

Brenda Rothert

I'M SNOW INTO YOU



*A Sven's
Beard Novel*

I'M SNOW INTO YOU

SVEN'S BEARD

BOOK ONE

BRENDA ROTHERT

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Cover design by Kari March

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CHAPTER ONE

Avon

“WELL, CRAP.”

I was *not* at my destination, though the Maps app on my phone said otherwise. While I was supposedly at an attorney’s office, the giant Viking I stood in front of couldn’t give me legal advice, what with him being a bronze statue and all.

Sven’s Beard, Minnesota: population 3,621. Temperature: frozen tundra. GPS accuracy: nonexistent.

The statue in front of City Hall had to be at least eight feet tall, wearing chain mail and a decorative breastplate on its torso. Beneath was a barely there loincloth, legs rippling with muscle and thick calves encased in tall boots. His helmet had horns and his beard flowed long and thick, reaching his waist. The midsection of the beard had been rubbed by so many hands it now shone a warm shade of gold, but the rest of the statue was still dark bronze.

“Need directions?”

The deep voice broke my trance and I jumped, turning toward the speaker. I craned my neck to see his face because while he wasn’t as tall as the statue, he stood well over six feet. He also had a beard, but his was dark, short, and neatly trimmed. His hair was also cropped short, and his eyes were a vibrant, mossy green. He was broad-chested—an absolute lumberjack of a man and he wore a police uniform.

Stunned silent, I openly stared at him. Surely there was a pile of wood

somewhere in need of this man's chopping skills.

"Ma'am?" he prodded.

I cleared my throat and smiled at him. "Hi, I'm looking for Max Morrison's office."

He glared for a split second and then pointed across the street. "Right over there. It's the one with the arched windows."

I immediately forgave my Maps app because maybe this run-in was fortuitous. Afterward, my agenda was wide open, and my flight home wasn't until Monday. I wanted to keep the conversation going. Maybe the lumberjack could keep me warm tonight. Smart? No. But tempting, yes.

"Thanks. How did you know I'm not from around here?"

He shrugged. "Only out-of-towners stare at Sven, and you're dressed like a tourist."

His derisive tone made me glance down at my heels and wide-leg linen pants. My feet were absolutely freezing, and my lightweight trench coat wasn't even close to keeping away the icy chill of the wind.

It was November in northern Minnesota. I'd known it would be colder than my home in San Diego, but admittedly, I hadn't expected drifting snow and bitterly cold winds. I wasn't giving this guy the satisfaction of admitting that, though.

"I'm only in town for a few days," I said, trying to force my teeth to stop chattering. "For a business meeting. So I'm wearing business attire."

He scoffed. "Yeah, I can see that. Get some boots, or you'll end up with frostbite."

"Wow, that's so thoughtful of you," I said with over-the-top sweetness.

"Just don't want the local hospitals filling up with tourists who should've known better." He sent another pointed glance at my footwear.

So much for my attraction to him.

"Okay, Officer—" I read the gold name bar pinned to the surly man's uniform. "Grady, thanks for the hospitality. You're quite the ambassador for Sven's Beard."

"Wasn't trying to be an ambassador," he said, scowling. "And it's *Chief* Grady."

"Well, Chief, you can get back to writing speeding tickets because I'm going to my meeting."

"Fantastic," he deadpanned.

It was a bad idea to flip off the police chief, so I put my hand in my coat

pocket before extending my middle finger. What a jackass. He'd lost his chance at getting into the new Ho Ho Ho bikini-cut undies I was wearing, a gift from my best friend Blair.

Which was his loss because the Ho Ho Ho thing had nothing to do with Christmas.

“WAIT, THE *WHAT*?” I asked Max Morrison a few minutes later.

“The *Sven's Beard Chronicle*. It's our town's weekly newspaper.”

I sat back in my chair, a leather wingback that added to the vintage vibe of Max's office. He was a Sam Waterston from *Law and Order* look-alike, and he had a massive oak desk and bookcases filled with leather-bound legal reference books. I'd taken time off work to fly here for the reading of the will of Peter Douglas, an uncle I never knew existed until getting a call from Max a few days ago. The word *inheritance* had gotten my immediate attention.

“A weekly newspaper?” I was taken aback. “What am I supposed to do with that?”

Max's smile made the corners of his eyes crinkle. “Well, Pete filled it up with town news and ads every week. It's very important to *Sven's Beard*. That's how we find out who's getting married and what's on the school lunch menu. And of course, who got arrested.”

So it was a business, like any other. I could sell it and add the revenue to my windfall. Not that I knew how much my windfall was, because I'd gone off on a mental tangent about the newspaper.

“Sorry, I wasn't expecting that,” I said, giving Max a quick smile. “I shouldn't have interrupted you.”

He looked back down at the papers on his desk and continued reading. “The *Sven's Beard Chronicle* and all its assets. Pete owned the building, too. It's one of the most beautiful buildings in our downtown area. He had an apartment above the paper.”

I waited, trying to look appreciative. But I still had more questions than answers.

“What are the assets?”

Max lifted the paper he was reading from and read from another one beneath it.

“I’m in the process of making a full list,” he said. “But bottom line, it’s all the office equipment and furniture, the building itself and the printing press. Pete spent a bundle on that press.”

I rubbed my temple, worst-case scenarios now flooding my mind. Working in sales had turned me into a number cruncher.

“What about the debts?” I asked. “If he financed that press, am I responsible for the payments now? Does the business have the money to support itself?”

Max’s gaze softened. “I’m in the process of gathering all the numbers as of the day of Pete’s passing. But from what I can tell so far, he didn’t have much in the way of debts or money in the bank. He was able to pay his people and put the paper out every week with subscriptions and ad revenue.”

“Okay.” I took a deep breath. “But I live in California. I’m only in town until Monday.”

“I understand. Here’s what I’d do if I were you, Avon. Go by the *Chronicle* and meet the staff. Let them know you’re the new owner and they can show you around. Even though Pete owned the paper, Bess knows that place in and out. Maybe she could be your interim publisher.”

I nodded. “Okay. But then what?”

“I assume you’ll want to sell it?” There was a twinge of sadness in his voice.

Of course I wanted to sell it. I couldn’t own a weekly newspaper in Sven’s Beard, Minnesota. Though technically, I already did. In a matter of minutes, I’d gone from dollar signs in my eyes to abject panic.

What if the building caught on fire? What if the paper started losing money? I could end up spending my own hard-earned cash on this inheritance if I wasn’t careful.

“Yes,” I told Max. “As soon as possible. I live in San Diego and have a full-time job. There’s no way I can manage this business like my uncle did.”

“I understand. I’ll start putting feelers out to see if I can find you a buyer.”

“Thanks.”

He grinned. “You bet. And I hope you don’t mind my saying, Avon...you look a lot like your mother. I was sure sorry to hear about the accident.”

I met his gaze across the desk, my throat tightening. It had been nearly two years since I’d lost my parents, but the wound would never fully heal. When I was growing up, we’d lived a quiet life in Phoenix, my parents telling

me my whole life that neither of them had any other family. They had never, not even once, talked about where they grew up. So it was a shock to hear that Max had known my mom.

“You knew her?” I asked, keeping my tone level.

“Oh yeah.” It sounded more like *yah* with the twinge of his accent. “We were in the same class. Amelia was bright and kindhearted.” He grinned. “And was she ever pretty. Any guy in our class would have married Amelia Cooke without hesitation. But she only had eyes for...” His expression turned sheepish and he cleared his throat. “Someone else.”

Did that mean he knew my father, too? I was about to ask when Max lightly smacked his palm on his desk and stood up.

“I’ll walk you out, Avon. I’m meeting my wife and daughter downtown to look at floral arrangements for my daughter’s wedding. I don’t know what they think an old dog like me can contribute, but Amy’s our only daughter, so I’ll do my best.”

He walked over to a coat tree in the corner of his office and took a long wool coat from a hook, then grabbed a red-and-black-checkered hat with earflaps that was lined with fleece.

“Where’s your coat?” he asked me, his brow furrowing with concern.

“Oh, I just brought this one,” I said, putting my trench coat back on.

“Well, that won’t do. Not in Sven’s Beard during November.”

He took another coat from one of the hooks—a thick, lined Carhartt one.

“Now, I know it’s not fashionable, but it’ll keep you warm,” he said. “And there’s an ear warmer in one of the pockets.”

His concern reminded me so much of my dad that I had to fight back tears. Though I wanted to tell him it was okay, I couldn’t say no to that fuzzy lining.

“Thank you. I’ll return it before I leave on Monday.”

He waved a hand. “Nah, you’ll need it for your trip home. It’s the least I can do for Pete’s niece, Avon. He did our little town such a great service with the *Chronicle*.”

I slid into the coat and followed him to the front door of his office, where he nodded at the woman sitting behind the front desk.

“Marian, I’m off to the flower shop,” he said.

“Okay, boss.” Her accent made it sound like *ookay*. “We’ll hold the fort down.”

Max held the door open for me and then pointed to the nearby

intersection where the statue of Sven stood in front of City Hall. There was a building at each of the four corners, and one of them was a red brick two-story with a retro neon red sign that read “Sven’s Beard Chronicle” above the entrance.

“There it is,” he said. “I’ll be in touch, and you can call my office if there’s anything you need.”

I smiled at him. “Thanks, and thanks again for the coat.”

I waved and set off in the direction of the building, buttoning the coat to block out the biting cold wind. It was surreal, walking toward a business I owned, even if I wasn’t going to own it for long.

Leadership wasn’t my strength. I liked to stay focused on my own work and nothing else. In the four years I’d worked in pharmaceutical sales, I’d set sales records and managed to bank almost eighty thousand dollars. I was close to my goal of having enough money to quit my job and travel. Fiji, Iceland, and the rest of Europe were at the top of my list. And if I got enough money from the sale of the *Chronicle*, I could add my dream destination—the Amazon rainforest.

I’d learned from losing my parents that tomorrow is never guaranteed. I was only twenty-nine, still young enough to have the adventures I dreamed of.

The doors and windows of the building were mirrored, so I only saw my own reflection as I approached the double doors that led inside. Though I didn’t know what I was expecting when I opened the doors, the sight that greeted me made my jaw drop.

The walls were covered in dark paneling and bore mounted heads of deer, elk, and antelope, as well as huge glassy-eyed fish on wood plaques. The open floor plan allowed for several large wooden desks to create a spacious work area and there was a black-and-white-checkered tile floor. A woman with a gray helmet of curls was stubbing a cigarette out in an ashtray as she surveyed me.

I’d worked at the newspaper in college at UCLA, and it had been nothing like this. This place looked more like a poker hall than a business.

“It’s about time you got here,” the woman said with a glare. “We go to press on Monday, you know.”

I lowered my brows, sure she was mistaking me for someone else. “I’m Avon Douglas, the new owner here.”

“Oh, I know who you are. You’re the spitting image of your mom.

Figured Pete would leave you the paper. Hang up your coat and I'll show you your office."

"I'm not...I won't be needing an office."

She snort-laughed and stood. "Well, the paychecks need to be signed and we need the news content for next week's paper. Pick a desk and get to work."

A man with a dark, bushy mustache walked into the room. "There she is! Avon, I'm Sam." He walked over and shook my hand, his grip tight. "I'm your sports editor. Looking forward to working with you. And hey, do you want me to take Shawn to the playoff game tomorrow to shoot photos, or am I taking them myself?"

I looked between him and the woman I assumed was Bess. "I have no idea how to run a newspaper."

Sam chuckled. "Well, we're here to help."

"I only stopped by to introduce myself," I said. "I'm not staying."

Bess scowled. "Look, missy, this ain't a job you can work a few hours a week at. I owe Ron over at Ron's Auto a hundred and fifty bucks for fixing my car and I need my paycheck so I can get my car back. You need to march into that office over there and get moving."

I supposed she had a point. I didn't want the employees here going without their paychecks. So I cleared my throat and tried to look boss-ish, even though Bess had already made it clear who the real boss was around here.

"This office?" I asked, pointing to a doorway as I walked toward it.

"That's right. The computer password is c-r-a-p-p-i-e278."

"Crappy?" I grinned. "Come on. It can't be that bad working here."

"It's a fish," Bess said, lighting up another cigarette.

"Right. I'll just..." I pointed at the door and then opened it.

So far, my windfall felt more like a windfail.

CHAPTER TWO

Avon

THERE WERE thirteen people on the *Chronicle's* payroll, and I exhaled with relief as I handed the thirteenth employee his signed paycheck.

"Thanks, boss," he said, touching the brim of his camo baseball cap.

The dress code here was relaxed, to say the least. One of the pressmen was wearing a T-shirt with a drawing of a cheerleader looking over her shoulder flirtatiously while pulling up the back of her skirt, her briefs stamped with *Minnesota Vikings*.

Classy. I was ready to find a hotel, check in, sink into a hot bath, and mentally relocate myself, if only for a few minutes.

"So we're good," I said to Bess as I put my borrowed coat back on. "I'll check in on things tomorrow."

She lowered her brows in disbelief. "Are you okay in the head? We're not *good*. Next week's edition doesn't have a single story or photo in the news section. I need the police roundup, the city roundup, and *something* to put on our front page."

"Well, I can't help with that. I work in pharmaceutical sales."

She shook her head. "We can't put out a paper with empty news pages. What will our advertisers say?"

I put my hands up in mock surrender. "I took a few journalism classes in college and wrote for the school paper, but that hardly qualifies me to help. You guys will have to come up with something on your own."

Bess gave me a withering glare over the rim of her glasses. “Do me a favor and walk over to the gray cabinet over there.”

I followed her gaze to a tall, beat-up metal cabinet with double doors on the front.

“Open that and grab a notebook and pen,” she said, her focus already back on her computer screen.

I picked up a steno notebook from the top of a stack and grabbed a pen, walking them over to her desk. At least she was being reasonable now. When I held them out, she didn’t look away from her screen.

“Those are for you,” she said flatly. “I’m still building ads, and I’ll be here until at least seven tonight and again tomorrow night. So the least you can do is walk over to City Hall and get me the police and City Hall roundups.”

“But—”

“All you have to do is pick up the papers.” She made a shooing motion. “Get to it.”

The dynamic of our relationship was reversed. She seemed to think I worked for her instead of the other way around, and I didn’t like it.

“If it’s just picking up papers, someone else—”

“Pete picked up the roundups,” she said sharply. “Pete was the owner. And now you’re the owner, so go get the roundups.”

It was a sound argument. I’d only be here for a few days and then I’d never have to worry about any of this stuff again. And I didn’t have anything better to do unless my long, hot bubble bath counted.

“I’ll go get the roundups,” I conceded. “But first I need to find a hotel for the next few nights. Is there a local place you’d recommend?”

“You mean to stay at?”

I nodded, fighting my urge to call her Captain Obvious.

She laughed, and it was the first time I’d seen her smile or look anything other than annoyed. “The Ice-Fishing Expo is going on in Montrose. The only hotel in Sven’s Beard books up months in advance for that.”

“There’s only one?”

Bess shook her head, her exasperated expression back. “It’s a small town.”

