

CHRISTINA BRAVER

YOUR
Heart



YOUR HEART

A STEAMY SMALL-TOWN ROMANCE

PERRY HARBOR BOOK 3

CHRISTINA BRAVER

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Though this story takes place in a fictional location, it is based on an area of the Pacific Northwest that is the traditional land of the Coast Salish. I want to honor with gratitude the land itself and the Coast Salish people.

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For Amy, and her love of Guemes Island Resort

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TESS

“IT WAS LIKE THE FIRST TIME YOU HAVE SEX.” THE MAN IN front of me in line at the coffee shop lowered his voice as he leaned closer to his friend and shoved his hand in the pocket of his suit pants. “You know it’s coming. There’s a lot of planning and anticipation for this important first. You want to get it right. And then it happens, and it’s over fast.” His friend, also in a suit, laughed and nodded.

Even in my haze of grief, I couldn’t hold back my chuckle. Mrs. Curtis would have thought that was funny, and I felt like she was reminding me that life and laughter went on. I glanced out the far window at the early morning sunshine stealing across the green rolling hills in the distance. Central Washington was sunnier and warmer this time of year than where I grew up in the San Juan Islands north of Seattle. I loved the sunshine, but the small coastal town of Perry Harbor tucked up in the northwest corner of the state, would always be home.

The two dads in front of me talking about the drama surrounding their children’s first time catching the bus to kindergarten were next in line, and they turned back to me as they stepped up to the counter. One looked away. The other, the one comparing the two important firsts in life, let his glance linger before turning toward the barista to place his order. I kept my expression neutral. Not resting-bitch face, but not smiling either.

I scanned the offerings in the food case. Nothing seemed appealing. I didn’t even want the spinach, feta, and egg wrap

that I lived on during every finals week in graduate school, but I had a long drive ahead of me, and I needed to eat something.

“And I’ll get hers,” I heard the man say.

“Oh no, that’s okay. I’m getting breakfast.”

“It’s fine. I’m paying it forward or backward.” His smile was a little too bright for eight in the morning.

I turned. “But there’s no one else in line for *me* to pay for.”

“Just doing a good deed.” His eyes glittered and roamed the edges of my face.

I sighed softly under my breath. This happened sometimes. I know, poor me, men wanting to buy me food or drinks or something. But this was tricky stuff. I didn’t want to embarrass him, but I also didn’t want to encourage his interest. If I accepted, would he let me sit here and eat my breakfast in peace, or would he want to chat? I should order a drip coffee to be gracious and go. My stomach grumbled.

Frankly, I was screwed. If I accepted the food and walked away, he might say I was an ungrateful bitch. If I didn’t accept the food and walked away, he might say I was a stuck-up bitch. I didn’t want to be any kind of bitch. But the only way I got to have breakfast in peace was to embrace the bitch.

“Okay, thank you. I’ll do the same next time.” I turned to the barista. “Can I get a grande flat white and a spinach and feta wrap heated, please?”

“Your name?” the barista asked.

“Tess.”

I stepped to the side to wait for my order.

“You work around here, Tess?” The one who insisted on paying eyed my black pantsuit and heels.

“No.” I smiled to cover the sharp tone in my voice. His friend raised his eyebrows and spun around again. A couple of women awaiting drinks and bouncing a toddler each on a hip gave me the eye from over his shoulder. I’m sure they wondered why I couldn’t be nicer. After all, I was getting a

free breakfast. *Ungrateful bitch it is.* I sighed and jostled with the other customers to move out of the way of the mom with a stroller entering the main door.

“Paul. Tess,” The barista finally called.

I stepped up to collect my food.

“Thanks again.” I gestured with my cup. “And good luck with the bus stop this year.”

“Maybe I’ll see you here another day,” he said.

“Probably not. I did work around here, but I got fired yesterday.” He blinked as I shouldered open the door. “I appreciate the breakfast and the funny story.”

I know it came off harsh, but I wasn’t capable of much more today. I walked to my car, juggled my drink and wrap, and started the engine. My heartbeat settled as I eased out of the parking lot and onto the main road leading to interstate eighty-two. My thoughts drifted as the long highway stretched out before me.

The first time I had sex was the summer after high school. He said it was his first time too, and it *was* over fast. But there were more times that night, and by the end of our last two days together, Drew had loved me slowly, and I was lost. Too bad it was all a lie.

STEPPING FROM THE CAR, I stretched and pressed at the wrinkles in my dress slacks and blouse. The drive from the Washington wine country to Perry Harbor took almost five hours. As I drove west, the fall colors and endless farmland morphed into the evergreen-covered Cascade Mountains. I loved the Pacific Northwest and didn’t want to live anywhere else.

I climbed the few concrete steps and entered the chapel. “Welcome. Would you like an Order of the Service?” The man spoke in gentle tones over the low drone of recorded organ music and handed me a small, folded paper.

“Yes, um, thank you.” My lips trembled as I took in the somber space.

“Restrooms are to your right, and we have tissue boxes in each row. We’ll be starting soon, but there is still time to speak with Mr. Rose if you like.”

He nodded toward the front, where the kind and wonderful man stood. Nearby, a polished mahogany table held an intricate urn surrounded by peonies and hydrangeas, her favorite, and a large photo of Mrs. Curtis with her dark hair cut short, smiling into the pink sunset at her beloved Anna Island Resort. I worked every summer at the small, rustic retreat since high school, and it had been like a second home.

By the time I started at Perry Harbor High, my two older brothers had moved away. Finn, four years older than me, was off at college, and Lucas, two years older than Finn, had graduated from Udub and was in Seattle pursuing a career in tech. It was lonely on my family’s tulip farm, and my summers on Anna Island had felt full.

Finn came home often, but his time was consumed helping Dad and preparing to take over the business someday. I helped Mom with her garden in the spring, and we did a lot of baking together, but otherwise, there wasn’t much for me on the farm then. The summers on Anna Island were filled with kids and laughter and fun. It was the place I felt most alive.

It’s also where I discovered my passion for the hospitality industry, leading to my bachelor’s degree and recent MBA. I was at the resort every summer until this year. It was time for me to start a real career after recently graduating, so I left the little island behind, and now, everything had changed.

Never again would I come into the resort office and smell her fresh-baked sugar cookies. Never again would she tell me stories about past guests while we folded towels, warm and scented from the dryer. Never again would she wrap me in her kind embrace and tell me that everything would be okay.

The thick, golden velvet drape making up the backdrop blurred as the tears welled, and I struggled to swallow. Mrs.

Curtis died quietly in her bed last week while Mr. Rose held her hand.

He wore a dark suit with a white button-down and a pink rose pinned to his lapel. I'd never seen or imagined the older man dressed in anything except Carhartt work pants and a flannel shirt. His white beard was trimmed neat, but his once sparkling eyes were dull as he stood shaking hands with the man who owned the local hardware store. Mr. Rose and Mr. Bergin seemed like old friends after all the years the resort's handyman bought God-only-knows-what at Mr. Bergin's business, trying to keep the old seaside hideaway in working order.

Mr. Rose smiled at the story they must have been remembering about Mrs. Curtis, but sadness rolled off him in waves from the loss of his longtime employer, friend, and, as some of us believed, his longtime love. He first came to the resort over twenty years ago. Grumpy and standoffish, I was told, but the man I knew was funny and kind and like a grandfather to me, having already lost both of mine.

I stepped closer. "Tess, thank you for coming." His brawny arms embraced me.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else. I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Our loss," he said. "I know the timing isn't good, what with your new job. Did you have trouble getting off work?"

"It was no trouble at all."

No trouble, because when I told them I needed this day, my snobby boss fired me. She said it was because I wasn't a good fit. That was true. I wasn't a good fit, and I was glad about that. Though not glad about being fired from my first job out of graduate school after only three months.

It was the perfect job on paper. Assistant Events Manager at one of the biggest wineries in central Washington. As it turned out, they hired me for my *pretty face*. I was a glorified coffee getter. They assumed I'd say yes, kiss butts, smile and greet guests, and let the *real* professionals handle the events.

All my ideas were disregarded, and any misstep was amplified to the point of tragedy, serving as evidence that I didn't belong in the big meetings or discussions. Those winery events were parties, not UN summits. Shit happened. That's how you learned. It was clear they weren't interested in my *learning*. And that was all I was interested in.

"Oh Tess, how is your new job?" Ellen Temple, owner of Shakey Grounds Café, wrapped an arm around my shoulder, and we moved toward the pews for a seat.

"It's fine," I lied. I would figure out what to say after I got through this day.

"I know you'll do well. You worked so hard for us at the café when you were in high school. And, with your smile, the customers couldn't stay away."

"That's kind of you, but I think it was the coffee." The Pacific Northwest was nothing if not addicted to coffee, and Shakey Grounds Café had the best in Perry Harbor. It was usually busy, with or without my smile.

My smile. A blessing and a curse.

A symmetrical curve on a perfectly symmetrical face. Symmetry equals beauty, some say, in people and in flowers, tulips particularly. My family grew millions of them on our local farm each year. I'd seen my share of beautiful, symmetrical tulips.

I would likely be considered clinically depressed or even anti-social if I let it slip that I didn't like tulips, such *cheerful flowers*. Their rich colors painted the landscape of my family's farm each spring, and the acres-long swaths of color were incredible. But tulips didn't have a scent. They weren't used for food or medicine. They self-pollinated and didn't provide nectar. Tulips were merely beautiful.

That beauty provided a living for my family and others, but a tulip's only job was to look good. And to me, they represented the emptiness of *only* being valued for that.

My parents, two older brothers, and their partners were already sitting in a pew not far away. Dad stood with a smile

and let my mom step past him so she could be the first to hug me. He'd learned a long time ago not to get between a mother and her child when it came to hugging.

Mom let go after an extra squeeze. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, then Dad took his turn wrapping me in his arms. "It's good to see you, Tessy."

Lucas and Finn were next, each with an *I'm sorry* on their lips. Quiet and somber, even Lucas, which wasn't his usual style of lovable cockiness.

Everyone shuffled to take their seats again, and I slid in next to my brother Lucas's girlfriend, Jo. She gave me a gentle nudge, sympathy clear in her expression.

My brother Finn's fiancée, Emily, leaned forward to make eye contact and reached out to squeeze my hand in a gesture of support. She and Finn had just gotten engaged a few months ago, and I was already thinking of her as my sister and favorite shopping partner.

I sat and stared at the photo of Mrs. Curtis and her infectious, knowing smile. She looked younger than the last time I saw her, with her cheeks rosy from the sun and her eyes holding depth, like a woman who'd felt everything from agony to joy and come through okay.

I had promised to visit this summer but didn't. Lucas and Jo did earlier this year, in the spring, followed by my parents shortly after, but not me or my brother Finn. A choice I know we both regretted.

Maybe, if I'd visited, I would have seen the signs. The weight loss and tiredness, though people said she was filled with life right up to the end. Her death had come as a shock, and the loss pulsed in my veins as the soft organ music played on.

Cancer. Her diagnosis was sudden, and the disease too advanced to fight it, she'd told Mr. Rose. I'd made that stupid job my priority instead of making the time to visit her. And now they were both gone.

I shook the thought away before I completely broke down. My eyes roamed the other mourners and froze. It was Drew, sitting in a back pew, staring straight ahead with a somber expression.

Why was he here?

I could still see the boy he once was in the face of the man he'd become. The boy who owned my heart for the first time, the only time. It wasn't real, but it felt real that summer we both worked at the resort.

He was there my first day that season, unloading wood from the old resort truck behind the row of cabins. He was tall and lanky, with a shy smile and a shaggy fall of brown hair that shadowed his face when he looked down. His hazel eyes caught mine, and something passed between us. I thought he was the first guy to really see me. Not my face or my body, but me. In the end, it wasn't true. It was a game he played to fuck the pretty girl, and he won.

I had only started to learn the rules of the game, and he'd taken advantage. His actions had been the tipping point for a valuable lesson about trusting people in this world. A lesson that turned out to be necessary, or college could have been much worse.

"Who's that?" Jo asked when she noticed the direction of my gaze.

"Who?"

"The guy you're trying not to look at."

I sighed. "Drew McAlister. We used to be friends. I haven't spoken to him since the summer before my freshman year at Washington State."

"Why?"

"He wasn't who I thought he was. I moved on." I faced forward.

Jo looked at me with a question, then glanced back at the man. "From the look he's giving you, I'd say *he* hasn't."

DREW

I KNEW SHE WOULD BE HERE. WE BOTH LOVED MRS. CURTIS. I told myself I wore this suit because Mrs. Curtis deserved the best. But the truth was, I wore it for her. Fuck. I had to stop doing things for her.

From the corner of my eye, I saw her eyebrows lift in surprise, then the look of disdain I'd pictured for years. She would never forgive me. Six years and nothing from her. I tried every way I could think of to explain and apologize. She never responded.

She dumped me and went off to her party school, where some good-looking asshole probably replaced me in a heartbeat.

I kept my eyes forward and remembered the reason I was here, to pay my last respects to the wonderful woman who was like a mom to me in a way my loving but busy-building-her-career mother couldn't be. Mrs. Curtis sent care packages and called to talk about me and what I wanted out of life. That was her specialty, connecting with people and caring.

A couple I recognized as the owners of the Shakey Grounds Café sat at the end of our pew, and Bethany scooted closer. She was a friend with occasional benefits. Tall, with reddish-blond hair and piercing green eyes that blazed with fire when she was stirred up. Note to the wise, don't get her stirred up.

I hadn't told her much other than I didn't want to go to the funeral alone, so she joined me on the first-class flight from

San Jose. Another truth, I didn't want to be alone the first time I saw Tess again.

"Who is she?" Bethany pointed her chin at the ponytail I had seen in countless dreams.

"Tess Bakker. We worked together at Anna Island the summer before I left for Stanford."

"You said you were a handyman there?"

I nodded. "I apprenticed for Mr. Rose. He was a friend of Dad's. We were vacationing here so Dad could feel out the prospects of building custom homes for billionaires. I wanted a seasonal job, a distraction. The resort's cool in a rustic way. Spotty Wi-Fi and barely any cell service."

Bethany made a face, then scooted closer, her soft breast pushed against my upper arm. "Limited access to the Internet seems untenable for you."

"It was a long time ago."

I ground my teeth against the memories. Tess's straight and pulled-back chestnut hair looked like the girl I knew that summer after I graduated from Briarwood Academy, a prestigious *young men's* high school north of Seattle.

I first saw her at a summer schmooze party my parents threw at an upscale seafood restaurant here called The Patio. With colorful sunsets above pristine waters and deep green forests, the San Juan Islands were home year-round to wealthy retirees from everywhere, as well as vacation-homeowners and sailboat travelers in the warm months. There was money here, and my dad wanted to expand the business, not that he needed to.

Tess was a server, and I hardly dared to look at her. My older brother Patrick would have been merciless if he'd caught me staring. The idea of a girl who looked like her with a guy who looked like me, my face permanently damaged by and, at the time, still plagued with teen acne, would have been a topic of tortured ribbing for weeks. But I couldn't stop myself from stealing glances as she moved with grace and confidence. Two things I lacked completely.

Mrs. Curtis's memorial was short and joyful, even with the sniffing, my own included. She would have wanted joyful.

"Do you want me to call for a dinner reservation somewhere?" Bethany asked while we stood outside the little chapel in the late-September sunshine after the service. Fellow mourners streamed around us.

"I have to meet with Mrs. Curtis's attorney, and I don't know how long I'll be." I checked the time, the dappled sunlight glinting off my polished steel Rolex, a gift to myself with part of my recent annual bonus. It was almost four o'clock. "Do you mind heading back to The Elliot Inn? You could schedule something in the spa and charge it to the room. We'll grab dinner in the hotel restaurant later."

Bethany smiled. "Okay, text me when you're finished, and I'll meet you in the bar."

"Thanks, B." I kissed her temple and handed her the rental car keys.

"You don't need the car?"

"Nah, most things here are walkable. I could use some air to clear my head." I sucked in a full breath, the air tinged with the smell of evergreens and the sea, so different from the food, coffee, and air-freshener smells of my software engineering job in San Jose.

She kissed my cheek and placed a comforting hand on my arm before walking away. We were friends, and though we were occasionally naked together, it would only ever be friendship.

Spotting Mr. Bergin, I went to say hello. He owned the hardware store in town, and I saw him a lot the year I worked for Mr. Rose. I was constantly picking up a new tool or supply before my morning ferry ride from Perry Harbor to Anna Island. Something always needed fixing or building or painting.

I grew up around construction and gained my skills working minor jobs at Dad's sites. My father owned one of the

largest construction companies in the Pacific Northwest and specialized in building green homes and office buildings.

At the time of the tech boom, Mom and Dad were in the right place at the right time. Dad had trained in LEED construction and environmentally friendly building practices. Mom, the firm's interior designer, had a natural talent for seeing the soul and purpose of a space when others didn't.

Together, they became a top choice for building, designing, and remodeling Seattle area offices for the growing tech industry. At the time, existing office buildings didn't have showers or kitchenettes. They didn't have spaces for a foosball table or a collection of sofas to create the communal environment that tech employers demanded, not to mention the power sources and cabling. Companies with more money than they knew what to do with paid top dollar for Mom's design and Dad's environmentally conscious approach to construction.

Their small company grew exponentially overnight, right along with the tech industry.

"Haven't heard from you in a while. You doin' okay?" Mr. Bergin asked as I joined him.

"I'm good, sir. How's the hardware business?"

"She'll always be my first love. Don't tell the missus I said that." He winked and nodded toward a group of women chatting a few feet away. "That fancy Silicon Valley job still treating you well?"

I hesitated. "It's not my first love." An image of a younger Tess stretched out beneath me in the firelight flashed in my mind. God, she was beautiful that night with her chestnut hair spread across the pillow and my arm tucked under her head. Her rapid breath brushed my cheek, and a warm blush colored her chest and neck. Her deep blue eyes were vulnerable and cautious as she granted me the privilege of loving her for the first time.

My breath caught, and I had to cough to cover it. "It's a lot of work and not nearly as fun as repair projects with Mr.

Rose.” I nodded toward where my former boss stood on the far side of the chapel lawn.

“Mr. Rose? That’s what made them fun?” He grinned. “I doubt even Silicon Valley has coworkers as pretty as your Tess?”

I glanced down. She was never my Tess, and she never would be.

“No one’s as pretty as Tess.”

He nodded. “Good to see you, Drew. Don’t be a stranger.” He squeezed my shoulder before strolling toward his wife.

The breeze through the tall evergreens near the chapel rustled like the first time I knew I would fall for her.

On my first day at the resort, Mr. Rose had me haul firewood from the top of the hill to the holding shed behind the row of eight waterfront cabins below. Wood stoves or fireplaces heated the simple rooms and the small sauna near the edge of the chilly sea. Firewood was essential and, fortunately, plentiful.

I backed the old truck to the edge of the existing stacks and added the wood from the bed. After a few minutes, a girl entered my view near the front of the truck. Well, not a girl, a ponytail. It swayed with her quick strides, and the deep brown strands shone in the broken rays glinting through the old-growth trees stretching the hillside behind us.

I stopped breathing as she turned toward me, her arms wrapped around a clipboard, and tapping a pen against her chin, concentrating. She was even more fascinating than when I saw her at my parents’ party two weeks before.

She startled to see me and tripped but caught herself while my legs stayed frozen. Standing to her full height, she smiled and blushed. Our eyes met, and something happened. Everything stilled to an unusual calm, and I found the words to introduce myself without sounding like a total idiot.

I hadn’t returned to the resort or these quiet islands since that summer after high school. My parents’ marriage finally

imploded later that year and returning to the scene of countless fights seemed like a bad idea.

I didn't want to come back here, anyway. This was where we worked together, where I loved her, where I'd ruined it, and where she left me. We went to different colleges, headed down different paths. For months that first year, I begged her to talk to me. She never returned one email, call, or text. It was just as well. People who looked like her didn't stay with people who looked like me.

In the years since our summer, there had been women in my life, but I knew that was more about my money or having fun. My damaged face was still scarred and pocked underneath my full beard, but women were willing to overlook it for a while. No one had lasted.

“Mr. McAlister.”

I turned from my thoughts, blinking at the man and his outstretched hand.

“Jose Gutierrez, Mrs. Curtis's attorney. We spoke on the phone,” he said.

“Yes, Mr. Gutierrez.” We shook hands. “You said you wanted to speak with me after the service. I'm available whenever you're ready.”

“Wonderful. I'm collecting the other parties, and we'll meet at my office in—” he glanced at his watch “—half an hour? It's the old brick building across from the bookstore on Commerce Street.”

“I'll be there.”

TESS

MR. GUTIERREZ'S OFFICE WAS EVERYTHING YOU WOULD expect a small-town attorney's office to be. Framed diplomas and awards prominently displayed on the walls. A dark wood desk and credenza showing their age and matching shelves full of thick books with gold lettering on the spines. A conference table filled the space near a window overlooking the street below.

I greeted Mr. Rose, who arrived shortly after I did, and motioned for him to sit at the head of the table, diagonal to me. Mr. Rose had been the closest to Mrs. Curtis and deserved the seat of honor at whatever this was. I poured him a glass of water from the clear pitcher at the center of the table.

"Do you know what this is about?" I asked.

"The will."

I furrowed my brow. "Why would I be here for that?"

"She didn't have any remaining family and no children of her own. You were like a daughter to her."

My head suddenly swam with the possibility of Mrs. Curtis leaving me a tangible memory of the resort. I would cherish anything from it.

I hoped Mr. Rose would keep the place. I could help if he wanted. My current unemployed status sprang to the forefront of my mind. Most of all, I hoped he wouldn't sell to some asshole who'd build a dozen zero-lot-line mansions on the lush ten acres of waterfront property. It couldn't be avoided forever,

but maybe for a while longer. Buildable waterfront on these islands was more valuable every day with sale prices that could tempt almost anyone.

Mr. Gutierrez strode into the space with vigor, followed closely by his paralegal, Elise.

“We’ll get started in a few minutes. We’re expecting one more.” He shuffled a few papers on his desk. Elise nodded at Mr. Rose and me before taking the seat on the other side of me.

With a knock, the door opened, and there was Drew. My lips parted in surprise.

“Mr. McAlister. Come in.” Mr. Gutierrez strode to the conference table.

Drew met my eyes briefly before he looked away with a blank expression. Thankfully, his companion from the funeral was no longer glued to his side. She’d been stylish and stunning in what had to be a couture dress with Michael Kors suede boots. I didn’t want to think about her and who she was to him or how I felt about it.

He looked good, and against my will, a long-dormant warmth simmered in my blood. I shifted to cross my legs against the growing sensations in my core. He was tall, at least 6’2”, and the tailored cut of his dark brown suit accentuated his broad shoulders and trim waist. His clear, hazel eyes still crinkled around the edges when his deep red lips smiled at Mr. Rose, but the beard hiding the marks on his cheeks and the neatly styled short hair were new.

Mrs. Curtis had mentioned a while ago that he graduated from Stanford and got a job in Silicon Valley. They must have exchanged Christmas cards or something.

My brother Lucas once told me he’d been with Drew on a few projects when they worked for the same big tech company where Drew had been a college intern. Luc was in the Seattle office, and they’d met at an intern meet-and-greet during one of his trips down to the San Jose campus. Drew had asked him about me. I was surprised he’d remembered. Lucas had

shocking stories about the users and grabbers in the world of big tech. I was sure Drew fit right in.

“Thank you all for coming on such a sad day. Because some of you live out of town, it was best to gather now.”

Mr. Rose nodded.

“I’ve called you each here for the reading of the Last Will and Testament of Mary Rentz Curtis.”

My hands shook, and I gripped them tighter, trying to stifle the grief one more time. Drew appeared calm before he coughed and swiped at his cheek.

It surprised me how affected he was. I mean, the Drew I knew liked Mrs. Curtis and Mr. Rose, but he only worked at the resort that one summer. Other students had helped in the summers since, and none of them were here.

It felt strange like I was missing something.

“Mrs. Curtis had a living trust with Mr. Rose being the successor trustee, which frees us from a probate court wait. We are ready to execute the will and transfer property to her designated beneficiaries.”

Mr. Gutierrez shuffled a few papers and began reading.

“To Mr. David Rose, I leave the set of easy chairs in the owner’s cottage of the Anna Island Resort. Also, all the kitchen dishes, cookware, and portable appliances, along with the colorful knit blankets stored in the linen closet of same cottage.” Mr. Rose nodded.

“To Theresa Bakker, my sweet Tess, I leave an undivided one-half interest in the Anna Island Resort, including all other assets, property, land, owned equipment, and supplies therein, as well as the owner’s cottage also on the property.”

Wait. What?

“To Drew McAlister, a good man, I leave the other undivided one-half interest in the Anna Island Resort, including all other assets, property, land, owned equipment, and supplies therein, as well as the owner’s cottage also on the property.”

The *good man*, Drew, finally appeared as surprised as I did.

“In order to take full ownership of the property, Mr. McAlister and Ms. Bakker must reside on the property for a period of one year to make any needed repairs and host the coming year’s reservations, which are already booked. After one year, if both parties agree, the resort can be sold in part or in whole, and Mr. McAlister and Ms. Bakker will be entitled to split any profit accordingly.”

“If Mr. McAlister and Ms. Bakker cannot live on the property for the period of one year, they forfeit their individual interest in the resort, and any profits from a sale will be donated to the charity of Mr. David Rose’s choosing.”

Mr. Gutierrez lowered the paper and raised his eyes to Drew and me. “There’s more legal jargon, but that’s the gist. Questions?”

More than a couple of beats passed in silence.

“Drew and I inherited the resort?” I whispered, suddenly dizzy.

Drew audibly inhaled, rubbing a finger against his lips.

“Yes.” Mr. Gutierrez said.

“And we *both* have to live on-site for the next year, or it will be sold, and the profits donated?” My mind searched to connect my thoughts, scattered and unclear like a fog.

“Essentially, yes. There is some flexibility, particularly on when the year begins. Mrs. Curtis made an allowance for each of you to handle any commitments and responsibilities.”

“How long?” Drew asked, his demeanor back to calm.

“One month from today’s date. You have a month to make your decision.”

“But this is crazy. When did she write this will?” I asked, still struggling to wrap my mind around the last five minutes.

“A few weeks ago.” He read the top page. “September first.”

It was too much to digest at one time.

Mr. Gutierrez nodded to his assistant. “I know this may be a shock. Elise and I can give you a moment of privacy if you like.”

I was confused and grieved and overwhelmed. I’m sure it showed. “No, no, stay, please.”

Drew said nothing.

I turned to Mr. Rose. “What about you? You worked at the resort for years before Drew and me. If anyone should inherit the resort, it’s you.”

Mr. Rose’s smile was clear in the gray-white whiskers. “I got everything I wanted.”

“But where will you live? She didn’t even leave you the cottage with the apartment in the back. That’s been your home for years. How are you not upset about this?”

Mr. Rose took my hand in his, pronouncing the words gently. “She gave me everything I asked for in that will. She asked me before she wrote it.”

“Some chairs and kitchen gadgets?”

He nodded quietly. “And a set of soft blankets she knitted herself while she looked out to the water and mountains.”

“Mr. Rose. You loved her.” It was a statement, not a question.

His eyes brightened. “She kindly invited me to enjoy her fine cooking on those dishes for years. I even helped to cook when she would let me. I read my favorite novels sitting in those easy chairs on the evenings she quietly knitted beside me. Having those things is all the earthly reminders I need.”

The tears were building, and I needed to focus on the facts before my emotions completely took over. “I don’t understand. Why me and Drew?”

Mr. Rose shook his head. “She was a mystery to the end.”

That was not enough of an explanation.

“Here are photocopies of the relevant sections for you both to review with your legal counsel should you choose.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gutierrez. I’ll do that,” Drew said, then quietly stood and took one of the offered packets. “Was there anything else?”

“You’re leaving?” My voice was sharp, even to my ears. Drew raised his eyebrows.

This was a big deal. He may inherit millions of dollars of property every day. I did not. Wealth had never been a stranger to him like it was to me.

“Can you please wait a minute?” I leaned toward the man who loved Mrs. Curtis more than any of us. “Mr. Rose, where will you go?”

“I can’t stay here, not without her. I’m moving back to Walla Walla. It’s all arranged. I have a nice condo near a vineyard. My kids and grandkids are there. They’ve been asking me to move for a while now.” He glanced up at Drew.

“Just like that?” I asked.

Mr. Rose gentled his rough and calloused hand on my cheek, the way he did when I was upset about something that would always turn out to be nothing. The gesture had been impactful in its sweetness and always calmed me enough to think clearer.

“I’ll stay on at the resort until you two make your decision.” He lowered his hand and patted mine, resting on the table. “This is what Mrs. Curtis wanted. I was with her the day she wrote it all out.” He smiled. “Everything will be okay. Trust her and trust the universe a little here, too.”

She left me the resort. Well, part of it. Slowly, my mind began whirling with ideas, and I felt a pinprick of excitement. I wouldn’t lose it to some developer who’d level the place. I could make the rest of the improvements Mrs. Curtis and I talked about in recent years. Heavy stuff like lofts and roofs would come when I could afford them, but new paint colors, cabinet updates, and other cosmetic changes, along with

upgraded Wi-Fi and point-of-sale software, were all things I could do on my own with the resort's reserves.

I'd have to live here with Drew for a year. That was no small thing, but with boundaries, I was willing to at least try. He could work remotely, fly back to Silicon Valley for important meetings and conjugal visits with his hot girlfriend. He could still do his slick job. I would take care of the resort. I just needed his body. On the property. I needed his body on the property.

I would ignore any other needs I had for his body.

DREW

“CAN YOU WAIT UP?”

Tess rushed toward me from Mr. Gutierrez’s inner office. I had to gather strength to look directly at her.

She was still stunning, with full pink lips, high cheekbones, and glittering blue eyes framed by thick, dark lashes and eyebrows. Her dark brown hair, pulled into a ponytail behind her, still swayed as she walked. In her heels, she was only a couple of inches shorter than me, and her body no longer held the angles of a girl but the supple curves of a woman. Gone were the youthful freckles I had spent too many hours dreaming about, and in their place was the flawless face of determination.

She wasn’t the bright and curious beauty from that summer. I had to stop thinking of her as anything more than someone from the past. There was a time I would have moved the moon for her. But those days were over.

This had to be Mrs. Curtis’s most outrageous idea yet. I told her I wasn’t happy in San Jose. I wanted to get away from the grueling schedule of writing code in that world. But did she honestly think I wanted to chuck it and run a seaside resort for a year? With Tess? No fucking way. It would be stupid to keep the resort, and I wasn’t stupid.

“We need to talk about this. What we’re going to do,” Tess snapped.

“We’re going to sell and give the money to charity.” I kept walking.

She stumbled and looked stricken for a moment before she shuttered it. “You made that decision on your own?”

“Oh, you’re talking to me now?”

She stopped short; her lips flattened into a firm line. I paused.

“This is important, Drew.”

And our time together before wasn’t important? No mistaking that sentiment. My stomach burned.

Her long legs met my strides as I headed for the marble staircase to the first floor of the old courthouse building that was now professional offices.

I turned to her on the landing. “For all I know, you were never going to talk to me again. Hard to run a resort with someone who won’t talk to me.” My voice echoed in the open hall.

Her eyes blazed blue like a fiery flame, and her nostrils flared.

I didn’t falter. “You alone decided to break off all contact after that day, Tess. I tried to explain, to apologize. But you shut me down. You’re not pissed I’m deciding on my own. You’re pissed that you’re not.”

She blinked. “I’m entitled to make 50 percent of the decisions for this resort, and I don’t want to sell. I won’t agree.”

My mirthless snort bounced off the gleaming marble, and I resumed my pace down the stairs and out the heavy wood door. “I work in California, Tess. My job is important. The projects I work on could make a real difference in the life of this planet and the people on it. I won’t throw it away to live on that island.”

“It’s just a year. You could work remotely. I’ll beef up the Wi-Fi. You could fly back for meetings every week or whatever. You can afford it.” Her eyes flashed with something.

Yeah. Dig at my money, sweetheart. Like I care.

“You work in the wine country, Tess, three hundred miles away. You can’t live on the island either.”

“How do you know where I work?” Her brows knitted together.

“Your brother Lucas told me at the service.” I rubbed my hand down my beard, hopefully distracting her from my slipped reveal. I was never a good liar.

Her brother was a lead developer in the Seattle office of the tech giant where I worked back when I was still an intern. We weren’t friends, exactly, but we’d been on some of the same projects. Once, I’d worked up the nerve to ask him about Tess when I realized who he was. He remembered I’d worked with her, though he clearly didn’t realize I’d hurt her, or I doubt they would have invited me back for that second intern year. Lucas Bakker was smart, knew his way around tough people and tough tech, and garnered respect and influence.

Mrs. Curtis was the one who told me about Tess. She did it almost every time I spoke to her since that summer. It was painful, but I never asked her to stop. Instead, I clung to the information and the imagined connection we still had.

“I don’t work three hundred miles away,” Tess said through gritted teeth.

“What about the winery?”

She turned to the side. Her gaze followed a passing car on the main road through town.

“Screw it,” she said, low to herself, then looked at me directly. “I got fired yesterday.”

“What happened?” I asked as she walked to a bench nearby and sat with a sigh.

“Does it matter?” Her eyes snapped to mine with the question. “The point is, I need a job, and one just landed in my lap. When the universe gives you exactly what you need, you grab it with both hands.”

“Tess, you haven’t spoken to me for six years. And now that *you* want something from *me*, I’m supposed to jump like a

lovesick puppy? I'm not one of your frat guys. I'm done."

She held her chin high with the firm set of her jaw. "Are you done with Mrs. Curtis too?"

I paused.

"You're in her will. My guess is there's more to that story, but right now, I don't care. All I care about is the resort," she said.

"No, all you care about is you. Where *you* will work, what *you* will do. You don't care how your choices impact anyone else." She blanched at my words.

"My choices?" She lowered her voice. "I didn't realize it was my choice for you to use me that summer."

"Tess, I didn't—"

"Save it. It's over. Mrs. Curtis loved that resort and the people who vacationed there year after year. She watched their kids grow up and come back with their own families. All we have left of her and her love is the resort. And you want to throw it away."

"No, I want to sell it. There's a difference."

Her gorgeous eyes bore into mine. "Who do you think is going to buy it? What do you expect them to do once they have it? You lived under your father's roof your whole life. You expect me to believe you don't know what a developer would do the day after they bought that land?"

"Then we won't sell to a developer. We'll sell it to someone who wants to continue the resort. We can put restrictions on the deed. Make it unappealing to anyone else."

"Mrs. Curtis had bids from companies for years. I'm telling you; they'll buy it and bring in high-priced lawyers to find the loopholes, and they will trash that land."

"I won't let that happen. Regardless of what you think, I cared about Mrs. Curtis, and I care about the resort. But you and me running the place *together*? No way, Tess." I shifted my focus down the sidewalk and took a few steps, attempting to appear more relaxed than I felt.

“Where are you going?” she demanded.

“Back to the hotel. I won’t keep Bethany waiting any longer. She’s *important* to me, and I won’t leave her twisting, wondering what happened.”

“We’re not done here.”

“For today, Tess, yes, we are.”

Seeing her again was a firm reminder. All my fantasies about forgiveness and second chances stopped today. I needed to forget her, forget the resort, once and for all.

I pulled out my phone to send a text.

Me: Hey B. I’m on my way.

Bethany: I just came down to the bar and ordered a drink.

Me: Order a Jameson for me and make it a double.

TESS

I CALLED MY FRIEND REEANN. SHE HAD ALSO BEEN MY YOGA teacher for the past few years and always brought calm. I brought wine. But even conversation with ReeAnn and time in my favorite poses on the mat in her sunny front room didn't ease my broken heart. I couldn't lose the resort. There had to be a way to convince Drew. But with no answers or promising ideas, I'd slunk home to the bed upstairs in my parents' farmhouse.

My room hadn't yet been fully transformed into a guest room or study like my brothers' rooms had. The fairy lights and most of the decorative signs went with me to college and were long gone, but the pictures I'd printed out of high school days and fun remained, stuck randomly around the mirror above the dresser. My best friend, Ally, was in most of them. We'd been friends since elementary school, and she'd been the only one to stand by me when the rumors started to spread senior year after Alicia Warren's boyfriend dumped her and started flirting with me. Alicia and I had been in the same friend group and at a party together the following weekend. During a game of truth or dare after too many wine coolers, she got me to confess who I had a crush on. That Monday, the rumors spread like wildfire that I'd gotten drunk at the party and given that boy and a few of his friends a blow job in the upstairs bathroom.

It wasn't true, but I got more attention than I knew how to handle. Girls, even the ones I'd thought were my friends, started eating lunch at tables that were too full to make room

for me and no longer invited me to walk to Shakey Grounds Café for a snack and an after-school study sesh.

Everyone but Ally. As the year went on, I hung out with a few new people and accepted dates to school dances and to prom, but Ally was the only one I trusted with all my teenage girl secrets.

Our lives went in different directions after high school graduation, and we kept in touch as much as possible over email until it dwindled to a few contacts a year and drinks at The Boathouse when we were both in town, which wasn't often. I crawled into bed that night missing my friend. At times like this, it felt like the world was too heavy to hold up by myself.

“WHAT’S UP, SHORT STUFF?”

Lucas strolled into the big open kitchen the next day.

“When are you heading back?” he asked.

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“No, I enjoy having you around to cook good stuff. Oh, wait. I don't need that anymore. I can cook good stuff myself now, and when I can't, Jo can.” The light in his silvery-blue eyes flashed brighter than usual at the mention of his girlfriend, a gifted chef who was a miracle worker because she taught my useless-in-the-kitchen brother how to do more than boil water.

“Hey, squirt.” Finn strolled in, his fiancée Emily following close behind. They were both dressed in biking clothes and soccer sandals. Quite a look, but their bike shoes with the metal clips embedded were a *no* inside the house.

“Did someone call a family meeting I was unaware of?” I asked, sitting up straight and looking around the now bustling kitchen. My brothers had houses of their own. Why were they raiding Mom's fridge?

Lucas chuckled. “There were leftovers from the farm crew meal that Sweetness cooked yesterday. We're here to eat those

up.”

“Where is Jo?” I asked while Lucas rooted through the fridge.

“The Elliot. Kaylie, the pastry chef that replaced her, isn’t feeling well, so Jo’s been filling in.”

“How long are you staying?” Emily asked. “Do you have time for some shopping? Or we could hit Seattle on your way home.” She carried a stack of plates from the cabinet to the island.

“I have the time, but not sure if I have the money right now.”

“Already spent your clothing budget, Tess? You gotta learn to pump the brakes even when you’re making the big paycheck.” Lucas was one to talk. Though he had a lot of money, and I mean *a lot*, having sold a couple of apps and a tech platform he developed to big companies in recent years. He never *pumped the brakes* on anything anymore.

My future had also been so bright, like a week ago.

“No overspending. I, um, I’m unemployed.”

Three sets of eyes focused on me.

“What are you talking about?” Finn asked, stopping mid-stride, almost dropping one of the glasses of water in his hands.

“The winery. They fired me.”

“What? Why?” Emily’s hand covered mine, and she leaned across the island. Her blonde ponytail fell forward and her brow furrowed.

“Not the right fit.” I rolled my lips together and tried to avoid too much eye contact.

“That’s bullshit. An excuse. Some employers say that to discriminate against people for their gender or their race, or whatever they want. You’re better off not working for a company that spews bullshit, particularly near wine.” Lucas.

So hot-headed. One minute he's scolding me, and the next he's defending me.

"What do you want to do next? I mean, you don't have to know. I'm just wondering." Finn stammered, and Emily dusted a hand across his shoulder. Our father had pushed Finn about his career and the farm and challenged his hopes for the mountain biking resort that now sat on a rocky corner of the farm. It almost came between them, and I think Finn was trying to be sure he didn't develop the same habits.

"Well, Mrs. Curtis left me the Anna Island Resort."

"What?" The room exploded.

"That's perfect."

"You'd be great at that."

I laughed as a chorus of support echoed off the hard surfaces of the kitchen. I loved my family. "Well, I inherited an undivided one-half interest."

"With Mr. Rose?" Finn asked.

"I wish. She left the other half to Drew McAlister."

"Drew?" Lucas straightened. "I saw him at the funeral. What's that about?"

"I have no effing clue. Mrs. Curtis didn't mention him often, but I guess they were closer than I realized. She put a stipulation in the will that we both had to live at the resort and run it for a year to inherit it fully. If we couldn't do that, it had to be sold, and the proceeds donated."

"That seems ... strange. Is that strange?" Emily asked all of us.

"Mrs. Curtis was like your former neighbors, Miss Nat and Miss Nell. Not exactly eccentric, but usually surprising," I said.

"And you want to stay and run the resort?" Finn asked.

I nodded. "There're things Mrs. Curtis and I talked about doing. Ways to expand. Some of them she's done like the

dining shelter where the food trucks stop, and the cozy new cabins built into the hillside.”

I shifted in my seat at the kitchen island while the others resumed their efforts to eat all the leftovers from yesterday.

“Other ideas she hadn’t gotten to yet. With time, I could do them. All the original cabins need at least a cosmetic overhaul, and I want to do something with the top two floors of the bunkhouse. The first floor is still the office, laundry, and maintenance garage. The second floor is the game room now, but it has the most breathtaking view from the deck built out over the shore. And the third floor is storage, mostly junk, I think. I desperately want to install a new reservation system, too.”

Finn chuckled. “You mean the endless scraps of Post-it notes stuck to the reception desk isn’t the best way?”

Mrs. Curtis hated the idea of a computer and software to manage her reservations and business accounting. She begrudgingly used a desktop machine for the resort email and checking the website occasionally for needed updates. The last time I worked at the resort, the old computer was still running a ten-year-old version of Windows. *If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.*

“What does Drew say about it?” Lucas asked.

“He wants to sell. Says his job is in California, and he can’t move to the island.”

Lucas furrowed his brow. “Is that the only barrier for him, his job?”

My phone chimed from my pocket. I checked the screen and held a finger up to Lucas.

“Hi, Mr. Rose. How are you today?” I tried to keep my voice light but cautious. The funeral was less the twenty-four hours ago.

“I’ve been better. Can you get over to the resort a-sap?” He pronounced it a-sap, not A-S-A-P. Always did.

The clock on the wall said it was a little after noon. “I think if I hurry, I can walk on the last ferry before the lunch

break. Could you pick me up on the resort side?”

“If you can’t catch a ride with Drew, call, and I’ll come get you.”

“Drew’s coming?”

“Yes, he should be on the same boat.”

LIKE HE SAID, a late model blue sedan was in line for the Anna Island Ferry when I arrived. The ferryboat held about twenty-five cars and ran every thirty minutes across the narrow shipping channel between Perry Harbor and Anna Island.

“Thanks for the lift, Luc.” I hopped out of my brother’s fancy Mercedes and pulled on the hood of my Eddie Bauer rain jacket. The sky was gray, and a soft drizzle filtered down from the heavy clouds.

“Call when you’re on your way back. Jo or I will pick you up.” I waved and shut the door, but Lucas lowered the window. “Hey Tess, it’s going to be okay. If you need anything that I have, let me know.”

I smiled. My brother. He was offering to share his money. He’d invested in Finn’s bike resort. I’m sure he thought I expected him to invest in my resort, also. I didn’t, but it was nice to know I had backup.

Drew waved and reluctantly motioned for me to join him and his girlfriend in the car near the front of the line, past the toll-taker. I declined.

“You’ve already paid,” I shouted across the distance. “I’ll walk on and wait for you in the parking lot on the other side.” I didn’t want to be close to them any longer than necessary. He and his pretty girlfriend, who was *so important*. I wasn’t jealous.

Who was I kidding? I was jealous. She was important; I had been a game, a prize. What was it like to be the woman he was real with, stayed with? More than once, I’d let my mind wander to a world where it hadn’t been a game, and Drew and I had dated and loved for years by now. Stupid. Not my life.

On the other side of the channel, the ride from the ferry dock to the resort was awkwardly quiet after brief introductions.

“It’s beautiful here. I’ve never been before.” *His* Bethany said after a few minutes passed.

“Does your family boat?” A hint of sarcasm edged my voice from the backseat, and Drew sent me a warning glance in the rear-view mirror. Well, excuse me if I was making his *fabulous and important* girlfriend uncomfortable.

“Not really,” she said. “My father’s more into cars. Does your family race?” Peering over her shoulder, she held my gaze a beat longer than was polite. Well, well, what was this? It was like she was sizing me up. Not in a, *you aren’t stealing my boyfriend* way, but in a *be kind to him or deal with me* way. Weird.

“No, we don’t race.”

Her comments went back to telling Drew how pretty it was, even in the misty rain spritzing the windshield, not heavy enough to trigger the automatic wipers but too much to ignore. It was the most frustrating version of PNW rain.

Her voice was kind, not fake, and her smile seemed genuine. She cared about Drew, and he cared about her. Whatever needs his body brought out in mine, I would ignore. Contrary to what girls in college said, I wasn’t into stealing boyfriends. And Drew got everything he wanted from me six years ago.

We pulled into the resort, and Mr. Rose swept out of the office, followed by Mr. Gutierrez. That wasn’t a good sign.

Another man I didn’t know, pudgy in a slick dark suit and slicker smile under a thick head of white hair, strolled over from the water’s edge. Two other men in work pants and boots stood under the awning by the office, nodding and pointing to large sheets of paper they held while a man smoking a cigarette walked with measured strides along the shore.

I jumped out of the car. “Mr. Rose. What’s going on?”

His eyes flashed. “Mr. Boyd. These are the owners.” Drew closed his door, and Bethany rounded the front to join him. Mr. Boyd shook their hands as if they were the couple who owned the place. He glanced at me with a flash of confusion and then interest. Ugh.

“Drew and Tess own the resort.” Mr. Rose placed his hand on my shoulder.

“There’s no smoking in the public spaces. Only in the designated areas up the hill.” Drew pointed to the man who appeared to be pacing off the amount of water frontage.

Mr. Boyd’s eyes flashed. “Of course. Hey Johnson!” He yelled to the two men with the large sheets of paper. “Tell my son to put out the smoke and hold on to the butt. These nice people don’t want litter.” He winked at Drew.

“Can we help you?” Drew asked.

“Well, I’m here to help you.” Drew’s jaw clenched as he stared at the unknown man. Bethany stood like a sentinel beside him. “I lease the ten acres of land on the other side of the hill there for logging.” I glanced at Mr. Rose with my brow furrowed.

“*You* also own that land now,” he said.

Folding my arms over my chest, I rubbed the base of my neck with one hand. I didn’t want to give too much away, but I didn’t know Mrs. Curtis owned that land. I always assumed someone else did when I saw the logging trucks each summer, followed by the sapling plantings to replace the felled trees.

“If you’re here to renegotiate the terms of your lease, we’re still working with our attorneys to settle the estate.” Drew’s voice was more confident than mine.

“Oh, I was told it wouldn’t go to probate.”

Mr. Gutierrez spoke. “It isn’t. However, the will was executed yesterday. Mrs. Curtis’s heirs need time to meet with their personal representation.”

Mr. Boyd curved his lips. “I see. Well, I’m eager to move forward with the purchase. Perhaps it makes the most sense for

all the attorneys to get together at once and sort it out. I'll buy the whiskey." His eyes gleamed under bushy white eyebrows, and his slick smile left me feeling cold. Give him a beard and a thick, black coat laced with sheep's wool, and he would look like an evil Santa stealing toys and loving it.

"We haven't listed the property yet. Accepting your offer without determining what the market will bear would be irresponsible. We'll need a few more weeks." Drew's posture relaxed.

