



The Beauty



RIE ANDERS

*The
Beauty*

R I E A N D E R S

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Chapter 1

THE LARGE MAN dropped to his knees in front of me. Clutching his hands to his chest, he collapsed to the floor.

I sprinted towards him and dropped to my own knees, my ski pants easing the impact against the resort's hard lobby floor. I hurriedly shrugged out of my ski patrol jacket to give me more flexibility.

"Sweet baby Jesus." The man muttered, staring up at me.

"Call 911." I shouted over my shoulder to one of the colleagues I'd been walking with. I shifted my gaze to the other and said, "Get me the AED."

They ran off in opposite directions, pushing through the crowd that was starting to gather.

The joyous Christmas carolers had stopped singing when I shouted, huddling up against the side of the lobby with the others to watch the emergency unfold.

I unzipped the fallen man's parka, preparing to start chest compressions. "Just hang on, we're getting you some help. Can you hear me?"

With one hand, he gripped my wrist and pulled me down to his broad chest. Caught off guard, I lost my balance and collapsed on top of him. The woodsy, outdoor scent of him wafted up. I inhaled and sighed, momentarily disoriented.

Before I had time to respond, he spun a lock of my long hair around the fingers of his other hand and marveled at it. "You are the most beautiful women I have ever seen in my life." He turned his gaze back to me. "Am I dead?"

"What?"

"Are you an angel?" His voice was gravelly.

I'd heard similar comments on my looks before. My skin had, for the most part, been blemish free and flawless. People had told me I looked like a porcelain doll, with big brown eyes

and long lashes. In the context of the moment, though, I wasn't prepared to process his words.

My colleague dropped down beside me with the AED. "I got it," he wheezed. His eyes darted between the man and me. "Is he okay?"

A slow, sexy grin spread across the face of the fallen man. My eyes went to his. They looked like bottomless pools of melted gold.

He whispered, gently pulling my flaxen hair, "I think I love you."

I fought for a breath, feeling suspended in time. That voice, again. Gravelly, but husky and deep. The voice of a healthy man, not one fighting for his last breath.

That realization snapped me back to the moment. I jerked my hand from his and forcibly slapped away the other. He released me and laughed.

I pushed at him and stood, clumsily. An attempt to make space between us. "What is wrong with you?" My voice cracked. "Do you have any idea how frightened I was? I thought you were having a heart attack."

With an agility I wouldn't have expected, he leapt to his feet. "I am so sorry. I couldn't help myself. You are breathtaking."

Two very attractive men I hadn't noticed before stepped forward. The tall, curly-headed blond muttered to the man, "Seriously, dude? You're such an ass; you scared her."

The dark haired one shook his head at me. "Please forgive my brother - he really is an ass. But he didn't mean any harm."

The hotel guests moved along, realizing the excitement was over. But they cast quick looks back at us, to see if things might escalate again. I turned my gaze back to the golden eyes.

Now that the adrenaline had slowed, I noticed just how large he was. Almost a head taller than me, and twice as wide.

His eyes were the only pretty thing about him. A white and faded scar ran through his eyebrow. Another through his top lip and cheek.

His cheeks had a few small, pitted scars, just barely visible below the beginnings of a beard. His nose was crooked, I wondered what kind of story had resulted in that.

The sexy grin was back when my eyes returned to his. I grabbed my jacket up off the floor. Shoving my arms angrily into the sleeves, I said, "Please be careful. I don't want to have to rescue you for real."

I turned to walk away. My colleagues were waiting for me at the exit doors.

He jogged up alongside me. "I really am so sorry."

I kept walking. "Ok."

"Are you on the ski patrol?" His jacket was still unzipped.

"I am."

"Are you..." His voice trailed off.

I reached the other ski patrollers, turned and stopped. "Am I what?"

He shoved his hands in his front pockets. He gave a quick glance at my colleagues behind me, as if asking their permission to talk to me. "I don't know. I don't know what to say to you. I just want to... I don't know." He hunched up his shoulders.

Telling the others to go ahead, I reached for his elbow and guided him to a quiet corner at the other side of the hallway. He came easily, like a little boy that knew he was being punished. "Listen..."

"Brett." He smiled, proud of himself.

"Brett," I repeated. He smelled really good. Like cinnamon and the outdoors. Warmth radiated from his body. I had to work to be able to concentrate. I wanted to reach out

and snuggle into his wool sweater. That would be a dumb move, considering.

I continued, "I don't have time to date. I don't have time for nonsense. And I certainly don't have time for someone who plays childish games to get a girl. I appreciate the compliments, but I have to respectfully decline."

"Give me a chance. Just one drink. When you're off work. I'll be normal." He made a cross over his heart.

"I'm sorry, but no." I turned to leave.

He called after me. "What's your name?"

"Have a good night, Brett."

"I lied," he called again. "You aren't an angel. You're an elf. A beautiful, magical elf, and you're going to fall in love with me."

I waved at him over my shoulder without turning around.

The sliding doors opened as I approached them. The biting cold of winter in Alaska hit me, nipping at my warm skin. I pulled my neck warmer up to cover the bottom of my face.

I'd grown up skiing in the mountains of Colorado. While the snow and cold was nothing unusual, the never-ending darkness that blanketed Alaska in the dead of winter was something I just hadn't gotten used to. Couldn't seem to get used to.

This was my third winter. I was finally starting to come out of the fog that had brought me here. I wasn't sure I would return to Denver, but I did want more than my quiet, solitary life here.

Brett was attractive, in an embattled warrior kind of way. His bulky skiwear hadn't hidden anything of the muscular body underneath. I might have considered a date with him under different circumstances. But recklessness was not something I could overlook. I'd worked too hard to protect myself from that kind of childish behavior from a man.

I made it to the ski patrol office just outside the tram. A

jubilant bunch of day patrollers held the door for me on their way out for the night. Bells, attached to the door, jingled.

“Hey, Dr. Cain.” They said as a chorus.

“Hey, guys.” I said as I stepped into the warm building.

The main room bustled with people ending or starting their shifts. Someone had put a Christmas tree up, decorated with colored lights and inexpensive ornaments, like beer cans and poop-emoji key chains.

“Hey, Liz, heard you saved a life today!” Thomas, another patroller, teased as he stepped into his boots.

I sat down on the bench and stepped into mine. “And I might take another.” I teased.

Laughter filled the room. “Aw, Thomas, she schooled you,” someone hooted.

Thomas locked the last buckle. He moaned, “Elizabeth. Elizabeth. Hear my soul speak: The very instant that I saw you, did my heart fly to your service.”

I rolled my eyes and huffed out a laugh. “Okay, Shakespeare, enough. He was harmless. A bunch of guys on a weekend trip.”

“Your beauty...” I threw a glove at him. His eyes sparkled with good humor as he caught it against his chest. “Okay, I’ll stop. But...”

“No buts.” I stood and pointed a finger at him. “We have work to do. You can buy me a drink when the lifts close.”

I gave him a teasing smile and he responded with a cheesy one. He raised his arms as if he’d scored a touchdown. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Artificial amber lighting illuminated the snow, allowing skiers to enjoy the runs for longer than the five hours of daylight we had this far north. I headed for the lift.

Laughter and excited chatter filled the sixty-person enclosed gondola. The door slid closed, signaling the start of our six-minute trip to the top of the mountain.

As it transitioned from the wheels to the cable, the lift vibrated. A little girl next to me clutched her mom's leg, whimpering at the uneasy swaying of the car.

"It's okay, baby. We'll be skiing soon," said the mother, soothingly.

The softness of the girl's mother contrasted sharply with the tense relationship I had with mine. I'd always imagined if I'd had a daughter, I would have comforted and soothed her just like this one. Sadness crept into my heart at the thought that I might have missed the opportunity to feel that joy.

I patrolled with Thomas. We'd worked together a number of times over the past few winters and had become good friends. We knew each other's downhill patterns and were familiar with our expressions of concern.

I was only a part-time National Ski Patrol volunteer. This week, though, I was filling in for a young patroller who'd wanted to spend Christmas week with his family in Seattle. As a result, Thomas and I had spent more time together.

My shift ended up being uneventful. No injuries. No distress. No broken bones. No drama.

After the runs were cleared and closed, Thomas and I took one last trip up the tram. Our last job of the day was to make sure no one was left behind on the mountain, that no one was hurt, and that everyone was back at the resort safe and sound.

I pulled my gloves off, stuck them between my knees, and adjusted the strap of my helmet.

"The snow was good today," I said to him.

He leaned against the handrail, gripping the cold steel with his hands. "Yeah, it wasn't bad. Supposed to get dumped on in the next few days."

"That's good. People staying for Christmas will love that."

I put my gloves back on and gripped the overhead handle

as the gondola rolled over the supporting towers. I swayed back and forth with the force.

He asked, “Are you going to see your family over Christmas?”

“Nope.”

He chuckled, “That was an abrupt answer.”

“They are all staying in Colorado. I didn’t want to travel.”

The gondola rolled into the landing and the doors slid open, saving me from having to elaborate further.

“Ready to make a final run?” I asked.

He nodded in the direction of downhill. “I’ll follow you.”

The lack of skiers on the snow provided a quiet solitude that should have been cathartic and peaceful. But my thoughts snuck in, drowning out the rhythmic *swish-swoosh* of my skis on the snow.

When I’d left Denver, my mind had been so clouded with pain that I ran without thinking through my actions. I knew I had to get as far away as possible, but I hadn’t considered proximity to the North Pole when making my decision. Hawaii and Alaska were the furthest from mid-America. Hawaii didn’t have skiing, so that was out.

Looking back, normal daylight and drinks on the beach might have been a better option than bears roaming the streets like stray dogs and midnight sun in the summer.

A flash of red flew past me, coming to a hockey stop and forcing me to stop before slamming into him. “What? Are you okay?”

He scowled. “Yeah, are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re daydreaming, Liz. You were flying down the hill without even checking the trees or looking around. You were skiing recklessly.”

I dropped my head and fought sudden tears. “I am so sorry. My mind wandered.” Ashamed, I asked, “Were you able to look around? Is there anyone left on the mountain.”

He stood silent, his brows furrowed. It was a moment before he asked. “Was it that guy? Did he upset you?”

I closed my eyes and raised my head to the sky. I took a deep breath, exhaled loudly, relaxed my shoulders. I looked back at him and answered, “No. Honestly, I’d forgotten about him. It’s just... it’s just the holidays. That’s all.”

“I get that you may not want to talk about your past. You’ve been buttoned up since you got here. But people care about you, Liz. You can consider us friends.” He shifted his weight and leaned into his poles. “I hope you consider me a friend.”

“Thank you, Thomas. I do. And I appreciate you worrying about me.” I know that wasn’t what he wanted to hear, but I couldn’t give him any more than that. “I really do.”

He sighed. After a few more moments of contemplation and assessing my state of mind, he jerked his head to the end of the slope. “C’mon. Let’s finish this run and I’ll buy you that beer.”

I pushed forward on my skis to get around him. “Deal.”

We finished our run of the hill, checked in with the gondola operator, and made our way back to the patrol room to change.

I changed out of my ski pants and sweater into a black turtleneck, black leggings, and black knee-high snow boots. After I traded my patrol jacket for a white, hooded puffer jacket, I followed Thomas in his beat-up Bronco to the local bar just a mile down the road from the resort.

Music drifted into the parking lot. Thomas waited for me at the door, holding it open when I reached him. “After you.” He smiled; his brown eyes crinkled at the corners.

Glittering Christmas ball ornaments dangled from the top of the bar, while heat lamps glowed on the outdoor patio.

We made our way through the bar to a group of patrollers. Judging by their glassy eyes, they'd been drinking since their shift ended hours ago.

"Elizabeth!" A junior female patroller slurred from the other side of the table. "When I grow up, I want to be just like you."

Thomas pulled a chair out for me. He asked her, "A doctor?"

She leaned her head on her friend's shoulder. "No. A goddess. I want men to drop at my feet and declare their love." She sighed. "It's like a dream."

Her friend pulled on one of her blonde braids. "You're drunk, Margo. Don't be dumb."

She jerked back. "Ow!"

I looked at Thomas as I sat down. He took the chair next to me. "Does everyone know?"

"Apparently," he chuckled.

I leaned towards Margo. "Don't be charmed by it. It was a silly prank, and there was nothing romantic about it."

She continued going on about love and romance while I focused on the menu, starving for something other than a burger.

A whispering murmur rose around our table of ten. When I looked up, there he was. Across the room, shooting pool like he didn't have a care in the world. Brett, the golden-eyed warrior.

Chapter 2

THE WALLS OF the bar seemed to close in around me. There was nowhere for me to hide. Instead, I raised my glass of water in a cheer. His eyebrows rose and he smiled as he tipped his beer bottle to me and tilted his head in a nod.

Margo turned her head to look in the direction of my gaze. “Oh, my god, yum!” She turned back to me and said in a low voice, “Seriously, if you don’t want one of those, I’ll take ‘em.”

Inwardly, I cringed. Outwardly, I lowered my brow at her.

His friends followed the direction of his gaze. There was a girl with them this time. A curly headed blonde that could have been the twin to one of the men I’d seen earlier. She smiled at me and waved. That was unexpected.

My cheeks warmed. I looked down at my menu and asked Thomas what he was going to order. He leaned towards me, setting his arm on the back of my chair.

I lifted my eyes, giving a quick glance back at Brett. He was leaning against a cocktail table, his hands resting on the pool cue between his legs. His eyes were on me. He looked amused.

Thomas asked me, “Do you want to leave?”

“No. I’m fine.” I stared back at the menu without actually reading it.

When the waitress came to take our order, I settled for a burger and a beer, not having the capacity to actually read and order anything different.

Talk around the table turned to the winter solstice party in two days, Christmas plans, and the fact that Margo was on avalanche patrol in the morning.

Concerned about Margo’s state of mind, Thomas asked, “Do you want me to cover your shift in the morning?”

Margo swooned, “Would you? I’m sorry, I lost track of

how many pitchers we had.”

He nodded, acknowledging her. “I’ll give you a ride tonight, too.”

Moments later, Brett materialized beside our table. “Excuse me for interrupting.”

Our conversation hushed. Everyone looked up at him with equal parts curiosity and wariness.

He shifted on his feet and put his hands in the front pockets of his worn jeans. “I’d like to apologize to all of you for my behavior earlier today.”

They all nodded and murmured, “Yeah, yeah’s,” and “No worries.”

“I didn’t really think through how my action would be perceived and I’m sorry to...” he waited.

“Elizabeth,” Margo offered with a goofy smile.

He grinned like he’d won a prize. “I’m sorry to Elizabeth for frightening her.”

I smiled with my mouth closed. “All is forgiven.”

Brett looked around the hushed table. I shifted uncomfortably, waiting for him to leave.

He turned his eyes to me. In a softer tone, he asked, “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

I looked around the table. Some of them were suppressing laughter. Margo, wide eyed, was nodding jerkily.

Pushing my chair back, I took my napkin from my lap, set the red cloth on the table, and stood. “One minute.”

He tipped his head towards the bar and I walked in that direction. He placed his hand at the center of my back as he led me past the crush of tables to the bar. The intimacy of the touch sent shivers up my spine. Gesturing to a stool, he waited until I was situated before taking the seat next to me.

He faced me. “Elizabeth, that was a great question. Thank

you for asking. I was going to go first, but I love that you're interested."

The bartender approached us. "Can I get you anything?"

Brett held up two fingers. "IPA"

"You got it."

Brett turned back to me. "Where were we?"

"You were talking nonsense."

He grinned and gave a thumbs up. "Right. Well, in answer to your question, I'm here with my brother, John, and his wife, Mia. The other guy is her brother, Jacob, which is a really complicated situation. But I'll leave that story for another time. Mia and Jacob..."

My anxiety rose. I put my hand up, cutting him off. "Stop. Please."

His shoulders relaxed, that amused look in his eyes again. The corners of his mouth turned slightly upward. His eyes crinkled at the corner. This time, he really looked at me. He seemed like a relatively intelligent guy, but this sort of cavalier behavior always wore me out.

"You don't have to act like this. I'm here. I'll talk to you."

He glanced at his family. The girl rose her eyebrows at whatever he was trying to convey. When he turned back to me, he looked calm, relaxed. He put out his hand for a shake. "Hi, I'm Brett Barringer. I'm here for the weekend with my family. Do you live here?"

I shook. The calloused palm tickled my hand. "Elizabeth Cain. I do."

The bartender set our beers on the bar. A waiter stood beside him, carrying my burger. "Do you want to eat here?"

I looked at Brett. He was quiet, waiting for my answer.

I nodded to the waiter. "Yes, thank you."

Brett asked the waiter to bring one more for him. "Double

patty, no cheese.”

The waiter nodded at him.

Brett nodded at my burger. “Please, eat.”

I cut the burger in half, took a bite, and ate quietly while he watched me.

“You know, you could have just said you have a boyfriend.” His tone was gentle.

I swallowed, wiped the corners of my mouth with the napkin, and took a drink of my beer. “I don’t.”

“The guy next to you seemed very protective. Close and comfortable.”

“Friends. Colleagues.”

He shifted so he was completely facing me. “Ski Patrol?”

I didn’t want to get too deep with him, so I simply nodded.

“How long have you been doing that?”

“Let’s go back to my first, fake question you were so willing to answer for me. Why are you here?” I ate a fry.

His smile showed straight, even, white teeth. Two in the front looked like implants. “My sister-in-law and her brother own an outdoor adventure company in Wyoming. They want to expand, so they’re looking at resort towns where they can do snowmobiling tours and backcountry camping.”

“Ah, I see. The glaciers are a great place to do that.”

“Yeah, they are. But I think the market is already saturated here. I got the feeling today that this isn’t a place they want to consider long-term.”

His burger arrived a short while later. He squirted catsup across his fries and dove into the burger like a starved man.

I spoke, giving him time to enjoy his food. “There’s plenty of nature here to be competitive, but the isolation in the winter takes some getting used to.”

He raised his eyebrows as he chewed, so I continued.

“I’m from Denver. I grew up skiing Vail, Beaver Creek, Crested Butte, wherever. My older sister was a downhill competitive racer. I used to try and catch her. One day, I thought I could beat her, so I skied out of the boundary of the run.”

He took a sip of his beer, his golden eyes twinkling. “Ah, so you do have a reckless streak.”

“I was young.” I emphasized. “And I really wanted to beat her.”

“Did you?” He plucked another fry from his plate. “Beat her, that is.”

“No. But that’s how I ended up on the patrol. The patrol guys on the mountain that day followed me. When we got to the bottom of the hill, they approached me and told me they could take my pass for the season over what I’d done.”

“But they didn’t.”

“But they didn’t. Instead, they offered me a job.”

“You must be a really good skier.”

“I’m okay. Not as good as my sister.” I looked away. “The funny thing is that I saw them chasing me and was only trying to get away. I wasn’t out to impress anyone.”

He laughed heartily. “I knew I liked you. A rebellious streak hides within.”

And that was my cue to leave. I pushed my plate away and signaled for the bartender.

“Can I get my check, please?”

Brett looked at him. “Add it to mine, I got it.”

I stood from the stool. “Well, thank you very much for dinner. And for the conversation. You seem like a nice guy and I appreciate the apology.”

He looked like he wanted to say something. Instead, he just smiled at me, and nodded.

“Well, again, thank you, and good luck to your sister-in-

law. I hope..." I stumbled, pushing in the stool. "I hope her business is very successful."

He just kept grinning.

"Good night, then."

He rested his elbow on the bar and put his chin in his hand. "Good night."

I said my good-byes to my friends and made my way out to the dimly lit gravel parking lot. The freshly fallen snow brightened the surrounding trees. When I reached my Toyota SUV, I dropped my chin to my chest, closed my eyes, and exhaled.

"Elizabeth?"

I jerked, startled. My hand flew to my chest. I turned to face him. "Oh, geez! You scared me."

Brett approached me slowly, as if not to frighten me further. He spoke with a voice as soft as a lullaby. "Elizabeth. I know this is crazy. Please know that I don't even know what's happening, but you have captivated me. I know it sounds like a line, but it's not.

I dropped my arms to my side.

"When you left the bar just now, I felt like a piece of me left. I know it's crazy. You feel like something I need. I can't explain it. If I had never seen you after my inexcusable behavior earlier today, I might have been ok. I would have chalked it up to a stupid incident on my part." He stopped a few feet in front of me. "But I will never be ok now, after talking with you. Your voice. Your face. Your beautiful hair. You're just really nice."

He reached out and caught a wisp through his fingers, looking at it as if he'd never seen hair before. He curled the blonde strand around his fingers as he continued. "It's like golden wheat, shining in the sun. It's so soft."

My mind raced. What was he saying? Was this real? Was he for real? No one talks like that.

And yet, a part of my heart responded. His words

sounded genuine, and something in me wanted them to be. I was speechless. My lips parted, and he stepped a foot closer.

“I’m leaving tomorrow night and I know this is insane but I need to kiss you. To taste you. You may have ruined me forever, and I just can’t leave without knowing if this was real.”

My body moved without my permission. I leaned against him, resting my right cheek against his chest.

With his right hand, he removed my beanie and pulled me closer. He rested the palm of his other hand on my head, cradling me against him. He kissed my head and whispered. “What am I going to do?”

Against my better judgement, I lifted my head, stood on my tip-toes and kissed the side of his neck, just below his ear, whispering, “Kiss me.”

He lifted me a few inches off the ground and walked me backwards. My jacket inched up and the cold glass of my car door window touched my back. The solid muscle of him held me firmly in place as he placed one knee between my legs. I rested, confident in his ability to hold me. Soft, warm, full lips touched mine. Like a padded pillow. He pressed his lips, waiting. My lips tingled. He nuzzled, pulling my lower lip between his, and then returning to kiss me fully.

White stars danced behind my closed eyes. I opened my mouth. His tongue danced with mine. I moaned. Fire leapt through me. I pulled him tighter to me. I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t want to breathe. A desire like I had never felt consumed me. Wrecking me. We became a tangled mess of arms and lips.

“Elizabeth. Sweet, beautiful Elizabeth, let me come home with you.” He said against my lips, my cheek, my ear. He planted kisses on my nose, my forehead, my temple. “I need you.”

My eyes stayed closed. I allowed the words to flow over me, warm and rich. I needed him, too. Then the fog cleared in my brain. His words clinked against the logical part of me. I

put my hands to his chest and gently pushed. As if handling a fragile doll, he slowly settled me to the ground and stepped back.

I held my hands up, palms facing him. Fearful of my desire for him, I said, "Please step back."

He brows raised with worry. "Elizabeth?"

"I'm not... this isn't who I am. I'm sorry." I fumbled with the door handle and jerked my car door open. He handed me my beanie, and held onto the window frame as I stepped in to leave, preventing me from shutting the door.

"Elizabeth, don't leave like this," he begged.

I stared through the windshield. "Please let me go."

I could feel his stare in the silence.

"I lied earlier," he said deeply.

I turned my head to look up at him.

He continued, "To myself. I lied. It's me that's going to fall in love with you. I'll figure this out. Somehow. You're it for me, Elizabeth. You take your time. I'll wait."

His words were shocking and crazy. And, oddly, they somehow felt possible.

He gently shut my car door. In a daze, I drove the mile back to my rented A-frame cottage, to my dog, Todd, and my self-imposed loneliness.

Chapter 3

I KNEW HE didn't really love me. That wasn't possible. I'd been in love before and that crazy, wild, liberating, feeling wasn't it. Love was steady, not reckless. Love was conscious, not senseless. Kissing Brett had been a mistake.

The hard snow and gravel crunched under the wheels of my car when I turned down my driveway. Todd's fluffy head appeared in the living room window, his ears perked. I parked the car and turned off the ignition. The curtains fell into place when he got off the couch and headed to the front door. I could hear his happy whine as I climbed the wooden steps.

When I opened the red door and stepped into the small living area, he circled me, panting, and then went to get his squeaky toy. A small lamp in the corner shone dimly, painting the room in a golden glow.

"Do you need attention, boy? Is that it? Get your toy. Go get your toy."

My small bedroom was to the left of the entryway. Just large enough for a queen-sized bed, a dresser, and a hanging rack. I'd removed the door because it kept hitting the side of the bed.

Coat hooks were mounted on the wall to my left. I hung my coat and bag. With one booted toe, I pushed off one boot, then pulled the other off with my hands, hopping so I wouldn't fall over. I peeled off my socks, put them in the boots and placed them under the coatrack.

The living area to my right was quaint and cozy. Two full-sized couches sat in an L-shape before a rustic, wood burning fireplace. The exposed flue pipe ran up to the low ceiling and out the top of the A-line roof. A small television waited in the right corner. Dust had settled on the screen.

My phone chirped. I pulled it from my bag and stared as it rang. "MOM," read the screen.

Ignoring the call, I walked into the kitchen at the back of the house, put my phone on the counter to the right of the sink,

and filled a small glass with water from the tap. I leaned with my back against the sink and drank it slowly.

The phone on the counter to my left taunted me, ominous in its ability to make me wait for news. I waited to hear if it would give me a message alert. *Ping*. There it was. A voicemail.

I rinsed my glass and put it in the drying rack. Todd lay at my feet, panting, his squeaky toy resting between his paws. I looked down at him. “Should I listen to the message?” He lifted his head. “I know. I’m just as tired of it as you are. Let’s go see what we can find out about Mr. Barringer instead, shall we? You don’t care, do you? Nope. I didn’t think so. Well, at least come keep me company.”

I motioned to the circular staircase that led to the loft I used as an office. “C’mon, let’s go.” He lifted himself up off the floor and jogged up the stairs in front of me.

Shag carpet absorbed my padded steps as I climbed the stairs. The A-frame peaked in this room, making me feel like I was in a cozy cocoon. A floor-to-peak, triangular window at the far end of the room looked out into the darkness. During the limited daylight hours of winter, I could stare at the snow-covered mountain peaks. In the winter they were accessible only by dog sled or snowmobile. In the summer, they were crisscrossed with hiking trails, leading miles into the back-country.

My desk was placed at the window. Orderly, simple, neat. I sat in the white cushioned office chair and turned on the computer. Todd lay under the desk, his chin on the tops of my bare feet.

I pulled up a browser and typed ‘Brett Barringer’ in the search engine bar and waited.

There were thousands of articles. If I were a less controlled person, I might have tossed the computer straight through the glass window.

Sharks Center, Brett Barringer, traded to Seattle Kraken

Barringer traded for a second time after missing eight

years of clinching a playoff win

Seattle Kraken to pay Barringer largest one-year contract in league history

Brett Barringer benched after knee injury; will return after the New Year

Is this the beginning of the end, for Kraken's Center, Brett Barringer?

Story after story about expectations for the great Brett Barringer. Of course. I wanted to vomit. I massaged my temples with my index and middle finger. I kept reading.

Brett Barringer was on track to being one of the top ten hockey players of all time. He's scored more points than any of his current competition but just can't pull the team together. With three conference losses, four missed playoffs, and one playoff loss, Barringer seems destined to keep missing the prized jewel of the hockey world, the Stanley Cup. The Seattle Kraken, the newest franchise in the league, took a gamble on Barringer, scoring him, at least, the largest contract in league history. It seemed the gamble was going to pay off, as the Kraken headed into the season with a record setting year of wins. That is, until Barringer took a hit to the knee and was benched until after the new year.

I stopped reading. I didn't want to know any more about him. I groaned. Why did I seem destined not to be able to escape that world?

I closed the browser and pulled up my calendar for the week. A few shifts on the patrol and a few annual check-ups for people trying to use up their flexible spending accounts before the end of the year. I hoped for nothing more than the common cold this week. Then again, the holiday skiers did tend to bring more broken bones, sprained wrists, and twisted ankles, so I might be busier than I wanted to be.

When I'd taken this job, it was supposed to be for a few months while the local family practitioner went on an around-the-world cruise with his wife of forty years. After they

disembarked in New Zealand, he sent an email to the board tendering his resignation. And here I am.

I thought about Margo and sent a text off to Thomas, *Did Margo get home?*

While I waited for a response, I stared at the red circle on my voicemail box icon. “You can’t avoid talking to me,” it seemed to say.

Todd whined and lifted his head from my feet. His ears perked and he stared out the window. A moment later, headlights shone on the driveway. Whimpering with excitement, Todd trotted down the stairs. I followed.

A car door slammed and heavy boots tread up the steps. I opened the door to Thomas. “Hey, everything ok?”

He hunched his shoulders from the cold. “Yeah. I’m good. I just wanted to make sure you got home ok. Can I come in?”

I opened the door wider so he could step inside. “Of course. I just sent you a text. How was Margo?”

“Drunk. But I got her home safely.”

“I was going to go to bed soon, but I can light the fire if you want to stay for a bit.”

He stepped into the center of the room and turned again to leave. “I should go.”

I shook my head in confusion. I hadn’t even let go of the doorknob before I had to swing it open again. “Oh. Ok.”