She was a cranky older woman, and I told myself not to be offended by her.

“Okay, what’s the hotel called?” I asked. “Maybe something will open

up.”

“The Sleepy Moose.”

I wrote it down on the first perfectly clean page of the notebook, thanked her, and left for City Hall. I’d forgotten how much I loved starting a new notebook when I wrote for my college newspaper. A fresh notebook held possibility.

The icy wind slapped me in the face as soon as I stepped outside. I checked for traffic, ducked my head, and hurried across the street, passing the Sven statue on my way to the front door of the city building.

As soon as I walked inside, my attention was drawn to a row of large, framed photos. There were nine of them, and eight were men. A few of them looked like Vikings, with long beards and fierce expressions.

Spotless, earthy-colored stone tile covered the floors, and the walls were painted bright white.

“Hi there. How can I help you?” a round-faced woman asked from behind a counter.

“Hi, I’m”

“Are you Avon?” she asked, her eyes bright with happiness.

How could she possibly know that? I tried to keep the alarm from my expression as I answered her.

“Yes.”

Her warm, bubbly laugh put me at ease. “Well, I’ll be. It’s awfully nice to meet you. I’m Barb. I knew it was you because of the notebook. Everyone figured Pete would leave you the *Chronicle* because you’re the only family he had left.”

Family. The word packed a punch. I didn’t know Pete, but he was my family. These past couple of years, when I felt so alone after my parents’ deaths, I had an uncle I never knew about. I wish I could have met him, even once.

“Have you met Laura yet?” Barb asked.

“Laura?”

Her smile faded. “Oh, I shouldn’t have mentioned her. It’s not my place.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m only in town for a few days, and I’d love to meet anyone here who knew my parents. Did Laura know them?”

Barb tapped a pen against the counter, her brows pulled together. “She’s your mom’s sister.”

My stomach dropped with disbelief. “And she’s alive? I have an aunt

who's alive?"

"Alive and well. Her son is away at college, but her daughter lives here, too."

Tears sprung to my eyes. I had an aunt and cousins. A knot of resentment tightened my chest. Why had my parents hidden their families from me? Were they terrible people? No matter the reason, it stung to know they'd kept their families from me because they were *my* family, too.

"I'm sorry," Barb said, looking guilty. "I overstepped."

"No, it's okay." I forced a smile. "I'm here to pick up a City Hall roundup and a police roundup for Bess."

Her smile returned as she reached for a paper on top of a neat stack on her desk. "The mayor left the roundup for you and he asked me to remind you that we need maps of the snowplow routes printed soon."

I glanced down at the paper and then back at her. "Do we have a copy of that?"

"I think our public works director emailed it to Pete a couple years back, and it hasn't changed."

"Okay, great. And is the police roundup here, too?"

Barb shook her head. "Oh no." *Oooh* no. "The chief always gave that to Pete himself. I'll buzz him and let him know you're here."

I nodded, hoping there was somehow another chief besides the bearded brute I'd met earlier today.

There wasn't. Less than a minute later, another woman, this one named Terrie, met me in the lobby and led me down a hallway and then into an office, where Chief Grady glanced up from his computer screen at us.

"You're Avon Douglas?" he said, sounding both puzzled and disappointed.

Such a charming man. Arresting little old ladies for jaywalking was probably his idea of a good time.

"Anything else, Chief?" Terrie asked.

She was clearly older than him, her hair mostly gray and crow's-feet visible by her eyes, but she still spoke with a reverential tone, like fetching the boss a cup of coffee would be the highlight of her day.

"No thanks," he said, giving me a skeptical look as she left the room, closing the door behind her.

"I'm just here for the police roundup," I said. "You wouldn't have had to see me if you'd left it at the front desk."

He took off his dark-rimmed glasses and set them on his desk, opening his mouth like he was about to say something. Instead, though, he put the glasses back on and clicked his computer mouse.

“Pete always picked it up in person,” he said, his gaze on the computer screen. “I’ll print it out for you.”

He looked out of place behind the desk. Broad-shouldered lumberjacks belonged in the woods, swinging axes and avoiding people. Probably so he didn’t have to hunch due to his height, he had his computer monitor sitting on top of two thick hardbacks. I snuck a look at the titles on the spines. *Criminal Procedure: Law Enforcement and the Constitution* and *The Fundamentals of Asset Forfeiture*.

“Are you serious?” he mumbled. “I just put paper in it.”

He lowered his brows, clicking the mouse again. The printer, sitting on top of a counter-height cabinet that spanned almost the entire length of one wall of the office, started beeping.

“Piece of shit,” the chief said under his breath.

I didn’t even try to suppress my smile as I scanned his office. There was a beautiful framed photo of a spectacular sunset over a frozen lake, a buttery glow swirling with pale blue and fiery orange in the sky. A lone fisherman was silhouetted on the ice, looking like he was bundled up and sitting on a bucket.

A bookcase was half filled with more police books, a couple of photos of men in camo clothing in the woods perched on an otherwise empty shelf. A brown, shriveled plant practically begged for water from the corner. His framed college diploma gave away his first name: *Ryan Grady, Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice*. He didn’t look like a Ryan. More like a Paul. As in Bunyan.

“I have to send this to another printer,” he said, clicking something and then taking off his glasses to look at me.

He cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. “I’m sorry for your loss. Pete was a really good guy.”

“Thanks, but I...never knew him.”

The awkward silence between us only lasted a few seconds, but it felt longer. Chief Grady looked like he’d rather be anywhere but here.

“Yeah, that whole thing was, uh...it was tough for Pete.”

I wasn’t going to let the opening pass me by. Though I was eager to leave, this was the only real opportunity I’d had to find out more about why

my parents had lied to me about their families.

“What whole thing?” I asked. “I haven’t met many people here so far, but everyone looks at me like...well, it’s almost *pity*, and I have no idea why.”

He held my gaze for a brief moment, then shook his head. “Have you met Laura?”

“No, I just got into town this morning. You were the first person I met.”

He grunted in response, looking like he was about to say something else when there was a knock on his door.

“Come in,” he said.

It was Terrie, who walked toward his desk to hand him the papers he’d printed. He met her halfway, nodding his thanks as she passed him the small stack.

“Can I get you some coffee or anything?” she asked. “Either of you?”

“I can get my own coffee,” he said. “Do you want any, Avon?”

I liked the way my name sounded when he said it in his deep, masculine voice. Now that he was standing and I couldn’t just see him but *feel* him towering over me from a few feet away, I was reminded how attractive he was. Yes, I wanted some, but I didn’t mean coffee. My libido didn’t seem to care that he had treated me like a dumb tourist just a few hours ago.

My cheeks burned as I grinned and shook my head, not trusting myself to respond with words.

“Chief, the mayor is ready for you whenever you’re able to get to his office,” Terrie said.

He handed me the papers and looked at me expectantly. “Need anything else? Or should I get back to writing speeding tickets?”

Was that amusement I heard in his tone as he recalled my earlier verbal jab? I couldn’t be sure, so I just tucked the papers into my bag.

“No, that’s all. Thanks.”

I left his office, not looking back as I walked down the hallway, my heels clicking on the tile floor. The same shoes the chief had made fun of earlier. Why was I attracted to someone who made fun of me?

I remembered the trophy Blaire gave me a year ago when I’d been crying for a full week over a man who’d dumped me because I believed the moon landing was real, which he said made me a sheep.

Worst Taste in Men Ever was the engraving on the trophy. It was true. I used to have a thing for fixing broken men, but I was wiser now. A younger me would have jumped at the chance to see what Ryan Grady looked like

beneath his uniform, but twenty-nine-year-old me knew better.

I'd spend my four nights in Sven's Beard in bed alone. Or maybe on a park bench if I couldn't get a room at The Sleepy Moose.

CHAPTER THREE

Avon

“OKAY, let me know if anything opens up...thanks.”

I hung up the phone and heaved a sigh, my eyelids heavy from my long day of travel.

“Told you,” Bess said smugly from her desk.

It was 7:30 p.m.—time to admit I wasn’t getting a room at The Sleepy Moose. I’d gotten up at 3:30 a.m. to get to the airport on time for my first flight, which felt like days ago. Curling up on the tile floor of the *Chronicle’s* office didn’t sound too bad at the moment.

“You’re welcome to sleep on my couch,” Bess offered.

Waking up a room away from the scornful, demanding woman I’d spent most of today with? Pass. Though I was curious about the man who’d married her. She probably critiqued everything from his toast-buttering form to his favorite sleeping position.

“Or you could always sleep in the apartment,” she suggested. “It’s part of the building, so it’s yours now.”

The apartment. I closed my eyes, guilt streaming through me for the thoughts I’d been having about Bess.

“That’s a great idea,” I said.

She opened her desk drawer and took out a key on a ring. I walked over to her desk and took it, reading the faded gold wording on the white plastic key ring.

We're master baiters - Mort's Bait Shop.

How many times did my uncle use this key to unlock his apartment? I felt a momentary pang, wishing I could have met him, even once.

"Hey, Bess?"

"Hmm?" She was peering at her computer screen.

"What happened to Pete? I mean, how did he pass away?"

Her eyes found mine, her shoulders slumping. "It was an aneurysm. He was walking back here after breakfast. He liked to eat at The Corner Café, which the locals call Tipper's. And he was walking back, talking to Jim Dorner, and Jim said his eyes got real wide and he just dropped. That was it."

I nodded, unsure what I could possibly say that wouldn't sound forced.

"Hey, would you happen to know how I can reach Laura?" I asked instead. "My mom's sister?"

"I can get you her number, or make sure she gets your number, whatever you prefer."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate it." I gestured at a pad of Post-it notes on her desk. "Can I write down my number so you can give it to her?"

She passed me the pad and a pen, and I wrote my number down, then gave it back to her.

"You should go home, Bess. It's late."

"I'm only staying another ten minutes or so."

"Okay, I'm going up to the apartment before I fall asleep standing up."

"You bet. See you in the morning."

I nodded. "Thanks, Bess. For all your help today and...before I got here."

She hummed cynically. "Just doing my jobs. Every time someone quits, I get their workload without any extra money."

Lacking the mental energy to engage with her anymore today, I just ignored her comment and walked through the open doorway that led to the back room, where the stairway to the apartment was. I'd passed through this room earlier but hadn't paid much attention to it.

There was a water cooler, a table with four chairs, and a bulletin board covered with old Far Side cartoons, some curling at the corners. Several cases of printer paper were stacked along one wall.

Another wall was lined with framed photos and plaques. One of the photos was a portrait of an old man laughing, with a shining lake in the background. Another showed the top few inches of a STOP sign poking up through a massive snow drift. A wide-eyed child was about to take the first

bite of a hot dog in another one, neon carnival lights swirling around her.

Every photo was beautiful. More than that—they were spectacular. I read the words displayed beneath the photo of the man by the lake.

Pete Douglas, Best Standalone Photo
“John Grinnell Turns 95”

Newspapers with a circulation of 30,000 or less, Minnesota Newspaper
Association, 2009

Every photo had been taken by my uncle and had won an award. There were around a dozen of them. I took a final look into the sparkling blue eyes of John Grinnell, smiled, and started up the stairway to the apartment.

The stairwell was painted dark maroon, the walls bare and the steps made of worn wood. When I reached the top, I put the key into the gold door handle and turned it, suddenly curious about what I’d find inside.

For tonight, I could roll with a hoarding situation or a meth lab as long as there was a bed in there somewhere.

I was pleasantly surprised when I pushed the door open and stepped inside the apartment to find warm, worn wood floors, an open floor plan, and sparse furnishings. After locking the handle and the dead bolt, I walked into the living room area and set my bags down on the simple brown couch with an afghan folded over the back of it. A leather recliner sat on the other side of the room, with a floor lamp and a bookcase nearby. There was a tug in my chest when I saw a hardback book on a small table beside the recliner, an open pair of glasses perched on top of the book.

The small television had a layer of dust on the screen.

A tiny table for two sat in the kitchen area, which was dated but clean and organized. Furrowing my brow, I walked over to the old green refrigerator, tears filling my eyes when I saw the photos displayed on it with magnets.

They were all pictures of me. Me as a grinning toddler learning to walk, as a toothless second grader, and even one in my high school cap and gown, my bright hazel eyes shining with happiness. There were ten photos altogether, and I sagged with sadness for the uncle who had cared about me enough to proudly display my pictures even though we’d never met.

Where had he gotten them? It was one thing for my parents to ditch out on their hometown if they had awful families who didn’t care for them, but these photos told a different story. It gave me an unsettled feeling, but I

consciously shoved it down, overwhelmed by the events of the day.

Quickly, I checked out the rest of the apartment. In the only bedroom, the queen-size bed was unmade, a basket of dirty laundry sitting in one corner. The bathroom was small but adequate, with a towel hanging over the shower curtain rod.

I couldn't bring myself to sleep in the bed; it didn't feel right. Instead, I washed off my makeup, brushed my teeth, changed into pajama pants and a UCLA T-shirt, and lay down on the couch, covering up with the afghan.

My anxiety had ample material to draw from tonight: inheriting a newspaper when I'd been expecting money or maybe a nice cabin on a lake, how I'd unload the building from several states away, and what headaches it could cause me in the meantime.

Fortunately, my exhaustion took charge and within minutes, I fell into a deep sleep.



I BLINKED against the bright light streaming in through the apartment's big arched window the next morning. It was cold; I kept the blanket wrapped around myself as I walked over to the window and looked out at the four-way intersection with the *Chronicle* building on one corner.

Heavy snow was falling, but people were walking on the sidewalks, bundled up and engaged in animated conversations like it was a bright, sunny day.

What was wrong with these people? This was the textbook definition of a blizzard. Lots of snow had accumulated since yesterday, but shop owners were out shoveling their walks and waving at people like it was no big deal. Kids were throwing snowballs at each other and people were laughing and sipping hot drinks from paper cups.

Cold seeped in through the edge of the window and I drew back. I was going to need the warmest clothes I'd packed. When I looked through my bag, I frowned when I realized that black leggings, a long-sleeved gray T-shirt, and black flats were my best bet.

I sighed heavily and went to the bathroom to shower and change, gasping when my bare feet touched the icy black-and-white tile. I had goose bumps from head to toe until the shower water got hot, which took three minutes but

felt more like ten.

The wait for my dryer to get my hair completely dry felt eternal in the freezing bathroom. When I finally finished, I left it loose around my shoulders, quickly put on some makeup and slid into my borrowed coat, moaning contentedly at the warmth it provided.

My phone had a waiting text from Blaire, which I read as I waited for my coffee to brew.

Blaire: Hey, I'm driving for the next 40 minutes. Call if you're free.

She'd called thirty-five minutes ago, so I quickly pushed the button on my phone to call her.

"Hey, how's Minnesota?" she said brightly.

"Ugh, it's basically a reverse hell. With icicles instead of flames."

She laughed. "But worth it, right? Because of the inheritance?"

"Um, no. I inherited a weekly newspaper."

After a moment of silence, she said, "Oh."

"Yeah, exactly. I'm going to sell it."

"Well, you're only there for a few more days," she reminded me. "Missed you at hot yoga this morning."