"Ah, well, it doesn't matter what the other offers are. I have the right of first refusal. It's there in the copy of the lease I brought with me."

Mr. Gutierrez, his expression stricken, held a set of papers. "He's correct."

DREW

FUCK.

“I’m sorry?” Tess kept her expression pleasant, innocent. Boyd had to take a beat in front of all that beauty. “What is right of first refusal?” she asked.

“It means,” I kept my voice steady while my stomach sank. “Depending on the terms of his lease, when we go to sell the land, he gets first dibs. We can only sell it to someone else if he doesn’t want it. And I’m guessing he wants it.”

He revealed a smile that would put any seedy politician to shame. “She’s a pretty one, but you’re the smart one.”

What the hell? No way that insult made it past Tess.

Her eyes were wide, and I felt her vibrating from a few feet away. “What do you plan to do with all this pristine waterfront?” she snapped.

He stepped closer and leaned in as if she was a toddler. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, he spanned the other over the resort like Willy Wonka. “I’m going to build big, expensive houses. Won’t it be magical? Folks will stand in line to buy them for more than asking price. In honor of Mrs. Curtis, I’d be happy to give each of you a right of first refusal. You’ll have to pay fair market, but I’ll reserve your spots at the front of the line so you can take your pick of lots.”

Her expression was murderous. She glanced at me, then sideways at Boyd.

“Fuck. Off,” she whispered to the man as she shrugged out of his hold and stormed toward the safety of the resort office.

He startled, then giggled. Giggled! “She’s feisty. I like it. And what a looker.” He whistled and stared after her. “I better keep her away from the job site, or the boys won’t get anything done.”

Bethany brushed my arm. “I think I’ll go check on her.” Her eyes were cold, staring at the man before she followed Tess. Her determined strides ate up the grass-covered ground.

“Well, now that the cat’s out of the bag, and the pussy too,” he grinned. “I believe we men can come to a reasonable plan for purchase.”

“Excuse us a moment,” I said. “Mr. Rose, Mr. Gutierrez, could I speak with you privately in the office?”

“Headed into the pussycat pen. Be careful you don’t get clawed.” Boyd laughed at his joke. “I’ll be with my boys there when you’re ready. Take your time.”

Inside, Tess paced like a caged animal. Bethany sat in a straight-back chair nearby, legs crossed and eyes wide.

They both turned at the sound of the bell above the door. “Why would she do this? Is this normal?” Tess asked.

“It is common,” Mr. Gutierrez explained. “Not in cases like this, though. It’s typically done to attract reliable renters. A homeowner will give a renter right of first refusal in their lease, so if the owner decides to sell the house, the renter has the chance to buy it instead of moving. The idea is that renters have time to save for a down payment, but it rarely works out that way.”

His comment only added to the confused state of the room.

“She needed the money that lease brought in.” Mr. Rose’s voice was hoarse, and his expression dazed. “That bastard, her husband, left her with nothing but this resort and a pile of debt. She loved this place and would’ve sold her soul before selling any part of it.”

Tess, who'd resumed her pacing, narrowed her gaze at me. "I guess you're happy."

"What? Why would you think that?"

She shook out her hands at her side to release anxiety. She'd done it that summer whenever a guest was rude or inappropriate. But this was the first time I'd seen her do it recently. Through the funeral, reading the will, and our brief discussion on the street where she told me she got fired, she hadn't needed to shake her hands like she was doing now. Her frustration and anger pointed in my direction.

"We already have a buyer. So easy to sell. You could stay an extra day or two, sign papers, and never have to come back," she said, her eyes blazing.

"Tess, would you give me a minute to think, please?" She paused her pacing briefly to glare.

"Mr. Gutierrez, can I see that copy?" I stepped closer.

He handed it over. "In exchange for a very generous lease payment each year, Mr. Boyd received the right of first refusal should this property be sold. The parcel he leases is ten acres, and the resort sits on the adjacent ten acres."

"What if we just sell him the land he leases?" Tess's words were quick, her eyes still wide.

"The will stipulates it must stay as one parcel for the first year. And though technically, we may find a way to break it up and argue his right is only to the leased land, the court frowns on changes in these cases. Too much history of owners trying to cheat renters out of their due. It's a substantial risk, and I'm not sure it's the best course."

I ran my hand through my hair. The best course was right there in black and white.

I handed the paper back to Mr. Gutierrez and looked out the office window to the gray day. A bald eagle circled above the shoreline, and in my mind, I heard the gentle swish of the small waves that occasionally lapped the pebbled shore from a passing boat. It had been a constant rhythm to my summer with Tess. The memories stabbed, but they didn't mar the

undeniable beauty in front of me. Places like this, open to everyone, were becoming rarer every year as the temptation of money became harder to withstand.

Mr. Gutierrez continued, “The right of refusal has a time limit, an expiration.”

“When is that?” Tess’s words sounded frantic.

“It’s a twenty-year term,” he said, and Tess crumpled. “From the start of the lease, which was about nineteen years ago.” Her head popped up. “To prevent Mr. Boyd from buying the property, you can’t sell until ...”

“Next December.” I exhaled and faced them.

Tess straightened. “That’s fourteen months. A little more than a year. It’s like the term of the will. We have to do this, Drew. To keep that slime ball off this land. I’m all in. What about you?”

Fuck.

“YOU’RE DOING the right thing, Drew.” Bethany’s voice was soothing from the passenger seat. I wasn’t sure about all this, but there was no other way to protect the resort. No matter what Tess believed, I cared about it, and I didn’t want to see it destroyed.

“Thanks for everything, B. I honestly had no idea there’d be drama.”

“I know, right? It’s like a Netflix movie.” She wagged her eyebrows then gazed out the car window as we sat on the small open ferry chugging back to Perry Harbor. Tess had stayed behind to talk with Mr. Rose.

“This is weird, moving across the water like this. If I focus on the distance, the edges blur, and it looks like I’m driving across the waves.”

I grinned and shook my head. “You need to get out more, B.”

“That’s true. Now that you’re moving a thousand miles away, I’ll have to find a new fuck buddy.”

“Jeezus, blunt much?”

She laughed and punched my arm resting on the console between us. “I am gonna miss you, though.”

“It’s a year. And it isn’t like I won’t be back. I’ll fly down for meetings. If you haven’t met Mr. Right yet, maybe reserve a couple *friendly benefit* nights for me.”

“Nope, I’m turning over a new leaf. All or nothin’ bucko.”

I grabbed her hand and brought it to my lips. “Thanks for everything, B.”

Her eyes sobered, and her smile was a bit sad. “You already said that.”

MY BOSS WASN’T THRILLED. When I told him I had to work primarily from the San Juan Islands on the Washington coast for the next year, he scoffed and said he needed to work from Cancun, but that didn’t mean it would happen.

After a brief meeting with my HR rep, he agreed. And I was driving my Porsche Cayenne E-Hybrid up the picturesque California coastline. It made the trip a day longer, but the Pacific Coast Highway was too scenic to skip. The late October colors were everywhere, and my cat, Buster, was riding shotgun on my laptop case.

Yes, I had a cat. A single man can have a cat, and Buster was a boss. Once he forgave me for having the vet cut off his balls, we worked out a symbiotic relationship. I kept him fed, and he patrolled my apartment for intruders in between his rigorous nap schedule.

It may’ve been more interesting if I’d made up a story about how an old girlfriend left Buster to me when she took her cold, dead heart to the arms of another man. Nah. Dude just showed up one day, dirty and hungry. His striped, orange coat was matted along his thin frame.

I didn't have a cold, dead heart, so I sliced off a piece of the leftover ahi from the night before and gave it to him with watered-down half-and-half. The fucker was still asking me for that meal.

I can neither deny nor confirm that I occasionally bought a couple of extra pieces of sashimi for him with my regular sushi takeout. If I didn't, he'd meow and howl the entire night. I stood firm on the half-and-half, though.

My phone chimed, and I tapped the button on the steering wheel to answer the call.

"Hello. I'm driving."

"Yes, I know," Bethany said. "How's Buster and day two of the drive on this fine Monday?"

"He's good. Trying to hide it, but I think he's totally stoked for this road trip."

"Well, I called to tell you I've replaced you."

"Already? Who's the lucky guy?"

"My new vibrator. It arrived today. He's not as handsome as you, but he'll do."

"That must be one ugly vibrator, B."

"Drew, for the last time, you are hot. Your body is ridiculous, and I should know. You're the only one who doesn't think so."

"Right. Thanks for the ego stroke."

"Well, soak it up. I won't be stroking anything else of yours anymore."

"Ha. Stay classy, B," I chuckled.

"Baby, I'm all class."

"Was that the only reason you called?" I asked.

"Actually, no," she said, her voice more serious. "I dropped off your keys at the property management company on my way into work this morning."

"Cool. Thanks."

The movers came last week, so Buster and I camped in my empty apartment for my last days in the office. He'd been confused, and I tried to tell him we weren't broke, but he still seemed worried.

"You have officially moved out of Silicon Valley." She paused. "Take care of yourself, Drew."

"It's a year. You'll see me soon. I'll be back for the quarterly project review in a few weeks. I'll buy you the biggest peppermint latte you can stomach."

"We'll see. Okay, I gotta go. I have an actual date tonight, and he doesn't require batteries. Gotta get my tits up," she said.

"A date? Not a hang or a group thing. Serious."

"Yep, and you don't know him. He's not in tech. I met him at the grocery store, of all places." Her voice sounded different.

"B, you're beautiful and smart and amazing. Make sure he treats you that way."

She paused. "Right back at you, buddy."

TESS

THANKFULLY, MR. ROSE WAS WILLING TO STAY FOR THE weeks it took us to get our shit together. Drew would be here tomorrow, and Mr. Rose planned to leave by the weekend. A moving company picked up his things a couple of days ago, and the pod-type container would wait for him at his new condo. The pod with Drew's stuff arrived yesterday and sat in the driveway waiting to be unloaded.

In the past three weeks, my brothers helped me move my things from central Washington, Mr. Rose and I donated most of the remaining original furniture, and I was slowly working through closets.

Drew and I debated who would take what part of the owners' cottage. The front of the house was larger and reflected the original space. The back apartment had been created from a couple of rooms and a two-car garage when Mr. Rose agreed to stay full time.

Drew said I should take the front because I liked to cook more than he did, and the kitchenette in the back apartment would be an insult. I argued he would be working and living there, so he needed the extra bedroom and space of the larger side.

We compromised. He took the front. I took the back. And we agreed to share the larger kitchen. There was an internal door between the two living spaces that would give me access. I'd find a way to cook when he wasn't around. We both had to live here, but that didn't mean we had to spend time together.

I'd always assumed Mr. Rose and Mrs. Curtis were more than coworkers. Mrs. Curtis didn't share much about herself or her past, so it made sense they didn't broadcast a relationship. But I bet that internal door was opened daily. I smiled to think of the two wonderful people sharing their lives in every way.

The Anna Island Resort consisted of the cape-style owners' cottage halfway up the hillside, two rows of cabins below, and a three-story bunkhouse on the water's edge. The row of eight original cabins lined the edge of a long expanse of green lawn stretching in front to piles of driftwood and the pebbled shore. Between the bunkhouse and those cabins, a small sauna sat close to the water, and there was a group shelter with grills, a gas crab pot for cooking the day's catch, and a crab cleaning station. All crab preparation was done outside by necessity. The smell of crab lingered for weeks if they were cooked inside.

Several yards behind the row of original cabins were six new cabins rising on stilts to fit snugly into the steep hillside. Surrounded by dense evergreens, these cabins were secluded and peaceful. With tall ceilings and windows that opened against thick conifer branches, they were more like treehouses and would accommodate the weekenders that made up the off-season reservations. That left the original ones by the water's edge available for upgrade work. I had several months until the summer season started, and I planned to do as much as possible.

"Ready for a break, Tess? Come and eat lunch." Mr. Rose called from the door of cabin one.

"I have a little more work here. I'll be right there."

"Tess, there's more to do in this cabin than one person can handle in a day. You need to learn to stop and rest."

I agreed and put down the supplies I was using to scrub years of dust and grime from the concrete floors. I wiped my hands and grabbed my coat for the walk back to the owners' cottage. My cottage. Mine and Drew's cottage. Wow. That sounded weird in my brain. No way I was saying it aloud.

"You're making progress," Mr. Rose said.

“Yeah, but I have a schedule, and I’m falling behind. My body hasn’t gotten used to the work. I’m sleeping more. I read four pages of a romance novel last night and fell asleep at nine o’clock.”

Mr. Rose grinned. “I’ve seen your checklist, Tess. It may be unrealistic.”

“You’re probably right, but I need to try.”

“Once Drew gets here, it’ll go faster. His back is stronger than mine.”

“Mr. Rose, you’re as fit as ever. And Drew won’t be helping much with the labor. He said he’d provide funding, maybe a hand here and there, but he’s keeping his software job, so he’ll be working in the cottage all day.”

Mr. Rose’s eyebrows met his hairline.

“Which is fine with me. He supplies the financial equity; I supply the sweat equity. It’s an arrangement I’m hoping will last awhile and keep this resort out of grabby developer hands.”

The savory scent of tomato soup and grilled cheese made with the last of the French bread I baked a few days ago had my stomach growling the moment we stepped into the cozy cottage.

Mr. Rose had never been talkative, and we ate in companionable silence seated in camp chairs in the empty dining space of the front apartment. From here, we could see out the big picture window to the resort below, the gray water of the Salish Sea, and the low clouds hovering around the green mountains beyond.

My tired body needed this break. Each of the new cabins had a back deck and a small hot tub. One of those was absolutely in my future. Tonight, since all the weekend guests had checked out yesterday. The off-season was almost exclusively weekend reservations, so during the week, the hot tubs were all mine.

“I can help with dishes,” I said.

“I’ll get it. You go back to work. Let me know if you need my help to move things. I’m doing my usual litter check around the upper cabins now that folks have checked out. Plastic bags, candy bar wrappers, the plastic wrapping around cigarette packs, it all ends up in the wind and then, in the water.” He shook his head.

“Thanks, Mr. Rose. I should be good. Emily’s coming over after her shift at the spa to help me think through design and furnishings.”

THE DAY WAS long and over quickly at the same time. My first goal was updating the older cabins because it was mostly cleaning and painting. For these rainy, dark months, it was a good place to start. It would be too much to start out remodeling the bunkhouse anyway.

While Drew was back in California preparing to move and likely indulging in marathon sex with Bethany, I’d already inventoried each of the lower cabins’ contents and what needed to be replaced. In every cabin, there was something. A new stove, kitchen table, sofa, or all three. And they all needed new rugs over the painted concrete floors.

With Mr. Rose’s help, I donated or dumped what had to go. The cabins were bare bones inside now, but it allowed me to picture the space I was heading toward. Emily and my brother Finn had researched sturdy furnishings to use in the yurts of the mountain biking resort they opened last summer. I’d capitalize on their work.

“Tess, are you in here?” I finished cleaning the bathroom and heard Emily at the door.

“Hey. I’ll be right out.” I grabbed my bucket of supplies and pulled off my rubber gloves.

Emily stood in the kitchen, taking it in.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I’m trying to figure out the chain of events on building this place.”

It was obvious the spaces were built in stages. Each original cabin, built in the mid-nineteen-hundreds, had a front room with a concrete foundation and three-foot concrete stem walls around the base. Those low walls were topped by large, round logs to the roofline.

They were about the size of a studio apartment with a dramatic river-stone fireplace for heat. Later, actual bedrooms and bathrooms with running water were added, and those first rooms were reconfigured into kitchens and living spaces.

“They’re each unique,” Emily said after I walked her through them all.

“This place was first built as lodging for working fishermen. Nothing was fancy, and I want to stick with the rustic, cozy vibe.”

“Have you had a structural engineer out to inspect it?”

I nodded. “Drew made that happen with his dad’s connections. Everything is sound except the last two shake roofs. Mr. Rose kept the buildings in decent shape. And going forward, I will. Since Lucas helped set me up with a reasonable satellite Internet plan, when I’m not falling asleep to romance novel love scenes, I’ve been falling asleep studying everything from installing kitchen cabinets to the best price for PVC piping.”

Emily laughed. “You may be reading the wrong love scenes.” She winked. “I have fabric and material samples I’ll bring by when you’re ready to talk furnishings. You can do a bunch here.”

I CLEANED MY DINNER DISHES, showered, and put on sweats for the walk to the last cabin in the cool night air. Mr. Rose was staying in the first cabin until the weekend, and this one felt more secluded than the others. Lifting the cover, I heard the soft sound of light rain tapping the roof over the deck as the warm water swirled. I stripped out of my sweats and stepped into the steaming, bubbling serenity. My sore muscles

instantly relaxed as the currents whirled against my naked skin, and I closed my eyes.

My thoughts whirled, too. Drew would be here tomorrow, and my year with him would begin. An ache formed in my chest. Could I survive a year of constant reminders that I fell hard but hadn't meant anything to him?

From the beginning, he looked at me differently than high school boys. He talked to me about everything, took me crabbing on one of the resort's rowboats for guests, and even taught me how to do some handyman jobs, like replacing roofing shakes. A skill I'd used frequently in years since.

I still remember my heart cracking at his deafening silence in response to cruel words. I'd trusted him and let him past the protective wall I built during my rumor-filled senior year in high school. He was the first person I trusted since Ally, and he'd played the long game, investing an entire summer to get laid by the unattainable girl. I'd been a naive fool, and that day, I vowed to be different.

I shut the door on that girl and left for Washington State University. College guys hadn't been any better, but at least I hadn't expected them to be, thanks to Drew.

Since then, there had been a couple of one-night stands and even a short-term boyfriend, but I hadn't let anyone in again. Loss overwhelmed me, and a tear slipped down my cheek.

Enough. It'd been years since I cried over a man, and I wasn't starting now. One year. Then he would leave. I'd get through the year by putting as much distance between us as possible. I was no one's fool anymore.

DREW

I STOOD FROM MY KITCHEN TABLE, WHICH I USED AS A DESK, and poured my fourth cup of coffee. Buster looked up from his current napping spot on my laptop case and gave me the eye. “Yes, I’m getting another. Stop judging me.”

I was settling in, but sleep had been challenging the two nights since I arrived. Images of a younger Tess assaulted my dreams. We hadn’t talked, though I caught glimpses of her across the property or out the window when she passed by the cottage. The door between our apartments stayed firmly closed, much to Buster’s consternation. He felt it was his duty to investigate and patrol everywhere.

She was avoiding me, but she would have to talk to me sometime. Mr. Rose left this morning after last night’s windstorm. It was just me and Tess now.

God, there was a time when that was my definition of heaven, alone at the resort with Tess. I had it once for two days before everything went to shit.

Deep fucking shit.

My brother Patrick came to the island on our last day that summer. Said he wanted to meet this Tess I wouldn’t stop talking about. When he arrived, we were by the water, where I kissed her with a promise to text and call and see her again if she wanted it. She said she did, and my heart damn near came out of my chest.

I introduced them, and he took a picture of us. Her body snug to my side, her head leaned against my shoulder, and her

hand on my stomach in a half-hug. Clearly, more than friends. She left to check something in one of the cabins, and Patrick subtly punched my stomach as we walked toward the covered space off the bunkhouse. I locked up the resort's small boats stored there, and Patrick grinned at me the whole time.

“What?” I asked.

“Damn, little bro. She's so fucking hot.” I met his fist bump with a smile, my pride obvious. He was right. She was more than that, but she was hot.

“You did the deed. You fucked her, didn't you?”

I shrugged.

“He's all grown up now,” he said with a big, proud grin. “Let me send you this pic I took. You need to post that shit. It's written all over her face, you lucky fuck. College girls see this picture, and they'll give you a ride just to have a taste of what the hot girl had. Not bad for a summer's worth of effort.”

Patrick had never talked to me like that, like the way he did with his friends. And definitely not about girls. He usually made brutal remarks about the scars on my face or laughed at me with his buddies about how I'd never get laid. The change surprised me, and I didn't set him straight or punch him like I should have.

Instead, I smiled my guilt and stood a bit taller. That's when I glimpsed her, a few feet away, wide-eyed. All Patrick said was, “oh shit.”

She'd heard every word he said and every word I didn't.

I tried to apologize in the few remaining hours, reminding her that Patrick was an asshole. I tried to explain that it wasn't like that, but she hadn't believed me and then she was gone.

I rubbed an ache in my chest.

It was a long time ago. We were different people now, and someone had to break the ice. I decided it would be me and went to find my boots.

Stepping into the sunlit fall day, I breathed in the salty, clean air and tried to relax. The small bark-chip path from the

cottage to the main road was thick and wet from the recent rain, and I had to take care as I strolled down to the bunkhouse. Several big pine branches littered the road, and I pulled them to the side. I'd come out later and load them in the old maintenance truck.

No sign of Tess inside the office. There were stacked ledgers and neat piles of paper like she'd been in the middle of organizing and got interrupted.

Back in the sunshine, I heard the banging while the tall evergreens on the hillside swayed in the breeze.

"What are you doing?" I called up to her. She was crouched on the shake roof of cabin seven.

"What does it look like?"

"It looks like you're on a roof without a safety harness."

Her eyes met mine under the brim of her Mariners Baseball cap. She moved forward, where I saw her waist and upper thighs clad in faded jeans and the seatbelt-like straps of the harness. "I'm good." She shook the rope tethering her to the secure D-ring at the apex of the roof.

My eyes were still stuck on the straps cinched over her hips and between her legs. I'd touched her there, kissed her there, and I pictured doing it again. I pushed that image out of my mind.

"Do you need any help?"

"Don't have an extra harness." She moved back and sat on her heels, blocking the tempting view. The wood shakes made a soft clatter as she pushed the replacements to the next spot for repair.

She'd propped the ladder on the side of the cabin, and I climbed to stand on an upper rung. At the front, she bent to hammer a shake in place, and I glanced at her ass, then looked away. All these images were only torturing me.

"What are you repairing?"

"The Sistine Chapel." She didn't flinch.

“Tess. We’re here for a year. It’s what you said you wanted. Is this how it’s going to be?”

“*You* wanted to sell this resort. Turn your back on everything.” She kept her body angled away.

“I’m turning my back?” My voice shot up in shock. “That’s funny coming from you.”

Her eyes snapped to mine and then looked out to the water and Mount Baker in the distance. The sunlight glinted off the glacier on the top. These original cabins had an unobstructed view of the water and the mountain range beyond. The roof was an excellent viewing spot. I knew because I’d done repairs to that same roof and others.

She sighed and lifted her hat to run her long, slim fingers through her hair. Her *short* hair, cut close above her collar in the back with longer straight sections in the front.

“You cut your hair.” My voice was low. I assumed she tucked the ponytail away, but it was gone.

She glanced over her shoulder at me. Her expression blank.

“You look different from ... you look older,” I stammered.

Her eyes returned to her work. “Yeah, well, I wanted something easier, and leaky roofs don’t give a shit what I look like.”

“You’re still beautiful, Tess.” The truth spilled out. She paused a beat, her back rigid, before placing another shake and nailing it down.

“Was there a leak?” I asked, trying to get us back on track.

“Yep,” her lips popped on the P.

“Tess. Seriously?”

She sighed and turned to me, her eyes less guarded.

“It wasn’t too bad. You can check it out. I haven’t finished cleaning up. I needed to patch this hole first. Another storm is coming tonight.”

Inside, I found a pile of wet towels and a dehumidifier humming in the center of the room. A simple pine dresser stood to the side with its drawers pulled open, drying. The walls above the concrete stem foundation were thick wood paneling installed over the outer round logs shiplap style, decades before it was a thing on HGTV. She had wiped the walls dry, and the dehumidifier would do the rest of the work.

The dropped ceiling with woodgrain tiles had seen better days. This last water event hadn't been the first. I pulled out a kitchen chair and climbed up. Raising a tile, I peeked into the void.

“OH, YOU'RE STILL HERE.” Tess stopped short at the door. “What are you doing?” She rushed to the pile of ceiling tiles amassed on the floor by my chair.

“These old tiles need to go. I think the whole drop ceiling should. The rafters are in good shape. We could sand them, stain them, and install better-quality tiles between them to match the pine paneling on the walls. The inspector said these last two cabins with shake roofs should get the new metal roofs like the others. Now's the time to do it all.”

“Those roofs had to be expensive, Drew. I don't want to blow all the money on a roof I can patch.”

“I know what the roofs cost, Tess. I ... have a dad in the business. They're worth it. They're durable. They're energy-star rated and notched for easier installation of solar panels, which I'm thinking we should put on all the roofs once we replace these last two.”

She glanced around, her hands coming to rest on her hips.

I continued like I sold the things. “The vaulted ceiling and exposed beams could elevate the whole aesthetic of the room. And with the dropped ceilings gone, the roofline is high enough to add a sleeping loft above the back bedroom.” I'd tried to talk Mrs. Curtis into doing it every time I had a new roof installed. She liked the idea but said the change would lead to a bigger remodel she wasn't ready for.

Tess raised her eyebrows. “Aesthetic?”

A slight curve danced at the edges of her tempting lips, and I realized I hadn’t seen her smile aimed at me since before that conversation with Patrick years ago. That ache in my chest was back again, but I willed it under control.

“My mom’s still a designer. I’ve heard many conversations about room aesthetics.”

I gave her a minute to absorb and picture the idea in her mind.

I stepped down from the chair. “If money is the issue, it isn’t. I’ll fund the installation above the remodeling amount we already discussed. It will add to the resort’s value.”

“Drew, it’s too much. We’re fifty-fifty here.” She shook her head and raised a hand like she could physically hold me back.

“Tess, you said you were all in and asked me if I was. Well, here I am, all in. You’re a hundred percent, and I’m a hundred percent. Neither of us is fifty-fifty.”

She peered up at the growing hole I was creating. “The statement of a vaulted ceiling and the river-rock fireplace would be all the focal point a room would need to tie it together.”

“Is that a yes?” I asked.

She paused. “Yes. Now, move. You doing labor wasn’t part of our bargain when you agreed to stay here. This is my job.”

“You’re doing everything else. I can do this. I miss working construction, and it clears my head.” I held out my hand to shake on our deal.

She cautiously grasped it and met my gaze. “Fine.”

The brush of her soft skin woke up my dick. I hadn’t seen her smile, and I hadn’t touched her. That simple handshake was the first time in years. My breath caught at the familiar yet new sensation.

She pulled her hand away. “You have other work to do. I can finish in here.”

I blinked. Right. My job. The one I had to work harder at since I was no longer under my boss’s nose fourteen hours a day.

“Yeah. But you don’t have to do this.” I motioned at the mess I’d made. “I started it. I’ll come down later and finish.”

“No, it’s fine. The repairs are done. I have time now. Thank you ... for all that you did.”

“You’re welcome. Um, I’ll make a few calls and see how soon we can get someone to install the new roofs.”

“Okay.” Her quick grin was bigger, her eyes brighter, and for a minute, I was back in a better time.

Tess and I were the only ones who worked at the resort that summer, along with Mrs. Curtis and Mr. Rose. Tess was focus and determination wrapped in magazine cover-girl beauty. She was constantly moving, carrying linens to the laundry, or greeting guests by the road, her blue eyes sparkling in the sunlight. As the weeks continued, I fell deeper into those shimmering pools daily.

Nothing had changed. She still worked hard, and I still fell.

TESS

I WOULD BE FOUND DEAD NEXT WEEK, BURIED UNDER A PILE OF ledgers. I knew Mrs. Curtis kept things, but this was beyond. She'd hidden her dirty little secret behind closed file cabinet doors. Mrs. Curtis was a paper hoarder.

There were ledgers and file folders stuffed in those cabinets that went back years, possibly decades. Hopefully, not thirty-plus years to when she and her husband took over the place. She was orderly in all other aspects of her life that I knew of. The cabins weren't excessively decorated. The landscaping on the grounds was natural, with native plants and flowers.

But clearly, she kept every piece of paper and sticky note about this business. And now it was my job to sort through it for a pattern and enter historical data in the hotel management software I installed on my fancy new laptop. The machine and software were a resort-warming gift from my family.

I was still curious about the cost of those metal roofs. I didn't find any entries for them in accounts payable, but I might have missed a ledger somewhere. So far, her biggest extravagance was the crushed oyster shells she had spread on some of the roads and paths around the resort annually, adding to the beachy vibe.

I had noticed the first two cabins had new roofs a couple of years ago. Then two more had them last year and a couple more this year. They had all been installed in the off-season, so I started reviewing ledger entries in September of those past

years. If I found the name of the company that had done the earlier work, we could use them again if Drew hadn't already booked someone. I didn't find any records in September and moved on to October. A bright orange note caught my eye. It was a flyer for the Anna Island Halloween Walk.

A similar notice had come a couple of weeks ago, but I couldn't remember where I put it. I jumped to the reception desk where I had tucked any non-bill related or non-urgent mail.

There it was. An advertisement for the walk to be held in the park up the road from the resort with cider and treats served at the Anna Island Resort! I checked my watch. Crap, tomorrow was Halloween.

I found her notes about what she had bought for last year's event and threw together a shopping list. Then, for the second day in a row, I abandoned my attempt to organize a sea of papers and hurried out of the office.

"I'm heading to Perry Harbor. I'll be back in a couple of hours," I said to Drew, jogging on the main road by the cottage. He was wet from his morning run in the light drizzle, and it took effort to not stare at the shirt clinging to his chest or the glistening ridges in his thighs as he slowed to a walk. Those were different. Drew had been all sinew and lanky muscles that summer. This was a man. Hard planes and contours everywhere you wanted them. Damn. I closed my eyes to regroup.

"If you hang on a sec, I'll come too," he said. "I need to pick up a couple of office supplies from Mr. Bergin's."

"The hardware store sells office supplies now?"

"Yeah, since no one else in Perry Harbor does. He's more of a general store these days."

Umm. "How do you know?"

He stared for a second. "He told me at the funeral."

That funeral had been a fount of information for him. First about my job and now about Mr. Bergin's store.

Though I didn't like the idea of a ferry ride and a shopping trip with Drew, I had no good reason to refuse him. And I had been an ass to him yesterday when he offered to help.

The past was painful. He'd made me the fool. That day, he'd said it wasn't true, and his brother was a dick. But who wouldn't say that if they'd gotten caught? I'm sure those boys in high school would have said the same thing if I'd confronted them about their laughing and gesturing. Deny, deny, deny.

I'd cried for months. I had to block him and try to forget him.

It *was* a long time ago. Hopefully, we'd both grown up a bit. Maybe we could find a way to be civil to each other. He wasn't the only man who'd seen me as a prize rather than a person. At least he was the only one I fell for.

"How long do you need?" I asked.

The dark hair of his beard shimmered with the clinging mist.

"Ten minutes? I'd like to shower first, for your sake." His smile was tentative, but his clear hazel eyes glittered, and I felt a rush of heat in my blood. Those were the eyes I saw all summer that had deepened to a caramel color in the firelight when he looked down at me.

I turned away. "Okay. I was planning to drop off the last of Mrs. Curtis's clothes and things at the Soroptimist thrift store there later this week. I'll load that stuff while I wait."

"We can take my car. It's bigger. If it isn't already unlocked, the keys are on the hook by the door."

I nodded and headed inside to collect the donation. I finished loading the back of his shiny Porsche SUV, stopped at the bathroom, and grabbed a bottle of water. By then, Drew was walking down the porch steps dressed in faded jeans and a thick gray and red Stanford hoodie. Crap. He looked good.

We drove toward the ferry dock in silence. His cologne was something woodsy, and it mixed with the scent of his leather seats. Damn, he smelled good, too. His hair was wet

from his shower, and a water droplet clung to the edge where his beard met his hairline. I wanted to lean over and lick it off.

Would he still let me touch him there?

The boy I knew didn't want me to at first. When he kissed me, I would reach up to caress his skin, shaved clean of the few patches of whiskers. He'd pull my hand away every time and place it on his chest, which was also a great place to touch him. But I kept trying to build his trust over our two days alone. At first, it seemed like it physically hurt him to know I felt the angry marks as well as saw them, but I had kissed him tenderly on his lips, nose, and eyelids, distracting him enough to let me.

The marks didn't bother me nearly as much as they bothered him. And by the end of those precious hours, he let me touch him, the cautious look in his eye all but gone.

"What are you getting in town?" His deep voice, different now, stirred me from my walk down memory lane.

I shifted in my seat. "Apple cider, paper cups, s'mores stuff, popcorn, oranges, and a couple gigantic bags of candy."

"So, you're into Halloween?"

"Not really. Sort of. It's for a party or after-party at the resort tomorrow."

He glanced at me and then back to the road before us.

"I guess it's a tradition. Local businesses and families set up tents in the park by the resort entrance and hand out candy. I think because houses are spread out on the island, it's a way for the kids to show off their costumes and collect treats, easy peasy."

"And how did that turn into an after-party at the resort?"

"Apparently, after the kids walk the tents, the resort hosts snacks and s'mores around the firepit, along with apple cider and take-home bags of candy. Mrs. Curtis loved with sugar." I smiled at Drew, and he returned it. He had a sexy smile. This one was knowing and a little flirty, and it did something to my

belly. I rubbed my hands down my jeans-covered thighs before I started rubbing him.

“Anyway, I found out about it this morning while piecing together the accounts from past Octobers. There was a flyer in the mail a few weeks ago with the details, and I forgot about it. So now, I need to shake down every business on these islands for supplies, and I have this luxurious car to do it in.”

Drew laughed, a quick one, and kept his eyes on the road. His elbow rested on the door, and his long finger rubbed against his beard just below his lower lip. Those lips were still that tempting deep red I remembered. I wondered when he’d grown the beard. Then I wondered what it would be like to kiss him with that beard. I put those thoughts out of my head.

NO STORE in Perry Harbor had Hershey’s chocolate. I grabbed some bags of thin Reese’s peanut butter cups, and though that was delicious, some people would demand the traditional chocolate bar version of s’mores.

“I guess we’re driving over the bridge,” Drew said as we walked out of the gas station market.

“Was there a ban on chocolate I was unaware of?”

“Not that I heard, but then I’ve been on *island time* for almost a week. I’m sure the amount of news I’ve missed is staggering.”

“Ha. I doubt it,” I said. “It’s all the same. This group thinks that group is wrong and insane. That group thinks this group is stupid and selfish. People everywhere are hurting, and someone filmed a puppy riding on a horse’s back, which should make it all better.”

“You don’t like watching a puppy ride on a horse’s back?”

“I like a good puppy-on-horseback as much as the next person, but there are actual problems to be solved.”

“That’s why we need to see the puppy-on-horseback. The worse it gets out there, the more we need to smile at cute pictures before we forget how to altogether.”

Well, that was insightful. “You may be right.”

“How ’bout coffee? I could use a decent cup,” he said.

“Making your own coffee too much for ya?”

“I make it all the time, but I’m not very good at it. Let’s stop at Shakey Grounds, and then head over the bridge. Not sure if the mainland is in on the chocolate trade disputes, but it’s worth a drive.”

Coffee and pumpkin spice filled the air in the busy café. I closed my eyes and inhaled. I loved how the air smelled like a warm hug this time of year.

Photos of several live volcanoes in the Pacific Northwest peppered the walls around the comfortable seating area. The Temples, who ran Shakey Grounds, were retired geologists and had taken the impressive shots of Mount Rainier, Mount Baker, Mount Saint Helens, and more.

“Those are cool,” Drew said, pointing toward the pictures while we waited at the counter for our order.

“Yeah. Mrs. Temple says the volcanoes in the distance are a subtle reminder that we live in a world outside our control. It’s an illusion, and in geological terms, our lives are momentary and fleeting, anyway. That realization always helps to put my problems in perspective.”

Drew’s quiet gaze rested on me like a touch for a few beats before the barista called our names.

DREW

“THE THINGS IN THIS BAG ARE NEW OR CLOSE TO IT. AND HERE are her dresses. You’re the expert, but a couple of these may be vintage,” Tess said and handed the items to the woman at the thrift store counter. I stood behind her, holding another garment bag. We had finally found chocolate bars at a grocery store on the other side of I-5, and we were back on track, dropping off the clothes Tess wanted to donate.

The conversation at the coffee shop about our lives being fleeting, a blip in geological terms, had stayed with me. Tess said it gave her perspective. Me too. Life was too short for chasing money or power because someone else said we were supposed to.

My coding work supported products and processes that promised a more sustainable future for the planet. Smart products like outdoor sensors that could automatically turn on or off lights and close or open blinds to limit or take advantage of the sun’s rays through windows reduced the energy needed to keep homes comfortable. Less energy needed, less pollution from creating that energy.

Efforts in Artificial Intelligence, AI, were working to create interconnected self-driving cars that could communicate with each other and automatically slow the car’s speed when needed, reducing traffic jams and the accidents caused by them. Travel in these extra-smart cars would reduce air pollution, lower consumer costs, and save lives. My division worked daily on ways to improve smart technology and create affordable products that would make it accessible to everyone.

It was important work that could impact millions someday, and I was a part of it. I valued that; I had enough money. My work helped to keep places like Anna Island alive with fresh air and clean water, and the connection to my dad's passion for sustainable construction made *him* proud, which felt good too.

Our quick trip to Perry Harbor turned out to not be quick and spending that much time with her had been ... pleasant. This Tess with short hair was more like the girl I remembered, yet different, wiser. She'd lost her reckless curiosity, though she still had a positive outlook and was capable of genuine joy, at least when finding the right chocolate bars.

The woman at the well-organized thrift shop unzipped the first long bag. "Oh my, this is special." She caressed her fingers gently across the tiny beads sewn on the fabric, her expression almost reverent. "This is lovely. Definitely vintage. I'm calling Sally at the historical society about this one."

"Really? You think it's that old?" Tess asked.

"Could be. You know, there is no telling what's up in that bunkhouse. It was full of old stuff from everyone on that island when they bought the place years ago. Do you have any other dresses?"

Tess reached back and took the last long garment bag from me. Our fingers touched for a second, and I noticed. She did too. Her eyes jumped to mine; something was there. A connection. I felt it when she looked at me on the way over. Would this Tess with the short hair finally hear me out, forgive me? I didn't like the idea of ruining this day and our fragile truce with the epic fail of the past. I'd bring it up soon, but not today.

Our last stop was the hardware store to pick up my order. A big dry-erase board with markers, a package of legal pads, a box of my favorite kind of pens, a surge protector, and an extension cord.

The familiar smell of cedar and something like birdseed hit me inside the door. I waved to Mr. Bergin on the raised podium by the checkout. His Perry Harbor Hardware

sweatshirt had seen better times, but Mr. Bergin seemed to be living his best day. He'd always loved his job.

I loaded my purchases in the now empty back of my SUV and started the engine.

With the donation done and the back seat loaded with the necessary Halloween items and other groceries, we were sitting in what Tess described as the early rush hour ferry line waiting for the next boat. A few cars in a line with a view of the water was nothing like a San Jose rush hour.

"I'm a little afraid to go up to the third floor of the bunkhouse. The sheer number of spiders and mice could be staggering," Tess said.

"It's mostly dusty boxes and broken furniture. Mrs. Curtis said she was going to go through the piles the former owners left, but I'm not sure she ever did. When they converted the floor above the office and garage to the game room years ago, she said they put everything on the third floor so they could go through it all at the same time. That time hadn't come yet." She chuckled.

"I can start on that stuff. On weekends. It will give me a useful distraction from work," I said.

"Is your setup in the cottage okay? I want you to be able to work on your real life. Since, like you said yesterday, being here is what I wanted. It's the least I can do."

"The setup is actually better if I'm honest. The trend in tech lately is to put a bunch of engineers in one room with no dividers or walls around the desks. It's supposed to encourage collaboration and increase efficiency and product quality. The reality is a group of sometimes smelly guys and a few girls sitting in an unoriginally funky, midcentury modern space, staring at a bank of screens while wearing noise-canceling earbuds. It's practically dystopian."

"That sounds awesome." The sarcasm was clear in her laugh.

"Here, I can listen to whatever music I want without earbuds, as long as Buster approves. And I don't get

interrupted. When I look up, I can stare out at the evergreens or the ships in the distance instead of an odd painting of orange circles. So yeah, my setup works.”

“You allow Buster to curate your music list?” One of her eyebrows rose in question.

“I hardly allow him. There are bands he doesn’t like, and he tells me about it.”

Tess furrowed her brow at me, but a curve curled the edges of her unglossed lips. “This is your cat, right?”

I nodded.

“And how does he tell you he doesn’t approve?”

“He howls. A cat howling is a god-awful sound. At first, it was funny, and I thought he was trying to sing along. But his expression is pure disgust. And when I change to a different band, one he approves of, he stops. He just settles back down in his napping spot. Then, if I turn the original band on again, he gives me that look and starts howling.”

She threw her head back and laughed. I swallowed the lump in my throat at the sight of her neck and the smooth, flawless skin there.

“I swear I’m not making it up,” I said, looking away. “I’m happy to show you sometime if you need proof.”

She cleared her throat. “I’ll take your word for it.”

I paused. To do that, she’d have to come into my space when I was there. She hadn’t done that in the days since I moved in. She hadn’t used the larger kitchen either, though a lot of her fancy gadgets sat unused on the counter.

“Otherwise, Buster’s settled in. At first, he ran around smelling everywhere, but he’s back to his routine. At least, I think it’s his routine. I wasn’t home much before.”

I realized my life was going to be different for the next year. There weren’t multiple coffee shops on the corner, and there wasn’t a *we-have-everything* big box store only minutes away, but there wasn’t any construction noise, traffic, or bright lights that drowned out the night sky.

The time would go by quickly, and I'd return to California. I hated the office politics, but I loved coding when I could focus on it. Being here made it easier to concentrate except when it came to Tess.

“So, you got your bachelor's and MBA at Washington State. You liked it there, then?” It wasn't a secret that WSU students hosted great parties, and I often pictured her loving life. I'd seen a few things on social media her freshman year, pictures with guys who could be underwear models, and I stopped looking. Even if she hadn't dumped me, she'd have reduced me to a guy she used to know once she hit that campus.

Years later, Mrs. Curtis said she had graduated, and I tried to find her on social media again, but I couldn't find anything. It was probably for the best, anyway. I didn't want to see her in the arms of another man. And there was another man. There had to be.

Tess stared out into the distance and rocked her head back and forth. “I had good times and bad. College is college, right?”

“I guess so.” I expected more enthusiasm, but I was glad I didn't have to hear about boyfriends and wild nights. Stanford had been fun for a guy like me. College for her had probably been too many dates to count.

“I considered other schools for my MBA,” she said. “But the program there was good, and I already knew the professors to avoid, or at least I thought I did.”

“Did you have a problem with someone?” The hair on the back of my neck stood up. If she told me an ego-maniac professor tried something with her, I was sending the fucker a package bomb of carpenter ants. That shit happened, and it was messed up.

She didn't answer.

“Tess, did some asshole—”

She shook her head. “No, not like that.” I felt a rush of relief. “One of my professors the last semester, *she* had a

problem with me. I almost didn't get my MBA."

The ferry arrived, and I started the engine. The line of cars crossed the ramp to load in three neat rows on the boat. Tess watched our progress through the windshield instead of looking at me.

"She had it out for me from the beginning. I got a low grade on the first quiz, and she refused to see me during office hours, claiming she didn't have any drop-in appointments, even though no one was waiting in the hall. I stopped trying after three failed attempts. She did everything she could to embarrass me in class, calling on me, belittling my answers or discussion points, and making me look stupid. I'm *not* stupid." She glanced at me, but I knew that already.

"When I asked her about what I thought was unfair treatment, she told me I was in the real world, and I wouldn't be getting any special favors. In her class, I'd have to do the work instead of coasting on my looks."

"She said that?"

"Yep." She popped the P again like she did yesterday on the roof.

"Tess, that sucks."

"Yeah, well, I graduated. She tried to fail me, but I had one of the other faculty review my final paper. I made sure it was a female professor. She said she would give me an A on the paper, so I went to the Dean. Couldn't get around the fact that he was a man. And after he told Professor Adams to re-grade my submission, she accused me of fucking him."

"And you reported that shit, right?"

"No, Drew, I didn't. I wanted out of there. You think she was the only person to accuse me of screwing my way to something? Or to suggest that I could?" She let out a mirthless laugh. "Most people don't care what I say, just how I look, and I never know who to trust. The only person I can ever be sure of is me. I graduated and got the hell away from there."

"Tess, I ..."

She ran her hand through her hair and sighed in an attempt to mask her sadness. “Poor me, I’m too pretty.” Her tone mocked her words, and I realized being pretty wasn’t always awesome like I’d assumed.

“You’re more than that, Tess.”

Her smile was quick, but a sadness hung in her eyes. “I’m fine. It happened. About a month after graduation, I got a text from an unknown number. My professor’s husband was having an affair with one of his students. She couldn’t take her rage out on that student, so she took it out on me and others. After the crap with my grade, the school found out and put both professors on leave.”

We drove the rest of the way in silence, Tess staring out the passenger window. I’d assumed college had been great for her. Easy, perfect. How couldn’t it be? She’d been smart, determined, and gorgeous.

Computer science at Stanford had been full of guys like me—geeky and gawky. So, college wasn’t difficult for me. When I finally developed decent facial hair, I grew the beard. I’d been hiding behind it ever since.

Hiding hadn’t been an option for Tess and her beautiful face.

TESS

THEY WOULD *NOT* FIND ME DEAD UNDER A PILE OF LEDGERS. I was determined to survive this paper apocalypse if it was the last thing I did. It helped that Drew offered to start the clean-out on the third floor, allowing me to finish here.

Drew was helping with a lot of things. The Halloween party was a hit. We both had bought a few items at the thrift store to throw together a last-minute effort at costumes. Drew was a pirate with an eye patch, a clip-on earring from a little girl-style dress-up set, and a red bandanna. I had to admit, with the beard, it worked and was actually kinda hot.

I was a seventies hippy with a long blonde wig, fake flower wreath around my head, and round purple sunglasses. I think we did a pretty good job, and no kids ran away screaming.

Drew kept the firepit going and helped to wrangle the kids making s'mores while I greeted everyone and passed out bags of candy and snacks. I caught him looking at me a few times, probably when I was looking at him. We had settled into a nice truce. Not friends, but not enemies either.

In the two weeks since Halloween, I'd made genuine progress. I divided all the cleaning needed in the cabins into smaller goals and tackled those in the mornings after my daily yoga practice. Then, I spent my afternoons in the office with the papers. I still topped most weekdays off with a skinny dip in a hot tub.

The resort's landline rang, and I jolted at the chirpy ring that had been popular with cordless phone makers fifteen years ago.

"Anna Island Resort," I said.

A deep voice greeted me, "This is Gary at Everett Metal Roofing. We're scheduled to install a Musket Grey Standing Seam roof on two of your cabins next week."

"Yes."

"I tried to charge the down payment to the card Drew used last time, but that one has expired. Do you have a new expiration date or card number?"

Drew used last time?

"I'm sorry. When was that card used?"

"I believe it was earlier this spring when we did the same installation on two other cabins there."

"Yes, of course. That's right." I kept my tone pleasant. I didn't want to tip my hand to this poor soul. He hadn't lied to me. "I don't have the new date in front of me, Gary. Can I have Drew call you back within the hour? I don't want to cause a delay."

"Take your time." He chuckled. "I've known that kid since he was playing T-ball. He's good for it. His dad would have his hide if he tried to stiff an old bastard like me. It won't cause a delay. We'll charge the down payment when we arrive on Wednesday if he doesn't get a chance to call before."

"That's perfect. Thank you. I'm sure he'll call." Probably ten minutes after I'm finished with him.

My mind raced as the click became a dial tone.