He stopped in front of me, looking a bit flustered. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He turned and left before I could respond that he probably wouldn’t. But it didn’t seem like something that needed to be corrected. Careful not to slip on the steps, he held the railing and was gone before I could figure out what had just happened.

Todd sat patiently waiting for me, ears perked. “That was

weird, don't you think? Yeah, me too." He tilted his head as if equally confused. "Want to go for a walk?"

His tail wagged as I put on my coat and boots and took him outside, not venturing too far because the temperature was below freezing. I was ready to burrow under my down comforter for a good sleep.

When Todd and I returned, my phone was blinking again. I sighed.

I readied myself for bed. Propping two pillows up behind me, I pulled the comforter up to my waist and put the phone on my lap. I settled myself and played the voicemails.

"Elizabeth, it's your mother. There's still time to come home for Christmas. You haven't been home in three years. We miss you. You're going to need to get over this. Sulking does not suit you. Elizabeth? Can you hear me?"

I rolled my eyes. Would she never understand that she wasn't talking to an answering machine?

"Elizabeth! I want you home for Christmas. This is your mother. Please call me."

I had a half second before the next message played. This one was spoken in a softer, kinder tone.

"Elizabeth, sweetie, you may not have heard, what with you being so far away, but..." she paused. "Sweetie, Amanda is getting married in May."

My chest constricted. My stomach clenched. I took a deep breath. "Oh, my God." Anguish consumed me. I couldn't even cry. I couldn't breathe. Why won't this just go away? My vision blurred.

Then the tears came, wracking and heart-wrenching. My mom's voice droned on. I could barely pick out pieces.

"I wish you would talk to her."

"She will want you there."

"She loves you."

"I know you love her."

“This has to end.”

“We miss you.”

I deleted the message.

I turned off the lamp, pulled the covers over my head, and cried myself to sleep.

*

The sky was still dark when my alarm went off at 6:30 a.m.

With a quick, easy morning routine, I managed to get dressed, eat a small bowl of cinnamon-roll-flavored oatmeal with blueberries, and drive the six minutes into the so-called town all in under forty-five minutes. A definite perk from the sometimes one-hour drives in traffic-jammed Denver.

I turned into the small parking lot of the local clinic that also functioned as a hospital and emergency room. As usual, I parked my car in my personal parking spot, noted by the sign reading “Dr. Cain”.

Not that I needed a spot. The parking lot of the dark gray, two-story structure had maybe fifty parking spots. I could definitely walk the twenty yards to the front door. But that’s how protocol worked.

An ambulance sat parked around the side of the building. It’s lights off. The emergency room, quiet.

“Good morning, Dr. Cain. How was your weekend? Did you patrol?” Jenna the receptionist greeted me from behind a round administrative desk as I came through the glass front doors. Silver garland hung in bows across the length of it.

“Good morning, Jenna. I did. It was a nice weekend. How are the twins?” I stomped the snow off my boots.

Her face broke in a smile. She pushed her glasses up off her nose with her forefinger. “Growing so fast. I can’t believe they’re already six months old.”

I walked towards the stairs that led to my office and gestured toward the blue and silver decorated Christmas tree in the front entrance. “Did you put that up?”

“I did.”

“It looks beautiful. And the garland?” I pointed to the greenery wrapped around the railing. Silver balls and white lights flickered from behind the branches.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Jenna. It looks very festive.” I walked up the stairs. “My first patient is at 8:00. Can you send them up to the waiting room when they get here?”

She smiled up at me. “I will. Should I bring you some coffee?”

“No thank you, I can get it. I appreciate your offer.”

She rewarded me with a grateful smile and a nod.

The stairs led to a large waiting area furnished with comfortable gray chairs and couches. A Keurig coffee machine sat on a large side table at the end of the room. Mounted in the corner was a television. The morning news played on the screen, sound off and subtitles rolling.

A door on the right separated the patient rooms from the waiting area. The door on the left gave way to four offices. A large corner one for me, and three others for part-time doctors - a gynecologist, a pediatrician, and a sports therapist.

Everyone that lived farther south and down into the Kenai Peninsula could make use of the clinic. The roads to Anchorage were sometimes inaccessible in the winter, so many of them came here.

At exactly 8:10 a.m. my nurse, Rebecca, knocked on my door. “Your eight o’clock is here. She’s all checked in.”

“Mrs. Viscotti?”

“Complaining of her arthritis.” She smiled knowingly. Mrs. Viscotti was in every other week.

“Thank you. I’ll head over.”

I grabbed my white lab coat, put my stethoscope in my pocket, stepped out of my boots and slipped on a pair of navy heels I kept under my desk. My day had officially started.

*

Just before noon, my stomach growled. I had an hour before my next patient, so I went back downstairs to the Emergency Room lounge to heat up some soup and fill my water bottle.

Double doors just off the main entrance led to the Emergency Room, which took up one half of the downstairs. Sports Therapy occupied the other half.

I pushed through the double doors and found Rebecca, my nurse, plus two EMT's, one male and one female. The male EMT had his feet up on the desk, twirling a fidget spinner in his hand. "Hey, what up Dr. Cain? Heard you saved a life this weekend."

The female EMT shoved his legs off the desk with her booted foot. "Seriously, Tyler?"

He laughed, flipping his bangs out of his face. "Easy, Babe, these legs are highly insured. You don't want to be responsible for the deductible."

She rolled her eyes. "Only you would think your skiing career is going anywhere."

We all knew she was teasing him. Tyler was close to making the Olympic ski team. With trials coming up in just a few weeks, he was highly protective of his legs.

I leaned against the counter, resting my elbow on the top. "Hi Kate."

"Hi, Dr. Cain." She said pleasantly.

"Does everyone know?"

Kate scrunched up her nose. "Sadly, yes. But if it makes you feel better, all the girls think it is incredibly romantic."

I nodded thoughtfully. "HmMMM."

"I saw you at the bar with him last night. You actually looked happy. You were laughing a lot."

"I was being polite." I tried not to smile.

"He looks a little rough. Like he's been in a few too many

barfights.” She swiveled around on the office chair.

“He’s a hockey player.” I said, before thinking. I hoped it wouldn’t come up, so I wouldn’t need to explain that I’d googled him.

She started to laugh. “Pucks to the face?”

“I would imagine.”

She continued. “Are you going to see him again?”

The radio on the desk crackled with an incoming transmission, “Calling Girdwood, St. John, this is Alyeska Station Alpha-107.”

Tyler’s face turned serious as he pressed the button, “This is St. John, go ahead.”

“We got a priority one trauma for you, let me know when you’re ready to copy.”

All eyes turned to me. I nodded.

Kate stood, grabbing her coat. Tyler grabbed the emergency log. “Go ahead, I’m ready.”

“I got a male patient, early thirties, skier on the mountain. Found unconscious. He’s being brought down now. Blood coming from under his fractured helmet.”

I listened intently.

The sender at the other end, continued, “I’ve got blood pressure 155 over 117. That’s one-five-five over one-one-seven. Pulse showing seventy-eight on the monitor. Oxygen stats are ninety-eight. He’s been bagged.”

Good, good, I thought to myself. He’s got a breathing mask on.

Tyler responded, “Ambulance will be there in five minutes.”

“Very good. Continue transport. See you in five.”

Tyler and Kate ran to the ambulance. Tyler shouted as he ran backwards smiling, “Hoo-ah, looks like today just got a little more interesting.”

The lights switched on, reflecting into the emergency entrance. Sirens blared as the ambulance pulled out of the bay and up to the mountain.

We waited.

Chapter 4

I HELPED REBECCA prep a room.

Minutes ticked by, but they felt like hours.

The air-raided brap of the ambulance sounded, and I went out to meet it. After jumping out of the cab, Tyler opened the back doors. Kate stepped forward, jumped to the ground and grinned at me. “You’re gonna love this. Male, thirties, possible concussion and lacerations to the face. Complaining of chest pain.”

Her lack of seriousness confused me. Kate and Tyler pulled the gurney from the back of the ambulance. The wheels came down and Kate locked them in place. The man on the gurney struggled to sit up and I grimaced. I can’t say I was surprised. I stayed at his side as Kate and Tyler wheeled him in. “Mr. Barringer, do you know where you are?”

Kate interrupted, “Patrol found him out of bounds.”

Glassy eyes looked up at me, briefly confused. “Elizabeth?”

“Mr. Barringer, you’ve been in an accident. Do you know what was happening prior to your accident?”

His eyes shifted between me and the EMT’s. “I was skiing.”

Kate and Tyler wheeled him into a small bay, locked the wheels in place, and stepped aside. Rebecca checked his IV and hooked him up to the vitals monitor.

I stepped to the side of the gurney and put my stethoscope to his chest. “Good. Can you repeat after me? Girl. Dog. Green.”

He said, “Girl, dog, green?” He started to sit up.

“Good. Do you...” I stepped back, just as he leaned over and threw up all over the floor.

He lay back down, panting, and put his palm to chest. “Fuck, that hurt.”

I closed my eyes and raised my chin, taking a breath through my mouth to calm myself. I glanced at Kate, who had pulled her lips close together, holding in a laugh. She covered her mouth with her hand. Her eyes were crinkled at the corners.

To Rebecca I said, "I need a CT scan. This wound on his head needs cleaning and stitches, too." I put my stethoscope back in my pocket.

"Yes, Dr. Cain. And we'll get this floor cleaned up right away."

Brett struggled to get up. "Elizabeth, what are you doing here?"

Voices echoed in the distance, getting closer, until the short, curly headed blonde, Mia, came around the corner.

"Brett! Oh my. What happened?" Mia ran to his side before realizing he'd been sick. She retreated to the end of the bed. Her husband, John, along with the man who'd introduced himself as his brother, Jacob, waited at the sliding glass door.

Brett mumbled. "I think I died."

I gestured to his friends. "If you could step out for a moment."

They followed me out of the room and I slid the doors shut behind me. Mia looked at me frantically. "Is he ok?"

"He's complaining of chest pain. And the vomiting is indicative of a concussion. I'll know more after the scans."

"What about the blood on his face?"

"A cut. A deep cut. We'll get him stitched up."

She leaned in to the dark-haired man, tears welling in her eyes. "I told him we were leaving this afternoon, that we didn't have time to ski. He wanted to go anyway."

A pang of guilt pierced me. I didn't want to think that he might have been looking for me. "I'm sure he's going to be just fine. Again, I'll know more after the scans."

She wiped the tears away with her fingers. "Ok. Should

we wait? Can we wait?”

“I’ll take you upstairs where you can sit.”

“I’m Mia, by the way.” She gestured to the men. “And this is John, my husband and Brett’s brother, and Jacob, my brother.”

“Yes, Brett mentioned your names last night. It’s nice to meet you.”

Jacob chuckled. “I guess the scar will just make him even prettier.”

Mia smacked his chest. “Knock it off.”

They followed me out into the lobby and up the stairs to the waiting area. “I’ll have the nurse bring you some paperwork to fill out for him.”

I turned to head towards my office. Mia followed after me. “Do you have a minute?”

After a quick glance at the wall clock, I nodded. “You can come to my office.”

She followed behind me. I shut the door behind her and gestured to two cushioned chairs. “Please.”

“Thank you.” She sat, wringing her fingers. “I wanted to apologize for him again. He really is a good guy, but a lot like his brother. They seem to want to be the life of the party, and they pull ridiculous stunts.”

I nodded.

She shifted uncomfortably. “When I met John, he was carrying a blow-up doll. I didn’t have a whole lot of patience for him.” She scooted to the edge of the seat. “I guess what I’m trying to say is... well, Brett has a heart of gold, and I know he really took to you.” Tears welled again. “Please take care of him.”

“Medically, I presume, is what you’re asking?”

She tilted her head, opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it again, sighing.

“Mrs. Barringer...”

“Mia.”

I nodded politely. “Mia, I will do my best for him while he’s in my care.”

Her eyes bore into mine. “Well, then, I guess I should tell you who he is.”

I kept a straight face. “Please.”

She reached into her bag. “He’s the center for the Seattle Kraken.” She wrote a number on the back of a business card. “It’s a hockey team. You’ll want to call the team physician.”

I took the card she handed me. I stood. “I’ll give him a call as soon as I get the results.”

She stood and followed me to the door. “Please don’t be too hard on him.” She shrugged. “Brett, that is.”

Kindly, I said, “Ok.”

Mia returned to the waiting room. I sat at my desk and put my head in my hands. My world was closing in around me.

The phone lit up. I hit the speaker button. “Dr. Cain.”

“Dr. Cain, the scans are back.”

“Thank you, I’ll be right down.” I hit the end call button and went back to the emergency room.

Mia, John and Jacob all stood when they saw me. “The scans are back. Give me about ten minutes to talk to him, and then you can come in to see him.”

They all nodded and thanked me.

The Emergency Room nurse had moved Brett into a private room at the back of the clinic. I read the scans before going to see him.

Hospital staff were busy working in the pit area as I made my way through to his room. I knocked gently, then pushed the door open.

He sat up in bed. His feet were bare. He wore long

underwear and a navy-blue T-shirt. A white bandage wrapped around his forehead. Dirty blond hair stuck out above it. He glowered at me.

“Mr. Barringer, I’m Dr. Cain. I’m the attending physician.”

“No shit.”

I ignored his curse. “You have a grade two concussion and will need to be monitored for the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

“Can’t.” He didn’t meet my eyes.

I continued, ignoring him again. “I understand you’re a hockey player with the Seattle Kraken. I’ll be reaching out to your team physician with an update.”

He was silent; his glower darkened. I continued, “Personality changes are a sign of concussion. I don’t remember you being this obstinate.”

That made him laugh. “And I don’t remember *doctor* coming up in our conversation last night.”

“It didn’t really matter.”

He looked at my mouth. I shuffled my feet.

“I didn’t hear about an avalanche today. What happened?”

“Are you wishing one would have buried me?”

“Not at all. Just assessing your mental state.” I changed topics. “I need to take your blood pressure.”

He lifted his arm. I wrapped the cuff around his bicep. Now I was the one trying hard not to look at him. I turned on the machine and waited.

Out of the corner of my eye, his chest rose and fell, shallow and quick. I put my stethoscope on and placed the bell on his heart. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.* Steady.

He placed his left hand on top of mine. Blond hairs

sprinkled his tan skin. I raised my eyes to his. He whispered, “Elizabeth.”

The monitor buzzed. I jumped, pulling the stethoscope out of my ears.

Mia hurtled across the room. “Brett, you stupid ass. You could have died.”

So much for waiting.

“Hello, Mia.”

She ran to the other side of the bed and sat down next to him. “We were so worried.” She patted his cheek, firmly, but with affection.

“I’m fine.” He grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

“I turn my back for a minute and you already have my wife in bed.” John said, entering the room. Mia scooted to make room for him. John hugged his brother, the bed making things a little awkward. “Glad you’re ok, man.”

Brett slapped his back. “I’m good, but you guys need to monitor me for the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

Mia scolded him. “We’re leaving tonight.” She turned to me. “Can he fly?”

“It’s not recommended. We can admit him overnight for monitoring if you’re unable to care for him.” I wasn’t sure, but I thought she might have scowled. “I’ll leave you to talk.”

I nodded and left the room. I made my way back through the lobby and asked Rebecca if we’d had any walk-ins while I was with Mr. Barringer.

“No Dr. Cain, but you do have two patients waiting and a third at 3:30 p.m. Nothing else on the calendar today.” She glanced at the books. “Do you want me to see if we can move your 3:30 p.m. to tomorrow? You have time in the morning.”

“Yes, please.” I climbed the stairs to the waiting area and apologized to the two individuals staring at their phones. “I’ll be right with you. We had an emergency this afternoon and we’re a little delayed. It will be just a few more minutes.”

They each smiled and told me, “No worries.”

After tending to both of the patients, I was finally able to sit down at my desk to call the Kraken team doctor. I didn’t need the card; I had the number in my phone. I put my earbuds in, scrolled through the contacts and hit call.

He answered exuberantly, “Liz! Long time no hear.”

“Hey Ryan, how are you?” I swiveled in my chair and looked out my windows. I could see the lights illuminating the ski runs in the distant hills. Night skiing at 4:00 in the afternoon. Too much darkness up here.

He whispered to someone, “Hold my calls, please.” To me he said, “I’m good. Yeah, yeah, I’m good. I’m the team physician for the Kraken now. New team here in Seattle. Great franchise. Great roster. I also set up a family practice on a small island across from the city. I’m just livin’ the dream, ya know?”

“The Avalanche didn’t work out for you?”

“Nah, great team, but too many egos. I don’t know how you stayed as long as you did. Couldn’t get out fast enough. Besides, I wasn’t pretty enough. They missed you.” He laughed.

I closed my eyes. The irony is that Ryan is very attractive. Girls flock to him like he’s fly paper. Dark brown hair and dark blue eyes. His Sicilian genes give him the perfect toasted complexion.

He’d had dreams of being a hockey player. But when he realized getting slammed against the rails and falling on ice hurt, he went into orthopedics, and then sports therapy. My guess was that he had a conflict with one of the players over a girl, and management suggested he find a new team to support.

“I’m sure they don’t.”

“How is that small Alaska town treating you, anyway? I was a little surprised you gave up the job and moved so far away. I thought you were chasing a man, to be honest. My heart was a little broken.”

At that, I laughed. “I don’t think so.”

“Are you calling because you want the position back? Because I think it’s still available.”

“No, no. No. I don’t... No, I don’t want that job back. I’m calling about one of your players.” A second of silence sat between us.

“One of my players?” He sounded incredibly confused.

“Brett Barringer.” I said succinctly.

“Brett? How do you know Brett?”

“Earlier today there was an accident and...”

“That mother-” he muttered a number of expletives and a few other choice words that didn’t make up complete sentences. “He was benched until next Wednesday. He was supposed to be resting his knee.”

I imagined him pacing. He went on about how much money the team spent on him, that he was getting too old for this shit, whatever he thought ‘this’ was. On and on he went for a solid minute. I waited until he stopped ranting.

I chuckled a little when I asked, “Do you want me to tell you what happened, or do you just want to assume the worst?”

“Man, I’m such an ass. Is he ok? I’m sorry. Go ahead.”

“He was skiing...”

“Skiing?” he shouted.

“Ryan,” I cautioned.

I heard him inhale deeply. “Go ahead.” Under his breath he mumbled, “That mother-”

“The EMT’s told me he was found out of bounds.” I rushed on, “I’m assuming it wasn’t intentional. There’s an area on the hill where people like to ski in the trees. There are paths, but the signs can get confusing. He hit a tree. And...” I rolled out the word, “I think the tree hit him back. He has a grade two concussion. He was wearing a helmet but it cracked. He must have hit hard. And he has a pretty nasty gouge on his

right temple. We've admitted him for the night for monitoring."

Ryan was silent.

"Ryan?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm here. So, no knee pain?"

"He wasn't complaining of any. His vitals are good. Oxygen is good."

"You'll send me the file?"

Sitting up a little taller in my chair, I shifted and turned back to my desk. "I will. Same email address?"

"Yeah." He responded. I wrote it on a Post-It. I would give the note to the night nurse later.

Then he asked, "Did he tell you to call me? What was he doing up there anyway? He's not really your type."

The comment hurt. I pushed the sting back down. "He wasn't here for me. He was with his brother and sister-in-law." I didn't want to stay on the phone with him any longer. My heart hurt. "I'll have the files sent right away."

"It's good to hear from you, Liz."

I hung up. I leaned back in my chair, my arms hanging over the arm rests. I exhaled. Time to go home.

I changed out of my heels and back into my boots, hung my lab coat on the hanger behind the door, and gathered my coat and purse.

After grabbing the Post-It note for the night nurse, I headed downstairs. The waiting room was tidy. The front entry-way was lit only by the Christmas lights and the parking lot light. A janitor cleaned with a motorized floor scrubber.

The ER was quiet. There had been a few minor cuts and bruises that had come in during the day from kids roughhousing at the resort, but other than our infamous patient, it had been a calm day.

"Headed home, Dr. Cain?"

“I am. Thank you Curtis,” I said to the night nurse as I handed him the post-it. “Can you please send Mr. Barringer’s file to this e-mail address?”

He extended his hand over the counter to take the yellow paper. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” I jerked my head to Brett’s room. “How is he?”

“He’s good. We ordered him a steak and salad from The Double Musky. Someone should be bringing it by any minute now.”

I nodded. Glancing down at the desk, a signed hockey calendar was open to September. I looked at Curtis and raised my eyebrows.

Curtis smiled. “I’m a big hockey fan, so...” He shrugged.

I grinned. “I’m going to check on him before I leave.”

“Okay. I’ll call and check on his dinner.”

The hallway lights were dimmed. I knocked on his door before entering. “Knock, knock.”

The television was on. He muted it, dropped his feet from the bed, and stood from the hospital chair he’d been reclining in.

“Hey, come on in.” He smoothed the bed sheet and looked around, as if he wanted to make sure everything was tidy.

I put my hands in my coat pocket. “I just came to see how you were feeling.”

He touched his head. “I took the gauze off.”

“I see that. Can you sit so I can look at the stitches?” I gestured to the bed.

He sat obediently.

I stepped in front of him and touched his forehead. “You have some dried blood. Do you want me to send the nurse in to clean it?”

His hands were at his side, palms down on the mattress, knuckles white. He whispered, “No, I can do it.”

I stepped back. An awkward silence fell between us. “Well, I just wanted to make sure you were feeling alright.”

He started to smile. “I’m fine. A little bit of a headache, and my chest still hurts some, but pain meds are magical things.”

“Your sternum is bruised. That will take a bit to heal, but at least you didn’t crack it.”

He nodded; his smile tentative.

I started for the door. “I should go. I’ll check on you in the morning.”

“Stay.”

I turned. “Woof?”

He burst out laughing. “Just, I mean, stay and keep me company. The nurse said he ordered dinner. Share it with me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Barringer, but I can’t. I’m sorry. I’ll see you in the morning.” I turned again, and then remembered my concussion word test. “Oh, before I leave, do you remember the three words I told you when you came in?”

He grinned broadly. “I do.”

I put my hands in my coat pocket. I raised my eyebrows. “Can you repeat them, please?”

He paused. “I. Love. You.”

I ignored his taunting. “Try again, please.”

“Girl, dog, green. Happy?”

“Yes, thank you.” I left the room, my face stoic until he couldn’t see me. Then I smiled.

Chapter 5

THE SHORT DRIVE home gave me just enough time to reflect on my past. This small, welcoming community never questioned why I came here. Alaska seemed to be the land of the misfit toys. If a broken or unusual toy showed up, well, welcome to the party.

Three years ago, I was on the verge of being engaged. In love, happy, settled. I was one of ten team physicians for the Colorado Avalanche and my life had been perfect. Or so it had seemed.

I was one of three girls born to the esteemed Vice Chancellor of Health for the University of Colorado School of Medicine. My older sister was the athlete. My younger sister was the smart one – A's came to her as easily as breathing.

I was the pageant queen. It was embarrassing to have my looks always commented on. "Elizabeth should be a model." Ignore the fact that I was only 5'6. "Elizabeth can have any man she wants." Ignore the fact that no one ever asked me out. "Elizabeth has such a beautiful smile." Ignore the fact that orthodontics gave it to me.

Not wanting to just be the beautiful one, I studied harder than either of my sisters. I graduated from Stanford University with a degree in Human Biology and went to medical school at the University of California, San Francisco. No nepotism here. Nope. I was going to earn my way.

After graduation, I did my residency in orthopedic surgery at the University of California, Los Angeles. While in Los Angeles, I treated a Los Angeles Kings goalie for hip pain - Clay McCarron. It was the first time I'd ever gone speechless with a patient.

He was charming, and boyish, and incredibly attractive. His smile melted my heart.

Clay became everything to me. I worked double shifts when he traveled so I could take time off when the Kings had home games. I spent every waking moment thinking of him.

And dreamt of him at night. I'd never been in love before, never had these all-consuming feelings of needing to be with another person. When we first started dating, I couldn't eat. I simply wanted to be wrapped up in bed with him. I wanted to keep him all to myself.

It wasn't until his trade that I realized I would follow him anywhere. I did. And that was the beginning of the end.

I didn't want to think about Clay tonight. I didn't want to think of him, ever. But with Brett here in town, it was getting harder and harder to hide from reality. I'd buried my head in the sand, or snow, long enough.

The crunch of gravel on the driveway alerted Todd to my arrival. His happy face appeared in the window, his breath creating a fog. Trustworthy Todd. Loyal and devoted.

He circled my legs as I walked in the door. "Hey there, boy. Wanna go outside? Give me a minute. Let me put my stuff down."

As soon as I opened the door for our walk, he was off and running. I followed him for a short distance and then stopped, waiting for him to finish his business and jog back to the cottage.

A loud noise from above me caught my attention. I looked up into the night sky and saw the bright landing light of a small, corporate type jet airplane taking off from the small community airport just down the road. A red light blinked at the end of the wing. The engines rumbled as the jet banked and headed south to the 'Lower Forty-Eight'. I was momentarily fascinated, and then, just as quickly, shocked. Had Brett's brother and sister-in-law actually left him here?

I looked down to see Todd sitting on his haunches at my side, ears perked, staring to the left and right of the road, waiting for me to figure out what we were doing.

"C'mon, boy. Let's go back." At my invitation and movement, he jolted out in front of me, back to my cabin.

When we returned, I put out a bowl of food for him, poured water in the pot on the stove to boil for tea, and then

went to my bedroom to change. I put on a heavier sweater and thick socks.

I padded back into the kitchen just as the pot began to whistle. After making my cup of earl gray, I headed to the couch to drink the soothing liquid. I pulled my left leg up, placing my ankle under my right thigh, and blew on the steam rising from the mug.

My mind wandered to Brett. All alone in the clinic. I knew Curtis would check on him, possibly even chat with him a bit. But still, it was sad that his family had left him. I took another sip of tea. Todd lay at my feet. His head rested on my right foot.

I took my phone from the side pocket of my leggings. I took a deep breath and called my mom.

“Sweetheart!” She answered on the second ring. “I’m so glad you called.”

It would be past dinner time in Colorado. I could see her so clearly in my mind. She would be in the large kitchen in their country club home, overlooking hole nine. My dad said he liked the location because that’s where the beer cart was, and that he could get one even when he wasn’t golfing. My mother simply loved the high ceilings and Italian architecture that extended out to the outdoor living area.

I had no idea if it had snowed there this year or not.

“Hi Mom, how are you?” I stood and stared out my front window towards the mountains. My reflection stared back at me in the darkness.

“Well, we’re getting ready for our annual Christmas Eve party, so it’s a bit chaotic here. But you know I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“You and dad always host the most wonderful parties.”

I heard her giving instructions to the staff in the house. “Put that in the front entry. We need a tree in every room.” Then she turned her attention back to me. “Elizabeth, you are going to be here this year, aren’t you?”

I sighed. "I'm sorry, mom, I can't."

"Elizabeth," she said more sternly. "This has gone on long enough. I didn't try and stop you from running off into the wild. But you haven't been back since, and *that* I will not tolerate. Not anymore."

Her vehemence caught me off guard. "I...I'm sorry, mom. I didn't plan ahead, and then I said I would fill in..."

"Now, you listen to me." I imagined her standing at the marble island in the kitchen, hand on her hip. "No more excuses. You come home. If just for a week."

I was being chastised. Rightfully. It felt like being eight years old again.

"We miss you." I thought I heard tears in her voice. "I miss you. So much."

"Mom, I'm so sorry. You know this been hard for me."

She sighed. "You don't belong up there, hiding away."

"I'm not hiding."

"Elizabeth!" She scolded me again. "You cannot lie to me. We all know what happened. And then you were gone. It's not too hard to see that you are hiding."

My eyes welled. "I'll come home soon. I promise. I just can't make it for Christmas." I almost told her I volunteered to pick up patrol shifts for a young man who wanted to visit his family, but I knew that would only bring her more pain, as if I'd done it intentionally. Which, of course, I had.

"Would you please also call your sisters? They miss you."

I cleared my throat, choking out the words. "I'll call them."

"Darling," she said softly. "Please come home soon. It's just not the same without you here."

I nodded. Then realized she couldn't see me. "I will, mom. I will."

We talked for a few more minutes. Safe topics like what

she was serving, the decorations, my youngest sister bringing a man she'd been dating for a while, and how they were looking forward to meeting him.

After I hung up, a wave of loneliness swept over me. I continued to stare out the window and thought about the hollowness of these past three years. My phone pinged and I jumped.

A message from Thomas, *Winter Solstice tomorrow night?*

I'd almost forgotten about the community celebration. *I have patients. I'll get there when I can*

He texted back, *I'll save you a log*

I smiled. There was an annual tradition to celebrate the winter solstice around a large bonfire at the community park. The benches were carved logs.

I sent back a thumbs up.