God, sweating my ass off at hot yoga sounded good now. Blaire and I went to an early hot yoga class Wednesdays through Saturdays, and we usually walked to a nearby juice bar after class on Saturdays since we didn't have to work.

"Where are you heading?" I asked her.

"I'm picking up Laney and we're meeting Mom for our Napa weekend."

I smiled, feeling a pang of longing for what Blaire had. She was close with her sister and her mom. They always included me in things, but I felt like an outsider every time.

"Sounds amazing," I said. "Have a blast."

"You too. Hey, Laney's on her way out. I have to go. Call me later. And don't get hit by any falling icicles."

"I'll try not to."

As I set my phone on the chipped Formica kitchen counter, the coffee maker made a sputtering noise and dropped a bunch of brown goo into the pot.

"Come on," I griped. "You've been making coffee for at least thirty years, and you pick today to break down?"

I picked up the pot and sniffed it, cringing. It went straight into the

kitchen sink. I'd have to find a restaurant close by, which was okay because I was both hungry and in need of coffee.

I grabbed my bag and left the apartment, locking up and heading down to the newsroom. Bess was sitting at her desk, immersed in something on her computer screen.

"Good morning," I said.

"Morning. Did you sleep okay up there?"

"I slept great. It's pretty cold in there, though."

"Yeah, this building is heated with an old boiler and there's not much insulation. It gets drafty in the winter."

I nodded. "Well, I guess as long as it works..."

Bess shrugged. "It's temperamental, but Mike Kemper can always coax it into working. Pete never had the money to replace it."

Now I felt bad for complaining about the cold in the apartment. The *Sven's Beard Chronicle* was clearly nothing fancy, but my uncle had taken pride in it, and the employees likely did, too. I needed to stop with the negative comments.

"Speaking of things that don't work around here," Bess said, peering at me over the top rim of her glasses. "When you wash your hands in the bathroom, only use the hot water."

I arched a brow, confused. "I used both hot and cold yesterday and it was fine."

She sighed heavily. "Well, you'd know better than I would."

Eager to escape her heavy sarcasm, I buttoned my coat and smiled brightly at her.

"Where's the closest place I can get breakfast?" I asked.

"The Corner Café is just a few buildings down from The Emporium."

"Mornin' ladies," Sam said. "Careful on the sidewalk. I'm heading out to shovel and salt it in a few minutes."

"Pete always did that," Bess said in objection.

Sam frowned at her. "Right. And?"

She nodded toward me. "Avon's the owner now. She should be doing it."

Me? Shoveling snow? My lips parted with shock and Sam laughed.

"Aw, Bess, look at her. The poor thing doesn't even have boots. And I don't mind doing it a bit. The fresh air'll be nice."

I gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks, Sam. I'm going to The Corner Café. Can I bring you anything?"

“No, I already ate, but make sure you try Tipper’s biscuits and gravy. They’ll knock your socks off.”

“I’ll do that, thanks.” I looked at Bess, forcing myself to stay cheerful. “What about you, Bess? Can I bring you anything? A fresh cup of coffee maybe?”

“Coffee from the pot here is good enough for me,” she said, her gaze on her computer screen.

She was a freaking delight.

I exchanged a look with Sam and left for the café. As soon as I opened the door, I was hit with an icy blast of wind. I didn’t want to give Bess the satisfaction of seeing me suffer, so I pressed forward, pretending to be unfazed.

Really, though? I was fazed. Snow was blowing onto the bare tops of my feet and my hands were freezing. I shoved them into my coat pockets and walked toward the restaurant.

I kept my head down and focused on getting there as fast as I could. By the time I walked into the bustling café, which incidentally was *not* located on a corner, my feet and legs were soaked almost up to my knees and my ears were numb. I had to look like a crazed avalanche survivor.

“We’ve got room for one at the bar,” a busy server said to me as she passed with a tray filled with steaming breakfast food.

An intoxicating combination of savory bacon and freshly baked cinnamon rolls filled the air. I was ravenous after not eating much yesterday. As soon as I slid onto the open stool, a man with a thick, short dark beard speckled with gray flipped over the empty mug in front of me and held a coffeepot over it.

“Coffee?” he asked.

“Please.”

“What else can I get you?” he asked me.

“I heard I should order Tipper’s biscuits and gravy.”

He grinned. “Who told you that?”

“Sam, from the *Chronicle*. I’m Avon Douglas, the new owner.”

His eyes and his smile widened. “Well Avon, it’s a pleasure. I’m Tipper and this is my place. Pete was a friend, and we sure miss him. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

His expression turned serious. “You need anything at all, you let me know, okay? I mean that.”

“Thank you.” I wrapped my hands around the warm mug and raised it to my mouth, enjoying the smell of it. “You’ve done more than you’ll ever know with this cup of coffee.”

“Where are you from, Avon?”

“San Diego.”

He laughed heartily. “Well, that explains the shoes. You’re gonna need some boots.”

I nodded. “I’m only here through Monday. I didn’t realize I’d be walking through snowdrifts.”

He arched a brow, looking amused. “Aw, that’s nothing. There’s maybe six inches out there.”

“More like ten.”

The man on the stool next to mine elbowed me gently and laughed. “If you think that’s ten inches, will you marry me?”

I laughed with him and Tipper but soon realized how busy Tipper must be with a full restaurant.

“I have to try the biscuits and gravy,” I said. “And also some scrambled eggs.”

He lightly smacked his hand on the counter. “You got it.”

I closed my eyes and took a sip of the coffee, which was not only hot but delicious.

Made sense. A place this cold had to master the art of hot beverages. And warm socks. And also boots.

I tried to wiggle my thawing toes in my soaking-wet shoes.

I hated to admit that the grumpy ogre of a police chief had been right, but...I was going to have to break down and buy some boots.

CHAPTER FOUR

Avon

“I NEED at least one photo for the front page,” Bess said the moment I walked back into the newsroom after breakfast.

I should have brought her one of the giant, freshly baked cinnamon rolls from the café; no one could be cranky while eating one of those.

“I’m not a photographer,” I reminded her.

“You can take a picture of anything, you know. People decorating for the holidays or working. This ain’t the *New York Times*.”

How could I explain to her that I primarily took selfies and occasionally IG-worthy photos of my dinner at restaurants?

I shook my head. “I’m just not comfortable doing it. I don’t even know how to use Pete’s camera.”

It was a fancy digital one. I didn’t even want to pick it up because I was afraid I’d break it and I didn’t want to ruin my chances of selling it.

Bess’s laugh was hearty, like I was a comedian she couldn’t get enough of. “That’s rich, Avon. If the rest of us never tried things we weren’t comfortable with, there wouldn’t be a paper here.”

“Bess—”

She cut me off. “You’re the owner of this place now, so grab that camera and get to work.”

I rolled my eyes. “I guess I’ll have to use the urinal, too, since that’s what Pete did.”

“You go right ahead,” she said. “And clean up when you’re done.”

On my walk to Pete’s office to get the camera, I saw someone at a desk that was usually empty. He looked around twenty, had shaggy dark hair and a small hoop nose ring, and wore headphones. A wise move when Bess was your office mate.

“Hey, I’m Devon,” he said, raising a palm in a wave and smiling. “I’m a part-timer; I help Bess with layout.”

“Hi Devon, I’m Avon.” I shook his hand. “By any chance do you like photography?”

“He’s got work to do!” Bess said sharply.

I sighed softly and Devon’s grin widened.

“She’s all bark and no bite,” he said in a low tone. “Believe it or not, she’s a really nice person.”

I wasn’t about to argue with him right in front of her, so I just nodded.

“Well, I’m off to figure out Pete’s camera,” I said. “Nice to meet you.”

“He’s got extra batteries for it in a desk drawer in case you need them. And if you need help learning Photoshop, I’ve got you.”

“Thanks.”

Once inside Pete’s office, I stopped and looked around. His desk was older, a few scratches and dents marking the wood, his office chair a simple rolling one covered in gray fabric that was either brand new or rarely used. Photos he’d taken and others with him in them were scattered on the paneled walls; in most of them he was dressed in camo or fishing gear.

I didn’t *feel* Pete in this office any more than I felt him in his apartment. But his photography was full of him. He was patient, as shown by his perfectly timed photo of a fish jumping out of the water, droplets of water flying around it in a flawless arc. He was down to earth, as shown in his many award-winning photos of people in his hometown doing everyday things.

His camera sat on a waist-high cabinet that spanned an entire wall of his office, looking innocent enough. Was I intimidated by the camera? Yes. But more so, I was intimidated that it was his. He was an artist, and this was his paintbrush. Who was I to pick up his brush and use it as my own?

My father’s voice echoed in my head. *What’s the worst that can happen?* He always asked me that when I was scared to try something.

Maybe my photos would be terrible. Likely, actually. But they could be deleted.

After a deep breath, I picked up the camera and turned it on. I held it up and looked through the viewfinder, then carefully hung it around my neck with the strap.

First stop: a store that sold boots. And then I'd take an extended walk around town to take photos.

"I'll do my best," I said to Bess as I walked out of Pete's office. "If I'm not back within two hours, I'm probably buried in a snowdrift."

She ignored me, probably because she was hoping for that outcome.

I went to the bathroom in the back of the building, which had a piece of computer paper hanging up on the wall behind the toilet. MEN USE THE URINAL OR LIFT THE SEAT. THERE ARE WOMEN WHO WORK HERE TOO. Definitely a Bess creation.

Before washing my hands, I gently moved the camera so it rested against my back instead of my chest to avoid any splash from the water touching it. I turned the handles on the faucet and one of them immediately came off in my hand, a geyser shooting up from the little pipe that fed the cold water.

"Oh my god!"

Water launched at my face as I frantically grabbed at the pipe, trying to turn it. It was fixed in place, though, and water was puddling on the floor.

"The water is shooting everywhere!" I yelled as I ran out of the bathroom.

"I told you to only use the hot water," Bess said, not looking away from her computer screen.

"I forgot! How do I fix it?"

Bess shrugged, unconcerned, and Devon frowned at me, his headphones around his neck.

"Pete was the only one who could fix it," he said. "The hardware store is just a few doors down; you want me to go get some pliers or something and see what I can do?"

"I'll go."

I ran out the door, grabbing behind my back at the camera to get it turned around. I was pretty sure I'd seen the sign for the hardware store across the street, a few buildings down from City Hall.

If I didn't get the water leak fixed quickly, it would cause damage that I'd be financially responsible for. I didn't want to think about paying for new flooring, walls, and maybe even plumbing.

Suddenly, I was being pulled forward, hard, as a car horn blared close by. My fall was broken by something huge and solid. *Someone*, actually, who

smelled like clean laundry and the woods. When I caught my breath, I realized it was my least favorite police chief.

“You okay?” he asked, his arms still locked protectively around me.

I just stared at him, momentarily dazed. This close up, I could see that his moss-colored eyes had flecks of gold. I’d briefly felt the brush of his beard over my cheek when we fell, and it had been surprisingly soft. I forced myself out of the trance I was in.

“Yeah, but...what was that for?” I asked.

“Hey kid, watch your speed!” he yelled at the driver of a car who had stopped and rolled down his window.

“I’m sorry, sir.” The boy barely looked old enough to drive and was near tears.

“Get out of here,” Grady said, waving a hand. “And be more careful.”

“I will, sir. Thank you, sir.”

The kid was terrified of him. Was it because he was a police officer or because he was intimidating? Probably both. I hadn’t checked the intersection before running into it, and Grady had just saved me from being hit by the car.

“Oh no, the camera.” I got into a sitting position, frantically grabbing for it.

Tears pooled in my eyes. I’d never forgive myself if I’d broken Pete’s camera. Nothing screamed *unworthy* like ruining it before I’d taken a single photo.

“What the hell were you doing?” Grady demanded, getting to his feet.

He examined a tear in the shoulder of his uniform, scowled at it, and offered me a hand. I remembered my plumbing situation and took his hand, scrambling to get up.

“Can we do this later?” I asked, tipping my chin up so my gaze reached his. “There’s water shooting out of a pipe in the bathroom at the *Chronicle* and I have to get to the hardware store.”

He lowered his brows in a serious look. “I’ll get my toolbox.”

Caught off guard, I said nothing as he ran toward City Hall, his retreating form looking like that of a pro football player heading for the end zone.

I picked up the camera, still hanging around my neck on its strap, and examined it. No cracks or scratches. Switching it on, I looked through the viewfinder and took a test shot just as Grady ran out of City Hall, toolbox in hand.

“What are you doing?” he said, his scowl back. “I thought you had a

plumbing emergency, and you're taking pictures?"

"I do, but I needed to make sure the camera still works."

He shook his head. "Just show me where the leak is. And for God's sake, don't run into the street without looking again."

His disdain was palpable, like I was a rambunctious toddler he couldn't corral, despite his exhaustive efforts. I held back my urge to tell him where he could shove his toolbox because I desperately needed his help, and he had just saved me.

As a woman working in sales, I was used to men underestimating me. Not all of them, of course, but I'd had male colleagues mansplain things a time or twenty. There was a reason Grady's ring finger was bare.

"Shit," he muttered as he walked into the *Chronicle*, water rolling across the floor toward the main office area now.

He set down his toolbox and bounded into the bathroom. I took off Pete's camera and gently set it on a desk, then followed him.

By the time I got into the bathroom, there was no water pouring from the sink to the floor anymore.

"I turned off the water supply to the sink," Grady said. "I'm going to find the main water shutoff and get that one, too, just to be safe." He pushed a button on the police radio that was strapped to his shoulder. "Command One is out at the *Chronicle* office."

Okay, asshole or not, his complete competence in this situation was hot. Why were the assholes always so attractive?

"What's your plan to get this replaced?" he asked me.

I gaped at him for a second before responding. "My plan was to stop the gushing water."

He gave me an irritated scowl. "Yeah, but the faucet also needs to be replaced."

Waving a hand, I said, "I'm sure I can find a YouTube video on it."

"A YouTube video? You need a plumber."

I shrugged, about to say I'd find one on Google when he put up a hand to stop me.

"After I get the water shut off, I have to respond to a call on the other side of town," he said. "If you can pick up a new faucet, I'll come back and install it when I'm done."

He *was* an asshole, right? It was like watching a Ping-Pong tournament—asshole, nice, asshole nice.

“Okay, thanks,” I said, my heart rate finally slowing to a normal speed. “Thank you.”

“Make sure you get one with two separate handles,” he said. “One handle won’t work on this sink.”

Asshole.

“I know. I’m not completely stupid,” I snapped.

The squealing sound of approaching wheels made us both turn. Devon smiled sheepishly, pushing the handle of a mop in a bucket.

“Figured I could mop this up,” he said.

“You’ve got work to do,” Bess reminded him.

I wasn’t just done with Grady talking down to me, I was done with Bess’s attitude, too.

“Thanks, Devon,” I said loudly. “As the owner here, I appreciate you being a team player and jumping in during an unforeseen emergency.”

“Sure,” he mumbled, seeming to sense he was caught in the middle of two feuding hens.

“I got the main water shut off,” Grady said as he walked past me. “So there’s no water in the building at all until I get that faucet replaced.”