I knew something was up. He'd paid for *all* those metal roofs. He'd invested thousands in this resort. Which explained why Mrs. Curtis left it to him.

Why? Had he done more? I stared out the window. There was the shelter with picnic tables and heated restrooms next to where the food trucks parked. Mrs. Curtis and I had dreamed

about that the summer Drew was here, and then it was built by the following season. It surprised me to see it so soon.

The outdoor common area and office interior were upgraded the following year with new grills and river-rock foundations to match the cabin chimneys and the new reception desk. The heavily shellacked, natural-edged plank of wood on top was installed below bright pendant lights for a welcoming and functional rustic space to greet guests. Both areas were exactly like I had described my vision to Mrs. Curtis.

The last year before the new roofs started, all new beds, mattresses, and luxurious bedding I helped to pick out were added to each of the eight cabins.

Was that him too? The annual upgrades began after the summer he was here. I don't remember anything as extravagant before.

I stormed up the path to the cottage but stopped short when I reached for the doorknob. I couldn't go right in anymore. Mrs. Curtis wasn't here, and the loss was like a sudden punch. Grief was a sucker-punch master, and I pressed my palm over my heart to breathe back the sudden wetness pricking my eyes.

I knocked hard, the experience foreign.

I heard a thump then, "Shit. One second," Drew called from inside. A minute later, the door swung open. He was shirtless in low-slung jeans. He had what looked like a brown stained T-shirt bunched in his right hand.

My gaze roamed the broad expanse of shoulders, collarbones, and light brown chest hair over defined pecs. This was not the same body I had known. Blood rushed through my veins.

"Tess?"

I looked away from the hot-man buffet and remembered I was pissed. "I know you're working, but can I come in?"

He glanced at the shirt in his hands, then over his shoulder. "Uh, sure. Have a seat. I spilled my coffee and need a second to clean up."

From the doorway, I saw a couple of legal pads propped in front of a bank of computer screens. “As for the work, I needed a break.” He rubbed his eyes with his free hand and took a deep breath.

I stepped into the space, the same but different. Gone was the smell of sugar cookies that had always lingered, and in its place was something woodsy with a hint of spice. A dark gray sectional sofa sat in the middle of the living room, facing the large picture window with a view of the resort and the water beyond. He’d pushed a rectangular table to the edge of the dining area a few feet away. It held three thin monitors and a sleek, modern office chair that looked new. Four straight-back chairs sat neatly along the far wall across the now-open eat-in kitchen.

“Work still okay?” I asked, making small talk while he sopped up the spill.

“Sure. Well, as much as it ever was. My boss wants me in San Jose all next week.” He picked up the brown soaked rags and set them on the counter.

“Oh, rather than two days?”

“Yeah. I changed my flight to leave Sunday. Same return though. I finished my presentation for the quarterly review. So, I’m good. Still good to look after Buster while I’m gone?”

I nodded, and with another rag, Drew squatted and wiped along the table leg and floor near his desk. His back was to me, and the muscles of his arms and shoulders flexed and rolled under golden skin. My mouth went dry, and I swallowed.

“You aren’t using the second bedroom for an office?”

“Nah. The view—” he pointed out the big front window to Mount Baker rising in the distance “—and it’s too far away from the coffeepot.” He smiled up at me with a gleam, and my heart skipped. There was the boy I’d fallen for. His smile was genuine, and that gleam familiar. With his broad shoulders and trim waist, I almost fanned myself.

He finished cleaning up, and I blinked away my imagination's vision of him stalking toward me, his expression showing his intent to kiss me.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee or a water?" He stood tall and hiked up his jeans. His socks were navy and striped with orange and light blue in varying degrees of thick bands. Interesting. The boy I remembered was a straight-up white athletic socks guy.

I shook off his offer and reminded myself one more time that I was angry. "This will just take a minute." I stood to confront him, hardening my expression. I wanted to see every reaction once he realized his secret was out. "Can I get the updated expiration date on your credit card?"

His brow furrowed while he absently reached toward his back pocket.

"Gary at Everett Metal Roofing called and said the card you used last time expired. He needs the new date for the down payment this time."

Drew's hand froze, and he blinked before pulling out his wallet and throwing it on the table-now-desk. He dropped his head with a little shake.

"Was it just the roofs, Drew?" He was quiet as he bent over the desk and rested on his knuckles.

"Drew?"

"No." He lifted and turned to me, crossing his arms. His legs spread shoulder width as if preparing for battle.

"The shelter?"

"Yes."

"The grills and reception desk?"

"Yes."

"The beds?" My words were coming faster and louder. My heart raced.

"Yes," he snapped.

“Why?” He didn’t respond but held my gaze. “Why did you keep this from me?”

“I didn’t keep it from you. You weren’t speaking to me. How was I supposed to tell you? You never took a call or answered a text. I tried, Tess.”

“Well, at least it makes sense why Mrs. Curtis left you the resort.”

“You mean *us*.”

“Why’d you do it?”

He paused; something like pain flashed in his expression. “This place, Mrs. Curtis, was special to me. My parents broke up a couple of months after that summer. My brother Patrick, the asshole, was no help. He just increased his drinking and partying. I’d barely settled in at Stanford when Mom called to tell me their plans. At Christmas break, I felt like I didn’t have a home to go back to and no one to talk to about it.”

His eyes landed on mine, and I had to look away. He had no one to talk to because I shut him out. He’d once told me he felt more comfortable talking to me than any other person in his life. I’d felt the same. How hurt would I have been if he’d been the one to shut me out?

“Mrs. Curtis called right before the new year and said she had a little extra money.” He relaxed his stance and brushed a hand through his hair. “She said you and she had designed a picnic shelter, and she wanted my advice on building it. When I talked to Dad about her plans and budget, he told me to manage the project and use any extra materials we had left from other jobs. He knew what this place meant to me.”

He returned to shuffling and wiping things on his desk. “So, I spent spring break cataloging what we needed, what was in our warehouse and scheduling the crews to do the work. It didn’t cost that much. Mr. Rose helped. The build was a quick two weeks, and Mrs. Curtis was over the moon about it.”

He paused. “It felt good to do something. My family was in pieces. I couldn’t do anything about that, but I could help

her, and she showered love and care packages on me when I needed them. So, the next spring, I called, and we came up with another project. She tried to pay, but I wouldn't let her. She sent cookies instead, often." His smile at what must have been a pleasant memory warmed the ice in his gaze.

"I wish I'd known it was you." Even I could hear the ache in my lowered voice.

"Would it have changed anything?" His tone matched mine.

Would it? It crushed me to learn Drew had faked our relationship to get laid. But doing this for Mrs. Curtis sounded like the Drew I thought I knew, like maybe he was real after all.

"I don't know. Maybe." My voice shook, and my head spun, trying to make sense of this. It was too much.

"What if I said I did it for you?"

My heart skipped, and I looked at him. "Did you?"

"I don't know." His eyes blazed. "Maybe ... Yes."

DREW

I CAN'T BELIEVE I SAID IT. BUT I FELT LIGHTER HAVING THE truth out there.

“Call Gary,” Tess said and walked out. She avoided me the next day, and then I left early Sunday for San Jose and the quarterly project review meeting my boss expected me to attend in person since I started working remotely.

Tess texted once to tell me the roof installation was completed without any issues, but there was no further conversation about my big reveal.

I blinked my eyes open to the light filtering under the blackout shades of my hotel room. After an all-nighter at the office, my brain was slow to come online this morning. The code we were writing wasn't syncing. Another guy on my team, Brian, logged in his part, but when he cascaded it down to another recently updated set, there was a break, and the group had been scrambling to find it before our morning deadline to lock the section.

About four in the morning, I logged onto the system after a *Starbucks powernap*—a shot of espresso then sleep for twenty minutes. My alarm sounded as the caffeine kicked in, and I had a good two hours before I felt the pull of sleep again. It was all the time I needed. Scanning the colorful lines of code, I spotted the error and sent Brian the trouble spots.

It was all part of the job. It took full concentration to write your section independently then sync it with the team for a

seamless process. Sometimes it was like linking the space station with a rocket ship for all the precision required.

My phone buzzed from the side table, and I growled a hello to Bethany. It was almost noon.

“Hey, handsome. Rough night?”

“You could say that.”

“Well, I won’t keep you. I got your message about being in town.”

I cleared my throat. “I wondered if you wanted to have dinner or something.”

“Or something?” Bethany’s voice was playful, and I realized how that sounded.

“I meant like a drink or coffee. I’m sorry we haven’t talked. The cell coverage at the resort can be spotty. It’s been a stormy few weeks.”

“Well, I didn’t think you would leave and never talk to me again. Hence, my willingness to call you back.”

“So, you want to have dinner? I’m in town for a couple more nights.”

“I would love to, but I’m in San Jose del Cabo through Thanksgiving. Trading turkey and stuffing for Mexico’s sun and sandy beaches this year.”

“That sucks.”

She barked out a big laugh. “Only for you, my friend.”

“Harsh, B.”

I heard a deep voice, and Bethany’s words sounded muffled, like her cheek brushed against the phone.

“I gotta go, Drew. We’ll schedule dinner next time.”

“I really am sorry, B. I didn’t mean to blow you off.”

“I know, Drew. We’re cool. Talk later.” And the call dropped.

I fell back onto the pillow. Two more days and I could go home.

MY KITCHEN SMELLED LIKE HER. Flowers and sunshine mixed with the savory scents of garlic and baking bread. The flight from California to nearby Bellingham felt long, even in first-class, and gave me plenty of time to think. About work. About Bethany. About Tess. Mostly about Tess.

“Knock knock,” she called from the internal door between our separate living spaces. I was surprised. She’d rarely used that door when I was here. “You’re home. Are you hungry?”

She stood in the doorway, and I was speechless. She was wearing pajamas, but all I saw were her breasts moving freely under the thin, silky fabric. Fuck. They were bigger. I would swear to it. I blinked before she caught me staring.

“I know it’s late,” she said and stepped into the room. “But I made lasagna in here earlier, Mom’s recipe, and baked a fresh loaf of bread. If you’re hungry, you’re welcome to have some.”

My stomach growled. Technically, I’d eaten on the plane, but for Tess, I was starving for anything she had to give. “That sounds great. I was wondering what I still had in the fridge.”

“I cleaned out the moldy items. Buster insisted. He said it smelled bad.”

I laughed. “Thanks for looking after him. I hope he wasn’t any trouble.”

My cat strolled out from behind Tess, brushing against her legs. “We came to an understanding and agreed that the door would stay open during the day, but we each slept in our own beds.” She bent down to stroke his fur. “Let me grab the pan, and I’ll be back.”

“Lucky bastard,” I muttered. I’m pretty sure he smirked at me.

Tess was not only gorgeous and intelligent, but a seriously great cook. Her Italian mother’s recipes were the thing of

legends. Tess and Mrs. Curtis sometimes cooked big lunches to share with me and Mr. Rose that summer. Those were the best days.

The aroma of tomatoes and mozzarella hit me. Then the sight of her again. Why were pajamas so fucking sexy? The fabric was thin, and her nipples pebbled. I wanted to taste them. Would she taste the same, feel the same as what I remembered? My dick twitched.

“That smells great. Thank you,” I said.

“It’s no problem.” She set the pan on the counter and cut a large piece. “I was keeping it warm in my oven until I went to bed, just in case.”

I accepted the plate with a slice of multi-grain bread on the side and leaned against the counter for my first bite. Tess moved toward the edge of the kitchen, and the silence grew heavy.

The last time we shared the same space, I admitted I did the upgrades for her. A week had passed, and I still didn’t know how much more to say. Those improvements were the only way I knew to stay connected with her. To give her something she wanted. My money was my best asset, and I used it to stay in her life in any way possible.

Now that she knew, maybe she’d let me explain, apologize for everything that day with Patrick. I wasn’t expecting a second chance, but I hoped we could put the pain behind us. My heart thudded, and I swallowed the lump in my throat along with a big bite of lasagna.

“I’m sorry, Drew.” She clasped her hands in front of her before lifting her eyes to mine.

“For?”

“For not taking your calls. For not texting. I was ... hurt, and I thought cutting you off would make it easier to forget, easier to control how it affected me. But it wasn’t fair to not listen to you.”

I put down my plate. “I’m sorry, Tess. I should have set Patrick straight. What he said, none of it was true. It wasn’t a

game. It was ... It meant something, and I never regretted anything more than hurting you. That's why the improvements."

Her smile was the sad one that didn't meet her eyes. "It meant something to me, too."

My arms ached to hold her.

"It's good to have it all out there," she said. "I want to remember that summer and not regret it."

"The only thing I regret was how it ended. Patrick was a total dick, and I let him think things, say things, that weren't true because I wanted his approval. Shitty as that is, it's the truth."

"I believe you," she said, and something in my chest expanded. My mind raced with what I wanted to say.

"That summer, those two days with you were some of the best of my life." That was a lie. They were *the* best.

"Me too." She took a step away, increasing the distance between us. We had somehow moved closer in the past minutes. Her expression was back to neutral. "I won't keep you. You can put the lasagna in the fridge when you're done. I'll grab it in the morning. I'm glad you're home."

Home. "Me too," I said, and she was gone.

DREW

“TOMORROW IS THANKSGIVING, BUSTER. WHAT SHOULD WE do?” My cat blinked at me from the back of the sofa. From that perch, he could look one way out the front window or another way at me and my desk. He was lord of all he surveyed.

I had sliced turkey and frozen green beans in the fridge. Close enough to Thanksgiving dinner for two dudes like us.

I clicked off the TV after watching the first *Guardians of the Galaxy*, the best one. The days before a holiday were usually dead at the office, and after yesterday’s coding project required working late into the night, I took today off.

I stretched and stared out the front window. Water lapped the shore below the cottage, and seagulls flocked behind a small, professional crabbing boat in the distance. To the side was the bunkhouse and a third-floor storage space filled with stuff I’d barely begun to clean out before I left for California last week.

In the fading gray of early afternoon, I noticed the lights on in the office. Tess was there.

“Okay, Buster, time to go to work.”

He looked at me in his nonchalant cat way, clearly assuming I was talking to some other Buster. I slipped on my shoes and coat, grabbed my hydro flask, and snatched up my partner in crime. He was coming with me to the third floor.

He'd spent three nights up there since I started the work and had already left me several dead mice. Occasionally, it was half of a mouse. I didn't want to know what happened to the other half. I scooped his litter box. There were things mature dudes like us didn't discuss.

I opened the side door next to the office and scaled the stairs to the third floor two at a time, with Buster squirming under my arm the whole way.

"Okay, man, have at it." He jumped down with a gentle thud on the scarred vinyl flooring. That shit had to go, but first, I had to get through all this crap. I got started shifting a few small items out of the way to build a path.

"HEY, I came to get the Christmas decorations." Tess pushed open one of the flimsy hollow-core double doors at the top of the stairs a few hours later. "They were by that wall." She pointed toward the one area I'd emptied.

I gestured to a stack of boxes by the door. "I moved them there. I didn't want them mixed in with the pile headed to the dump."

She nodded as Buster appeared and rubbed his whiskers against her shin. I frowned at him, but he didn't care.

"How's it going?" She asked and knelt to rub her hand across Buster's back. His tail was straight in the air as if to say, *look at me gettin' lovin'*, and his purr was audible from a few feet away. He continued to swish through her legs, encouraging her petting. Cocky fucker.

"Pretty good."

She stood and glanced around. "You've done a lot. I haven't been up here since you started."

The first cleared space now held a handful of storage boxes and a mountain of dust.

"It was mostly broken chairs and old mattresses. I took a load to the dump, and I put the scrap wood planks and old iron tools in the garage. It's slow progress, but I'm getting a sense

of what's here and what to do with it. I'll leave any boxes or unbroken things to the end so you can see if there's something you want to keep."

She hesitated, then walked toward the far wall with small windows, visible now, that looked out to the water and Mount Baker.

"Still scary up here?" I joined her at the window and bumped her shoulder with my fist. It was supposed to be casual, but I think it came off more flirty because Tess's eyes glittered, and she smiled. Damn, that was a double gut punch.

"No, your friend Buster's been working hard. I think the rodent population is down, and the spiders are less active in the cold."

"You knew about his nocturnal activities?"

"I think you left the door open one night. He brought me a present on the second-floor landing one morning."

"Ah, sorry about that. Was it a whole one?"

She shook her head. "I had to step over it on my way into the game room. I gave him a good pat and a thank you for the *lovely* gift, then got the shovel. It was a quick funeral and burial at sea."

I cringed. "Sorry."

"So, your trip was good? We haven't talked much since Sunday."

"Yeah. Okay. Work."

"Your girlfriend was nicer than I was the day the developer was here. If you want to have her visit sometime, I can go stay at my parents' house for a few days."

Girlfriend?

"I didn't see Bethany. She'd already left to spend Thanksgiving in Mexico."

Tess frowned, then stepped closer to the edge of the remaining junk. "That's a bummer."

“It’s fine. Bethany’s not my girlfriend. Never was. We’re just friends.”

She turned back to me with her eyebrows raised. “Does she know that? Because she didn’t look at you like a friend.”

“We sometimes were a bit more than friends for a night here or there, but we weren’t a thing.” I shifted a couple of boxes nearby, trying to dial down the awkwardness between us.

“But you said she was important to you, and you wouldn’t keep her waiting that day at the attorney’s office.”

She remembered that? “She is important to me and was waiting for me at the bar. If I’d let her stay there alone too long, I would have been having dinner by myself while she got better acquainted with some manly sailor.”

Tess chuckled. “You don’t believe that.”

“Okay, no. But we *are* just friends. She’s protective of me like I am of her.”

Tess’s eyes lingered a beat, and my pulse jumped. She stepped sideways and took in the room. “I’m almost finished with the files and getting the front desk software set up.”

“Yeah, I noticed the paper recycling’s been pretty full lately.”

Tess shook her head. “So many trees paid the ultimate price for her hoarding, but I still loved her.” She sighed with a hesitant smile. “I can come and help you sometime.” Her stunning blue eyes held a question and vulnerability.

She said it casually like it was nothing. But this was something. She suggested we spend time together, working on a project like we used to do.

“I’d like that.” I cleared my throat. “The help, I mean.” Hell. Did that sound as idiotic to her as it did to me?

“Great.” She knelt again since Buster had come back for more petting. She was hard to walk away from. I felt his pain.

“I can start Friday. How long will you be gone for Thanksgiving?” she asked.

“I’m staying here. So, I’ll keep at it, and you can jump in whenever you’re back.”

She looked up; her brow furrowed. “You aren’t going to your dad’s?”

“Nah. He and his wife, Ashley, are headed to my brother’s house. Patrick, who isn’t quite the asshole he used to be, actually got a girl to like him enough to move in with him.” I smiled. “She’s hosting her parents, so Patrick wanted Dad and Ashley to join them, too. They invited me, but being the fifth wheel at my family holiday? No thanks.”

“Tell me about it.” She stood. “Both of my brothers are in loove, so I’m in the same boat.” She pulled her earlobe and glanced to the side before meeting my gaze like she used to do when she was nervous.

“Do you want to come to my parents’ house tomorrow?” she asked. “Not a date or anything. You’d be saving me from fifth wheel hell, and the food’s good.”

Her eyes searched my face. My face, so different from the overwhelming beauty of hers. Her lips parted, and she exhaled, a hint of a blush creeping up her neck above her sweater. Did the blush start right above her breasts like it used to? Was her heart beating fast and her breaths shallow? I wanted to know. Needed to know. If there was even a chance I could know again, I’d go anywhere with her.

“I’d love to.”

TESS

“I’D LOVE TO,” DREW SAID, AND THOUGH I SAID IT WASN’T A date, it felt like a date. That was crazy because Thanksgiving with my family was so not-date-like. I realized I’d never been on one with Drew.

I headed toward the door. “Great. We’ll catch a mid-morning ferry if that’s okay. I help Mom cook.”

“Whatever works for you is fine with me. Can I bring something? Wine?”

“Wine’s perfect. My dad and brothers will watch football and get the Christmas decorations from the attic. I’m sure they’d love an extra pair of hands.”

“I’m happy to help.”

I blinked. He was. At least he had been that summer. It’s how we’d gotten close. He’d see me with a big load of laundry and swoop in to help me pull the heavy cart. And I’d help him wash off the kayaks and lock up the dinghies at night before we biked back to the dock and caught the ferry to Perry Harbor. We talked, and he asked me my opinion about everything, current events, or songs on the radio. He told me about life at his all-boys high school, and I told him about growing up in a small town. We didn’t always agree on ideas or songs, but we shared and listened. He never flirted or leered or even stood too close.

I didn’t realize how rare it was for people to ask my opinion or care about it. Once I got to college, everyone seemed to think I was incapable of having a valid opinion.

They rarely asked for it. Boys who talked to me usually hit on me, and most girls in the dorm talked about bad dates and boy problems. Whatever boy problems *I* had were met with eye rolls. How could the pretty girl possibly have problems with boys?

There were a few girls in my major who I connected with in class. We usually had coffee or lunch a few times a week to study or hang out, but I didn't let myself get close to anyone.

I missed my conversations with Drew, missed him, for a long time.

"I need to cook a couple of things for tomorrow. I'd like to use the big kitchen."

"Oh. Sure." He gestured toward the piles. "I'll be here a while and then probably go for a quick run. Get ahead of that Thanksgiving meal." He winked at me.

I'd never seen him wink before. I got winked at often, but not like that. His was playful in a warm, familiar way. Comfortable, safe, like a brother, but Drew was *not* my brother.

He helped me carry the boxes of Christmas decorations to the first floor and headed back upstairs. I got them organized in the garage and then walked the hill to the cottage, my thoughts swirling like the last of the fallen leaves whipping up in the wind off the water.

I'd been thinking a lot about all Drew had done for the resort. And he said he did it for me. Out of guilt, but he did it. At least he'd cared enough to feel bad. He apologized and said that summer meant something. Maybe this year could be something new.

He was here, probably damaging his lucrative career because I'd asked him to. That sacrifice was not nothing. I needed to do my part as we forged that something new. Images of this Drew, sexy and strong, his eyes shining, flashed in my mind and had the blood rushing in my veins. This was real. Not imagined scenarios that enhanced time with my favorite vibrator.

My thoughts continued to swirl while I peeled and par-boiled the yams to not quite tender. I sliced them in half and let them cool while the stick of butter and a generous amount of brown sugar slowly warmed on the stove.

“Hey. I need to grab my running clothes.” Drew blew into the cottage and down the short hallway to the bedrooms. At least, I think it was him. He didn’t stop or even pause.

He reappeared in athletic shorts and one of those wicking material shirts that fit tight across his shoulders. “I’ll be back,” he said and was gone, but not before I’d snuck a glimpse of the muscles rolling and bunching in his legs. I exhaled. Yeah, he was real, and he was hot.

I mixed the dough for the rolls I made every year in Mom’s kitchen. Luc’s talented girlfriend Jo said bread carried the taste of the place where it was made, and I’ll admit I was curious to see if I tasted a difference making them here. She usually knew what she was talking about, especially cooking.

Back in my apartment, I put the dough in the fridge to proof overnight and placed the yams and glaze together in a storage container for heating tomorrow. To make room, I pulled out the pot of Portuguese stone soup I had made earlier in the week and set it on Drew’s stove to warm. Since he was still out, I grabbed a blanket and a glass of wine and headed to the front of the wraparound deck that looked out over the water. This was on Drew’s side of the house, and I hadn’t been out here much.

It was peaceful and quiet, and it wasn’t even raining. There were two reservations checking in later this weekend, but the place was empty for now, except for Drew and me.

Then, like I’d conjured him with my mind, he appeared on the road by the cottage. His lighted running vest blinked in the night. The resort was dark except for the security lights high on the side of the bunkhouse. The thick clouds of fall blocked the moon.

There was a picnic table by the community grills with a firepit off to the side. Drew lifted a stone from the edge of the pit and then lay on the top of the table with it resting on his

chest. He did a million sit-ups followed by a million push-ups on the lawn. And I watched like a creeper.

I pictured him shirtless. How did he do that many push-ups?

Walking up the short hill to the cottage, he tapped the screen on his watch and spotted me.

I raised my glass of wine. “I came out to look at the ship lights on the water,” I said, trying to sound like I hadn’t been out here watching him for the last fifteen minutes.

“Stay there. I’ll join you.” He jogged the rest of the way and climbed the outdoor steps to the deck. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said.

He lifted off his vest, and the movement exposed the skin at his waist and the dusting of hair that dipped below his shorts. I swallowed and looked away.

“Let me grab a glass.”

“Wine is your after-workout sports drink?” I called after him.

“Among other things,” he shouted back. The tone in his voice was flirty, and my mind pictured an image of another type of exercise that might require hydration.

“Something smells good in there,” he said as he returned.

“Oh yeah, stone soup.”

He quirked an eyebrow while he chugged a bottle of water. “Like the children’s book?”

“Yes, though, this is an actual recipe. It has a bunch of different vegetables and seasonings as well as a bit of Portuguese sausage. Would you like some?”

“If you have enough.”

I’d barely talked to him since he got here, though I’d thought about him. Then he said that summer meant something, and now, we were sharing a meal tonight and one tomorrow.

It wasn't on purpose. I had a lot of soup, and it would have been rude to let him spend Thanksgiving here alone. I was being nice.

Yeah, even I was starting to not believe me.

TESS

THE LINE FOR THE FERRY OFF THE ISLAND HAD BEEN FULL, AND I was worried we'd miss the first boat. Luckily, we made it, the last car on, and I took it as a good sign for the day.

The smell of earth surrounded us as my family's farm dog, Rex, jumped and shook his butt in greeting. I was consumed with the resort and hadn't been to my parents' house in weeks. I think he missed me. When my older brothers were off at college, Rex had been my buddy, and we had a special bond.

The farm was quiet this time of year, with the tulip bulbs planted in early October growing under the surface of the fertile soil. To the edge of the water, the tilled ground was a promise of color and spring on the other side of the cold, dark winter.

The huge greenhouse and bulb processing warehouse were off to the side of the fields and busy year-round growing different varieties of flowers and herbs. Many families' Thanksgiving tables today held flower arrangements sourced from right over there. I'm sure Mom's table inside was no exception.

Rex settled as we climbed the steps to the farmhouse's covered back deck, but he was still trying to reach the container of candied yams I was carrying. They were buttery and sugary, more like a dessert than a side, and my family loved them. My brother Lucas could eat an entire pan.

"Down, buddy," I cooed. "You're such a good boy, but your paws are a mess. Yes, they are. Yes, they are." Rex loved

the sweet talk. “Let me get a towel and wipe them off. You wait for me here.”

Drew opened the door, and Rex sat with a thump on the mat, his eyes scanning Drew.

“Your dog is sizing me up,” he said and followed behind me with the bowl of proofed dough.

“Yeah, he doesn’t know you. He’s reserving judgment, taking his cues from me on whether you’re good or bad. So, don’t piss me off today.” I elbowed him in the side, and he grunted like I’d hit him much harder.

My father and my brother Finn sat in the great room watching football.

“Hey, guys. You remember Drew.”

“Sure. Welcome, Drew,” my dad said with a smile as I set down the dish and grabbed a towel to wipe Rex’s feet and fur. I held the door open, and he trotted straight to the giant dog bed near the sofa. We didn’t allow him everywhere in the house, but the big, airy TV room with the large stone fireplace was as much his as ours.

I leaned down to give Dad a side hug and a shoulder bump to Finn.

“Have a seat if you want to watch the game or Lucas is in there helping if you’d rather do that.” Dad nodded at Drew and returned his eyes to what sounded like a kickoff.

Drew glanced at me, then back to the men taking up the sofa. “Let me set this down, and I’ll join you.” He followed me to the open kitchen.

“Tess, you made it,” Mom said from the stove. She extended one arm to invite a hug while stirring her homemade cranberry sauce. The scent of clove, citrus, and cinnamon mixed with the savory smell of roasting turkey, and my stomach rumbled.

“Welcome, Drew. We’re glad you’re here.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bakker,” he said as I took the bowl from him and set it on the counter where I could knead the dough

and break off pieces to rise once I prepared the muffin tins.

“Call me Donna.” She winked.

“This is Emily. She’s engaged to Finn.” I touched my brother’s fiancée on the shoulder while she stood at the island, snapping green beans. She wiped her hands on a towel and reached out to Drew.

With one hand firmly in his pocket, he shook hers with the other and flashed that shy smile that used to melt my heart to goo.

“Hey man, good to see you again.” Lucas approached from his spot at the other counter. “This is my Jo.” Lucas glowed and pulled her to his side. They both glowed since they returned from Hawaii a couple of weeks ago. I needed a trip to Hawaii if you came back looking like that.

Jo gave Lucas a bump with her hip. “I guess you already know *my* Lucas?”

“Damn straight I’m your Lucas,” he whispered into her hair before kissing her temple and stepping away.

I glanced at Emily and made a gagging gesture. This was not the Luc I grew up with, and while I was thrilled for him and Jo was awesome, they were getting to be a bit much. Emily chuckled. She and Finn were just as bad.

Drew shook Jo’s hand with a grin. “It’s nice to meet you, Jo.” He angled toward my brother. “It’s been a while. Are you still coding somewhere?”

“You could say that. I’m starting my own shop. You looking to make a move?” Lucas smiled and chucked Drew on the shoulder.

“Really, your own consulting firm?”

“Yep. Here in the Harbor. Everything is online and remote capable now. There’s no need to live in the city and fight traffic. And Jo’s here.” Another glowing smile. “I’m hoping to get things rolling after the first of the year.”

“That’s cool, man. Goals. You’ll kill it. You were the best in our division before you left,” Drew said. His expression

held genuine respect. My goofy brother was a big deal in some circles.

“Thanks. I sold some apps and a platform since then. The work’s been good to me.”

“What would you like to drink?” Mom asked. “We have beer, wine, water, soda ...”

He glanced at the drink in Lucas’s hand and then to me. “I’ll take a beer.” His tone was like a question.

“I got it, Mom.” I moved to the fridge and grabbed us each a Chuckanut Kolsch, keeping it light. We were both excited for the food.

His gaze stayed locked on me as I walked back and handed him the opened bottle with an English pint glass. His fingers grazed mine as he took the glass, and the rush of warmth up my arm was instant. It swelled into my chest before pooling in my core with a sizzle. I wasn’t sure if it was the touch or the stare. It was probably both.

“I’ve done all I’m qualified to do in here, ladies,” Lucas announced and dropped his side towel on the counter with a flourish. “Drew, let’s hit the sofa. The men have cleanup duty afterward, so we need to rest.” He landed a peck on Jo’s cheek before heading toward the manspreading already going on in front of the TV.

“Thank you,” Drew said to me softly as he took the bottle and then glanced at my family before strolling toward the TV room like he hadn’t just turned me on in my mother’s kitchen with everyone watching. Also, the faded jeans highlighted his ass and thighs. Damn.

“Soooo, Tess.” Emily’s eyebrows shot up. “How’s it going?”

“Umm.” I blinked from staring at Drew’s backside and walked to the big kitchen island. “The resort is coming along. We have a steady flow of reservations on the weekends, and I’m making progress with the new software and remodeling plans. Drew is cleaning out the third floor of the bunkhouse when he isn’t working.”

There was silence for a few beats.

“What?” I looked to see three smiling women.

“Drew looks nice today. I love the color of his sweater,” Mom said.

“And he smells good,” Emily said with a gleam.

“Um, hmmm,” Jo said, nodding. “And the beard. He’s got that good guy/bad boy thing going on.”

“You noticed all that?” I asked and sat on one of the bar-height stools with a thud. I leaned back to make sure no one was listening.

Hands shot up, and shouts rang out from the couch. “Did you see that? Man, that catch was awesome.” Lucas high-fived Drew like they were old friends.

Good, they weren’t listening to us.

“Are you guys a thing?” Emily whispered.

“Not too low, girls, I have to keep stirring, and I want to hear.” Mom, sheesh.

“No. But ... there’s history,” I said. “We both worked at the resort the summer after high school. We were friends.” I shrugged and met the blinking eyes of the two women I knew would someday be my sisters-in-law.

“Well ... maybe a little more than that.”

“Ooo. Start at the beginning,” Emily said.

I sucked in a deep breath. Not many knew about what happened with Drew. It was too embarrassing and sad. Mrs. Curtis guessed, but I refused to discuss it with her until a couple of years later.

“From the beginning, he treated me differently.”

More blinking eyes, waiting.

“Boys in high school, college ...” I grimaced.

“Don’t tell me no one noticed you,” Emily said.

“No, they noticed me, parts of me, for sure.”

Mom glanced over. She knew about some boys in the past, but not the full story of this boy. “Most guys seemed more interested in my looks than me or my brain. A lot of selling themselves as hot or athletic or even how much other girls wanted to fu ... uh, sleep with them. Telling me how good we’d look together as a selling point. They made jokes about how hot I was and how we could make millions doing sexy YouTube videos or some crap. It was pretty freaking annoying.” I ran my hand through my short hair, already starting to get longer.

“Drew had talked to me like a person and taught me how to do things, like fix a door or paint a room like a pro. He was doing those things, and I would hang out with him in my spare time. When I did, he said I might as well work and taught me how to do whatever he was doing.” I smiled.

“We ... spent time together.” I wasn’t talking about my first time with my mom in the room. No way.

“Then, his brother came on our last day at the resort, and I heard them talking about me. His brother made rude comments, and Drew didn’t correct him. I thought he agreed with him. I thought he’d lied to me to ... reach a certain goal. High school boys had certainly tried. Drew was the first guy I thought really cared about me. That day with his brother, it broke my heart, and I cut him out of my life. Never returned a call or text after that day.” Emily and Jo nodded.

“The whole thing reinforced a growing fear that I might not find real love beyond the guy who loved my face. My face was all anyone seemed to talk about. What happens when the face goes?” I shook my head. “I didn’t want to be one of those women constantly chasing beauty to feel like they mattered. What he did hurt more than anything else ever had.”

“So, why are you letting him sit on my sofa with my favorite men?” Mom asked.

“I found out a couple of weeks ago that Drew was the one paying for all those annual renovations at the resort. He paid for all of it. He said he did it for me. Like he felt bad about what happened and wanted to make amends. It was something

the Drew I thought I knew would have done, and it got me thinking. We're both older. We've both grown. Maybe we could be friends again."

The eyes in the room shifted between each other, then back to me.

"Mrs. Curtis never told me it was him. She talked about him sometimes but never mentioned he was behind the upgrades. I don't understand why she wouldn't tell me."

"He may have asked her not to. Men in love do strange things," Mom said.

Emily and Jo chuckled.

"I'm not sure it was love," I said.

"I know what lovesick looks like. On the drive to Pullman after that summer, that was you. I let your father believe the sadness was about leaving him, which he loved, by the way, but I knew there was more to it."

"I thought he used me, but I may have been wrong about him."

Mom patted my hand. "He's here, and that's something. The past is the past. Can't change it. But you're both here now, living together. This could be a second chance."

"We're not living together."

Mom rolled her eyes. "Whatever." She was as good at that as I was.

"The way he just looked at you was not nothing," Emily said.

"And all that *something* wrapped in a body like that," Jo added, raising her eyebrows. "You may be in a little trouble."

If the buzz in my core and constantly hard nipples around him were indications, I was in *a lot* of trouble.

DREW

“THAT WAS DELICIOUS, MRS.—UH DONNA.”

“Thank you, Drew. It was a group effort.”

That had been one of the best Thanksgiving meals I’d ever eaten. Turkey, juicy and tender, garlic mashed potatoes and gravy, Tess’s rolls and yams that could totally pass for dessert, crisp green beans, cranberry sauce that didn’t come from a can, and Jo’s southern pecan pie with homemade whipped cream. I couldn’t move.

“Another round of coffee boys, and then we have to get to work,” Mr. Bakker said from his chair at the head of the table.

“I need more time to digest,” Finn said.

“You can rest, but no one leaves until my decorations are down from the attic.” Donna pinned them each with a glare.

“Yes, my love.” Mr. Bakker winked.

“Gals, should we take our coffee to a more comfortable setting?” Donna pushed back her chair.

“Hey, Mom, hang on.” Lucas pulled Jo closer and wrapped an arm around her. Jo’s smile was big and warm as she gazed up at him. Her dark hair, curled in ringlets around her heart-shaped face, had the look of innocence, but she had fire that flashed bright as she and Lucas joked and teased each other earlier today. She was beautiful, but not like Tess. No one was beautiful like Tess.

“Jo and I, in Hawaii, . . . she said yes. We’re getting married.”

Ohs, and the sound of shoulder slaps surrounded me. The wave of good vibes lifted me from my chair, and I waited my turn to congratulate the happy couple.

“We found the ring at a shop in Seattle right after we got back, and Lucas picked it up yesterday,” Jo said. Lucas pulled a ring box from his pocket and slipped the sparkler on her finger. It wasn’t a huge rock like I’d seen among the wealthy crowd. This one sat low and close to her skin, but the cut and clarity of those diamonds must have been of the best quality because they caught the light at every angle.

“Two weddings.” Donna fanned herself. “Who will go first?”

Lucas glanced at Finn. “We may elope.”

“Don’t you dare,” Emily said, her voice sharp through her sweet smile. Tall and willowy, with long blonde hair, she’d been calm and reserved up until this point when a similar fire burned in her bright green eyes. “Jo deserves the fairy-tale white dress and all the fuss if she wants it.”

“You could get married at the resort.” Tess’s face lit up. “We’re cleaning out the top two floors of the bunkhouse, and I want to remodel it into an event space. There are amazing views, and we can host weddings or retreats or whatever. Mid-week the cabins aren’t full in the off-season, and it would be great to be able to share the resort with more people.”

That was new to me, the part about weddings.

“That’s awesome. A commercial kitchen?” Jo asked.

“Of course.”

“What about the game room?” I asked. I had fond memories of that game room.

“I wanted to talk to you about that. I’d like to add an enclosed area to the picnic shelter and make that the game room. Add a sports court in future years.” Her eyes were bright.

Huh. That could work. “The restrooms are already there. I can see that vision. It wouldn’t take a lot. It’s a great idea, Tess. You’re pretty good at this resort thing, you know.”

She lifted a shoulder. “Thanks.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised. Tess had always been quick and capable of anything she tried. Each of her ideas for how to improve the resort over the years had been perfect. She could always envision possibilities when I never could. She knew what she was doing and had a quiet confidence in her work, which was intimidating, along with her stunning beauty.

She’d always been so far from my world of Star Wars T-shirts, douchey tech-bros, and endless lines of code.

“HERE, CAN YOU TAKE THESE TOO?” Finn piled another small box of ornaments on top of the two I already had in my hands.

“Sure. I can’t see, but I think I have the way memorized,” I said.

“You don’t need to see, son. Do what the lady tells you, and you’ll be fine,” Mr. Bakker said. I’d learned he had a heart attack about a year ago that led to his retirement. It seemed to be agreeing with him. His smile was always big when it came to Donna.

My parents got along. It wasn’t a contentious, drawn-out divorce. Two successful people had worked to build their careers and give their children all the opportunities money could buy but had forgotten to stay in love. They were both remarried and happy. The couples even hung out sometimes at parties. But it would have been nice to have something like this.

I carried the boxes down the stairs and stacked them next to the others piled in the entry hall.

“The food is all put away in to-go containers, and the dishes are ready for you whenever,” Jo announced, walking in.

“Some of the food is staying here, right?” Mr. Bakker called from the second-floor hallway near the attic door.

“Yes, dear,” Donna quipped up the stairwell and strolled toward us with a wink and a fresh glass of red wine. “Ooo, all these decorations. Every year, I can’t wait to get started.”

“I’ll be over at ten to help,” Emily said. She and Finn lived next door. He ran the family tulip business now with input from Lucas. It made sense for him to be close.

“Does ten work for you, Tess?” Donna asked.

“I, well, Drew and I,” she glanced at me. “We have to hang all the decorations at the resort this year. I should stay there.”

“Oh, before you guys go,” Emily said. “I have more design books for you. Things more in line with the look you were talking about last time.”

“Here’s the last box,” Finn said from the bottom of the stairs. “Dish time. You want to wash or dry, Drew?”

“You want dry. You always want dry,” Tess whispered.

“YOU LIKE BEING BACK at the resort, Drew?” Mr. Bakker asked from his seat on one of the high bar chairs around the kitchen island. Lucas was scraping dishes and loading the dishwasher, Finn was at the sink washing the big stuff, I was drying, and he was supervising.

“I do. The view’s better from my desk, that’s for sure,” I said.

“I’m sure. And working with Tess again. That’s going okay, I assume.”

“I think so. We haven’t worked together on much yet. She’s a hundred percent focused on the resort, and I’m still working remotely at my tech job.”

“Uh, huh.” He was as bad as the dog with the sizing me up.

“Don’t start, Dad,” Lucas said. “If Tess comes in here and sees you giving her boyfriend the full court press, she will make you sorry.”

“Tess is my baby girl. I need to watch out for her. That’s a father’s job.” He puffed out his chest.

“Tess will remind you she’s a grown ass ... grown woman,” Finn added.

“I’m not Tess’s boyfriend.” Though the word and the idea sounded fucking awesome. What would that be like? A face like mine and a face like hers.

“So, it’s like that, is it?” Mr. Bakker frowned and shifted in his seat.

“Wait. What? No, we’re not ... involved ... like you might be thinking.” I was suddenly sweating as I glanced around the room. These men, who’d been so welcoming and kind, now thought I was casually fucking their *baby girl*. Shit!

“You guys aren’t dating?” Lucas asked.

“No. Just friends.” Unfortunately. I kept my focus on the dish I was drying. It was a big pasta serving bowl with a delicate design. I didn’t want to drop it and find out it was an important family heirloom. They’d probably kill me.

“And the resort, then?”

“I’m not dating the resort either,” I smiled and hoped to lighten the awkwardness that had suddenly descended.

“Ha.” Lucas punched my shoulder.

“The resort is good. Tess is doing a great job.” It was true, but I was also working to get back on stable ground with these guys.

Mr. Bakker cleared his throat. “Uh, I thought after that summer, I knew she’d liked you and then her bringing you here today. She’s never brought anyone else to Thanksgiving before. I assumed ...”

“Tess didn’t bring home any guys from college? That’s weird. You guys seem nice enough.” I was still with the jokes, but I also was more curious than I should’ve been about Tess and any past loves. It was the sort of thing you wanted to know, and you didn’t.

“She’s choosy, our Tessy, and I’m glad about that,” Mr. Bakker said.

“So, someone for you in California then? Wait, you’re not in the tech-bro scene?” Lucas asked.

“I’ve dated. No one stands out.” No one like Tess. “As for the brogrammers, I’m too busy for that whole thing. Plus, I work with a woman who writes great code. Saved my butt more than once. She won’t help brogrammers. So, nah. It’s not for me. I took enough hazing from my brother. I don’t need to do that to someone else.”

“Good answer,” Lucas said. “Only one brother? Is he a dickhead like mine?” Lucas made a pitying face.

“Watch it, jackass,” Finn said.

“Boys, your mother’s still in the house, and there’s nothing wrong with her hearing.”

“Right,” Finn and Lucas said in unison. I chuckled at Lucas, who held his index finger to his lips in the international symbol for quiet.

“Not anymore. Patrick is four years older than me. I think he always saw himself as my hero regardless of whether *I did*.” Lucas elbowed Finn in the back.

“He liked to pick on me, make fun of me, my looks mostly, since around the time I was born.” I smiled. “He was a dickhead,” I whispered the word, “a tormentor for a while, but he’s okay now.”

Patrick sucked back then, for sure. His words and my idiocy had hurt Tess. Hundreds of times, I’d wondered what might have happened if I’d stood up to him that day. Punched him. Would I have spent other Thanksgivings and holidays here with her, sneaking kisses and giving engagement rings like these guys were?

Probably not. She would have met another and left me. But I would have had more time with her, more memories before she did. Maybe I could have that time now. We had a year.

DREW

I WOKE EARLY, ENERGIZED, AND EDGY. YESTERDAY WITH TESS and her family was good, too good. She laughed and sat beside me, brushing against my arm and leg. She smelled sweet and sultry, like lavender or roses, and I needed to clear my head before I lost control and kissed her.

I took the old truck up the hill to grab a load of firewood from the enormous pile there. Mr. Rose cut down a few trees each year to thin the wooded areas. He sectioned the logs and pulled them out of sight to dry for a season. The next year, a mechanical splitter created a small mountain of wood to be used as the primary heat source for the resort.

Bringing down the firewood was my favorite chore, and not because it reminded me of seeing Tess that first day here. It was demanding work, and I always broke a sweat. My muscles shook after a strenuous hour or two of loading and unloading. I needed it after that Thanksgiving meal.

I stared at the neat row of logs Mr. Rose cut this year. Next summer, I would schedule the machine to come and split it. I would select the trees to cut down. And I would section the logs and pull them here to season. I wanted to do it.

The rain had stopped by the time I finished loading the truck and drove down the hill past the cottage. I waved at a newly arrived guest smacking a pack of cigarettes against his hand, likely walking to the smoking area nearby. The scent of evergreen hung heavy in the damp air. I spotted Tess heading

toward the hillside cabins with a box in her arms and a bag hanging off her shoulder.

“Hey. Do you need a hand with that?” I asked as I pulled next to her and lowered the window. It felt familiar. It was what I used to do. I was always looking for a way to help her with her work so she’d help me with mine and I could spend more time with her.

“No. It’s not heavy. Stuffed Santas.” She shrugged. “And tiny flocked trees.” She jiggled the box, letting me know the contents.

“Did you find the decorations you wanted for the cottage?”

“Yeah. I left the full-size tree and things on your side. I can help set it up later,” she said.

“Okay. Um, my family has a tradition of eating Chinese takeout the day after Thanksgiving. Since the closest restaurant is a ferry away, I planned to cook a chicken stir-fry tonight. Would you like to join me before we decorate?”

She smiled big, and my stomach dropped. Damn, she had a great smile.

“Sure, okay.” She glanced at the firewood in the back of the truck. “What time?”

“How ’bout six. I want to string the outside lights on all the unoccupied cabins while it’s not raining.”

“Sounds good. I’ll work on the inside decorations, and then if you park by the shed, I can stack that load while you do the lights.” Her eyes flashed with excitement.

That was Tess. Eager to prove she could do the work, and she loved string lights, especially the ones under the bunkhouse deck that were up all summer.

I positioned the truck like she asked and walked to the garage end of the bunkhouse. Several boxes of old lights and the new sets she’d ordered from Mr. Bergin were stacked neatly inside. I got busy setting the hooks and stringing the lights on the high edges of each cabin. There were only a few hours left of the blueish-gray daylight.

I caught glimpses of Tess moving around the property with boxes and bags. Her earbuds keeping her company and allowing me to stare a little without getting her attention.

She moved easily across the ground like she was gliding. An hour later, she took off her fleece and tied it at her waist, exposing the slope of her neck in the long-sleeved Anna Island Resort T-shirt. Her short hair highlighted the column of creamy skin I wanted to smell and taste and suck. My dick twitched, like always.

I finished my job with minimal *fucks* under my breath and a handful of replaced bulbs. The lights were industrial-grade LEDs. Replacing spent bulbs was easy if you hadn't moved the ladder yet. I moved that ladder back and forth too many damn times. But the work was done. With light from my headlamp, a useful tool for extending time outdoors during the fall and winter months, I carried the ladder, the empty spools for the lights, and the extra clips to the maintenance garage in the bunkhouse and checked the time.

It was later than I thought, and I wanted to grab a shower before cooking dinner. Peeking outside, I saw the last of the new tree-house style cabins still had lights on and figured Tess was there. I sent her a text that I was running late.