The confinement of my cabin suddenly felt lonely and dull. I grabbed my jacket, put my boots back on and headed back to the clinic.

The building was quiet and dark when I arrived. I punched my code in the keypad and opened the door to the lobby. I made my way back to the emergency room where Curtis was watching a Netflix show.

He jumped to his feet. "Dr. Cain."

"Please sit, Curtis."

His brow furrowed. "Are you ok?"

I thought to myself, I don't know, am I? Aloud, I responded, "Yes, fine. It's been a while since we had an overnight guest. I wanted to make sure he was ok."

Curtis laughed. "I understand."

I pointed to his room. "I'll just go ahead and..."

Curtis tried not to laugh again. He simply nodded.

Brett was in the third room at the end of the dimly lit hall.

I could hear the television through the door. I knocked gently. "Mr. Barringer?" I let myself in. "It's Dr. Cain."

As the door swung open, he jumped to his feet from the blue faux leather reclining hospital chair. He muted the television. "Elizabeth. Hey, you ok?"

It was my turn to laugh. "Everyone keeps asking me that."

He put his hands in his jeans pocket. I jerked my chin at the brown leather duffle bag on the bed. "You have your things."

He tidied the bed, put some of his belongings back in the bag and looked around awkwardly for a place to put it. "Um, yeah. Mia brought them for me before they left."

He crossed the room quickly to the closet and put the bag inside. Now he was standing very close to me. I stood with my hands in my coat pocket and looked up at him.

He continued, "Do you..." He turned to look at the room and crossed back to the chair. "Do you want to sit down?"

Awkwardly, I muttered, "Sure." I crossed to the chair and sat.

He sat on the bed and simply stared at me. Abruptly, he stood. "Sit here." He reached for my hand and pulled me gently from the chair. He directed me to the bed, almost lifting me up to the mattress. "I don't like looking down at you." He leaned against the window sill. "That's better."

I shifted a little on the mattress, trying to get comfortable in an uncomfortable situation. I looked down at his stockinged feet and then up to his smiling face. I looked at the hockey game on the television. "Who's playing?"

"You came back."

I shrugged.

"It's Ottawa against Winnipeg." He said, as he moved to sit back in the recliner. Now I was looking down at him. I tucked one of my feet up under me.

I stared back at the television, not really seeing the game.

He asked, “How was your day?”

I turned back to him and a laugh escaped me. The normality of the question and the ridiculousness of this situation was suddenly incredibly funny. Another laugh, and then I completely burst. I couldn’t stop the laughter. The simplicity, and irony, of the question, had me almost in tears. I wiped my eyes and tried to settle my laughter, only to erupt again. My abdomen hurt from laughing.

I guess my laughter entertained him. He chuckled, and his face softened a little. More in amusement of me, I think, than from understanding the joke. When my laughter finally subsided, I took a huge sigh to relax.

He said, “I guess it was good?”

I unbuttoned my jacket. “Oh, goodness. That felt good.” As I shrugged out of it, I saw him glance quickly at my chest and then back at the game. When I spoke again, he turned his attention back to me. “It was challenging.”

He grinned, kicked up the footrest, crossed his ankles, and asked, “Oh? How so?”

“I had a pain in the ass patient. Can’t seem to keep himself from getting hurt.”

“But you like him.” It was a statement.

I shrugged. “No, not really. He’s not very attractive.”

He smiled because he already knew he was, in that beat up, hockey kind of way. “That’s probably not his greatest gift.” His eyes sparkled.

I flushed. My belly tightened with a zing. I shoved those feelings back down. “Hmm. Well, he doesn’t seem to be a very good hockey player, either.”

I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth. I had only meant to tease and forgot my place. His face darkened and he looked back at the screen.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

He grunted, “How did you mean it?”

I wrung my fingers. “I talked to your team doctor today.”

“Mia tell you?”

“She did.”

“He blew up my phone today. Left a ton of voicemails.”

A flash of dread passed through me. “What did he say?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t listened to them.”

I stayed quiet. He turned his golden eyes to me, sadness and regret stared intently at me. “So, what did Doc have to say to you?”

“He started with a string of obscenities and then asked for your file.”

Brett nodded.

I continued, “He asked about your knee.”

“I imagine he did. My knee is fine.”

“Do you want me to look at it?” I blushed when he started to smile.

“I’m okay. It was only a sprain.”

I nodded. Not sure what to do with myself now, I started to stand.

He said, “Sit.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Please stay.” He said, with more vulnerability.

“It feels a little unconventional being here.”

“Why did you come?” The husky, caramel smoothness of his voice was back.

I quickly said, “Just so you know, I don’t date hockey players.”

He glanced at my mouth. “Message received.”

“Just so, you know...” I was flustered. “So... Just so you

know. I'm your doctor. Today."

He nodded. "Today, you're my doctor."

My face felt so hot.

"Do you want to play a card game?"

I laughed. "Do *you* want to play a card game?"

He laughed; a sexy, deep laugh. "No."

We smiled at each other.

"Tell me why you don't date hockey players." He said softly.

I hardly knew this person. I wasn't ready to share my past with him. "Why don't you tell me why you *play* hockey."

He grinned and his eyes sparkled. He loved the game, obviously. The game on the television was still muted. He told me about his brothers - that John was a football player and Rand was an accountant.

"My mom couldn't keep us contained. We were always rough-housing, and we just destroyed our rooms. She needed a way for us to get all our aggression out, so she put us all in hockey."

"She thought you could slam each other up against the side boards of a rink instead of her coffee table?"

"Something like that. But she didn't count on us getting even more battered and bruised." He laced his fingers and rested his palms on his belly.

"My sisters and I sat still and looked pretty."

"I'm sure I don't believe that." I giggled and he went on. "Rand didn't care for the aggression of the game. He's the youngest, and the smartest; more cerebral."

"I'm sure I don't believe that."

He laughed and I scrunched up my nose at him.

"With John and I out of the house, Rand could focus on schoolwork without getting beat up. And John and I could beat each other up without getting in trouble."

“Brothers are fascinating. My sisters and I would never think to get in a fist fight just because. When we fought, it was over one of us stealing a shirt or a dress. And then we wouldn’t talk for days. Brothers are back to being best friends minutes later.”

“I loved spending time with John, but it soon became really clear that his heart wasn’t in it and he quit to play rugby, and then eventually football.”

“You loved it.”

“I love it.” His eyes held mine. “I love the cold smell of the rink, the quiet mornings, the sound of my blades on the ice.” His voice softened. “I love the intimacy of the rink with the fans, they can get so close. They are right there behind the plexiglass. You can feel their energy. You can see them screaming for you. You can *hear* them screaming for you.”

I lay down on my side, tucking the hospital pillow under my head. I lay my left hand on the pillow and rested my right check on it.

I knew what he was talking about. I’d felt the same way when I had the privilege of getting game tickets. The rush I’d felt trying to keep up with the puck. The adrenaline that would spike when the puck hit the boards, or the plexiglass. Even though I knew the puck wouldn’t hit me, the force of the slam was deafening. And it would ultimately be followed by two or three players slamming up against the boards, fighting for the puck with the stick.

“I imagine that must be something pretty special.”

He nodded. “It’s something pretty special.”

We talked, and talked. Every now and then he would catch the game out of the corner of his eye and shout out what the player should have done, what he should do, or encouragement to start a fight. We talked about food, and movies, and favorite vacation destination. Everything except why I didn’t date hockey players. He made me laugh.

He stood from the lounge chair, grabbed a blanket from the closet and covered me with it.

My eyelids got heavy. I blinked. I rested them a second longer every time. Talk. Lower my lids. Blink. His voice lulled me. Like a calming summer wind, he whispered, "You're safe, Elizabeth." Soon, I was asleep.

Chapter 6

“ELIZABETH.” WARM BREATH tickled my ear. “Elizabeth, you need to wake up.” A gentle hand pushed back my hair, stroking my forehead.

“Mmmmmm, stay.” I wrapped my arms around the large body hovering over me. “Don’t leave.” I buried my face in his neck and inhaled the salty, manly smell of him.

He chuckled and tried to pull my arms from him. “As much as I would love for you to stay, you need to go home.”

I opened my eyes. I blinked a few times, looked around and then up into smiling golden eyes. The sterility of the room momentarily confused me. “What?”

He whispered, “Curtis just came in. I don’t want people to see you here in the morning.”

“Curtis?” The fog in my brain cleared. “Curtis!” I sat straight up and collided with Brett’s forehead. Putting my palm to my head, I closed my eyes and fell back to the pillow. I groaned. “Oh! That hurt.”

He groaned. “You have a very hard head.”

I glared at him.

“He was very discreet.”

I whispered in frustration, “Why did you let me fall asleep?”

“Why did I let *you* fall asleep? Why did you let *me* fall asleep? I’m the one with the concussion. You’re the doctor. You’re supposed to make sure I don’t die in my sleep.” He was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

I pushed at him. “Get up. Let me up.”

He leaned back, allowing me to swing my legs around and climb out of the hospital bed.

“You were so much sweeter last night.” He winked at me.

I hunted for my shoes. “What time is it?”

“Almost 5 a.m. Curtis was doing his rounds before shift change.”

I tossed pillows and whipped the bedsheets around, searching for my coat.

“In the closet,” he said.

The closet door squeaked when I opened it. I grabbed my coat and shoved one arm in.

“He likes me for you,” he added.

I paused, mid sleeve entry. “He does? Did he say that?”

Brett pulled his feet up onto the bed, crossed his ankles, raised the back of the bed and reclined against the pillows. The pillows I had just been sleeping on. “Yep.”

I finished putting my coat on. “You lie.” I said flatly.

He sat up and laughed. “I do not. Ask him.”

“I will not. I need to go.” I started for the door.

Quietly, he said, “Curtis said you were lonely, that you needed someone to make you smile. That I’m the only patient you’ve ever come back to check on. That you must like me.”

I pursed my lips. “Well, Curtis can mind his own damned business, and you...” I pointed my finger at him. “You do not make me smile.”

His grin grew larger. “So, you like me?”

I opened the door and walked past the nurse’s station. Thank goodness it was only Curtis.

“Ma’am.” His eyes were the size of saucers.

“Curtis.” Embarrassed, I walked past him without making eye contact, out through the lobby, and to my car.

I drove home, wide awake now. No sense in going back to bed. When I reached the cabin, I put on a pot of coffee and took Todd out for a walk. It wouldn’t be light out for another five hours. I sighed.

Falling asleep at the clinic last night was dumb. I needed to apologize to Brett. Visiting him had been highly

inappropriate and nothing I had ever done. Or should have even done.

I took my time getting ready for work. I sat at my loft desk, pulled up my calendar for the day, and saw that I only had two patients. One at ten, and the other at one. The ER doctor would check on Brett this morning. That gave me time to catch up on a white paper I'd been working on.

By the time I got to work at 9:30, morning twilight had turned the sky into a kaleidoscope of blue and pink and orange. The sun had yet to crest over the top of the mountain. The town was shaded in gray, the snow was quiet tones of blue before the brightening white of the day. Porch lights shone through the trees along the road.

After my first patient, I sat at my desk, looking up at the snow-covered mountains, daydreaming.

I'd spent the last few years being so controlled. I was a rational person. I followed rules, for the most part. I was logical and predictable. My life was safe here. I didn't like the irrational way I was behaving. Kissing a man I'd spoken to for only a few hours. Spending the night at the hospital with a patient. And wanting to touch him. To kiss him. To just let go. But I didn't know him well enough to trust him. A part of me was cracking open and I didn't like not knowing how it would end. Would he break my heart, too? Or would he catch me?

Not liking the swirling direction of my thoughts, I stood abruptly from my office chair and went downstairs to the emergency room to check on Brett.

A young boy had been brought in for a cut to his chin. Apparently, he'd tripped on the driveway at the lodge. The day nurse was getting him stitched up.

The patient screen above the nurse's station was empty except for the boy.

"Where is Mr. Barringer?" I asked the nurse on duty.

"He left this morning. Just walked out."

I stared at her in surprise. "He just left?"

She shrugged. “He was packing his things when I went in for rounds this morning. I asked him to wait for you, that you would want to make sure he was ok. But he said he felt fine and didn’t need an official discharge. I couldn’t really stop him. He just walked out.”

“Did someone pick him up?”

She shrugged again.

“You didn’t help him?”

She flushed. “He didn’t seem to need any.”

“He’s a patient.” I said, a little more loudly than I should have.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Cain. He just kind of ignored me.”

I sighed and reached my hand over the counter. “His chart, please?”

She handed me his folder. I opened it and read the last entry from Curtis: blood pressure 110/74, oxygen 98. The chart notes stated the patient felt fine; vision was fine; sternum pain minimal. There was nothing that would have caused me to keep him here.

I snapped the folder shut and handed it back to the her. “Thank you. You can officially discharge him and send the updates to his team doctor.”

My second patient cancelled. They wanted to get ready for the winter solstice party. Even my receptionist could hardly sit still. Every time I walked by her desk, she was on the phone with someone, either making plans, giving instructions or talking about her outfit.

In Colorado, the winter solstice simply meant that Christmas was four days away. In Alaska, it meant there would be more daylight every day from then on. Only a minute or two every day until June, but in this land of what felt like eternal darkness, a minute was everything.

Eventually, I just sent her home.

With wide eyes, she asked, “Are you sure?” She could

barely contain herself.

“I’m sure.”

“Oh, thank you, Dr. Cain. I even made a sign for the front door.” She waved a ‘CLOSED FOR WINTER SOLSTICE,’ sign at me and immediately started gathering her things. “Are you coming tonight?”

I nodded, slightly amused at her energy.

She continued, “Do you have a costume?”

My eyebrows rose. “Do I need one?”

She huffed. “You went last year, didn’t you?”

For the past two years, I hadn’t attended, wanting only to work and keep to myself. Since joining the ski patrol and making a larger network of friends, I had ventured out more often, but not that often. “No, I didn’t really know many people.”

She shrugged on her heavy coat and stepped into fur-lined boots. “I have a closet full. I’ll run home and get you one.” She looked me up and down, taking in my full breasts and curved hips.

“Go ahead, say it. Your clothes might be too small.”

She scrunched up her nose. “I’ll try and find one that flatters.”

I tilted my head. “Thank you for your political correctness.”

She laughed and ran out the door. “I’ll be back in thirty.”

I waved as the door shut behind her and she shuffled over the frozen ground to her car.

While I waited, I shut down my computer, locked the office behind me, and made myself comfortable in the lobby.

She struggled in the parking lot with a heavy garment bag over her arm, dwarfing her.

I stood and opened the door, stepping out to help her and

she shook me off. “I got it. If you try and take it, I might drop it.”

I held the door open as she carried the bag in and set it on the reception desk. “Is it a wedding dress?”

She laughed. “No, but it is gorgeous. It might be actually be the perfect length for you. I had to wear heels. You can probably wear snow boots and be more comfortable.”

I took the bag from her. Awkwardly, I put it over my arm, adjusting my purse so it wouldn’t fall. “I was going to leave when you came back. Can you lock the door behind us?”

She followed me out. Turning to lock the door, she said over her shoulder, “Sure, sure. Don’t you want to look at it first?”

“It’s the only costume I have, so it either works or it doesn’t. Looking at it won’t make a difference.”

She laughed in surprise. “That’s very logical. And, so you know, it has room in the hips, but you might...” She gestured that my breasts might spill out the top.

“I’m sure I can manage.”

“Okay, then, I’ll see you tonight.”

Tentatively, I walked to my car, trying not to slip. Night was settling in, the darkness closing in on the town. The solstice would happen later tonight, but the celebration at the park had already started.

Chapter 7

WHITE FAIRY LIGHTS draped from tree to tree, wrapping the townspeople in a bubble of celebration. Beyond the lights, thick woods loomed. Children were told not to venture past the tree line.

I observed the party from the edges. Druids and fairies, goddesses and kings, danced around the bonfire. Children in elf costumes chased each other. The scene was magical and ethereal.

My own costume was a long white skirt of a gauzy material, topped by a gold leafed corset. Over my shoulders, I wore a white, fur-lined wool cape. Gold embroidery traced the shoulders and ran down the front to the hem. To stay warm, I wore white snow boots.

Jenna saw me and waved from across the park. She was holding a gold goblet and dancing to the live band that had set up on an elevated stage. She held hands with another pagan looking creature.

I waved back and stepped into the cocoon of lights. Slowly, I walked through the revelers and made my way to the bar. Little more than sheets of plywood resting on empty oil barrels, the rusticity of the bar somehow added to the surreal, mystical feel of the celebration. As I approached, I realized the furry-suited, horn-headed bartender was Curtis.

“Ma’am.”

“Hi Curtis, what are you serving tonight?” I looked at the row of liquor behind him, set up on another sheet of plywood.

He leaned closer, “Ma’am, about this morning...”

I put up my hand. “Please.”

“I won’t mention it to anyone.”

I blushed. “I wish you hadn’t mentioned it to me.”

He nodded. “Consider it unmentioned.”

“Thank you.”

“How about a wassail?” He grabbed a stone mug and thrust it under the spout of a large coffee urn.

“Sounds perfect.” I took the mug from him and sipped the hot, spiced drink. “Mmmmmm, this is good.”

He grinned. “I like your crown.”

I touched the tips of the icicle spikes reaching up from the gold headband. “It’s not too much?”

“No.” He smiled. “I especially like the silver snowflakes hanging from the sides.”

I smiled at him, knowing he was trying to move past the uncomfortable discussion from a moment ago. I raised my mug to him. “Thanks again.”

To the right of the bonfire stood a twenty-four-foot, aerial silk tri-pod structure. One of the local girls had been training with a cirque company and had come home for the holidays. Evidently, she had offered to perform a demonstration with the drum circle.

I circled the group of celebrators. I talked with some of the local parents and navigated my way to my ski patrol friends and Thomas.

“Hey, you made it.” He greeted me with a careful hug. He kept his head far away from the icicles. He chuckled. “Those things could hurt someone.”

“I feel a little silly.”

One of the other female patrollers, dressed in a red velvet hooded cape, with tulle draped over the shoulders, said, “No, you look fabulous. Very winter Wiccan.”

I blinked my eyes rapidly. “Oh, goodness, that isn’t what I was going for at all.”

The rest of them laughed. “Relax,” Thomas said. “We all know how serious you are. No one will mistake *you* for one.”

I didn’t know whether to be relieved or offended. Before I had time to examine my feelings, conversation turned to Christmas and New Year’s Eve plans. With the exception of

patrolling on Christmas Day, I really had none. Intentionally, of course.

The band stopped playing and the mayor stepped on stage, calling for everyone's attention. "Hello, everyone."

Hoots and hollers.

"Everyone, hello. Happy winter solstice."

More cheers.

"We have a very special presentation for you tonight. Our very own Isolde Kelly."

Applause from the audience.

"Isolde will be performing a program she choreographed herself, and then we'll start the drum circle. It's time to celebrate the winter solstice and great stillness, before the days get longer."

More applause. Thomas and Margo wandered off to watch Isolde from a better viewpoint. He asked, "You coming?"

"No, you go ahead."

The mayor closed her announcement with, "Enjoy the performance."

The band played slow, sweet, mystical music, while Isolde prepared her silks. Everyone waited and watched as she wrapped the silks around her ankles and prepared to twirl. The burgundy silks flowed around her, twisting and twirling in the dancing firelight from the bonfire.

A drum beat. The band played more quietly. A drummer stepped towards the fire. Isolde did the splits, a silk wrapped around each ankle. She spun slowly.

A drum beat. The fire danced. Wood crackled, and flames leapt out of the circle towards the sky. Isolde spun. A second drummer stepped towards the fire. An enchanting feeling enveloped me, lulling me into harmony with the moment. Sparkles of ash flickered up to the heavens, floating as if woven into the music. The drummers grinned at each other

and started a harmonizing beat. The band continued to play. The townspeople swayed and moved to the music. A group of middle school children swung from the branches of a tree, knocking feet to make each other fall. They laughed and did it all over again.

A drum beat. I put my mug on the empty wine barrel next to me. A third drummer joined the circle, placed a chair next to them, put his drum on the ground and started a rhythm. A beat. The mayor joined the drummers with a tambourine. I covered my mouth to hide a smile. She wore an eighteen-inch headdress. It was a sharp detour from the suits I usually saw her in.

A drum beat. It pounded in my chest. The deep beat of the drum's vibration. People swaying. People dancing. People kissing.

And then I saw him. Across the bonfire. Like a vision. I blinked. He was still there. Standing back from the party, his golden eyes bore into mine. I couldn't look away. My chest heaved in the tightness of the corset. I took a step back from the crowd. I continued to stare.

Like a predator, he walked slowly around the outside of the group circling the bonfire. The drums beat. I could barely breathe.

Closer. I watched him on my left. He wasn't in a costume. His jeans were snug on his strong thighs. The bulk of his winter jacket making him seem even larger. With his hands in his pockets, he continued to step slowly around the circle towards me.

More drummers joined the circle. The drums were louder. Sitting on their small folding chairs, they beat to a tune of celebration.

When my eyes could no longer follow him, I turned my body in his direction. We were feet apart, longing and desire mirrored in our eyes. He reached out his left hand, and I took it with my right, linking my small hand with his larger, calloused one.

He looked away, and stepped towards the forest. I lowered my head and followed, watching his booted feet lead us into the darkness.

Deep into the forest, we stopped at a spruce tree. He stepped behind the wide girth of it and placed me up against it. Neither of us spoke. He pushed up against me and buried his face in my neck. He inhaled and nuzzled my soft skin. I lay my head back against the tree and sighed. He pushed his leg between mine, forcing the dress to tighten around me.

He lifted his head and cradled my face with his calloused hands. My eyes closed, reveling in the gentle touch. His thumbs brushed my lips and they parted.

The drums beat louder. I exhaled. The smell of woodsmoke hovered around us. Laughter echoed through the trees. He held my head steady. I opened my eyes. Not looking away, I reached out to unbutton his coat. When the jacket opened, I wrapped my arms around him. I caressed his back. He held me tight, as if pained not to be kissing me.

The glow of the bonfire flickered in the forest behind him. He looked over my shoulder, around the tree. Then he looked back at me, the reflection of the fire in his eyes. With caramel like slowness, he gently pressed his lips to mine. Neither of us moved. He pushed his body towards mine. I couldn't get close enough to him. I opened my mouth in invitation and he kissed me deeper. He kissed my cheek, my neck, my other cheek and back to my mouth. Every nerve in me was tight. I needed him.

His left hand reached down and pulled up my dress, scrunching until he could get under all of the fabric and touch my thigh. He lifted my leg. I rested my booted foot on the back of his calf. His large palm squeezed my bottom and he sighed. He lowered his forehead and closed his eyes. "Please, Elizabeth."

"Yes." I breathed. I dropped my hands from his back, frantically unclasped his belt buckle and unbuttoned his jeans.

I reached in to hold him. His penis was hot and silky soft. I closed my own eyes, rested my head back against the tree

and stroked him. His left hand reached under the skirt, between my thighs. He ran his fingers along my silky folds, parting them. He slid a finger inside me and flicked his thumb over my clit. I gasped. My legs shook. His other arm circled my back.

“Here,” I begged.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He gently released me. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a condom.

My eyebrows rose.

He shrugged.

I smiled.

With care, he rolled the condom on.

I lifted my skirt.

He lifted my left leg again and settled between my thighs. The dress was bunched between us, shielding us from seeing each other. Only feel.

The drums were beating.

The tip of his penis pressed against my sex, and I nodded slightly. With great care, he slowly entered me. My eyelids lowered closed. He filled me. My heart expanded. He made a sound that sounded like a small cry. When he was fully inside me, pressed flush against me, he said, “Open your eyes.”

I opened them. His golden eyes were kind, and loving, and almost laughing. He slid out and then back in, grinding and circling against me. I tried to keep my eyes open. The drums beat. Sliding out. In again. The drums beat. Firelight flickered. His eyes glowed gold. Drums. In. Faster. I thrust against him. He put his lips to mine again and thrust. The drums. The beat. Everything pulsed between us. My heart expanded with inexplicable emotion, while my sex clenched around him. The drums beat, faster, and faster, pushing

towards the solstice. We panted. Our hot breaths making a fog in the cold air around us.

Faster and faster the drums beat, until every nerve in me tightened and exploded. He tensed and came with me. My toes tingled. My body tingled. Then I fell limp, weak with pleasure. I sighed, falling into him. Calm and peace and pleasure surrounded me in a blissful cocoon of relaxation. Brett held me up against the tree, supporting me, as my breathing returned to normal.

The drums silenced. The energy of the winter solstice settled.

Silence.

Everyone was silent.

The only sound, the murmur of a parent telling their child to, “Shhhh.”

Time shifted.

We stayed quietly together, not making a sound.

We waited until we heard the mayor shout, “We are now past the longest and shortest day of the year. Go now, rest and reflect.”

We tried not to laugh.

He pulled out of me, stepped back and tried his best to clean himself up. He stayed in the shadow of the tree in case anyone could see us.

I tried to straighten my crown.

“You look beautiful.” He adjusted himself and buttoned up his jeans.

“Thank you.”

We both stood looking at each other in awe.

“I’ll follow you home.” He jerked his chin towards the bonfire and the party. “I’ll wait for you in the parking lot.”

I nodded.

Making my way back to the crowds, I was careful not to

draw too much attention to where I came from. I skirted around and came out by the makeshift bar.

“Hey! There you are!” Thomas called. “I was looking for you. Want a special solstice drink?”

I stood uncomfortably next to him. I didn’t know if my dress was back in all the correct places. “No. I would love to, but I’m on patrol tomorrow and I have a few work things to finish in the morning.”

“That’s right.” He slapped his forehead with his palm. “You closed the clinic?”

Out of the corner of my eye, Brett walked towards the parking lot, hunched into his jacket, head down. Keeping my focus on Thomas, I responded, “yes. Until the twenty-sixth. The emergency room is open though. You know, for all those crazy holiday skiers.” I tried to joke.

“Speaking of crazy skiers,” he started, and I cut him off.

“You know, Thomas, I’m really kind of tired. Can we chat tomorrow?” I put my hand on his arm.

He looked disappointed, but immediately covered it with a smile. “Sure. I’ll walk you to your car.”

I put my hand on his chest. “I’m good.” He looked down at my hand, startled. With a softer tone, I added, “I’m good. I’ll be fine.”

He simply nodded and said, “Well, have a good night then.”

I walked to my car. The parking lot, illuminated by one, small light, was still full. The town would party well into the night. Brett stood by a large black Toyota truck. I jerked my head towards my four-runner. We didn’t speak. He climbed in the truck and waited until I had started mine, turned it towards my cabin, and followed me home.

Chapter 8

I HELD THE door open and he stepped inside, glancing around at my small living area before settling in front of the wood burning fireplace. “Should I start a fire?”

I nodded.

Todd whined. His ears sat up inquisitively at the stranger in our house.

“I need to change.”

We were cautious around each other now, our voices quiet. He pet Todd on the head and gave him a little scratch behind the ears. “Do you need help?” He asked quietly, without looking at me.

I had gotten into the dress by myself. I imagined I could get myself out. But my mouth wouldn’t work. I nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

He stepped towards me. He reached up to the crown on my head and gently removed the pins holding it regally in place. Careful not to get my hair caught in the silver snowflake drops, he slowly lifted the gilded art piece from my head and set it on the back of the couch. I kept my eyes at his chin.

Standing just over a foot from me, he then reached out and unfastened the hook and eye closure at my neck. The cape fell to the side and he grabbed it, hanging it on my hall-tree. “Turn around,” he whispered.

I did as he said, my body heavy with awareness.

He unhooked the top button of the dress and then slowly pulled the zipper down. His knuckle caressed my back. I shivered.

“You have beautiful skin, Elizabeth.”

When the corset fell away, I put my hands to my chest, holding it up until I could remove the rest in private. I turned to him and then glanced at the doorless entry to my room.

Noticing the direction of my gaze, he said, “Ah, should I take your dog for a walk?”

The simplicity, and thoughtfulness, of the question, made me smile. “That would be nice, thank you.”

“C’mon...” He looked at Todd, then me.

“Todd.”

He laughed and took the leash from the hook. “Todd?”

“It just, I don’t know, fit him.”

He looked down at Todd, who stared up at him, tail wagging, tongue lolling. A new best friend. “You wanna go outside, Todd?”

Todd whined and stood, began to circle Brett. He clipped the leash to his collar.

“You don’t really need that.”

“The last thing I need when trying to win a girl is to lose her dog.”

My heart cracked just a little. I simply nodded.

“C’mon Todd, let’s go,” he said as he opened the door. Stepping outside, he shut it behind them.

I inhaled deeply and then exhaled, trying to calm my nerves.

My mind raced, trying to decide what to put on. I frantically pulled out shorts, then leggings, then a T-shirt. Then I thought I should put on a T-shirt dress, then realized it was almost bed-time. Sweats and a tank top? Yep, that’s what I settled on. Bra? No bra? No bra. We’d already been there, what did it matter?