“Gee, is that what it means to shut off the water?” I fired back.

For a split second, I thought he was going to smile. Instead, he shook his head.

“You’re welcome,” he said. “I’ll be back later.”

LAWSON’S HARDWARE was located in a narrow building that was so deep with aisles of tools, birdseed, garbage bags, and other items that I felt like I’d stepped into a magical wardrobe.

“Hi there, how can I help you?” a blond man asked me with a grin.

“Am I in Narnia?”

His smile widened. “I loved that book. And no, you’re in Lawson’s. What do you need, gorgeous?”

He was an anti-Grady. Average height and build, but his short golden curls, bright-blue eyes and perfect smile set him apart. And bonus no scowl.

“I’m looking for a bathroom sink faucet with two handles.”

“Right this way.”

He led me to an aisle of plumbing fixtures, grabbing a box from a lower shelf. “This one’s your most economical option. Delta’s a solid brand. I don’t sell anything that won’t last.”

“Oh, is this your store?”

He extended a hand. “Yes, ma’am, this is my humble domain. I’m Austin Lawson. And you are?”

“Hi, I’m Avon Douglas.”

Recognition dawned on his face as we shook hands. “The new owner of the paper. Knew you were new in town because we don’t get many beautiful redheads.”

“You’re sweet,” I said, smiling. “It’s pretty much auburn now, but it used to be redder.”

“Whatever you call it, it’s gorgeous.” He winked.

“Well, thanks for your help with that.”

I reached for the box, but he tucked it under his arm and headed toward the register.

“What’s a newspaper owner doing buying faucets instead of making newspapers?” he asked as he walked behind the register.

“Ha.” I took my wallet out of my bag. “I don’t know much about newspapers. And our bathroom sink faucet exploded earlier, so here I am.”

“Ah.” He told me the price and I passed him my debit card. “Well, I can give you a hand and install this if it would help. We’re not too busy this time of day.”

Not only was he cute, but he’d also offered to help instead of telling me what was going to happen, as Grady had.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Absolutely. One thing you’ll find in Sven’s Beard is that we help our neighbors. Makes up for the lack of fine dining and shopping.”

He passed my card back and told someone wearing the same red Lawson’s T-shirt he had on that he’d be back in a few minutes.

“Oh, I’m not staying,” I said as we left the store together. “I’m only here through Monday.”

Austin frowned with disappointment. “You don’t want to run the *Chronicle*?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know anything about running a newspaper, and I live in San Diego. I’m going to sell it.”

“I get it. Never thought I’d end up in a little northern Minnesota town in

my thirties. Sometimes I think about selling the store and moving to a place with...you know, more.”

A middle-aged woman openly stared at us as we walked on the freshly cleared sidewalk toward the *Chronicle*, the snow falling in light flurries now.

Austin leaned closer to me and spoke in a low tone. “That’s Frannie Moore. Half the town will know about this date by tomorrow.”

“It’s not a date,” I said, pinching my brows together in confusion.

He laughed. “You don’t know Frannie. It’ll be retold as a date. The rumor mill is a big source of entertainment in small towns.”

I scoffed, amused. “But you’re not from here?”

“Originally from Mobile, Alabama. I bought this place when I was twenty-two and it’s been home since.”

That explained his slight drawl. I couldn’t imagine anyone choosing to live in this tundra when they came from a place with beaches and sunshine.

When we walked back into the *Chronicle* office, Devon had cleaned up most of the water and put up “wet floor” signs. Austin got to work on the faucet and I walked over to Bess’s desk, watching as she designed dummy pages for next week’s paper. They all had white rectangles of different sizes, some of them filled with ads and some with an X through them, indicating they still had to be filled.

“This takes me back to working on my college paper,” I said.

Bess sighed softly. “This place didn’t even have computers when I started working here.”

“When was that?”

“Thirty-seven years ago.”

“Wow. You must love it.”

She shrugged. “It’s home, you know?”

I hummed my agreement, though I had no idea what she meant. How could a job feel like home? I worked for money, nothing else. Pharmaceutical sales was a means to an end, and the end I had in sight was to travel. I wanted to set foot on every continent, explore hidden beaches, and taste exotic foods.

Grady came in the front door and gave me a nod. “Did you get a faucet?”

“I did, but you don’t need to install it.”

“It’s no problem.” He nodded at me, almost smiling, and then walked toward the bathroom, and I stepped away from Bess’s desk to catch up with him.

“What are you doing here?” Grady asked, looking from Austin back to

me.

“That’s what I meant when I said you don’t need to do it,” I said, finally reaching him.

“This one’s covered, Chief,” Austin said, sounding amused. “Get back to fighting crime.”

A storm swam in Grady’s eyes as he glared at me accusingly. I drew back, having no idea what I’d done other than save him the trouble of installing a faucet.

He shook his head, turned around, and left without another word.

CHAPTER FIVE

Avon

I GROANED and wrapped my hand around my nose, still only half-awake. Even though I'd slept in two layers of clothes and socks, wrapped in the afghan, my nose was ice cold. Apparently I needed a ski mask to sleep comfortably in this apartment.

My phone was plugged into a charger, sitting on a small end table by the couch, and I reached for it to check the time. 8:07. I was officially missing Saturday morning hot yoga.

I still hadn't taken any photos for next week's issue. I was determined to get one today, after breakfast at The Corner Café again, and then I planned to walk around downtown and visit the shops.

The shower water was hot enough to thaw my nose out, but it was so cold once the water was off that I toweled off, dressed in jeans and a light sweater, and dried my hair in record time.

My walk to the café was damn near blissful in my new faux-fur-lined boots, which had set me back nearly two hundred dollars but were worth every penny. I'd also picked up a hand-crocheted purple stocking cap with a fuzzy ball on top from a boutique next to the shoe store, so I no longer looked like an out-of-place tourist.

I was close to the restaurant when the sight of a massive animal ahead brought me to a stop. My heart raced and I clapped a hand over my mouth.

Be cool, Avon. Don't upset it.

It had to weigh at least six hundred pounds, and from its snorting sound, I knew it was vicious. I remembered the woman walking behind me who had two children with her. This was like when bears ended up in residential areas and destroyed things. I couldn't let this wild creature hurt anyone.

"Run!" I yelled, turning around and waving my arms in the opposite direction from the...moose? Reindeer? All I knew was it had antlers and was big enough to trample someone to death or spear them bloody with its antlers.

"Hurry!" I cried, peeking over my shoulder. "Get out of here! There's a wild animal!"

People weren't listening. I could taste the panic rising in my throat. After a deep breath, I rushed toward the café and hurried inside, slamming the door behind me and panting as I pressed my back against the glass.

"Don't go out there!" I cautioned the people who were about to leave. "There's a wild animal! It's huge and I think it's got rabies or something because it's snorting. We need to call animal control."

A few people got up from their seats and peeked out the windows of the restaurant. Finally, someone was taking me seriously.

A man wearing a thick stocking hat grinned at me.

"You're not from around here, are you?"

I lowered my brows. "No, why?"

"That's just Floki. He's an elk who comes to town most every day. He's probably looking for his girlfriend, Helga."

There was a light ripple of laughter in the crowded restaurant and murmurs that included the word *tourist*. My cheeks burned as I moved away from the door and said, "Oh."

If only a hole would open in the floor and swallow me up. I'd never seen an elk, so of course being twenty feet away from one had scared me. These people wouldn't last an hour in San Diego.

"Morning, Avon," Tipper called from behind the bar. "Got a spot for you on the end here."

"Good morning," I said, sliding out of my coat.

"Avon?" a female voice said from nearby. "Avon Douglas?"

I turned to find a twentysomething blond giving me an eager look.

"That's me," I said.

"Oh my gosh!" She threw her arms around me. "Finally!"

I hugged her back, and after a couple of seconds, I felt her body shake with a sob. She pulled away, smiling widely as she wiped beneath her eyes.

“Shoot, I didn’t even introduce myself,” she said. “I’m Harper Landis, your cousin. My mom and your mom are...or, I guess, *were* sisters.”

Tears pooled in my eyes as her words set in. “Laura? You’re Laura’s daughter?”

“Yes.”

I pulled her into another hug, crying along with her. When my parents had died two years ago, I’d thought I had no family left in the world, and now I was hugging *my cousin*.

There were still so many unanswered questions. My parents had left their families here behind forever, and there had to be a good reason for it. I wanted to get to know Laura and her family, but I was also cautious about getting too close.

“I was just leaving,” Harper said, frowning. “I have to work for a few hours. I’m a hairstylist and Saturdays are always busy. Are you busy tonight, or can we hang out?”

I didn’t hesitate before answering, my excitement stronger than my reservations.

“No, I’m not busy. I’d love to.”

Her smile was radiant, lighting up her whole face. With light-blond hair, blue eyes, and a slight frame, she looked nothing like me other than her very fair skin.

“Here, put your number in,” she said, passing me her cell phone. “Mom said she heard you were in town, but she wasn’t sure you’d want to hear from us. She’s in Minneapolis visiting a friend.”

Why wouldn’t I want to hear from them? I again had the feeling that there was a lot about my family here that I didn’t know but needed to.

I entered my number into her phone and passed it back. “I want to meet her, too. I’m only here through Monday.”

“She won’t be home until Tuesday.” Harper looked at her phone screen and groaned. “Shit, I’m gonna be late. I’ll text you my address and you can come over at, like, six to get ready with me. Will that work?”

“Sure.”

“I can’t wait,” she said, squeezing my hand.

“Me either.”

“MOST OF MY clients would kill for this hair,” Harper said that evening as she ran a flat iron through a section of my hair. “It’s so thick and this dark auburn color is literally like walking around with fall on your head.”

So far, I’d found out she was twenty-six, just three years younger than me, she lived alone in a cute, brightly furnished two-bedroom bungalow near downtown Sven’s Beard that her dad had remodeled for her, and she loved Fruity Pebbles. She’d been in the middle of eating a bowl of her favorite cereal when I arrived.

“I can finish this,” I offered. “You’ve been doing hair all day; you don’t have to do mine.”

“Stop saying that. I don’t mind a bit. I’ve wanted to meet you my whole life.” She met my gaze in the mirror. “My mom said you didn’t know about us, though.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Do you know why?”

I shook my head. “I was hoping your mom might be able to tell me.”

“All she ever told me was that her sister Amelia had to leave here and she couldn’t come back. She got to see her a few times, but I never got to go.”

Laura had seen my mom? The betrayal I already felt kept getting compounded. My parents hadn’t just kept secrets from me—they’d lied. And for what? To keep me from people like Pete and Harper, who seemed perfectly nice?

“Do you know where they saw each other?” I asked Harper. “And when?”

“Let’s see...” She furrowed her brow. “I know Mom went to the funeral after they died. I’m so sorry about that, Avon.”

“Thank you.”

I didn’t want to dwell on my parents’ deaths, so I didn’t say anything else.

“I know they liked to meet up in Chicago in the summer. My mom told me about their trips to Navy Pier and I wanted to go so badly she took me there when I was a senior in high school.”

My heart squeezed as I remembered my mom telling me those trips were girls’ trips with a close friend of hers from college. She’d even shown me pictures, never bothering to mention the “friend” was her sister.

“What do you think?” Harper asked as she finished the last section of my hair.

“I love it. This is the best blowout I’ve ever had.”

She grinned and rolled her eyes. “Come on, I know I’m not as good as those high-dollar city stylists.”

“You are, too.”

She met my gaze in the mirror again with a sheepish smile. “Well, don’t tell anyone, but I fried my mom’s hair when I was in beauty school. She let me use her as my trial client for a chemical treatment and a bunch of her hair fell out. She had to get it all cut off, but I felt so bad I asked one of my instructors to do it because I was afraid to touch it.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “We all make mistakes.”

“True, and she looked good with short hair. I mean, once the bald parts grew back out. I’ll have to show you the pictures sometime.”

She flat ironed a few sections of her own hair and applied pink eye shadow, dark eyeliner, and mascara, then turned to me and said, “Let me do your eye makeup.”

“I already have mascara on.”

She gave me a look. “That’s not enough.”

“It’s enough! It’s almost seven, let’s get going.”

“Well, you’re not wearing that.”

I looked down at the jeans and light gray sweater I’d been wearing all day. “What’s wrong with this?”

She hesitated before saying, “There’s nothing *wrong* with it, but it’s just not something you wear out. I’ve got just the thing for you.”

The *thing* turned out to be a black top that not only showed my cleavage but also exposed half an inch of my midriff. I laughed at my reflection in the mirror.

“Clearly I’m too tall for this, Harper.”

“No, it’s cute on you.”

I groaned. “It’s just not”

“You’ll never see any of these people again, though. Just wear it. After we do a shot of Fireball, you’ll be feeling braver, I promise.”

I cringed as I followed her into her kitchen, where she poured two shots of Fireball into glasses that said, *Kayla’s last ride before she’s a bride*.

“From a friend’s bachelorette party?” I asked.

“You betcha.”

I hummed in acknowledgment. “I had something similar at mine.”

“Wait, what?” She gaped at me, her eyes bright with happiness. “You’re

engaged?”

“Was.” I reached for one of the glasses. “I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll wear this shirt and do this shot if we can *not* talk about that.”

She nodded. “Done. I recently broke up with a guy myself, so I get it.” Raising her own glass in the air, she smiled and said, “To family.”

“To family.”

We clinked our glasses together and downed the red-hot shots. Harper slammed her glass down onto the table and grinned.

“To The Hideout,” she said. “After we rub Sven’s beard.”

I gave her a confused look.

“You’ll see,” she said. “But first, back to the bedroom so we can find you some cute shoes.”

“ARE MY NOSE HAIRS FROZEN?” I asked Harper as we walked into The Hideout half an hour later.

She shook her head and gave me a wry smile. “No, you’re good. And now you’ll have a lucky night.”

We’d stopped at the statue of town founder Sven Karlsson outside City Hall on the way here, Harper taking a selfie of us rubbing his bronze beard. Apparently it was a thing here. She said her mother had pictures of her next to the statue as she grew up, as did most parents in Sven’s Beard, and that photos with the statue were a mandatory part of life events here—graduations, engagements, and holidays.

The bar we’d just walked into was about a quarter of a mile from the statue, and Harper waved at someone as I surveyed my surroundings.

There was a giant, lifelike Bigfoot next to the front door, standing at least eight feet tall. The floor was concrete and the walls were made of weathered wood planks, but the wood was hardly visible because every surface was covered with Bigfoot photos and signs.

The signs said everything from *Bigfoot for President* to *Bigfoot Saw Me But Nobody Believes Him*. There were several framed newspaper articles about purported Sasquatch sightings.

County music was playing on an old-school jukebox and a few people were dancing, though there was no dedicated dance floor.

“Let’s go grab that table,” Harper said, taking my hand and leading me through the crowd.

People turned to look at us as we passed, some of them not even being subtle about it.

“Are they looking at me because of this shirt?” I asked Harper as we slid into our seats at a high-top table. “It’s because of the shirt, isn’t it?”