She hadn't texted back while I was showering, so I checked her side of the cottage. It smelled like her, sweet and floral mixed with Christmas cinnamon. She wasn't there either.

Grabbing my flashlight, I headed to the cabin on a trail that ran along the ridge behind them. Summer guests used it as a shortcut to the picnic shelter and food trucks at the top of the hill. I noticed several cigarette butts on the path and made a mental note to clean those up tomorrow. There was no smoking anywhere on the resort outside of the designated area, and I didn't want guests to think it was a rule they could ignore.

I rounded a curve and descended toward the last cabin in back, smiling when I heard the low hum of the hot tub. Tess must have taken a break. The steep slope of the hillside here,

plus the thick canopy of evergreens, ferns, and underbrush, made it impossible to see the decks of the cabins below. Mrs. Curtis told me it was by design because the lush forest surround added to the sense of seclusion and relaxation.

I walked a few more paces and spotted the warm dappled glow of the lights I'd hung earlier. One step more, and I passed an unusual break in the branches. That's when I saw her floating in the water. Topless. The lights cast a warm glow on her nipples bobbing in the froth while her arms fluttered like wings on the water's bubbling surface. Her exposed skin was pink, and steam billowed around her. She looked like she was floating on a cloud with her back arched. Her neck and head rested on a towel sitting at the tub's edge, and her eyes were closed.

She was so fucking incredible. It was like staring at the sun. I hoped this image would burn into my brain. I'd pictured her a thousand times, and the image in front of me didn't match. This woman was soft, rounded, and even more spectacular than I remembered. I was stuck to the spot. I'm not sure I breathed.

One of her hands lifted to splash water gently over her shoulders, and her fingers ghosted along the pale, plump flesh at the base of the tight peaks rising out of the bubbles. Where was her other hand?

Oh shit. I stepped back, blocking the view, and ran my fingers through my hair. My mind raced with the temptation to look again and the awareness that it was wrong.

I pictured myself in the water, her legs wrapped tight at my waist, angling her warm folds to rub against my straining dick while I teased and sucked one hardened nub and then the other. I had to get out of there.

My dick pressed painfully into the zipper of my jeans. I gripped it hard to shift it and started back the way I came. She moaned a sweet, deep sound, and I froze. "Oh God, yes," she said on a gasp. Then finally, a low, aching cry, "Drew."

THAT WAS the hottest fucking thing I'd ever seen or heard. I don't know how I got back to the cottage. I must've because I was standing in the kitchen, braced against the counter, sweating.

I'd had my share of lust-filled nights since Tess. I'd explored and enjoyed and woken the next day to another woman who wasn't her. But I hadn't even done that lately, jacking off so much I was convinced the muscles in one of my arms were noticeably larger.

This was Tess. And she said my name.

I was eighteen again, struggling to read the signs. Praying I wasn't reading my hopes and dreams into the reality before me. I vibrated with the possibility like I had our first night together.

She didn't want to do it with just anyone or an older guy in college. She wanted it to be me, and I hadn't even kissed her.

The memory of her placing her hand in mine was still vivid. Her eyes held a question, and somehow, I found the right words because she led me down the stairs from the game room where we'd played too many rounds of an old pinball game to pass the time.

It was the end of the season, and Mr. Rose had driven Mrs. Curtis to Seattle on a Tuesday to pick up a part for some equipment and visit a friend. Tess and I agreed to stay on the empty property overnight while they were gone and had set up in two of the cabins.

The night was dark and quiet, other than the low buzz of the security lights above the bunkhouse and our rapid breathing as we crossed the grassy lawn to the cabin Tess had chosen.

We kicked off our shoes by the door. "Can you start a fire?" she asked.

"Sure." I kept my eyes on her as she walked back to the bedroom.

My hands shook as I stacked the kindling and then the wood by rote after building and lighting countless fires for

guests that summer. One strike, and the match burst into flame.

With the fire lit, the reality of the situation came into question. She *was* talking about sex, right? God, if I'd read this wrong, and she'd meant she wanted her first beer to be with me, I was going to die of embarrassment or blue balls.

I wanted her. I barely knew what it meant to want a girl, but I wanted her. She made me feel invincible. She laughed at my jokes and hugged me sometimes for unknown reasons. It was a special brand of torture to wrap my skinny arms around her softness, feel her breasts press against me, and inhale her flowery scent.

Always eager to learn something new, she spent her extra time hanging out with me. She was smart and kind, never flinching or pretending she didn't see my damaged skin, angry red and pocked. I know she saw it, but she never acted like it bothered her the way other girls had.

She returned to the front room with pillows and bedding piled in her arms.

"Let me help you." I jumped up with energy crackling in my ears like the wood in the fireplace.

"I thought this would be warmer. By the fire, I mean." She shook out the thick comforter and laid it on the coarse carpet, followed by the sheet, more blankets, and two pillows. She kept her eyes on me and pulled the elastic from her ponytail. The long dark chestnut strands fell around her shoulders.

I didn't know what I was doing. I'd kissed a couple of girls in high school, and one let me feel her tits. But that was it. I'd seen porn here and there, but that was mostly from Patrick sending me stuff to embarrass me in front of his friends. I'd read things online and took sex-ed at my all-boys school, which had been informative and useless at the same time.

"Tess, I don't have a condom."

She smiled at me. Not the friendly one she gave to guests, but a new one, a sexy one. "I do. And I'm on the pill."

Fuck. She had condoms. Birth control. "Tess, I've never done this before, either. I've messed around some, but that's

it.”

She pulled on her left earlobe and glanced at her toes, now bare as we stood on the little bed we made. “I kissed two boys in high school. And neither of them was nice about it. One even laughed with his friends like he won a medal.” Her voice went soft. “Will you kiss me nicely? Will you touch me nicely?”

My fear melted. I could do that. I nodded.

I brushed my fingers across her cheek. My eyes followed the movement over her sun-tanned skin and the light freckles on her nose. I’d touched her before. I’d touched her face before when she got a piece of a leaf in her eye. But this was different.

My dick had been ready all summer, but definitely since she walked in the game room tonight wearing yoga leggings with a tank top and a loose hoodie that fell off her shoulder when it was her turn with the flippers on the pinball machine.

Kissing the cheek my fingers had caressed, I felt her long eyelashes against the rough skin of my face. I shifted to kiss her other cheek, then down along the column of her neck like I had wanted to do approximately one hundred and seventy-five thousand times that summer.

She lifted onto her toes, wrapped her arms over my shoulders, and pressed her lips to mine for the first time.

TESS

IT WAS ANOTHER DINNER, BUT IT FELT LIKE MORE. WE'D EAT and drink wine, and he'd smell incredible, fresh from the shower.

Drew and I ate countless meals together that summer years ago. But the dinners we shared, just the two of us, were during that last week when we were here alone.

I thought I'd locked the memories away, but lately, my mind had returned often to the way he looked at me and made me feel.

I still can't believe I made the first move. His eyes held surprise when I said I wanted that special first with him.

We'd shared a summer. I learned to repair a roof, installed a garbage disposal, and even baited a crab pot. A disgusting task I had avoided for years, but if we divided the catch equally, then it required equal work, he said. Equal, like I could do anything he could. "Luck doesn't always favor beauty." He'd said, grinning over the sealed bag of smelly crab bait. He was more right than either of us knew at the time.

We were relaxing around each other. Becoming friends again, I hoped. Thanksgiving with my family was nice. He didn't brag or try to impress anyone, and he sat close, radiating heat while I inhaled his woody scent. His cologne was different from what he used to wear. Deeper and richer, I wanted to glide my nose along his neck to breathe him in.

Memories of his scent, the image of his body after a run, and the events of our past had meshed and invaded my quiet

moments. In the hot tub earlier, surrounded by the fresh, crisp air and the warm glow of the Christmas lights he'd hung, I gave in to the thoughts and sensations that ignited my body in ways it had been missing for a long time.

On our first night together, his touch was gentle, and his eyes were filled with questions as his hands roamed my body. We were both so uncertain about our actions, but I was never uncertain about him. Taking him in my hands and mouth had been more thrilling than I could've imagined.

I relived the sensation of his mouth on mine and my most private places. His look of care as he entered me and the pinch of pain before it was replaced with new pleasure. The sweetness of his embarrassed smile when he came so quickly the first time, then energetically tried to make it up to me.

And he did. After holding me and caressing my skin in the warm firelight, he moved over me again. His kisses were no longer tentative but confident, and his hands touched not to explore but to feed the sizzle in my belly. The memories and the feelings were so close to the surface.

On the edge of something unknown, I'd clutched at him, asking him to move faster and to push harder. I was chasing it and getting closer the more intensely he moved with me. My heart beat fast, and I could barely breathe. My frantic thrusts drove me higher somehow until the overwhelming relief of my first orgasm exploded with bright lights and his name on my lips.

If his younger self could make me feel that alive and wanted, I shuddered to imagine what the grown man could do. God, I wanted to know.

THE DOOR between our two sections of the cottage swung open at my knock. "I brought wine," I said and lifted the bottle. Rain, not drizzle, had started since I'd returned from the hot tub, and it sliced through the light on the wraparound porch visible through the big window ahead. A fire crackled in the small wood stove, inset into the once-working fireplace in the

front room. It gave off the scent of woodsmoke and a warm glow to counter the chilly, wet dark outside.

“Great. Come in. It’s basically ready. I’ll open this if you grab us a couple of glasses.” He took the bottle and nodded toward an upper cabinet near the sink while Buster jumped from his perch on the back of the sofa.

The sweet orange tabby with his stripes and prominent M pattern above his eyes trotted over to inspect me and allow me to pet him. I frigging loved cats and how they deigned to tolerate us humans. I felt special when I passed their tests, and they presented the top of their head or the hump of their back for me to scratch. Cats were in charge; if you disagreed, that wasn’t their problem.

I grabbed the glasses and turned to Drew. Was he flushed? Something was different. He was jumpy, almost. Perhaps the awareness of this being our first dinner together since those long-ago days had hit him, too. “Are you okay?” I asked.

“Sure. Sorry, it’s later than I planned.”

“No big deal. It gave me more time in the hot tub. After unloading the wood, the soak was luxurious.”

He cleared his throat and poured us both a glass.

“This is the best I could do for a table,” he said. “I cleaned off the left side. We can eat there.” He’d pulled two kitchen chairs to face each other across his table/desk and rolled his big office chair out of the way. “I’ll get the food if you’ll grab the plates and forks.”

It was casual. Friends having dinner. Not romance with flowers and soft music. A part of me was disappointed, and not just the part that had been imagining his body against mine.

“This is good. How’d you learn to make it?”

“Survival and practice. I learned early you could make a stir-fry with almost any leftovers your roommates didn’t scarf down before a party or college game. I was the only computer science major among the four of us. Many days, they left me to study and fend for myself with meager supplies.” He

smiled, moving his fork through the bright mixture of vegetables scented with garlic, ginger, and something sweet.

“Now, I eat most meals at work. The food is great, and it’s free. I don’t keep many groceries in my apartment. But I usually have at least the ingredients for a stir-fry in the freezer. Your roommates were probably more civil.”

“I was in the dorms for the first two years and avoided starvation with the campus meal plan. People stole snacks or cookies, but that was stuff I didn’t need, anyway. I lived off campus with a guy for the last two years of undergrad and alone during grad school. It was easier that way.” I shrugged.

“That first apartment, with Dave, we had a good setup,” I said. “He didn’t take all the hot water, replaced the toilet paper roll, and did his share of the cleaning. We shared most of the food, but he never took what he knew were my favorites without checking first.”

Drew swallowed. “You and the guy? How’d you meet?”

“Online, if you can believe it. I was lucky. He said we both were.”

“What happened? You’re not together anymore?” He studied his plate.

“Dave moved to Seattle with his boyfriend after graduation.” I grinned. “We met on a campus roommate locator.”

“Ahhh.” He looked up; his expression relaxed.

“Dave is great. We still keep in touch. Birthdays and Christmas cards. And I better get a wedding invitation.”

Drew smiled, the real one that lit his hazel eyes.

The wine was delicious and paired well with the sweet and savory stir-fry. The first glass went down so smoothly; the second was going down fast. Briefly, my mind contemplated the downside of a third and promptly pushed that wisdom aside for another day. Bring it on.

We finished eating, and Drew stood to take our plates to the counter. I grabbed our empty wine glasses. He set the

dishes near the sink and pulled a bottle of bourbon out from the shadows under the cabinets.

“I can offer you whiskey and chocolate for dessert.” He wagged the heavy glass bottle at me.

“Sure. It’s the start of the holidays. I need to get my drinking muscles back in shape.” I winked at him. Was I flirting? It was a little fuzzy. I bumped my hip with his to scoot him aside, giving me room to rinse our dishes and load the dishwasher.

Drew worked to put the leftovers away. “This was fun. Thanks for coming over.”

“Thanks for the invitation.” I kept my eyes on my task.

Close to my side, he reached up and opened a cabinet. His delicious scent of wood and spice wafted around me. I inhaled as deeply as possible without being too obvious.

He pushed the sleeves of his Henley up his forearms, and I stole a peek at the movement of muscle and strong hands as he poured the amber liquid over ice cubes in small juice glasses. I wanted to touch him, to see if his body matched the images in my mind. If I leaned closer, I could brush my cheek against his shoulder.

Whoa. I needed to pump the brakes on the alcohol.

I loaded the last dish, and he handed me a drink. He grabbed a container of chocolate-covered almonds and motioned toward the sofa. “We can sit in there.”

On the sofa ... big and comfy. A person could stretch out. The cushions were even deep enough for two ... together. My pulse skipped, but I nodded and followed.

I sat near the end, close to Buster’s favorite spot. He glanced back at me but didn’t seem to mind my presence.

Drew settled on the center cushion. His heat was warm and soothing, like my personal, deliciously scented space heater.

He set the chocolates and his glass of whiskey on the coffee table before clearing his throat. He stroked a hand over his beard. I wanted to do that.

“Tess, umm. Well, ...”

“Brings back memories, us having dinner together,” I said and took a fortifying sip of the rich liquor. Bringing up the past was unnerving.

Drew’s shoulders relaxed. “Yeah, good memories.”

“For me too.” I smiled.

“Tess, I need to tell you something.” He brushed his hand through his hair, and the movement made his bicep pop under the fabric of his shirt.

“I wasn’t sure you got my text about running late. So, I walked over to the cabin to check on you. I took the back path, the one that goes behind the cabins and down the hill.” His expression was guarded like he was in trouble.

Oh. No. My heartbeat thumped.

“I saw you in the hot tub.”

I set down my glass and stood, blinking rapidly against my narrowing vision. Another person saw me naked without me knowing. I needed to move and shake out my hands. The cottage was small, and a few quick strides put me in the kitchen, boxed in by the U-shaped counter. Drew was right behind me.

I turned. “Did you stay? Stare?” My voice was soft but clipped.

“No. I left. I saw you, I had a stroke, and then I left. I swear it.”

A stroke. Ha. But this was Drew. It wasn’t like he’d never seen me before. And I had just been fantasizing about him seeing me again. He wasn’t a frat guy passing a photo in a chat. It was an accident, and he was telling me about it when he didn’t have to. Standing before me, his shoulders tensed, and his eyebrows pinched together, I believed him.

Maybe it was the whiskey or the orgasm I had earlier and my growing desire to have another one with the real thing. If you want something, ask for it.

I put my hands on my hips. “Okay. So, what are you going to do about it?”

“I’m sorry, Tess. I would never intentionally invade your privacy like that.”

“Well, you did. So, what are you going to do about it?” I stood my ground, my expression holding challenge.

His was still anxious. “What do you mean?”

“Everything equal, Drew, remember? You saw me. I want to see you.”

DREW

IT WAS A DREAM. ONE OF A HUNDRED DREAMS I HAD ABOUT Tess, but this was a new one. And it was really fucking realistic.

“You want to see me?” I asked.

“Yep. Let’s go. Your turn. I went first.” She waved her hand like she was waiting for me to give her a screwdriver.

“Tess, let me get this straight because I’ve been to an HR training. Are you asking me to take off all my clothes in front of you?”

“Yep.”

Okay. This could end really fucking well, or really fucking awful. Her eyes sparkled, and the effort to keep her expression blank was obvious. I stared at her mouth as her tongue came out to wet her full, kissable lips. My dick was instantly hard.

“Okay, but I only saw your front from the waist up. If we’re being fair, you only get to see my front from the waist up. If you want more, I want more. Equal.”

She looked to the side and bit a sweet lip. Disappointment? I was getting lightheaded.

“How much more?” she asked.

“Your tattoo. For starters. I assume you still have it.”

“Of course I do. It’s my animal.”

A hummingbird. She'd spent the Fourth of July with her family that summer and returned with a tattoo on the upper left side of her back near the tantalizing slope where her neck met her shoulder.

She said it represented her activity, her work to have a successful career. She wanted to be great at planning events and managing projects. The hummingbird behind her would push her to do it.

She kept it covered and favored the area while it healed, and though she told me what it was, I didn't see it until she returned to wearing her usual tank tops that showed her shape and the valley between her breasts. Those tops had been equal parts gift and torture device for me.

With her hair in a ponytail like always, the design was on full display then. I wanted to touch it, smooth my hand over it, and on our first night together, she let me. I kissed her there and skimmed my lips down the flawless skin of her back. Was it still flawless and silky, with a subtle indent along the column of her spine? I had to know.

"Okay, Angel?" Her eyes grew wide with recognition. It was what I used to call her. She was an angel. Heaven sent to rescue me from the realities of my tormentor brother, the breakdown of my parents' marriage, and the gigantic step into an uncertain future I was preparing to take in a matter of days. She was light and goodness and overwhelming beauty.

I held her gaze and grabbed the bottom of my Henley, pulling it over my head in a single move. I dropped it on the floor, and her eyes blazed a deeper blue as she raked her gaze over my chest and abs.

She turned, then lifted her sweatshirt over her head the same way I did. The action sent a wave of her flowery scent through the air. I inhaled, and she glanced back at me over her shoulder. Her eyes dropped to my crotch and what I knew was a visible bulge in my jeans. I was hard as stone.

Her smile was teasing as I traced the shape of the tattoo with my fingertip. I was being pulled to her. No control. My fingers studied the lines on her smooth skin, and our eyes met

as she turned to face me again. Her expression was more serious now, and her breaths came fast. The rise and fall of her chest drew my attention to the full swell of her breasts and her nipples visible through the sheer fabric of the pale pink bra.

Suddenly, she pressed her lips to mine and wrapped her arms around my neck in one move. I was lost.

I pulled her tighter and went deeper, licking my tongue against hers as we both strained for breath. She tasted like whiskey and spice and everything I'd missed for six years.

God, this was real. Pulling her with me, I sank back to rest my hips against the counter and smooth my hands across her bare skin. She felt so good. Like a key in a lock.

I caressed the subtle curve of her ass through her leggings, pressing the softness of her into the hardness of me. A moan rose from her throat at the warm slide of our bodies.

She sounded desperate. I was desperate too and ground against her. She broke our kiss and, keeping eye contact, stepped behind me, turning me with her. She hopped onto the counter, making her breasts bounce. My dick swelled bigger, and I dove back in, taking her mouth with mine, my hands tangling in her hair. Our tongues stroked and swirled, hungry for more. Her center was now at the height I could grind harder into her, and her legs encircled my waist.

My hands were everywhere. I held her closer, memorizing her and kissing her neck to her shoulder. I slid her bra strap off as I licked and sucked her creamy skin, breathing her in.

Oh, fuck. This was Tess.

I pulled back to look at her. To make sure this wasn't a fantasy or a stranger. Her lips were wet and swollen, her pupils wide, and that sexy flush moved up from just above her incredible tits.

Neither of us spoke. She reached back and released the clasp of her bra. It slipped down to reveal her round softness and the pink peaks calling to me.

I brushed my hand over her flesh and pulled a distended nipple between my finger and thumb.

“Yes.” She arched, raising the full globes higher.

I buried my nose there, inhaling. My mouth found her other nipple, and I sucked it in to lick, taste, and tease.

Her hands were in my hair, holding me. She rocked her hips, her legs squeezing me tighter, and her head fell back with a moan.

I looked up, and she groaned.

“Drew, please.”

Damn, those words sounded good. “What do you need, Angel?”

“Lips on me. A little more.” A little more? She could have my lips anywhere on her for as long as she wanted.

I resumed my efforts to nip and lave first one rosy peak, then the other. With each shift, her breath grew louder until she panted and used her legs to show me her rhythm. I ground hard against her center.

“Oh, God. Drew ...” Her voice was breathless and aching. “Yes!” she cried and smacked the counter before her body tensed, then fell lax in my arms.

I held her tight and caressed her back in soothing strokes, concentrating on not coming while I soaked her in.

Her legs loosened from my waist but didn’t let go. Still, rock hard, I gently grazed my jeans-covered length against her center and the warmth there, even through her leggings. I kissed up her neck, nipping and tasting along the way.

“How was that, Angel?”

“Good.”

“Just good?” I teased.

“So good,” she said on a sigh and covered my mouth with hers as she tightened her arms around my neck again.

She pulled back, separating the warmth of her chest from mine, and ran her hands over my shoulders. Her gaze followed her fingers as they slid down my arms and across my pecs to

weave through the hair there. No tattoos ... yet. But ideas were coming to my mind more with every passing day I spent with her.

“Tess.” I knelt to look into her eyes.

“Drew.” Her voice carried a hint of a tease, and she met my gaze.

“I have a bed.”

She leaned into me and placed open-mouth kisses along my collarbone then up my neck. She nuzzled behind my ear, and chills surged down my spine.

“Still sensitive there,” she said and smiled against my skin. Fuck, I forgot that. Tess had found that spot behind my ear and kissed me there every chance she had, making me shiver and get hard for her almost immediately. No one else elicited the same response as Tess.

“Your bed sounds like a magical place,” she whispered into the spot. “Can you take me there?”

“Fuck yes.”

She squealed as I scooped her off the counter and held her to me. Her legs clamped at my waist again with her feet hooked behind me.

“Wait, we need water,” she said.

“Yep.” I held her body to me and strode to the refrigerator. “Right door, top shelf.”

Tess opened the fridge and pulled out two of the reusable water bottles I kept stashed there for after a run. I shifted, giving her room to close the door with her elbow, and then marched toward my bedroom. Tess still clung to me, laughing, and trying to hold the chilled bottles away from both of our bare skin.

“Sorry, the bed’s not made. No point with only me here.”

“I don’t care,” she said as we landed together in the rumpled sheets. “It smells fantastic, just like you.”

I shifted up onto my knees, reached to turn on the bedside lamp, and deposited the water bottles on the nightstand. Her empty hands fell wide to her sides, and I stared for a moment at the woman in my bed. How many nights had I dreamed of this, pictured this, wished for this? And she was here.

I lowered over her, resting my arms underneath her bare shoulders, holding myself above her on my elbows. My fingers stroked through the soft strands of her hair, and I remembered the shape of her jaw as I skimmed my thumb along her silky skin.

“It feels like a lifetime since I looked at you from here,” I whispered.

“Two lifetimes, yours *and* mine.”

TESS

HIS BODY AND HIS HEAT PRESSED INTO ME AS THE SOFT lamplight reflected in his eyes. The warm caramel-hazel eyes of my first love. I brushed my fingers over the beard that was not the boy's but the man's. I could still see traces of the marks and scars I knew were hidden there. The boy underneath the hardness of the man.

“I guess I'm the one who has to make up for coming quickly this time,” I said.

His smile grew dangerous. “I'm told if you do it more, you build stamina to hold out longer.”

“You heard that, did you? Well, then we should do it again.”

He chuckled. “Like our first time having this conversation, I couldn't agree more.”

In one smooth motion, he sat back and pulled my leggings and socks with him.

“God, Tess, you're incredible.” It sounded like a statement of fact, not a come-on or sweet talk to an end.

“Fair is fair. Lose the pants, Drew.”

His eyes sparkled, and he shifted to stand. “I'll up the ante.” He pulled off his socks, then shucked off his jeans, taking his boxers with them. Standing next to the bed, gloriously naked, he raised his eyebrows. “I like those panties, Tess, but they have to go.”

He was sexy and bad boy with his calm demands. I liked it. Slowly, I peeled the sheer material down my legs and laid back in the nest of soft sheets, his delicious scent surrounding me.

“There aren’t words, Tess.” His voice was low.

I let my gaze roam his body from his solid thighs and impressive length, standing tall near the ridges of his muscled torso, to his defined chest and broad shoulders. “Same goes,” I said.

He crawled up my body, and I reached out, taking his bearded cheeks in my hands and pulling him to me.

I stroked my thumbs over the soft hair, and he rested above me again. I lifted my lips to his, and the fire was back. Burning and churning.

I widened my legs and intertwined them with his. Drew groaned at the connection but didn’t stop kissing me. His weight pushed his hardness against my sex, the pressure and heat sending sparks charging through me. I wanted more.

Taking the kiss deeper, I pulled him tighter against me. I rocked my hips, seeking the delicious friction. The long-dormant muscles in my core stormed to life again, making me greedy. “Do ... you ... have ...”

Drew continued to suck and stroke his tongue along my neck. “I do.” Right now, it didn’t matter why he had condoms at the ready. I didn’t want to think about him with other women. This man was *my* Drew.

He pulled away and shifted to the side. His fiery gaze met mine as he stroked his finger up the inside of my thigh. He tapped the tight bundle of nerves at my center, and I shivered on a groan.

The look of hunger in his eyes made me burn for him. His fingers slipped lower. “So wet and ready for me.”

He reached into the drawer of the nightstand. I watched as he rolled the condom on and remembered watching him do this before. Now, he completed the task with rehearsed and

confident movements. Again, I put the idea of him with other women out of my mind.

I opened my legs wider, and he lowered, nudging the blunt head of his cock at the entrance to my body. “It’s been a while for me,” I said.

“I’ll go slow.”

I slipped my arms around him and reveled in the aching pressure of him sliding inside. When he was fully seated, filling me, connected with me, he paused, resting on his elbows. He stroked the pads of his thumbs along my jaw, and the intensity in his eyes stopped my breath.

“I’m sorry I didn’t defend you. I’m sorry for every moment since that you didn’t know how real it was. Talking to you, hearing your ideas, and making you laugh, all of you. Not just this. Being with you like this was indescribable, but it wasn’t the only reason you were important to me.”

Those words. Those eyes. The familiar caress of his hands on my body, of him inside me. It was overwhelming.

“I believe you. I’m sorry I shut you out. I’m sorry I didn’t have more faith in you, in what we had.”

I brushed my lips against his. He opened and stroked my tongue in languid swirls as he moved. The push and pull, the sensation of his skin, the noises he made, and my hushed sighs, all of it familiar. The ache of missing him, missing this, intensified. I clutched at his back with each thrust. My body pleading for him to let go, to lose control with me like he never had before. I wanted it. I wanted him.

He shifted and his mouth clamped onto the skin of my shoulder as his breathing increased to groans and grunts.

“You’re so much more, Tess.”

I gasped. The blood in my veins pulsed warm and sent tingles to my swollen sex with each thrust of his body into mine. The sensations, the stretch, and those tingles were intoxicating. My movements fell in sync with my breath for the climb.

“God, Tess. I imagined this so much. I can’t believe this is real.”

“It is Drew,” I panted. “It’s real. Make me feel you.”

He cursed and quickened his pace. His thrusts driving harder. Our rhythm in sync as my orgasm threatened.

My skin was buzzing, my cheeks flushed, and I got wetter. This was Drew. Not the boy I thought used me and hurt me. This was the sexy man who knew more about me than my face or my major. The man who held me before the bullshit of college, where too many guys wanted to fuck me and too many girls treated me like shit because of it.

“Ahhh, Drew. Yes.” I exploded around him with a gasp. His thrusts slowed for a moment more, and I felt the pulse of his release against my throbbing core.

His head slumped forward, and he lowered his chest to mine though he held most of his weight on his elbows. Our breathing slowed, and we lay still, wrapped together for a blissful moment.

“Are you okay?” He whispered against the skin of my shoulder.

“More than that,” I said.

He rose on his arms more quickly than I would have been able to do and gave me the sexiest smile. “Yeah? Me too.”

I never believed I would see him again; much less be naked with him. Everything from that summer came rushing back. No other man had made me feel as safe and satisfied, not like Drew did in his fumbling eighteen-year-old sincerity. And not like this sultry, grown-up version.

Maybe we could do this. Take this time together and explore what it could have been like if things had been different. Our summer here before college was a simpler time. I’d still believed working hard was all I needed to be successful and respected, and a man would see me and love me for me, not just my pretty parts. I wanted that belief, that innocence back, if only for a little while.

We were here for a year. Drew's life and future were in California, and mine were here. But for now, we could give each other what weakness and fear denied us six years ago. We could get the closure we both needed to move on. We spent two incredible days wrapped up in each other like this. We'd make this one incredible year.

DREW

HER SCENT SURROUNDED ME. I'D DREAMED OF FLOWER FIELDS in sunshine with her favorite peonies, dahlias, and wildflowers. Tess smiled among the blooms. Her thin dress skimming her shape in the sunlight.

I never wanted to leave this bed. Tess was next to me again with her silky skin, warm and tempting. Her hair tickled my chest, but I didn't move. I wanted to hold on to those expressive blue eyes, quick wit, and the way she gave me all of her.

She was the same, and she was different. Still driven and eager to master any task set before her. Still stubborn, but that was part of her beauty, too. It was impressive how she dug in when she had to, became formidable, in her work, in pinball, and in life.

But she had a vulnerability now that hadn't been there before. She was cautious.

When we inherited the resort, I didn't want to stay. Seeing her every day and being reminded of what I had, and what I lost would be unbearable. It seemed too far out of reach to think she'd let me back in. Let me hold her like this again.

She was too beautiful for forever, but we were here now, and I would use this time to make everything up to her. We'd talk, work on the resort, and share meals like before. And I'd light up her body as often as possible. That was a personal mission I wanted to get started with right fucking now.

I checked the clock. It wasn't quite midnight. We'd fallen asleep in the afterglow, but the night was young.

We both startled at the sound of a loud knock on the front door.

"Who's that?" she asked, her voice still sleepy.

"No idea," I said, pulling on my jeans and running out of the bedroom.

I opened the front door. "What the ...?"

One of our guests, Roy, or Ray, stood in the doorway. "You've got a fire." He pointed to the bunkhouse by the water. "I called 911 but wanted to know if anyone could be in there."

"No, it's the office and storage." I rubbed my eyes still coming alert.

Tess jogged up behind me in her leggings and a shirt of mine since hers was still in a pile on the kitchen floor.

"Oh, God," she said and pushed out the door.

"Tess!" I yelled, and Ray ran after her as I shoved on sneakers and followed. We all reached the bottom of the hill together and stopped short outside the bunkhouse while dark smoke oozed around from the open side door to the stairwell. Unfortunately, the rain had moved out, but I hoped the existing wet would help somehow.

"Ma'am, do not go in there." Ray's voice was stern, and we both snapped our heads to him. I noticed his long-sleeve shirt with *Shoreline Fire* on the front in bold letters. He approached the open door and got low. "Leif. All clear. All clear, Leif," Ray shouted inside.

He stepped toward the south side of the building, where smoke was now visible, escaping from a spot near the roof. Tess clutched my arm as the smoke thickened in the yellow glow of the security lights. The distant chirping of a siren caught my attention.

Ray jogged back to us. "Do you have a fire suppression system in this building?"

“Yes,” Tess said.

“It’s the standard wet pipe,” I added, and Tess looked at me. I remembered Mr. Rose telling me about the safety features of the resort buildings. The original system was old but got upgraded more than once due to changing codes. Mr. Rose didn’t cut corners with safety.

“I’ve got a fire extinguisher,” I said and thumbed to the maintenance truck parked a few feet away.

“No, department’s almost here, and with no visible flames, it won’t help. No one else is going in now without gear, fire extinguisher or not.”

At that moment, another man emerged from the open door, hunched low with his hand over his mouth, coughing.

Ray ran to him and wrapped him in his arms. “Leif, are you okay?”

He rose to his full height, and two words flashed in my head: Viking and Thor. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and his blond beard held flakes of ash. “I’m fine, babe. This door was already open. I checked a couple of rooms, then closed the internal doors and shoved my shirt under the last one.” He coughed again. “It was less than four minutes. I’m good.” He returned Ray’s embrace with kisses on his cheek.

“You scared me,” Ray said.

“I’m sorry, babe. I know what it’s like to watch the man you love run into a risky situation.” Leif’s expression softened. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

THE SOUND of the engine pumping water had quieted to a low rumble, and the remaining firefighters were checking for hot spots or sparks in the walls. The fire started in the maintenance garage, near the rolling doors, and had traveled up the outer south wall to the second and third floors by the time the fire crew arrived with hoses. Most of the heat-triggered sprinklers on this southern end had gone off, meaning at least a part of each floor would have water damage.

But it was fixable. That much I knew. Tess had been quiet for a while, standing off to the edge of the activity and staring out at the dark water. The moon was setting over the hill behind us, making room for the sun to the east in a few hours.

I stepped closer. I wanted to give her space, and I wanted to hold her tight to my chest. Bright lights from the trucks highlighted the debris and the streams of water running from the building to the shore. Among the mess were a couple cigarette butts scattered by one of the second-floor deck posts off the back of the bunkhouse. We needed more *No Smoking* signs. Maybe Ray and Leif had been smoking down here under cover of the deck above, and that's how they saw the fire. If so, I was willing to overlook the infraction.

"The fire marshal will be out on the first ferry to start the investigation," said the captain of the Anna Island Volunteer Fire Department. "We'll stay a while longer to make sure everything is out. But you're lucky you caught this as quickly as you did. There could have been a heck of a lot more damage, especially to the roof, before the sprinklers kicked on." She turned to glance at the still smoldering building.

"When can we see what it's like on the upper floors?" I asked. I'd already seen that the maintenance garage was probably a gut job. Fortunately, since Leif closed the inner doors between the garage and laundry, and the stairwell and office, the fire didn't reach the north side of the building. Everything reeked of smoke, but we could deal with that.

"Check with the fire marshal, but to be safe, I'd get an inspector out here before going inside."

Tess let out a big exhale.

"Don't worry, Tess," I whispered and hugged her. "I'll call Dad when the sun's up. He'll help us sort this out."

The captain gestured to Ray and Leif, both looking completely comfortable in the heavy firefighter jackets borrowed from the engine. "Good job, you two. I'll send a letter to your department in Shoreline."

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Leif said, and the two men nodded before the captain strode away, her protective suit making a thick, swishing sound.

I kept holding Tess, and Ray and Leif stepped closer.

“How did you know?” she asked.

They glanced at each other. “We were out for a walk since the rain stopped and smelled the smoke,” Ray said. “We’ve smelled enough smoke to know it wasn’t wood burning. It didn’t take us long to find the source.”

“Thank you,” she sighed. “You have a free reservation for life. We should have a policy; firefighters stay free or something. Like cops in coffee shops get free food.” Her shoulders relaxed.

Leif laughed. “I don’t think that’s necessary. I’m glad we were here.”

“Are you celebrating something? Can we extend your stay?” I asked.

Leif smiled.

“Celebrating not being with my family for the entire Thanksgiving weekend,” Ray said and chuckled. “I have eight siblings, and they have spouses and kids, and it all gets to be too much, even for me.”

“I love my in-laws,” Leif said. “But damn.”

THE FIRE CREW was gone by three in the morning. Ray and Leif, who’d been helping, returned to their cabin. The other couple staying at the resort for the weekend had slipped away once the immediate danger had passed. Tess and I returned to the cottage in a daze.

Leif said it looked like the fire started near an outlet in the wall by the rolling doors. The flames traveled along the south wall of all three floors to the roof, but the garage had the most damage. It would be a major repair, but it was doable.

Still gripping my hand, Tess stumbled inside the door on my side, kicked off her shoes like I did, and stepped toward the inner door that led to her apartment. She stopped, facing away from me. She didn't let go, and neither did I.

“Tess.”

She turned. Her other hand was over her mouth, and her eyes were wide, filled with tears not yet spilled onto her cheeks.

I pulled her into me and held on as she shook.

“Tess, it will be okay. We can fix it.”

She wiped her face and looked at me. I caressed her hair back and kissed her. Not with heat or passion, though I felt it, but with tenderness.

Without a word, we walked down the hallway and into the bathroom on my side of the cottage. I reached into the shower and started the water warming, then lifted my gray Stanford sweatshirt over her head, revealing her body to me again. Hooking my thumbs on the edge, I whipped off my shirt, one I grabbed with our jackets earlier, while Ray stayed with Tess.

I unbuttoned my jeans and pulled them off with my boxers while Tess added the rest of her clothes to the pile. Steam rose around us as I guided her into the warm spray and washed the smoke out of her hair. I took my time with the soap, going over every curve, not to arouse her, to take care of her. This wasn't a sexy shower, though my dick didn't get the message. I ignored him and finished washing us both.

Afterward, she wrapped herself in a towel, grabbed clothes from her side of the cottage, and returned to dress in my room like she didn't want to be apart. I didn't either.

I pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms. I wanted to hold her. This wasn't about sex. She sank into my arms, and I settled the blankets over us. She snuggled close, her head on my bare chest.

“Are you okay, Angel?”

She nodded. “You said we.”

“What?”

“Earlier, you said *we* can fix it. I’m glad you’re here, Drew. Thank you for all the sacrifices you’ve made to do this with me.”

Sacrifices? Being here with Tess was no sacrifice. Even before I knew she would let me back into her body, I had to be here because she needed me. I’d tried to convince myself I could stop doing things for her. I couldn’t.

“If I’d been alone—”

“You’re not alone, Tess.”

She exhaled a quiet sob, then sniffed. “All that stuff on the third floor. I know it’s mostly junk, but it’s the last I have of her. I was so strong, cleaning out the cottage and the office, thinking it was the right thing to do, making the resort mine. But as the days passed, I felt more of her slipping away. I imagined if I still had that stuff to go through, then she was still here.”

She shook her head lightly against my chest. “That sounds stupid.”

“Tess.” I lifted her chin, encouraging her to look at me. “You’re not stupid, and you’ve never sounded stupid. You loved her. We’re grieving. Some things won’t make sense. This is the hard part, but we’ll get through it.” A moment stretched between us in the quiet.

“Thank you, Drew.” She placed a kiss over my heart before she let her hand rest there. I wanted her hand there forever.

“Let’s get some sleep. We can start working on repair plans tomorrow.” I sifted my fingers through her wet hair. This felt right. Holding her, comforting her. If she needed me, I would be here.

TESS

THE PHONE RINGING WOKE ME. MY BROTHER FINN.

“Hey, squirt. Impromptu engagement party for Lucas and Jo at The Boathouse tonight. Can you make it?”

I sat up in bed, shifting the covers. “What time is it?”

“I think we’re meeting about six. Bring Drew. He was there for the announcement. He’s invited too.”

“I mean, what time is it now?” I didn’t see a clock on the nightstand, and I was too sleepy to realize I could check the phone held to my ear.

“Almost two o’clock. Tess, are you okay? Are you still in bed? No, wait. I don’t want to know. Just tell me if you and Drew can come tonight.”

“It’s not what you think.” It was sort of what he thought. “We were up most of the night. There was a fire in the bunkhouse.”

“What!”

“No one was hurt. The fire marshal came and said an electrical outlet spark was the cause. The building is damaged, but Drew says it’s fixable. He was with me. We’re okay.”

Finn exhaled into the phone.

“Mom’s gonna need more details. Set up a video conference with everyone. Whatever time works for you. Tell the story once, and Mom gets eyes on you to see for herself how *okay* you are.”

“That’s a good idea, but I need to eat something first.”

“Do you still feel like a party tonight?” His voice was soft. “If not, Luc will understand, or I’ll dick punch him.”

I smiled. Those two wanted people to believe they did a lot of dick punching, but they were all talk.

“Let me check with Drew, but I think we can make it.” I glanced back at the man. He was awake and listening to the conversation, watching me with a sleepy grin. “It’ll take our minds off things. Nothing to do until Monday. Drew’s father is coming out and bringing a building inspector. It pays to know people.” I nudged Drew.

“Good. So, Drew, he’s good to you?”

“I’m a grown—”

“Yes, yes, I know you’re a grown-ass woman. Making sure I don’t need to beat him up.” My brother, sheesh.

“No, Finn, it’s fine. I’ll see you later.” I tapped the red dot to end the call and felt the comforting caress of Drew’s hand on my back.

“Your brother wants to beat me up? He must think I lied to him.”

“About what?”

“Your brothers *and* your dad. Thanksgiving. They assumed I was your boyfriend. When I said I wasn’t, your dad said, *oh, that’s how it is*, like I was getting the goods but not willing to commit.”

“You’re joking.”

“I corrected them, but hell. For a second there, I was marking the exits.” He ran his other hand over his beard.

“They’re harmless, big talkers.” Finn and Lucas were protective big brothers. That was all. I angled toward Drew. “There’s an engagement party at The Boathouse tonight for Lucas and Jo. Would you like to go?”

“Like a date?” Drew asked, his eyebrows furrowed.

I paused, and my heartbeat skipped. “Um, I guess, or not, if you don’t want it to be. It’s just beer and pool.”

His grin was sly as he sat up and brushed a finger down my cheek. “Tess, I would fucking love to go on a date with you.”

I smacked his arm playfully. “You suck. See if I ask you out again.”

He shifted onto his knees in front of me. He was wearing boxers and a smile now.

The fire marshal had arrived first thing this morning, and we dressed, talked with him in our bleary-eyed state about insurance and reports, then returned to the cabin to strip off layers, crawl under the covers, and sleep.

Drew captured my hands and pushed me back onto the bed in one move. His palms held mine out to the side while he hovered over me, his bent legs scrunching my T-shirt above my hips.

He winked. “It’s a date, Angel. Definitely. What do you want to do until then?” He waggled his eyebrows.

“Not that,” I said. His face fell. “I mean, yes, that. I hope that happens a bunch more. But I think we both need food, and I better meet with my family soon, or they’ll start calling.”

“THE BOATHOUSE IS MY BROTHERS’ favorite hangout. They’re tight with the two guys who own it. Lucas graduated with Rhys, and Jake, Rhys’s brother, hangs with Finn. Jake used to sail on an America’s Cup team. Hence the boat theme, but it’s a cool place. Exposed brick, dark wood. I’ve been noticing that sort of thing more lately.”

“Is it your favorite hangout too?” he asked, pulling into a parking space across the street.

“Bars aren’t really my thing, but if they were, this would be the one. Inside those walls, I don’t have two brothers, I have like ten. And this time of year, it’s mostly locals. I don’t get approached, which makes it easier to relax.”

Drew nodded.

“Have I said you’re beautiful?” he asked as we reached the street corner. I smiled and looked down at my feet. I took his hand, and he looked both ways before pulling me into the crosswalk with him. Somehow, when Drew said I looked beautiful, I liked it.

“Have I told you I’m glad I get to be the one to take you out, talk to you, fetch your drinks? Save you from the unwanted advances of countless idiots,” he said.

“Yes, you mentioned that, too.” My cheeks hurt from smiling. A strange reality considering the last twenty-four hours. It was all because of Drew.

For the first time in a long time, I’d put in the effort with my makeup and outfit; skinny jeans, fuzzy crop sweater, and suede booties. I wanted Drew to notice and rest his hand on my low back or pull me closer if he saw other men looking. I wanted them all to know I was with him.

Men looked, and there wasn’t anything anyone could do but get used to it. It was a free country, and I was in a public place. *What did I expect?* So-called friends had been less than supportive when I said it gave me the creeps when looking became staring.

Not tonight. I wouldn’t have to negotiate pickup attempts or somehow say no without pissing off some drunk guy. There wouldn’t be any eye rolls from my tablemates when another guy stumbled over. I could relax. If men leered, it wouldn’t matter. They couldn’t touch me. They couldn’t even get close. Because of Drew.

Drew’s were the eyes that saw me as more, and it made me want to show him everything. The thought threatened to release a thousand butterflies in my belly.

Warm air and laughter spilled out of the bar as we walked in. I spotted Finn and Emily at a large section of high-top tables in the back. A few folks I recognized were playing pool, but I didn’t see Lucas and Jo yet. I grabbed Drew’s hand and headed over.

“Is it a surprise party?” I asked Finn and slipped out of my rain jacket. Everyone was here. Rhys and Jake were even mingling while their staff managed all the customers. Miss Nell and Miss Natalie, two older ladies who lived next door to Lucas and Jo, were here with Mr. Landers, Miss Natalie’s boyfriend. Or was it man-friend? They were all pushing seventy.

“Give me a hug, squirt,” Finn said.

“Finn, I’m fine.” He squeezed a little tighter.

“Party’s not a surprise. Luc’s late. Typical.”

Emily smiled. “I think Luc gets distracted more lately. They’ll be here.”

Yeah, I’d seen a bit too much of that. My brother Lucas loved public displays of affection. I’d never noticed that about him, but with Jo, he could barely keep his hands off her at Mom and Dad’s dinner table, *the most* unsexy place in the world, much less anywhere else. She didn’t seem to mind.

“I hope soon. I’ve been on my feet too long in these pretty shoes,” Miss Nell said, taking another sip of her cocktail. Her southern accent was always a bit more when she drank.

“You do look lovely.” Finn winked and gave her his best smile.

“I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a hundred times. Finn Bakker, keep those dimples away from me. Kryptonite is what they are.” Finn chuckled, making his dimples more pronounced.

I introduced Drew to my friend and yoga teacher, ReeAnn. She and Jake were coming up on a year together. They’d been friends in high school, moved away to chase separate dreams, and each moved back to Perry Harbor. Once they were both here, Jake had asked Ree out, but she always said no, guarding old rejection wounds. Last Christmas, they got stuck in a snowstorm in Whistler, Canada, and she wasn’t turning him down anymore.

Love agreed with them. Her deep brown skin glowed under Jake’s non-stop affection as he kissed her cheek and

nuzzled her ear. He wanted everyone with eyes to know she was with him.

“Hey, Tess. Glad you’re okay.” Jake gave me a side hug.

“Jake, this is Drew.” They shook hands.

“Drinks?” Jake asked.

“Whatever Chuckanut variety you have on draft,” I said.

Drew smiled. “That works for me. I’ll come and get this round.”

“Nah, I own the place,” Jake said. “First round for this crew is on me. But I will take an extra set of hands to carry a few for the table.”

“Right behind you.” Drew held my gaze, heat, and intensity blooming while he rubbed his thumb over mine. One look and something buzzed in my core. Exactly like the last time in my mother’s kitchen two days ago. Damn, he was good.

“Girl, he’s fine. And totally into you,” ReeAnn said, her voice hushed.

“Yeah.” He did make those jeans look good. The untucked button-down shirt and funky sport coat weren’t too bad either.

“I’d say you’re into him right back. I thought you guys were working on the resort and trying not to get in each other’s way. The look he gave you? I’d say you got in his way.”

ReeAnn always saw. One of her many gifts.

“It’s new. Like in the past twenty-four hours.”

The front door burst open. “She said yes! Champagne’s on me!” My goofy brother shouted over the din of the bar, his arm secure around Jo. I shook my head and grinned as the entire room, friends, and strangers alike, erupted in applause.

Lucas planted a kiss on his fiancée that wasn’t altogether family-friendly while she held her left hand high in the air. The sparkle on that ring was visible from here. It wasn’t big but had to be the highest quality money could buy. Lucas

loved spending *handfuls* of cash on Jo. She wasn't what anyone would call flashy or greedy, which made Lucas's antics even sweeter.