I’d just put on a pot of water for tea when they came back into the house. A blast of cold air rushed in with them.

Todd ran to his water bowl. Brett went to the fireplace. He put a base of newspaper down and broke the kindling into smaller pieces. He made a teepee with the sticks, then lit the

paper on fire with an electric lighter that sat on a side table. When the flames were going strong, he tossed on two logs.

I watched him from the kitchen while I waited for the pot to whistle.

He sat on his haunches, resting his left elbow on his left thigh. He poked the fire with a stick and then stood.

A smile spread slowly across his face when he saw me watching him.

I turned back to the tea, prepared two mugs, and then went to sit on the couch next to him. He took the mugs from me and put them on the coffee table.

Turning me, he pulled me up against him so my back was flush with his chest. His left leg was up on the couch. He cradled me between his legs, pulled a blanket off the back and covered us up. We stared into the dancing flames of the fire. He snuggled me close.

“Now that we officially got that out of the way,” he teased and kissed the side of my head.

I wasn't sure how he wanted me to respond so I remained silent. What we'd done in the forest had been erotic and moving. I knew I didn't want to move from this spot right now. I wanted only to curl up and go to sleep on him.

He continued, “Why didn't you tell me you were a doctor when we were at the bar?”

“It didn't matter,” I whispered.

“How so?”

“I didn't think I would see you again.”

He ran his palm over my hair. “What's happening?” he said, quietly.

I stared into the flickering flames of the fire. “I don't know.”

He lowered his head. I tilted mine back. He settled his cheek against mine.

“I have to leave in two days.”

I nodded, unable to respond.

He asked, “Can you spend that time with me?”

Eyes closed, I nodded again.

It didn't seem possible, but he pulled me even closer, wrapping his arms around me like a weighted blanket.

We fell asleep. At some point in the middle of the night, he lifted me up and carried me to bed. I stirred. His gentle hand caressed my stomach, and I turned to him.

Lowering his head, he kissed my belly and then blew softly on the wet skin. I closed my eyes. He tugged on the waistband of my sweats and I lifted my hips. Soft lips brushed my inner thighs, leaving warm, wet kisses as he worked his way to my sex. I spread my legs for him.

The mattress depressed as he stood. I watched the shadow of him pull his shirt over his head. I heard the zipper of his jeans and the rustle and clink of a belt buckle as he tossed everything to the floor.

I had no idea what time it was. All I knew was that I needed him over me, around me, inside me.

The soft hair on his broad chest tickled my breasts. I parted my thighs, inviting him in. I thrust up to meet him, gasping at the thickness of him. Opening myself more fully than I had in the forest, I let him take me.

He wasn't gentle. He wasn't tender. He thrust into me like a man branding his woman. Placing his hands behind my knees, he pushed them back. The drums beat in my head again. He moaned and ground against my mons. I held my breath. I was reaching, grasping, tensing, waiting. The rhythmic pressing and grinding drove me over the edge again and with one final thrust, I shattered. I screamed his name. Stars filled the space behind my eyes.

He threw his head back and moaned again. A guttural sound of pride and release. I went limp, wanting only to fall back into a blissful sleep, relaxed and at peace.

When I woke again, the bed was empty. Gray light shone through the windows. It had to be almost noon. I was on ski patrol at two o'clock.

The house was quiet. I smelled coffee.

Padding quietly into the kitchen, I poured myself a cup of the hot liquid, and curled up on the couch. A moment later, booted feet clomped on the steps. Todd and Brett both came through the front door with smiles on their faces.

“You're up.”

“I am.” I jerked my chin towards him. “Where did you get those clothes?”

He unleashed Todd. “Todd and I jogged to my house, so I could change, and then we ran back.”

I opened my eyes farther in surprise. “Your truck is here. How far did you run?”

He went into the kitchen and got a cup of water. Still a little winded, he said, “Less than a mile. Todd needed to go out.” He chugged the water, rinsed the glass and put it in the rack to the left of the sink. “We had a rental house closer to the mountain. I was able to keep it for a few more days.” He came into the living area, sat down beside me, and gave me a kiss on the cheek. He smiled. “Good morning.”

I smiled back. “Good morning.”

His phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and declined the call. “So, what's the plan today?”

“I have to work.”

He raised his right hand, palm up. “Doctor stuff?” He lowered his right hand and raised his left. “Ski patrol stuff?”

“Ski patrol stuff.”

He rubbed my feet. “How much time do you have?”

My grin grew. “Not that much time.”

He teased, winking, “Dirty mind. I thought I would ski too. Can I see you after?”

“Like a date?” I took a sip of coffee.

“Is that so unusual?” He leaned forward and whispered, “And just so you know, I don’t kiss on the first date.”

I pulled my lips between my teeth, trying not to laugh. “Is that so?”

He nodded affirmatively. “I will treat you like a lady.”

Hearing those words made me wanted to be treated like anything *but* a lady. The smirk on his mouth told me he knew exactly where my thoughts had turned. I said primly, “In that case, I would be happy to go out with you tonight.”

He jumped off the couch. “I need to go get my gear.” He patted Todd on the head. He looked back at me. “See you on the mountain?”

“Yes.”

He ran out the door, then back in. He gave me another kiss. And then another. “So pretty.”

I swatted at him. “Go.”

“I’m going.”

This time he did leave. When the rev of his truck left the driveway, I started getting ready myself.

I was grateful for the break from the clinic this week. If there were any emergencies, I would be paged. But for now, I technically had a few days off to ski. And now, to spend with Brett.

I didn’t fool myself into thinking this was going to be anything more than a fling for him. I was fine with that. Maybe he was just what I needed to get back into dating. From the second I’d seen him beyond the leaping flames of the bonfire, I’d known we would be intimate.

It had been such a long time since I’d been physical with someone. It was nice. No, more than that. Freeing. I hadn’t been with anyone since Clay. The chain was broken.

I drove the short distance to the resort, parked in employee parking, and made my way through the lobby to the

patrol office. The last time I'd walked through here, I'd thought Brett was having a heart attack.

The patrol office buzzed with Christmas cheer.

Margo saw me come in. "Liz! Wow! You looked gorgeous last night."

The metal locker clanged when I opened it and exchanged my winter coat for the patrol jacket. "Thank you. I borrowed the costume from Jenna."

"It was perfect for you." She unbuckled her boots. "I thought I saw that hottie from the bar the other night too."

"Hmmm. I don't know." I turned back to my locker to get my patrol badge. I clipped the plastic encased photo onto my jacket.

The volume in the room rose with laughter and conversation.

"He's the one that hit a tree, right?"

I looked at Thomas. "You ready?" Then, to Margo I said, "Yeah, two days ago."

Thomas headed out, holding the door, and I followed behind him.

Margo shouted after me, with a hint of laughter, "I'm just sayin', he's hot!"

My skis rested in the rack reserved for patrollers next to the tram. I held them by the bindings and stepped into the tram.

People boarded behind us. One last rider stepped in just before the doors closed. He squeezed himself past everyone with an occasional "Excuse me," and "how ya doin'?" until he was standing beside me and Thomas. He put out his hand to Thomas. "How ya doin? Brett Barringer."

Thomas shook his hand. "Thomas Wolfe. Nice to meet you."

Brett held on to his skis.

The tram lurched and he reached up to hold the hand rail. He leaned down and whispered in my ear in greeting, “Elizabeth.”

Chapter 9

BRETT KEPT HIS distance, allowing me to work.

I kept my distance from Thomas, not wanting to answer his question, “Something going on with you two?”

We were teaching a group of middle school girls, on vacation with their families, the importance of how to handle a toboggan during a rescue mission. They were having a blast taking turns being the victim.

“It’s just, he seems awfully familiar with you,” Thomas said, skiing backwards in front of me as I held onto the front of the toboggan.

“Okay, girls, what do I do on a steep downhill?” I asked

They responded from the toboggan, “Vary the speed.”

“Good.” To Thomas I said, “He’s a patient. I can’t help it if he wants to flirt with me.”

“He just seems really familiar with you.”

It was none of his business, so I ignored him.

The rest of the afternoon was a combination of kids falling off the chairlift at the top when trying to get off, snowboarders going too fast and cutting off skiers, and a hotshot hanging from the lift on a dare from his friends.

The lights turned on around 3 p.m. for night skiing. I finished my patrol shift at 8 p.m. uneventfully.

Thomas tried to talk to me again, but I changed and ran out of the patrol office as fast as I could.

When I got home, Brett was waiting in the driveway. His truck was running. When he saw me pull in, he turned it off and stepped out with a bag of groceries.

“Have you been here long?” I slung my crossbody bag over me.

“No. I bought chicken and couscous and purple carrots.

Have you ever seen these things? I didn't know they existed.”
He followed me up the stairs.

I unlocked the door and held it open for him. He kicked off his boots inside the door and kept talking. “Apparently, they originated over a thousand years ago and have less lycopene than their orange cousin.”

He put the bags on the counter and started unloading. I followed him in and opened a bottle of wine.

“Also, they are five times more likely to inhibit the growth of cancer cells.” He held up the chicken. “Frying pan?”

I nodded to the cupboard in the corner. He went to it, pulled out a cast iron skillet, and kept talking. “They are best eaten raw, but tonight, I'm going to roast them with just a little salt and pepper, and some olive oil.”

His jeans sat low on his hips. I found his stockinged feet oddly erotic. The sleeves on his green Henley were pushed up to his elbows.

I jumped up on the counter and took a sip of wine. “Fascinating.”

He paused and smiled at me. He pointed the chef knife at me and I recoiled in mock horror. “You jest, but these are hard to find.”

I laughed. “And why do you even know this?”

“I googled it.”

“Well, I appreciate the science lesson,” I teased. He started chopping the carrots. “Can I help?”

“Why don't you start the couscous.” He continued dicing the chicken into tenders.

We talked about his family while we cooked. And while we waited for dinner to be ready, we talked about mine. I sat on the counter. He leaned against the one opposite me. It was normal and comfortable. And the sense of intimacy terrified me.

We sat at my small kitchen table. Our knees touched. He

frequently put his hand on mine.

When dinner was finished, he cleared our plates, washed and rinsed them. He poured more wine in my glass. He grabbed my hand. “C’mon.”

Pulling me into the living room, he settled me on one end of the couch. He sat in the middle, pulled my feet onto his lap and massaged them.

I closed my eyes and sighed. “That feels so good.”

He pushed his thumb into the sole of my feet. “What do you want to do tomorrow?”

I took a deep breath and opened my eyes. “Brett, don’t you think we should talk about this?”

“What is this?”

“You and me. What happened.” I sipped my wine.

He leaned his head back on the cushions. With a sigh, he let go of my feet and ran his hands over his face. “Do you regret making love with me?”

“No, but I don’t want you to get the wrong impression.”

“What impression am I getting?”

I raised my eyebrows.

He turned back to me, shifting and raising a knee onto the couch. “I know I didn’t give a very good first impression, but I think you like me. I like you.”

“I do like you.”

“How about if we do something fun tomorrow? Like real tourists. No pressure to examine what this is.”

Slowly, I asked, “To get to know each other better?”

He raised his hands. “Sure.”

I swatted him playfully on the arm. “Don’t pacify me.”

He chuckled. “I’m not. I want to do things with you.”

I pondered what he would find fun, and asked, “What do you normally do? How do you spend your free time?”

“In the off season, I usually go to Jackson, Wyoming, and spend time with Mia and John. I hike. I bike. I camp.”

“You are very outdoorsy.”

“I like to be active. John has a football camp and I help him out sometimes.”

“Do John and Mia have children?”

His eyes drooped a little. “No. They’ve tried but they just haven’t been able to yet.” He shrugged. “I don’t know. I stopped asking. Mia has been really sad, so I don’t press.”

I wanted to ask him if he wanted children. The words danced on the tip of my tongue. It was very personal and I wasn’t sure I was ready to widen the fissure that had opened in my heart. “Do you want children?” Too late. Inquisitiveness got the better of me.

His grin grew. “I do.” A peaceful acceptance settled between us as we simply stared at each other. “Do you?”

My heartrate accelerated. “I’ve, yeah, I’ve thought about it. Maybe two. A boy and a girl.”

He laughed. “Didn’t you learn in medical school that you don’t get to decide?”

“Brat.” I slapped his knee and he grabbed my hand before I could pull it back.

Huskily he said, “While we focus on *not* discussing what this is, what do you want to do tomorrow?” His hands were soft.

“How about snowmobiling?”

He almost shot off the couch. “Yes! Definitely, snowmobiling.”

It was so hard not to like him. He was so energetic. So full of life. I smiled at him.

Then he leaned closer and said in a seductive tone, “In the meantime, can we do more of the stuff that happened between us, that we won’t regret?” He inched towards me.

I put my wine on the coffee table and scooted down so he could lay on me. “Such as?” I pouted.

“Dr. Cain, you are more than your fancy education, aren’t you?”

A flash of wariness about his own profession crept in around the edges of my thoughts. I pushed them away. Not tonight. Tonight, I would let myself be loved. In a few days, we could go our separate ways.

In lieu of answering, I pulled his shirt up and over his head. His phone rang. I ran the tips of my fingers over his well-defined chest. He reached into his jean pocket, pulled out his phone, and turned it off.

“Do you need to answer that?”

“I need to kiss you.” He lowered his lips to mine and we kissed like we’d been kissing each other forever.

Our night was spent in a blissful bubble of lovemaking, sleep, talk, repeat. I don’t know how long I slept, or how many times we touched each other. It was as if nothing else in the world mattered except the safety of the cabin and me and Brett.

The next day was a continuation of the night before - laughter and lighthearted fun. I would work Christmas Eve and Christmas Day on patrol, so I had the day off to play.

Brett was charming and genuinely kind. He helped a couple from Mississippi get settled on a double snowmobile. They’d come in on a cruise ship and had always wanted to go snowmobiling on a glacier.

At first glance, I had nothing to complain about. But the reality of who he was, along with my past, precluded any potential future I had with him. That thought started to make me grumpy. By the end of the day, all I wanted to do was go home and be alone. I wanted him to leave. I was ashamed of my thoughts. Brett had been nothing but pleasant and kind all day. I didn’t want to want him.

On the way back to my cabin, he held my hand and drove with the other. He sang along to the country music playing on

the radio. It was one of the only stations with enough frequency to cut through the winding mountain passes.

His phone rang. He let go of my hand, grabbed it from the console, and hit the end call button.

I fidgeted in my seat. “You keep ignoring your calls. Should you answer?”

He glanced at the phone and then at me. “Nah, it’s just the team doctor. I’ll call him tonight. Are you okay?”

The moment was getting closer. He would soon know who I was.

I stared out at the darkness passing by me, seeing only my reflection in the side window. “I’m fine.” I said softly, embarrassed by my outburst.

When we got to my cabin, Todd was staring out the window, waiting for us. His tail was wagging.

Brett turned off the ignition and sat quietly in the cabin of the truck. “Elizabeth, you know I need to leave tomorrow.”

“I know.”

He turned in the seat. “I’m going to Jackson Hole to spend the holiday with Mia and John, and then back to Seattle. We have a game in a few days.”

I nodded.

He reached for my hands. “Come with me.” His face was like granite, chiseled by the porch light shining through the darkness. “Spend Christmas with me and my family.”

“I can’t. I already told the patrol I would cover the shifts for someone else.” I pulled my hand back.

“Then come after. Meet me in Seattle.” He smiled.

I was tempted.

I opened the door to get out. I laughed to diffuse the seriousness of the conversation. “We both know what this was, Brett. Don’t feel obligated to keep things going.” I stepped out, shut the door, and headed up the steps to my cabin.

He stepped out of the truck, slammed the door and followed me in the cabin. “Don’t you want to give us a chance to find out if there’s something more between us?” He asked, almost angrily.

“Brett, it’s just not realistic. I live here. And you have a very busy schedule coming up.” I kept my voice flat, trying not to get emotional.

He took off his goose down jacket, hung it on the hall tree, put his hands on his hips and glowered at me. “So, you want to just pretend this didn’t happen? Thanks, have a nice life?”

“I’m not going to pretend this didn’t happen. I just don’t want you to feel obligated to continue.”

His eyebrows jumped on his forehead. “Obligated? I like you.”

I put my fingers to my temple. “I like you too, but, logistically...” His phone rang again. I sighed. “You should answer that.”

It continued ringing. He stepped towards me.

I crossed my arms and nodded at his pocket.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” He jerkily pulled his phone out. “Barringer.” He opened the front door, stepping out into the cold to talk.

I tried not to cry. I sat on the couch and waited. I was pretty sure it was Ryan calling. In a few minutes, he would have a lot of questions.

I could hear his deep voice through the door, but not the words. I waited. There was a long silence and then the door handle turned.

He shut it quietly. When he turned to face me, he was silent. He simply stared at me.

“Everything okay?” It was a dumb question. I could tell by his face it wasn’t.

“Well, besides being a doctor,” he said bitterly, “it seems

you left a few other things out the other night.”

My heart raced. I crossed my arms in front of me. “Such as?”

He crossed the room and stood in front of me. “Here I am, thinking you’re just a normal girl, working as a doctor in a small town, but you’re not, are you?” His tone was one of betrayal, hurt. He was frowning at me.

“I didn’t owe you any explanation.”

“When we first met, maybe not. But you knew I would find out.”

He had me with that. I knew that Ryan would bring it up as soon as they talked.

He continued, “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I just didn’t want you to know.” My eyes watered. “Maybe I was just waiting for you to leave so I could avoid the conversation.”

His head reared back. He blinked his eyes. “Wow! So that’s how this is?”

My anger rose. I stood so I was more even with him. “You blow into town, profess love to someone you don’t even know, and I’m just supposed to open up my soul and share my whole life with you? That’s not fair.”

“Maybe not your soul, but as soon as you knew who I was, what I did for a living, it might have been a fun conversation to have. Who we might both know, and the world I live in.”

The tears pooled.

He stepped back and put his hands back on his hips. “Oh, I get it. It’s *because* of who we might know. Okay.” The corners of his mouth turned down in a frown. He nodded, realization dawning. “And it’s why you don’t date hockey players.”

“It’s not an experience I want to repeat.”

“You use up your hockey player allotment? I would’ve

never taken you for a rink bunny.”

His words felt like a slap.

“I wouldn’t have thought you would.” I crossed my arms.

He raised his voice. “He cheat on you? Break your heart? Blah, blah, blah?”

I inhaled sharply. “Something like that.”

He leaned towards me and sneered. “Get over it. Shit happens.”

“And this is supposed to endear you to me?” I frowned.

“Let me tell you somethin’ darling, any man can cheat. Any *woman* can cheat. That’s not who I am. And it isn’t who I will ever be. I may have come at you in a very unconventional way, but I’m a good guy.”

He stepped closer to me. He grabbed my cheeks in his hands and said, almost as if the words pained him, “I’m not joking when I say this, so hear me well. I’m not him. Don’t throw away a future with me because of a fucked up past with him.”

The tears overflowed. One dropped down my cheek.

He brushed it away with his thumb. “I know you, Elizabeth. I can feel you’re part of me. I knew as soon as you came back to the hospital that I would cross the planet for you.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“Tell me who he is.”

I shook my head.

“Tell me.”

“Does it matter?” I choked and pulled his hands away from my face.

“Yes!” He dropped his forehead to mine. “Because he’s keeping me from you. Woman, I adore you.”

I could barely choke out the words. “I need you to leave,

Brett. I don't want to continue this with you. I don't want that life."

"You can't be serious."

I stood. "Please."

He chewed on the inside of his bottom lip. I was the first to look away. Then he stepped back again. "I'll leave. But only because I have a game in three days. And if I don't get back, they'll suspend me again."

"I understand."

He guffawed. "No, I don't think you do." He put his hands on his hips and paced. He stopped. "Elizabeth." He rubbed his hands over his face and then resumed pacing. "What am I going to do?"

I couldn't help him. I didn't even know how to help myself. I didn't have the mental energy to allow myself to fall in love again. And I knew that if I fell in love with Brett, my heart would never repair itself.

I went to him. I stood in front of him so he would stop pacing. "Please, Brett. I can't do this with you. I can't give you what you think you want from me." I turned and stepped towards the door. I opened it. "Please."

He didn't budge.

I tried not to cry.

He whispered, "Don't do this."

I opened the door wider. Todd sat at my feet looking from him to me, and back again.

When I didn't respond, he walked towards the door. Before leaving, he leaned down and kissed me. I needed him like I needed to breathe. But I couldn't take the risk. I stepped back and choked out, "Good-bye."

He grabbed his coat from the hall tree, turned, and walked away.

Chapter 10

MY HEART SHATTERED. I cried myself to sleep that night. No one called me. I had no one to call. The loneliness I'd been masking for the past three years rose up and hit me like a brick.

Sometime in the middle of the night, I woke to the sound of a jet. I stared at the ceiling, imagining him at the small regional airport down the street.

I imagined him all bundled up, his duffle bag slung over his shoulder, a Seattle Kraken beanie on his head, standing on the tarmac, waiting for the steps of the airplane to descend.

I rolled to my side and checked my phone for messages. Nothing. Twenty minutes later, the roar of jet engines flew back over my cabin. He was officially gone. I cried some more.

The next two days, I showed up for patrol duty, smiled, and did my job. When I first moved to Alaska, working two jobs had helped keep my mind from wandering. It had also surrounded me with people that I didn't really need to get close to. Now, it seemed like a chore. Gray and monotonous.

On Christmas day, the ski runs were almost overflowing with families. To the children's delight, Santa made a visit on his sleigh, pulling up right in front of the tram, as if magically appearing from above. Brightly colored packages that had been wrapped by the resort staff, overflowed the over-sized red velvet bags.

Thomas, Margo, and I stood next to the sleigh, helping to hand out the gifts. A cacophony of "Me next!" and "Santa, over here!" surrounded us.

Margo whispered to me, "Gah, can you imagine having kids?"

I laughed softly at her youth. I thought of Brett. His children would be absolute terrors. And probably full of love. I didn't respond to her rhetorical question.

My phone pinged in my pocket. My heart raced. I looked at Thomas. "I'll be right back."

I stepped away and pulled my phone from my pocket. Mom. "Uh." I sighed heavily. I inhaled again, and exhaled heavily, puffing out my cheeks. Might as well get it out of the way. I stepped away from all the children. "Hi, Mom."

My entire family chorused, "Merry Christmas!"

My gut clenched. "Hey, everyone."

My younger sister, Amy, chimed in, "I've redecorated your condo. You're going to have to sell it to me now."

I put my finger in my left ear so I could hear them better. "We'll see."

"It's not like you need it."

"Amy!" My mother chastised. "Elizabeth, we are missing you today."

My older sister, Amanda, said, close to the phone, "I miss you, Lizzy."

My throat closed at the use of her nickname for me. My eyes were hot. "Uh-huh. I miss you guys too."

Sounding far away, my dad shouted. "There's a full stocking here for you."

I said a little louder, so he could hear me, "I'm a little old for stockings Dad."

"Then I'll eat the candy." He echoed in the distance.

I laughed, "Ok, you do that."

My mother added, "How's your day, dear?"

"Can you take me off speaker, Mom?"

"Of course, dear."

I went into the resort, stepping into the same quiet corner I'd dragged Brett into. "That's better. Thank you."

"How are you really, sweetie?"

"I'm fine, Mom. The resort is always crowded at

Christmas. I'm glad I'm here."

She was silent. I continued, "I'm having dinner with some of the other orphans tonight."

"Orphans? Is there an orphanage up there?"

I laughed. "No, Mom, it's called an orphan Christmas. It's when everyone who doesn't have family gets together and has dinner together."

I heard her sigh heavily. Here it comes - the weight of duty and expectation.

"Elizabeth, I want you home for Amanda's engagement party in February. I'm over this childish behavior of yours. You are a grown woman. A grown, mature, intelligent woman. We all need to move on."

I was done fighting her. "Okay."

"We need to be a family and support her," she rambled on.

"I said okay."

"Okay?" She asked in disbelief.

I said flatly, "You've been telling me for weeks now. Do you want me to keep fighting you?"

She stumbled over her words. "Well, no, but you haven't acted like you would ever come home again."

A sense of finality came over me. Relief that I would be home for Amanda's engagement party, and that I could hopefully move on. I'd realized over the past few days that I was exhausted from carrying around all this pain. "Remind me when. Send me an email and I'll make arrangements."

"I'll have Amanda call you."

"Don't go that far. I won't answer her call. Just send me an email."

"Are you going to..."

I cut her off. "Mom, I'm coming. Can we just start with that?"

“We can start with that.” I could hear her gentle smile through her words.

“Okay. Well, I need to get back to Santa and his reindeer. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

We hung up and I rejoined the chaotic distribution of presents outside. Christmas at Alyeska suddenly seemed a little brighter.

*

The next few weeks flew by in a combination of anxiety and hope. The snow was still high in the meadows and falling frequently. But the hours of daylight were getting longer and I could spend more time outside. It was still dark when I went to work, but not when I left. And that made me happy.

My sister’s engagement party was on the Friday night of Valentine’s weekend. I made my plane reservations to fly in Friday morning and leave on Sunday. It was never easy getting out of Anchorage. I had to fly out on Thursday night in order to get to Colorado on time.

On the day of my flight, Thomas drove me to the airport.

Heat blasted from the vents of his early model Ford Bronco. “I feel kind of dumb for not knowing you had a sister. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrugged and stared at his profile while he watched the road. “I don’t know. I guess it just never came up.”

His tone was soft when he said, “Liz, I know you must know that...”

I cut him off. “Please, Thomas. I need you as a friend. Please don’t say anything.”

He clenched his jaw.

He’d come over on Christmas night after the orphan dinner. I’d had one glass too many of the highly spiked eggnog, and was feeling a little too uninhibited. And I’d been lonely. I’d flirted with him and he’d flirted back. When he’d

kissed me, I'd wanted to feel something, anything. I'd wanted to erase the mind-blowing, all-consuming kisses that Brett and I had shared. It hadn't worked.

I asked Thomas to leave before we went too far.

“Have you ever thought of me as something more?”

He had been a solid friend and partner on the patrol. As the patrol director, he was always accommodating my schedule at the hospital. And in return, I tried to help out when junior patrollers needed time off. I would be a liar if I said I didn't know. I had just chosen to not acknowledge his feelings. Because of moments just like this one. I didn't want to hurt him. I also didn't want to lose him as a friend, which I knew was unfair to him.

I turned a little more in my seat. “I do like you. You are the best friend I have in this town.” I sighed, searching for the right words. “But I'm a little bit broken and I... I don't even know what my future looks like.”

He jumped on my last statement. “Here. Stay here. Build a life here.”

Part of me felt angry. I didn't want to be pushed or confronted about my choices. I took a deep breath. “Thomas, please, can we not talk about this right now? I have a very long flight, and what will most likely be a very long weekend. Please. Let's talk when I get back.”

We drove the rest of the way in uncomfortable silence. The vibe in the truck had calmed a little by the time we reached the airport, making it easier to hug him good-bye. “Do you need a lift back on Sunday?”

“No, I'll get an Uber.”

He put his hands in his pockets, hunching his fleece-lined jean jacket up towards his ears.

I put my purse on top of my carry-on. “Thomas.”

He tilted his head to the left. “It's okay, Liz. You don't owe me any explanation. We can talk when you get back.”

I nodded solemnly, turned, and walked through the

sliding glass doors into the airport.

The flight to Seattle was a little bumpy, but nothing that bothered me. I tried to catch up on reading medical journals, but my mind wandered to Brett. The Kraken had been doing really well. And Brett didn't seem to be affected by his knee injury or the concussion.

I searched the news for any other stories of him. I searched for his Instagram account. It was easy enough to find through the Kraken team page. There was a post of him, John, Mia, Mia's brother, and a pretty brunette taken at Christmas time. They were under the antler arches in Jackson, Wyoming. The brunette was sticking out her tongue at the camera. The caption? "That feeling when your squad is your fam #squam." Clever.

Mia seemed fun. Brett was on the end next to his brother. His smile didn't reach his eyes. A pang of guilt hit me.

After changing planes in Seattle, I decided to try and get some sleep. It was almost two in the morning and my eyes were getting bleary. When we landed in Denver, the sun was bright on the Eastern horizon, the mountain peaks were still covered in snow, and I was disoriented.

After disembarking the plane, I cleaned up in the lady's room. I brushed my hair and my teeth. I washed my face and put on moisturizer with sunscreen.

My phone pinged with a message from my youngest sister. *I'll be there in ten minutes* Which I knew actually meant, "I've just left the house."

With a leisurely pace, I walked through the terminals instead of taking the tram, wanting to stretch my legs.

I waited inside the terminal until she texted me that she was outside. I put on my jacket, stepped outside, and immediately saw her smiling face through the front window of my old Lexus SUV.

She jumped out of the car, came to me and started to cry. "Elizabeth. You're actually here."