“Most of the women in here would die to look like you in that shirt,” she said. “And no, it’s because they don’t recognize you and because you’re pretty. The single men are trying to figure out if they have a chance with you and the women are just jealous.”

“I seriously doubt that.” I slid out of my coat and hung it on the back of my chair. “What can I get you to drink?”

“Ask and ye shall receive,” a male voice said from behind me.

It was Austin Lawson, who slid two martinis onto the table. Instead of his red Lawson’s T-shirt, he wore a gray Henley that fit just right over his biceps.

“Thanks, Austin,” Harper said, picking up her drink. “This is my cousin Avon.”

A smile played on his lips as he said, “Oh, we met. She’s my favorite newspaper owner.”

His gaze dipped down to my exposed midriff, his intentions obvious.

“It’s good to see you again,” I said, sipping my drink.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

“Please do.”

He found a chair at a nearby table and as he sat down next to me, I began to flirt. Not with him—at least, not yet. First, I was toying with the thought that tomorrow, I could wake up warm for the first time since getting to Sven’s Beard.

CHAPTER SIX

Grady

“TASTES LIKE WILLIE NELSON,” Jake said, making a face and pushing his beer to the center of the table.

“I know I’ll regret asking,” Coulter said, “but what the hell are you talking about?”

“Kristy wants me to cut back on the swearing since she’s expecting.” Jake shrugged. “And it’s easier if I replace swear words with singers or bands.”

Coulter met my eyes and shook his head. “Can’t believe she still lets him order a beer. Hell, ’fore long, he’ll be sitting here on a barstool sipping on a juice box. Maybe Kristy’ll send him a little bag of Goldfish to snack on.”

I’d known them both since we were kids. We’d played football together in high school and started meeting up at The Hideout when we were home on college breaks. Jake was married to his high school sweetheart and owned a successful contracting business. Coulter was an officer for the Sven’s Beard Police Department, making me his boss. When we were outside of work, though, we could still shoot the shit as friends.

I knew a lot of people in the bar tonight, but there weren’t many besides Jake and Coulter that I’d call friends. I’d arrested several of the patrons here, including Danny Price, who sat at the table next to us. His driver’s license was still suspended for a recent DUI conviction, and word around town was that he was now getting around on his dad’s snowmobile. Technically that was illegal, which was probably why he kept giving me nervous glances.

“Can I have some of your Goldfish?” Coulter asked Jake.

Jake glowered at him.

“I think he wants you to Willie Nelson off,” I told Coulter.

Coulter opened his mouth to respond, but instead, his jaw dropped farther and he said nothing as he stared across the bar.

“So that’s Avon Douglas,” he said. “Damn, she *is* hot.”

I followed his line of sight, feeling a pounding sensation in my chest when my gaze landed on Avon. Rubbing my sternum, I furrowed my brow.

“What’s up?” Jake asked from the other side of the table.

“I don’t know, indigestion or something.”

Avon was sitting with her cousin Harper, and not surprisingly, Austin Lawson was standing between them, blatantly hitting on Avon. I couldn’t believe she was actually smiling at him—he was a Grade A douchebag whose bedpost was maxed out on notches.

“What do women see in him?” Coulter muttered. “He’s more of a tool than the shit he sells in his store.”

I shrugged. “She’s from California. She probably likes blond guys who wax their chests.”

Coulter hummed his agreement. “Doubt Lawson’s got any hair on his chest.” He grinned at me. “You know, you could bag her if you wanted to, Chief.”

I scowled at him. “You’re a real romantic son of a bitch. I don’t want to *bag* anyone.”

“Don’t look at me like that. You say you’ve moved on, but you never”

I cut him off. “Waylon Jennings you. If I want your advice, I’ll ask for it.”

Coulter fell silent and Jake busied himself texting to avoid getting in the middle of things. I sipped my beer and leaned over to peer into the sliver of a view our table had of the kitchen. Apparently, the cooks were butchering a cow to make our burgers. Even for a Saturday night, this was slow service. Coulter and I had spent the day ice fishing and I was ravenous, my roast beef sandwich and thermos of coffee not nearly enough to hold me over all afternoon.

“Shit, I’m about to go back there and cook it myself,” Coulter muttered.

I wrapped a hand around the back of my neck, glancing at Avon again. Coulter was right—she was hot, but she stuck out like a sore thumb in the Beard. Her shoes tonight were the most ridiculous yet—a pair of heels with

so many straps they had to take at least fifteen minutes to get on and off. There were women here who dressed impractically for a night out, but most of the lifelong residents wore a good pair of boots in the winter, no matter where they were going.

One slip on ice and a fall into a pile of snow would convince Avon I was right. Not that she'd be here long enough to fall. She was out of here Monday, and the *Chronicle* probably wouldn't be around much longer than she would.

Print newspapers were dying a long, slow death. Pete had been a good friend of my dad's and I knew he'd been operating on a shoestring for a while now. But for him, that paper was a labor of love.

Austin took Avon's hand and pressed it to his chest, placing his hand over hers. Pathetic. If he was trying to show off his pecs, newsflash—he had none. I'd single-handedly pushed his car to get it moving again when he was stuck in the snow last year.

Like boots, trucks were mandatory in the Beard. But Austin still clung to his convertible, which he was able to put the top down on for maybe a month or two a year.

Avon laughed, her hand still being held against Austin's chest, and I groaned with frustration.

"You want to just go get a pizza?" Coulter asked me.

He thought I was pissed about the food taking so long. I was, but my frustration over Austin putting the moves on Avon was stronger.

"She'll need to wear a hazmat suit if she goes home with him," I said with a scowl. "Guy's a walking STD at this point."

Coulter followed my gaze and then laughed. "You feeling some kind of way about her, Chief?"

I shoved his shoulder lightly. "Feeling like a decent human being who doesn't want to see Pete's niece taken advantage of."

"She looks grown to me."

"Sorry about that," Jake said, setting his phone down. "What are we talking about? Grady likes the redhead?"

"You guys are pathetic," I said, moving my beer aside as I saw our server approaching with our food.

"Sorry about the wait, guys," she said. "The fries are super hot, be careful."

Jake had ordered a hot dish, a tater tot casserole he loved that his wife

never made at home. His face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning when the server put his plate in front of him. Coulter and I both had burgers and fries, and I took down about a quarter of the burger in a single bite.

“How’s your dad, Grady?” Jake asked.

“He’s doing a lot better. Glad to be out of the hospital.”

“Was it pneumonia?”

I nodded. “Yep, again. They told us when he was injured that he was more susceptible to pneumonia and respiratory stuff, and this is the third time in four years he’s had pneumonia.”

Jake shook his head. “Glad he’s doing better. And remember, one of my foremen lives in that little cabin about a mile from your dad’s place. Anytime he needs his drive shoveled or anything else, all he needs to do is say the word.”

“I appreciate it, but I plow him out when it snows.”

Jake shrugged. “You never know when something could come up. And if you’re working, it’s covered, man. Just let me know.”

He took the first bite of his meal and groaned with satisfaction. “I swear they use my mom’s recipe. Tastes exactly like hers.”

“Why won’t Kristy make hot dish?” Coulter asked. “She grew up here; she knows it’s a thing.”

“Her mom made it so much when she was growing up that she swore she’d never eat it again. Her mom’s not the best cook.”

I chanced a look over at Avon and found she was looking directly at me. Our eyes locked for a couple of seconds and I felt that pounding sensation in my chest again.

Austin approached her table with a tray loaded with drinks. I couldn’t tell exactly how many there were, but it was too many for a guy with good intentions.

I finished my food and pushed the plate aside. My next look at Avon revealed she, Harper, and Austin were all about to do shots.

She had every right to get as drunk as she wanted and go home with whoever she wanted. I knew that. But I couldn’t stop thinking about the way she’d looked at me after I pulled her out of the way of the oncoming car she hadn’t seen. She’d been stunned, but I’d also seen something else in her eyes. Something I couldn’t describe, but it was what kept me from walking out of The Hideout.

“Dolly Parton,” Jake muttered as he looked at his phone screen. “Kristy’s

at her mom's house and her car won't start. I have to go."

Coulter slid some cash onto the tray with our check, saying, "I've got it. You assholes enjoy the rest of the weekend."

"I'm hitting the john," I said as they both turned toward the door. "See you around."

I walked right past Avon's table on the way to the bathroom, scoping out the number of empty glasses on the table. There were five or six shot glasses and at least eight full-size ones. Her voice sounded higher pitched than usual, too.

My stop in the bathroom was brief. By the time I got back to Avon's table, Harper was off talking to someone else and Austin was at the bar buying more drinks.

"Hey," I said to Avon.

"Oh, hey." She gave me a bright smile. "These are *not* my shoes, Chief Grady, so don't write me a ticket, okay?"

Her cheeks were tinged pink and it was obvious she was tipsy at the very least. There was a zero percent chance I was leaving her here with Austin, even if I had to carry her out of here over my shoulder.

"Hey, let me take you home," I said.

"Wow! That's *bold* of you. Like I'm just going to"

I cut her off, irritated. "Not *my* home, Avon. I'm taking you to the apartment and then I'm leaving."

She laughed. "That won't be necessary, Chief. I know where it is."

Austin returned to the table and put what looked like a piña colada down in front of her.

"What's up, Grady?" he said. "You here to ruin the fun?"

I wanted to punch the Southern drawl out of him, but instead I glared down at him, taking advantage of my significant size advantage.

"Go prowl somewhere else, Lawson."

His expression was a mix of amused and confused. "You on duty as police chief? Cause I don't think you can just tell me what to do whenever you feel like it."

"That's just who he is," Avon said. "He doesn't mean anything by it."

My smile at Austin wasn't a friendly one. "I do mean something by it, and what I mean is fuck off. She's not leaving here with you."

"Hey, we're just two people enjoying some drinks together."

I scoffed. "You're the worst fuckin' liar ever." I looked at Avon. "Get

your stuff. We're leaving."

"I'll go with you because I'm ready to leave, not because you ordered me to."

She slid down from the high-top chair, wobbling as one of her heels slipped on the floor. Austin lunged for her waist, but I pushed him back with a hand on his chest, offering her my other arm for support.

"What the hell?" Austin narrowed his eyes at Avon. "You're just leaving with him?"

"I think..." She gripped my forearm as she regained her footing yet again. "Yeah, I need to go. I'm texting Harper. Thanks for the drinks."

"Cockblocker," Austin muttered under his breath.

"Dickhead," I said, my tone loud enough for all of us to hear. "You got anything else to say to me?"

"Fuck you, Grady."

He turned away, immediately turning back to swipe the fresh piña colada from the table and walked toward the back of the bar. I had no doubt some other woman would be getting that drink.

"You okay to walk?" I asked Avon.

"I'm fine," she said, sounding aggravated. "I slipped one time."

"Yeah, okay." I shook my head as I walked behind her, prepared to catch her if she fell again.

She made it out the door, turning in the direction of the apartment once outside.

"My truck's over here," I said.

"I thought we were walking."

"Nope. Definitely not in those shoes."

She smiled and said, "I bought boots, you know. My cousin Harper insisted I wear these tonight."

"That's good. On the boots and on you meeting Harper."

She sighed, her breath making a cloud in front of her. "This entire town knows I don't know my family here, don't they?"

"People like to keep up on the gossip around here."

I offered my arm as I stepped into the road, which had a dirty slush coating it. Avon put her hand on my forearm again, and the pounding in my chest returned.

Well, *shit*. It wasn't indigestion—it was her.

Since I had no interest in getting involved with a woman, it was a good

thing she was leaving Monday. I liked my life as it was, living alone. Unless the station cat, Radar, counted. He came home with me sometimes.

“This is yours?” Avon asked as I unlocked my truck.

“Yep.”

“Are you compensating for something, Chief?”

“Nope, just needed a big truck because I’m a big guy and there’s a hell of a lot of snow here.”

She grinned at me as I opened the door and she held the handle to get into her seat. “I was just kidding.”

After closing her door, I went around to my side and got into the truck, turning on the heat and the heated seat on her side.

“That feels good,” she said, rubbing her hands together. “I didn’t realize this place would be North Pole-level cold.”

“You meet Laura yet?” I asked her.

“No, she’s out of town until Tuesday. I’m hoping she and Harper can come visit me once I’m home.”

She sounded both apprehensive and disappointed about not meeting her aunt, so I moved on quickly.

“No love for the Beard?”

After a note of laughter, she said, “It’s...unique. But definitely not for me.”

It was a quick drive to the *Chronicle* building, where I parked out front and went around to open her door.

“Harper and I dropped my boots off here earlier,” she said as she took out the keys to the building. “I think I’ll sleep in them tonight. My feet are frozen.”

“Is it warm enough in the apartment? I know a lot of the older downtown buildings are drafty.”

“It’s fine,” she said, opening the door. “And I only have two more nights here.”

I nodded. “Guess I have to leave you here so you can lock up behind me.”

“Thanks for the ride, Grady. And for not arguing with me for five whole minutes. That can’t have been easy.”

I ignored my urge to lob a comment back at her so our last interaction would be civil.

“Night, Avon. Good luck with everything.”

“Good night.”

I waited until she'd locked up from the inside to walk back to my truck. Two more nights. Then the annoying pounding in my chest would go away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Avon

“I’M afraid I don’t have good news for you,” Max Morrison said from behind his desk on Monday morning.

“All the offers are low?” I sighed. “I thought that might be the case.”

My initial excitement over an inheritance had been dampened by my time here. I was over sleeping on Pete’s scratchy, lumpy couch, pretending I knew anything about running a business, and I hated the constant cold.

Max didn’t realize how low my expectations were now. Anything I got for the sale of the *Chronicle* was more than I had a week ago. I planned to bank every penny of it to continue saving for travel. And tonight, I’d be sleeping with an unfrozen nose, which I was looking forward to more than the money.

He knitted his brows together. “Well, unfortunately, Avon, there are no offers. Not even low ones.”

I slumped back in my chair, stunned. No offers? Not a single one? Not even a lowball *I don’t mean to insult you* one?

“I don’t understand. Not even for just the building? Someone could make it into another business. How much did you ask for it?”

Max slid off his glasses and set them on his desk. “I solicited offers through a nationwide newspaper association. I didn’t put a price on it; I said all reasonable offers would be considered.”

My chest deflated with a deep exhale, the reality of the situation setting

in. Not only was I getting zero dollars and zero cents for my “inheritance,” I was still responsible for the newspaper’s employees and the building.

“This can’t be happening,” I said under my breath.

“It’s still very early, Avon. I’m not giving up.”

“This inheritance is going to cost me money, isn’t it?” I asked, my stomach churning nervously.

His gaze was sympathetic. “Not necessarily. I did get some feedback from the association. They said the press is an asset, but the circulation is much lower than it should be. If you can raise your circulation, I think we can get an offer.”

“I have no idea how to do that, though.”

A few moments of silence passed and then I asked, “Can I just sell the building? Close the newspaper and take whatever someone will give me for the building?”

Max shook his head. “You’d have to bring the building up to current building codes, and they’re strict here in the Beard. It’s the reason I make do in this tiny office instead of moving. I’d have to add sprinklers to sell this one. And in a building the size of the *Chronicle*, that would cost you significantly more than you’d get for the building.”