Drew returned with our beers and stood next to me, his hand low on my back and his thumb rubbing the strip of skin between the top of my jeans and the edge of my sweater. The sizzle coursing through my veins burned hotter. Mmmm. I wanted to rub myself against him. A couple more beers and I'd do it, here in front of God and everybody.

The evening was filled with congratulations, laughter, and too much kissing by all the couples nearby. There were questions about wedding plans and if Finn and Emily would have a double wedding with Luc and Jo. To which Luc and Finn said a loud *no* in unison. Finn and Emily were planning a spring ceremony by the tulip fields, and Luc and Jo mentioned getting married in Jo's hometown of Nashville. Something about southern tradition.

"Wanna suck face?" I turned to find Finn's friend Angela glancing around the bar. She was completely unfiltered, and I loved it. "So much tongue wrestling goin' on in here, I'm thinking of finding an old flame and doing some wrestling of my own."

Angela was small compared to my 5'9" frame, but she made up for it in flare and attitude. With her long, dark hair and deep-golden skin, she had her share of old flames. I was sure most, if not all, would jump at the chance to rekindle a spark with her. She always left them wanting more.

"Thanks, I'm good," I said to her kind request. "Plus, I have a world-class suck-face guy right here." I pointed at Drew, and he coughed before he greeted her.

"I'm Drew. It's nice to meet you," he said with a side glance at me.

"Angela. My brother, Alex—" she pointed to the man sitting at the bar "—and I ride mountain bikes with Finn and Emily. We grew up with these guys."

"I own the Anna Island Resort with Tess."

He sounded like we'd owned it for years. The idea warmed my blood before I could stop it.

"That's right. Finn mentioned." She lowered her voice. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," I said. Angela's expression was sincere. She was fun and bold. But she was also compassionate and genuine.

"Okay, well, I can't sit in this mating season pheromone soup and do nothing. That can lead to insanity in small primates. This one in particular." She pointed to herself. "Good to meet you, Drew," she said and strolled toward the bar.

"Small primates?" he asked.

"She's a vet, or vet tech, actually. Her parents have a farm with horses on the south side of the island, but she's been reading about animal behavior all her life."

Drew took another sip of beer, then grinned. "Wanna suck face? I hear I'm world-class at it."

DREW

TESS GRINNED. “HERE, IN THE MIDDLE OF ALL THESE PEOPLE, under the watchful eyes of my brothers, you want to kiss me?”

“Yes, I do, Tess. I don’t care where we are or who’s watching. I will always want to kiss you so hard you feel it everywhere.”

She drew a quick breath, and I leaned closer. Our lips were nearly touching, and her pulse fluttered in the hollow of her neck. She liked that idea.

Plenty of people were watching. Her, not me. Every time I turned my head, I caught the eye of another guy checking her out. On one level, I got it. She was stunning, like walked off the page of a magazine and out of the sexiest dream you ever had, stunning. But what the hell was that like for her? Knowing men were looking and thinking things. No wonder she didn’t hang out in bars.

“What’s stopping you?” she asked, that challenge in her eyes. The same one from last night when I admitted to seeing her in the hot tub. That look was hot as fuck.

I stared at her plump lips. She pulled the bottom one between her teeth, teasing me. I stood to face her square on and cupped her jaw in my hands. She didn’t back away. I kept my eyes on her mouth and leaned in. The first light touch was electric, and I felt her sigh. She angled her body closer, but I still held her jaw, and she had to arch a bit. Her arms came around my waist under my sport coat, and she tugged our hips

together. We were close to the same height in her high-heeled boots, and my dick pressed against her center.

I skimmed my lips across hers again. The creamy skin of her cheeks grew pink under her light makeup. Her breath was uneven, and I reveled in the faint push and pull of her tits against my chest. All the surrounding noise dulled, and her flowery scent rose on the heat between us. Still holding her cheeks, I molded my mouth to hers for a gentle kiss. Our noses brushed, and she made a small, frustrated sound in the back of her throat. My dick loved that sound.

“Do you feel it everywhere, Tess?” I whispered against her cheek.

She fisted the back of my shirt and hauled me closer.
“Yes.”

I crushed my mouth to hers and pulled her tight against me with an arm around her shoulders and my other hand in her hair. She opened on a sultry moan, and our tongues met. She was warm and sweet, mixed with the tang of the lager she was drinking. I held her close and her hands, still under my jacket, glided up my back as she melted into me.

Our tongues tangled and tasted, our arms held and squeezed before I eased away to take sips from her kiss-swollen lips. She straightened on her feet, and I gave her a playful peck before releasing her.

“Holy shit,” someone said.

With our eyes still locked, I smiled, and she smiled back. Then she laughed and looked beside us. Her friend Angela, the source of the holy shit comment, stood staring.

“That’s it,” she announced to the nearby wall of the bar, where several guys holding beers leaned. “First guy to kiss me like that wins a prize. Let’s go, fellas. Who thinks they can do it?” Angela strolled in the direction of the dudes, and Tess covered her mouth and laughed.

“So ... you’re not her boyfriend?” Lucas asked as he and Jo returned.

“Oh, he is,” Tess said. “He wasn’t then, but he is now.” Her eyes sparkled, and she bit that plump lip again. I wanted to beat my chest. She was with me, fellas. Beauty like hers and a face like mine, not impossible after all. Teenage “pizza-face” me did a little *in-your-face-Patrick* celebration dance in my head.

Both Lucas and Jo grabbed another quick hug from Tess before they went back to making the rounds with their friends. The fire scared us all. I was holding Tess close for a few reasons tonight. Finn and Emily joined us again, and we ordered dinner.

“That was great. I can’t eat anymore.” Tess patted her flat stomach.

“You can get the chocolate lava cake to go. It heats well at home and makes for a great ... late-night treat with a glass of wine,” Emily said. Her smile was big, and she exchanged a look with Finn. Yeah, I bet it made a great after-sex treat.

“I’ll catch the server and add a couple to our bill.” I winked at Tess and headed to the bar by the short hallway to the restrooms. Our server was waiting for a drink order, and I placed the cake order to go, then headed to the restroom.

I did my thing and stood at the sink, washing my hands.

“Fuck! That Tess Bakker is hot.” The voices echoed down the hall before the two drunk guys strolled in the door, laughing. “And now with the haircut. She gets hotter every time I see her. I want one night with that body.”

“Dude, you couldn’t handle a body like that.”

A chill rippled across the back of my neck. I wasn’t a fighter, but I was a quick learner, and they were half-drunk, at least. I figured my odds were fairly good that one punch was all I needed.

The plaid shirt one spotted me at the sink. “Hey, you. Show me your dick.”

“What?” I stepped closer.

His friend was too busy laughing his ass off to be much of a fighter.

“It must be huge if you got Tess. She probably gets a lot of dick.”

“Watch your fucking mouth, asshole,” I growled.

“And I’m better looking than you. So, I figure yours has gotta be huge. That or you got a fat wallet.”

“Fuck you,” I said and shoved him hard into the door on my way out.

“Whoa, Drew. You okay, man?” Finn stepped in my path, and the red mist faded.

“Yeah, fine. It’s nothing. Guys talking shit.”

Finn squinted at me. “About Tess, right?”

I said nothing.

“Yeah, imagine a twenty-something asshole said that shit, and she was sixteen.” My eyes got wide. “It’s messed up. Tess doesn’t think Lucas and I know about what she has to deal with. We know more than she thinks. It only took me shoving the first three or four assholes face down on that bathroom floor before they stopped saying it around us. They’re more careful, but I doubt they stopped.”

“Shit.” I ran my hand through my hair.

“Look, we all know the deal. Lucas, me, Rhys and Jake, and the rest of our friends. We’ve all heard a shithead make a remark, or worse, describe what he wants to do to her. We’ve all pounded our share of faces for it. But there’s always some new asshole,” Finn said.

“So, what ... you do nothing?”

“No, man, I didn’t say that. We make threats. Our friend Alex is a boxer. He doesn’t mind popping a guy for disrespecting Tess. Jake and Rhys have kicked guys out of the bar for mouthing off. It sucks, but if we didn’t, she’d be out there standing up to it all on her own. Tess is an independent badass, but everyone has limits.”

Finn took a breath. “My point is none of that crap is really about her. It’s about those shitheads, and there seems to be an endless supply in this world. You’ll want to fight them all. You can’t. You’ll end up being angry all the time instead of being with *her*. Keep *your* focus on *her*. Be good to *her*, and don’t be a shithead or ...”

“Or you’ll shove my face into the bathroom floor?”

“Yep.” He smiled. “You got this.” Finn slapped me on the shoulder and kept walking.

Tess captured people’s attention and being with her meant attention for me as well. Guys would see me as a competitor to defeat, and some, a lot better looking than me, would approach her confident they could replace me. She’d have every opportunity to find someone else. It was only a matter of time.

A part of me wanted to lock her away. Keep her safe. Or cover her up and protect her from the stares and leers. I had to remind myself those leering looks and comments weren’t about Tess. They were about the assholes who made them.

“Hey, trouble ordering the cakes?” Tess asked when I made it back to the table. A couple more friends had joined her and Emily.

“No, I ran into Finn.”

Tess frowned at me. “Was it some sort of big brother talk about that kiss?”

“Something like that.”

Tess rolled her eyes.

“It’s cool,” I said. “He’s looking out for you. He’s a good brother. Lucas too.”

Tess’s smile changed to one so full of love. Wow. New goal. That smile.

“I know. They’re the good guys,” she said.

“Drew, got a minute?” I turned to find Lucas.

“Finn’s already given him the *big bro* speech,” Tess said.

“Well, I’m doing it to be sure it’s done right.” Lucas reached over and pinched her arm.

She swatted him away.

“It’s okay, Tess.” I kissed her cheek. “How about I grab those cakes and take you home after this?”

“Perfect.” Her eyes held a banked smolder I was ready to light on fire.

I followed Lucas, and we headed to the bar.

“This isn’t about the big bro speech. I’m sure Finn brought you up to speed on the face-pounding experience we all have regarding Tess, and yours would just be one more in the fray should it be needed.”

I nodded.

“This is about your job,” he said.

I frowned. “My job?”

“You happy there?”

“The schedule could be better. The work is good. My boss, not so much. And I could do without the brogrammers. Too much dude-speak. My head is full of code while I’m standing in line at the coffee cart. I can’t listen to that crap.”

Lucas laughed. “Well, like I said the other day, I’m starting my own shop here. Strictly coding. The fun part. I remember your skills. You’re here in the area for a while. I think we should talk about opportunities.”

Wow. Me? “Yeah. Okay. I’m definitely open to that.”

“Great. Can I get your cell? I’ll set something up when you’re not on a date with my sister.” He smirked. “This is a good place, Drew. Decent tech here, believe it or not. My buddy Rhys over there was the original CFO at Maxx.”

“No shit?”

“No shit,” Lucas said and handed me his phone, so I could add my number to his contacts. Maxx was a much talked about start-up success a few years ago. Many envied the meteoric

rise in their stock price right after going public and often referenced Maxx as an example of how to do it today. I saw the CEO speak at a conference last year. He was a major douche who thought of himself as some sort of sage. All the bros were going fangirl on him. I half expected him to wipe the sweat off his brow with a towel and throw it at them.

“Rhys retired a while ago?” I asked.

“From that job, yes. Cashed out after his divorce. Came back here for a better life. Who wants to run that race forever? Not me,” Lucas said, glancing at his fiancée.

I nodded. Fourteen-hour days and no real life outside of work was not a long-term professional goal of mine, either.

At the table, Tess gave Lucas the eye.

“It was fine, Angel. I got the two-bro seal of approval.”

“You got Angela’s too,” Emily said and giggled.

“Here are the cakes you ordered.” Rhys slid in next to Emily.

“Drew, this is Rhys. Rhys, this is Tess’s boyfriend,” Lucas said.

Rhys smiled. “Yeah, he better be with that kiss.”

Was Tess blushing? Adorable.

“It’s good to meet you,” Rhys said. “Any friend of Tess ...”

“Is welcome as long as he’s good to Tess?” I shook Rhys’s hand and held his gaze.

“Bingo,” he said.

“I told you he’s smart.” Lucas thumbed toward me. Well, that felt good.

“My buddy Rhys here can do all the things with numbers and can dead-lift like a boss,” Lucas said.

“And he plays guitar.” Emily batted her eyes as Finn rejoined the table.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

Lucas chuckled. “I believe your fiancée likes guitar players.”

“And he has those tats.” Now Tess was batting her eyes.

“Okay, we’re leaving,” I said and chuckled. “Rhys, good to meet you.”

“You too, man. Make sure our girl gets home safe.”

I helped Tess with her coat, and we hustled through the chilly rain to my car.

DREW

TESS WAS QUIET ON THE WAY BACK TO THE ISLAND.

“Next time we come for dinner or a party, we should get a room at The Elliot Inn. We wouldn’t have to worry about catching the ferry,” I said.

“Yeah, that could be fun. I’ve never stayed there. It’s a little out of my price range.”

“For a special occasion, then.”

“Thanks for coming with me.” Her expression was soft, sweet.

“Anytime, Angel.”

She gave me a teasing grin. “And that kiss was fucking phenomenal.”

I laughed. “You enjoyed that? Was it the kiss ... or the people watching?”

“Both. The air shifted after that. It changed what people saw when they looked at me. Everyone knew I was with you, really with you. I liked them knowing that.”

Yeah, I liked it too.

“I had more control. People could think whatever, but I was going home with you, and they knew it. I wasn’t a prize or a trophy for anyone tonight.”

She smiled, then stared out the car window as the ferry chugged across the channel. “I don’t date much. It’s hard to

know who's worth the effort. One guy, who'd talked to me after Econ class for three weeks and seemed so sincere my junior year, told me on our date that his friends had a bet about who could get with me. He won a hundred bucks and bragging rights at his frat."

"He said that?" She nodded. I could picture it. All the campus guys pushing and shoving for a chance to be with her, to be the big man because he got the hottest girl. Nothing about the fact that he got the *best* girl. Nothing about *her*. And any decent guy would never have approached her with all that noise.

"I had a bit of revenge. I ordered the most expensive thing on the menu and didn't let him touch me. His friends called me an entitled bitch, but he won money because I agreed to go out with him. Why shouldn't he spend it on me, right?" She was making a joke, but her voice held disappointment at the edges.

"He deserved a knee to the balls," I said. "And that shit hurts like fuck. I don't say that lightly."

She looked at me. Her expression soft again. "I get ... attention. I know some people like that. But for me, the spotlight feels like pressure. The background fits better. I like to plan events, not host them. I'd make a great vice president, but I don't want to be president."

She looked away. "I know my looks open doors. But they close some, too."

"Like going out and not getting hit on."

"Yeah. Or just being normal. In college, some girls wouldn't go out if I was going. They said I blew the curve. Too pretty. I'm sure they meant it to be a compliment, but they were still rejecting me for my looks. I had nothing to do with my face or my body. That was my parents' genes. Being left out by friends or seen as some sort of prize hurt, and I didn't always know when or from where a jab would come."

She reached across the center console and smoothed her fingertips along my thigh in the quiet. I got hard. Damn it. She

was sharing about being objectified, and I got hard. Not my best move.

“It made it tough to trust people, to feel normal. But tonight felt normal. And that *was* a world-class suck face.”

I brought her hand to my mouth and kissed her fingers. She was remarkable for a lot of reasons. Her looks were just one of them.

We rolled off the ferry, and it was a short drive to the resort. I parked in my usual spot and pulled Tess to the deck steps that led to my door. Her smile was shy and knowing. Damn right I wanted her again. Her.

We kicked off our shoes in the entry, and I shrugged off my sport coat. She hung her raincoat on an empty hook. That hook was hers now. I wanted to see her coat there all the time.

She walked into the kitchen and set the cakes on the counter. I stepped behind her, and she turned in my arms. “Kiss me,” she said, her eyes shining.

“I’ll do my best.” I smoothed my thumb across her cheek. She was shorter now, with her boots off, and I kissed her forehead, then each of her eyes, and hesitated. There was that faint pulse at the base of her throat. She fisted my shirt again and pulled herself tight to me. I unleashed like I hadn’t done at the bar, holding her tight, cradling her head as I delved in, licking against her tongue, then sucking a lip. She nipped my lip and pushed her tongue against mine. She gave as good as she got. Like she wanted to lead.

“You want control?” I asked after another mind-blowing kiss.

Her chest heaved, and she struggled for breath. “I guess sometimes. I don’t know for sure. I’ve never felt safe enough to ask.”

“Tonight, you liked it, having control over how people saw you.”

“It’s not a situation I’m in often.”

“You want to take control tonight?” The pulse at the base of her throat thrummed. “You can have it. Anything you want.”

Her guarded expression slowly morphed into hunger in her eyes.

“You can’t touch me or tell me what to do,” she said. “You can only watch.” Umm, okay, that could be hot.

“Will you show me how you like to be touched? Because, Tess, I’ll watch that. Can’t promise I won’t come first, though.”

Her eyes glittered. “Will you wait until I tell you to come?”

Fuck. “I’ll try.” I raised my hand and paused closer to her cheek. “Can I touch you before?”

Holding eye contact, she shook her head and stepped out of reach. “No.”

Double fuck. I wasn’t sure I could survive seeing Tess touch herself, but I’d die trying if I had to.

She moved backward, a sultry gleam in her eyes. Her lip between her teeth again. My heart skipped. Tess. Sexy and teasing and leading me right where I wanted to go.

We walked to her part of the cottage and back to her bedroom. I hadn’t been in here yet. The bedside lamp gave off a low light against the pale sea-foam green walls. The bed was old wrought iron, painted white and covered with a thick light-gray comforter and lavender throw pillows. It was feminine and serene, enchanted with her things around. For a moment, I was eighteen again and overwhelmed by her.

She stopped inside her room and eyed the foot of the bed. “Take everything off and lie down.” Her voice was soft and sweet but still demanding.

Yep. I slowly unbuttoned my shirt.

She closed the door before she lifted her sweater, revealing a peach satin bra cupping the swells of her breasts.

“I like privacy, especially with something like this.”

I had to calm my breathing if I wanted to wait to come. We mirrored each other, removing our socks and our jeans. She unclasped her bra, letting it fall to the floor, then hooked her thumbs in her panties. Slowly, the fabric slid against her skin as she removed them and stepped away.

I was frozen until she smirked, then I stripped off my boxers, still watching her. She went to the other side of the bed and pulled the comforter down, exposing the soft lavender sheets. They smelled like her. This entire room did. Elements of her were everywhere.

As instructed, I laid on my side across the bottom of the bed and rested, propped on my elbow across a pillow she tossed me. My dick was rock hard and already leaking. I squeezed around the base to ease the ache.

Tess opened the drawer of her nightstand and lobbed a small bottle at me. Lube. “It’s all I have. It’s a little sticky, but it’s the kind that’s safe to use with toys,” she said, giving away more about this sexy part of her life.

“I’ve thought about you ... when I do this,” she said.

“I’ve thought about you, too. I still do.”

She lay back on the bed, her head and shoulders propped against the headboard and pillows. She placed a small bullet vibrator next to her hip and slowly rubbed her legs together as her hand caressed her stomach. Her gaze stayed locked with mine. The slow, slick slide of my palm with the lube had my dick pulsing.

“What do you think about?” she asked.

“Eating your pussy. I want to do it now.” The words were raw, and her breath caught. Her fingers drifted to her peaked nipples, and she closed her eyes on an exhale. She was too damn hot, and she was letting me see her like this. I stroked my shaft in languid passes, trying to slow things down rather than climb higher. This was more than I dared to imagine, and I wanted it to last.

“What about you?” I asked.

“Same. I want it again. Your mouth on me with soft licks and hard sucks.”

Fuckity fuck. “You can have it anytime you want.” I leaned forward.

“Not yet,” she said, and I concentrated on my breathing instead of the growing pressure in my dick.

Her hands drifted down her torso and the neat triangle of hair at her apex. Her bent knees spread wide, and I shifted closer, catching her sweet scent.

“No touching,” she said.

Her fingers caressed her folds and opening, spreading her slickness to her clit, and tempting pink flesh.

My fist squeezed my shaft tighter. She kept her eyes on my hand. The flush appeared above her tits and rose along her neck as her breaths came faster.

“Let me taste you.” I wasn’t above begging, not for Tess.

“Soon. I want my mouth on you too,” she said. “I’ve never done that to anyone else.” Fuuuck, that was all mine. Mine. The buzz started at the base of my spine. Too soon.

“Tess, you’re killing me. This is too hot, too good. I’m struggling to hold on.”

“Then don’t hold on. Show me. I want to know how to make you feel good.” Hell, if she made me feel any better, it would kill me. Nothing had ever been like this.

Her words had the sensations already building. I squeezed hard on the upward stroke and watched her fingers caress and press and tease. After I came, I was kissing every inch of that delicious pink.

She panted. “Do it. Come for me. Let me watch you.”

Two more strokes, and I couldn’t hold back anymore. Electricity exploded through my veins, and I sucked in long draws of air as I rolled onto my back to catch the mess on my torso and chest.

Damn. My breathing slowed, and I covered my eyes with the crook of my arm. Her breath panted, then there was the low buzz of the vibe. I looked to see as she held it to her clit and teased a nipple with the other hand in slow, easy strokes. As she rose higher, she moaned and jerked her hips. That other hand began fisting the sheet by her side. "Drew!" she gasped and cried out her release.

She was unbelievable. Sex with Tess was unlike anything else. Sweet and sensual one time, then brave and new another. No one had ever provoked this feeling, this need. Only Tess. No other woman would ever compare.

TESS

OH. MY. GOD. I JUST DID THAT. AND IT WAS THE SEXIEST thing ever.

Only Drew.

This wasn't about what he wanted. He watched because I asked him to, and even though he wanted to touch me, he didn't do it. This was about me. Sure, he enjoyed it, but that wasn't the goal, and he was still all in.

"I need to clean up," he said.

I closed my eyes and nodded in my blissed-out state as he rose from the bed. Orgasms on my own had never been like that.

I learned the joys of self-love after my summer with Drew. As much as I didn't want to, I ached for him, and nothing dulled it.

Touching myself was out. I found out quickly the dorms weren't a private place. People were always talking about vibrators, but I didn't dare buy one then. Those bitches would have found it and posted a picture on Insta. Instead, I came home for fall break, ordered my trusty little bullet, and finally took the edge off in the privacy of my teen bedroom like a normal person.

It was always Drew I thought about. The softness in his eyes when he was above me. The gentleness of his touch. His sincere interest in learning about this mysterious thing, my

body, and discovering how good he could make it feel. I was lost in him then. There was no way not to be.

The bed dipped, and he crawled toward me. “Need to taste you. May I?”

“God, yes.”

Without hesitation, he lowered his mouth to me. With slow caresses that changed into nips and sucks and hums, he was taking me up again. My nipples peaked, and my body opened to him.

“I want you too,” I said on a breath and rolled to my side. I reached for him, and he shifted his legs, rolling to his side next to me. He was hard, and I touched my tongue to the tip as I took him in hand, his salty taste on my tongue and his scent filling my nose.

He responded with suction on my oversensitive clit, making me squirm. The scruff of his beard on my thigh and the sensitive skin of my sex had my core pulsing.

I licked and circled the head, then sucked him in, and he grew harder. His groan vibrated against my flesh.

“Want to be inside you, Tess,” he said between teasing licks and thrusts of his tongue. “Is it my turn to lead?”

Damn, that was hot. I’d had a couple of other lovers, but none of them ever let me have control, much less *asked me* to give it to them. They had it from the start, showing me something special, or so they thought.

It wasn’t all terrible. I climaxed every time. No faking it. I even had a boyfriend once, and we explored various positions. But he was always in control. That’s the reason for no blow jobs with anyone else. It wouldn’t have been about my power over his pleasure. It would have been about me servicing him.

“It’s your turn. Where do you want me?”

He growled as he moved to the pillows and took my mouth in a searing kiss. His palm covered me, and a finger stroked around the opening to my body before dipping inside. I ground against his hand, wanting more.

He rolled and pulled me to straddle him, our bodies aligning. “Like this, so I can watch you again.” He pushed his hardness against my center. My heartbeat surged, and the climb intensified.

After a few torturous and thrilling thrusts against my clit, he grabbed a condom from the nightstand. He must have stashed it there when he went to clean up. He rolled it on, and I pulled my knees snug to his hips. Slowly, he guided me onto him and moved in tender thrusts.

“You can go hard, Drew,” I panted.

“Are you leading, or am I?” His tone was teasing.

Oh, my. “You are. I just wanted you to know ... you don’t have to go easy ... I want it all ... dirty and sweet, hard and soft.”

“Oh, I’m gonna fuck you hard, Tess. Maybe from behind after I bend you over the sofa.” His movements were gentle, but his words made me burn. “Or against the wall, quick, with your clothes bunched out of the way.” Still with the slow, teasing rhythm. “Would you like that, Tess?”

“Yes.” I groaned.

“I know you like those ideas. I can feel you getting wetter,” he said. “Touch your tits. Caress them like I would, like you’ve imagined.”

Oh. My. God. Still with the slow, deep rhythm. I smoothed my hands over the roundness, ghosted over the throbbing peaks, and my head fell back.

“Pinch your nipples hard, like I would bite them.”

I did it, no choice, and my pussy clenched.

“Please move faster, Drew. I need it.”

He smiled and pulled me down to him. He kissed me with tenderness, holding me tight against his chest. Then finally, mercifully, he dug his heels into the bed and thrust hard.

His kisses grew hotter as he surged into me, my taste on his tongue, and we came together. Our panting breaths and

moans filling the room. With him still inside me, I rested my forehead on his.

Our blood settled, and I shivered at the chill of my sweat-damp skin. With a soft kiss, Drew slowly lifted me off him, then rose to take care of the condom while I pulled the covers over me.

“I’m sleeping here tonight,” he said when he returned, like I would argue.

“Good.”

He slid in beside me, pulled my head to his chest, and switched off the light, bathing the room in darkness. I was warm and satisfied as sleep greeted me.

COFFEE. I needed coffee. I woke to his scent on my sheets and smiled.

“Drew?” I called, looking around the gray morning of my bedroom

“Hey, Angel.” He appeared and leaned against the doorjamb, wearing those low-slung pajama bottoms again. Abs, chest, and arms on full display. Hot. As. Fuck. His hand scratched over his neatly trimmed beard, and his hazel eyes sparkled with teasing. That image had heat pooling in my core. Again. My body was still delightfully sore, but that didn’t matter.

He strolled to the bed and crawled over me, holding himself above on his hands and knees, caging me in. “How’d you sleep?”

The covers slipped low, and I flopped flat on my back, making my naked boobs jiggle and catch his eye. My fingers roamed the bulges and hard planes of muscle in his shoulders and chest. “Great. You?”

“Same.” He winked. Fuck that wink. I loved it.

“What are you doing today?” I asked.

“You.” He smirked, and the heat in my core jumped a notch.

“I’m serious.”

“I am too. Completely serious. Three days ago, I told your family we weren’t together. A very depressing state and one I thought I couldn’t change. This morning, I woke with your naked curves in my hands and your hair tangled in my beard. Whatever this bubble is, I’m not ready for it to break. I need more time. Many, many days, Tess.” He dropped teasing nips and pecks on my shoulder, tickling my neck. I squirmed and laughed. This was a morning with Drew? I needed more, too.

“We can’t stay in bed all day,” I said.

“Why the hell not? It’s still a holiday.”

“I need to turn the rooms, get the laundry going. We have guests checking out today, including Ray and Leif. They’re getting a refund and a gift certificate for a free weekend. I don’t care if they say it isn’t necessary.”

Drew shifted and collapsed beside me. “Always so hardworking and responsible.”

“And I’d like to put up the Christmas tree ...”

“If I say yes, what do I get?” He ran a finger down my nose.

“How about me naked later, and you can lead the whole time?”

A deep rumble echoed in his chest. “Okay. Eat first. I’ll need energy. Food supplies are low. I’ll run to the ferry dock market for essentials. But let me be clear, I want more of this.” He motioned between us and rose from the bed.

“Got it,” I said, nodding my head.

I dressed in my cutest pajama set, and Drew hummed his approval when I entered the kitchen on his side. He handed me a cup of coffee with another sweet kiss and asked me how I liked my eggs. He was cooking breakfast for me? I was quickly getting lost in him again.

We talked about next steps for the bunkhouse, and Drew reminded me his dad was coming out in the morning to scope out the repair work. Once the insurance investigator gave us the okay, we could start. The real world seeped back in.

As soon as the building was safe, I wanted to dive into the third-floor clean-out. It was time, and I didn't want to risk missing out on whatever could be up there.

TESS

THE NEXT FEW DAYS WERE BUSY. THE INSURANCE ADJUSTER completed his paperwork and said that the process wouldn't take long, but it could be a couple of weeks to get a check. He expected we'd get it by the Christmas holidays.

Drew's dad had driven up twice from his home north of Seattle to inspect the damage and make plans to repair the structure. I'd been nervous about meeting him. He was wealthy, and I knew wealth at his level didn't always come fairly. Some played dirty, and I feared Drew's dad could be like that.

He wasn't. Drew introduced me as his business partner, his smile giving away a little more, but his father never made a remark or leered knowingly. He asked me questions, treated me like I had a brain, and treated Drew with respect and pride as well.

Drew said now was the time to change the electrical, water, and HVAC for the remodel. So, I was meeting Emily and Jo for lunch to talk about ideas. Emily was already helping with the design of the lower cabins, and Jo was a chef with a background in catering and events. I figured they were a good place to start working through my plans for a new event space in the repaired building. I didn't have Drew's money, so I was thinking about taking out a loan or approaching Lucas to help pay for these upgrades. I didn't want to miss this chance to get it right.

I parked around the corner from The Boathouse. Low, gray clouds hung around the mountains in the distance, and there was a chill in the air. It was the PNW version of the Holiday Season. Not much snow usually, but gray days made brighter by the twinkle lights in trees and on streetlights, storefronts, and boats. Anywhere you could put a twinkle light had one. And most would be left up well into February when the days began to slowly grow longer.

“Hey beautiful, I know you.” A man dressed in dark jeans, work boots, and a sweatshirt stood on the corner of Commerce Street, smiling at me. Dark blond hair cut high and tight with a clean shave. The two other burly guys with him wore t-shirts with the three reflective lines construction workers wore for safety.

“Man, you don’t know her. Put your dick away,” one said.

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember meeting you. Have a nice day.” I turned toward The Boathouse door, and his buddies chuckled.

“You own that resort ... on the waterfront,” he added quickly and stepped closer. His eyes roamed my body, and I swallowed against the creepy feeling rising in my throat.

The developer’s son. He was there with his dad the day we learned about the right of first refusal on the land. We didn’t speak or get introduced, but I remembered him.

“Your father leases the land on the other side of the hill.” He nodded. “I believe I told him to fuck off.”

He chuckled. “That you did. He can be a prick, but he offered you a shitload of money for a place that’s falling apart.” He took a drag from his cigarette and blew the smoke sideways, though the wind wafted it back to me. The scent was unfamiliar, sweet, like pipe tobacco. I coughed.

“We’re not selling.” I headed to the door.

“Hey, you come here a lot?” he asked and pointed to The Boathouse. “We started a new project not far away, thought this place could be good for a beer after work sometime.”

“Yeah, the food’s great.” I ducked inside. He could fuck off like his father.

I was usually more cautious with guys trying to low-key hit on me because some took *no* as a challenge. But today, I was bolder. The image of Drew lying across the foot of my bed, asking to touch me, scrolled through my mind. I’d never taken control like that before. I had a safe place with Drew, which made me stronger everywhere else.

“Hey Rhys,” I said and waved to Jake at the other end of the bar as I slid onto a bar stool. I was early.

“Hey, Tess, what’s up?” Rhys’s brow furrowed.

“Nothing. Guys outside. It’s fine.”

“Did they say something?” Rhys glanced out the window, flipped his white bar towel over his shoulder, and leaned in. His thick arm muscles, visible in his short-sleeved T-shirt, bulged and rolled above a dark leather cuff at his wrist.

“Not really. One of them, his dad leases the resort’s back acreage for logging and wanted to buy the resort right after Drew and I took over. The dad was insulting. I doubt Junior is much better. Junior was out there with some friends and tried to chat, but I hustled inside.”

“Any trouble, you let me know.” He pointed at me.

I gave him the thumbs up.

“How ’bout a beer?” Rhys said.

“Sounds good.”

“Is Drew coming?”

“Nah, girls’ lunch. Emily and Jo will be here soon,” I said.

“I’ll get your drink while you wait.” He stepped to the center of the bar where the beer taps were.

Settling in, I scrolled through my phone before I felt the shuffle of someone sitting next to me. I turned. His friends weren’t with him now.

“So, you don’t like my old man. Me neither. We have that in common.” His eyes sparkled like he had a secret. “I bet there’s more we have in common.” His eyes dropped to my boobs.

“I have a boyfriend.”

“I’m sure you do, honey, but I could show you a very good time. Dinner on a yacht, tickets to a Seahawks game, a weekend on Orcas Island in a private house with a hot tub overlooking the water.” He leaned closer. “You like hot tubs, don’t you, beautiful?”

“No, thanks.” I caught sight of Rhys as Casanova put his hand on the back of my chair.

“I’ll make sure you like it.” His smoky breath hit my face.

“Back-off, dickhead,” I gritted out. Working in the hospitality trade, I learned to smile through just about anything. Today, it wasn’t working.

“Oh, you are all kinds of fine, aren’t you?” He lowered his voice. “I bet you like to fight before you fuck.”

“Screw you, Ass—”

“Hey.” Rhys leaned across the bar. “She said no. She meant it. This is a nice place. A lot of pretty women come in here, and I want to keep it that way. So, drop that asshole behavior at the door or leave. It’s that simple.” Rhys pushed back and crossed his arms. The move caused all the muscles in his upper body to pop.

Junior shifted in his seat. “You cockblock all your customers? What’s so special about this princess?”

“Nothing. She’s a woman like any other, and they all deserve your manners.”

“Fuck this,” Junior said and stood. “You’re missing out, princess.”

“I doubt it,” I said loud enough for him to hear as he moved toward the door.

“Thanks, Rhys,” I sighed. “I had him, but I appreciate the support.”

“Anytime.” He paused. “Make sure you don’t leave alone. I’ll walk you to your car if needed.” And he strolled to another customer. Ten. Big. Brothers.

Jo and Emily arrived, and we grabbed a booth on the wall opposite the bar.

“What’s up with you?” Emily asked.

“Nothing. The usual.”

“Some dickhead hit on you?” Jo asked.

I nodded.

“Was it those jerks on the corner? They made a few comments to us, too. It’s fucking noon. I never understood trying to pick up women at lunch.” She shook her head. I’m sure Jo saw a lot of things working at a much-hyped restaurant in Seattle before she moved here last year.

I chuckled. “Why?”

“If they have a job to get back to, there’s a time limit on getting to know her. If they don’t have a job, well ... the pickup stops there now, doesn’t it? I mean, what sort of message is he going for? Either I don’t want to invest much time in you, or I can’t hold down a job. Neither one of those works.”

We all laughed.

Lunch was worth the effort, and I forgot about the dickhead and his dad. I had visions of what I wanted the event space to be like, but Jo and Emily helped to round it out. We had three scenarios. My dream, my good enough, and my starting place.

We listed the details of all three, the events they would support, and the amenities we could provide. Weddings and small meetings could use catering if we had a kitchen. An elegant room on the third floor could be a bride’s room along with smaller meeting rooms and storage. I was already thinking about advertising.

My heart was beating hard. This was my dream. An event space at a spectacular place.

THE DOOR between my apartment and Drew's part of the cottage was propped open when I got home, and he was staring at his bank of monitors, his hand guiding the mouse and clicking. Buster sat on his perch at the top of the sofa and gave me a nonchalant glance. I was much more commonplace in his world lately, and he let it show. Cats.

I didn't want to disturb Drew, so I took my excitement about the day to my bedroom and stripped out of my jeans and turtleneck.

"I hope you don't mind. The door was open." His deep voice was sultry, and I looked over my shoulder to find Drew in the doorway. His long-sleeve T-shirt stretched across his shoulders and biceps, and the wear and fade marks of his jeans drew my attention to the bulge behind his zipper.

I couldn't get enough of him. We'd spent every night together since last weekend. He was a man on a mission to make good on his promise to fuck me hard. But in true Drew style, he loved me tenderly at other times. Passionate, like no other man.

"How was lunch? You were gone a while. I hope that means it went well."

"Absolutely. After a crap start, it was great."

He chuckled. "Crap start?"

"That developer, the one who came here and called me a pussy, —" yeah, Drew told me about that "—his son came into The Boathouse and hit on me. Rhys had my back." She shivered. "Yuck, he stunk like an old ashtray."

Drew's jaw tensed. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"Me too, but not because of that dickhead. It happens. You can't be there all the time, even though I would prefer it." I walked toward him in my bra and panties. His eyes softened as he took me in.

I'd started paying more attention to my underwear lately. I threw out a few things that weren't even good enough for a period day and made room for new items. Emily showed me one of her favorite sites, and she and Jo helped me do a little online shopping this afternoon. I couldn't wait to show Drew.

He wrapped his arms around me. "God, you take my breath away." He caressed my back, then rubbed his beard along my neck and shoulder, making me giggle like a teenager. I'm not sure I giggled like that when I *was* a teenager.

"Mercy. Please, I need mercy," I gasped, and he pulled away. I stood on my toes and pressed my lips to his. He groaned and cupped my bottom, squeezing and lifting. I wrapped my legs around him and ground myself against him.

"Damn, Tess. So many ideas in my head right now. What do you need? Quick, against the door? Deep and slow on the bed? Name it. It's yours."

I loved that he asked me what I needed. He let me have control first. Always.

"I like what you're thinking, but what I really want to do is tell you about the design ideas we had." My eyes pleaded with him. "After you're done working, of course."

"I'll never be done working. I'm not waiting for that to touch your skin." One of his hands caressed and stroked my body as I clung to him. "Will you wear this outfit while you tell me about it?" he asked.

"Will you build up the fire so I don't freeze my tits off in the front room?" I arched a brow.

"Hell, yes." He strode through the doorway, his powerful legs eating up the floor.

"Wait. Take me back. I need my bag."

He groaned but shifted toward my bedroom. He didn't put me down, so I leaned across him to grab my bag from the bed before he carried me back out the door.

DREW

DAD STOPPED BY WITH DRAWINGS THAT WEEKEND. TESS HAD great ideas for the bunkhouse, and I'd shared them with him. He had one of his CAD drafters create basic sketches showing what was possible.

The building showed fresh signs of life, and it lit Tess's eyes in a way I wanted to see every day. Several places needed new studs, and a few floor joists needed to be replaced. One of Dad's crews had finished that work, and the inspector said it was structurally sound to begin the remodel.

They ruled the fire an accident. A faulty wall outlet had sparked and quickly spread. The insurance investigator scheduled the professionals to come in for cleanup, and after days in the hands of people who did this all the time, the place looked much better.

We'd removed soggy drywall along the south side of all three floors as well as damaged flooring and ceiling materials. The acrid smell of smoke still hung in the air, but it dissipated every day and combined with the comforting scent of new wood.

About a quarter to a third of the sprinkler heads had activated on the top two floors, and the industrial dehumidifiers used to dry out anything remaining made a constant noise. But with the doors shut, it was possible to have a conversation in the office without shouting.

"Thanks, Dad. For everything you've done. Your teams are busy enough. And it's the holidays."

“That’s actually good. Everyone needs extra cash this time of year. I offered extra pay for the folks who helped with the resort.”

“I’ll pay you back. This is my thing, not yours.”

“Drew, you’re my son. This is important to you. Save your money for the interiors and furniture. Let me handle the construction. I want to help.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

The divorce had been a challenging time that led to a couple of tough years, but Dad was trying, and he and Mom were both happy now. In the end, that was all that mattered. We’d gotten back into our old habit of the bro-hug-back-slap to say goodbye.

Tess finished cleaning out the office and set up the front desk exactly how she wanted it. All the files were electronic or neatly stored in a quarter of the original file cabinets.

This week, we were tackling the third-floor clean-out. Her brothers and friends were all heading over to help. Once that was finished, Dad and I would start scheduling the materials and crews to make Tess’s dreams for this space into reality. It was a perfect way to spend my money.

Wanting to extend my break from hours of coding, I walked to the garage side. There were a few tools and other things I could salvage. Taking a page from Tess’s playbook, I used this as an opportunity to clean out and restock. I was making a list of new things we needed when the landline rang from the office.

“Anna Island Resort,” I said.

“Hey kid, Boyd here. Heard you guys had a fire. What’s the damage?” The sound of the sleazy, old developer’s voice made me cringe.

“Not too bad,” I said. “We were lucky, and no one was hurt. We’ll have the building back in shape soon.”

“Huh, that right? I heard there was quite a bit of damage.”

“Nothing we can’t handle.” I wanted off the phone, but no way this was a friendly check-in. I waited for the punch.

“Construction is expensive, kid. And that resort needs more and more of it these days. Don’t you think it’s time we talked seriously about a sale? I’m willing to pay the same price as earlier, even with the burned-out building.”

Burned-out building? Thankfully, it hadn’t been that bad. “The answer’s still no. Find another property.”

“You got balls, kid. I’ll give you that. All that expense and responsibility. But ... this offer, it’s subject to change the longer you wait.” He lowered his voice. “You’ll have a better chance of getting in that girl’s panties if you have a little coin in your pocket. Money’s a great aphrodisiac.” He chuckled. “Ask any rich, ugly prick standing next to a hottie half his age.”

The fuck? I wanted to reach through the phone and punch the asshole. But my dad taught me better. Construction was a tough business. Most people in the industry were completely legitimate. Some were not. And a large firm like my dad’s had to deal with everyone. He’d taught me the skills to handle guys like Boyd long ago. First, I didn’t rise to the taunting jab at my looks.

“Answer’s still no. And tell your son to stay the hell away from Tess.”

“Ha, boy, you’ve got it bad.” His chuckle erupted into laughter. “When you change your mind, you know where to find me. I hope my offer’s still this good when that time comes.”

“Fuck you, sir.” And I slammed down the phone.

“ARE YOU HUNGRY?” Tess snaked her arms around my neck from behind as I sat at my desk, working on a particularly frustrating set of code that I needed to lock and check in to the system by midnight tonight. I was having trouble concentrating after that asshat called earlier.

He was such a lowlife, suggesting that Tess would care about money. I knew what that looked like, and it wasn't her. Plus, she was with me and didn't know how much I had.

Sure, I had a nice car, and my dad owned one of the largest construction companies in the Pacific Northwest, but Tess probably couldn't guess what I was personally worth. And soon, I'd have more. On my next birthday, I'd have access to the rest of my trust fund.

"I'm always hungry, Angel." I pulled her to sit on my lap.

"I mean food," she said and laughed.

"I think I would be more efficient at work if you sat on my lap."

She huffed. "Yeah, I don't think so, smarty pants. You work on your code. I'll cook. I'll sit on your lap, or—" she looked at my mouth "—wherever you want me to after dinner." My dick got hard. Fuck, she was sexy. Code, what code? What was code again? I completely forgot.

"Now look what you've done." I nodded to the obvious bulge in the sweatpants I'd put on after my afternoon run. "How am I supposed to work?"

She snickered and stood. "Sorry. I'll be good. I have a new recipe from Jo I want to make tonight, which might take a while. Will I disturb you if I work in this kitchen?"

"Not at all."

She'd cooked almost exclusively on this side lately, and I loved it. If I needed to concentrate, I'd slip on my noise-canceling headphones and get back to it, knowing that she was steps behind me, and I could kiss her, touch her, and hold her any time I wanted to. This was living.

TESS

THEY ARRIVED AT WHAT SEEMED LIKE DAWN IN THE approaching winter, but it was actually eight on a Wednesday morning. My family and most of our friends were here for a one-day, *all-hands-on-deck* clean-out of the bunkhouse. Everyone's jobs were geared toward weekends at the spa, the bar, or the bike resort. A weekday fit their schedules better.

Everyone except ReeAnn. This was her salon day. She and her mom met with the same group of women at a shop in Oak Harbor every two weeks for an afternoon. ReeAnn wore her hair natural now and didn't require a long time in the stylist's chair, but she said those ladies were her mom's *ride-or-die*, and she had to show up.

Instead of being here, she sent inspiring quotes for me to meditate on during my morning yoga practices this week. She knew working through those last piles of things left by Mrs. Curtis would feel like a final ending, and ReeAnn wanted to help me prepare for the potentially tough day. The wise words from scholars and yogis about respecting the past and letting it go to make room for new life had helped, and I was as ready as I could be. *The beautiful lotus grows out of the muck.*

Finn and Rhys drove their trucks to transport anything worth donating or recycling. Drew said he'd use the resort truck for dump runs since it was already beat to hell. Jo and Lucas brought enough food to feed everyone twice and were in the cottage prepping lunch. Everyone else was cleaning and organizing on one of the three bunkhouse floors.

Dad, Drew, and Finn were in the maintenance garage sorting tools and installing the new racks, shelves, and bins Drew ordered from Mr. Bergin's hardware store. Rhys, Jake, and Alex were on the second floor, loading out the game room equipment before removing the old vinyl flooring down to the plywood.

There were a few losses. The Ping-Pong table and air hockey were toast. The corn-hole boards, the basketball net game, and the table shuffleboard fared well enough. And the ancient Centipede and Galaga arcade games along with the Wii and Xbox were untouched. Drew and I tested those out yesterday.

The salvageable stuff was being hauled to the shelter area at the top of the hill. We'd cover everything in tarps for the duration of the remodel work. The old wooden pool table would need new felt and refinishing. Jake and Rhys said the guy who serviced the ones at the bar could help, and they moved that heavy thing to the garage in pieces.

Emily, Angela, Mom, and I were on the third floor, knee-deep in stuff up there.

"The goal is to get through all this today?" Angela asked, with her hand on her hip.

"As much as possible. Once these top two levels are clear, we can gut it and bring in new flooring, baseboards, and paint." I pointed to an area on the other side of the room. "If you and Em want to start there, that would be awesome. Mom and I are making good progress here."

"You got it, Sis," Emily said and winked. Emily sometimes called me *Sis* since she and Finn got engaged. I liked it. Neither one of us had a sister.

The morning flew by as we sorted through boxes and everything else, from broken chairs and tools to bins of buttons and sewing fabric. There were old dishes, lamps from the seventies, not the cool kind, and much more. After a couple of hours, we had piles for recycling, donation, and the dump. I texted Drew, Finn, and Rhys that they could start loading the trucks whenever they wanted.

We'd cleared a path all the way to the south wall, and the soot-blackened studs stood out among the new studs and beams added in the repairs. Drywall would go up once this floor was clear. New life coming from the muck.

Attacking the pile from that side, I spotted a mound covered in a tarp.

"Hey, it's lunchtime, isn't it?" Finn said, strolling through the double doors at the top of the stairs and heading straight to Emily. He wrapped her in his arms and gave her a smacking kiss.

"I'm dirty, Finn," she said.

"Ooh, just the way I like you."

"Barf! And Mom's here," I shouted.

"Oh, I like loving smooches. Your father and I—"

"Mom, no. Finn, can you please stop mauling your fiancée and come help me here?"

Another smacking kiss and a giggle, then the heavy clumps of boots on the worn floor.

"What's up, squirt?" he asked.

"Can you get that side of the tarp? I don't know what's under here."

Together, we pulled the dusty cover to the side, revealing the old pinball game. It had broken a while ago, and I assumed Mrs. Curtis had it hauled away. Memories flooded back. Good memories made painful because I'd thought Drew used me. But I'd been wrong, and it felt good to remember now without the sting.