I hugged her tight. My bag slid down my shoulder and

rested at my elbow. “I’m actually here.”

She pulled back, looked at me, and then hugged me tight all over again. As she kissed my cheeks, I felt the dampness on hers.

She took my rolling carry-on from me. “Mom told me to take you straight to the house,” she said as she shoved it up onto the backseat.

“No, I’m staying at the Brown Palace.” I stepped into the car and shut the door.

I watched her run around the front. She scowled at me as she stepped in and buckled her seat. “That is going to piss her off.”

That comment put my hackles up. I had promised myself I would smile and be happy. I didn’t want my schedule mandated as well. If I was at the house, I would have no place to hide. I took a calming breathe. “She’ll get over it.”

She merged aggressively into traffic. “I could just kidnap you, ya know?”

I held on to the overhead handle. “But you won’t. Can you slow down? I haven’t had as much coffee as you yet and you’re stressing me out.”

She laughed. “Sorry about that.”

My heart squeezed from missing her. Amy had graduated from high school with a two-year college degree. She graduated from college after another year and a half, and then medical school at the same time as me. Much to the disappointment of my father, she now ran a public service, not-for-profit medical clinic. She made pennies but she loved the work. And her boyfriend worked for Green Peace, so they were both going to somehow change the world.

“You get to meet Mark while you’re here.” Her face lit up like sunshine.

“I’m looking forward to that.”

“He’ll be at the party tonight.”

“I’m looking forward to that as well.”

She chuckled. “No, you’re not.”

I shrugged and watched the Denver skyline get closer.

When we pulled up in front of the hotel, a valet came to help me. To Amy, I said, “Don’t get out. I’m going to try and take a nap and I’ll see you tonight.”

“Did you bring something sexy to wear?”

“It’s going to drop below freezing tonight.”

She scowled at me as she rested her arm on the steering wheel.

I added, with a sigh, “I brought something appropriate.”

“Now that’s frightening. Is it a scythe?” She tried not to smile.

I tried to remain serious. “No, they took that from me at security.”

At that, she laughed. She wiped a tear from her eye. “Oh my, I have missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too. I’ll see you tonight.” I shut the car door and waved at her as she drove away.

I managed to get a few more hours of sleep and spent the rest of the day in the salon getting my hair and makeup done. My hair was brushed back in a simple chignon. My makeup, too, was elegant and simple. I had been tempted to wear a black dress, but that would have been disrespectful to my parents.

Shortly before six, I ordered an Uber and dressed while I waited. I’d brought a copper velvet wrap dress. It had long sleeves and a high low effect, just showing my ankles. I’d brought a white cashmere wrap and a silver clutch to match my heeled sandals.

The Uber driver arrived and I spent the next ten minutes blowing air on my clammy palms.

The iron gates were open at my parents’ house, allowing

guests to easily drive through to the circular end of the driveway. When we reached the front door, a valet opened the door of the Uber for me and I stepped out of the car. “Miss,” he said.

I thanked the Uber driver and then stepped to the side of the driveway, into the shadows, to take a few calming breaths.

Every light in the house was on. The sun had set, forcing the landscape lights to turn on and highlight the professionally manicured yard.

I walked to the heavy wood double front door. A caterer opened it before I could knock with the brass knocker and invited me in. By the doorway, a waiter stood with a tray of champagne. I shook my head. “No, thank you.”

The house was full of people. Loud laughter reached me in the marble foyer. A string quartet played classical music in the living room. I spotted my sister at the same time she spotted me. She rested her hand on the arm of the man next to her. He turned in my direction. Amanda turned to the couple they’d been talking to. “Excuse us,” I saw her mouth.

Bile rose in my throat. It was too late now. There he was. The man I had wanted to avoid and could no longer do so. They approached me, holding hands.

I wanted to flee. I wanted to cry. Why couldn’t I escape this?

My sister dropped his hand and ran to me. “Lizzy.” I allowed her to hug me. When she stepped back, the man stepped forward.

He leaned in to kiss me on the cheek. “Lizzy.”

I choked out. “Hello, Clay.”

Chapter 11

THE LAST TIME I'd seen Clay was three years ago, in the Avalanche Corporate offices. I was packing my personal items.

He'd stood in the doorway, all dark Irish and broody, apologizing. I'd always thought we'd make beautiful children.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Lizzy." He put his hands in his pockets. "But I got hurt too. After all this, management traded me to the Bruins."

I'd tried very hard to keep my composure but couldn't keep from a little pettiness. "Oh, woo. Poor Clay." I continued shoving items into a box. "No one ever means to do anything hurtful, and yet you managed."

"It just happened." He stepped forward angrily.

"Did it have to happen with my sister?" My voice rose. I lowered it. "All the women, in every city, in every state, at every rink, and you choose my sister."

"I thought you and I were just having fun." He'd said, almost sheepishly. Embarrassment dislodged his anger.

I blinked rapidly and shook my head, trying to understand those ridiculous words. "Oh, my God. You said you loved me."

He put his hands out, opening his arms. "I mean, yeah. But like, you know, like, I love being with you."

How had I missed how vapid he was? I'd thought at that moment, that *exact* moment, as I stared into his pretty, stupid face, never again. Never again will I date a hockey player.

I stopped moving, my hands on the framed team photo I was about to put in my box. I released it, leaving it for the man I'd help select as my replacement - Dr. Ryan Robson.

On the verge of tears and exhausted from fighting, I said quietly, "What do you need from me, Clay?"

He'd stared at me for a few moments, our eyes locked

together. “I love her, Lizzy.”

I harrumphed.

He continued, “I’m *in* love with her, Lizzy.”

His words punched me in the gut. My heart squeezed. I put my forefingers to my temples. “Please stop calling me that. My name is Elizabeth.”

He’d just stood there, watching me pack.

“Is there anything else?” I asked flatly.

“She doesn’t want you to leave.” That’s not what I’d wanted him to say. My own sister. A piece of me had died with her betrayal.

I finished packing my things. I put on my coat, set my purse on top of the box and headed towards the door.

He stepped towards me, “Let me help.”

Weary, I side stepped him. “I can do it.”

I took all my belongings, packed them in my SUV, and drove to my condo.

I’d left the keys on the counter for Amy and taken an Uber to the airport. I’d left.

And now, here I was, as if no time had ever passed, staring at the source of my unhappiness.

Holding hands, Clay and Amanda grinned at me. Clay had cut his hair. It was now buzzed short. Still black, but definitely more respectable. Amanda looked bridal thin. Still strong, but much thinner than the athletic downhill skier she used to be. It was as if all she was eating was celery and the occasional hard-boiled egg. Her light brown hair was expertly highlighted honey blond. Her fake lashes confused me. She had never been the girly type. She had become a stranger.

“We are so happy you’re here.”

I couldn’t tell if she was masking her nervousness or if she was genuinely pleased to see me. Our fight had been a

little different than the one with Clay. More yelling. More tears.

I remained stoic, a watery smile on my face. “I’m happy I’m here too.” I said politely. I had dreaded this moment for so long. The beginnings of a fever dream closed in around me.

Amanda let go of Clay’s arm and hooked hers through mine. She escorted me into the main living area of the house. Clay followed behind.

A waiter passed by with a tray of mango shrimp. “Ma’am?”

I put my hand up, “No, thank you.”

Standing regally at the fireplace, my parents waved us over.

The fifteen-foot mirror above the mantel, flecked with gold, reflected the light from the elaborate crystal chandelier hanging above the sitting area.

“Elizabeth,” my mother exclaimed. “You made it.”

The guests’ chatter surrounded us. I noticed a few side eyes and quiet whispers from some of the men I’d treated as players. Clay may have been traded to the Bruins, but he still had many friends in Colorado. A few of the players waved and smiled. Others took a direct route out of my way.

“Hello, mother.” I kissed her cheek. My dad took me in a hug. “Dad.”

My mother addressed Clay and Amanda, “I’m going to sneak her off for a moment, we’ll be right back.”

Amanda said to my parents, “We’re going to continue greeting guests.” She turned to Clay, beaming, “And then I think you want to formally announce, right?”

Clay wrapped his arm around her and kissed the top of her head. “I can’t wait.”

I almost vomited. My gag reflex caused my breathing to rapidly increase. I turned back to my mom, “You wanted to talk.”

“Yes, come to the study with me.”

She turned on her heel. I followed dutifully behind her.

We moved towards the front of the house again, and then down a hall to the right. My dad’s study was dark and smelled of leather. Triple crown molding gleamed at the ceiling. Wood paneling made it look like a British gaming club.

I sat on the arm of a burgundy leather couch.

My mom came to me. With two hands, she grabbed my face, “Elizabeth.” She kissed my cheeks. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

I put my arms around her. She dropped her hands from my face and pulled me towards her. “It has been so long. I wish you hadn’t stayed away for so long.”

“I’m glad I’m home too.”

She stepped back and crossed the room to sit in a Queen Anne chair. She crossed her ankles and sat primly with her hands in her lap. “Now, I want to make sure you aren’t going to cause any trouble for Amanda.”

Sucker punch. “What?”

She didn’t move. “It’s just that they’ve waited a long time out of respect for you, and I don’t want you making this difficult for them.”

I stood. “Are you serious?”

“Do not raise your voice, Elizabeth.”

“For months you have been trying to get me home, begging and almost guiltting me into coming. I finally come home, and you have the audacity to ask me not to cause trouble?”

“I wasn’t sure what you had in mind. The fact that you haven’t ever come home is exactly what worried me. Why now? Why at their engagement party?”

“Wow! Well, for one, you asked me to. And secondly, you think it’s out of respect for me that they waited? Like I was the one holding up their beautiful nuptials?” My voice

was dangerously low. “Where was their respect for me when they were fucking in my condo?”

“Don’t say that word.”

“Oh, my god! *That’s* what you heard?” I started to leave the room.

“I’m not finished, Elizabeth,” she said calmly.

I stormed back to her. “I am. I’m finished. Do you know how many times she traveled with him when I was off rotation? How many times they were off in the golf cart here, when I had to go home early for work, after a family dinner?” I could feel my tears starting to fall. I was afraid I would hyperventilate. “That I had to find out about them because I caught them in the locker room after a game? Why bother? Why not just break up with me and give it some time. Neither of them has *any* class or *any* respect for me.” I clutched my stomach. “Oh, my god, I can’t breathe.”

“Elizabeth, sit down.” She rushed to me and guided me to the couch.

“This is why I never came home, Mom. I can’t bear to be in the same room as them.” I put my head back on the couch and stared up at the muraled ceiling. “I can’t stand to look at them.” She sat next to me on the couch. Tears fell from the corners of my eyes. “I don’t want to be here.”

“Elizabeth,” she said softly. “My beautiful girl. I know it hurts. And I know how hard this has been for you. But I wish you hadn’t run away.” I started to rise. She gently pushed me back. “No, you listen to me.”

I tried to relax. But pain, and disbelief that my own mother thought I would do something awful, had me tense.

She went on soothingly, trying to calm me down. “He was never good enough for you. And if you hadn’t run away, you would have given yourself time to see that. You are just now coming back, and all you remember is those last few weeks. The running from the pain. That’s all you remember.” My head spun as I tried to piece the events together. “If you’d

stayed, you would have noticed how perfect they are together. She adores him. And you were always too strong for him.”

I wiped at the tears. “That’s not what a woman wants to hear, mom.”

She chuckled softly. “In time, you would have crumbled under the weight of his vanity. You are too beautiful for your own good, but you’re smart Elizabeth. And it is going to take a very strong man to bring out the best in you.” I rolled my eyes towards her drolly. “Don’t look at me that way. You know I’m right.”

My diaphragm shook as I tried to relax after the tears. I tasted the salt on my lips.

Depleted of energy, I took a deep breath. “Are you finished trying to keep my potential crazy at bay?”

“I just wanted to talk with you before the party got too late.”

“No, you wanted to make sure I didn’t cause a scene.” I stood. “I guess I should get this over with.” I held my hand out to her. She took it and I helped her stand.

“Now, remember, no trouble.”

She walked away and I said to her back, “Oh my God, didn’t we just go over this?”

She laughed and kept walking.

Out on the patio, heat lamps stood next to standing cocktail tables, keeping guests warm as they ate and drank. But now, the guests were coming inside.

We all made a half moon circle around the happy couple. Part of me knew that they were perfect together. They fit. Not only physically - tall and athletic - but also silly. They laughed together. Often. I’d seen it even before I had wanted to admit what I intuited. I had never really laughed with Clay.

My father took center stage to introduce them. “Ladies and gentleman.” He tapped his champagne glass gently.

A waiter appeared over my shoulder with a tray of

beautifully stemmed champagne flutes, “Oh, thank you,” I whispered, plucking a glass from the tray.

My father continued. “I am very happy that you could all join us tonight for this beautiful celebration. We are especially grateful that Clay and Amanda could travel for this special occasion.”

A round of “Hoo-ahs!” went around the room.

“Especially since you have a game tomorrow night. Thank you for accommodating our humble family.”

A round of laughter.

My phone pinged in my bag. I ignored it.

“It is a lucky man who can raise three beautiful daughters.”

Around the room, “Hear, hear.”

My dad beamed. “It is an even luckier man who can give them away.”

Laughter.

He stood to Amanda’s left and looked at her. She leaned up and kissed his cheek. Then he looked back at the crowd of guests, “Ladies and gentleman, it is my honor to present to you, the soon-to-be Mr. and Mrs. McCarron.”

A round of applause. And then Clay started talking.

I had done my duty. I’d shown up.

Quietly, I retreated towards the circular staircase in the foyer. Gripping the heavy ornate railing, I climbed the plush carpeted steps.

My room was at the end of the hall. I opened the door and stepped into what was now a tastefully decorated guest room. The curtains over the sliding glass doors were open. Dim lights flickered on the ceiling – landscape lights reflected by the pool. I sat down on the silk duvet covering the bed and stared out the window.

All I wanted to do was go back to Alaska. But I didn’t

want to travel to Alaska, I wanted to be there already. At the same time, I no longer wanted to be there at all. It was no longer my hiding place.

I felt... weary.

A small voice said, "Elizabeth?"

I turned to see Amanda standing in the doorway.

"Can I come in?"

I looked back out the window. "Sure."

Her footsteps were soft as she crossed the room. She sat a few feet away from me, closer to the end of the bed. "I'm really glad you're here."

I turned to face her. She looked worried. I inhaled and exhaled before saying, "I don't want to be."

She simply nodded.

I looked back out the window. "It was really hard for me."

"I know it was."

I laced my fingers together in my lap and stared down at them. "Was there something you wanted?"

I heard her snuffle. "I wish I hadn't hurt you. I wish it had been different."

"I don't want to rehash this, Amanda."

"I know you don't. But I miss you so much. And I want to get back to being us again."

I turned my body towards her. "I always looked up to you. I always wanted to be around you. You were the stars and the moon to me. You said some really awful things to me before I left."

"I felt guilty." She scooted closer.

I laughed. "Why did you bother sneaking around as long as you did? How did you think this was going to end? You're my sister. Boyfriends are supposed to be off limits." I sat up straight so I wouldn't cry again.

Her voice rose. “I wasn’t being intentionally hurtful.”

“Then what was it? Jealously? No one does that to someone else unless they want to hurt them.”

“You were always so busy with work; he didn’t think he was important to you.”

My mouth dropped open. “I moved back to Colorado to be with him.”

“You made him feel inferior. You were always smarter than both of us. He felt carefree with me.”

I put up my hand. My stomach was in knots. “Stop. Just stop. Stop trying to make me the bad guy to justify your actions. I can’t help how he felt. And I certainly can’t help you. Own your own feelings.”

“Lizzy...”

I put up my hand again, and closed my eyes. I practically shouted. “Please stop. Please stop calling me that. You always use it when you’re trying to be cute, or get your way. Please. No more.”

She nodded. “Elizabeth, I love him. I loved him since the first time I saw him on the ice. You didn’t even know he existed. He played for our college team. We had a few mutual friends and I thought we would stay in touch when he was drafted. But we didn’t. When you brought him home, I thought my entire world collapsed.”

“I know all this, Amanda. Not that you loved him, but that you’d known him. Remember, at dinner that night, we laughed about how small the world was.”

She sighed, “I guess what I’m telling you is that I couldn’t have not loved him. He calms me. I know who he is under all that arrogance,” she paused, “and he gets me.”

Even though I had come to my own realization about the rightness of them, it hurt to hear her say it.

And talking with her was exhausting. “Can we be finished with this? I don’t want to do this with you anymore.”

My phone chimed with a text reminder.

She stood. “Sounds like someone is trying to reach you. I’ll go back to the party now.”

I nodded.

She continued, “I love you so much, Elizabeth. I hope that you’ll come to the wedding. I want you to be there. You don’t even have to be a bridesmaid.”

I opened my eyes wide.

“Unless you want to, I mean.”

“No, no. Nope. Nope. No, no.”

“Well, I hope someday you’ll forgive me. For now, I’m just glad you came.”

She quietly shut the door and I flopped back on the bed. I reached around for my clutch, opened it, and pulled out my phone.

I miss Todd

I smiled. What would someone flirty say in response? Since I had never been good at flirting, I didn’t respond. My heart fluttered though, and that made it really easy to leave the party.

Chapter 12

TWO THINGS I was happy to see - Todd and sunlight.

In the weeks since my return to Alaska, the hours of sunlight had lengthened, and Todd and I could walk farther into the backcountry.

Alaska had given me what I'd needed, when I'd needed it. Breathing room. But ever since visiting my family and finally being face to face with my sister and Clay, I'd felt both released and confined. I was glad I could start healing, but being so far away had me feeling isolated.

It had been hard to leave Amy. She was like a sweet puppy. Not so hard to leave Amanda. I had worshiped her growing up, but now I could see how selfish and immature she really was. She and Clay deserved each other.

Part of my heart still hurt. Mostly because I had been so naïve. Blinded by his looks and status, I had overlooked his vanity.

Brett's face, laughing on the snow-mobile popped into my head, and I shook it. Confident? Yes. Reckless? Possibly. Vain? No, he had no reason to be.

And then there was Thomas. Calm, steady, reliable Thomas. Had I been wrong not to give him a chance? No, not wrong. Not ready.

It was time for me to figure out where my place was. Where my home was.

"What do you think, Todd?" I asked him. We were out for a Sunday walk along the river. I threw a stick and he ran to get it. "That's what I thought. You don't care, as long as you can run."

Todd came running back with the stick in his mouth. His paws were wet. Dropping the stick in front of me, he circled once and prepared to run again. He panted. I threw it for him. "Get it."

He took off at full sprint, splashing in the crisp river

water.

Along the path home, a few trees still shaded patches of snow. A hint of warmth kissed the air. Not enough to go without a jacket. But enough to know that spring was coming.

My phone pinged with a text. I stopped just before my driveway to read it. *Hey there, I'm a very talented hockey player and I used to know a girl with the same name as you... are you, by chance, a really smart doctor?*

I smiled and responded; *I don't know any talented hockey players so I'm probably not the doctor you're looking for.*

I put the phone in my pocket knowing he wouldn't respond. Over the past few weeks, he'd been sending me texts. Just silly things, like, "my teammates want to know if you like me," and, "do you believe in love at first text, or should I text you again?"

I always responded with, "No"

When I rounded the corner, Thomas was sitting on my front porch. Todd had run ahead and was sitting at his feet. He stood and smiled when he saw me.

"Hey."

I smiled back. "Hey, yourself."

"I was hoping you were home."

"Just out for a walk. Trying to take advantage of a little more daylight."

"Pretty soon you won't be able to sleep at night for all the sun."

"I don't know if I will ever get used to these swings in daylight and darkness up here." I opened my front door. Todd ran in.

Thomas's face fell a little. Then he was behind me, following me into the house. "Have you eaten?"

"No. I was thinking about making soup tonight. Do you want to stay?" I hung my coat on the hall tree.

“Actually, I was thinking of watching the game tonight. The Kraken are doing really well this season.”

I gave him a side eye.

“I mean, he’s like our resident hero. He may not live here, but he certainly made an impact to the community.” He cringed. “And his stunt is a little hard to forget.”

“His donation to the patrol and the clinic was very generous.” I went into the kitchen and took a beer out of the fridge. “I’ll give him that much.” I unscrewed the cap and handed it to him.

Thomas took it from me, leaned against the counter and took a swig from the bottle. He watched me carefully as he said, “He liked you.”

I stared back.

He continued, “Anyway, his team is doing really well, and I thought you might like to join a group of us at Chair 5 to watch it on tv.”

Chair 5 was the local hangout for televised sports, burgers, and beer. It was where the locals went to escape the tourists.

When I didn’t immediately respond, he took another swallow of the beer and added, “It’s just a game.”

I nodded. “Okay. I’ll meet you guys up there.”

He looked like he wanted to lean in and kiss me. Instead, he put the beer bottle on the counter, shoved his hands in his pockets and said, “See you there.”

He let himself out.

A loud and rowdy crowd greeted me at the bar. Televisions hung from every corner, providing prime viewing from every angle of the bar.

“Elizabeth!” Margo exclaimed. “You made it!”

Tyler screamed at the television. “You’re tougher than that. Press ‘em, press ‘em.”

When the Kraken missed a shot, Tyler clutched his hair with his hands, making it stand on end, and groaned. “What the heck was that?”

Kate put her arms around him from behind, kissed the side of his neck. “It’s ok, baby. You would have made it.”

“Damn straight.” He muttered, reaching for her hand. He kissed the top of it.

Thomas stood and held a chair out for me. “I’m glad you came,” he said quietly.

I took off my jacket and he took it from me.

Margo gazed at my scarf. “The colors are gorgeous!”

I unwrapped it from around my neck and placed it over my coat on the back of the chair. “Thank you.” I sat down and nodded towards the screen. “Who’s winning?”

“Bruins. But only by one.” Thomas put his hand on my shoulder. “Can I get you something to drink?”

I rested my hands in my lap and turned only my head towards him. “Sure. How about an IPA?”

“Comin’ right up.” He stood and I turned my attention back to the television. But not before I caught Margo’s look of longing as Thomas walked towards the bar. I averted my eyes as quickly as I could, not wanting her to feel embarrassed.

Since returning from Colorado, the bubble of fog I’d submersed myself in had been lifted. I was noticing things I hadn’t before. Like Margo. And Thomas. And Tyler and Kate.

Thomas returned with my beer. “I ordered a plate of nachos and some hot wings.”

“Thank you.”

My attention turned to the game, and I found myself getting caught up in the action. This was something I never had trouble doing. The game was so fast. It was hard to keep up with the puck.

When the Kraken were still down by one in the third

period, Tyler stood and paced. “Come on!” he shouted at the television.

My leg was bouncing.

Thomas chuckled next to me. “You okay?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s just kind of tense.” I took a sip of my beer.

The Kraken scored and Tyler shouted, “Yes, one more. C’mon, one more.”

The players flew across the screen. My leg bounced even harder. Brett was shoved up against the wall, and I jumped out of my seat. “Stop playing with the puck!”

Quiet settled around the table. The rest of the bar wasn’t fazed by my outburst and continued their conversations. Margo, however, gaped at me and laughed. “Okay, Liz. A closet fan, I see.”

I sat back down and said sheepishly, “My sister is marrying a hockey player.”

Thomas leaned towards me. “I didn’t know that.”

I sighed. “It’s a long story.”

“I’d like to hear it.”

Despite what I had so clearly seen as unrequited affection on Margo’s face, Thomas and I had always been friends. “Okay. Maybe later.”

The game intensified, and the Kraken took the win. The bar roared with applause. Without a hockey team of their own, Alaskans were strong supporters of all the Seattle sports teams.

Once the excitement of the win mellowed, and the crowd began to thin, I stood to make my own departure. “Thank you for including me tonight. I had a lot of fun.”

Kate smiled up at me from where her head was resting on Tyler’s shoulder. Her eyes were glassy from one too many beers. “You’re welcome, Liz.” She hiccupped. “I mean, Dr. Cain.”

I smiled at her. "Liz is fine."

She gave me a thumbs up.

Thomas stood and helped me with my coat. "I'll walk you out."

Outside, the noise from the bar was muffled. A chill had crept back in to the air. I wrapped my scarf around my neck and tied it snugly.

"Thank you for inviting me. It felt good to get out."

"Of course."

We stood awkwardly staring at each other. Thomas shoved his hands in his pockets. "I didn't see your name on the schedule for patrol next weekend."

"No, I'm working on an article for a medical journal. Stretching for skiers." I shrugged. "They only gave me two weeks to send it in."

"I know we haven't talked much since you've been back from Colorado..." he left his statement open ended. When I didn't say anything, he added. "I don't know if things have changed for you, but I would still like to see you. Maybe take you to dinner."

I had no reason to say no. "I'd like that."

"Friday night?"

"Friday it is."

"And I promise, I won't keep you out late. I know that article is important to you."

I double clicked my key fob to unlock my car door, opened it, and said, "I'll see you Friday."

Gently, he shut my car door behind me and I drove home. Thomas was peaceful and kind. I was looking forward to dinner.

As expected, Todd was waiting for me at the window. He was the best gift I had given myself when I moved here.

I had just settled into bed when my phone pinged with a

text. I turned on the lamp.

Is it thawing in Alaska?

I smiled, reached for my reading glasses on the nightstand, and put them on. Was he talking about my heart, or the snow?

Instead of answering, I congratulated them on the win.

The dots bounced on my screen almost immediately, then stopped.

Then, *Were you here?*

I could almost feel him wanting to crawl through the phone and shake me.

Tonight, I wanted to respond with more than “No.” I snuggled under the covers, pulled the comforter up to the middle of my waist, and rested my elbows at my side. I held my phone over my chest and texted, *Watched from the bar*

And?

I laughed. Interesting that he was looking for a compliment. Part of me wanted to impress him. Part of me wanted to cut him down. I responded, *You have great flow, but you spend too much time around the red line*

His response came fast. *I'm looking for breakaway passes*

I typed quickly, *And the other team knows that. You're neglecting your defensive end*

Moments passed before his next text came. *Can I call you?*

Was I ready? I'd hated how things had ended, but I'd honestly thought I would never hear from him again. If I said yes, what did that mean?

It's just a phone call, I reminded myself. Nothing more.

Then my mind went racing back to the winter solstice. It had felt like more back then. Had I imagined our connection?

My fingers hovered over the letters. I typed, *Yes*, and hit send before I had the chance to regret it.

Moments stretched. Was he reconsidering?

And then it rang.

I put my phone to my ear and answered. "Hello."

"Hello, Elizabeth."

I hadn't imagined our connection. It came washing back like a tidal wave, surging through the phone, and wrapping itself around me. That voice.

"Congratulations again on the win," I said.

"Have you been watching the games?"

"Honestly? No."

He laughed. "Ouch! I'm hurt."

"Doubtful." The line was quiet. "Brett?"

"I'm here."

"Are you at the arena?"

"No. Home."

I closed my eyes. An inexplicable pull to him washed over me through the phone. I wanted him to be next to me, if only to feel another person. Someone to love me and tell me I was perfect. Just for them. I couldn't tell him that. I didn't really know him. I kept my question surface level. Opening my eyes, I asked, "Where do you live?"

"Bainbridge Island. On the water. It's beautiful. Have you been to Seattle?"

"Once. For a conference. It rained the entire time."

He chuckled. "Yeah, it does that. But the summers are beautiful."

I kept up the small talk. "You were traded pretty recently. How did you find a house so fast?"

I realized my mistake as soon as he laughed. "Doing research?"

"When you were here." I squeezed my eyes shut and then

opened them to stare at the ceiling. “For, you know, the medical stuff.”

Medical stuff. That was dumb. Elizabeth, stop talking.

He ignored me. “Elizabeth, I owe you an apology.”

My heart fractured just a little at his words. I closed my eyes again, thinking, please don’t be nice, please don’t be nice.

“For what?” I asked tentatively.

“I had no right to say the things I said to you the night I left. I was hurt, and I lashed out.” I heard him sigh before he continued. “I wonder if things have changed for you.” Both him and Thomas were asking that.

“Brett, I, um...” I stumbled. “It’s more complicated than just not wanting to date a hockey player.”

“I’m a thousand miles away now, Elizabeth. And you can’t see me. You might as well tell me.” When I didn’t immediately respond, he added softly. “Please, tell me.”

Tears welled in my eyes. I shook them free. And then I told him. I told him how my sister had known my hockey player boyfriend before me, but they’d never dated. “I hadn’t even known she knew him.”

“Does he still play?” I didn’t respond and he asked, “If you worked for and left the Avalanche, then he was a player. Who is it?”

I didn’t want to tell him.

“Elizabeth, I’ve already played them three times this year. We lost, but now I might just kick his ass.”

I quickly thought about what he might find on the internet. I’m sure if he dug deep, he would find it. But I also knew that Brett wasn’t that kind of guy.

“I’m not telling you who it is.”