I closed my eyes, wishing my parents were still around to give me advice. My only job experience was in pharmaceutical sales; I didn’t have a clue how to run a newspaper, let alone grow one.

“Don’t give up hope,” Max said. “It’s only been a few days. Offers could still come in, and in the meantime, you can hire some help to keep things running in your absence. I’ll certainly keep an eye on anything you need me to.”

It sounded like a solid idea, but it wouldn’t work.

“There was barely enough money in the account to cover payroll when I wrote out the checks,” I said. “I can’t afford to hire anyone, and Bess can’t take on any more work.”

“Can you stay here longer? Try to get the circulation numbers up while I work on drumming up a buyer?”

I said nothing, but based on Max’s laugh, my response must have been written all over my face.

“You must feel like a fish out of water here,” he said. “But...” He cleared his throat. “Sorry, you didn’t ask for my advice.”

“No, it’s okay. What were you going to say?”

“Your parents grew up here. This place was part of them, so it’s part of you.”

My appendix was part of me, too, but it didn’t serve any purpose and I’d be just fine without it. No point in mentioning that, though. I sat in silence for a bit, thinking about my options, though truthfully, there was only one.

Begrudgingly, I met Max’s gaze across his desk. “I have almost eight weeks of vacation time from work. I guess I’ll be using it.”

Max gave a nod of approval. “I think it’s wise to stay here until we find a buyer if you can.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Not only was there no apparent buyer for the paper, but I could easily burn through all my vacation time keeping it running.

A month. I’d give it one month. Then I’d reevaluate my options.

“I’m not looking to make a ton of money,” I said. “Just to get out from underneath it with something would be a relief.”

“I understand. I’ll bring you any offer that comes in.”

I could possibly work remotely for part of the month, and I’d try to figure out how to increase the paper’s circulation. The one thing I couldn’t do, though, was sleep another night on the lumpy couch in Pete’s ice-cold apartment.

“Can you recommend someone who can fix the heat in the apartment?” I asked Max. “And also, someone who can move a queen-size bed out of the bedroom?”

I still hadn’t been able to bring myself to sleep in Pete’s bed. It just didn’t feel right. The cost of a new bed would be worth it if I ended up here for an entire month. And fixing the heat would be an investment in the building. *My* building. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be used to owning a business.

“Absolutely.”

Max put on his glasses and scrolled through the contacts in his cell phone, then gave me a couple of names and numbers.

I wouldn’t let myself panic. Max was right—a buyer could come along any day now. I’d control the things I could and stay positive. With some luck, I could still get out of this situation with some money, and now I also had Harper in my life, and soon, I’d get to meet my aunt.

“Don’t worry, Avon,” Max said. “This is all going to work out. And remember, you’ve got Sven on your side now.”

I plastered on a smile and thanked him, wondering if he meant the statue

or the ghost of the town's founder. Either way, I'd take all the help I could get.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Avon

I PICKED up this week's edition of the Chronicle and studied it for what had to be the hundredth time. It was still warm from the press when I saw it for the first time, a photo I took on the front page in full color.

That was Monday, and even now, two days later, it made me smile. One day I'd look back at this picture of a little girl in a red snowsuit trying to catch snowflakes with her tongue and remember my brief foray into newspapering.

Bess inhaled sharply from her desk, which was next to the one I'd started using in the open newsroom. I didn't like being stuck inside Pete's office, which didn't have any windows.

"Patty Chapman passed?" Bess said to no one in particular. "I just saw her at church."

I never knew if I should respond to Bess's rhetorical questions, but I didn't want to be rude by ignoring her.

"Was she an old friend?" I asked as I scanned news headlines from my laptop.

"I wouldn't call her a friend, but I knew her my whole life. Her husband Paul was the high school principal for many years until he left her for his secretary, who gave him genital warts."

How was I supposed to respond to that? I decided to just let it go because I'd already heard more than enough.

Bess let out one of her *I told you so* hums, and I braced myself for a doozy of a comment.

“Paul couldn’t get an erection after his prostate cancer treatment, though, so then the secretary left him.”

Where did she hear such personal things about random people? Bess knew all the town gossip, but she hadn’t shared anything with me until I announced I was staying in Sven’s Beard—for now.

“I’ve got three more obits to type and then I’m out of here,” she said.

I looked at the time on my computer. It was 11:45 a.m., and Bess never left before six. If anyone deserved to cut out early, though, it was her.

“I’ve got a stack of checks to sign,” I said. “Then I think I’ll go get the police and City Hall roundups.”

“Well, only if you can get all that done in the next half hour or so.”

I was on the verge of asking her why I only had thirty minutes when Sam walked into the room wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt and a grass skirt with shorts beneath, several leis around his neck.

“No one told you guys?” he asked, knitting his brows together. “There’s a luau theme.”

Bess looked at him over the rim of her glasses, her hum dismissive this time. “I made a coconut pineapple salad. That’s my contribution to the theme.”

Sam scoffed as I realized they had to be going to a party I wasn’t invited to. Which was fine, because I had emails to catch up on. I was trying to keep up with my job remotely while here, and it was keeping me busy.

“What about you, Avon?” Sam took a yellow lei from around his neck and offered it to me. “Do you want one?”

I waved him off. “I’m buried in emails, but you guys go have fun.”

Sam and Bess exchanged a look.

“But...it’s Svensday,” Sam said.

“It’s...Wednesday,” I said, wondering if I had misheard him.

Sam grinned. “We haven’t told her, Bess.”

“We don’t have Wednesdays in the Beard,” Bess said. “We only have Svensdays.”

This place was nothing if not quirky. I looked between the two of them. “And does that mean everyone dresses up?”

“Sometimes, but not usually,” Sam said. “The only rule you have to follow is no working past noon on Svensdays.”

I gaped at Bess. “No working past noon?”

“We give Bess until one, but that’s our little secret,” Sam said. “On Svensday afternoons, everyone has to do something that feeds their soul. Something fun.”

“Oh.” I gave him a reassuring smile. “It would be really fun for me to clear out my email inbox.”

He shook his head emphatically. “No work. There’s always a group event for Svensdays, or you can choose your own fun thing, but no work allowed.”

This was...crazy. I couldn’t imagine the entire town actually shutting down midway through the middle day of the week.

I groaned. “So what do we call Thursday, the day we all have to work until bedtime to make up for Svensday? Is that Screwed Day?”

“We’ve been doing this our whole lives,” Bess said. “You’ll get used to it.”

It was half of one day a week for the month I’d be here. I could roll with it. I closed my laptop.

“Okay, so I guess I’ll need that lei,” I told Sam.

His eyes shone gleefully as he passed it to me. “That’s the spirit. We’re getting together for a big potluck lunch at The Hideout and then painting downtown shop windows for the holidays. I already got out Pete’s CD of holiday songs to play on the boom box while people are painting here.”

The boom box. And a CD. Sam was reliably behind the times, but he was so good-natured that I found it endearing.

“And I got cookies from the bakery,” Bess said.

“Oh. I hope you charged those to the business,” I said.

She laughed. “No, I paid for them.”

“Ask Dandy to reimburse you.”

That was our HR and payroll person’s actual name—Dandy Mulligan. I’d never get used to it.

“Are you sure?” Bess said. “Pete was always tight about stuff like that.”

The people here didn’t get paid much—I knew, I signed their checks—and they also worked extra hours that they didn’t get paid for. The least the *Chronicle* could do was reimburse them for business expenses.

“Completely sure,” I told Bess. “And what can I grab quickly to bring to this potluck?”

“Nothing,” Sam said, shaking his head. “My wife made venison sliders, venison chili, and brownies. There’ll be more food there than we need. There

always is.”

“Okay.” I checked the time on my computer. “I’m going to do my last six minutes of work.”

“You betcha,” Sam said, walking over to a closet to get out the boom box, which was practically an antique.

The top unread message in my inbox had just come in a few minutes ago. It was from a former journalism professor of mine, Claire Beaumont. I’d frantically messaged her on Monday asking for advice on running a newspaper, and I was eager to read her response.

AVON,

It was so nice to hear from you. I always saw so much promise in you as a journalist, and though I understood your choice to go into sales rather than continue in journalism, I will admit to also being disappointed. The field needs people like you, now more than ever.

When you were on staff at the paper here, you worked several different beats. Fundamentally, all journalists should be doing the same work. As Dunne said, comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Question authority. Be a voice for the voiceless. Look into how the government is serving its people and hold public servants accountable. Be fearless and fair. Don’t accept the status quo.

In small towns, journalists can have their judgment clouded when they feel like they are part of a team of community leaders. They can allow themselves to be manipulated and told what’s best for the paper. Protect your integrity. Trust your instincts.

I can’t imagine a better inheritance than a newspaper. What a gift your uncle has given you. I’ve just subscribed to the Sven’s Beard Chronicle by mail, and I look forward to seeing what you do with it. I am always here if you need me.

All my best,

Claire Beaumont

THE HIDEOUT LOOKED different in daylight. It was scrubbed clean, the long

L-shaped bar filled with Crock-Pots and casseroles. There were two people running microfiber mops over the concrete floor to keep up with all the snow being tracked in on boots.

It seemed like half of the people in the crowded bar were looking at me. I smiled and murmured to Bess, “Is it me, or is everyone staring?”

“Just people getting their first look at you. They don’t mean anything by it.”

She put her Tupperware dish on the bar and slid out of her coat. I was taking my coat off when I saw Chief Grady walking into the bar, his massive frame filling the doorway.

He had the male version of RBF. RDF. It wasn’t a full scowl, but it sent a clear message—you’re probably annoying to me. But he’d taken me home from here the other night when I was drunk.

Which way would the asshole-nice Ping-Pong ball bounce today?

“Dig in, everybody!” a man with a short gray beard said from behind the bar. “Make sure you try Tipper’s jalapeño deer sausage; it’s a new recipe and he nailed it. We’ve also got some lutefisk, but when it’s gone it’s gone. And Barb’s got the details on window painting, so check in with her after you finish eating.”

Grady was with two other uniformed officers, and he got behind them in the food line. I was following Bess to the end of the line when I looked at Grady and our eyes locked.

“Hey,” he said gruffly. “Feeling better?”

I wasn’t sure if a jab about my drunkenness was coming, so I just nodded and said, “Thanks again.”

“Hey, is this her?” A barrel-shaped man with a black beard and a receding hairline approached and put his hand on my arm. “Are you Avon Douglas?”

From next to me, Bess sighed through her nose. Was she just hungry, or did she not like this guy?

“You can go ahead and get in line,” I said to her.

“No, I’ll wait for you. Avon, this is Ron Davison. He owns the car dealership and repair shop.”

Ron extended a hand to me. “It’s great to meet you, Avon. I was a friend of your dad’s.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I said. “How did you know my dad?”

“Dave and I grew up together. We were in the same Scout troop,

graduated in the same class.”

I couldn't picture my dad as a kid. I'd never seen any pictures and he hadn't said much about his childhood. Knowing Ron had known him then gave me a warm feeling, like I was a little bit closer to my dad.

“I'd love to hear more about that sometime,” I said.

Ron grinned. “Anytime. I was sorry to hear he passed. If you ask me, Pete took the whole thing with Amelia too hard and Dave never should've had to leave.”

Grady's *resting dick face* turned into a full scowl. “Nobody did ask you, Ron, so move the fuck along.”

I could feel my heartbeat everywhere as I looked at Ron, ignoring Grady.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Shoot, surely you know your mom was engaged to Pete first?”

I swallowed, my head spinning. “What?”

Ron chuckled. “Yeah, she left him for his own brother and then had a kid with him. At least, I *think* Dave was your dad. S'pose it could've been Pete,” Ron said.

I just stared at him for a few seconds. He had to be mistaken. There was no way what he'd just said was true.

But when I looked from Bess to Grady, it was written on their faces. That was why everyone stared at me. Why my parents fled their hometown and never looked back. The thing everyone else knew but didn't want to tell me.

I cleared my throat, trying to keep my composure. “I...didn't know, but that makes sense.”

He grinned sheepishly, about to speak when Grady cut him off.

“Ron, you're in the way. Move along.”

Though he wasn't in the way, Ron left. I met Grady's gaze, still stunned. He wasn't even the one who'd dropped a bomb on me in front of more than a hundred people, but he looked sorry anyway.

“Come on, Avon,” Bess said softly. “You shouldn't have had to find out that way.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” I whisper-hissed.

“It wasn't my place.”

I stopped walking and glared at her. “Whose place was it, then? You know that's why everyone in here is staring at me.”

Now Bess looked apologetic as she said, “I guess I should have told you.”

It was my parents who should have told me. They'd lied about so many

things, and then there were their many lies of omission. And now I'd never be able to hear their sides of the story.

I shook my head. "It's okay, this isn't your fault. I'm going to go."

"No, don't go."

"No, I really do need to. I won't work. I'll just hang out in the apartment."

And work from there, but I didn't say that. I needed to be alone. My mom had once been engaged to Pete. People here speculated about who my father was. I felt sick at the possibility that my dad, for all his faults, wasn't really *my dad*.

And worse, I might never have even known if I'd flown out two days ago as planned.

CHAPTER NINE

Grady

I SCOWLED at my computer screen as I thought about Ron Davison's comment to Avon a few hours earlier at The Hideout. The guy was an asshole and even though it wasn't in the scope of my job to investigate it, the whole town knew he was a tax evader and I was just waiting for the day the IRS would nail his ass to the wall. Sometimes I wished karma had a 1-800 number people could call to expedite the process.

The office was quiet on Svensdays, with just the essential staff working, so it was the one day I could actually get some work done.

The results of my database search for a DNA sample match popped up on my screen with the same answer it gave me week after week, month after month, year after year: no matches found.

I logged into another state's database and uploaded the sample there. As I waited, there was a soft scratch on my office door.

"You finally remember it's Svensday, Radar?" I said as I got up from my chair and walked over to the door.

I opened it just wide enough for him to walk through, because I didn't want anyone else getting any ideas about coming in during my quiet work time.

The black cat, who spent his days on a sunny window ledge in the lobby, getting attention from the dispatchers in their workroom or sleeping in a bed behind my desk, meowed and brushed past my leg.

“I got you something good,” I said, reaching into my pocket before I sat back down.

He jumped up on my desk as I set down several strips of dried salmon. Every Svensday, I brought him back something from the potluck lunch. That was the only part of the day I usually participated in. Painting windows and singing Christmas carols weren't my thing, but I did take part in the fishing tournaments in the summer.

As Radar ate his snack, I went back to my computer screen.

No matches found.

I moved on to the next one, following the same list of databases I did every week. There was a nationwide database, but not every department was connected to it. Though I wanted more than anything to get a hit from one of these searches, I did them for my own peace of mind.

This cold case would haunt me for the rest of my life, whether it got solved or not. It was my greatest failure as a man and as a police officer, and my inability to solve it only added salt to the wound that would never close.

While I waited for the next database search, I picked up the newspaper from the corner of my desk. There was a photo of Billy Grafton's kid trying to catch snowflakes with her tongue, and the caption below it said *Avon Douglas/Chronicle Staff*.