Drew walked over. "I'm ready for lunch. Break time, boss?" he asked me.

He followed my gaze, and recognition dawned. "Is this the same game?"

"It is," I blushed, and Drew noticed it.

“A lot of nice memories playing pinball that summer.” He brushed a piece of hair behind my ear.

Finn leaned in. “I don’t want to know what kind of memories you two had with this. Put those eyes away.”

“Don’t you have a fiancée to maul?” I said without looking away from Drew’s smile.

“Do you want my help or what?” Finn asked.

“Yes,” I said, breaking the spell. “Help me take this to the garage. I’ll call around and see if I can find someone to fix it.”

“Can we eat after that?” Finn asked. Drew was already shifting things nearby to make room for more folks to help us carry it.

“Yes.”

We’d made solid progress. The maintenance garage was coming together. The laundry area off the stairwell had a fresh coat of paint, and the vinyl flooring was removed from the second floor and loaded for the dump. Lunch sounded perfect.

Fried chicken and biscuits, roast beef sandwiches, two kinds of slaw, oven-fried potatoes, fresh cut fruit, and Jo’s famous almond cake with chocolate sauce had us moaning and rubbing our stomachs where we sat scattered around the cottage’s kitchen and living room.

“I love full bellies,” Jo said. “Good cookin’ for hard workin’ folks.”

I smiled at Jo’s southern accent leaking through. “Nailed it.”

“How’s the remodel going in the cabins?” Emily asked.

“Great. I can show you.” I gestured out the front window.

A round of yeses rang out. “I should walk off some of that chicken. Can I do a self-tour later?” Dad asked, and Mom grinned. Dad had worked hard to get healthy since his heart attack last year. He’d already lost over twenty pounds and was grumpy if he didn’t get his exercise.

“Of course.” I smiled, and he bear-hugged me like I was twelve, then headed out for his lunchtime walk after a wink at my mom. The remaining guys took off in the loaded trucks to catch the ferry to Perry Harbor. That left the ladies to tour the lower cabins that Drew, and I had been updating little by little.

“Tess, these are really cool,” Jo said as she took in the last cabin. They all had the metal roofs now, thanks to Drew, and we’d been able to vault all the ceilings like he’d suggested. Each cabin had a fresh coat of paint, and I was slogging through the installation of new kitchen cabinets. The scrubbed concrete floors were still bare, but we’d ordered industrial carpet squares to put down once I finished the other work. I was proud of what we’d accomplished.

“You should think about having a photographer out to take photos. Start planning marketing campaigns for all the changes you’ve made,” Emily said.

“That’s a good idea. I’ll do that . . . right after I finish my Christmas shopping.”

“I’m done,” Mom said, and we all groaned. “Only a couple weeks left. Better get to it.” We agreed we needed a ladies’ online shopping night at Emily and Finn’s this weekend.

We headed back to the third floor. None of the trucks had returned yet.

“Hey Tess, come here,” Emily called to me from where she crouched by a box with less dust. It hadn’t totally survived the water, though. In it were about twenty or thirty journals. Some with bindings made of leather, some with colorful cloth, and others with thick paper embossed with designs.

“What are these?” I asked.

“I think they’re Mrs. Curtis’s journals. She left you a note.”

Emily handed me a letter. The tears welled as I recognized the neat handwriting. Water had smeared the ink in spots, but I could make it out.

Tess, I know you had questions about me. The choices I made and was I happy. If you want to, read these. They are

mostly boring entries about food I liked or the weather. But I think you'll see that I was loved and truly happy here. I hope you will be too. Love, Mary.

I knelt to pick up one on top in colorful cloth and flipped it open where the ribbon bookmark was placed.

July 20th - Another hot one today. Thankful for the cool breeze off the water. Tess and Drew kayaked out to Jack Island and spotted four seals and two pups in the water near the rocks. They were both so excited. They cleaned all the kayaks later that afternoon. They work so well together.

I remembered that day. Drew and I had kayaked together several times that summer. It was excellent exercise, and I loved it growing up, but I didn't want to go to Jack Island by myself. The island was across a busy channel, and water sports were always safer with a buddy. He agreed to go and was stoked when we saw the seals. He was always calm and collected. It was funny to see him excited about something. We kayaked out to Jack Island at least once a week after that, usually spotting the seals.

I flipped through more pages.

August 5th – David brought me a jumbo pack of Post-it notes today, in all the colors. That man knows the way to my heart. Who needs flowers? I can't write notes on flowers. Post-its are what this girl wants.

I giggled at the memory of her love for all things Post-it. Mr. Rose would have brought her flowers, but he knew better.

“Is it just this box?” I looked around.

“I think so. But it was here with this.”

The box was stashed next to the far wall and hanging above it on a huge fencing nail was a garment bag. Remembering the lovely vintage clothes I found in her closet, I wondered what these could be. I lowered the zipper to find another note.

Tess, this made me think of you. It's classically beautiful like you. I know you don't like it when people say that, but

some people say it because they love you and your beauty is part of you.

Not sure how old this dress is. I found it here in this dusty bunkhouse the one time I tried to clean it out. I don't know its story. But I think you would look lovely in it. They don't do beadwork like this anymore. It's all hand sewn. I want you to have it.

Love, Mary

“Oh, Tess,” Mom said and pulled the dress fully out of the bag. “I think this is a wedding dress. It has a little sweep train, see? Wow.”

“I found other vintage clothes in garment bags in her closet. I took them to the thrift store a couple of months ago, and they thought the historical society might want them. Those were lovely, but not like this.”

I held the fine silk fabric covered by delicate lace. The beads did appear hand sewn into it, but there had to be thousands. Whoever wore this dress must have really been something. Definitely beauty out of the muck.

DREW

RHYS AND LUCAS HAD DROPPED OFF THE DONATIONS AT THE thrift shop and were on the same ferry with Jake and me on our way back from the dump. Finn and Alex, who'd taken a load to the recycling center, had to wait for the next ferry, so we took a quick break before diving back in.

I liked Emily's friends. They were cool. Jake rode with me in the resort truck to help with the dump run. He was talkative most of the time. Maybe it was the friendly bartender in him, or he just liked to talk about his girlfriend, ReeAnn.

"She's with her mom today. They get together at a salon near the naval base every two weeks with several other ladies. They take turns bringing in lunch, and this week was Ree's turn. She'll come back happier and even more beautiful." Jake's smile was easy and big.

"You guys have been together a while?"

"I've known her since high school. Had a big crush but never took a shot. I left to pursue a sailing career and the America's Cup, and she went to college. I realized I couldn't live without her and came back. After making me sweat a while, she finally let me in. We're coming up on a year together."

Jake eyed me. "So, you and Tess."

I grinned. Me and Tess. I liked hearing that. "Yep. We worked here together the summer after high school. I was an idiot and hurt her. After that summer, we didn't talk again until we inherited the resort."

“How’d the first conversation go?” he asked with a gleam in his eye. “Wait, I can guess. Tess punched you in the dick and threatened worse if you didn’t go along with what she wanted?”

“Something like that.” Seeing her that day had been a punch in the gut. “I’m sure we don’t make sense to some people. Like we don’t fit. But I don’t think I could walk away.”

“I hear you. Ree and I hit a rough patch recently.” Jake shrugged. “She’s Black, and I’m White. Some people see us together and think we don’t make sense. Personally, I don’t give a shit what people think. But it gets to her sometimes. That makes me want to punch anyone who looks at us sideways. ReeAnn said I can’t do that. She said it wouldn’t help. I told her I thought it would help a little.” He smirked and absently rubbed the spot over his heart.

“I’m rough. I grew up solving problems with my fists and never backed down from a fight. ReeAnn grew up fighting with words. She’s brilliant, and her parents have money. I thought she deserved someone better.” He shrugged. “I broke it off last month. Told her to find someone with an education and polish that her parents would approve of. She said her parents would approve of me fine if I sacked up and acted like the man she knew I was.”

He glanced at me. “So, I did. And she forgave my stupidity, thank God. Those few days without her—” he shook his head “—I never want to do that again. I’ll die fighting first.”

That sounded familiar. People who look like Tess didn’t spend their lives with people who look like me. But damn, if there was a way to change that, I would.

“BACK TO WORK, BOYS,” Tess’s dad said as Alex and Finn pulled into the lot by the office.

I climbed the stairs to the third floor to check in with Tess. I was tired in an unfamiliar way. Not brain tired like usual, but

body tired, all over, and it felt good. We'd get the bunkhouse sorted, then I was taking Tess to one of the hot tubs. No guests were here in the middle of the week. We had our pick.

“Hey, Angel. What's going on?”

She turned, and I froze. She was holding a dress to her body, a white dress with beads that shimmered and caught the light. An image flashed of her walking toward me in that dress on the beach, the sun shining in her hair and on her face. It was a dream I was scared to have. I coughed and waved my hand around like it was the dust and not the vision that had me choked up.

“What's that?” I asked.

“A dress from Mrs. Curtis. We were wondering if it would fit.” It sure looked to me like it would.

“What else did you find up here?” I asked, hoping a change in subject would help settle my pulse.

“This box of journals. They were hers, and she left them to me. There's a bit of water damage, but most are okay. I'll take them to the cottage when we're done.”

“I can do that.”

“Thanks.” She smiled, and I felt her lean in like she was going to kiss me on the lips before she seemed to rethink it and pecked my cheek. Maybe it was too soon for affection in front of parents or too much of a serious couple thing, and we were ... I didn't know what we were, but I wouldn't make waves by asking. I was taking every minute until she realized she could do a lot better than me.

The rest of the day passed quickly. We finished in the garage and stored the heavy pool table and my favorite pinball game ever under a tarp there to await repair. Tess and I played that ancient game daily that summer. Then, once during our two days, she climbed on, looked at my mouth, and asked me to make her come after a game she *won*. Fuuuck. We both won. That memory was one of my favorites.

The second floor was ready for construction crews. The only items that remained on the third floor were several boxes

of old papers and photos that Tess wanted moved to the office to go through later, a few pieces of furniture that were repairable or in good enough shape to use in the renovated cabins, and a few other things like sets of china dishes and old event decorations.

We shifted everything to the side and pulled up all the damaged flooring that would fit in the truck for one more dump run later. And that was it for the day. Lucas brought growlers of beer, and we all hung around outside under the deck by the office with a glass.

“Thank you all for coming,” Tess said, her voice shaking. “It means everything to have your support in this. Drew and I couldn’t do it without you.”

There were those words again. “Drew and I” like “you and Tess.” We sounded right together, even if we didn’t look right together.

We said our goodbyes, and I drove the resort’s truck back across the ferry to the other side of Perry Harbor with the final dump run and returned to stumble into the cottage. All I wanted was Tess in the hot tub.

Inside the door on my side, the smells of home hit me. The floral scent of her body lotion, the savory aroma of vegetable soup, and the faint scent of wood smoke from the stove in the front room. Home and comfort never smelled better than this.

I came into the kitchen and found Tess wearing her robe, plush and soft. There was a good chance she was naked under there.

“What ’cha got on under that robe, Tess?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Want a peek?” And she pulled one side down to flash her bare breast. Fuck, I loved her tits.

“What I *want* is to shower off the grime, then soak in a hot tub with you.”

“Oh, that sounds perfect. This soup will hold for a while. Go get showered and be fast, or I may have to head over without you.”

I took the fastest shower ever and jerked on a pair of sweats and a sweatshirt. When I returned to the kitchen, ready to have Tess's sweet curves in my hands, she was also changed. The rain turned from the usual mist earlier to a full-on downpour tonight, so we threw on jackets and dashed between tree canopies on our way to the first hillside cabin.

We lifted the lid off the tub, and steam rose in the cool, damp air. I'd checked the water and pH balance in all the tubs yesterday like I always did as part of the regular maintenance of the resort. The water had been inviting, and that was without the added temptation of a naked Tess.

I ripped my shirt over my head and stopped to stare as she did the same. I would never tire of looking at her. A knowing smile graced her gorgeous lips as she toed off her shoes, then pulled off her pants and threw them on the bench behind me. She hadn't bothered with underwear. She climbed the stepladder and stepped into the tub, incredibly beautiful.

"Are you joining me or watching again?" She smirked as she turned on the jets. We were both thinking of the night I'd accidentally seen her. That night started it all.

I stripped off my shoes and joggers and climbed into the swirling water while Tess kept her eyes glued on me and my hard dick. She licked her tempting lips.

"Another confession," I said and held her gaze as I sat and pulled her close. "I didn't just see you that night."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard you."

Her brow furrowed.

"You called my name when you came."

"I did? I don't remember that." She blushed and moved to float her body above mine, her hands on my shoulders. The water swirled around us. "I remember I was thinking of you. Seeing you again, the images in my mind became much more vivid than before when I made myself come thinking about the way you touched me."

I groaned. “I wanted to be in here with you, touching you that night, every night.”

“Well, since I have the real thing this time instead of my imagination, do you want to see if you can make me scream your name again?”

Hell. Yes.

TESS

“WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO LOOKING PRETTY?” DREW SAID, stepping through the open inner door between our spaces.

“Emily’s.” Emily and Finn lived in the remodeled original bungalow next to my parents’ big farmhouse where we grew up. “She’s hosting an online shopping party. We usually bring our laptops, drink wine, and help each other pick out clothes, but this time, it’s Christmas shopping. I’m way behind.”

I was. The decorations were up, and I’d made a couple of batches of cookies. That was it. I was focused on the resort, the remodel, and Drew’s hard body in our island bubble, and Christmas snuck up on me.

We didn’t go big with the gifts in my family. At least, everyone but Mom. We all had everything we needed. For fun, we got little things we thought the other would like. A ball cap for Finn. He never had too many of those. Lucas bought me the best coffee mug ever one year. It had a big daisy and said, “Good Morning Fucking Badass.” I loved it.

“Which reminds me. Anything on your wish list this year?” I wasn’t sure what to get Drew.

“Just you. And cologne that makes your panties drop.” His eyes twinkled.

“Yeah, you already have that. Haven’t you noticed?”

His big smile grew bigger. “I may need a demonstration.” He stepped close and leaned in, inviting me to sniff him.

“Not now. I gotta go. But hold that thought.” I pointed at him. “I know you have work.” He’d been getting up early most mornings lately, and I always found him in sweats in front of the monitors.

“Yeah, I should get this next bit of code locked.” He sighed and smoothed a hand over his beard. “With everything going on, it’s been difficult to keep up.”

“If you need to pull back on things with the resort, Drew —”

“I’m not saying that. I look forward to the work we do together around here.”

After a hot kiss, I made it to my car. Barely. That man could effing kiss. Drop my panties? Why? Usually, they’d already been incinerated.

At Emily’s, we broke into rotating groups in case anyone needed to shop for someone who might also be here. A few of us were in the kitchen, and others split between the two bedrooms in the back. ReeAnn and I were on the sofa in the front room.

“Have you decided what you’re getting Jake for Christmas?”

“Ski lessons. For me.” She laughed. “Really, it’s three nights in Whistler again this year. But I’m taking lessons so I can at least pretend to go skiing with him. My parents ski. It’s time I learned. What about Drew?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know what this thing between us is. We’re in a cocoon at the resort, and it’s perfect. But he’s only here for a year. After that ... His life’s in California. More basic may be better. Less pressure. He wants new speakers for his desk, but they’re kind of pricey.”

“Speakers? Girl, that’s a no. He wants something inspiring. Like that lingerie you were talking about.”

“I don’t think they have his size.” ReeAnn gave me that *don’t play with me* look. “Okay, something inspiring,” I said.

“Something fun that matches the moment as it is right now.”

I smiled. “He said something about cologne, but I can get the shower set and offer to *help* him with it.”

“Now you’re thinking.” She winked.

THE HOLIDAYS WERE A BLUR. A pre-Christmas snowstorm took everyone by surprise and added magic to the season, along with the colorful twinkle lights on all the boats this time of year. Drew and I took advantage of the time to stay longer in bed and try to keep warm, somehow.

Other than those sexy times, Drew worked until right before Christmas and then took off to split the holiday week between his parents. Not too bad of a deal, considering his dad’s place likely had a magnificent view of Puget Sound, and his mom was at her house in Palm Springs.

Since we didn’t have guests at the resort, I did the usual sleepover at Mom and Dad’s, a big dinner, and Mom’s panettone French toast for breakfast.

Jo and Lucas were there, and we discussed initial plans for a fall wedding in Nashville. Lucas gave Jo a set of Japanese full-tang chef’s knives that she went crazy over, and everyone stayed an extra night at the farm so Jo could prep a special meal the day after Christmas. Finn and Emily were with her family, and it was weird not having him around. A sign of the future.

REEANN and our friend Carrie strolled through cabin three’s open door, holding their yoga mats. “Happy New Year’s Eve,” ReeAnn greeted. She and I were sharing a morning practice to ring in the new year, and our friends joined us. I added more wood to the woodstove and opened the rough muslin curtains to the water view.

“I love the Christmas lights on the cabins, and the bunkhouse looks better. Will it be ready for wedding season

this summer?" Carrie asked with her usual bright smile. She and her husband Dan had a bouncing ten-month-old baby girl, and Carrie had experienced postpartum depression since the birth. It was good to see the old Carrie coming back.

"It's on its way," I said. "We're installing a small elevator and moving plumbing for a third-floor kitchen and bathroom."

"Wow. Sounds big."

"Sounds expensive," I said. "But Drew says he's getting good prices because of his dad." I smirked.

After the holidays, I needed to get serious and order the flooring and paint we picked out. If Drew was funding this remodel like he did the new roofs, I needed to put in serious sweat equity to equal it out.

"Is Drew still in Palm Springs?" Ree asked.

"Yeah, he comes back tonight. How was Whistler and skiing?"

ReeAnn's face lit up, and she rolled out her mat. "Perfect." She held out her left hand, and the diamond caught the light.

"Ree, congratulations!"

Emily and Jo rushed over from the door. "What's this?" Emily asked in greeting and almost dropped her rolled mat when she hugged ReeAnn.

"He asked, and I said yes. I hope the resort's new wedding venue will be ready because we're hoping to book it."

"It will be. This is awesome!"

A round of hugs followed.

"Wow, that ring. Jake did good," Emily said.

"I think he was still reeling from our break-up and went overboard."

"Break-up! What break-up?" I asked.

"We broke up for a few days not long ago. Jake said we didn't fit. He thought my parents disapproved. I told him I'm an only child. My dad was going to grill any man I fell for. It

said something that Pops even took the time.” Her dad was a retired navy pilot. No nonsense was an understatement.

She brushed a soft, tight curl behind her ear. “People sometimes look at us longer than is polite. Jake let it get to him, and he wanted to come out swinging every time. I told him I wasn’t about that. I’m not spending my life fighting against the world. I’ll fight, but sometimes I want to focus on the love. Constant negative energy isn’t good for my soul.” She rested her hand over her heart.

“We’re the only people who should care if we fit. No one else knows us the way we do. He made me fall in love with him, and then he was leaving me? Uh-uh, not this time.”

ReeAnn told me once about the hurt she felt the summer after Jake turned her down for prom and left to train for the America’s Cup. I was glad they were finally together, even if it was years later.

She went on, “People will always have something to say about anyone and anything. We can’t let that make us doubt what we know is real.”

“I’m so happy for you, Ree,” I said and hugged her. Everyone else did too.

With love and cheer all around, ReeAnn linked her portable speaker with her phone. Calming music filled the air, and we all sat comfortably on our mats.

ReeAnn’s voice switched to teacher mode. Steady and gentle. “Nothing to do here but breathe, friends. Let’s open practice with pranayama.” She paused. “Close your eyes and bring your hands to your heart, palms together, in prayer pose. New Year’s Eve. Take a moment to dedicate your practice today to the new year. Whatever’s in your heart. Focus on loved ones, pray thankfulness, or offer this time, asking your God to speak to you, to guide you, or settle you as you move forward into another year.”

ReeAnn taught a flow class, allowing us to connect with heat, or sweat, on this damp and chilly day. Yin classes were slower, with lots of stretching. Important, but today I think we

all needed to push our bodies and burn off those holiday calories. I was ready for savasana at the end of the ninety minutes.

“So, Jo, you’re planning your wedding in Nashville?” Carrie asked and rolled up her mat.

“It’s the southern way. Usually, the girl’s family hosts before the boy carries her off to a faraway place.”

I laughed. Luc and Jo were visiting her parents soon to choose a venue and catering. I’d never been to Nashville. I wondered if there would be any famous people at the wedding. Jo said stars walked around like everybody else there, going to the mall or dropping their kids off at camp. I think I’d freak out if I saw a famous rockstar with his kid at a high school band concert or something.

“The best thing about that town is the live music. It’s everywhere.” Jo said. “*Every* bar has at least a lone guitar player. So many people want to be seen and heard by the right person, they practically pay the bar to let them sit in the corner and sing their guts out.”

“What are you and Dan doing tonight, Carrie? A sexy anniversary planned?” Emily asked.

Carrie grinned. “Dan’s folks have Lily, and we have a reservation at The Elliot. That’s all I’m sharing.”

“You want to come out with us, Tess? Since Drew may be late,” Jo asked, and Emily nodded.

“Thanks, I’m good. I’m going to take a big umbrella, an even bigger glass of wine and prop myself under a thick blanket in one of those Adirondack chairs by the water. Mrs. Curtis loved spending New Year’s here. She said she could see fireworks over the water from Bellingham to the houses across the channel. And I want to be home when Drew gets here.”

“There’s that light in your eyes. Give him a hug from us,” Jo said, and we finished packing up our yoga props.

I was more excited to see Drew than was good for me. We’d been apart eight days, and I’d missed him despite the calls and sexy texts. I’d gotten used to it being him and me

here most of the mid-week gray days at the resort, and it didn't feel right while he was gone. I tried not to think too much about what that meant as I caught myself daydreaming about engagement rings and anniversary nights at The Elliot.

When I wasn't thinking about Drew, I'd been reading Mrs. Curtis's journals and shared a few stories with him. Like the fact that Mr. Rose asked her to marry him, and she said though she loved him, she didn't want to get married again. I hadn't read about her ex-husband yet, but I had the feeling he wasn't a good guy. I remembered Mr. Rose called him a bastard the day the developer showed up.

Mr. Rose had stayed; it sounded like happily. Would Drew consider staying? I was too scared to admit it aloud, but I wanted him to. This time apart had taught me I didn't want to be apart from him.

I spent the day cleaning and cooking and basically counting the minutes. The fireworks started at nine and didn't disappoint. Neither did the Liberty Hill Cellars Red Blend I was sipping. The Christmas lights were still up on the cabins and twinkled in the night. They were all on timers and would go off before the midnight fireworks shows started. I relaxed in my chair by the glowing firepit, watching the tide go out under the red, green, and white flashes in the distance while the light rain tapped against my umbrella.

“Happy New Year, Angel.”

I soaked up the sound of his deep voice and turned.
“Happy New Year, Drew.”

DREW

GOD, SHE WAS BREATHTAKING. PARTICULARLY IN THE WARM glow of the fire. She was bundled in a thick coat and hat with a blanket over her lap. An almost empty wine glass rested on the flat armrest of the weathered wooden chair, and the lights of a tanker ship bound for the oil refinery in Perry Harbor glittered like a city in the distance.

I leaned in and pressed my lips to her chilled ones. She opened, and I was home. “Aren’t you cold?” I asked.

“Not really. It’s wonderful. Join me? I brought an extra blanket.” She lifted the thick fleece throw she’d stashed in the other chair she’d pulled close to hers.

She was thinking of me. Wanting me with her. I never wanted to leave her again. Not for the holidays, not to see my family, not for work, nothing. I knew it wasn’t realistic, but it was the truth, and I needed to stop denying it.

I sat, and we tucked in under the umbrella, the blankets, and the warmth of the blazing fire a few feet away. Small bursts of color bloomed in the distance. Locals shooting off fireworks at a party or family celebration. She poured more wine into her glass.

“I’ll share with you ...” She gestured toward the now full wine glass, and I took a sip. It was deep and rich. We sat in silence, watching the occasional burst of light. I felt peaceful. I wanted her, but it wasn’t desperate and hurried. It was certain and calm. I would feel her skin against mine tonight and many more days to come.

“Still reading Mrs. Curtis’s journals?” I asked.

“Little by little. If a sentence starts with ‘David did the best thing in bed last night,’ I skip that page.”

I smiled. Good for him. Mr. Rose loved her.

“Maybe I should read those sections. Learn from my elders,” I said.

“Drew, you don’t need any help in that department.”

That was nice to hear. “There’s always room for improvement. Practice makes perfect,” I said. Her soft, pink lips curved into a smile, and the firelight glowed in her eyes. I reached for her hand, tucked under the blanket, and kissed her fingers. “We have a couple of hours until midnight. Come inside with me.”

She paused. “Okay.”

We spread the embers wide, and the flame settled. Tess lowered the umbrella and leaned it against the bunkhouse while I doused the smoldering ash with seawater. It was raining, and fire chances were low, but safety habits died hard around here.

Leaving our shoes by the cottage door, we shrugged out of heavy coats, and she hung hers on that hook again. Something in my chest tightened.

“Let me check the wood stove,” I said.

Tess pulled the two remaining gifts out from under the Christmas tree lit with colorful lights. I’d set hers there earlier. “Want to open these now?” she asked.

“Sure.” I closed the door on the stove, and the blaze grew brighter through the glass. “You first.”

Tess sat on the sofa and bit her bottom lip as she opened the outer box to find a smaller one in the iconic robin’s egg blue.

“Drew, this is beautiful.” A simple silver necklace with a floating open heart. Nothing flashy. Simply beautiful, like Tess.

“It’s from Tiffany’s,” she said. “I didn’t get you anything nearly this expensive.”

“It wasn’t that much, and I thought of you when I saw it.” This way, she could literally keep my heart close to her body. She fastened the latch behind her neck and smoothed her fingers along the delicate chain.

“How does it look?” she asked.

“Perfect.”

She handed me the box with my name on it. I ripped the paper open, not nearly as gently as Tess. It was hair and body wash, conditioning shave, and beard oil, all from the cologne I wore.

“Will these make your panties drop?” I asked.

“Let’s find out.” She stood from the sofa and walked down the hall, pulling her sweater off.

“Bring the stuff, Drew,” she said without turning. “It’s only part of the gift. The rest is in the shower.”

I jogged to my bedroom and grabbed a condom before following her into the bathroom on this side.

She was wearing another fuck-hot lingerie set. This one was a deep blue that matched her eyes. She left the necklace on, which stood out against her creamy skin. I had to catch my breath.

I stripped while trying not to break eye contact and watched as she slipped out of her bra and panties. She stood under the warm spray and closed her eyes as water cascaded over her hair, her face, and down her body. Hell. There was nothing sexier.

“Don’t forget the stuff, Drew.”

What stuff? Oh, the body wash. I stepped in behind her and slid the glass door closed. She turned, took the shower gel from me, and squeezed a dollop onto a cloth.

“I missed you,” she said.

“I missed you too.”

Lifting the cloth, she smoothed it across my shoulders and along my neck. Tenderly, she massaged across my chest then nudged me to turn my back to her. She guided my head into the spray and washed my hair. It felt fucking phenomenal. Her fingers massaged my scalp and created a weird dichotomy. I was relaxed and burning for her at the same time.

She rinsed my hair, and I turned to face her again. She kissed her way down my body as she washed and rinsed me before lowering to her knees and looking up. The water massaged my back, and she took me into her warm, wet mouth. I memorized that vision. Her. And my heart shining on its chain around her neck.

She stroked with a firm grip as her plump lips rose and lowered over me.

“God, Tess.” I reached a hand to the tile to steady myself.

She smiled but didn’t release me.

“I won’t last long. This is too hot.”

She hummed in response against my sensitive tip, and the vibration matched the sizzle already electrifying my spine.

She gently held and stroked my balls in the slow rhythm of her mouth on me, and I felt them pull tight against my body.

“Angel, I’m close.”

She hummed again, then gently but firmly, circled the top of my sac, and stroked away from my body. The sensations froze. My orgasm didn’t progress or recede. It was a steady buzz as she loosened her hold and took me deep again. The sizzle was back, stronger this time, with the erotic image in front of me. Again, my balls grew tight, and she stroked them away from my body.

She brushed the skin behind with teasing pressure, and I almost lost it.

“Tess, fuck. What are you doing?”

“You don’t like it?” She looked at me with a confident smile.

“No, I love it.”

She returned to her pattern a third time, taking me higher and pulling me back from the edge, the intensity growing. I leaned forward to rest my other hand on the wall. I was going to collapse any minute. My legs shook.

“Let me come, Tess.” It wasn’t a request.

She released me and reached for the little bullet vibrator resting on the shower floor. How did I miss that being there?

She switched it on, and it buzzed low as she held it to the center of her body before she returned to me with a firm grip and a warm mouth. I rocked my hips, and she matched my rhythm. Her chest rose and fell more rapidly, and she hummed a moan around my dick.

The sight of her controlling us both was too much. My muscles tensed, and the sizzle unleashed in me. “Tess,” I warned and then exploded, shaking, and coming like never before as she took it all in.

She released me with a gentle kiss and gripped my leg as she arched her back, panting. I watched her hand continue moving between her legs and her eyes close before she stilled and moaned my name. I was in awe.

I pulled her up and into my chest with one arm. I still had one hand on the wall to keep steady.

“Damn,” I said. “That was ... I don’t even know what that was.”

“I’ve done some reading, imagining.”

“Well, you almost killed me. That was the best orgasm I’ve ever had.”

“Good. Merry Christmas.” She pressed a sweet kiss to my lips.

That necklace was not enough. I needed to buy her a car or a boat or something else.

Wrapped in towels, I pulled her back to my bedroom. The bed was made neater than I’d done it.

“You remade my bed?” I asked.

“I figured it was the right thing to do since I’d been sleeping in it.” She smiled. “I missed you, so I slept here while you were gone.”

Something in my chest tightened again. She could sleep in my bed forever. But could she choose a face like mine for the rest of her life? That was a long ass time to be looking at my scarred face.

After I gave her an orgasm with my tongue and slid inside her wet heat for another, we wrapped in blankets and stepped outside to the deck. Quiet and calm surrounded us.

“It’s almost midnight,” I said and sat in the darkness on one of the big porch chairs. I opened my blanket, and she opened hers to snuggle onto my lap. Together, we settled skin to skin under two layers of blankets to watch the fireworks across the water.

She nuzzled against my beard. “Will you kiss me until next year?”

I looked at her, caressed her face with my fingers, and then her lips with mine as booms filled the air. A new year. The last one brought Tess back to me. Would this one take her away, or could I hold on a bit longer?

“OH. MY. GOD.” Tess sat forward, pulling the covers off my chest. I shook my head to wake up. The morning light was gray under the curtains.

“What? Are you okay?” I sat up behind her. She held one of Mrs. Curtis’s journals open on her lap. She had put on one of those skimpy tank tops she slept in, and her tattoo peeked at me from her shoulder.

“She set us up! They both did!”

“What? What are you talking about?” I asked and rubbed the sleep from my eye.

“Listen,” she said, then read aloud from the journal.

September 10th. It's a wonderful week for a trip. I'm glad David suggested it. Two nights in a hotel with breakfast in bed, getting dressed up, seeing a play at the Paramount, and eating out. I feel young again. My heart is full.

September 11th. Happy to be in the city. We ate dinner last night at a restaurant off an alley. It had a pink door, and the food was excellent. The view over the water to the setting sun was almost as impressive as David in dress pants and a button-down shirt. I hope Drew and Tess are okay. I'm enjoying time in loving arms. I hope Tess is too.

Tess glanced at me with her eyebrows raised.

September 12th. The resort survived the two days. I knew it would. The smiles are big, and the glances are lingering. I'm glad they finally took a chance. Leaving them alone was exactly what they needed. David always has great ideas.

“Wait. What? I thought they went to Seattle to pick up a part or something, and the truck broke down. They had to stay another night until it was fixed.”

“Yeah, that's what they told us. But they planned it all along. They went to a show at the Paramount!”

I shook my head again. “It was a setup?”

“They wanted us to be alone together. What if they'd been wrong? What if I didn't like you that way?”

I moved the journal off her lap, and she grinned back at me. I kissed her shoulder, that busy little hummingbird tattoo, and then her neck before I shifted over her, and she lowered her head to the pillow.

“They knew I'd never hurt you. We'd play pinball until our arms fell off if you didn't like me. But I'm glad they were right, and I'm really glad you liked me *that* way. I absolutely liked you that way.”

This year with her, was a setup too, but like those days years ago, I was just happy to be with her for as long as I could.

DREW

MY STOMACH WAS GROWLING TOO LOUD TO IGNORE. I NEEDED a break and food. I'd been pushing hard these past few weeks of the new year. The February product read-out at work was coming up fast. I locked my screens and rolled my chair back from the table/desk as my phone dinged with a text from a number I didn't recognize.

????: Hey, kid. We should talk about a sale.

Me: Who is this?

????: Come on, kid. You're the smart one, remember? This could be more than most people earn in a decade. Probably more than you've ever seen. You really gonna turn that down?

Boyd. Either this guy was going to pay us way more than the land was worth, or he didn't know who my father was.

Me: I don't need a lot of money

????: Not even for a bigger hot tub?

What? My blood ran cold.

????: This one's too small

It was the subject line under a clear picture of Tess floating in the swirling water with the soft evening light around her. In another photo, she stood on the top step by the edge, looking into the water below. Her entire body was visible, and the posture had her naked breasts jutting forward. She was like those statues of Aphrodite. Fucking gorgeous.

????: Kid? Nice pictures, don't you think? How pissed are you right now?

????: Imagine how pissed you'd be if these were posted online? I could pair them with an ad for the resort. I bet that would bring in the customers.

This asshole.

Me: Fuck. You.

????: That mad? Talk to your little piece, convince her to sell, and I'll be in touch.

I wanted to break something, like a board over this guy's head. But I wasn't some naive kid or hot-headed punk. I knew how to hit this guy where it hurt, but I needed to talk to Tess. I wasn't keeping this from her. I knew her well enough to know that wouldn't work.

I knocked on the interior door to her apartment.

No response. Then I heard the muted sounds of the latest Adele album, Tess's favorite.

"Tess?" I called and opened the door. "Where are you?"

"Oh, hey." She stopped short in the hallway, wearing leggings and another sexy hoodie. She had one of those big design books cradled next to her soft tits. Lucky book.

"Do you have a minute?" I asked.

"Sure, come in. Alexa, cancel." The music stopped. "I just poured a glass of wine. Do you want some?"

I shook my head.

"What's up? You look pissed. What did your boss do now?"

"That developer texted me about buying the resort," I said.

"Jeezus, that guy." She paused, taking in my lack of a smile. I'd told her about his phone call after the fire, and she was more pissed than me.

"He made threats if we didn't sell."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Threats? What kind of threats?"

I unlocked the screen, opened the text app, and handed her my phone.

She set the book on her kitchen table and stared before inhaling deeply.

“Tess, we can handle him. No one will see those pictures.”

“Tell him to post them.” She looked at me. “We’re not selling.” She handed me my phone and walked to the counter for her wineglass.

“What?”

“Tell him to post them.” She took a big swig of the golden liquid. “You think this is the first time someone posted naked pictures of me?”

“What are you talking about?” My mind raced.

Tess reached up to pull on her left ear. “Spring of freshman year. A fraternity did one of those “Who’s Hotter?” things. A girl in my dorm took a picture of me in the shower, my head back, rinsing my hair.”

I remembered what that looked like. Goddamn glorious.

“The girl had a thing for one of the frat guys doing the contest. He ignored her, and she wanted his attention.” Her eyes had a defiant, closed-off light.

“They posted the pic on social media, on a site that deletes everything after twenty-four hours. I didn’t even know about it until a guy in my psychology class said he’d seen the screenshots floating around. Not all the girls were completely nude, but I was.”

“Tess.”

“I took down all my accounts except for Facebook because that was mostly for Mom and her friends. I didn’t want to get tagged. No way I wanted Finn and Luc to see that.” She sighed.

“I reported it to the school and told my parents, as humiliating as that was. The school reached out to the other girls and made a show of dealing with the guys, suspending

the fraternity for the rest of the semester. Which came back to bite me because they threw the *best* Spring Fling party.” Her voice went higher, dripping with sarcasm.

“They couldn’t that year because I made a fuss about some pictures. What was I so upset about? I won the contest. Turns out I’m *really* hot naked.” Her eyes held anger and hurt. She took another gulp of wine.

“Tess.”

“I’m fine. It happened. The worst part was that for months, random guys in class or in the dining hall would give me that look and lick their lips. I got catcalls from across the quad and asked out on a lot of dates. The problem was, I wasn’t sure if the guy liked me or just wanted the live version of the show. For a while, I doubted everyone.” She lifted a shoulder and went back to the table.

“I stopped dating, threw myself into school, and avoided parties. At least I got to live in sweats. That’s an upside.”

She sat at the table. “I’m aware of what I look like, Drew. Since I was fifteen, men of *all* ages told me I was pretty. Women said it too. Not perceptive or capable. Pretty.”

She shook her head. “I’m not saying my life’s been terrible. It hasn’t. After the frat thing, the school let me live in the upperclassmen dorms my sophomore year. They were suites, so there was more privacy. I roomed with a senior from my major, which was helpful, and two girls studying abroad from Mexico. We went to movies, school sports stuff, and had late-night pizza. Even after I moved in with Dave, I still hung out with Valentina, Isabelle, and a few other friends. But I didn’t get too close to anyone. Trust was hard, and things were easier when I kept my head down.”

Her back was ramrod straight. “I know those pictures are still out there, but I can’t let it get to me. I didn’t let shitheads bully me then, and I’m not starting now. Tell him to post the fucking pictures. He isn’t getting this land.”

“Tess. You can’t be okay with that.”

“No, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Yes! It does.”

“Drew, when the year is up and you’re back in California, I’ll have to handle shit like this on my own. I’ll need to be tough then. Might as well start now.”

On her own. She’d handled a lot on her own. I pushed the *California* part of her comment to the back of my mind. She wasn’t handling this on her own.

“Tess, this is a real threat, and it’s traceable. If he posts those pictures, we’ll find him and bury him. He doesn’t know who I am or who my dad is. We can ruin him. He won’t do this. Trust me. You’re not on your own.”

I SHOOK out my hands like Tess did when she was stressed. It worked, and my blood pressure calmed. I dialed Dad’s number and closed my bedroom door.

“Hey, Drew, how are you?”

“Hey, Dad.”

“Is everything okay? Tess?”

I sighed. “No. That developer, Boyd, the one who wanted to buy the resort, wants to meet with me. He has pictures of Tess getting into a hot tub naked, and he threatened to post them if we didn’t sell him the land.”

“What?” Dad said.

“We aren’t selling.”

“Of course, you’re not. Have you talked to Tess?”

“Yes, and she’s seen the pictures.”

“What did she say?” he asked.

“She told me to tell him to post them because we’re not selling.” I ran my hand through my hair.

Dad’s tone softened. “She’s a tough one.”

Yeah, he had no idea.

“He doesn’t know who I am, who you are,” I said.

“What was this guy’s name?”

“Boyd.”

“This is the guy with the right of first refusal?”

“Yeah. Allstar Builders or Alastar Builders, something like that,” I said.

Dad grunted. “Alastar North Builders. Not a great reputation. Uses cheaper grade materials, but the house prices are only marginally lower. He makes a big profit preying on people who want more house than they can afford.”

He paused for more than a beat.

“What?” I asked.

“You told me he called you shortly after the fire and expected you’d want to sell.”

“Yeah.”

“And now he’s threatening you with these photos.”

“Dad, what are you thinking?”

“That first day I was there after the fire, we examined the damage to the walls, and I thought how lucky you were that someone smelled the smoke and called the fire department so quickly. That fire started in the perfect spot to do maximum damage before the heat sensors in the sprinkler valves activated. It was already to the roof by the time the firefighters arrived.”

“That’s what the report said.”

“If I wanted to cause the most damage but not destroy the building, that’s how I’d do it. It would be fixable, but it’d be expensive. Not everyone would know that, but someone with experience in construction would. A little accelerant added in the typical electrical wiring pattern, and it looks like the wires burned first because they did.”

What. The. Fuck?

“Dad, are you suggesting he tried to burn down a building to get us to sell?”

“I doubt he’d do it himself. But get someone else? If he did, he picked the one building on the property guaranteed to not have anyone in it that late at night. It wasn’t about hurting people. It was about squeezing you so hard that your only choice was to take his offer.”

“Hell, Dad.”

“He wouldn’t be the first to try to sabotage the competition,” he said.

Something tingled in the back of my mind. Those pictures. I pulled them up again. I’d seen that view the night I accidentally saw her. The tree canopy had an unexpected hole there and the cigarette butts on the ground had a strange design on them. The ones I found by the bunkhouse deck pillars the night of the fire had the same design. Tess said Boyd’s sleazy ass son was smoking when he hit on her.

Motherfucker. His son took those pictures, and I’d bet he set that fucking fire.

“I think you may be right. So, what can I do?”

“Take that meeting,” Dad said.

BOYD CALLED TWO DAYS LATER, and I agreed to meet him at a coffee shop near his office.

“Hey, kid. Good to see you,” he greeted.

“Sign these papers,” I said and threw an envelope and pen on the table as I slid into the other side of the booth.

His mouth curved in a greasy smile, and he pulled out the papers.

His brow furrowed. “What’s this? I’m not breaking the lease.”

“Yes, you *are*. And you won’t post those pictures.” I leaned in. “The internet is forever. Everything is findable if you have talent. And I have talent. I’ll find the servers and the connection to you, and we’ll press charges.”

He shifted in his seat. “No one cares about pictures of a hot girl naked other than the girl.”

“I think the people who run some of the biggest construction projects in the area have families and daughters and sisters. They might care.”

He chuckled. “What? Are you gonna tell ’em? I doubt any of them would take the call.”

“Nah, my dad will.” I reached out my hand. “I’m Drew *McAlister*. You may have heard of my father’s company.”

His expression hardened, and the vein at his temple pulsed. “Shit.” He didn’t shake my hand.

“What if, during the investigation about those pictures, we decide to reopen the investigation about the fire? See if those two things are related.”

“You can’t prove anything,” he said.

“Are you willing to take that risk? The accusation alone could be damaging. Firms spending millions on major construction want to hire companies with impeccable reputations. It could take years to rehab your image from suspicion alone.”

His cheeks reddened. “You think you’re pretty slick?”

“No, I think I’m a resort owner and want to keep it that way.”

He stared at me.

I lowered my voice. “You’ve lost nothing here. You signed a lease, did the logging, and made a profit even with the generous terms. Let it go. There are other properties.”

“You little fuck. And your fucking dad,” he growled. “I don’t need this.”

He scrawled his signature on the papers, breaking the lease and canceling the right of first refusal.

TESS

I HEARD DREW'S CAR IN THE DRIVEWAY AS I SAT AT MY SMALL kitchen table, reviewing the online furniture order for the cabins. They were delivering the new industrial carpet squares soon, and once those were down, we could move everything in and be all but finished with the cabins. The budget was tight, but I was determined to make the numbers work.

I was glad to have something else to think about other than how to explain to my parents that there would soon be naked pictures of me on the internet. Again.

Drew strolled in through the open inner door. "Hey, gorgeous." He came up behind me and latched his lips to where my neck met my shoulder.

I shuddered. "Drew, that tickles. Your beard." He knew it tickled. He also knew it made my nipples hard.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Picking out furniture for the cabins. What do you think of these chairs?"

"They're okay. What about those?"

He pointed to a previously viewed option twice as much as the ones I'd shown him. "Those are great but expensive."

"Get what you want, Tess. We're making improvements. It's an investment. We'll make our money back ... But can you do that later?"

"I guess. Why?"

His eyes sparkled, and he vibrated with energy. “Let’s go out.”

“Like a date?” I teased the same way he had teased me a couple of months ago.

“Absolutely. We’ll get dressed up. I’ll try to impress you and hope you’ll let me worship your body at the end of the night.”

That sounded good. I glanced at the clock, a little after four.

“What’s the occasion?” I asked.

He sat across the table from me. “The developer, the pictures. It’s over.” He handed me a document with a barely legible signature on the bottom. Boyd broke the lease. He no longer held the right of first refusal to this land. My heartbeat raced.

“How did you get this?”

Drew bit his lip. “My dad has a little influence in the construction industry. Something he doesn’t take lightly. If Boyd posted those photos, we’d press charges, and Dad would make sure many key contacts were notified about it. Boyd’s business would take a hit, probably a big one.”

Drew glanced away. “Dad had a theory about the fire.”

I frowned.

“He said it happened in the perfect spot to cause the most damage. With Boyd making the offer afterward and then stooping to coercion when we still didn’t sell, it doesn’t seem too farfetched that the events were connected.”

“What?”

“I suggested to Boyd that the investigation into the photos could turn up something more about the fire. Asked if it was worth the risk. He didn’t confess, but he didn’t want an investigation either. I reminded him he’d made money, and it was time to move on.” Drew grinned. “So, he did.”

It was over. Drew did this for me. I wasn’t alone.

I climbed across the table and kissed him. He leaned back and pulled me the rest of the way onto his lap, not breaking our lip lock.

“Thank you, Drew.” I crashed into him again. “Thank you.” He overwhelmed me.

“You’re welcome. Go out with me?”

“I need a shower first,” I said.

“Me too, race you there.” He tried to stand.

“No. If this is a proper date, you have to pick me up. I want the whole *see me at the door* thing. No getting ready together. I want to put in the effort and dazzle you.”

“Tess, I can’t be more dazzled than I already am.”

Challenge accepted.

I took my time in the shower, rubbed generous amounts of lavender body lotion into my skin, and dressed in a casual, white-collared, gray sweater dress. The design mimicked a long crewneck sweater worn over a white button-down shirt. I usually belted it and wore it with dark tights and booties to dial down the sexiness. Tonight, I left it loose and wore my thigh-high black suede boots.

My hair was growing out, and I finger crimped it into soft waves and applied light makeup. A delicate smoke around my eyes and a natural brown-pink color to my lips. With imagination, I looked like I’d casually thrown on some of Drew’s clothes after sex. Everything was covered. Only a couple of inches of thigh were exposed between the tops of the boots and the hem of the dress, but the look was suggestive and sultry.

I never dressed this way. I didn’t want the attention this outfit garnered. But for Drew, I wanted to tempt him and drive him crazy with need. He made me feel sexy and desired not just for my body but for me. And the way he’d handled the developer—helped me—no other guy had done something like that for me. Tonight, everyone would know I was his. And Drew would know it too.

“I’m coming around, Tess. Are you ready?” He called through the now-closed inner door.

“I’m ready.”

A minute later, he knocked on my door in the back, and I opened it. I sucked in a breath. Wow. Dark jeans, a white button-down shirt, and a thin caramel sweater pulled over it. He’d scrunched his sleeves and cuffs to appear casual. Instead, it was sensual, showing the flex of muscle in his forearms.

“Holy shit, Tess. You look ...”

I cocked my hip. “Like I just rolled out of your bed?” I raised a single eyebrow.

“Well ...” He grinned. “Yeah, but I wasn’t sure if that sounded bad. You’re a fucking knockout.”

“More dazzled?”

“Definitely,” he said.

Before I locked up, I grabbed my wool cape-style wrap and a small black clutch.

“Would it be completely lame if we took a selfie?” he asked, holding his phone.

“All the big dates start with photos at the door. Bring it.”

Drew stood next to me, and we posed, grinning.

“One more,” I said, and he snapped while I planted a smacking kiss on his cheek.