“I might not know who he is, but one day, he’ll know I beat him.”

I laughed softly. Okay, maybe he was that kind of guy.

Some innate part of me was flattered that he felt like he should defend my honor.

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Brett. Truly. I’ve moved on. I went home for their engagement party a few weeks ago, and I’m over him.”

“I’m so sorry. That must have been really painful for you.”

At his sentiment, I did cry. Just a little, but enough that I had to snuffle. “Thank you.”

“So now what?”

“What do you mean, now what?” I yawned.

“Are you going to stay in Alaska? Are you happy there?”

Was I? I didn’t know. Suddenly, he felt like my best friend in the whole world. He felt like the safest person. I turned off my lamp and snuggled down farther under the covers.

Quietly, I said, “I don’t know. I ran here because it was far enough away that they couldn’t get to me easily. Now, I just feel isolated. I guess I need to figure out what I really want.”

“What *do* you really want, Elizabeth?” His voice was like caramel, thick and rich. It poured over me, in the darkness.

“To be happy, I guess.” I yawned again.

He asked, “Do you want me to come up?”

“Ask me tomorrow?” I said sleepily.

“Sleepy?”

“Mm-hmmm.” My eyes were already closing.

“Good night, Elizabeth.”

I clicked off the phone and fell fast asleep.

Chapter 13

BRETT CALLED FIRST thing in the morning. I was with a patient and he left a voicemail. “Do you want me to come up?”

In the light of day, I realized I was still terrified of my feelings. I texted him back, *It’s not a good time*

Thomas called too. Just before noon. “Still on for Friday?”

“Yes, sounds good.”

We agreed on 7:30 p.m. at my house.

The week crept by peacefully.

On Thursday, I received a phone call from Ryan, the Kraken team physician.

“Elizabeth!” he said exuberantly after I answered. “How are you?”

“I’m good. It’s been a while. How’s the team?”

I heard the horn of a ferry in the background. “Funny you should ask. I wanted to talk to you about a job.”

Dread crept up my spine. The walls of my office felt too constricting. “Hey Ryan, can I call you right back? I’m going to step outside. I just need a minute.” He agreed and I disconnected the call.

I grabbed my wireless earbuds and left my office. The sun was shining brightly. I wanted to breathe in the fresh mountain air.

I sat on one of the picnic tables around the side of the clinic, put my earbuds in and connected the Bluetooth. He answered right away. “Lord, did you travel to Russia? That took you forever.”

I closed my eyes and turned my face to the sun. “I needed a minute to get settled.”

“How’s Alaska?”

I opened my eyes and looked around. The sky was the

color of a shiny robin's egg. A soft wind rustled the cottonwood trees, their cottony substance floated in the air like snowflakes. In the distance, I could hear the river running, smashing over the boulders. I didn't lie when I responded, "Beautiful."

"Nice, nice." Wind swept over the microphone. "Are you happy up there?"

His tone was baited.

"What are calling about, Ryan?" I asked warily.

"I want to offer you a job."

"I'm not coming to work for the franchise. In answer to your question, I'm happy in family practice. I like the small-town work. I'm done with ortho."

He laughed. "Well, you stepped right into that one, because I'm not looking for a team physician."

Again, panic. Slowly, I asked, "What are you looking for?"

"A partner."

He let it just sit between us. Equal parts hope, and anxiety filled me. A partner. I had to assume it was in his practice, but I needed to hear him say it.

Tentatively, I asked, "In?"

He laughed. "My practice. I need someone I trust. And you just said it yourself, you're happy in family practice."

A partner. That's the dream job. In a small town. My own practice. Life wouldn't get much more perfect than that.

When I didn't immediately respond, he rushed on, "You're good, Liz. I wouldn't ask if I didn't really want you here. We're getting a lot of new patients. Kids, and adults. The community here is growing with tons of new money and athletes wanting to be close to Seattle, but not too close."

A hot flush of embarrassment rushed through me. And then, anger. "Seriously, Ryan? That's the bait? How much did he pay you to offer me this job?"

“What?”

“Barringer. How did he convince you?”

“Uh, I don’t know what you’re talking about, Liz. Are you referring to Brett?”

I stood from the picnic bench and almost spit the words. “Of course, I’m referring to Brett. I thought he was just being flirty, but now I see he’s a manipulative ass.”

“Elizabeth, what does Brett have to do with you? I don’t know what you’re thinking, but Brett had nothing to do with this.”

“I don’t want the job. Thanks, Ryan. Take care. I’ll call you when I cool off.” I hit the end call icon and dropped my phone in my lab coat pocket.

Then I took it back out and sent a text to Brett, *You went too far. Do not try and manipulate my life through my friends*

I couldn’t see straight from the tears that threatened to fall. Inside, I kept my head down, took the steps at a brisk ascent, and shut the door to my office behind me. Then I let the tears fall. It was just too much.

My phone rang. Brett. I let it go to voicemail.

Then a text. *Elizabeth, I don’t know what you’re talking about*

I sat down at my desk, blew my nose, and calmed myself before listening to his message. “Elizabeth, it’s Brett. I have no idea what you’re talking about but I have to imagine, based on your text, that you are hurt. Please call me. I never want you to be sad or hurt or upset with me. Please call me.”

That brought on a fresh wave of tears. I grabbed my bag and my coat and left for the day. Rebecca looked up at me in confusion as I approached her desk, and stopped to tell her, “Please cancel my appointments for the rest of the day.”

“Are you okay?” Her eyes were wide.

“And please cancel tomorrow as well. I’m not feeling very well and think I’ll take the day off.”

She said softly, "It must be allergies. You should get some rest."

I gave her a wry smile. "Must be allergies."

"Have a good night, Dr. Cain. I'll take care of your patients."

I drove the few miles to my house, dropped my coat and bag on the floor, kicked off my shoes and went into my bedroom. I took my pencil skirt off and dropped it on the floor. The last thing I did before I crawled beneath the covers on my bed was to turn off my phone. I would start over tomorrow.

*

I woke at 4 a.m. and stared at the ceiling. I must have been exhausted to have slept that long. Maybe it *was* allergies. Nope. I was emotionally drained.

I battled with myself as to whether I should turn on my phone. The professional side won. I shouldn't miss any work calls.

When it finally turned on, it pinged with multiple missed message alerts. The first was a missed call from Brett. No voicemail. The second was a missed call from Thomas. A voicemail. I would listen to it later, since I knew it was probably about our date tonight. The third was a missed call from Ryan, and a voicemail.

I checked my text messages. Brett. Three of them.

Elizabeth, something happened and I don't know what it is. Please call me

Beautiful girl, please tell me what I did so I can fix it

The third was from just after midnight and had a lighter, funnier tone. With a hint of frustration.

It's clear now. And I don't know whether to come up there and strangle you or come up there and kiss you senseless. You'll figure it out soon. I'm going to have to figure out how to earn your trust. I'll think of something

A sense of dread filled me. I'd missed something. I

listened to Ryan's message. All he said, laughter lacing his words, was, "Call me. You misunderstood."

I pinched my forehead with my thumb and forefinger. I needed coffee for this.

After preparing my coffee and opening up the front door to let the spring air flow through, I settled down on the couch and waited for a reasonable hour to call Ryan.

The cool air soothed me and I ended up falling back asleep. Shortly after 8 a.m. I woke again. My coffee had gone cold, and Todd was staring at me from the floor. "Thanks for protecting me. Can you give me a few minutes to take a phone call, then we can go for a walk?" his ears perked and his tongue lolled.

I patted his head, grabbed my cell phone from where it had fallen to the floor, and called Ryan.

"Elizabeth!" he answered after two rings. Chuckling, he asked, "Do you want to talk about the job now, or apologize?"

I curled up in the corner of the couch and held my cold coffee on the armrest. I would drink it anyway. "Let's start with an apology."

He laughed. "It's not really necessary. But I did find it curious."

I sighed heavily. "Brett was..."

What was he? Charming? Kind? Funny? What was I supposed to tell Ryan that would explain my behavior.

"Elizabeth, listen, I've known you for a long time. And I know what Clay did was pretty awful. It was hard not to hear the talk in the locker room."

"Did you tell him?" I took a sip of my coffee.

"Who, Clay? God, no. Not my place."

"No, Brett. Did you tell Brett that it was Clay?"

"I didn't tell Brett anything about Clay. After you hung up, I called and asked him what happened in Alaska. I told him I'd offered you a partnership and that you blamed him for

setting my offer up as an attempt to get you to Seattle for him.”

He paused for a moment, waiting for me to talk. When I didn't immediately respond, he went on. “Liz, I know you're hiding up there. My offer was genuine. Don't let whatever happened with Brett cloud a good opportunity.”

I sighed again. “The offer is real?”

He clucked his tongue. “A hundred percent.”

“Can I think about it?”

“Of course, you can. But don't think too long. Please.”

“Okay.”

“And for what it's worth, Brett's a good guy. He's not Clay.”

I nodded, then remembered he couldn't see me. “I'm getting that.”

“And now that we've got that all figured out,” he chuckled, “how did that happen anyway?”

I uncurled my legs and stood. “None of your business.”

He laughed, “I like him for you.”

“He's very pushy.” I took my mug to the sink.

“He's a really good hockey player.”

“He's arrogant.” I rinsed the mug and put it in the drying rack.

He laughed again. “No. Confident. Seriously, Liz, you two are a lot alike. He's just as committed to his job as you are. I've never met someone, other than you, who is so defined by their work. And not their looks.”

“Whose side are you on?” I teased as I stared out the window into the forest behind my cabin.

“Mine. But I'll root for the two of you, anyway.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Okay, Ryan. I gotta go. I'll

think about the partnership and let you know in a few weeks, okay?”

“Few weeks, no more.”

I agreed and we hung up. I knew I owed Brett a call or a text but I didn't have the courage to do it. Instead, I took a walk, read a book, took a nap, and got ready for my date with Thomas.

He smiled big when I opened the door. “You look beautiful.”

A feeling of shame ran through me. He looked neat and handsome. His dress shoes confused me. If he had ever worn them before, I guess I hadn't noticed. They seemed out of place on him. Or maybe it was that they seemed out of place for Alaska.

I wore a wool dress with knee-high boots, and I'd pulled my hair back in a low ponytail.

I shut the door behind me. “Thank you.”

He held his hand out for me and helped me down the stairs.

We drove to a small, quirky little restaurant in town, famous for Cajun style cooking and steaks. Our table sat in a room that looked like a greenhouse, all plexiglass walls and ceilings. Dimly lit lamps gave it a romantic outdoor feel, while still keeping us warm and comfortable.

Thomas held out my chair for me as we sat. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” He took his own seat. “Should I order a bottle of wine?”

“Yes, thank you,” I responded, stiffly.

After the waitress left our table, he said, “Liz, this doesn't have to be weird.”

I dropped my shoulders and exhaled. “Is it that obvious?”

He let out a soft laugh, “Yes. And we're friends if nothing else. Why are you uncomfortable?”

I shook my head, and sighed. “I haven’t dated in a while. And maybe because we are friends, it seems weird to be on a date.”

“Maybe don’t think of it as a date. Think of it as a business dinner.”

“Kind of defeats the purpose of why you asked me out, then, doesn’t it?”

He smiled. “Whatever makes you more at ease works for me.”

The waitress appeared and poured two glasses of wine for us. “Do you need a few more minutes to decide on dinner?”

Thomas gave her a charming grin. “Yes, please.” She nodded and left our table. He turned to me. “Now, why don’t you start with what happened with you when you went home a few weeks ago. That seems to be the crux of all my problems.”

His attempt at sarcasm relaxed me. “Hardly, but ok.”

We spent the next hour talking about my family and his. The waitress returned at some point and we ordered dinner. Another glass of wine and I told him about Clay and my sister, and how I’d needed to get as far away from them as possible. That I couldn’t breathe around my family.

He listened quietly. His patience allowed me to share things I’d never shared with anyone. My hurt. My pain. My sadness. The feeling of being so disposable. I found myself crying and he handed me a tissue from the inside of his suit pocket.

“I just felt so alone,” I sniffled.

His eyes were sad. He reached across the table and wrapped my fingers in his. “I’m really sorry, Liz.”

“It’s getting better.”

He smiled wanly at me. We finished our dinner and he drove me home.

Cool, crisp evening air, and a clear, starry sky. The setting as he walked me to my door was perfect. Tree branches,

ruffled by the light breeze, scratched at the roof over our heads.

Thomas was taller than me. A few inches shorter than Brett, and leaner, but tall enough that I needed to look up at him.

He tilted his head, searching. I leaned towards him, giving him permission to kiss me. With a soft touch, he reached out and held onto my upper arm, pulling me a little closer.

My breath quickened. Excitement? Nerves? I waited.

When his lips touched mine, they were soft and tentative. I waited. He waited. When he tilted his head to take the kiss deeper, I kissed him back.

I waited to feel something. Some spark that would tell me Thomas was my destiny. That Alaska was my destiny. But I knew it wasn't. I choked on a cry, and he stopped kissing me.

“What? What? What happened?”

I just started crying. “I’m sorry, Thomas. I’m so sorry. I just can’t.”

He rubbed my arm and pulled me to him. Brushing his palm over the top of my head, he said, “It’s him, isn’t it?”

“I’m so sorry, Thomas. Maybe now I understand a little of how my sister felt. Like I don’t have a choice in who I love. That in not making any sense, it makes perfect sense.” I just kept repeating I was so sorry.

“Shhhh.” He pulled back and took my face in his hands. Then he laughed. “Good lord, you’ve got it bad.”

I groaned. “I don’t want it bad.”

He laughed and hugged me again. “I think it’s too late.”

I rested my forehead on his chest and whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

When we pulled apart, he asked if I wanted him to come in.

“No, I think I need to be alone.”

He leaned forward and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll see you on the mountain.”

“I’ll see you on the mountain.”

And just like that, we were back to being friends.

His truck tires crunched on the gravel drive as he left. The sound of the engine became faint and the silence of the night settled around me. To my surprise, relief replaced my confusion between the two men. I didn’t know what I was going to do about it, but I would start with an apology to Brett for my behavior.

When I was settled in bed, I sent him a text, *I’m sorry*

What a mess I’d created. I was full of apologies tonight.

A text came back a second later. *I’m listening*

Chapter 14

I GROANED.

I don't why I had the idea he would be magnanimous about this.

Where would I start?

While I was pondering the apology, he texted me, *Can we facetime?*

I was so nervous. Instead of responding, I simply hit the video camera button. Feet into fire.

A moment later, his face appeared on my screen. In the background, it was dark. Lights twinkled in the glass behind him, reflections from the lamps in his house.

"Hello, gorgeous."

I willed myself not to tear up. "Hello."

"You seem sad." He plopped down on a couch, his head resting on a cream cotton back.

I lay down on my side, holding the phone close to me, my right arm tucked under my head. "No. Maybe. Embarrassed."

"Because you thought I had bribed Ryan to give you a job?"

"Yes."

His voice lowered. "Elizabeth, I would never do anything to hurt you. Never."

A tear leaked out.

"Dammit!" He sat up. "Tell me who hurt you so I can kick his ass right now."

I covered my mouth to hide a laugh. "So dramatic."

He leaned into the phone so I could see him better. "I don't think you really understand how much I want to be with you."

"You hardly know me. Shouldn't we date first?"

He guffawed. “First, that’s a waste of time. Secondly, we’ve already slept together.”

“It was hardly sleeping.”

His voice dropped a level. “It was so hot.”

We stared at each other through the phone. Before he could suggest it, I said, “No, I’m not having phone sex with you.”

He roared with laughter. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to.”

His eyes danced with glee. “See, you know me.”

I got lost in those eyes. They were so pretty.

He continued quietly, “Come visit, Elizabeth. Come to a game.”

“I need some time, Brett. The fact that I immediately assumed you were trying to work through my friends to get me to move to Seattle tells me I’m not ready to trust someone yet. I need some time to think about what I want. Without running from, or to, a man. I’m not ready.”

“I understand. I do.” He smiled sweetly at me. “Doesn’t mean I’m going to stop trying.”

My heart swelled. “I wouldn’t expect any less.”

“Goodnight beautiful. Sleep well.”

“Goodnight, Brett.”

I hung up, and then I slept peacefully for the first time in years.

The next morning, I vowed that over the next couple of months, I was going to do everything and learn everything I could about everything I had ever considered interesting. Well, not everything, but enough to hopefully fill the void in my heart and give my time in Alaska more meaning.

Skiing was now only available on the weekends, so I had evenings free again. I joined a book club, something I never thought I would do. And I taught myself how to make bread.

Every now and then I would get a text from Brett, *Come to a game*

I never responded. One day I would, but for now, that had to be enough.

Thomas had finally taken notice of Margo. I hung out with them a few times at the local bar. It made me happy to see them together. She seemed calmer, and he seemed confident. That was sexy.

I'd also called Ryan to apologize. He *was* magnanimous and laughed it off. "You should give me the same professional credit I gave you."

I could hear his smile through the phone. "Can we just pretend it didn't happen?" I said, on a small laugh.

His response was empathetic. "Liz, I'm sorry you never knew this, but the Avalanche traded Clay before you left. You could have stayed."

"I did know. He told me as I was packing my office. But it was more than that. I needed to get away from everyone. It was hard to even be in that building, let alone be near my family. It wouldn't have made a difference."

He sighed. "Yeah, well, you opened up a few doors for me, that's for sure."

"I'm glad."

"Which brings me back to the partnership. I owe you a lot Liz. And you're the best sports doctor I know. Plus, you already told me you wanted to move to family practice, so what do I need to chip away at to get you to join me?"

"Honestly, I'm seriously considering your offer. I don't want to leave this community in a bind though, so I need a couple of months to put out some feelers. Don't hold me to it, but know that I'm almost in."

His muffled, "Yes!" told me he'd moved the phone away from his mouth. "I'll have the lawyers start drafting up the contract."

I laughed. "I said I'm almost in."

“Almost. In. Same thing. Send me your terms, we’ll negotiate from there.”

When we hung up, a hopeful smile tugged on my lips. I wrapped my arms around myself and smiled optimistically.

One Friday night in May, I joined Thomas and Margo for dinner and a game of pool. Tyler and Kate joined us as well.

Thomas lined up his cue stick, aiming for a solid ball. “Pretty cool how the Kraken made the playoffs.” He hit the ball and stood upright. “One more game and they’ll have a real chance at the Cup.”

Margo sat on a bar stool next to me, holding a cue stick. She watched Thomas miss the shot. Turning her head slightly towards me, she asked, “Have you talked to him, Liz?”

A quick glance at Thomas told me he hadn’t said anything.

I tried to be as evasive as possible. “We talked a few times.”

Kate and Margo grinned at each other. Kate teased, “He so had the hots for you. What have you guys talked about? Is he coming to visit? Are you going to Seattle? C’mon, spill.”

I had worked so hard in college and then in medical school that I’d hardly had time for socializing. Most girls had avoided me, thinking I was too pretty and thus a threat to them. And honestly, I didn’t really have time for drama.

Before Clay, I’d had my older sister to talk to. But I could no longer confide in her. I wasn’t used to having these kinds of discussions with other girls.

Margo handed her stick to Tyler. “Take my turn.” Then sat down, facing me. “Yeah, spill.”

I huffed, laughing softly. “Uh, well, he kissed me outside the bar that night before Christmas.”

Margo slapped her hand down on the table. “I knew it!” She sat back, crossed her arms, and nodded slowly. “I knew it.”

I crunched my eyebrows together. “How could you know that?”

She shook her head and smiled. “You two were just so into each other at the bar.”

Kate added, “Yeah, I saw that too. Remember, I told you when we brought him in after his accident. You weren’t listening.”

Margo continued. “You were all leaning in to each other. You didn’t notice because you were all smitten.”

“I was not smitten.” I said as vehemently as I could. I tried not to smile, but couldn’t help it. “Maybe a little. But I didn’t want to be.”

Kate clucked her cheeks. “Happens like that. We get these men that act like boys, then we find we find out they’re really smart intellectually, but really dumb emotionally. We can’t win.” She looked longingly at Tyler. “We just have to love them.”

Margo added. “Yep. Just have to love them.”

Kate asked, “When are you going to see him again?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.” I couldn’t tell them about the partnership offer until I knew for certain that I had a replacement lined up. And that I was going to take it. For now, I just wanted to sit in this moment, sharing with these two women. “He keeps texting me to come to a game.”

Margo asked, “Are you going?”

“I haven’t said yes yet, but I want to. I feel like... yeah, I feel like I want to.” Saying the words out loud set butterflies fluttering in my heart.

Margo and Kate grinned again. Kate said, “Yep, you love him.”

The rest of the night passed just as it had. A lot of laughs, and a lot of public displays of affection between Kate and Tyler. Margo and Thomas were a little more reserved. But I imagine it was just because their feelings for each other were new and had been a surprise to both of them.

A few days later, we all gathered at the local bar to watch the final game of the Western conference playoffs. The Kraken were playing the Los Angeles Kings. This game would determine the Western Conference champions - and the Stanley Cup playoff team.

I wasn't surprised to see that the bar was packed. The pitchers of beer that dotted every table couldn't manage to stay even half full. Whenever a shot didn't make it to the goal, shouts, hollers, and groans of disappointment filled the air.

Then, Brett scored the goal that put the Kraken ahead. Everyone erupted into cheers, spilling their beer. The crowds in the stadium were on their feet.

My heart raced. I heard Brett's words, "You can feel them cheering for you." I wondered if he felt it now. I watched him intently. His scarred face, his eyes blazing with adrenaline.

The Kraken managed to hold off the Kings for the win. The bar exploded with applause.

I stared at the television, watching Brett circle around the ice, hoisting his stick in the air. He searched the crowd for someone, and for a second, he looked lost.

I realized he was searching the crowd for me. And I wasn't there.

I would go. I would make the plans and go. I couldn't stay away from him any longer.

When I got home that night, I was buzzed from drinking more beer than I was used to. And buzzed from realizing how desperately I wanted to see him.

I had just drunk down a large glass of water when my phone pinged with a text.

We're going to the Stanley Cup Finals

Now that I'd made up my mind to go, confidence had me teasing him. I responded, *Good luck*

I covered my mouth to muffle my laugh.

He texted back, *You should tell me you love me now*

Butterflies. Oh, this man. I wished he was here now, but was grateful he wasn't. The realization of my feelings for him overpowered me. I needed a few more days to sit with them.

Instead of confirming what he was asking for, I typed, *Why's that?*

He responded, *If we win the cup, you'll look bad, you should get out in front of it so I know you mean it*

I'd take my chances. He'd know soon enough. *What if you lose?*

Nothing. I waited.

And then, *Not gonna happen*

I smiled before sending, *I'll take my chances*

I wanted to torture him just a little bit longer.

He didn't respond to my last text. I was fine with that. I would start making my plans to go to the games in the morning.

The next day, all the tickets were sold out. I sat in shock at my desk staring at my computer screen. There were a few seats left for game seven but that was never a guarantee. One of the teams could win the cup without ever having a game seven.

I drummed my finger nails on my desk. There were a few for \$1,400 in the nose bleed section, and a couple for \$14,000 down close to the rink. Nausea rolled in my stomach. I had to do it. If I wasn't there, it would ruin how we started.

I typed in my card number and purchased one ticket. Ouch. I'd have a bag packed if game seven happened. First, I needed to get through this week and my patrol shift on Saturday.

The bars that week were packed for every game. I stayed home and watched them. The stress of watching him with my friends was too much. Todd and I sat curled up on the couch, every night. Red wine and nachos. That was always my good luck meal for home games. I thought it might still work.

Game six was in Boston. The Bruins. Clay's team.

I paced my small living room. Tonight, it was just red wine. The Kraken were ahead. All they had to do was keep the other team from scoring. The camera shot to my sister, sitting in the section reserved for players' wives and girlfriends. She was pulling her turtleneck up over her mouth - a tell sign she was nervous and didn't want to watch. I had seen that a hundred times growing up when one of us girls was getting in trouble.

Brett had the puck but was dancing around the ice. I started screaming at the screen. "Hand around. Christ, Brett!"

As if he'd heard me, he turned and made a pass with the backside of his blade. His teammate took the puck, but it was immediately taken back by the Bruins. Brett charged after him, preventing a score.

The clock was running out. The crowd was screaming. Brett and his teammate toyed back and forth with the puck. All they had to do was keep it away from the Bruins. The final buzzer sounded and the Seattle fans in the arena cheered. The Kraken were going to game seven. And I was going to Seattle.

Chapter 15

THE NEXT MORNING, I worked my last patrol shift. The snow at the bottom of the mountain had thinned to a dirty brown slush. The skiing on the top, however, was still worthy of a few final runs.

Most of the skiers were local high school kids getting out on the weekend. We were blessed to be able to have fun into May. This was the last weekend, and then the mountain would close to get ready for summer.

I was in the patrol room, getting ready, when Margo asked me if I'd made plans to go to the final game.

"I bought my game seven ticket about a week ago." I told her.

"Does Brett know?" She asked as she buckled her boots.

I put my heavy wool socks on. "No, I was going to call him when I got to Seattle. My plane leaves first thing tomorrow."

She laughed. "The game is tomorrow."

"I know, but I didn't want to miss my last shift." I stood to get my boots from my locker.

"Girl, were you always this responsible?" She shook her head.

"Yeah, kind of."

From outside the locker room, a deep voice asked, "Is she here?"

I heard Thomas's tentative response. "I think so."

I peeked around my locker door and witnessed Brett storming into the patrol office.

"Where's Elizabeth?" His eyes scanned the room.

I stared, wide-eyed, shocked by his sudden, and commanding, presence. One of the patrollers pointed wordlessly to me.

He maneuvered through the skiers and stood in front of me. He pointed his finger. “Now listen up. I have a real chance at the Cup this time. And if you think we have a chance at being together, you need to be there. Because if you think you might love me and you aren’t there, and we win, you’ll ruin it for me.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but only a squeak came out. I couldn’t believe he was here. Having just seen him on television last night, his presence felt surreal.

He continued, “And why haven’t you come to any of my games?”

I blinked.

He asked, “What’s wrong with you. Are you ok?”

All I could say was, “Why are you here?”

“Christ, woman! Enough of this. I want to be with you. That’s why I’m here. I’m tired of you putting me off. You’ll come to the game.”

Oddly, the he-man attitude, which I would have normally scoffed at, was kind of attractive.

“You came all the way here to tell me that?”

He put his hands on his hips. “Do you know how hard it was to get a corporate jet at such short notice?”

My voice rose with surprise. “You came straight from Boston?” My heart was squeezing with the realization of what he’d done for me.

“Yes, and if I don’t get back, I’ll get fined, so I need an answer.”

His hair was mussed. His T-shirt untucked from his faded jeans. The heavy boots were haphazardly tied. He looked like he’d traveled all night.

I glanced over his shoulder at Margo and my colleagues. Most of them just stared in shock and silence. But Margo had pulled her lips between her teeth to keep from laughing. Mostly because she already knew I’d made plans to come to

the game. But also, I knew, because she would think this was incredibly romantic.

“Brett...”

“Don’t Brett me!”

My mouth dropped open. I closed it. I whispered without laughing, “I can’t just leave. I have responsibilities here.”

He stepped forward and took my face in his calloused palms. “Elizabeth.” He sounded almost pained.

Adrenaline surged through me. Love for him filled my heart. Just as quickly as he’d grabbed my face, he dropped his hands, took hold of my left hand and headed for the door. I had to jog to keep up with him.

He was marching towards the hotel lobby with me in tow. “Brett, I don’t have any shoes on.”

He stopped briefly to look down, and then he scooped me up and carried me. When we reached the same alcove where I’d told him I wouldn’t date him, he placed me against the wall and held my face. “Elizabeth, this is it for me. I’m retiring after this run. Please don’t say no.”

I relaxed into him. A wave of peace and a sense of rightness settled over me. I put him out of his despondency, whispering, “I’ll be there.”

He looked momentarily confused. “You’re coming?”

I nodded. And then he kissed me. A deep, all-consuming kiss that told me he would never let me go. He pressed up against me, the hard length of him dizzying me, making me desperate to touch him. Memories of our time together tangled in my mind with the reality that we were in a public place.

Placing my hands on his chest, I casually pushed him away. “Not here.”

“You know I can’t stay. I have to get back to Seattle or they’ll bench me. I have to go.”

I held his hands. “I can’t believe you came here.”

He dropped his forehead to mine. And then kissed me

again. Quick. “Where are you staying?” Before I could respond he added, “Stay with me. Please stay with me.”

I nodded and he kissed me again.

He groaned. “I just want to keep kissing you.”

“Tomorrow.”

He kissed me again before I started laughing. “I need to get to work.”

“I can’t believe I have to go.”

He lifted me up and carried me back to the patrol office. “You did this to yourself.” I teased.

“Maybe I could stay for lunch.”