She was impulsive, at least I assumed so based on the way she'd run out in the street that day, and she had the same disdainful attitude most people from the big city had about the Beard.

Fun to visit, but why would anyone want to live there?

I'd never live anywhere else. This was my home, and I'd take the small-town busybodies over big-city snobs any day. Avon didn't know this place and its people like I did.

Her feistiness intrigued me, though, and I could never seem to make myself look away from her long, wild red hair that wasn't quite curly or straight, but a sexy in between. There weren't many people with the guts to dive in and run a newspaper they didn't even ask for, but she had.

I'd heard she fired the advertising representative, who never showed up on time, and was handling ad sales herself while she looked for a replacement. She probably didn't know that her fearless, hardworking attitude made her more like the people in this town than she realized.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger, telling myself to stop thinking about her. I had a policy about women in the Beard—

strictly professional relationships only. And women I saw for a night when I went into the city for a weekend a couple of times a year weren't relationships, either. Just a quick, easy way to scratch an itch. It had been close to a year since I'd even done that because it was a pain in the ass finding women who only wanted one night.

Radar finished his salmon and looked at me expectantly.

"That's it, buddy," I said, running a hand over his back. "You'll have to settle for your cat food later."

He stalked off, pissed. Radar was a moody bastard, just like me. That was probably why we got along well.

A window popped onto my computer screen: no results found.

I heard a commotion in the lobby and looked at the video feed on one of the screens hanging on the wall next to my desk. A group of people had arrived to paint the City Hall windows. I scanned the faces and saw that Avon wasn't with them. I'd assumed when she took off after Ron Fucking Davison's thoughtless comment that she wouldn't be returning to paint windows, and I couldn't blame her.

She'd looked so damn hurt as his words sank in, finding out in front of a bunch of strangers that her parents had deceived her and, worse, that everyone but her knew about it.

People had been talking about me for more than a decade, so I was used to it. The longer I went without a woman in my life, the more the gossip mill churned. I'd heard it all. Some people said I was waiting on a mail-order bride to arrive. Others said I was too stubborn and set in my ways for anyone to put up with me. Most people agreed that I'd never be able to move on from my broken heart.

I had moved on, just not with another woman. I'd moved on to a solo existence, working as late as I pleased, spending my weekends hunting and fishing and not answering to anyone. The TV dinners sucked, but other than that, I liked my life.

Hours passed, every database search leading me to a dead end, as usual. It was long past sunset when I looked at my cell phone screen and saw a text from Coulter.

Coulter: Meet up at The Hideout at 6:30?

It was 6:10 now, and I was hungry and sick of sitting in my office chair. I texted him back.

Grady: Yeah.

Coulter: See you there.

I powered down my computer and locked up my office, looking at the freshly painted windows on my walk through the lobby. It looked like there was a Twelve Days of Christmas theme this year, and City Hall had gotten nine ladies dancing. Most of the ladies looked like aliens or clowns, and I shook my head and laughed at the disastrous display. Some years art students from a college an hour or so away led the window painting, and some years the townspeople were on their own. No one with any sort of artistic talent had been part of this design.

Coulter was already bellied up to the bar when I walked into The Hideout.

“What’s up, Chief?” he said.

“Not much. Did you finish all the reports before you left?”

“Yep, they’re in your inbox.”

“Thanks.” I nodded at the bartender, Willie, as he sat a frosty mug of beer in front of me, then looked at Coulter. “You ordered that for me?”

He shrugged. “Someone’s got to take care of you, and I’m the closest you’ll ever get to a girlfriend.”

“Shit.” I laughed and took a sip of the dark stout. “You’re one ugly fucking girlfriend. I hope you can at least cook.”

“You know my cast-iron skillet meals are killer.”

“Everything tastes killer when you’ve been hunting in the cold for ten hours.”

He scoffed, looking offended. “Remember you said that when I bring peanut butter and jelly on our next trip.”

“Okay, precious. Your skillet meals are the best.”

He leaned over and spoke in a low tone. “Guess what I did this afternoon?”

“You took a nap.”

“You’re right about the bed part.” His eyes twinkled mischievously.

I groaned. “You slept with the hairstylist again.”

“Damn right I did. She’s been texting and asking me to slip her the old nightstick, and she was at home alone, so...” He shrugged.

Coulter had been having an on-again, off-again relationship with a local hairstylist for a few months now. She never wanted to go on dates with him; all she wanted was an occasional hookup. I thought he should end things, but he wouldn’t.

“Are you looking for congratulations?” I asked irritably.

“No, just telling you.”

“Just be careful,” I said for at least the dozenth time.

“Don’t worry about me; I’m a grown-ass adult. I know what I’m doing.”

What he was doing was setting himself up to get hurt. Coulter was thirty-seven years old, and he wanted a life partner. Unfortunately for him, he was drawn to women who treated him like shit.

When Willie delivered both of us a second beer as we waited on our food, Coulter slid off of his barstool.

“Let’s go to the toast,” he said.

“Nope.”

“Come on,” he urged.

“I’m good right here.”

It was a Svensday tradition for everyone in the downtown area to meet up at the Sven statue at 7:00 p.m. for a toast, always with mugs of beer. I’d done it many times in my twenties, but now, at age thirty-four, I no longer saw the point. It was a good time for the college-aged kids and old-timers, nothing more.

“Well, I’m going,” Coulter said, still not moving.

“Have fun.” I waved at him, my eyes on my phone screen. “And if you see Danny Price on his dad’s snowmobile, tell him I’ll be there any minute.”

Price had pushed me too far, driving the snowmobile all over town. If he’d been going to work, I would’ve let it slide, but he was going to bars on it, proving he’d learned nothing. Some people needed to see the inside of a jail cell to change their ways.

“You got it, boss,” Coulter said. “Don’t eat any of my fries if my food gets here while I’m gone.”

“I make no promises.”

He left the bar and I stayed focused on my phone, looking over both shoulders to make sure no one could see me as I typed “Avon Douglas” into the search bar on Facebook.

She actually had an account, and unlike me, she updated it more than once a year. Mine was exclusively hunting and fishing photos. She hadn’t posted anything since arriving in the Beard, but her other posts showed her smiling in groups of friends. In several photos, she was with the same female friend, and they were eating at different restaurants, all with the hashtag *brunch*.

Avon liked to read. She had posts about books she loved and others where she was pictured with dogs available for adoption, sharing their details.

I closed out the app, mentally scolding myself again. The last thing I needed to know was that the gorgeous redhead I couldn't keep off my mind volunteered helping shelter dogs. The point was to focus less on her, not more.

Taking a drink of my beer, I turned my attention to *SportsCenter*, which was playing on a TV screen mounted on the wall behind the bar. Football analysis was a much safer bet than anything involving Avon Douglas.

CHAPTER TEN

Avon

BESS STOMPED the snow off her boots as she walked into the back door of the *Chronicle*, doing a dramatic double take when she saw me sitting at my desk as she walked into the newsroom.

“What are you doing here so early?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Easy commute. And I couldn’t sleep.”

“It’s really coming down out there,” she said as she took her long coat off and hung it on the ancient coat tree in the corner.

It was snowing. Again. The view through our windows was almost solid white, the snowfall so thick you couldn’t see anything through it. I had an appointment Friday to get an estimate for a fix on the furnace in the apartment. My new bed was delivered yesterday, though. I’d immediately layered it with flannel sheets, fleece blankets, and a down comforter. Last night I’d burrowed myself beneath the covers at 7:30 p.m. and slept until 4:00 a.m. It was the best night of sleep I’d gotten since getting here.

“Hey, I wrote a feature story about the teacher who got the principal’s job at the grade school. Can you read it for me when you have a chance?” I asked Bess.

“You betcha.”

Bess wore many hats here, and one of them was editor. I’d discovered that by reading some of Pete’s drafts of stories and comparing them to the versions that ran in the paper. She’d cleaned up his grammar and polished

awkward sentences. Pete probably should have left the *Chronicle* to her, instead of his niece who preferred sunshine to blizzards.

My stomach twisted nervously. Surely I was his niece and not his daughter. The thought of my mom keeping a secret of that magnitude hurt me bone deep.

“Andrea from The Sleepy Moose is going to email you about their holiday ads,” I said, focusing on work to keep myself from worrying about questions without answers.

“I assume they’ll do their usual,” Bess said. “They’re pretty good about not making me build new ads all the time.”

“I think they just need you to change the dates of their events,” I said absently.

“Did you stop by 3B and introduce yourself?”

Since firing Dana, the advertising representative who thought work hours were just a loose suggestion, I’d become not just the only reporter for the *Chronicle*, but also, temporarily at least, the only ad rep. I was comfortable working in sales, but it was hard to find the time to keep up with everything. Usually, I was only able to carve out about thirty minutes a day to keep up with emails for my job back home.

“Uh...remind me what 3B is,” I said to Bess.

“Beard Books and Brews. The coffee and book place down the street.”

I grabbed a hair tie from my desk and used it to put my hair in a ponytail at the nape of my neck. I’d been meaning to stop by the coffee shop for a week now, not just because they were an advertising customer but also because I’d heard they made great coffee.

“Not yet,” I said. “Hopefully I can do it today after I get the roundups.”

Bess let out her sigh of disapproval. “Simone has been buying ads from us for many years. It doesn’t have to be a long meeting, you know. Just stop by to introduce yourself and thank her for her business.”

Because I had nothing else to do. I was putting in at least eleven hours a day, but my to-do list just kept getting longer.

“It’s not that I don’t know what to do, it’s that I haven’t had time,” I said, an edge in my tone.

“Well, don’t be surprised if we lose them as a customer.”

Pressing my lips together, I grabbed my headphones and put them on, then scrolled to the Escape from Bess playlist on my phone and pressed play.

A FEW HOURS LATER, I sat in the waiting room of the mayor's second-floor office at City Hall. It was a contrast to the clean white and gray tones on the first level of the building, with dark red carpet, leather chairs, and big, framed portraits of past Sven's Beard mayors.

All white dudes with beards, of course.

Dale Meecham, the current mayor, smiled brightly in his photo, his bushy gray mustache and matching comb-over making him look like a friendly grandpa.

"He's ready for you," the mayor's secretary, Sylvia, said.

I'd asked to meet with him and Chief Grady at the same time, and Grady was stuffed into a black chair across from the mayor when Sylvia opened the door and led me into the office.

Both men stood, Grady dislodging himself from between the armrests and scowling as he set the chair back on the floor.

"Avon, it's sure nice to meet you," the mayor said. "I'm Dale, and you already know Grady."

I shook his hand and nodded at Grady. "Yes, we've met. Thanks for letting me meet with both of you at the same time."

Dale waved a hand. "Anytime. We're pretty easy to get along with around here."

I smiled. "I try to be, too."

Grady coughed like that was humorous. I turned to him with a sharp look.

"What?" he said. "I had to cough."

I let my skeptical gaze linger on him another second before continuing. "As I was saying, I want to continue the strong working relationship Pete had with you guys. The stories that come out of City Hall and the police department are the backbones of a solid local newspaper."

Dale pointed at me and grinned. "See, I knew it. Didn't I tell you, Grady? I knew this one was more than just a pretty face. I'm so glad we got to meet and we look forward to working with you." He picked up a piece of paper from his desk and passed it to me. "And I'll just give you this week's roundup now so you don't have to get it from Sylvia."

Grady reached into a black leather notebook holder and pulled out a few papers, holding them out for me to take. "I can email this to you if you'd prefer."

“Oh, same for me,” Dale said. “I know you young people are way more into technology than I ever will be.”

I gave them both the smile that had closed more than a few pharmaceutical sales deals.

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the work you’ve put into those summaries every week for the *Chronicle*. But moving forward, I’ll be taking a more active role in news gathering.”

The mayor lowered his brows. “What do you mean?”

I reminded myself that this was how journalism was supposed to be done. My job, temporarily at least, was to question the establishment and not let elected officials tell me what was and wasn’t news. But the mayor and Grady were staring at me like I’d just told them about the spaceship I’d ridden here on.

“It’s going to be less work for you guys,” I said brightly. “I’ll be attending city council meetings, taking my own notes, and writing my own stories. And Grady, I want to work out a system where I can look over the types of calls the police have gotten over the week and ask you about them.”

He balked. “No one is allowed to look at our internal stuff but our staff. We have ongoing investigations and we can’t discuss them.”

“I know, but”

Dale interrupted. “We need to stick with the system Pete had in place. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, right?”

Grady nodded. “My roundup includes a record of every arrest made. I’ll continue providing it to you.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Avon. Let us keep doing our part so you can focus on other things. Aren’t you the only advertising person? You have to pay the bills, so put your energy into that.”

He didn’t want me to worry my pretty little head. Neither of them did. But I wasn’t backing down. Yes, I was a twentysomething woman who preferred beaches and Starbucks to the ice and snow of the Beard, but I was determined to run the *Chronicle* in a way I was proud of until the day I sold it.

“Thank you for making your positions clear,” I said, standing up. “I’m going to do some research on Minnesota’s freedom of information laws and get back to you, Chief Grady. And Mayor Meecham, I already know that city council meetings are required to be open and you can’t keep the public from attending. So I’ll be at the next one.”

The mayor waved his hand in a downward motion, his way of telling me to sit back down.

“No, no, no. We’re not here to make trouble for you, Avon. Pete devoted his life to keeping a newspaper in this town when they’re dying everywhere else.”

His desk looked like it was solid cherry. It was a far cry from the broken-down particle board ones in the newsroom.

“Great,” I said, smiling. “So I’ll see you at the meeting Tuesday night, and I’d love to be able to approach you afterward with questions.”

“Absolutely,” the mayor said. “My door is always open to you. And Chief Grady and I will talk to our city attorney about what police records we’re allowed to share with you.”

Grady crossed his arms, frowning. “I’m not sharing anything that could compromise an investigation or put my officers in danger.”

“I’m not interested in doing either of those things,” I assured him.

“Well, you don’t get to be the arbiter of what does and doesn’t get released,” he said in a gruff tone. “I do.”

It was like trying to have a conversation with a grouchy bear who kept me on my toes by suddenly using the word “arbiter” and using it correctly.

“I’m hoping we can work together to come up with something we can both live with,” I said.

He scoffed. “I just don’t know why we have to change what we’re already doing.”

He reminded me of Bess, who was so set in her ways that she was offended by the mere suggestion of change. I’d bought a different brand of coffee for the newsroom the other day and she reacted like I made her whole work environment unbearable.

I looked at my watch. “I have to go; I have another meeting. But thank you both for your time, and I wish you a happy Thanksgiving.”

It was Wednesday for me, Svensday for everyone else here. And though I respected their tradition, there was no way I could take half of today off and all of tomorrow. I had to work all day today to keep my to-do list from inducing a panic attack.

“You, too,” the mayor said. “Tell Don and Laura I said hello.”

“I will.”

Grady didn’t say a word. His feathers were ruffled, but he was going to have to get over it. We both had jobs to do, and we had to get along to do

them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Avon

MY UNCLE DON and Aunt Laura had a fish-shaped mailbox. I turned and looked back at it as I stood on their front porch, reminding myself that people with a fish mailbox were probably nice.

