectacular.

The staid audience of scientists roared their approval.

*This* was the best possible combination of art and science.

“How about we go play doctor?” Blake whispered.

“I’m all in. We don’t even need a bed. How about that supply closet in the quantitative biology wing?”

“Slow your roll. I mean letting *me* be the doctor. Before anyone notices that you just dripped blood down my sweater.” She led him offstage.

“I’m fine,” he huffed.

Ugh. He was playing the stoic spy. That wouldn’t fly around her. “You could have a concussion.”

Wyatt cradled her cheeks in his palms. The single blue light at the stage manager’s podium backlit him like a ghost. “Blake, if you forgive me? And stay with me? I could have a

skull fracture and still be fine.”

“That’s not really the low bar we’re trying to hit.” She laughed, so happy and so full of possibility. “How about we aim for a few levels better than fine? We can still have sex if I give you stitches, but not with a skull fracture.”

“You’re such a stickler. It’s sexy.”

“I know you can’t tell me much, but you got the bad guys? Craig’s carted them off?”

“Yeah. A helicopter should be landing right about now to take ’em all away. I’ll have to file a report with Craig tomorrow, but that’s it. That part of my life’s officially over. Will you be part of the rest of it?”

“How could I say no to a bleeding artist? It’s very angsty. Van Gogh-esque. It’s sexy,” she mockingly echoed.

# Epilogue

*Six Weeks Later*

Wyatt swore. Almost toppled off the ladder.

“I know you can’t share specifics.” Blake didn’t move from where she leaned against the wall. The lights of the Christmas tree sparkled on her silver sequin top. “But having watched a lot of thrillers, I’m assuming that at some point in your shadowy career, you leaped from rooftop to rooftop. Ran across steel beams twenty feet in the air. Why can’t you keep your footing on a six-foot ladder?”

Yes, he in fact *had* done those things. But one foot of the ladder was missing a rubber cover and it wobbled. A fact he hadn’t discovered before leaning his entire body weight off one side.

“Nobody said that being in a relationship would mean taking a daily dose of snark.”

“Nobody asked. Ignorance is never an excuse,” she said tartly. But her bright red lips lifted into a smile.

“Man, why didn’t I think of that as a comeback six weeks ago when you got all pissed? You never directly asked me if I was a spy.”

“Too soon. No jokes about how awful that day of revelations was for at least, oh, a year.”

“Well, the new year does start in five hours... Come help me with this.” He tossed her the other end of the garland with silver stars hanging down.

“I did not expect you to decorate for this party.” She held it up to the window frame as he pinned it in place. “I didn’t expect you to *have* a party.”

“I’m embracing small town life. We went to the Thanksgiving-eve pizza party at Ana’s. The cookies and caroling party on Main Street. The one where you represented the Montgomerys and sampled one of every cookie

presented.”

“That is my favorite family obligation of the year.”

“Then Fitz and Hallie hosted her family and Megan—with Everett cooking, like the pushover that he is—and us for Christmas. It was obvious we needed to step up and host New Year’s Eve.”

“You love it all, don’t you? All the things I take for granted about living in Swan Cove.”

“You bet I do.” Wyatt climbed down from the ladder. He had a plan to do this later, when the countdown ended, but sometimes life handed you a moment. “I love you, Blake.”

“Mmm. I love you, too. Come kiss me and prove it.”

The doorbell rang. Wyatt was happy to ignore it with a target lock on Blake’s lips. But only a moment later, the door opened and a flurry of barks sounded.

Reluctantly, he let go of his woman and turned to find Mal in the entry way. “The whole doorbell sequence is a social construct that only works when you wait for someone to open the door.”

“It’s a party. You just walk in.”

“You’re half an hour early. If you walk in, you walk in on us kissing.”

“Are you trying to embarrass me? That’s basic biology. And I’m early so I could take Faraday on a tour of the house, help him adjust to a new place.” The King Charles spaniel at his feet barked at his name.

“Why did Mal bring his dog to a dinner party?” Blake crouched to stroke the dog’s ears.

“I’m dog-sitting.” Wyatt winced. “I texted you and asked if you could talk, but you were busy. And then I had to pick up my vasilopita at the bakery.”

“The what?”

“Traditional Greek NYE cake. I, ah, encountered it on my travels. Has a coin for good luck baked into it.”

“That is lucky. The 460 BC silver tetradrachm of Naxos sold in 2012 for almost seven hundred thousand pounds.” Mal grinned.

“Don’t hold your breath. Pretty sure the one in the cake is plastic.”

“That’s got to lower the luck quotient significantly.” He unhooked Faraday from the leash. “But I’m already feeling lucky that you agreed to watch him. Randall offered me a discount at the kennel, but my boy is shy. He needs to just lie on a pillow and be treated like the king that he is.”

“Duly noted.”

“How long will he be on your pillow?”

“Not the one you share with him, Dr. Montgomery. I’ve got his bed in the car. I’ll bring it in now if you two will keep an eye on him.” Mal headed back out.

The dog had already plopped in front of the fireplace. Didn’t seem to require any active surveillance.

“I’ve got him for two weeks, while Mal goes home to India.”

“You’re...test-driving dog ownership?”

“Yeah. Everett’s suggestion. He knew I was thinking about getting one. And since he knows my, well, real history, he thought I should try before committing.”

“It’s a smart move.” Blake stroked through Faraday’s silky fur. “He’s sweet. Soft. Warm. Takes up considerably less of the bed. I might swap you out for him.”

“Not even a little bit funny, Doc.” Especially since Wyatt was sweating from being interrupted. He was primed and ready. He needed to spit it out. “So, since you admit that you love me—”

“You said it first. That’s very important, for the record.”

“Right.” Blake had echoed him two seconds later, but whatever.