We stopped just outside the door where he put me down. “You need to go. And I promise, I’ll stay as long as you want me to after tomorrow.”

“Forever.”

I tilted my head. “That’s a long time.”

“It will never be enough with you.”

Hot tears blurred my vision. “Brett.”

He opened the door for me. “I know.”

As soon as everyone saw that we were smiling and the tension between us had dissipated, they all smiled back and said hello. A couple of them asked for his autograph, and he proceeded to sign helmets, jackets, lockers, anything anyone wanted him to sign.

When he couldn’t stay any longer. I hugged him, walked him out, and said, “I’ll see you in twenty-four hours.”

He pulled out his phone. “I’m texting you the address and key code. I have to be with the team all day and I might not be there when you land.”

I stared at his bowed head as he typed. “Do you want me to send a car for you?” He answered his own question. “Yes, I’ll send a car for you.”

How could I have ever thought he would be anything other than the decent, caring, loving man in front of me?

When he looked up at me, confusion swept over his features. “What?”

“Nothing.” I couldn’t stop the smile that grew on my face.

He shook his head and then pulled me slowly into a hug. “I told you. I told you you’d fall in love with me.” I didn’t respond. Only grinned. He kissed me again. “I really have to go.” Another kiss. “I don’t want to go.” Another kiss. I started to laugh. “Okay, I’m going.”

I stepped away from him. “You need to go.”

He started to walk away. “Text me your flight information so I can send a car.”

“I will.”

He ran back and gave me another kiss. “I love you. We’re gonna win.”

“Would you go?” I laughed and pushed at him.

One last kiss and he jogged away.

For the rest of the day, I couldn’t erase the grin on my face. I skied in a blissful fog of hope and happiness. When the last run of the day ended, the resort celebrated with a town barbeque and beer-fest.

I didn’t think anything could have ruined my euphoria, until I got home that night and my mother called.

My suitcase waited by the door, and I was finishing up the last of my dishes when my phone lit up.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Elizabeth, you have not been answering my calls.”

“I’ve been really busy. Sorry.” I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Amy tells me you’re finally leaving Alaska. That you took a job in Seattle. Were you going to let us know?”

Judgement and disappointment practically oozed through the phone.

I sat on my couch, put my earbuds in, and set my phone on the armrest. The mountain view through my living room window helped me feel a measure of calm.

“Elizabeth!” She practically shouted. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes, Mom. I heard you. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I’ve been really busy here trying to transition to the new doctor and I guess I thought Amy would let you know.”

“Well, these kinds of things should come from you,” she scolded.

I didn’t respond. I was tired of reacting to her. The silence stretched. Then, almost as if she knew I wasn’t going to react, she said, “You know, Amanda is going to be in Seattle for the game tomorrow night. You should call and congratulate her on Clay making the Stanley Cup Finals. It was a good trade to Boston for them, after all.”

She droned on and on about Clay and Amanda. Of course, it would give them something to brag about at the country club. “This will be his first trophy, you know?”

As if I didn’t. “Um, yeah, Mom, I knew that.”

Sheepishly, she added, “Of course.”

“Did you call for a reason, Mom?” I hated that we talked to each other like this. But the way we’d left things in Colorado hadn’t left much room for kind feelings.

“I thought...” She started again, “I thought that if you could make it, you might want to go to Seattle and support her.”

It was all I could do not to laugh.

I should tell her. Part of me wanted to keep this to myself a little bit longer, to keep my - whatever it was I had with Brett - to myself.

The other part, the little girl part that, deep down, still

loved her mother, wanted to give her some peace. “Actually, Mom, I am going to the game.”

She chirped, “Are you going with Amanda?”

Lie? Don’t lie? Don’t lie. “Actually, I have a friend that plays for the Kraken, and he’s invited me to watch.”

“Elizabeth, you cannot cheer for the opposing team. You can’t do that to her.” She practically screamed. I pulled an air pod out of my ear. “That will crush your sister.”

I put the air pod back in and stood from the couch. “Okay, Mom, you know what? We’re done. I’m done talking to you. You completely miss the point of everything. I didn’t do it *to* Amanda. I never do anything *to* Amanda. And yet everything you do and say seems to demonstrate that you have no regard for my feelings. Is it possible that I might like this player?”

“Are you punishing her?”

“Oh my God. I’m done, Mom. I’ll call you next week.” I hit the red phone icon, ending the call, and threw my air pods across the room.

I closed my eyes and took a deep calming breath. When I opened them, Todd was sitting at me feet, staring up at me. Panting.

“I want to be a dog. Your life is so easy, isn’t it?” He tilted his head in confusion. “I know. You just want to go for a walk, don’t you?” He bolted towards the door and did a circle. “Yeah, me too. Let’s go for a walk.”

When we returned, my heart rate was lower, my shoulders less tense. A sense of peace settled over me. I had tomorrow to look forward to.

Chapter 16

DECENT, CARING, AND loving was not how I'd describe the man that took the ice for the seventh game in the Stanley Cup Finals.

Up close and personal, Brett was a force on the ice. He was focused, determined, relentless. Knowing he was planning on retiring after this season, I was hyper-focused on his every move.

I'd arrived earlier in the day. It had been a quick drive and a peaceful ferry ride from the airport to his house.

A heavy wooden gate had opened at the end of a very long drive. From tall, wooden pillars that framed the gate, cameras angled down at the entrance.

The driver eased through the gate and we cruised slowly down the endless driveway. Finally, we came to a stop before a very secluded, very large house. It sat at the edge of the water, with a spectacular view of Seattle across the bay.

The driver had jumped out and opened the door for me. "I'll get your bags for you ma'am, and then I'll wait here until you're ready to go to the game."

"Thank you." I said, and he followed me to the door. I'd punched in the key-code Brett had given me and the doors swung open. The driver carried in my bags and set them just inside the door.

He shut the door behind him, reminding me to come out when I was ready.

I'd arrived with plenty of time to settle in, so I took my time looking around the upstairs of the house. It had an open floor plan. The kitchen and large eating area were on the left, while on the right was a spacious living area with a stone fireplace and big screen TV. A set of stairs descended to an unseen room; an area I imagined I would explore later. Plush, creamy cloth couches formed an L to the fireplace. Heavy throw pillows and jewel toned throws were strewn haphazardly across them.

To my left was a long hallway. I took my suitcase and rolled it behind me, peeking into doors along the way. Two guest rooms and a Hollywood bath were on the left. A guest bath and a den on the right.

At the end of the hall was an airy master bedroom that ran the entire width of the house.

The room was painted a charcoal, feathered gray. The bed had a heavy oak, dark chocolate frame. Gray and rich brown area rugs covered light oak flooring. On the ceiling, silver steel track lights turned on automatically as I entered the room.

I rolled my suitcase to the end of the bed and sat down on a leather loveseat facing the floor to ceiling windows. Heavy, velvet, blackout drapes hung at either end of the glass.

I'd opened the sliding glass door and stepped onto an expansive deck. Two chaise lounges faced the low afternoon sun. An umbrella shaded them. The water lapped at the beach below the house. Salt water scented the air.

After spending some time wandering through the upstairs, I'd cleaned up and dressed for a cold arena.

The driver jumped out of the car when he saw me come out the front door, opening the back door of the black town car for me. "Ready, miss?"

"Yes, thank you."

I'd settled in for the quick ferry ride back across the bay. Now, I sat one row back from the ice - my favorite place to watch the high-speed action - and marveled at Brett's talent.

After a cursory glance around the arena, I spotted my sister sitting behind the Bruins bench. She hadn't texted or called me, even though I was confident my mother had told her I would be here.

Ryan found me and offered club seats to the two individuals sitting next to me so he could sit with me. They were happy to take them.

I kept my eyes on the game, cheering on the Kraken alongside him.

Without taking his eyes from the ice or the game, he leaned in and said loudly, over the shouts of the crowd, “I’m glad you made it. I’m happy you’re here.”

“Me too.”

Then he looked at me and laughed. “Yeah, I’m sure you are.”

Going into the third period, the game was tied. The entire audience cheered on their feet. The arena was so loud, I wondered if I would go deaf.

At this point, the players were playing for the win. Skill and aggression kept the game moving at a very fast pace. I could hardly keep my eye on the puck.

Dancing and shifting across the ice, Brett reached in and stole the puck from a Bruins player. The crowd erupted.

In front of and behind Brett, two players approached, attempting to block him in. One raised his stick as if to steal the puck, but, as if in slow motion, hit Brett’s face instead. The force knocked his helmet off, and it rolled to the edge of the rink.

The other player came in low, knocking Brett’s legs out from underneath him and toppling him to the ground. His head smacked on the ice, where he lay prone.

A whistle blew. The crowd went quiet.

Ryan jumped from his seat. “I’ll be right back.”

I stood as well. “Let me come with you.”

He nodded curtly.

We jogged through the walkways to get to the tunnel. One of the television screens above the concession stands showed the other team doctors and the coach walk out onto the ice. They were putting Brett on a stretcher.

When we reached the Kraken dressing rooms, Ryan flashed his badge at the security guard.

“You have a badge?” The oversized human asked me.

Ryan quickly said, “She’s with me.”

After a cursory glance at me, the guard stepped aside and we rushed past him.

I heard Brett yelling, “I’m fine,” even before we reached him. He was on the stretcher, being wheeled into the medical room.

“You’re not fine. You hit your head and that could be one concussion too many for you to finish the game.” The assistant coach stood next to him as the doctors transferred him to the medical recliner.

Ryan entered the room and I stepped in beside him.

“Elizabeth!” He jumped up in all his gear. Crossing the room, he pressed his lips firmly to mine and stayed there for a full breath. Then he stepped back. “Did you see what happened? They totally sacked me.” He cursed.

“I saw.” I placed my hands on his arms and propelled him backwards. “You need to sit down.”

He obeyed, reluctantly. “I need to get back out there. Please tell them to let me back out there.”

He sat. His eyes turned down in despair. The doctor started his exam. He shook his head and said to Brett, “I’m not comfortable letting you go back out there.”

Brett leaned forward aggressively. “But you aren’t uncomfortable, either.”

The doctor looked at Ryan. Ryan looked at me. I battled with knowing what Brett should do and what he *needed* to do. He would hate me forever if I agreed with the doctor. But he wouldn’t be the man I loved if he couldn’t finish the game. No matter the outcome.

I stepped forward. To Ryan I asked, “Do you give me permission to examine him?”

The doctor turned to Ryan. Ryan nodded.

“Can you guys give me a minute with him?” I asked.

One of the trainers shook his head. Another’s eyebrows

flicked high up his forehead.

Ryan eyed me contemplatively and then jerked his head towards the door. Everyone cleared the room.

When we were alone, I stepped towards Brett and he spread his knees apart. Situating myself between his legs, I rubbed my hands over his sweaty head, moving his hair off his forehead. I murmured, "You shouldn't go back out there."

"I-"

I cut him off by pressing my lips to his.

When I pulled back, he continued. "I have to finish, Elizabeth. This is it for me. I've been traded twice and I don't have anything left." His voice cracked. "I want to be finished, but not like this. Not on an injury. If we lose, we lose, but not like this."

Tears welled in my eyes.

I stepped back. Shaking my head to clear it of bias, I looked around the room for a penlight. I found one in a drawer. Then I stepped back to him and said, "Look at me." I shone the light back and forth across his eyes.

"Good. Any ringing in your ears?"

"No."

"Stand up for me." He stood, towering over me in his skates. I had to step back to see him better. "Put your arms out to the side and close your eyes." He did as I asked and I watched him for any imbalances. "Good. Sit back down."

He sat like a little boy being punished. I stood in front of him. "Can you repeat these words after me? I. Love. You."

"I love you." He grinned.

The television in the locker room erupted with a score from the Bruins. Brett flinched and cursed.

I continued. "And I would never do anything to compromise my health or my future by doing something dumb like pretending I didn't have a concussion."

“Elizabeth...” he begged.

“Say it.”

“I don’t have a concussion. I feel fine. I wouldn’t lie to you. Tell them to let me back out there.”

I weighed the risks for another long moment. Then I nodded.

He jumped to his feet and almost ran to the door. When he got to the door, he turned and said, “Next time I’m that close to you, you’d better be naked.”

With a laugh, I said, “Go get the Cup.”

He was out the door in a flash. Ryan came back in. “You let him go?”

“I know it wasn’t my place, but he’s fine.”

“And if he isn’t?” He crossed his arms and leaned against the door frame.”

I simply shrugged. “He needs this.”

“You’re lucky I’ve got such a high opinion of you, Dr. Cain.” He pushed off and turned towards the ice. “Want to watch from the tunnel?”

I smiled, softly, “Yeah.”

From behind the plexiglass, we watched as Brett came at the ice with a vengeance. The announcers talked faster and faster. Brett and one of his teammates passed the puck effortlessly back and forth. The teammate took a shot and scored. The arena cheered. Once again, the game was tied.

The announcers commented, “McCarron couldn’t hold that one off, could he?”

“No sir. The Beauty is earning his name tonight for sure.”

“He has perfect flow. Maybe taking a moment off the ice has put him in the mindset to win.”

“To be fair, Kyle, I think the Bruins did him a little dirty tonight.”

“Bad call on the refs. But good for Barringer getting a

little time in the locker room.”

They continued to comment on the plays. Soon, they called out less than a minute on the clock.

Ryan turned to me. “Does he know?”

I kept my eyes on the game. “No.”

He laughed. “Why didn’t you tell him?”

“I didn’t want vengeance to be what fueled him.”

When he didn’t immediately say anything, I turned to look at him. He was smiling at me. “You love him.”

“Shhhh. The game’s almost over.”

He simply laughed.

The announcers called every second of the game now. I could barely hear my own thoughts over the roar of the crowd. The players were a scurry of color. To the untrained eye, it would be hard to keep up with the plays. To me, it was poetry. The Kraken constantly passed the puck in order to keep it away from the Bruins. Brett played back like he was going to attempt a breakaway.

The clock was in the seconds now, moving faster to the end of the game. I bounced up and down, nervously holding my fists to my mouth.

Five seconds. My eyes darted from the ice to the clock. The announcers’ voices merged with the roar of the crowd as one of the Kraken made a breakaway from the center of the ice.

Four seconds. The player with the puck made a play to pass up through the center.

Three seconds. Suddenly, the player turned.

Two seconds. Brett made a play up the rail. The player made a back pass to Brett.

One second. With a force that said he had nothing to lose, Brett struck the puck. Time stilled. A collective hush followed the puck. Everyone watched as he put it right in the net.

Eruption in the stands. The Kraken had won the Stanley Cup, and Brett had scored the final goal.

Tears fell. Laughter and disbelief mixed with joy. Ryan hugged me. People next to me that I didn't know hugged me. The crowd was a sea of smiles, with the occasional sulky Bruins fan.

Brett held his hockey stick in the air. The rest of the team climbed over the rail to circle him, shouting.

They surrounded him. A mass of hockey skates, men and sticks, huddled together in mutual joy. I watched as he struggled to break free from his team and skated over to me. He slammed himself into the plexiglass and smiled at me. I made a heart with my hands.

Over the top of his head, I watched Clay skate off the ice. My sister sat with tears in her eyes. As Clay passed her into the Bruins tunnel, she mouthed to him, "I love you."

The way she'd betrayed me hurt less than it had a few months ago. I didn't know if I would ever completely forgive her. But, in a way, she'd led me to Brett. And for that, I wouldn't complain.

Brett skated off to join his team, holding the cup high as he circled the rink. I caught my sister's eye. She smiled wanly at me. I gave her a small smile, turned, and left the arena.

Chapter 17

BACK AT BRETT'S house, I turned on low lights, changed into a hockey jersey I found in one of the guest rooms, and opened a bottle of wine.

Brett texted, *Just finished press. Be there in an hour*

I responded, *Wine is open*

I lit the gas fireplace, turned on the television, and curled up to watch the news highlights.

I flipped through the channels until, almost exactly to the hour, Brett came through the front door.

“Hello, Stanley Cup winner.” I smiled at him. I put my wine on the coffee table and stood.

He glanced from my toes to my face, and a rush of heat ran through me. “Hello, gorgeous woman in my jersey with nothing on underneath, I hope.”

Neither of us moved. He, in the entryway to his house. Me, twenty feet away, standing on the plush carpeted rug in front of the fire.

“You’re really here. This is real.” He said barely above a whisper.

I took in his jeans and dark navy t-shirt. His hair, wet from a shower, was slicked back on his head. A few pieces had dried and fallen onto his forehead.

Slowly, he approached me. He slung his keys around on his finger before placing them in a bowl on an end table.

“I’m here.”

He was now a few feet in front of me. “And you’re not leaving.”

“Ever,” I whispered.

He stepped closer, ran his hand along my thigh, bunching up the jersey. When he discovered I wasn’t wearing anything underneath, he groaned and became like a starved man.

With both hands, he gripped my hips and pulled me towards him. His mouth crashed to mine and I let him kiss me like I was everything to him. Just as it had been the very first time, we couldn't slow down. I reached for the buttons on his jeans, frantically trying to get them off.

He stopped kissing me long enough to pull the jersey over my head. With a roughness that walked the line between pleasure and pain, he took my breast in his mouth and sucked on my nipple until the peak was strained and tight. I moaned with pleasure. My legs were weak.

My sex throbbed with need. He lifted me and placed me gently on the couch. It was the last gentle thing he did.

Moments later, we lay tangled around each other on the floor, having slid off the couch in our enthusiasm. The coffee table had shifted farther away from the couch.

He reached up and grabbed two pillows and a throw blanket from the couch. Pulling me close up against him, he tucked the blanket around me and placed his palm on my head.

My cheek rested on his chest. I stared into the fire's flames. "Congratulations, by the way."

"On my stellar performance? You're welcome. But I assure you I can last much longer."

I raised my chin, looked at him, and smiled. "I meant about the game."

With mock surprise he said, "Oh, right. The game."

I huffed out a laugh.

A few moments passed. Both of us were silent in our own thoughts. I sat up and took the blanket with me. He stood and lifted me onto his lap on the couch.

"Now what?" I asked him.

He kissed the side of my neck. "You tell me. I have to assume that since you're here you want to be with me. But I don't really know for sure. Are you leaving Alaska?"

I turned so I could see him better. "I took the partnership

offer.”

A slow, sexy smile started to crinkle around his eyes. “So, you’ll need a place to live.”

“And, I’ll be very busy at first, so I’ll need someone to cook for me too.”

“Done. I’ll hire someone.”

At that, I laughed.

Brett lowered himself to the ground and knelt between my legs. The blanket slid down to my waist and he pushed it aside. I grabbed it and covered myself back up.

“Listen, before we continue, I want to ask you something.”

Distracted, he kissed the inside of my knee. “Go.”

I grabbed his head. “Pay attention.”

His hands ran up the side of my thighs and he grinned. “You have my full attention.”

I knew I didn’t, but I was going to ask anyway. “Do you want to come to a wedding with me?”

“Ours?” he smiled. “Of course I will attend.” He gripped my hips, squeezing them gently.

“My sister.” I stared into his beautiful golden eyes.

He pushed my legs farther apart. “Mm. Sure. You gonna tell me who she’s marrying?” he said, seemingly unconcerned.

I waited just a second. “Clay McCarron.”

He stilled. “Bruins’ goalie?”

I nodded, trying not to smile.

“I thought you said he played for the Avalanche.” His hands rested at my hips.

I shook my head. “You assumed.”

Then he threw his head back and laughed. “That’s perfect. That’s fucking beautiful.” His laugh settled, and then

started all over again. “So, Clay is going to be my brother-in-law?”

“I guess if you’re asking me to marry you, he will be.”

He laughed again. “That was a given.”

“So, you’ll come with me?”

He lowered his head and kissed his way up my thigh. “Oh yeah, I’ll come with you. Now let’s stop talking. I need to love you.”

And love me, he did.

Epilogue

Four and half years later

“**MOMMY, WATCH.**” **BJ** screamed as he barreled through the house with a hockey stick. “I’m gonna be the booty, just like daddy.”

“BJ, what did I tell you about playing hockey in the house?” I said to my oldest boy as I bounced my youngest, Ranger, on my hip. He pulled on my hair as I pulled the Cheerios box out of the cupboard. I poured a handful onto the highchair tray for my middle boy, Sawyer. He beat on the tray, pinched a handful of circles and shoved them in his mouth.

“You aren’t going to be a hockey player too, are you?” He grinned and slobber ran out of his mouth. I rubbed his head. To BJ, I added in a less gentle tone, “Please watch out for the tree.”

Just across from our open kitchen, BJ continued to run circles around the coffee table in the family room, making comments to himself about his excellent shooting skills. Todd cowered at my feet, trying to avoid the tornado that was BJ.

Through the glass windows that ran the length of the front of the house, I looked out at the gray water. The Seattle skyline was barely visible through the overcast skies. The morning clouds were dark, threatening snow today. A white Christmas would be fun.

Brett came down the long hall that ran to the master bedroom, barefoot, wearing jeans and an ugly Christmas sweater. “Hey, beautiful.” He placed his hand at my back and kissed me sweetly on the cheek. “Here, give me Ranger.” He took our boy from me. “Why don’t you sit down? You’re due in a few days and you need your rest.”

BJ flew by him. “Look Dad, I’m a booty.”

“BJ, what did we tell you about playing hockey in the house?” Brett grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, lifting him an inch off the floor to stop his destructive forward

momentum. When he set him down, BJ took his stick and disappeared down the hall.

I leaned against the counter. “I’m so glad you are a full-time dad. I would be afraid for anyone else to coach BJ.”

“I never thought I would enjoy coaching hockey, but these little guys are beasts. And, I get so much more free time with you.”

“Lucky me.” I kissed him. “What time will Mia and John be here?”

He looked at the clock on the microwave. “Soon.”

I rubbed my very pregnant belly. “Oh, ouch.”

He paused, a look of panic on his face. “You, okay?”

“Uh-huh. Just a few cramps. Nothing to worry about.”

The doorbell rang. Looking at the camera monitor above the microwave, I saw it was Mia and John. I clicked the remote that would open the gate and watched on the screen as they drove through.

“I’m sorry your sister can’t make it.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, well, she’s due soon also and can’t fly.”

“You do know how much I love to razz Clay about the win.” He bounced Ranger on his hip, blew kisses on his neck and Ranger giggled.

I rolled my eyes at him. “That’s probably the real reason they don’t come to visit.” I groaned again.

“What? You’re not okay.”

With a hearty scream, BJ came running back down the hall. He was giving a play by play of the score he intended to make.

BJ raised his stick and took a shot through the living room.

Mia and John came through the front door, arms weighed down with gifts, and announced, “We’re here.”

The puck flew through the air and crashed through the window. Shards of glass fell to the floor. Mia looked on in shock.

I groaned again. My legs buckled. Water ran down my leg. “Oh, no.”

Everyone stopped and stared, not knowing what to address first.

“Mommy, you peed your pants.” BJ lowered his stick.

Brett glanced around frantically, looking for a place to put Ranger. Mia put the packages on the floor and rushed forward. “Here, give him to me.”

John stepped around Mia. “I’ll take care of Sawyer and the glass.”

Another contraction. I lowered myself to the ground. “Brett, we’re having a baby.”

“I know, baby, I know.” He pulled out his cell phone and called 911.

He crouched down next to me and spoke into the phone. “Yeah, my wife is having a baby.” And then to me he said, “She said to stay calm.”

I breathed. “I think she meant you.”

He asked the operator, “Me?” and then, “Okay.”

He stuck the phone back in his pocket. “They’re on their way.”

“This is unusual, don’t you think?” I practically panted.

“What do you mean?” His voice was breathy and flat.

“You calling 911.”

“Well, you are having a baby. It’s an emergency.”

“I mean,” I groaned from a contraction. “I mean, last time I called 911, you were faking a heart attack.”

He held my face. I started to sweat. He wiped the hair back from my brow. “Darlin, that wasn’t fake. You stepped in front of me, and I was done. It was an emergency.” He kissed

my forehead. "I'm so in love with you. I love you more than you can possibly imagine. And if you don't think I was done for the minute I saw you, well, we'll just have to make more babies to hold all the love I have for you."

A tear fell from my eyes. "I love you so much."

"Ditto."

The ambulance arrived and we barely made it to the hospital before our fourth, our only girl, was born.

She has a name. But we simply call her, Beauty.

ABOUT THE STANLEY CUP

I hope you enjoyed the story of Brett and Elizabeth. For my avid hockey fans, the below information may not come as a surprise. But for those of you that have just recently been introduced, the Stanley Cup is a much-revered trophy, not only in hockey, but one of the greatest status symbols of any professional sports organization.

Being from Seattle, I was thrilled that the NHL finally added a team to the Emerald City. Everything in the story was fiction, but I'd like to believe that maybe I might have sprinkled a little magic on the team for the next season.

I'd like to thank the Official Site of the Hockey Hall of Fame for the below information on the Stanley Cup. It makes a lot of sense after reading this why the Cup was so important to Brett. And why he would have wanted to share the moment with Elizabeth.

“The Stanley Cup, notably the oldest trophy competed for by professional athletes in North America, was donated in 1892 by Sir Frederick Arthur Stanley, Lord Stanley of Preston and son of the Earl of Derby. He purchased the trophy for 10 Guineas (\$50.00 at that time) to be presented to “the championship hockey club of the Dominion of Canada.” The first team ever awarded the Stanley Cup was the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association in 1893.

“Since 1910, when the National Hockey Association took possession of the Stanley Cup, the trophy has been symbolic of professional hockey supremacy. Beginning in 1926, only NHL teams have competed for this prized trophy.

“The Montreal Canadiens have won a record 23 Stanley Cups since the formation of the NHL (they also won in 1916), with Toronto a distant second at 13. The Habs also hold the record for most consecutive championships with five, accomplished between the years 1956 and 1960 inclusive.

“There have been numerous alterations to the Cup structure. In its infancy, tiered rings were added periodically to the bottom of the bowl. This was followed by long narrow

bands in 1927 which were later replaced by uneven bands in 1947. Because the Cup is the only professional sports trophy where the name of every member of the winning team is inscribed, bands are often retired to make room for new champions. Retired bands, along with the original Stanley Cup bowl, are proudly displayed in Lord Stanley's Vault in the Esso Great Hall. Currently the Cup consists of a bowl, three tiered bands, a collar, and five barrel or uniform bands. The trophy stands at 35 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches and weighs 34 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds. (complete measurement and inscription breakdown).

“Each year upon presentation of the trophy to the championship team, a summer of celebration begins, as each of the organization's players and staff enjoy 24 hours with the Cup - a tradition which has no rival in any sport. In its many years of existence, the Stanley Cup has traveled around the world, including stays in Russia, Japan, and Switzerland as well as atop mountain peaks through the Rockies and inside igloos in Canada's newest territory, Nunavut.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rie Anders grew up in the Pacific Northwest and has led a very colorful life. After successful careers in the country's aerospace program and corporate America, she picked up a pen and left the nine-to-five life. She wove her knowledge of aviation, Pacific Northwest culture, commercial fishing in Alaska, and the West's rugged landscapes, into beautifully crafted, happy ever after, contemporary romantic fiction novels.

Rie lives in Texas with her husband and competitive figure skating daughter. She is sure there is a story there as well. On the daily drives to and from the ice rink, Rie enlists her daughter's input on many things. Character development, possible actors to play her feisty heroines on the big screen, and new songs to inspire perfect scenes are just a few.

If you want to know more about Rie, when she will release her next book, and where you can find her, please visit her website at www.rieanders.com and follow her at <https://www.bookbub.com/profile/rie-anders> and <https://twitter.com/RieAnders>.

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And don't forget to join my Romance Newsletter on the homepage at www.RieAnders.com!

Please also enjoy an excerpt from Mia's story,

[DEAR SANTA, DEFINE GOOD](#)

World champion snowmobile racer Mia Brooks sacrificed love in exchange for her dreams. Alongside her brother, Jacob, she now co-owns and manages the most successful outdoor adventure outfitter in Jackson, WY.

Jacob schedules an excursion for a bachelor party the week before Christmas. But when he falls ill the night before, Mia must take over the adventure, and she is less than thrilled. Things only get worse when Mia finds that the groom-to-be is none other than the man who made her choose all those years ago.

Struggling to hold onto her heart, and her dignity, Mia must find a way to cope with the unfinished business of a first love; an only love. She thought she had moved on, but being in his presence proves more difficult than she could have imagined. The cold, snowy days in the woods lead Mia to make the ultimate choice – salvage the past, or move on to an entirely new future.

Chapter 1

“JACOB! WAKE UP!” I pounded on my brother’s bedroom door as I ran down the hall, frantically tying the belt on my bathrobe on my way to the kitchen.

Mumbling to myself about how late we were, I put on a pot of coffee and pulled two microwavable egg sandwiches from the freezer.

My brother and I owned Brooks Adventure Outfitters in Jackson, Wyoming. While we don’t open the shop until 10 a.m., we had gone out the night before to celebrate our birthdays, and today...we were running late.