“Well, let’s make it count, Angel.” He pulled me tight against him and dove in. I held his bearded cheeks in my hands, and our tongues touched and teased. He was hard against my core, and I opened wider on a moan. His tongue slid along mine, and I forgot where I was for a second. Then I put my hand up to block the camera and giggled through more kisses. He kept pushing the button.

“Now, that’s the way to start a date,” he said.

“Yeah, I think I need new undies. The originals went up in flames.”

He laughed. “You don’t need undies, Angel. I’ll protect you from roving eyes and grabbing hands.”

“All of them but yours.”

“Damn straight.”

He’d made reservations at The Patio, an upscale seafood restaurant by the marina, and one of my former employers. I’d worked there and at Shakey Grounds Café in the off seasons during high school.

They sat us by the window, and a bar runner brought two glasses of champagne to the table. “Compliments of the house. Enjoy.”

Glancing around, I spotted the longtime bartender smiling. He was closer to my dad’s age than mine, and he’d always been kind.

“An admirer already,” Drew said.

“That’s Bill. He and the owner go way back. I used to work here in high school.”

“I know.” Drew grinned.

“You do?”

“I saw you here a couple of weeks before we met at the resort. You worked at a party my parents hosted in the private room upstairs.”

“Really. You remembered me?” I asked.

“Yeah, Tess. You were stunning then, too. I barely dared to glance at you. If Patrick caught me, he would have been brutal explaining how a guy like me had less than no shot with someone like you.”

“Patrick turned out to be wrong,” I said, keeping my voice low and suggestive. “Then and now.” The confidence of grown-up Drew, combined with his good looks, and hard body, was difficult to resist, but it had been the shy, sweet boy I fell for first.

“He did, and I couldn’t be happier.” His gaze intensified as he sipped his champagne.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” I asked.

“It never came up, and I didn’t want you to think I was a creeper. I found out you worked at the resort on my first day there.”

“By the woodpile,” I said.

“That’s right.” He paused. “If I’d told you I saw you and was blown away, my crush would have been obvious.” He chuckled.

We ordered and ate and talked. He smiled and laughed, a deep throaty sound that stirred the butterflies in my stomach. I was comfortable, and it was the best date I’d ever had.

“Tess, you’re even prettier than last I saw you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Arlens,” I said to the older man in a three-piece suit. I still loved his Irish accent. “This is my boyfriend, Drew McAlister. Drew, Mr. Arlens is the owner.”

“Boyfriend, eh? Lucky man. Many have tried, but one prevailed,” he said.

“Thank you, sir. I think.” Drew laughed.

“A beauty like hers ... is rare.” Mr. Arlens looked at Drew.

“She’s out of my league. That’s true.”

“I heard you have the old resort now,” Mr. Arlens said.

“We do. Mrs. Curtis left it to both Drew and me. We’re converting the bunkhouse into a small event space. Weddings or meetings or retreats.”

“Ahh, well, you’ll be great at it. I’ll be sure to recommend you every chance I get.”

“Thank you, Mr. Arlens. We’d appreciate that.”

“Dessert? On me? Fatten you up a bit, missy?”

“Yes, thank you,” I said.

“Enjoy your evenin’. Great to see you.” He nodded at us and strolled away casually like he was whistling.

“Many have tried, huh?” Drew asked.

“Not that many. I didn’t date guys from work. The single guys flirted. A few of the married ones, too. Yuck. Since I wasn’t accepting any offers, they made a joke out of hitting on me. I mostly ignored it.”

“That must have sucked.”

I shrugged. “Good training for college. I got used to it. Men look. They always have.”

“Yeah,” he growled. “Men a lot better looking than me are doing it right now.”

“Drew, no one’s better looking than you.”

“Right. Okay. Thanks for that. Let’s talk about something else.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He had no idea how many admiring glances followed him when he walked by.

Dessert was a classic Lemon Cake Doberge. Six layers of buttermilk cake with lemon custard in between and a sweet lemon cream icing. It had been my favorite in high school, and it was flattering to think that Mr. Arlens remembered.

Drew was quiet on the ride home until we drove off the ferry onto Anna Island.

“Thanks for coming out with me tonight. I had a great time,” he said.

“Oh, is the date over?” I asked, hoping to return to the teasing and fun conversations we had at dinner. I shifted in my seat and let my dress hike up, exposing more skin. He noticed.

“Not if you don’t want it to be.” His smile made some promises.

What I wanted was Drew. Here with me at the resort, giving me advice on the upgrades and being impressed with my business and handyman skills. I wanted to slide in next to him at night and feel his arms surround me with warmth and comfort, reminding me I wasn’t alone. I’d never felt this way with anyone other than him. Not even close.

It was never a crush for me. I loved him then, and I still did. But life with me at the resort didn’t compete with the energy and challenge of Silicon Valley. He cared for me more

than anyone else ever had, but I'd have to let him go at the end of our year. Hopefully, I'd figure out how to survive that before the time came.

I wasn't looking forward to another Drew-shaped heartbreak, but I couldn't seem to help myself.

DREW

THAT DRESS. HELL, ANY DRESS ON TESS. BUT THAT ONE ... she looked exactly like she rolled out of my bed.

She was way out of my league for many reasons, not just her gorgeous face and body but everything. Her drive, her strength, her courage.

At the resort, it was bliss. We fit together in bed and in the rhythm of our days. But in the real world, there were too many reminders of her beauty and how I didn't quite fit with it.

She walked toward my door instead of the one to her apartment.

“Would you like to come to my place?” I teased. “We could watch a movie.”

She smiled at my game. Watch a movie.

“That sounds good. I'm not tired.”

We left our jackets on the hooks, and Tess took off those sexy as fuck boots. She tousled her hair, damp from the rain, and stood before me. Her feet and legs were bare. She wore just the dress that looked like my shirt and sweater.

That was even hotter.

I took her hand and pulled her to the sofa. “What movie are you interested in?”

“Something funny, no blood and guts.” One romantic comedy coming up. It wasn't my favorite type of movie, but I didn't hate it. Plus, I didn't plan to watch much.

She settled on the sofa, her feet and legs tucked under her. I sat next to her and cued up Netflix.

Tess scooted into me when I leaned back and put my arm around her. She kissed my neck below my beard, and I captured her teasing lips. I pulled her tight to my chest, and she shifted to straddle my lap. Her dress scrunched up her legs, bracketing my hips, and I ground against her heat.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have sex on the first date.”

“Well, good thing this is our second date. Don’t forget the engagement party.”

Her grin grew big, her eyes glittering. “You’re right.” She stood and handed me the remote. “I don’t want this movie.” She bit her bottom lip and looked at me through her lashes. We hadn’t even picked one yet.

“What *do* you want, Angel?”

“You, naked, in bed.”

Yes. I switched off the TV and took her hand. I pulled her with me and strolled toward the bedroom. No rush. Tonight, I’d take my time.

Her eyebrow rose in question as she took in the tidy room and candles by the bed.

“Wanted to make a good impression if the night worked out the way I planned.”

“So far, it’s going the way I planned.” She stepped to the bed and lay at the top of the mattress, propped on her elbow. “I need you to fuck me.”

Hell. I took a picture in my mind. When this thing between us was over, I would remember this image. The most beautiful woman in the world wanting me. Wanting to give herself to me like she did that summer. The ache in my chest hammered behind my ribs.

I lit the candles, switched off the light, and settled over her.

“You’re pretty good at this dating thing, Drew. I’m impressed.”

“I’m not done yet.” I ran my hand along her thigh and pressed my lips and beard to her neck the way I knew would make her squirm against me. She laughed and pushed me away before sitting up and pulling off her dress. A sheer gray bra and panties and her smooth skin greeted me. The silver heart on a chain rested against the hollow of her throat.

She pulled back the covers while I stripped to my boxers. I slid in next to her, caressed her jaw, and down to her shoulder. Her eyes were bright and teasing. Happy. I was too. Here with her. The resort. Her family and friends. My family close by. All of it. Here I fit.

She asked me to fuck her. There was no way. Tonight, I could only make love to her.

MY PHONE RANG in the darkness. My buddy Brian from work. Tess stirred but didn’t wake. I silenced it, grabbed a pair of sweats, and crept out to the front room. It was after midnight.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“We’re pulling an all-nighter here, and we need your code,” he said.

“It’s not due to lock until tomorrow night.”

“That got moved. Check your inbox. Dickford changed the schedule yesterday.” My boss’s last name was Bickford. The nickname wasn’t a stretch. “How long do you think?” Brian asked.

“Shouldn’t be more than a couple of hours.”

“Sounds good. I’ll let you get to it.” Brian clicked off.

Shit. I hadn’t opened my work email for two days. Everything with the developer and Tess was front and center. I didn’t have time for my boss’s meandering comments and off-the-cuff requests that were his norm.

I scrubbed my hands down my beard, switched on my desk lamp, and woke up my computer. Caffeine was necessary, but I wanted to see exactly what I was in for after midnight on a fucking Friday.

Once I was in the zone, the time flew, like usual. After the first hour, I got the expected code to Brian and made a pot of coffee. There was more due tonight and still more due tomorrow night. Dickford was on a roll.

Hours later, silver light filtered across the water outside my window, but I kept working. I should have checked my email.

“How long have you been out here?” Tess’s sleepy voice whispered in my ear, and I noticed the light was much brighter in the sky.

“A while.”

“Couldn’t sleep? You should have woken me.” She waggled her dark eyebrows and spun to sit across my lap.

“I wish. I was late with code.”

“No. What happened?”

“Deadline moved. I hadn’t checked my email in a couple days. I didn’t know. I’m a little behind and need to catch up.”

“Oh, sorry.” She stood.

“No, never be sorry for sitting on my lap.” I gave her the best smile I could in my exhaustion.

“Can I make you something to eat or get you more coffee?”

I rubbed my eyes. “Actually, I think I’m going to grab a couple hours of sleep, then I’ll eat something.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

God, yes. “No, you’re awake. Go ahead with your day. We’ll talk later.”

“Okay, I’m going to call that photographer. Schedule photos for the new ads.” She gave me a playful smooch on the cheek.

I turned. “Thanks for the date.”

“Anytime.”

A WEEK WENT by in a blur of code, coffee, kisses, naps on the couch, an occasional run or shower to clear my head, and a few meals. I hadn't had Tess in my arms for that time, either.

We passed in the day, and she told me about the furniture she'd decided on for all the cabins, particularly the one she was staging for the photo shoot. I wanted to focus, but it was hard for my exhausted brain. I hadn't realized how far behind I'd gotten on several projects, and sleep was a luxury.

On a break, I'd strolled through the bunkhouse. It was progressing, and she was constantly talking with my dad's crew. Putting in her sweat equity, she said. I was glad she could because I was buried with work.

The February quarterly product report meeting was next week. I was flying back to San Jose tomorrow, and I dreaded it. Yes, I'd fallen behind, and I owned that. I also worked my ass off to get on track, and I did it. My boss was now making unreasonable demands and being a dick about it.

"Even if you aren't physically in this office, you still have deadlines, Drew," he'd said. Like I'd been on vacation instead of dealing with an extortionist/evil developer. The only deadline I ever missed was the one that changed suddenly while I was out on a date with my fuck-hot girlfriend. Otherwise, I got my shit done.

I *was* distracted lately. By the resort, Tess, and several other things. My twenty-fifth birthday was next month, and they would release all the funds in my trust. I'd been talking to the attorney, the accountant, and the insurance folks when I had a spare moment. I wanted to make sure all my investments were covered. Big money was a big responsibility. I'd watched Patrick make questionable choices after he turned twenty-five, and I wasn't going to make the same mistakes.

Lucas and I were in contact about a job, but I was hesitant, and he knew it. If I took a job here and stayed, how long would it be before Tess moved on? I didn't want to hold her back, but there was no way I could watch her with another man. If I took a job here, I could be stuck doing exactly that.

I flip-flopped between staying as long as she'd have me and concentrating on enjoying the rest of our year before rejoining my old life. My boss sucked, but the work was important, and I was good at it. It's where I belonged.

My head spun with thoughts and lack of sleep.

"The photographer is here. Do you want to come and see?" Tess asked as she massaged my shoulders. I sat hunched at my desk with a single cursor blinking in the open section of code. She bent to kiss my neck and pressed her soft tits into my upper back. I closed my eyes to shut out everything but her. The feel of her hands, the smell of her hair. "I think you'll like the setup." Her voice was soft.

I straightened in my seat. "Give me a minute, and I'll walk down." I flashed another tired smile, but it was the best I had.

She gave me one last shoulder squeeze and headed to the door.

I needed to shower and change my clothes. By the time I did, the photographer was almost done.

"Want some shots with the two of you?"

Tess looked at me.

"You should do it. Yours is the face people want to see."

"We both should be on the brochure since we both own it," she said.

"Nah, this place is you. Plus, this mug—" I pointed to my face "—is not about the marketing."

She paused, then turned to the photographer. "Actually, I think the resort should be the focus."

"It's your call." I rubbed my eyes. "Everything looks great. I'm gonna get back to work." I nodded to the guy. "Thanks again."

TESS

HE SAID THE RESORT WAS ME, NOT US.

Since that code deadline change, Drew had been uninvolved with the resort. Instead, he'd been consumed with writing code or laughing in banter-filled video conferences with his colleagues. He told me to do what I wanted when I talked about the renovations.

He was already slipping back to his important world where he belonged. It was silly to think he'd stay here.

But I'd thought something had changed between us. I felt it when he touched me the night after our date at The Patio. I felt it when he looked at me. We were good together. He liked my renovation ideas and helped me pick paint colors and appliances. He helped me, and I depended on him, reveling in the feeling of not being alone in everything.

Together, we installed new kitchen cabinets in all the lower cabins, which was more fun than I had planned. Holding the heavy pieces high while I drilled in the screws made his muscles bulge, and I'd been more than a little distracted. The mission-accomplished celebration sex that night had been fast and sweaty against the wall before it was slow and sweet in the bed.

That was before. I hadn't slept in his room for days. He was never there anyway, grabbing a few hours of sleep on the sofa between work and meals. I'd even taken over feeding Buster and scooping his litter box. And I was back to solo hot tubbing. Nothing was the same.

This was a good reminder of reality. The dreamy past few months weren't forever. He'd only agreed to a year, and I needed to remember that.

I walked to the cottage while the photographer packed his gear. Drew was, once again, hunched at his desk. It would have been nice to have had a professional photo of us.

"The photographer's finished. Do you want to Venmo him, or should I use the resort's card?"

"Whichever works best. Either way, I pay." He sighed and didn't turn his head to look at me. His tone wasn't accusatory exactly.

"Drew, I thought you wanted me to do these ads. I'm not trying to spend money for fun."

He turned, and I saw his bloodshot eyes. "I know that." He rubbed his forehead. "You aren't like those girls."

"What girls?"

"Girls in The Valley, except Bethany. She has her own money." He glanced around in a daze.

"What are you talking about?"

"My money. I'm the perfect tech meal ticket. Lots of resources and not that good-looking. I had more than one woman want to spend time with me because of what I was able to buy her."

"Well, that sucks. I'm glad you're free of those girls."

"Am I?"

I blanched. "Are you what? Free of girls using you for your money? I hope so. Or do you think that's what I'm doing?" I stepped back.

His eyes grew wide. "No, not you. I meant in the future." He stood up and took a few steps toward me. "Tess, I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of that." His words rushed out. "I'm sleep-deprived. Nothing is coming out right. My job sucks right now, and my mind is swimming. I'm pissed off that I have to fly to California when all I want to do is sleep next to you."

I exhaled; the relief palpable in my chest. “What can I do?”

“Will you sleep with me? Just sleep. I’ve missed holding you.”

Hope peeked out, and I nodded. “Let me pay the guy, and I’ll be right back.”

I used the resort’s card to pay the photographer and thanked him again before jogging to the cottage. Drew was already in bed with the fading late afternoon light. I stripped to my undies and slipped into one of his t-shirts. I set the alarm on my watch and climbed in with him, kissing his bare shoulder as I cuddled next to him. He wrapped me up and pulled me tight to his chest.

“Hmm, Tess. You’ll be hard to leave,” he whispered into my hair.

“You’re coming back soon,” I said, but he was already asleep.

MY ALARM WOKE me a couple of hours later. The night sky was dark, and I wanted to let Drew sleep, but I didn’t know when to wake him for his flight tomorrow. As gently as possible, I got out of bed and padded to his desk to search for an itinerary.

I didn’t have access to his calendar online, so I shuffled through legal pads, looking for a note or slip of paper. He said he was a visual person and liked to print out important emails as reminders, particularly when he was stressed. He must have been stressed because there were many more papers here than usual.

I found a folder labeled travel, opened it, and flipped through the items. One caught my eye. It was an email from an accountant about the valuation of the resort. The date was last week. He’d requested a final report on the current *value at sale* of his one-half interest. Why would he need that?

Sale? He still wanted to sell? I couldn't believe it, but it was there in black and white.

I sat in his chair. We couldn't sell for eight more months, or the proceeds had to be donated. That was the stipulation in the will. We made a deal to protect the resort from grabby developer hands, and we were only four months in.

My spine tingled, and my breath caught. Now that Boyd was no longer an issue, Drew could break our deal. He could sell his half to someone who would support the resort. Selling was his original plan. I swallowed.

The next piece of paper was an email from my brother, Lucas. The subject line read: Opportunity Discussion. It was a reminder for a zoom meeting scheduled for next Thursday.

Was my brother the buyer he was looking for? They both knew I loved this resort and would never sell my half. Drew would only ever be able to sell his, and I had to agree. I couldn't object if he sold to my brother. Lucas would be a silent partner in another local resort like he was for Finn's mountain biking resort.

And Lucas could afford it. He'd asked me, in the beginning, to tell him if there was something I needed that he had, like money.

The penalty for selling early was the proceeds had to be donated, but the resort was found money for Drew. And he probably had enough. A big donation like that would be a nice tax write-off. Oh, God. There was nothing in the way now. I didn't have eight more months with him. He could leave anytime.

My vision tunneled. All the improvements to the resort, he'd said, were *investments*. We'd make our money back, he said. My stomach dropped, and my mouth watered. I was going to be sick. He'd paid for those improvements to the resort all those years to ease his guilt for how he hurt me. These improvements must have been to ease his guilt about breaking our deal. I'd been the fool again.

He agreed to stay because of the right of first refusal, and as soon as that problem was solved, he made plans to go back to his old life. Bethany. He said they were friends, but she wanted more, and she was part of his present. I was a girl from the past. Unfinished business now finished.

God, I was stupid. I thanked him for getting us away from Boyd. Enthusiastically. With my body. I'd celebrated the thing that made it possible for him to leave and take my heart with him.

A tear dropped on the paper, and I sniffed, wiping my eyes. I knew better than to trust people. This shit happened to me every time I thought something was real. It never was.

I was pretty. And pretty was good enough for sex and fun for a while, but that was it.

I looked around the cottage. This side would soon be mine. I'd have the bigger kitchen all to myself and the incredible view. I'd spend summer evenings drinking wine on the deck, watching the families congregate by the crab pot or grills at the end of a successful day on the water. I'd watch the teens run and scream from the chilly sea into the nearby sauna for a few minutes to warm up. I'd watch the lights on tanker ships in the channel turn on in the distance as the moon rose over the mountains beyond.

I'd be alone. But alone was my natural habitat.

I'd survive this like I survived the frat guys, the crap dates, the mean girls, and the jealous professors. One day at a time.

My original plan had been to do this resort on my own, and now I would.

I took a big breath and mindlessly thumbed through the last few pages in the folder. I found his itinerary listing an afternoon flight. He didn't need me to wake him. His return flight was scheduled for a week later, and I wondered how long he'd stay after that or if he'd even come back.

There was a note scrawled at the bottom of the paper. "Call Bethany."

DREW

I ROLLED TO MY SIDE AND REACHED FOR TESS. THE SHEETS were cold, and I sat, rubbing sleep from my eyes before I checked the clock. Seven. I'd slept for more than thirteen hours. That was a record. But then, I hadn't slept more than a handful of hours a night for the past week.

My stomach growled as I walked out of the bedroom, searching for food and Tess. She wasn't on my side of the cottage, and the inner door was closed.

That was not a good sign. Shit. We'd fought yesterday. I was exhausted and raw, and I'd been careless with my words to the one person I never wanted to be careless with again. I barely even remembered what I said, but I didn't think Tess was using me for money. There were girls who did, but that wasn't her.

Slowly, I opened the inner door.

"Tess? You in here?" Silence and darkness filled the space that carried her scent of flowers. Maybe she was already at the office.

I grabbed a pair of sweats and shoved my feet in sneakers. I should take a run before I got on the plane today.

I found her on the second floor of the bunkhouse. "Hey, Angel." I snaked my hands around her middle from behind. Hopefully, the new day had cleared her memory of my asshole behavior.

“Hey, you.” She patted my arms and stepped out of them like something was off. But when she turned, her expression was bright.

“You’re up early,” I said.

“Didn’t sleep well.” She shrugged. “I stopped fighting it. There’s a lot to do.”

“I wish I could help more.”

“I’ve got it. You’ve already done more than expected. You were supposed to bring the financial support, and I was supposed to do the work.” She returned to measuring spaces and plotting a vision in her mind.

“Tess. About the money, I didn’t mean anything yesterday. I’m sorry we fought. I want you to use whatever you need to make this resort the best it can be.”

“Top-dollar value,” she said, her voice a little too bright and clear.

“Absolutely. This place is already great. Everyone who stays here loves it, and that will only improve with you in charge.”

She glanced at me with a small smile.

“Tess, is there something else?”

She sighed. “Spring is coming, the finish work in here is almost done, and the ads will be in the papers and online soon. Hopefully, we’ll get people looking for a wedding venue and then the constant summer bookings. The real world is right around the corner.”

She continued to measure, pausing, and considering the space.

The real world.

Here at the resort, we fit. We made sense. In the real world, we didn’t.

I ate, packed, then went for a run. After a shower, I went to find Tess before I left. She was in the laundry room folding

sheets and towels from the dryer. She had her back to me, and for a moment, I watched her.

She was a dream. From her hands' swift, sure movements to the casual way she brushed a lock of hair behind her ear each time she pulled a towel from the machine. The curve of her waist and gentle flare of her slim hips. Even through the scent of dryer sheets, I smelled flowers and something that was uniquely her.

I cleared my throat, and she turned.

"You taking off?" she asked.

"Yeah. Let me know if you need something. I'll be slammed this weekend and the first part of the week, but I should be able to text at least."

She shook her head. "Go to California, Drew. I'll be busy here too. Take the time you need. It's your future." She paused and stepped closer. "Our bubble has been great, healing even, and I appreciate everything you've done for this resort, but we both know this isn't forever." She kissed my cheek and turned back to her task.

Her words hung heavy in the air.

The resort would get busy and stay that way through the summer. Then our deal would officially be over. But I had eight more months. I didn't want to pop the bubble a second earlier, even if she did. I was already in love. Eight months wouldn't make that better or worse, and those months would have to be enough to last a lifetime.

"Tess." She looked up and set the folded towel on the storage shelf, her expression blank. I pulled her to me and cupped her face in my palms. Her eyes flashed the familiar brightness I would always fall into. "So beautiful," I whispered, and I pressed my lips to hers in a tender kiss full of all the hope, passion, and love I felt for her.

I leaned my forehead against hers. "Miss me while I'm gone."

"I already do."

“HEY MAN, YOU NEED A RIDE?” Brian asked as he walked over from the conference room where my presentation was this afternoon. He was a good friend in this crazy place of climbers, schemers, and brilliant coders. He was tall and thin with long arms that made him a kickass foosball player, and he usually wore some pretty cool T-shirts, prized possessions around here. “Most of the team already left for the bar,” he said.

I looked up from the pictures of Tess I had on my phone from our date night. Yeah, I was pathetic. At least I knew it.

Another guy, Vijay, stepped up behind me. “Dude, who’s that?”

The most incredible woman in the world. And I got to hold her, touch her, and make her laugh, flexing my biceps while hanging heavy kitchen cabinets.

“My girlfriend,” I said. For now.

“No fucking way.”

I switched to a photo of us kissing. Not a graphic one. I wasn’t sharing those with anyone.

“Damn, bro. She is an inferno. That girl is here?” His eyes glittered.

“Don’t get any ideas. She’s in Washington.”

“Is she blind? Because she could do a lot better than your sorry ass.” He ran his hand through his thick black hair, cut short and styled with too much product. I was surprised his hand didn’t get stuck.

“Fuck off. You think I don’t know that? That’s why I want to finish all this meeting follow-up bullshit, so I can get home before she figures it out.” I rolled my chair back to stand. He wasn’t trying to be a dick. For some guys, it came naturally.

I stayed clear of most programmers. They weren’t nice. Not to women, not to each other, not to waiters, not to anyone.

“Is Dickford coming?” I asked Brian while I packed up my laptop.

“Nah, dinner with the division VPs.” He waved, and Vijay motioned for us to meet him at his office. He was recently promoted to lead and had a coveted private space.

“Then I’ll come. I don’t think I could take much more of him today.”

“That was brutal. ‘Why can’t you bend the space-time continuum and pull code out of your ass, Drew? Everyone else can,’” Brian mimicked my boss’s monotone voice.

“It must be because I’m lazy,” I said, the sarcasm oozing.

Brian punched me in the chest. “He has a real hard-on for you these days. What’d you do to him?”

“My guess? I called HR when he wouldn’t let me go remote from Washington so I could handle my shit. He thinks I got special treatment, and that’s reserved for him.” I smirked. “I doubt he knew how to spell HR before that day. He does now. And the rep that set him straight, a woman.”

“Ahh, yeah. That makes sense. He would not like to be told what to do, least of all by a *woman* in *HR*. He says HR is only good for planning parties.

“Yeah, Dickford’s a real sweetheart,” I said.

I looped my laptop bag over my head, settling the strap across my chest, and noticed the set of large pictures hanging on the far wall of the room filled with open desks. Those damn orange circles in various stages of overlap. Not the sky, mountains, and water I saw from my desk on the island.

“What would you do if you weren’t here?” Brian asked as we walked down the hall toward Vijay’s office and the lobby. His usually light-hearted vibe turned serious.

“You wanting to make a change?”

“Say you hit it big. Had a twenty-million-dollar payout. You could do whatever you wanted.”

I considered his words. I wouldn't get twenty million on my next birthday, but close enough. I *could* do whatever I wanted.

I liked the fast-paced challenge of big tech. Our work impacted hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people. It gave my life meaning, for lack of a better way to say it. Everyone was pushing and striving; I was running with the pack. But I didn't have to.

An image of Tess in that white beaded dress flashed in my mind. If it made sense, I'd stay at the resort with the woman I loved, like Mr. Rose had done. I rubbed the space over my heart to soothe the ache.

"Would you continue here, form your own company, or travel the world?" Brian asked.

"Are those my only options?"

"Nah, suggestions."

"No offense, but I wouldn't stay here," I said. "Not working for Dickford. But another team working on these projects? I could stay. What we're doing is impactful to the world, for the better. How many people can say that about their jobs? I'm good at this stuff. I should do it."

"And we get to work with so many guys. Especially the socks and sandals crew. They really get me hot." His expression was back to his usual easy-going style.

"Brian, are you coming out to me right now because it wouldn't change anything between us?"

He laughed as we reached Vijay's door. "Thanks, man. Nah, at least I don't think so. But I'm not sure I remember how to talk to girls. It's been too long."

Vijay stood from his desk and adjusted the strap on his laptop bag before slinging it over his head and straining the buttons on his too-tight pinstripe button down even more. He patted the pockets of his raw denim jeans and pulled out his keys with a big grin. What a tool. I could afford thousand-dollar jeans too, but that didn't mean I wore them to work where everyone else was in Levi's and faded band T-shirts.

“No worries, bro. I’ll help.” He slapped Brian on the back. “Or we could blow off the team and get the hell out of *Man Jose*. Drive to San Fran for Wednesday night *hump* night.” He emphasized the word with a pelvic thrust. “I got my new Tesla last week.” He waved the slim key card with the Tesla logo.

“Dude, no. It’s a school night.” Brian said, reading my mind. No way I was up for the trek to San Francisco tonight and round two with Dickford tomorrow. I wanted to get this shit done and go the fuck home. If I only had eight months left with Tess, I wasn’t spending one more minute here than I had to.

“You don’t have kids or a wife, bro,” Vijay said to Brian. “Drop that school night crap. We’re young. We have the money to buy pretty girls a lot of twenty-dollar cocktails. The game is ours, gentlemen.”

I didn’t want the game. I never did.

TESS

DREW HAD BEEN GONE SINCE FRIDAY, BUT IT SEEMED LONGER. To Buster too. Each time I fed him, he looked at me like *where's my other human?* I petted him and cuddled him and told him Drew would be back for him soon. When the sweet tabby left, I was getting a cat of my own.

I was reading more of Mrs. Curtis's journals between hosting guests, working in the cabins, talking with the construction crew in the bunkhouse, and starting the resort's taxes, which made me want to scream. If it got too complicated, I'd get Rhys to help. He was a numbers whiz.

It was the bright spot in my day to read about Mrs. Curtis's love affair with Mr. Rose.

Drew texted after his presentation and said it had gone well. I updated him on my progress in the cabins. We were both getting things done, moving forward to our real worlds.

Valentine's Day came, and we exchanged a few teasing and suggestive texts that made me miss him even more. And I *missed* him, missed hoping we could have a future. Losing that hope was the same pain I felt after our summer six years ago, and my heart ached to the point that I sometimes had to catch my breath.

No more. Time to accept reality and concentrate on the future, the resort. Focus on what's in front of me instead of what's behind me, like always.

Jo and Lucas bought Emily's house in Perry Harbor after she and Finn got engaged. It was older, with great bones, made

of brick, which was unique in this area, and had a great view of the channel and nearby islands, including my favorite, Anna Island.

We were getting together at their house tonight to finish the last of the wedding details. Emily and Finn's big day was a little more than a month away. Helping to plan a wedding for a happy couple was probably not the best thing for me right now, but this was my career goal. If anything was going to snap me out of my funk, it was planning an event, even this one.

They'd kept the timing flexible since the ceremony was being held near the farm's tulip fields, and Emily wanted to be sure there would be blooms. She'd been hoping for a cooler winter after an early-season snowstorm. A colder winter would delay the blooms, and the event could be held in the slightly warmer time of early May.

It was not to be. After that pre-Christmas snowstorm, the winter had been warmer this year, which meant the flowers would be early. They solidified plans with the caterer and wedding coordinator last week to hold the event on Friday, April 3rd, before opening Saturday of the month-long Annual Tulip Festival.

The festival would bring tens of thousands of tourists to stroll the tulip fields at each local farm, take pictures, and buy bulbs. It was essential to the life of the farms and all of Perry Harbor. It would be a busy time, but we'd make it work.

I knocked, and the door swung open to a cheerful greeting from Miss Natalie and Miss Nell, Lucas and Jo's neighbors. They were a mystery on the island after being widowed and moving here together from somewhere down south.

There were several rumors about them, but Lucas's favorite was the one where they were CIA agents, and I had to admit, I could see it even though both ladies had to be in their late sixties, at least. Small-town gossips tried to work out something racier, which I think Miss Natalie and Miss Nell found more entertaining than annoying.

"Tess, dear, don't you look pretty," Miss Natalie said.

“She always looks pretty, Nat,” Miss Nell said. “You look strong today. Determined, like you can take on the world.”

I wish. “Thank you both. I’m not sure I feel it.”

“Fake it ’til you make it. Isn’t that what they say? I believe in you.” She gave my arm a tiny squeeze, and she reminded me of Mrs. Curtis for a moment.

“Let’s go, Nat. Daylight’s burning,” she said, holding a couple of fat envelopes and a small box probably delivered here while they were out of town. Emily told me a while ago that they were often traveling. Further supporting the CIA theory.

Jo sent Lucas to hang with Finn for a while, but before he left, he cooked and served us an asparagus frittata with a baby greens salad and set out a charcuterie board for snacking. I was impressed with his cooking *and* her ability to teach him.

We were sitting at their big kitchen island now, which was covered with laptops, notepads, and Post-it notes. It looked like a lunar landing command center.

“It’s going to be perfect,” Jo said, and Emily clasped her hands in her lap like she did when she was worried.

“I don’t want the wedding to add to the stress of the festival.”

“It’ll be fine,” I said. “It’s a big party with a wedding thrown in the middle, and we do that every year on the night before opening day, anyway. The party part. The paths will all be clean, and the show gardens and flowers will sparkle in your pictures. Everyone is in town, and the wedding coordinator is doing most of the heavy lifting that we would’ve done for the annual crew dinner. This way is actually better. Two birds, one party.”

“Thanks, Tess.” She bumped her shoulder with mine.

“I got you, Sis.” I winked at our nickname and was lighter for a moment, like my old self.

We checked the status of everything from the food and music to the ceremony and dresses, and we finished a bottle of

wine. It was time to go, and I stood to pack my things.

“Oh, we started on the seating chart. Please assure Drew he’ll be at the head table with you instead of hanging with the crowd of relatives,” Emily said.

“Thank you, but I’m not sure Drew’s coming.” I focused on unplugging my laptop power cord and zipped it in the mesh bag with my wireless mouse.

“Why? Something about his job again?” Jo asked.

“Sort of. He’s probably moving back to Silicon Valley soon.”

“What? But I thought you guys ...”

“Yeah, well. That may have run its course. Back to reality.” I cleared my throat and tried to keep my voice steady.

“Why now? The deal was a year.”

“That developer’s no longer trying to buy the resort. The reason Drew stayed was to prevent that guy from getting the land. Now, there isn’t a reason to stay. He can go back to his life.”

“What about you? You’re a reason to stay.”

I paused and swallowed the lump of emotion. “His work is important. His life is there, not on a remote island in the San Juans.”

My heart cracked. It was the first time I’d said it aloud to another person. I hustled out after our goodbyes and made it to my car without tears, but I cried the entire trip back to the resort.

DREW

THE ROW WAS A STRIP OF RESTAURANTS AND BARS BETWEEN San Jose and Santa Clara. Places that served decent food for dinner morphed into low-key clubs later. Vijay wasn't joking about the twenty-dollar cosmos. This area was particularly boujee for several reasons, but at least the crowd didn't consist mostly of San Jose State students like the cheaper bars downtown.

Brian, Vijay, and I found the rest of our team crowded around high-top tables at the restaurant. Our admin had called ahead and ordered snacks on the company, and the waiters kept the food coming for a while.

"You know Drew, if you're here Friday night, one of the new design engineers is having a house party. I can get you an invite." Vijay raised his eyebrows in question.

"No thanks, I'm good." Those house parties were a shit show. Silicon Valley was famous for outrageous ones thrown at cliff-side mansions by entrepreneurs and investors with too much money. I'd never been to one of those, but if half the stories I'd heard were even close to accurate, I didn't want any part of that mess.

Some newly minted engineers threw smaller versions like they were training for the *big show* someday. No fucking thank you.

Brian waved to a couple of girls at the bar.

"Friends of yours?" I asked.

“Yeah, the redhead works reception in the building next door. Jenny. Nice girl.”

“You interested?”

He looked away and shrugged. “Nah, I think she’s more interested in Vijay.”

Vijay was a minor-league programmer trying to go pro. When we first started working together, he was normal. But he was smarter than most people around here, which went to his head fast. The *dickhead* was getting stronger in him every day.

“What does she see in him?” I asked.

“Dollar signs.”

Ahh right. Money was the best beauty mark. Fuck, I wanted to be done with this scene, and none of these girls were Tess.

Brian and I chilled at the table while everyone else mingled. A couple of girls stopped to chat. I was a terrible wingman with my attitude. I decided the least I could do was pay for our drinks.

“Go talk to that girl. You don’t have to babysit me,” I said.

“What girl?”

I gave him the WTF look. “The one in the blue sweater who keeps glancing over here.”

“Yeah. I don’t know. She’s a girl in a bar.”

“I thought that’s what you wanted, to talk to girls.”

He frowned. “She’s pretty. But why can’t I meet her in a park or while walking my dog?”

“When’d you get a dog?”

“I don’t have one. That’s not the point. I want to meet a nice girl in a nice place. I want to kiss a girl like you’re kissing yours in that pic. Real. You’re a lucky man, and not just because she’s a fucking rocket.”

“Yeah, I’m lucky now. I’ll be a shell of a man when she moves on to better and hotter.” I shook my head. “But I can’t

walk away yet. She's amazing. Smells great. Talented and determined. She basically remodeled the resort's older cabins on her own. It's easy to be with her. And when she gets dressed up, damn."

"Yeah, that look right there. I want that," Brian said.

"Well, it won't come from me. I suggest you go buy that girl a drink. I'm done for the night. I'll get our tab and grab an Uber."

THE CAR PULLED under the canopy of patio lights strung across the drive at the front of my hotel. "Thanks, man."

The air was warm for February. It was probably in the sixties, much warmer than on the island, but I still felt cold.

I needed to walk.

The sidewalk was busy with folks moving from restaurant to bar to parking garage. A few shops were open, and the neon signs blazed funky designs into the night air. I passed places with outdoor seating lining the sidewalk. Conversations and clinking glasses competed with the sound of traffic on the nearby street. Everyone looked the same. Jeans, hoodies, and Adidas Gazelles for the guys. Loose neck sweaters and leggings for the girls. All of them smiling, trying to meet someone they didn't have to always smile with. Like what I had with Tess.

The energy of this place, the tech, and feeling like I was at the epicenter of something big had helped to smooth out the edges of all the crap you had to tolerate. Everyone trying to be the next big thing. Everyone else acting like they didn't notice. All the bros driving a rainbow of electric cars or Lamborghinis.

With Tess, there were no edges that needed smoothing. She was perfect, exactly how she was. Her energy and love for the resort. Her absolute certainty that she could make it work and her drive to be part of each step. Her appreciation for the finer things like hot tubbing naked and fireworks reflected in the water. And the way she looked up at me with clear, vulnerable

eyes as I moved over her. I wanted to be with her forever, but we didn't make sense. Reality made sense. Tess and I forever wasn't real.

The walk helped, but my mind stayed cloudy. Back in the hotel room, I grabbed a tiny bottle from the mini-bar and poured the liquor over ice. Lying against the headboard and pillows, I rested my laptop on my thighs and woke up the machine.

An email from Dickford. Of course.

A new assignment. He was shifting me to a different product team and demanded that I stay until the middle of next week to put in face time with them since I'd be out of the office for several more months.

Reminding him again that I was remote, not out of the office, was a waste of time. He didn't seem to grasp the difference, or he didn't want to.

He said he would have an admin email my updated itinerary.

As I read more, I realized this was a shit assignment. The project included people I'd worked with in the past. They were Teflon. Questions slid right off them and rolled back to me. When I asked about their part of the code, they re-framed what I said into a question for me instead of answering. "How the fuck would I be able to answer a question about your code? It's your code." And round and round we'd go.

I reminded myself this was part of how the products and changes for good happened. It wasn't all rainbows and kittens. Some of it was shit and shovels. I wasn't looking forward to this one.

TESS

DREW CALLED LATE LAST NIGHT TO LET ME KNOW HE HAD TO be in California for a few more days than planned. Something about a new project. I wanted to be excited for him. I wasn't. I wanted him here, helping me with this project.

He'd sounded exhausted and distant though he'd said he missed me. I ached with missing him, and he hadn't even officially left me yet. I couldn't let it show, and I couldn't comfort him. I had to take care of myself now. The call had been short with all the things we didn't say. Heartbreak sucked.

I needed yoga. My head was not in the right place, and ReeAnn's class always helped more than my regular practices at home.

Not this time.

I tried to leave negative thoughts and feelings off the mat and breathe. Nothing to do on the mat but breathe, ReeAnn said. Simple.

Not so much.

She eyed me as I started collecting my mat and props, tucking them into my colorful shoulder bag after class. I waved at an older couple I knew as they left the studio.

"Girl, are you okay? You usually rock crow pose."
ReeAnn stepped closer. "Your heart's blocked?"

Yeah, you could say that. "I'm a little off." I tried to smile.

“In your feelings is what it looks like,” ReeAnn said, raising her eyebrows to emphasize her point.

“Sad,” I said, preempting her next question, which was going to ask me to name my feelings. Naming them helped to separate them from ourselves and leave them off the mat during our practice. Yoga was partly about channeling energy, and nothing blocked energy like negative feelings.

“I see that. What else?” Her voice was soft but firm.

“Disappointed.”

She flipped her hand in a small circle that was the international symbol for *tell me more*.

“Hurt.”

ReeAnn gently draped her arm across my shoulders. “Now we’re getting there.”

“Drew’s leaving, going back to California. We had a deal for a year, but he’s ducking out early.” I concentrated on not crying.

“You love him.”

I nodded. No reason to hide it.

“Why did he say he was leaving?” ReeAnn asked.

“I haven’t talked to him about it. I found paperwork about his plans.”

“Hey, if you haven’t talked to him, maybe there’s more to it.”

There was never more to it. I was a pretty girl, and everything was easy for us. No one needed to help me or be nice to me or fall in love with me.

People told me not to complain when I was sad or disappointed because I was *so lucky*. And that was true. There was good in my life, and I *was* thankful. Fuck, I was thankful! But the shit parts of my life were still shit. When the only man I ever loved didn’t even care enough about me to honor our deal, that was seriously shitty, and it hurt no matter how lucky I was.

I didn't want anyone telling me to count my blessings or look on the bright side. Screw the fucking bright side. Drew leaving didn't have one.

ON THE FERRY back to Anna Island, hurt turned to exhaustion. In a moment of weakness, I slid into Drew's bed in the middle of the day to grieve the loss.

His sheets smelled like him, and I remembered the last time he loved me here. His heart had pressed against mine, and I felt them beating together. No one would ever touch me like he did. No one would ever see me like he did. Drew saw the person underneath the symmetrical face, but he was leaving. So, I let the tears come.

I woke up a couple of hours later. It was early afternoon, and the sun was still in the sky. February teased with longer days, and I watched the sunset times get later, with the promise of summer.

I put on my coat and jogged down to the bunkhouse for something to do.

"Hey Tess," Kelly, the construction crew lead today, called from her truck. "We're packing up. Do you want to check it out?"

"Absolutely."

"Another week of punch-list items. We shouldn't need to be here all day, though. When we get supplies in, I'll send someone out."

"Sounds good," I said and stepped into the renovated space.

It was perfect. The second floor was a big open room with hardwood floors stained dark, light-gray walls with bright white molding, and exposed ceiling beams painted a darker shade. The long wall facing the water held four floor-to-ceiling glass panels that folded and tucked in on each side, providing open and easy access to the larger deck and a view of the

snow-capped mountains in the distance. It was the perfect space for a small wedding reception or day retreat.

The third floor held a compact professional kitchen with gleaming stainless steel and a simple flow designed by Jo. A couple of appliances still needed to be installed, but there was enough to picture the completed space. Outside the kitchen area, the rest of this floor had a light-gray industrial carpet that resisted stains and was easy to clean. The same paint colors were here too, and there were removable partitions to create smaller rooms for meetings or wedding party prep areas. There were bathrooms, an elevator next to the main stairs, and a smaller staircase leading to the new attic storage.

“Kelly, it’s a dream come true. All the natural light. The flow of the metal tubes to hold the electrical wires in the exposed beams and along the walls. It’s modern and old, sleek and rustic, all at the same time. I love it.”

“I’d like to take credit, but a good bit of that was Drew. He made a few changes to the original CAD drawings.”

There was that familiar pinch of sadness. Whatever his reason, he’d worked to make this space the perfect realization of my dream plan. When he was gone, I wouldn’t be able to look anywhere without seeing him in every perfect detail. I hoped one day it wouldn’t break my heart.

Everyone had left by the time I wandered back to the office and checked my desk, making sure I hadn’t left something undone. I hadn’t. No unopened emails. No accounting to do. No new reservations to confirm. Everything was finished for the day.

I locked the office door and walked back to the cottage. With the construction crews no longer constantly present, I would be alone most days until the warmer months. Six hot tubs, all to myself.

I sighed. Before Drew, I was badass enough to be brave, take risks, and do it alone. But now that I knew what it felt like to have someone in my corner, Drew in my corner, my solo badass had gone missing. And my frozen burrito for one looked inedible.

My bedroom didn't cheer me, with all the images of Drew here giving me control, trusting me to use my power for good on those nights, and relieving me of control other times, so all I had to do was feel.

My heart ached. My head ached. Everywhere I ached for him. Exactly like I had years ago.

DREW

AFTER ANOTHER LONG DAY ON THE COMPANY'S SPRAWLING campus, I was meeting Bethany for a drink. A new place in Santa Clara known for its signature cocktails. It was getting busy, and I snagged a table off to the side of the sweeping bar that curved in a sleek midcentury modern style, like the inside of a 1960s airplane.

I had snuck out of my building earlier in search of a free room in the office building next door, so I could have my conference call with Lucas in peace. I didn't want my team peeking in through the glass wall.

The call went well, and Lucas made me a great offer. I had a lot to think about.

After the call, I caught an Uber rather than return to the open office space with orange circles on the wall. One or two heads would've popped over my monitor bank to ask where I'd been, and I didn't have the energy to come up with a lie that would've been remotely believable.

I kept replaying my conversation with Tess the day I left. She said we both knew it wasn't forever. I believed that but what we had felt like forever to me.

I spotted Bethany coming in the door. I hadn't seen her since I moved last fall, and I'd missed her. We'd worked together for years, and she didn't give a shit about my money. She was a good friend and not just because of the benefits. We'd never been more, which struck me as weird for the first time.

She was gorgeous, as always. Her reddish-blond hair was shorter, making her green eyes stand out even more. She was classy and formidable in a navy suit, and I stood to greet her with a hug.

“Wow, B. You’re glowing.”

“You’re not too bad yourself.” She winked.

Our server appeared, and Bethany ordered a white whiskey cocktail topped with foam. What the hell was white whiskey? Silicon Valley. They made shit up all the time, and people bought it for millions.

“What’s with the suit? Job interview?” It was the standard joke. Anytime someone came to the office dressed better than jeans and a wrinkled button-down shirt, people asked if they had a job interview. It was a throwback thing. No one wore suits to job interviews in tech.

“Har har. No, a meeting with Daddy’s foundation. They like to go big ... I suited up.”

I grinned, and she eyed me. “First off, this is not a booty call.”

I coughed, not used to her bluntness after being away for a while. “Jeezus, B. I agree.” I chuckled. “It’s nice to see you. I missed you, and ... this week’s been rough.”

“I’m sorry, Dickford?” Bethany had heard several stories about him on her own. She worked in another building on campus, but his reputation was widespread.

“Among other things. A lot on my mind.” I paused and leaned in. “You and me, why were we just benefits? Why not more? Was it, you know, not the right look?” I pointed to my face. “You can tell me. I can take it.”

She rolled her eyes, then smiled softly. “I’m not her.”

“Who?”

Bethany raised her eyebrows in a *get real* expression. “And let me tell you a secret,” she said. “Nobody else is either.”

I sat back and rubbed my hand down my beard.

“You love her. You always have. It was plain as day at the funeral. The joy and pain in your eyes seeing her. You vibrated with it.”

She leaned in, her expression kind. “The pull to her was hard to watch. I’d always known there was someone. That day, I knew it was her. Up until then, I hoped you’d move on, and there I’d be waiting to snag you up.”

Wait. “You had a thing, like a real thing ... for me?”

“Yes, Drew.” She chuckled. “Don’t let it go to your head. I got over it. You, sir, are permanently friend zoned.” She shifted in her chair with a wink. “And not the benefits kind.”

“B ... I ...” Holy hell. I was an idiot.

The server returned with our drinks, and we smiled at her, waiting for her to retreat.