The door thudded open again. “You know the best part

about our parents having moved to Florida?” Fitz asked as he and Hallie stomped off snow. “They don’t know when I raid their extensive wine cellar. I’ve got a 2012 Dom Perignon for us to crack at midnight.”

“Aren’t you too old to steal our parents’ alcohol?”

“I consider it only the beginning of the payback they owe me for forcing me to be mayor for eight years. Due compensation.” He hugged Blake, shook hands with Wyatt.

Okay. Yes, the party had been his idea. But it wasn’t supposed to start for half an hour, and he needed freaking two minutes alone with Blake.

“You’re early.” Wyatt made sure his annoyance vibrated through his tone.

“I just finished the kid’s new year celebration on Main Street. Straight up six o’clock—midnight in Belgium, of course—confetti, noisemakers, and sparkling cider. Wasn’t worth driving home, so we just came here.”

“That’s perfectly fine. We should get a head start on celebrating. Wyatt has news.”

He did have news. Big news. But he didn’t want to be sidetracked. “That can wait ’til over dinner.”

“I can’t wait. I’m too excited for you.” Blake did wait, however, because the door opened yet again. Everett waved as he clomped in with an armful of wood.

“Didn’t want you to run out mid-party. I’ll just load it into the log rack.”

“Oh, good timing. You can hear Wyatt’s big announcement.”

They all turned to him with expectant faces.

That was one of the best presents of all in moving here. In giving up his solitary life. His friends had folded him into their tight circle. It didn’t feel like Wyatt had lived here only three months—aside from how he didn’t take a second of it for granted. It felt like his forever home.



“I, ah, got an agent. For my work. She’s already got galleries in New York and Chicago on the hook.”

They all cheered.

Everett clapped him on the back. “Wyatt Keene, famous artist. That’s got one hell of a ring to it.”

“Forget midnight.” Fitz headed for the kitchen, talking over his shoulder. “This calls for opening the Dom right now.”

It was great. It was awesome. Especially the pride beaming from Blake’s smile.

It had to stop. Because he was more roiled up with fear and anticipation than the first time he’d tackled a sniper.

Wyatt put two fingers between his lips and gave a sharp whistle. “Everyone just...hang on.”

“What’s wrong?”

He turned to his beautiful, smart, *wonderful* woman. “You said you loved me.”

She smirked. Softened it with a soft finger caress down his cheek. “I say that to you several times a day.”

“Yes, but you said it now. Tonight. Which was supposed to be the perfect segue into asking you to move in with me. Here. Or I’ll move into your apartment, if you prefer, but I really like feeling close to Aunt Bec here. And you can redecorate however you want. Even though they’re anathema to an artist, I’ll even install a whiteboard so you feel at home, if that’s what it takes.”

“Oh.”

That...wasn’t an answer. It wasn’t close to enough. Obviously, he hadn’t sold her on it. So Wyatt moved in to circle her waist with his arms. She softened against him as if they’d been embracing that way for years.

“I know it’s fast. Maybe too fast. But I’m sure I love you. I’m sure I want to wake up with you every day, and that you’re the last thing I see before I close my eyes every night. You changed my life, Blake. You helped give me the life I always

dreamed of getting. Please say yes.”

Blake cinched her arms around him. And gave that warmly seductive smile he'd been captivated by from the jump. “Sorry. That wasn't hesitation. You shocked the words right out of me. It's a yes. Yes, I want to start the new year here, in my new life with you. Absolutely yes.”

It *was* a new life. Better than Wyatt had ever imagined. As their friends and family clapped and cheered, he dipped her.

And kissed her until long after the clapping had stopped.



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# Acknowledgments

Thank you so much to Wendy Chen for scooping me up in the midst of a series. It was probably scary for both of us, but she gave me a very safe landing.

Back in the day—high school—I got an FBI application. I was ready to fill it out...until I saw that none of the required majors interested me. But oh, the life of a spy, that sure did. Luckily, I was able to channel those long-on-hold dreams into this book. Fairly certain, given my ability to injure myself crossing a flat floor, this was the safer choice.

I did research to make Cygnet Labs believable on the ‘most amazing scientific discoveries’ of the past year. Go ahead. Google it. Your mind will be blown. Scientists are working miracles on a daily basis, and I am in awe. Blake’s study of curing blindness in mice in this book is *real*.

I’m grateful to Maryland/DC friends who have shared knowledge with me of certain three letter agencies in the area to help craft this book (I don’t dare get more specific!). Quite often the process of churning out books feels plodding—but every two weeks I have a write-in with authors who light a fire under me. It helps *tremendously*, so thanks and wine and brownies to Robyn Neeley, E. Elizabeth Watson, and M.C. Vaughan.

# About the Author

[Christi Barth](#) earned a masters degree in vocal performance and embarked upon a career on the stage. A love of romance then drew her to wedding planning. Ultimately she succumbed to her lifelong love of books and now writes award-winning contemporary romance, including the Naked Men and Aisle Bound series. Christi can always be found whipping up gourmet meals (for fun, honest!) or with her nose in a book. She lives in Maryland with the best husband in the world.

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In the span of three months, I lost my husband, my NYC apartment, my money, and frankly, my dignity. And then the only person who ever understood me died and left me her house in the burbs. First rule of surviving suburbia? There's nothing that YouTube and a glass of wine can't conquer.

[TALK FLIRTY TO ME](#)

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When it comes to my brother's best friend, smart-mouthed firefighter Sam O'Shea, avoidance is key. But when my dream audition falls in my lap, I'll do anything to kickstart my career—including making a deal with the devil himself to read with me. The problem? We land the job. Together. Oh, and the book is an erotic romance. Nothing like narrating steamy lines in a tiny studio with a man who lights a fire under your skin...