While the coffee was brewing and the sandwiches were cooking, I went back down the hall to get him. Pounding on his door, more firmly than before, I shouted, “Jacob? Jacob, wake up!”

Not hearing an answer, I opened the door and jerked my head back, eyes widening, cringing at the stench that hit me. My eyes watered, and when I looked to the bed...no Jacob. “Jacob?”

A loud moan came from his attached bathroom. “In here.”

I crossed his room and saw him lying on the floor, his back against the tub, arm resting on the toilet seat. “What the heck, Jacob? For goodness’ sake. Did you really drink that much last night?”

“I’m so sorry, Mia. I didn’t think I did, but then I woke up this morning feeling awful.”

He really did look absolutely miserable. Skin splotchy, eyes red, T-shirt...well, disgusting.

I flushed the toilet, wet a rag with cold water, and wiped his face, watching as his eyes started to close and his head lolled back.

“C’mon, take off your shirt, and let’s get you back in bed.”

He slouched forward and I pulled his shirt off and over his head, throwing it in the bathtub behind him to retrieve it later.

Jacob and I were twins. Yesterday had been our thirty-first birthday and, by the looks of him, he'd drunk way too much. The birthday was nothing monumental, and it had been on a Monday. Even so, the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar had been filled with friends willing to celebrate any occasion.

My curly blonde hair fell into my face as I leaned down to help him up. The smell of smoke from the bar last night had permeated the long strands, and I almost felt sick from the combination of awful scents. I needed a shower.

“C’mon big guy, you gotta help me.” My hands were under his arms, and I tried to lift him from the ground. He was well over six feet tall, a former linebacker for the Seattle Seahawks, as gorgeous as Chris Hemsworth, and solid as a bull. Or, since we live in Jackson, Wyoming... a buffalo.

Jacob and I grew up in Laguna Beach, California. Our dad was a football coach for the San Diego Chargers. I loved the beach, but I was drawn to the mountains. My parents took me skiing at Snow King Mountain, in Jackson Hole, when I was six years old. I spent my entire young life trying to get back.

During that first visit, my dad had taken me on an overnight snowmobiling trip through Yellowstone Park. The guide took us through the snow-covered trees, along a path cut specifically for what he called sleds and wound through the hills into an open pasture. This was the first time I experienced true exhilaration.

Settling in front of my big, burly dad, I recall him leaning around me so he could face me. We were on a so-called sled for two, and I was nestled in front of him so I wouldn't fall off. He asked me if I was ready. I smiled gleefully, nodding my answer. He gently bonked his helmet to mine so I would know he understood me, and then he revved the throttle.

We shot out across the pasture like a rocket, and I screamed with delight. Laughing into the wind, I held on for

dear life as my dad turned sharp, heading in a new direction. That moment solidified that wherever life took me, it was going to be on a snowmobile. I had found my passion.

Doing my best to get my brother from the bathroom to his bed, I heard him mumble against his chest, “I didn’t drink very much last night, Mia.”

My average height was causing me to struggle to keep him upright. I managed to get him to the bed, and he fell like a lumberjack onto it. Curling himself into a ball he started to shake. I stared down at him and put my hands on my hips. “What’s wrong with you, then?”

Watery eyes stared back at me. “I think I’m sick.”

A flash of panic struck me. “Oh, no, no, no, no, no! You have that bachelor party coming in this afternoon.”

“You have to take them.” He started to heave, and I ran into the bathroom to grab the garbage can.

“Jacob!” I whined at him. “C’mon, you can take them. You’ll be better in a few hours, or days, and everything will be fine. Please don’t make me take a bunch of frat boys up to Racers Roost. I’ll kill one of them, I’m sure of it.”

Racers Roost was a six-bedroom log cabin my brother and I built together almost five years ago. Between my race winnings and Polaris royalties, and his NFL earnings, we sunk everything we had into Brooks Adventure Outfitters. The house was nestled deep in the forest, and it was where we took our customers when they joined one of our wilderness excursions.

His response was a robust hurl into the garbage can.

Closing my eyes, I lowered my chin to my chest and shook my head side to side. With resignation and a heavy sigh, I told him, “I’ll call Morgan, she might be able to work the shop while I’m gone.”

A grunt and a moan were all I heard from him as I left his room. I went back to the kitchen to call Morgan Archer, a friend of one of our employees.

As the phone rang, I poured myself a cup of coffee and then took the sandwiches out of the microwave. They had hardened, so I tossed them in the trash and sat down at the kitchen bar, waiting for Morgan to answer her phone.

She answered after a few rings and I proceeded to tell her my predicament.

“Oh, goodness, what exactly do you need from me?” She whispered. Her voice was muffled. I imagined her huddled between the bookshelves of the library, where she worked her usual job, mumbling with her hand over her mouth.

“Jacob is sick and I need to pick up a party at the airport this afternoon. I was hoping you could come work in the shop until Cody and I get back.”

Cody was our employee. A twenty something year-old skier, snowmobiler, river-rafter, and mechanic-in-training. He showed up one day over a year ago and just made himself useful. He was rangy and wore a man-bun. These days, he was indispensable to us.

“Oh sure, I can do that.”

She was going to hate me for my next words, so I said them in a rush. “And then I was wondering if you could work the store and check in on Jacob for the next three days.” I squinted my eyes shut and prayed she’d say yes.

“What?”

“I know, I know. But, now that Jacob is sick, I need to take this damn excursion since he won’t be able to work. I need Cody and Mac with me and everyone else has left for the holidays. There’s no one else.” I begged. “Please?... Please, please, please, please, please.”

“I can work the next two days, but I work on Friday, so Jacob needs to be better by then.” She tried to sound adamant, but I could hear the teasing lilt in her voice. I thought she might have a crush on Jacob, but I had more pressing problems than thinking about the two of them.

She told me she’d be at the shop at 2:30 p.m. and we hung up.

I finished my coffee, rinsed my mug in the sink, and reached for the aspirin in the cupboard above the microwave. Taking two for Jacob, I shook the bottle and took two for myself. A dull ache was already beginning behind my eyes and I needed to ward it off.

Jacob was lying flat on his bed, one arm thrown across his stomach, the other across his eyes. He was breathing heavily. I sat down on the edge of his bed, put my palm to his forehead, then gently nudged him awake.

Now that I knew he most likely had the flu; I spoke more softly to him. "Jacob. Jacob. You need to take some aspirin. Jacob, wake up."

He groaned and slightly rolled himself to his side. Lifting himself up on one elbow he took the aspirin, put them in his mouth, and washed them down with the glass of water I handed him.

The pillows cushioned his fall back down to the bed, and I laughed at his misery. "You look pathetic."

"Yeah, I'm sure."

He waited a moment and then, without opening his eyes, asked if I got in touch with Morgan.

"Yes. She'll be here this afternoon while I go get the party."

"Good. That's good." His voice trailed off.

"You so seriously owe me for this."

He was nodding off again. "Uh-huh."

I covered him with the comforter and then went down the hall to my room to get ready.

When Jacob and I built the store, we added a second floor with a two-bedroom apartment. At one end of the hall was a door that acted as our front door and went down to a parking area in the back of the store. At the other end of the hall was the door that opened to a staircase that led into the store.

The apartment had a full-sized kitchen, a large living

area, and we each had our own suites, with a bedroom, bath, and small office.

I showered quickly, washing my hair twice and applying a leave-in conditioner. I left it down so it could dry on its own.

Dressing for the day in my thermal long underwear, black stretch pants, and white turtleneck sweater, I pulled my fur-lined boots out from my closet and pulled them on over knee-high socks.

The sun was shining today, but I had lived in Jackson long enough to know that the temperature was most likely in the teens. It would be biting cold outside.

Peeking in on Jacob before I left, I saw he was fast asleep. I pulled the blanket up over him and left the door open just a bit.

Hanging on the rack by the door was my fur-lined jacket, which I grabbed on my way out the door into the store. Before I stepped out, I glanced at the clock above the microwave... 10:02. Late, but not too bad.

I walked out onto the balcony that looked down into the store and locked our apartment door behind me.

Not only had I managed to live my dream, but my brother and I had built our business into something bigger than either of us had first imagined.

After college, Jacob had been drafted by the Seattle Seahawks. Four years into his career, he broke his leg. Both bones down near the ankle.

I'd left California right after high school to travel and compete in snowmobiling races. Polaris found me cute and inspiring - their words- and they started sponsoring me. Eventually, I became a face of the brand and traveled all over promoting them. I moved to Jackson, Wyoming, permanently. When my brother was injured, he came to live with me while he recovered.

The sports doctor here in town told him that the way the bone had healed, he could never play again. He still walked with a bit of a crooked gait, but he pulled the cowboy thing

and made it look like a swagger. It certainly did not ward off swooning girls, and I was constantly signing them up for rafting trips...the ones he led.

Jacob decided to stay in Jackson, and I was starting to tire of the traveling, so we settled on snowmobiling tours. Then we added white-water rafting. Followed by fly-fishing. Later, overnight excursions, which is when we built Racers Roost.

Now, we had four guides and a mechanic, and I was perfectly content. I had already won the World Championship Snowmobile Derby, basically the Indy 500 of snowmobile racing. I loved being able to stay here, in Jackson. It was my home.

Standing on the ledge, looking down into the store, I was proud of the business we had built. We had a section for fishing, a section for kayaks, a section for skiing, and of course, an apparel line.

Cody was unlocking the front door and I saw Mac enter through the back. He caught my eye and raised his green industrial coffee thermos to me. "Ready for the day, Princess?"

Descending down into the store I smiled at him. "Absolutely!"

I reached the bottom of the steps as Cody started the cash register. Mac came to a stop in front of me and I gave him my standard morning greeting. "Today looks like promise Mac, today looks like promise."

Chapter 2

EVEN THOUGH WE were open for business, it would be unusual to get any walk-in customers this early on a Tuesday.

Our shop was located one street back off the town square, and it was usually tourists and Christmas visitors that would stop in. We shared a wood-plank walkway with a clothing store, a bank, a small café, and an art gallery.

I jumped up on the counter, watching as Cody counted out the cash in the till. Mac stood on the other side, one hip leaning casually against the counter, and waited for my morning talk.

“Jacob is sick. I think he has the flu, so I called Morgan to come help out.” I watched as Cody’s ears turned red and tried not to giggle at him. “Cody, I need you to fill up the trucks and then work the store while Mac and I get the gear ready for the expedition this weekend.”

Mac stood up straight and removed the ever-present toothpick from his mouth. With a craggy voice he asked, “You takin’ the trip instead of your brother?”

I sighed heavily. “Unfortunately, yes. But the two of you will be with me, so I’ll be fine. Morgan will be here at 2:30 p.m. so Cody and I can head to the airport to pick up the bachelor party.”

Mac chuckled under his breath and put his hands in his front pockets. “Oo-wee! I feel sorry for them boys. The great Mia Brooks is gonna knock them senseless if they get outta hand.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, but babysitting a bunch of drunks on a bachelor party was not how I wanted to spend my weekend.”

He laughed heartily and reached across the counter for the expedition packet. “Let’s see what size men we got here, and I’ll start pulling out the gear.”

Mac was one of our very first employees. We called him

Mac because he was our mechanic. His real name was something entirely too basic for him, so we continued to call him Mac.

I'd met him on the racing circuit and when I retired, he just followed me home. He probably wasn't more than fifty or so, and I don't know if he was ever married, or if he had a girlfriend. He came to work, he fixed the sleds, he accompanied us on tours, he helped cook the meals, and then he went home. On occasion, he'd accompany us to any number of the bars, but those instances were few and far between. If I had to call him something, I would call him our right-hand man.

Turning my attention to Cody, I asked, "Do you want to take the trucks into town now and fill them with gas? I'll help Mac put everything out when you get back, and then load it all in the trailer. We'll hook up the flatbed and load the sleds."

Cody nodded in agreement, grabbed the keys from under the counter, and headed out the front door. He didn't speak often, usually only when asked a question, or when asking a question, that needed words instead of action.

I turned to Mac. "How many sleds do we have at Racers Roost?"

He rubbed his chin and nodded thoughtfully, "I think we left four last weekend. We'll need to load yours, and Cody's, and mine." He paused, thinking it through. "With a group this large, we'll need three more doubles. The men can pair up from the bottom of the trail through the woods."

I was nodding at him as he spoke. "So, there's six of them?"

Glancing back down at the reservation sheet, he said, "Looks like."

I drawled, "Great." And rolled my eyes. "You and Cody can pull their luggage on the utility sled and I'll take the fresh food and miscellaneous items behind me."

"Sounds like a plan, Princess."

"Yeah, well, you know what they say about best laid

plans.” I added sardonically.

He laughed good-humoredly at me and headed out to the back storage area to start pulling gear for the men.

I was just reaching for the expedition packet when I heard the bell ring above the front door. My best friend, Camille, bounded towards me, eyes gleaming with mirth. Her brown hair flew crazily behind her. She was wearing very expensive snow boots and a fur-lined suede jacket with a hood. She will tell you it is fake fur.

With great enthusiasm she jumped up on the counter and started talking.

“I heard you’re picking up a bachelor party this afternoon. Mind if I tag along?”

Lifting my eyes to her, I shook my head and asked her how she knew.

“I ran into Lane Archer at the feed store.”

“What were you doing at the feed store? Never mind, go on.”

“He asked about you and I told him he missed a great birthday party last night.” She poked me in the arm and continued, “I think he’s keen on you.”

Sarcastically, I said, “Oh, please!”

She missed my tone and continued rambling. “Well, anyway, he’d heard from Morgan that your brother was sick, and that she was going to be helping out at the store because you had to take a bachelor party that Jacob was supposed to run.” Gleefully she added, “And so I ran right over to see how I could be of service.” She squeezed her breasts together and wagged her eyebrows.

Exasperated, I said, “Freaking Jackson. This town is so small. And no, you cannot come along.”

She jumped off the counter and started whining, “Oh come on Mia, you know I can help out! Please! Please let me come with you.”

“No. But you can help out here until Cody gets back so I can go help Mac.”

She pouted. “That doesn’t sound exciting at all. I’m going to walk next door and get a coffee. Do you want one?”

“Yes please. Vanilla latte.” I shouted after her, “NO FOAM!”

She waved at me over her head, and I took my phone out of the side pocket of my leggings to text Mac. I’ll be out when Cody gets back.

He texted a thumbs up.

Opening the packet...again...I read through the itinerary Jacob had planned for them. Their flight would arrive at three thirty this afternoon at the Corporate Aircraft terminal and tonight they would be staying at the Lodge at Jackson Hole. We had dinner reservations at Gun Barrell for eight people at 7 p.m. and then I would pick them up at the hotel tomorrow morning to start the excursion. They had booked four nights and then they would spend their last night in Jackson dining at... the Cowboy Bar.

I looked up from the packet and groaned out loud. “Ugh! Not the Cowboy Bar.”

At that moment, Camille came back through the front door, with Cody right behind her.

“One vanilla latte for the traitor.”

I lowered my brow at her and held out my hand for the coffee. “I’m not taking you because I don’t have room for you. Now give...”

She handed me my coffee and I turned my attention to Cody. “Trucks full?”

He tossed the keys back in the drawer and then tucked some of his hair back behind his ears. “Yep.”

“Great. Thank you.”

Camille had made herself comfortable on the trio of couches that surrounded a gas fireplace in the middle of the

room. She was sipping her coffee and had picked up a fly-fishing magazine. “Camille, I’m going out back to help Mac. Do you want to come with me?”

“I’m good here. I’ll just hang out for a while.”

Camille’s dad owned the San Diego Padres, so we were both from sports families. Not only did her dad own the baseball team, he was also part owner at Snow King Resort. Camille and I had become friends as children, and closer friends when I moved here full-time.

Camille also did not have a job. She spent her days shopping, sleeping...bugging me. Every now and then she would do something philanthropic, like host parties for local charities, but only when inspired to do so buy some popular single athlete.

I left the itinerary on the counter and headed out back to help Mac.

Our shop was on an empty lot behind the store, surrounded by a chain-link fence. Two of our three Ford-F350 dually trucks were parked inside the gate, along with both a large and a small trailer to haul the sleds. Cody had left my truck parked on the street.

Grabbing my down jacket off the hook by the back door, I stepped out into the harsh cold, tucking my chin into my turtleneck and lowering my head as I walked to the shop.

It was sunny today, and I was praying it would hold. Bad weather would make for a long weekend stuck in the lodge.

I heard the engines running from inside as I opened the chain-link gate and walked across the cement slab. Pulling open the heavy steel door, I saw Mac checking each sled, one by one to make sure they were ready to go. I flipped the light switch two times fast so he’d know I was there, and I waved when he looked up and saw me.

He turned the engines off.

Pulling the hood off my head, I unzipped my jacket and walked towards him.

Wiping his hands on a rag, he approached me and stood to my side so we were both looking at the sleds.

“Everything looks good. Shouldn’t have any problems.” He was nodding confidently and I turned sideways to smile at him.

When my brother and I started the business, I wanted nothing but the best sleds, the prettiest, the fastest. I wanted them all to be red, and I wanted them to all be Polaris 800 switchbacks. Over time, after many accidents, and mishaps, and dare-devils, I had come to accept the fact that most people wouldn’t know the difference. Now, I just wanted them to stay in one piece.

My sled was a Ski-doo Freeride and she was beautiful. Now that I was no longer beholden to Polaris, I bought myself the sled I’d always wanted. She was capable of handling deep powder, as well as being powerful enough to pull someone out if I needed to. She was kept covered and Mac knew to baby her.

“Great! Thanks Mac.” I slowly wandered through the shop doing my own assessment, and then sat down on one of the doubles. “Cody’s back with my truck so we should be ready to go soon. I’ll check on Jacob one more time and then we’ll leave for the airport.”

Mac stared at me pensively, quietly. And I just sat in the now silent shop.

“What’s on your mind, Princess?”

I took a deep breath, puffed out my cheeks and exhaled dramatically. Weighing my words, I waited a minute to gather them.

“Do you think I made a mistake, Mac?”

“What kind of mistake?”

“I don’t know. It just felt weird last night celebrating thirty-one and without having someone to celebrate it with.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. “And don’t say I have you.”

He laughed and said, “You know I’m not one for these deep talks, Mia.”

“I know.” I hung my head and stared at the dials on the sled.

We sat in silence for a few moments, lost in our own thoughts.

Mac wandered over to me and stood on the other side of the windshield. “But I reckon you did what you felt you needed to do, to make yourself whole as a person. And you shouldn’t worry about not having anyone to share it with right now. There’ll come a time when an opportunity presents itself, and you’ll know he’s the right one.”

My eyes glassed over. I swallowed audibly to keep back the cry.

“Now stop your crying and let’s get these beauties ready to load.”

With a laugh, I wiped the tears from the corners of my eyes. “Who said you weren’t good with these talks?”

He stepped around and gave me a hug. “Next time call your mama.”

“Oh God! Yeah, right!”

We both laughed as I walked to the shop garage door, pushed the green button that raised the electric door, and waited until it stopped to walk out to the lot.

Mac and I worked seamlessly together, hitching up the trailers, backing them in towards the garage and then loading the sleds one by one.

As soon as we were satisfied that we were ready for the morning, I left Mac to close up the garage and I headed back to the shop. Morgan, Cody and Camille were all sitting in front of the gas fireplace.

Morgan was such a pretty girl. She was young and studious, with the beautiful auburn colored hair that most of the Archers had. Her eyes were the color of sherry, and her

skin was like cream. She was going to be stunning in a few years.

Approaching them, I realized my clothes were dirty, and that I needed to change before we went to the airport. I plucked at some of the dirt on my turtleneck as I came to a stop behind one of the couches.

“Hi Morgan, thanks for helping out. I really appreciate it.”

“It’s okay Mia, I don’t mind helping when I can.” She smiled at me from across the seating area.

I looked at my watch. Two forty-five. Looking at Cody next, I said, “I’m going to run upstairs and change really quick, and then we can go.”

His response was a quick, “sure.”

Taking the steps back up to my apartment, I let myself in and went directly to the kitchen to get Jacob some more aspirin and a glass of water.

His door was still ajar. When I pushed it open a bit farther, I saw he was fast asleep and breathing deeply.

I sat down on the edge of his bed, gently nudging him awake.

“Jacob. Jacob, wake up. Jacob, it’s Mia, I brought you some aspirin. Wake up.”

His eyes opened slowly and they were glassy with fever.

“Sit up as best you can and take these. Morgan’s here, and we should be back in a short while.”

He sat up, took the aspirin and water quickly, and then flopped back down on his bed. Throwing his arm back over his eyes, he mumbled, “Mia, I’m sorry about Cole.”

Adrenaline shot through my body, and I inhaled sharply. “What?”

“Cole. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Cole.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. Cole Blackwood

was my high school sweetheart, and kind of college boyfriend. More importantly, he was my first love. And if I was honest with myself, my only love.

“Jacob, what didn’t you tell me?”

Jacob had nodded off to sleep again, and I pushed at him. A little louder, I said, “Jacob! What didn’t you tell me?”

But he was out and I wouldn’t get an answer.

Chapter 3

COLE AND I had met at camp the summer before our junior year in high school. It was a camp in Lake Tahoe, the kind where they fool the kids into thinking it will be kayaking, and hiking, and sleeping in. But it wasn't. It was a science camp.

I wasn't the most enthusiastic student, and my mom thought I might learn something. I definitely learned something; I learned to kiss. And by kiss, I mean, long, slow, sweet, summer night kisses that went on forever and marked my soul. Kisses that made me forget I wasn't supposed to let a boy put his hands down my pants, plunge his fingers inside me, and touch me until my legs quivered and my toes curled. Kisses that promised forever. Kisses I shared with Cole Blackwood.

We were an unlikely couple. I was cute and bubbly. Cole was tall and gangly, with a mop of black hair that never seemed to stay in place. He was studious; I was obsessed with being outside. He was calm; I was chomping at the bit to get out of Laguna Beach. He wanted to be a doctor; I wanted to race around the world.

But I loved him. He centered me and made me believe in fairytales.

By the time we graduated, Cole had been accepted to the University of San Francisco, and I had earned enough points in the winter racing to compete internationally. We stayed together for two years, until I got picked up by Polaris as a sponsor and an ambassador. My schedule got so crazy, our visits became further and further apart. By Christmas of his junior year, we were finished.

As I sat staring at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, that Christmas came sharply into focus.

My parents always hosted a Christmas Eve party, with people coming and going throughout the afternoon and into the evening.

Our house sat up in the hills and looked out over the

vastness of the Pacific Ocean.

The interior, tastefully decorated in red and gold, sparkled with Christmas cheer. I kept watch on the door, waiting for Cole to arrive.

Dressed in a red, short-sleeve, mock turtleneck dress with a black belt, I was the epitome of one of Santa's helpers. My over-the-knee black boots reached just to the hem of my dress; enough to be sexy without being improper.

I hadn't been with Cole since September because of my racing schedule, and I was anxious to see him.

A little before 8 p.m. the doorbell rang and I jumped up off the couch to answer it. "I'll get it."

When I opened the heavy wooden door, Cole was standing on the other side, holding a small poinsettia and looking exceptionally gorgeous. He had trimmed his unruly dark hair and he looked...like an adult.

I reached out my hand to him and pulled him into the house. Shutting the front door, we turned to each other and I leaned up to kiss him greedily.

He held me with one arm around my waist, the plant in the other, and I pressed my mouth to his, wanting to get as close to him as I could.

He muttered against my lips, "Mia. Mia. Not in the hallway."

Nipping him a few more times, I said between kisses. "But...I...have...missed you."

"I've missed you too, but let me at least say hello to your parents."

Running his hand down my arm, he linked our hands together, and we walked to the living room together.

When my mom saw us, she excused herself from the couple she was talking to and headed our way. "Cole! I'm so glad you made it."

He leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Merry Christmas,

Mrs. Brooks.”

“Merry Christmas. Is this for us?” She reached for the plant and he handed it to her.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, I just love the poinsettia plant. It always adds just the right amount of warmth and class at the same time.”

He agreed, and my mom asked me to get him a glass of wine.

I leaned up to kiss him again before wandering to the kitchen. “I’ll be right back.”

Watching him from the open kitchen, I took a few minutes to memorize his face. My heart hurt, and I pressed my fist to my chest, trying to rub out the pain. His mannerisms were controlled, tense; his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

Now that I was an observer, I could see something wasn’t right with him, and I wanted to put the blinders back on. Pouring us two glasses of wine, I joined him and mingled with the rest of my parents’ guests.

Shortly after nine o’clock, I grabbed Cole away from a couple of my fathers’ friends and dragged him downstairs to my room.

“Oh my God! I thought I would never get you alone.” I started unbuttoning his shirt as I slowly walked him backwards towards my bed.

He reached up to cradle my face, and I leaned into his kiss. He devoured me, and I pulled his shirt out from the waist of his pants. I ran my palms up his chest, under his shirt and continued to kiss him until he fell onto my bed.

Scooting himself back, he pulled me up and onto him. I leaned down to kiss him, our tongues intertwining, our heads tilting to get closer to each other. He gripped my hips, and I pushed down onto him, feeling his hardness, and knew I was already ready for him.

“Cole. I’ve missed you so much. Please make love to

me.” I was reaching for his belt buckle when he gripped both my wrists.

“Mia, wait.”

“Wait? For what? Oh, you don’t have a condom?” I jumped up off him and headed towards the bathroom, grinning seductively over my shoulder at him, as I sauntered away. “I think there are some in here.”

“Mia, no, that’s not it.”

His tone was sad, and resigned, and I stopped in my tracks. Turning to him, I crossed my arms in front of me. A chill passed over me and I frowned. “Then what is it?”

He was sitting on the edge of my bed, looking ruffled. He pulled one knee up and rested it on the mattress and patted the spot next to him. “Come here.”

“I’ll stand.”

Letting out a heavy sigh, he said, “I want you to move to San Francisco.”

Uncrossing my arms, I went to him. “Christ! That’s it? You had me worried.” I reached up to palm his cheek. “But I can’t right now, I’m getting ready to go to Northern Europe. I have a race circuit coming up and some promotions I’m committed to.”

He pulled my hand off his face and held it. “That’s just the thing Mia, you are always running off somewhere. I miss you.” He looked me in the eyes and said more emphatically, “I love you!”

My eyes started to water. “Then why does this feel like goodbye?”

“Mia, I love you! I have loved you since the first day of camp when you used the paint as toenail polish. I want to be with you, but I’m tired of being without you.”

“But I can come back more often....”

He cut me off. “We’ve been doing this for two years now. You always say that.”

I stopped my crying and felt my heart freeze. “Then what are you saying?”

He held both my hands in his and pleaded with me. “Come to San Francisco. Move in with me. Let’s plan a wedding.”

In what felt like slow motion, I pulled my hands from his and rested them in my lap. “And stop racing.” It wasn’t a question but his silence gave me my answer.

I lowered my head. “Please don’t make me choose, Cole. Please don’t do that to me.”

Raising my eyes to him, I saw he was on the verge of tears. I choked on a cry and tried to speak past the lump that was forming. “I can’t...I can’t do that.”

Rising from my bed, he started buttoning his shirt and tucked it back in his pants.

His silence was angering me. “That’s it?”

“I’ve said all I can say, Mia. You won’t stop, and I need to move on.”

“And you’re just going to walk away?”

He stood quietly, peacefully, and said in a controlled voice. “I love you! I will always love you. But I can’t do this anymore. I can’t be second. I’ll say goodbye to your parents and let myself out. I’ll tell them you were tired.”

I picked up a pillow, threw it across the room at him, and shouted, “You’re a coward! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!”

He picked the pillow up off the floor and placed it cautiously back on the end of my bed. “I’m so sorry, Mia.”

I heard him choke and I started to cry. I threw myself on my bed and shouted into the pillow. “Get out!”

I tried to call him the next day to apologize, but he didn’t answer. I continued to call him well into the spring. He never answered. After a while, I figured it was time for me to gain some dignity and stop calling.

A knock on my apartment door shook me from my

memories. It was Morgan. “Mia, Cody’s waiting for you.”

I wiped the tears from my cheeks and yelled, “I’ll be right out.”

Putting on another white turtleneck, I touched up my makeup and fluffed out my curls.

I left my apartment and went back downstairs, a big smile on my face. Cody was waiting for me, truck keys in hand. He smiled at me, understanding that this expedition was the last thing on earth I wanted to do right then.

“Ready to go get our boys?” I asked sarcastically.

He laughed and nodded, handing me my truck keys before heading to the back door. I went out the front door and climbed up into the cab. Reaching above the visor, I found my oversized polarized sunglasses and put them on.

I waited until Cody pulled out from around back before pulling out to follow him to the airport. To myself I muttered, “God, please help me.”

END EXCERPT

Start reading all of the Cabin Christmas romances [HERE](#)