“It’s okay. You’re easy to love, and I was a safe person to you. I thought it was a good thing for a while. Until I realized I was safe because I couldn’t hurt you. You’d have to love me for that to happen.” I was quiet. She was right.

She rested her hand on my arm. “Drew, the only woman you’ve ever loved enough to be hurt by, is her. She’s not safe. And I don’t want to be safe to someone either. I want a man who looks at me the way you look at her. And I found one.”

I cleared my throat. “You did?”

Her eyes lit, and she blushed. That was different.

“I did,” she said. “You’d like him. Genuine. Decent. Not a cocky jackass with too much money like these clowns.” She nodded her head toward the bar full of people.

“Is he good enough for you?”

“Yeah. He is.” Her smile was one I hadn’t seen in a long time. It was hope. “Love is out there, Drew, but you’ve got to claim it, choose it, and bet everything. It doesn’t always work out—” she tilted her head in my direction “—but when it does, it’s worth the risk.”

I took a deep breath. My throat was tight. “I could lose my heart and soul in that bet.”

She squinted. “Don’t you think you already have?”

“If I believe I can have her, and it doesn’t work out, it would be nuclear. I can’t come back from that.”

“What choice do you have? You’ve tried to date girls like her. The barista and the admin for their kindness, the doctor for her drive, and the landscaper for her scrappy work ethic. There were a few would-be models thrown in there, too. You were trying to Frankenstein together some replica of Tess, but you only want the original.”

I wanted Tess. “Everyone sees her beauty, then looks at me like *how’d you get her*. Or sometimes they have this blank expression like they’re trying to figure us out. On Anna Island, it’s just us, and we fit. Everything is easy. But off that island, in the world, I can’t shake the feeling we don’t match.”

“You think it doesn’t match, you next to her? Something wrong with your gorgeous face?” she asked.

“My face is not gorgeous.”

“It is to someone who loves you. Do you only love her for her face?”

“No.”

“If you love her for more than that, isn’t she capable of the same?”

I blinked.

“Does she only like the pretty ones?” Bethany asked. “Have all her boyfriends been models?”

“She hasn’t had many boyfriends. She said most guys didn’t take the time to see beyond how she looked.”

“And how’d she like being treated that way?” Bethany asked.

I said nothing.

Bethany smirked. “Now you’re saying she’d do the same to you? Judge you based on looks alone?”

Shit. Bethany was making sense. Which was great or fucking scary because I’d have to go back there and be all in, no matter what. Not eight months. Forever. No fear.

“Drew, she’s gorgeous. That can be good or bad. Girls can be mean, especially to someone who gets the attention *they* want. She’s intimidating. I learned that the hard way. I didn’t want to like her, but I did because I’m that big of a person.” Bethany winked and flashed her humble smile like she was receiving a humanitarian award.

“My guess is most people see the surface, put her in a box, and don’t take the time to look deeper. But you did. You see her. And you love her for her, all of her. You may be the only man who ever has.”

She touched my hand resting on the table. “You want to know how a girl like her can be with a guy like you? Simple. Love. Maybe she loves you the same way you love her. There’s only one way to find out.”

Love and forever with Tess. Coding with a mentor like Lucas instead of Dickford and the tech-bros, the sound of the wind in the trees instead of the hum of traffic, a bright orange sunrise instead of those big orange circles.

The thoughts whirled as the server took our order for another round. Of course, I saw her. Tess was amazing. Funny, loyal, determined, kind, bossy. I loved it all, along with her face. Could she love all the parts of me along with mine?

Bethany told me more about her new man. She met him at the grocery store. He was a middle school math teacher, and she said he should be sainted for it. He grew up on a farm in the Sonoma wine country. That’s how they met. She was trying to pick out a bottle for yet another fancy event, and he helped her.

“I never actually made it to the dinner.” She smiled. “It was a big foundation thing, and my blowing it off caused a little uproar. But it was worth it. I met a wonderful man that

night. Someone I may have a future with. A great future, and there was no way I was going anywhere until I saw it through. Some people are worth it. And he is.”

She said she knew that first night.

I did, too, at The Patio six years ago. I knew if there was ever a chance I could be with Tess, I’d move heaven and earth to take it. This had to be my chance. Like B said, only one way to find out.

I checked my watch. Seven-thirty.

“Will you excuse me a sec? I want to make a quick call.”

“Sure. Should I order food?” Bethany asked.

“Will your man approve of you having dinner with a former booty call?”

“He knows I’m coming home to him.”

That same glowing expression again. Love. Tess had that expression when she talked about her brothers that night at the engagement party. And she had it after our date when I made love to her. Tess loved me back. It was right there on her face the whole time.

I stepped outside in the clear San Jose evening and made the call I hoped would change my life.

TESS

BARELY FIVE O’CLOCK ON FRIDAY NIGHT, AND THE Boathouse was already busy. Didn’t these people have jobs? I’d come to town to run errands and found myself day drinking with a broken heart.

Finn and Emily were back by the pool tables with most of their mountain biking crew, celebrating the build of another new trail on the island’s south side that he and his friend Alex had designed. Jo texted that she and Lucas were joining the celebration but running late. More getting distracted time. The memory of Drew’s kiss in this bar still caused a sizzle in my core. Ugh. I missed him.

“Hey Rhys, another?” I pointed to my empty pint. Rhys’s expression was stern, and he held a single digit toward me. He wanted me to wait a minute? Or was he saying I could have one more? That was probably it.

I looked around the bar and waited for my second beer. No, third. Yeah, it was my third. Or fourth.

Rhys set the chilled glass in front of me. “How ’bout food, Tess? A burger?”

A burger ...

“Ooo sliders ... and fries. You know, tiny burgers—” I squished my thumb and forefinger together to demonstrate the size “—and you put a piece of pickle on them and spicy sauce.”

Rhys looked at me. “Tiny burgers. You’ll eat something if it’s tiny?”

“Absolutely. Fewer calories in tiny food.”

He rolled his eyes. What? Tiny food was awesome. I took a sip of my new beer and thumbed through my phone until my plate arrived. As expected, my sliders were delicious. I inhaled the first one, then another.

On the third, I looked closer.

“Rhys, did you cut a regular burger into pieces?”

“It’s food, and it’s tiny. Eat it, Tess, and drink that glass of water. Your brothers will have my ass if you don’t sober up, and I mean now.” He pointed again to the water. “Did you eat *anything* today?”

Umm. That’s a no. I didn’t feel like eating. Nothing tasted good.

“Fine,” I grumbled like a toddler.

Two women occupied the seats next to me. No dude could approach me. I was safe as a kitten under Rhys’s watchful glare. I ate and relaxed with my beer. Beers.

“Can you save my seat?” I asked the girl on my right after I finished my food.

“Umm, sure.”

“I’m going to the ladies. I’ll be right back.”

She eyed me. What?

I jumped off the bar stool. It was farther than I realized, and I almost slipped. Good thing I was wearing sneakers tonight, keeping it casual. If I’d been in heels, I would’ve gone down.

I stopped short in the hallway to the bathroom. Two of Finn’s biking buddies, Alex and Travis, were having a heated discussion with another guy. They all looked at me, and I realized the other guy was that developer’s son. My last beer, number three or four, churned in my stomach.

Alex and Travis had their hands on their hips, legs spread in a challenge. Junior stood with his back against the wall.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

“Hey, princess. I was explaining to your bodyguards that it’s a free country, free speech, and all that.”

Alex growled.

“My bodyguards?”

“You’ve got quite an entourage keeping tabs on that sweet little ass of yours. Are you banging all of them at once, or is it a rotation?”

“That’s it, asshole. Your evening is over.” Travis, who was somehow super tall tonight, grabbed Junior and headed toward the emergency exit.

“Get your hands off me.” Junior pulled out of Travis’s grip. “Settle down, fellas. I’ll be good.” He tipped an imaginary hat at me. “See you around, princess.”

He stepped around me, and Travis followed, but I jumped in his way.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. He was being rude.” Travis and Alex exchanged a look. “He was talking shit about people we know,” Travis said.

I furrowed my brow. “Like people, or like *one* person?”

More exchanges. “Tess, guys come in here and say shit, and you’re like family. I’m not letting anyone say shit about my sister or you,” Alex said.

Wait. “Guys? How many guys?”

They must have sent some sort of bat signal because the next thing I knew, Finn was there too, and Emily was pulling me into the ladies’ room.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Nothing. You need to go to the restroom,” she said.

Oh, yeah, right. I did.

“After this, we’ll get you some water and fries.”

“I already had fries,” I told her after finishing my business and washing my hands.

“Great. Let’s get more.”

What was up with Emily tonight? What was up with everyone tonight?

I sat back on my stool to find another full glass of water. Emily leaned against the bar next to me. Rhys hovered.

I was getting a clearer picture. “The thing with Alex and Travis. You and Jake staying close all the time. You guys are running interference with assholes. That’s why I don’t get hit on in here.”

“This is a nice place. A lot of pretty women come in here, and I’d like to keep it that way. I don’t want anyone getting harassed.”

That speech was familiar. “Especially me?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

Rhys leaned in. “Especially you, baby girl.”

“I’m not a baby,” I snapped, all evidence to the contrary. Rhys pointed at me in warning.

Emily ordered a bourbon as Jo arrived and greeted us both with a hug.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were coming later,” I said.

“It is later.”

Huh. Time flies when you’re drunk.

“What can I get you, Jo?” Rhys asked.

“Something with vodka. Your choice.”

“Comin’ up.”

“What about me?” I asked.

“I’m making you something special, baby girl.” Great.

“What’s going on, Tess?” Emily asked. “It’s not typical for you to get lit sitting at the bar by yourself. Even here. And yelling at Rhys?”

“I’m embracing the bitch.”

“Tess.”

“Fine.” I put my head in my hands. Jo and Emily moved in close. “I miss him. He’s staying longer in California. He’s already slipping away. I’m trying to let him go, but I can’t. Drew is different. Forever, people have seen me as one thing, pretty. Nothing more. But not Drew. It’s like my face is an afterthought to him. No one else ever saw me like he did. Like he saw into my soul. He’s who I want, but I don’t know how to make him want to stay if he wants to go. And it hurts so damn much when he goes.”

“Tess, you can’t make him want to stay,” Jo said. “But you *can* let him see how much you want him to stay. Have you told him how you feel?”

“Put it out there and see what happens, even though he’s halfway gone already?”

“I’m not sure what other option you have. This isn’t working.” She gestured to what I could only assume was my drunk and sloppy self. “I know it’s scary, but the people who really see us, they’re worth it.”

For her, that was my brother. Speak of the devil.

“Hey, Tess.” Lucas sidled next to Jo with a surprisingly chaste kiss on the cheek.

“Don’t give me *Hey Tess*. Why didn’t you tell me?” I was whining. I gulped water in hopes it would wash some of the desperation away.

Lucas’s brow furrowed. “This is between you and Drew. Leave me out of whatever this is. I made him an offer, and he accepted it. I thought you’d be happy.”

“I’m sorry, Lucas. This isn’t your fault. You’ll be a great business partner for me like you are with Finn.”

“Business partner for *you*?”

“Yeah, partner. I’m staying. You’re only buying his half of the resort.”

Lucas coughed. “I’m not buying any part of the resort.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I offered him a job. One he accepted last night.”

“A job? With you? Here?”

“Yeah, well, remote. He wants to work from Anna Island most of the time.”

“But ... how can he do that with his job in California?” I must be really drunk because I wasn’t following.

“He can’t.” Lucas lowered his eyes to me and spoke slowly. “That’s why he quit that job today.”

“He quit?”

“He didn’t tell you? Hell. Maybe it was a surprise. Act surprised.”

I was stunned. The blood rushed in my ears, and my heart hammered. I looked at Jo and Emily, but they weren’t any help.

“That look right there. Hold it for about—” Lucas glanced at his watch “—another five minutes. He should be here by then.”

“He’s here?”

“Flight landed in Bellingham an hour ago. He called from his car. We’re meeting to celebrate and hammer out the rest of the details.”

The door opened, and he was there, looking like everything I ever wanted.

In a second, I was across the bar, leaning into him on my tiptoes, my arms around his neck and my face buried against his shoulder. He smelled wonderful.

“Tess?” he said and held me to him, right where I needed to be.

“You’re not leaving me? Not moving back to California?” My heart was beating in my throat, and the words rushed out as I gasped.

Drew startled. “No.” His hands, chilly from the air outside, cupped my cheeks and lifted my face to his. “Why would you think that?”

“The night before you left, I found the request for the resort’s value at sale and a reminder for a meeting with Lucas about an *opportunity*. I thought you were trying to sell to Lucas so you could go back to your life.” More rushing words.

He glanced toward Lucas at the bar. “Tess, my life’s here. With you.” He placed his forehead on mine like he did the day he left. “That was why you were upset that day.”

“All the improvements you did because you felt bad about that summer, I thought the bunkhouse was the same, and you were doing it because you were going to hurt me again.”

“Tess, I didn’t do those annual improvements out of guilt. I did them because it was the only way I could be in your life. And now, I’m investing in the resort because it’s our future.” It was good that he was holding me; otherwise, my knees would have given out. Drew’s gaze held mine. “You and me. It’s where I want to be, and I’m staying here as long as it takes to prove I’m the man for you. I love you, and you love me too.”

My heart swelled, and I struggled to catch my breath. “I do. I love you, Drew. Forever.” I hugged him tighter, clinging to and feeling him through his wet raincoat.

“Did you plan to sell? I mean, with the valuation thing. You never said anything, so I assumed you didn’t want me to know.”

He slumped back. “I’m sorry, Tess.” I held my breath as he pulled me to the corner by the front window, where there weren’t any chairs or tables. It was more private. He stopped and caressed my jaw before pulling me in for a surprising crush of a kiss.

“Sorry. I had to do that.”

My cheeks held tears, but that made me smile.

“I’m sorry I didn’t trust you,” he said. “I’m not used to being honest about my money, especially with the women in my life. But you’re different, and I should have trusted you.” He paused and cleared his throat. “My birthday is in two weeks. I’ll be twenty-five. My parents set aside money for me and invested it when I was young. I received part of it when I turned eighteen, more at twenty-one, and the rest of the money, the biggest piece, I take control of on this birthday. It’s a lot of money, Tess.”

He took a breath. I was sobering fast but still having trouble taking it all in. He loved me.

“I need to insure it, to protect it, like if I do something stupid and someone sues me. The insurance company writing the policy needed the value of all my assets. That’s what the valuation was for. I’m not selling. I never wanted to sell. Tess, you’re it for me. You always have been. I thought you couldn’t spend your life with a face like mine, but I promise I’ll make you happy if you do. I’ll love you more than you ever imagined.”

“I thought you wanted Silicon Valley? The important job, the excitement. Here, there’s just me.”

“That’s not true. Even though you are more than enough. I’m excited to work with Lucas. We’re interested in similar sustainability projects. I want to see what we can do together on a smaller scale. Tess, I’m proud of the work I’ve done. It will impact hundreds of thousands of people, and that’s meaningful. But I’m one person on an enormous team. At the resort, connecting with the guests who stay year after year making their lives a little happier. That’s meaningful too. And I get to do that with you. That’s everything.”

“I don’t want to do this without you.”

“You don’t have to. You’re not alone anymore.”

I attacked him. Smashing my lips to his. “You’re staying, you’re really staying,” I mumbled against his lips.

“Yes.” He chuckled as I bounced in his embrace, vibrating with joy.

“Hang on,” I said and pulled him near the bar. I grabbed an empty chair and used it to climb onto the copper top.

“Can I have your attention, please?” I shouted over the music and conversation.

“Get down, Tess!” Rhys barked.

“One second.”

“Take it off, baby!” someone yelled from the other wall, followed by whistles.

“No. No. I’m not doing that. It has come to my attention that several folks have been running interference for me in here.” I looked around the room, making eye contact with a few suspects and their guilty expressions. “I want to say I appreciate you, but your services are no longer needed. I’m out of the game.”

“Tess! People eat where you’re standing!” Rhys shouted again.

I turned to him. “I’ll clean it, Rhys. Chill.”

I pointed at Drew. “That man. That incredible, sexy man. I choose him forever. If I’m a prize, I’m his, and he’s mine. That’s it.”

Drew stepped closer. His smile was wide and his eyes bright as he slow-blinked and oozed calm. He lifted his hand to help me off the bar and wrapped me in his arms.

“That ... was awesome,” he said, kissing me for real this time. Deep and wet, passion and heat, our tongues tangling as the claps and cheers of the world slipped away.

DREW

FOREVER. ONE WORD. THE BEST WORD WHEN IT REFERRED TO how long Tess and I would be together.

I love you. Those were good words, too. And I wanted them from her every day.

She was at the bar. It wasn't her usual hangout, and I'd been surprised to see her there. Then she was in my arms, and that surprised me, too. I expected to convince her there wasn't anyone better for her than me. I had a whole speech prepared. But she already knew.

Lucas asked me to take his drunk sister home before she climbed on the bar again. He said we'd talk about work later. His eyes held something like trust and happiness for us.

"You had a few tonight, huh?" I teased and merged into the non-existent late-night traffic on Commerce Street. The empty, wet pavement reflected the colors of the blinking stoplights.

"It wasn't premeditated. I was nursing a broken heart."

"No more broken hearts for either of us." I grabbed her hand and kissed her knuckles.

"When did you decide to quit your job and stay?" she asked.

"I decided to stay the first time you let me hold you again. I decided to quit my job and convince you to let me stay forever, yesterday."

"Convince me?"

“I spent many years listening to my brother teasing me about my scarred face, my skinny body, or whatever he felt like that day. He’d say, *good thing you’re rich with that face*. It stuck. I wasn’t sure you could live with a face like mine,” I said.

“I love your face. Keep the beard. Shave. I don’t care.” She paused. “You think you can live with my face?”

“Tess ... yes.” I gave her the side eye.

“People look at me, Drew. Men say things. I know I belong next to you. But you have to believe it too.”

“I do.” I darted a glance at her, squeezed her hand, and threaded our fingers together. “I was talking to a friend—”

“Bethany?” Tess grinned. “It’s okay. I was jealous, but all she did was love you, and I can’t fault her for that.”

“You knew?”

“You didn’t? Drew, it was obvious.”

“Well, anyway, she reminded me that what we have is about more than either of our faces.”

She leaned across the center console and nuzzled against my beard. It was something she often did, and I loved it. She nipped my ear lobe on her way to that spot behind my ear, kissing and tasting me there. And like always with her and that spot, I got hard.

“I have to drive, Angel.”

She whimpered against my neck. “I missed you. You won’t have to drive on the ferry.” She sat back in her seat. “That’s ten minutes that we can make out.”

“I hope the car next to us doesn’t mind,” I chuckled.

“Oh, a challenge. We have to keep our shoulders and above completely PG-rated. All bets are off for everywhere else.” Her eyes glittered. She was still a bit drunk.

We rolled onto the small ferry along with other cars. It wasn’t full, but we weren’t alone. I cut the engine, and Tess lolled her head on the headrest, then smiled at me as her hand

drifted up my thigh. I spread my legs and shifted in the seat to give her better access. I wanted her hands on me right fucking now. It was dark. Only a few deck lights. No one would see.

I stared into those shimmering blue pools. I cradled her neck and smoothed my thumb across her cheek. “I love you, Tess.”

“I love you, Drew.” That smile would get me every time.

Her fingers brushed over my dick, still hard and pushing against the zipper of my jeans.

“I missed you,” she said, her expression serious, but her hand continued to stroke and tease.

“I missed you too. In fact, I don’t think I can’t keep this PG much longer.”

Her hand stilled. “No ... I mean, I missed you for six years.”

I pulled her to me and leaned in. “I missed you too ... for six years.” The movement brought our bodies closer, and that hand torturing me in the best possible way began again, this time stroking harder and longer. I kissed her.

We kept it to our lips and her hand. She was running the show. As we disembarked, she kept her hands to herself, sadly, and waved to Jerry, one of the attendants on duty tonight.

Ten minutes later, I parked in the driveway of *our* cottage. Tess jumped out and rounded the front of the car with a gleam in her eyes as she pulled me toward the narrow path leading to the road and down to the water.

“Tess?”

“Come with me. I want it to be you.”

Those words from our first night that summer before she led me across the grassy lawn to her cabin. She’d had a similar spark in her eyes, but now it held more depth. Assurance. Knowing. It wasn’t our first time, but it still felt new.

She opened the cabin door. It was the one she’d prepped for the photo shoot just ten days ago. It was the same cabin she

stayed in during our two days alone. I hadn't noticed before. It was different with her updates, but a few things, including the fireplace and wood stove, were the same. We took off our shoes by the door.

“Can you build a fire?” she asked, looking back with a breathtaking tease in her eyes.

I nodded, and she stepped back to the bedroom. My hands shook again. This was Tess, and she loved me. I was going to marry her and love her and watch the summer sky turn pink, holding her to my side.

The flame caught, and a warm glow filled the room. I switched off the light, and she walked toward me with a pile of bedding. Together we spread out the thick comforter, the sheets, the blankets, and the pillows.

We stood in our socks on the little bed we'd made, and I kissed her to calm my nerves.

“Water. I need water,” she said and jogged the few steps to the kitchen for a glass. Sex after drinking always called for water. Noted.

I laughed, which helped, but as she stood before me and lifted off her half-zip fleece, revealing creamy skin and a plain white bra, all those nerves returned.

Shit. “Tess, I don't have a condom. Stay here, and I'll be right back.”

“Wait,” she said and gripped my hand.

“I'm on the pill. I haven't been with anyone without a condom, ever.”

My heartbeat skipped. “Me either. Never ... are you sure?”

She nodded. “It's my first time with someone who loves me,” she said. “Will you touch me nicely? Will you kiss me nicely?”

I shook my head and smoothed the pad of my thumb across her sweet lips. “It isn't the first time with someone who loves you. I've always loved you, Tess. I did our first time here in this cabin and every time since.”

Through unhurried kisses, we helped each other remove the clothes that blocked the feel of bare skin connecting. I followed her down between the sheets and brushed her hair away from her perfect face.

She held mine above her for a moment. “I love your face, Drew. Everything in your heart shows there when you’re looking at me, and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

I rested my hand on her chest, between her gorgeous breasts, my fingers grazing the edges of that hollow silver heart I gave her. “I love your heart, Tess. You put it into everything you do, and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

TESS

“I LIKE THIS DRESS.” DREW LEANED IN TO KISS THE hummingbird tattoo on my shoulder near my neck. The navy-blue cocktail dress had a deep V that rose to cap sleeves, exposing my neck and shoulders.

Drew’s parents wanted to throw a little cocktail party for family and friends to celebrate his birthday, and at his suggestion, they rented the private room at The Patio again. We’d secretly shared a smile about this being where Drew first saw me. Mr. McAlister had quietly joked that Drew should pay the bill since he recently came into money.

“I’ve got other plans for that money, Dad.” If his recent expenses were any indication, it seemed like he planned to spend at least a chunk of it on the resort. Construction of the new game room building and sport court near the food truck shelter would start next month. Solar panels were being installed on all the lower cabins the month after that, and Drew and I had several conversations about a complete gut and remodel of our cottage. That remodel work wouldn’t start until next winter when the resort was less crowded, and we could stay in a cabin out of the way. One with a hot tub.

The birthday party was the perfect opportunity for our parents to meet, and I gave Mr. McAlister a hug for what he did to keep those pictures off the internet. I tried to explain, not wanting him to think I was running around nude everywhere, but he stopped me mid-sentence.

“You thought you were in a private place, which was violated. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Thank you for not blaming me,” I said and hugged him again.

“I’m sorry you have to worry about blame, but maybe the world will get better.” His eyes held kindness and sincerity, like he saw more than my face, too.

Drew is the one who really saved me. Not just the pictures but from feeling alone against the world. He was in my corner, and I was in his. We shared plans and dreams and the responsibilities of it all.

“Everything equal.” He said it with a glint in his eye, reminding me of the night I told him to *show me his* since he’d seen mine in the hot tub. He tried to convince me we should also share more of the cooking, but I thought he should start smaller. There was only so much stir-fry a person could eat. Jo offered to teach him, but Lucas shut it down.

“Jo’s too sexy when she cooks,” he said.

Jo said she was a chef, and chefs cooked and taught. Lucas hugged her and mouthed *no way* at Drew, but I caught Jo pinching his side. She was on to him. She let Luc think he was in charge, but everyone in the family knew the truth.

“I guess I’ll have to teach you,” I said and shrugged as Jo and Luc walked to the bar.

“That sounds good,” Drew whispered, “but you are also too sexy when you cook. Not sure I’ll be able to focus.” He stepped to the side, turned his back to the guests, blocking their view, and then kissed me like he did that night at The Boathouse. When he pulled away, he grinned at the pink beard burn on my chin. We were so busted. And I needed another drink to cool off.

At the bar, Drew’s brother, Patrick, approached with caution, and I smiled. He apologized for the painful assumptions he made that long-ago summer and asked for my forgiveness.

“I don’t have a good excuse, except that I was a stupid kid,” he said.

“It wasn’t your fault I shut Drew out.” I looked at my man, and he pulled me close to his side. “I’ll never do that again.” He pressed his lips to my forehead.

The biggest surprise of the night was Mr. Rose. We’d sent the invitation without expecting him to show up. He wore his dark suit with a light blue shirt that brought out the sparkle in his eyes as he laughed with Drew’s father. They’d known each other years ago, and I remembered that was how Drew had gotten the job that year.

“You made it.” I hugged the man who, as it turned out, had a significant impact on my life. “You set us up, you and Mrs. Curtis.”

He looked at his shoes to hide his smile. I’d never seen him do that before.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” he said.

“I’m talking about those two days at the resort that summer. She left me her journals ... I read them.”

“Ahhh, well, I was in love, and she believed the two of you were as well. I’d give her anything she asked. So, I took her away for a few days. What you two did with the time, that’s on you.”

I hesitated than asked, “The stuff about her husband ...”

Mr. Rose shrugged. “They married young. Her mother’s idea since he was from a prominent family, but they didn’t love each other. He worked at the bank here in town. Went into debt trying to buy happiness, and when he died in a car accident, Mary was left to deal with it.”

“He cheated on her,” I said, and Mr. Rose nodded.

“She wanted to leave him. But he accused her of trying to humiliate him and threatened to sell the resort to pay his debts if she tried to divorce him. Mary would have sold her soul to keep the resort.”

“Mr. Rose.” I bit my lip and moved closer. “Why didn’t you ever get married?”

“Honestly, I think she didn’t want to risk anyone threatening her resort, but she told me marriage hadn’t agreed with her. She said I could stay, and she’d love me as long as I wanted. I’d have taken any deal that let me spend my life with her.”

Drew squeezed my hand and gave me a knowing grin.

“One day, I asked her to marry me for the day, one day at a time. She said yes, and I asked the next day, and she said yes. I asked her every morning, and she said yes, every morning. It became our greeting.”

“That’s what that was?” Drew said. “I thought I was going deaf those first couple of days. She’d say *yes* to you, and I hadn’t heard a question.”

Mr. Rose smiled and put his hands in his pockets. “She married me every day. That’s all forever is. Saying yes, one day at a time. Her last word to me was yes.”

Tears collected in the corners of my eyes and threatened to fall.

“No tears, Tess. Not today,” Mr. Rose said. “She’s smiling right now. Happy that she was right about you two then and now.”

“That’s right. This *one year at the resort* thing was a total setup, too,” I said.

Mr. Rose ran his hand through his thinning, silver hair and whistled. “I was worried about that one, but Mary said she knew what she was doing. I’d forgotten about the developer deal and wasn’t sure how that would play out. From the looks of things, she was right to be confident.”

We talked about his life in Walla Walla, playing with his young grandchildren, and helping part-time at the vineyard near his house. He’d become his family’s go-to wine guy at seventy-two, reinventing himself. We shared stories about Mrs. Curtis. He teased my brothers about being old men now and wondering how they had such lovely fiancées. He was

charming instead of the gruff man others said he was. I never saw it, but I usually saw him when he looked at Mrs. Curtis with nothing but love. Nothing, but *yes*.

The party was light, and spirits were high, singing happy birthday and eating yummy Lemon Cake Doberge, but I was ready to be alone with Drew. That kiss earlier, his hand on my low back, his winks and attention all night had my body vibrating with thoughts of him.

I leaned in, whispering against *my* spot behind his ear. I loved that spot. “I’m so wet right now. Is there a way you can help me with that? Maybe with your tongue?”

“Fuuuck, Tess,” he whispered as he turned his head to take my lips in a not-so-PG kiss. It only made my current situation worse. Apparently, I was into the occasional public display of affection too. Maybe it was genetic.

I heard a throat clear. If that was one of my nosy brothers, I was going to punch them. They kissed their fiancées in public all the effing time.

“It’s been a nice party,” Patrick said from beside us. I ended the kiss and felt the blush rising, but Drew didn’t move. His eyes held mine, and a little half-smile curved his lips.

“You two seem tired,” Patrick said. “Why don’t you head out. The party’s wrapping up, and I can stay to help Mom and Dad.”

Drew turned and grinned at his brother. “Thanks, man. Finally, you’re being helpful.”

“I’ll let you have that one since it’s your birthday, and my awesome girlfriend is watching, but tomorrow, you better be careful.” Drew laughed, and they did the bro-hug-slap thing.

“YOU’RE SMILING BIG, DREW MCALISTER,” I said as we walked the hall to our suite at The Elliot Inn overlooking the harbor. This birthday was a special occasion.

“I’m excited about my birthday present,” Drew said.

“How do you know what I got you?”

“I mean the birthday present I have for you.”

“You got me a present on your birthday?”

“Sort of. It’s mine, but it’s for you too.”

I leaned close. “If you’re talking about your dick, I’m excited too.”

Drew laughed. “Make that two presents I have for you, Angel.” He shoved the keycard in the slot, and we stepped inside the spa-like room. Our bags were brought up earlier while we walked a couple blocks away to the party. This was my first time taking in the luxurious space. Luxury like this was new for me.

Drew shuffled our bags as I took in the dark woods and creamy neutral tones. There was a king-sized bed covered in what looked like clouds, a huge bathroom with a soaker tub and giant shower, a small wet-bar area, and two overstuffed chairs in a pale blue near the tall windows with plantation shutters.

Drew stepped beside me. “Get used to it, Angel.”

“I’m not sure I’ll get used to it, but I’ll try.” I gave him a playful smile.

He pulled me into his arms. “Are you hungry? Room service?”

“Later.” I slipped my hands under the lapels of his sport coat and pushed it off his shoulders. He let it slide down his arms, then caught it behind his back as he leaned in to kiss me. He tossed it on the chair and started on the buttons of his shirt.

“I can help.” I stepped closer and opened the next button, feeling the bulk of cotton under it. Another button revealed a bandage.

“What ...” I recognized this.

“Can you help me take it off?” Drew asked. “The guy said cold water should loosen the adhesive.”

“Drew. Is this where you were this morning?” He nodded.

“Okay, I’m afraid this ruins my plans for birthday bathtub sex tonight.”

Drew groaned.

“Another time. I promise.” Every time with Drew was special. There were many things I could do to show him how much I loved him that didn’t involve a tub. “I can think of something else for tonight. Let’s get you undressed and on the bed.”

“Okay, I like how this is starting,” Drew’s mood rebounded quickly as he unbuckled his belt.

In the bathroom, I removed my dress, revealing a new lingerie set. This one was white and sheer. I was going for innocent and tempting, but maybe it worked for naughty nurse. I soaked one of the soft washcloths with cool water and wrung it out.

Drew had pulled down the cloud covering on the bed and stretched out on the sheets wearing only his boxers.

“Wow, Tess. I like it.” His eyes roamed my body.

“Thank you, now be a good patient, so I can get this bandage off.” I winked and shifted to straddle him. He raised an eyebrow in question. “Studies show this is a better angle for me to reach the area. Now, lie back.” I tried to keep my expression serious and my voice less like a porn star, but I was failing.

“Whatever you say.” He put his hands behind his head. “I’m in your care, sexy nurse.”

I laughed. “Okay, ready? This will be a little cold.”

He nodded, and I began to dampen the bandage at the edges. As it loosened, I revealed more of the fresh ink on his shaved chest. It was a heart with two hummingbirds over it. I stared at the colors, one male and one female.

“It’s you,” he said. “You and me. Did you know hummingbirds are the only birds that can fly backward? They do it to move from one beautiful flower to the next.”

My hands were still resting on his chest, and he covered them with his own. “I’m glad we went back to the resort, the place where beauty first entered my life. The place where it continues to fill my life.”

Drew’s hands stroked my sides and over my hips and ass to the backs of my thighs, bracketing his hips. His touch was gentle and warm, his expression sultry. The sizzle in my core began to pulse, and I needed Drew inside me.

Keeping eye contact, I shifted back to pull his boxers off. I stood by the bed and shimmied out of my soaked undies, keeping the bra on, a nod to my *naughty nurse* game.

“I believe you said you needed my tongue.” Drew reached for me.

I shook my head. “Next time. I don’t want to risk rubbing your tattoo. We must be careful with injuries like yours.”

His eyes blazed. “You are a very naughty nurse.”

I giggled. “I am.”

Drew sat and reached out again, his smile beaming. “Come here, Tess. If I can’t taste you, then let me see you.”

He pulled me over him, straddling his hips again. With one hand, he gripped his cock at the base, and with the other, he guided my hips as I lowered onto him. Nothing between us.

“You feel incredible, Tess. Only you. I love you.”

My heart was full. “I love you, too.”

EPILOGUE

April

Tess

“It’s perfect,” Emily said on an exhale and kissed my brother for the camera.

It was. The sky above the fully bloomed tulip fields was a deep cerulean blue after yesterday’s spring rain, and the late afternoon sun shone brightly above. The color and light were breathtaking. Finn certainly appeared breathless as he posed for pictures with his new wife. He was as bad as Lucas with the PDA, constantly touching Emily in her white gown with intricate floral lace appliqués on the bodice and layers of soft chiffon that floated to the ground.

They held the simple afternoon ceremony at the edge of the closest field. The pastor from Emily’s childhood church in Seattle came to do the honors, and eyes had grown watery at the mention of Emily’s mom, who’d passed away years before.

Her father had beamed with pride as he walked her down the grassy aisle with her bouquet of colorful tulips handpicked this morning by Finn. Nothing but perfect blooms from the show garden for Emily.

“No tulips at our wedding,” Drew whispered and handed me another glass of champagne. His dark gray suit fit him like a glove, and his tie complemented the blue of my dress. Standing off to the side with the rest of the wedding party, we looked great together. Emily had asked me to be her maid of honor, and Lucas was the best man, of course. It was a title he took as a reference to his character, and Jo didn’t argue. Which made it worse.

“Is that a proposal?” I teased and absently floated my hand over Drew’s silver heart at my throat. I never took it off.

“Not yet. When I propose, you’ll know.” He winked.

Life was a bit full right now. This wedding. The Annual Tulip Festival starting tomorrow. Our first summer season at the resort in a couple of months. And Drew was getting his feet under him at his new job. Which he loved. We both loved it because he worked from the island most days and had regular hours, leaving time in his day for something besides work. Like me.

“You don’t like tulips?” I teased.

“No, you don’t like them,” he said.

I glanced around to see if anyone was paying attention to us. “Keep your voice down, or they may banish me. Plus, tulips aren’t so awful. The fields are beautiful today.”

“You’re beautiful today. You’re beautiful every day.” He placed his hand over the center of my chest in a quick gesture to let me know he meant me and my heart, not my face. And I smoothed my hand down his cheek and neatly trimmed, soft beard.

Emily and Finn strolled over, and she shivered. I held up the white faux fur wrap she bought the day after they decided April was the wedding day instead of May. She turned to slide her arms inside.

“Thank you,” she said, leaning close. “The tulips are perfect, but April is chilly without sleeves. Finn’s one request for my dress was nothing I had to wear a bra with. My bare tits are half frozen in this silk and chiffon,” she whispered in my ear and chuckled.

“I shudder to say it, but I’m sure he’ll find a way to warm them up.”

“He always does.” She blushed. It wasn’t her style to be forthcoming with intimate details, and it made me smile when she tried.

“Okay, let’s move this inside.” That was the wedding coordinator. Emily’s dad spared no expense on this event. He hired out the entire thing. The coordinator, the catering, the setup, and the decor. All of it. None of us had lifted a finger. Not even my mom, which required monumental prevention

efforts. Emily and Finn said they wanted it, and poof, it appeared.

The event company erected a massive tent on the lawn between the farmhouse and the bungalow where Finn and Emily lived. They installed about a thousand slabs of portable hardwood floor over the grass and set up large round tables and chairs draped in white. Greenery and tulips decorated all the spaces between the gleaming china and crystal. Glittering chandeliers hung from tent poles, and lighted trees winked from the periphery. Space heaters also hung discreetly at the edges, making it warm and magical inside.

Everyone was chatting and enjoying a cocktail. Emily's dad and his girlfriend, Elena. Emily's brother Gray, his wife Abby, and their young son. All the farm crews were here with their families and Finn and Emily's bike buddies. Even Miss Nell and Miss Nat, along with Mr. Landers, were sipping champagne and laughing with friends.

Drew

“How about a cocktail, Angel?” She nodded and squeezed my hand as I led us around groups of guests toward the bar. I didn’t want to tell Emily, but Tess was the most beautiful woman here. The vibrant blue maid-of-honor dress highlighted her eyes, and her chestnut hair was up in a sort of twisty thing, revealing her hummingbird. I’d gotten into the habit of kissing her there. Today was no exception.

“Rhys, you work behind a bar. Now you’re spending your free time on this side of one?” Tess asked and stepped next to him. He held a rocks glass of whiskey in his hand.

“It’s my comfort place, I guess.”

“Where’s your date?” Tess asked.

“No date.” Rhys was, at times, a man of few words.

“Oh, Drew, I see Emily juggling her bouquet and hugging people. Let me grab it and take it to the head table for her. Be right back.”

“Drink?” I asked.

“You choose,” she said as she walked away.

Rhys looked at me. “Want a suggestion? You know, from her regular bartender.” He held up his hand as if I would think he was overstepping. Rhys was like her brother, and I knew she was coming home to me. No threat of overstepping.

“Sure. I was thinking of a cosmo, or lemon drop instead of her usual beer. I’ve seen women drink those. Or something with white whiskey.” I smirked.

Rhys smiled. “Sounds made up. I know. It’s just unaged whiskey.”

“Isn’t that moonshine?”

“Moonshine is made from just corn. White whiskey, like any whiskey, is made from grain mash that could be various

amounts of corn, wheat, rye, or barley.” Rhys tipped his rocks glass at me and took a sip.

Huh. I didn’t know that. “So, what do you think for Tess?”

Rhys stretched to see the mixers the caterer had supplied. “Get her a Bow Hill Mule. It’s made with blueberry juice from Bow Hill farm, not far from here. Best blueberries you’ll find.”

“Right.” Tess always brought them back to the resort on Saturdays when she helped her mom at the Farmers’ Market.

I also ordered one for myself and leaned against the bar with Rhys.

“So, Lucas said you used to work at Maxx.” It was the first time I’d seen him in anything other than jeans and a T-shirt. His suit looked custom-made, but he’d paired it with well-worn boots and had already ditched the tie.

Rhys nodded. “Yep.”

“That’s awesome. I’d love to hear about it sometime, what it was like. Ups and downs. Start-ups aren’t for me, but I’m curious about your view.”

Rhys took another sip from his rocks glass. He didn’t punch me, but his expression said it was an option he was considering. “I believe Shawn does speaking tours if you’re interested. I couldn’t get you tickets, but he’s the best one to answer your questions.”

“No thanks,” I smirked. “I saw him and his wife at a convention once. I wasn’t impressed.”

Rhys straightened and angled toward me. “Is that right?”

“Bit of a tool. Sorry if you’re friends. It’s my opinion. Plenty of others were going fangirl.”

He eyed me. “You took that job with Lucas?”

“Yep,” I said and smiled.

“Do you have a side gig with Wired Magazine or CNET or something?”

“Um, no. Should I?”

“I don’t do interviews. Here’s the deal. Shawn’s a *major* tool. His wife? She used to be my wife. Until he got her pregnant.”

“Oh, shit.”

Rhys chuckled. “Yeah, you can say that again.”

“Hey, sorry, man. I didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

“Don’t worry about it. Shit’s putting it mildly. Start-ups, as a rule, fail. Booksellers want to tell you there are five steps or ten or some crap. The truth? There are no steps. There’s luck. You gotta have a great fucking idea and the ability to sell ketchup popsicles to people in white gloves. You have to believe in your soul the lies you’re selling, and the people you are working with better be saints, including you. The temptations provided by the people who would love to make money off of you can be hard to resist.”

He sipped his drink. “And that’s it,” he said. “Everything else, the smart coders, the business mentor, the money man, we’re on every corner. Nothing special.”

All I could do was blink. I couldn’t even think of a question. I was standing here with an original member of the C-suite at Maxx, the CFO, and I choked. But damn. That was not the story Shawn was selling. I guess he believed the lies in his soul.

“The thing with Amanda, my ex, was a function of us being too young and too naive. Too easily swept up in one thing or another, including marriage. The story was we were over long before the affair.” He shrugged a shoulder like maybe that was true and maybe it wasn’t.

“The end was quick. A few months. Uncontested and no assets other than our interests in Maxx. The divorce was final on Thursday. The IPO was the following Tuesday, and she delivered a healthy baby girl on Friday. A busy couple of weeks.”

“Damn, man.”

“Are you sorry you asked?”

“Nah. I’m sorry that happened. Did you at least deck that dickhead?”

Rhys laughed. “Close enough. I sold my stock as soon as possible and left him to explain my reasoning to the shareholders.” He paused. “The thing with Shawn and Mandy, the details aren’t public.”

I nodded. Knowing tech, they made him sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement.

He took another sip from the rocks glass. “Things worked out the way they should. Mandy wanted a higher star to hang on to, and I was never about that tech life.”

I smiled. “I think I know what you mean.”

“You’ll do well with Lucas,” he said with a knowing smile. “You both have stars in your eyes put there by pretty women.”

“No stars in your eyes? The love of your life still out there?”

“Ah, Drew—” he slapped me on my shoulder “—you’re a lucky man. Not all of us get a love of our life. But speaking of.” He nodded behind me.

I turned, and mine walked toward me with a smile.

Dinner was followed by speeches and cake. I lost track of Rhys when the dancing started. Tess greeted, hugged, and introduced me to relatives and family friends as her boyfriend. A few eyebrows rose, but it wasn’t about how we didn’t match. It was because I was loved by her. I was a lucky man. The luckiest.

Finn and Emily left to applause and waves. They were spending the night in a yurt that was part of their mountain biking resort on the far edge of the farm property. Apparently, that’s where he proposed, and this way, they’d be here tomorrow for the Annual Tulip Festival opening day.

I’d never been to the festival, though I’d heard about it for years. I’m not sure I’d postpone my honeymoon in Fiji for it, but maybe I needed to see it to understand.

Finally, Tess was in my arms, and we swayed to a slow song. “Have I said you look beautiful?”

“Yes,” she said, her eyes dropping to my lips, making them itch to kiss her.

“Have I told you I’m glad I get to be the one who holds your hand, fetches your drinks, and avoids your toes on this dance floor?”

She paused and bit into her full bottom lip. “Yes, to that too.”

“I’m ready to have you to myself. On the island, it’s you and me most of the time. I’m not used to sharing you.”

She chuckled, then leaned in to nuzzle against my neck. “We’ll go soon. A couple more songs, and I think this party will wrap up.” We were staying at Finn and Emily’s house across the lawn since they wouldn’t be there; this way, we didn’t have to worry about the ferry schedule.

I pulled Tess tight to me. “That dress, that day in the bunkhouse. The one with the beads.”

She nodded.

“It’s a nice dress.”

“It is,” she said, swaying to the beat, her arm around my neck and her other hand nestled tightly against my chest, over my tattoo.

“That day, I pictured you in it, holding a bouquet. Your hair blowing in the breeze, and the sunlight bouncing off the water behind you. I’d like to see that for real one day.”

“You want that?” she teased.

“I do.”

Her smile was soft, and her eyes clear. “Me too.”

The Bakker siblings' stories are complete, mostly. Do you want more Perry Harbor? Get ready for their friends' stories next.

Your Turn (Perry Harbor Book 4) - coming Summer 2023

Sex is a gift. A beautiful, wonderful, complicated, desperate gift.

Rhys Gunnerson was fine, despite all the effing weddings on his calendar. His bar was in the black, the crowd responded well when he played his guitar, and he had sex when he wanted it. Easy. His ex-wife was happy, and he will be too, once he recaptured the part of him she destroyed in the divorce.

Nicole Freeman was fine, or at least she will be once she buys a house. She had friends, a good job, a mean roundhouse kick, and almost enough money to buy a home where no one could ask her to leave.

The hot guy at the kickboxing gym is a distraction, a fantasy. But when Nicole moves above his bar, the fantasy starts to become reality. She's ready. She can do this.

He doesn't want a relationship with the beautiful woman at the gym and her ball-crunching kicks, but her incredible singing voice along with her courage and softness is more than Rhys can resist.

Attraction and slow burn, burst into flames, but something is wrong. As she reveals she grew up learning sex and women's bodies were bad, Rhys, with his bone-deep protective instincts, wants to show her she's not bad and neither is sex. But sex is complicated for them both.

Together, the two embark on a journey to forgive the past and create a better future, one neither of them dared to hope for. But the scars of the past run deep. Will they let the doubts and fears hold them back, or will they each finally get to have their turn at the happiness everyone deserves?

Trigger Warning: Nicole was raised in a culture of sexual shame. Though there are no flashbacks, her memories and her

struggle to overcome the trauma she experienced in that environment are included on the page.

Thank you for reading *Your Heart*. I hope you loved Drew and Tess, and the resort. It's based on a real place I love.

<https://www.guemesislandresort.com/>

For a peak inside their sexy first day of the summer season - a quickie before the afternoon ferry starts running - click here for a special Bonus Epilogue.

<https://BookHip.com/CBKWDBL>

Want the inside scoop on all things Perry Harbor and my misadventures in writing? Sign-up for my newsletter via my website:

www.christinabraver.com. Unsubscribe at anytime.

As much as I try, I'm not perfect. If you find an error, please email me at:

author@christinabraver.com.

ALSO BY CHRISTINA BRAVER

Perry Harbor - The Bakkers

Your Two Lips (Book 1)

Finn & Emily - <https://amzn.to/3OvGgRU>

Your Sweetness (Book 2)

Lucas & Jo - <https://amzn.to/3S5Qevq>

Your Heart (Book 3)

Tess & Drew – <https://amzn.to/3SF4X1m>

Perry Harbor - The Boathouse

Your Turn (Book 4)

Rhys & Nicole - coming Summer 2023

Perry Harbor Related Standalone

Formula One Noel (Book 2.5)

A Steamy Holiday Romance

Walker & Nora - <https://amzn.to/3Sh56qf>

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To my husband and very own beta hero who first said the words “You should write a book.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina Braver writes steamy, small-town, contemporary romance set in the Pacific Northwest. Her stories are about real people and real love with the guaranteed HEA we all need.

She's been reading romance for decades and loves to escape into stories about strong heroes with softer sides and independent heroines with a bit of sass.

She strives to support allyship in her writing and portray diversity in everyday life. She believes together, we will save the world.

When she isn't writing, Christina can be found reading in her favorite corner chair, sipping wine and laughing too loudly with friends, or cooking dinners that always take twice as long as the recipe suggests. She lives in Seattle with her husband who shares his bourbon, and two teenagers that keep them both on their toes.

And just like her favorite latte, her books have some steam. If that's not your regular brew, you may want to change your order. Enjoy!