Why was I so nervous about this? When Laura had called to invite me over for Thanksgiving, she'd told me how much she was looking forward to meeting me. It was going to be fine. And Harper would be there; I already knew she was sweet and friendly.

But this was my mom's sister. A living link to her. I wanted so badly for her to like me and for her to be like my mom. I clutched the casserole dish I'd brought so hard my fingers started to burn.

"There she is!" A tall, bald man with a salt-and-pepper beard and a sweater with a huge fish on it grinned at me from beside the door he'd opened. "Come on in, Avon. I'm your Uncle Don."

He opened his arms to hug me but stopped short when he saw the dish I was holding.

"Ope, that would be a messy hug," he said, grinning. "Why don't I take that and let Aunt Laura get the first hug?"

"She's here?"

An excited female voice sounded from nearby as I slid out of my coat. As soon as Laura came around the corner, smiling, my eyes flooded with tears.

She had my mom's bright, beautiful eyes. Though she was shorter and

had longer, darker hair than my mom, just seeing eyes that reminded me of my mom's was enough to make me break down. I was twenty-nine years old, but I still wanted my mom. I always would.

Laura wrapped me in a hug, not saying a word as I cried and she did, too. Don shooed someone as he walked away.

"Give 'em a minute, guys," he said. "Oh, hey, did you find the electric knife?"

Don's voice was straight-up Minnesotan. Warm, friendly, and distinctive, especially when he said the word *oh*. Laura's was similar.

"You're so beautiful," she said when we finally pulled apart and she looked me over. "I always knew from the pictures your mom sent, but seeing you in person..." Her eyes welled with tears again as she took my hands and squeezed them. "I always wanted to know you, Avon. I want you to know that. Our parents did, too. Laura had her reasons, and we'll find some time to sit down and talk about that later. For now, I'm just so happy you're here."

I nodded as Harper walked in and gave me a hug.

"Thanks for inviting me," I said. "I brought a broccoli rice and cheese casserole."

Laura waved a hand. "Oh, you didn't have to do that, but it was sure nice of you. Come on in and meet everyone."

Their home was a modest, well-kept ranch, the walls loaded with family photos. Laura led me down to the basement, where around a dozen people milled around a bar in a large family room, playing darts and eating appetizers.

I met Don's mother, Charlotte. His brother and sister-in-law, Chris and Mandy, their adult children Carter and Allison, Allison's husband Frank and their twins Abbie and Carson.

"And these are our neighbors who are like family, Bob and Sherry Denton and Austin Lawson."

Austin was playing pool, and he took a break to rest the end of his cue on the floor and grin at me. It was the first time I'd seen him since the awkward ending of our evening at The Hideout, but he looked as smooth and confident as ever.

"Hey, Avon," he said. "You up for some pool? This is my first time playing."

The man at the other end of the table, Bob Denton, cackled. "Don't listen to him; he's a hustler."

Harper appeared beside me, saying, “She’s coming upstairs anyway.”

Austin shot her a quick, disapproving look, then shrugged. She led me back toward the stairs.

“Let’s go have some wine,” she said.

“You’re not an Austin fan?” I whispered.

She laughed bitterly. “No. He got to you before I could warn you that night at The Hideout. He’s a revolving door of dick—just spins around and sticks it in everyone he can.”

“Oh. So have you—”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, but I don’t want to talk about it.”

I was even more glad Grady had driven me home that night at The Hideout because I didn’t want to sleep with anyone my cousin had a history with.

“Okay, so...wine would be good,” I said.

“Wine would be very good.”

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, I sat between Harper and Laura at the long, oak dining table in Don and Laura’s dining room, the table crammed full of every Thanksgiving dish I’d ever heard of and more.

Don had proudly carved up the turkey in the kitchen with his electric knife. It was funny that I’d been nervous about meeting him and Laura because they were the nicest people I’d ever known. Don was always laughing, sometimes at his own terrible dad jokes. I saw in him a contentedness that my father never seemed to fully find.

“You got some lutefisk, right, Avon?” he said, eyeing my plate from the other side of the table.

“I did.”

“Best in the Beard,” he proclaimed. “Made it myself. Try it.”

The white fish, which he pronounced loo-te-fisk, was unlike any fish I’d ever eaten. He’d made sure I scooped some onto my plate, and my first clue that something was off was the large serving spoon in the dish. A spoon for fish?

Yes, if it was the consistency of Jell-O. And it was. Don was staring at me, waiting for me to try the fish goo.

“Yeah, I can’t wait,” I said, taking a sip of water and steeling myself.

“You’ll want this,” Harper said, picking up a gravy boat full of melted butter and dousing my goo.

“Harper, don’t,” Don objected. “You’ll ruin the flavor.”

I was pretty sure I’d be thanking her later for ruining the flavor. I scooped up a bite, everyone at the table waiting for me to eat it.

Whatever it tasted like, I’d had worse in my mouth. Hopefully. I wasn’t going to offend my uncle, so I ate it.

It was liquidy, with a mild flavor. No chewing required—it just slid down my throat. I nodded with appreciation as a soapy aftertaste kicked in.

“Very good,” I said.

“See?” Don beamed at his wife. “It’s in her blood. She’s a Beard girl, through and through.” He picked up his glass. “To our niece, Avon, at the first of what we hope will be many Thanksgivings together.”

Everyone toasted and drank, and I felt warm inside. This was the only place I’d been in Sven’s Beard where I wasn’t seen as the new owner of the *Chronicle* or whispered about because of my parents. Here, I was just Avon.

“So how do you make lutefisk, Uncle Don?” I asked, moving on to my mashed potatoes.

“Oh, it’s a long process. I always use cod, and I dry it for at least ten days. Then I soak it in water and lye”

“Lye?” I cut him off. “Not like *lye lye*, right?”

“Just good old-fashioned lye.” He grinned as he picked up a giant turkey leg.

I put a hand on my chest, trying not to look as alarmed as I felt. “Isn’t lye able to dissolve...things?”

Entire human bodies. Lye could dissolve entire human bodies. I’d learned about it in a college science class. It was also used to clean drains and make soap, which explained the aftertaste.

Don chuckled. “Dissolved a lot of my mom’s silverware when I was learning to make it. She wasn’t too happy with me. It’s all about how long you soak it.”

I picked up my glass of water and downed the entire thing. Now would be a great time to throw up, but I didn’t want to offend my aunt and uncle.

“It won’t hurt you,” Harper said in a low tone. “I’ve been eating it my whole life.”

“I hate it,” Laura said. “Your mom always did, too.”

How could anyone not hate it? I was devising a plan in my head to mix the gooey fish with something else on my plate in hopes of disguising it and then not eating that thing. One bite of lutefisk was more than enough for me.

“I THINK that’s everything I have,” Aunt Laura said a few hours later as I closed the cover of a photo album.

“Thank you,” I said, my tears dry now but my emotions still welling.

We’d spent the past couple of hours looking through her albums, several of which contained the only childhood pictures I’d ever seen of my mom. Laura said they’d been a happy family, their dad an iron miner and their mom a teacher.

Everyone else was downstairs, so Laura, Harper, and I had the main level to ourselves. We were all curled up on an overstuffed sofa, a fire crackling in the fireplace.

“She loved Pete,” Laura said. “But I don’t think they ever slept together. They were waiting until after the wedding.”

My shoulders sank with relief. “Really?”

She put her hand over mine. “There were rumors about it after she left, of course. Dave came home from college for the wedding and told her he loved her. They eloped and got pregnant with you right away.”

“That must’ve been hard for Pete.”

Laura sighed softly. “He was devastated. Pete only ever had eyes for Amelia. But she wanted to leave the Beard and see the world, and so did Dave. The *Chronicle* was the Douglas family business, but Dave never wanted anything to do with it. Pete took it over because it was either that or our town would have lost its paper.”

“So my parents just left because they wanted to?”

I was right on the edge of the answer to one of the questions that had been plaguing me since I got here. Had my parents been forced to go, or had it been their choice?

Laura’s brow creased as she considered how to answer. “That was part of it, but also...” She shook her head and looked away. “Your mom wanted to protect you from all of this, but I think you deserve to know. It was a scandal in our little town, her leaving Pete like that the day before the wedding, and

for his brother. It was hard for our parents.”

They’d left their hometowns, with devastated family members in their wake. I wasn’t ashamed of them for it, but I wasn’t proud, either.

“It was messy,” Laura said. “But Amelia and I always stayed in touch. She sent me pictures of you and I sent pictures of Harper and Ben.”

It hit me with sudden, crystal clarity—they hadn’t left because they wanted to, but because they had to. I couldn’t help hurting on their behalf. They’d been younger than me, and they’d had to leave their families, with no one to rely on but each other.

“Your parents wanted them to go, didn’t they?” I asked Laura.

She took my hand in hers. “Yes. And Dave’s parents did, too. They never forgave him, and neither did Pete. It’s funny—Pete was able to forgive Amelia but not his brother. Amelia sent him pictures of you. In his own way, Pete eventually moved on. He found happiness in other things.”

Harper put an arm around me and leaned her head on my shoulder. She was hearing most of this for the first time, too.

“Thanks for telling me,” I said to Laura.

“Of course.”

We sat in silence for a minute and then Harper said, “I think we should go for a walk.”

“A walk? It’s freezing outside,” I said.

She laughed and got up from the couch. “This is a nice day for Thanksgiving in the Beard. It’s not snowing. We’ll wear hats and gloves.”

I grumbled some more, but in the end, Harper and I left the house in borrowed hats, coats, scarves, and gloves from Don and Laura.

“We’ll walk to the lake,” she said. “Have you been to the lake yet?”

“Not yet. Not having a car here makes my world pretty small.”

“Didn’t Pete leave you his truck?”

“Yeah, but it has a flat tire. I need to get that fixed.”

She linked her arm through mine. “I could’ve given you a ride today.”

“You can give me a ride home if you want. Devon gave me a ride on the way since he was heading to his parents’ house.”

Karlsson Lake was on the edge of town, and it was apparently a hub for lots of activities. Fishing, cardboard boat races, and canoeing in the summer, and ice-skating in the winter. There were at least twenty people on the ice today, all spread out. Some were skating, and a few were shooting hockey pucks.

“Wait a minute.” I squinted at a man playing hockey with two boys. “Is that...?”

“It’s Ryan Grady,” Harper said. “He’s the police chief. Have you met him?”

“A few times,” I muttered.

“Other than Keller Strauss, Grady is the most eligible bachelor in the Beard.” Harper’s gaze was locked on him. “He treats me like a little sister, but I’d give my left tit for a shot with him.”

I burst into laughter. “He’s not worth giving up a tit for.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh yes, he is. Did you know he had a serious girlfriend who passed away? It was like ten years ago, and he hasn’t had another girlfriend since.”

Grady struck me as the type who held everything on his shoulders so that nothing bad could ever happen to him. That was shallow of me, though; of course he could be hurt. I suddenly felt bad for being so critical of him. But tragic past or not, he didn’t need to be so abrasive.

“That’s sad,” I said.

“Yeah, he was like twenty-four when it happened. His dad used to be the police chief before him. Did you know that? Also, he wears a size thirteen in shoes and I’ve seen his bulge—it’s the real deal.”

“His *bulge*?” I cringed. “Was he wearing a Speedo or something?”

“No, his uniform. And I guess it wasn’t a full bulge; it was like a side outline. But it was an impressive side outline.”

“Put some muscle into it!” Grady yelled at one of the boys, his hands cupped around his mouth. “Hit it like you mean it!”

Harper sighed dreamily. “I’ll hit it like I mean it. As many times as he wants.”

I playfully shoved her shoulder. “You’re ridiculous. He’s crankier than any old man I’ve ever met.”

“I’ll give him something to smile about,” she cracked.

“Who are the boys?” I asked.

She grinned at me. “See? You’re interested, too.”

“I’m just making conversation.”

“Sure you are.” She waggled her brows. “They aren’t his if that’s what you mean. He coaches youth hockey. Also hot.”

We weren’t far from him now, and Grady looked in our direction. Our eyes met, but he showed no reaction.

“Aren’t you supposed to be eating turkey?” I asked him, cupping my hands around my mouth and yelling so he could hear me.

“Already did.” His gaze slid down and then back up again. “Nice boots.”

His tone, as usual, carried a note of sarcasm. So he didn’t just want me to get boots, they had to be the exact boots he would have chosen.

“Thanks.”

He shook his head. “Don’t call me when you fall on your ass.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

He turned his attention back to the boys, both decked out in hockey gear. Harper smirked at me, her brows arched.

“So you’ve got a thing for him,” she said.

I balked. “What? I can’t stand him. He’s an ass like eighty-five percent of the time.”

“That exchange back there was banter. You guys will end up in bed. Guarantee it. Which, I mean, if I can’t have him, I’m glad you will.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “There’s not even a remote possibility of that happening. It’s hilarious that you think that.”

Pulling my hat down to cover the bottoms of my ears, I glared at her. “I’m not even going to be here for another month, but I could be here for the next decade and not be tempted by him. He may be good-looking, but he has the charm of a rock.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” my cousin said. “And obviously, I want all the details when you’re wrong.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Grady

“WAS THE LAKE BUSY?” my dad asked as he rolled his wheelchair into the room.

I shrugged as I held my hands in front of the fire crackling in the great room fireplace, trying to thaw them. One of the boys who had met me at the lake for extra help shooting had forgotten his gloves, so I’d given him mine.

“About like usual,” I said.

“I had to take a post-turkey nap,” he said with a smile. “I’m not used to getting up that early anymore.”

Dad was one of those guys who had to work hard at retirement. A former Marine who’d spent his career in law enforcement, he liked the structure of a schedule. He filled his days with woodworking, perfecting recipes on his smoker, and when the weather was better, fishing from his dock on the small lake their cabin was on.

After his injury, he and my mom had battled over a few things. He’d won the round about continuing to mow on his riding lawn mower, having it equipped with accessible hand gas and brake pedals; she’d gotten her way about him not ice-fishing in his wheelchair.

He missed it, just like he missed hunting, but one thing my dad excelled at was adapting. He’d taught me and my sister not to get bitter about things we couldn’t change. Life threw curveballs.

“Well, it was worth that 3:00 a.m. wake up,” I said. “That turkey was

fantastic.”

“I’m sure your mother will send so much home with you that you’re sick of turkey sandwiches by next week.”

“Sounds better than the Hungry Man dinners I usually eat.”

“You know you’re welcome here for dinner anytime,” Dad said, picking up the remote to turn on the TV over the fireplace. “I think the game is still in the first quarter.”

As soon as I sat down on the couch, my mom spoke from the open kitchen, where she was working at the island.

“Who wants apple pie?”

I’d put away a lot of food, but I couldn’t say no to my mom’s apple pie. I got up and walked over to the kitchen to help her.

“I’ll take some,” I said.

“Holding? What a bullshit call,” Dad muttered from the other room. “He barely touched him.”

My younger sister Shea came into the kitchen then, her brows knitted together with concern.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

“Oh, just work stuff.”

Shea managed the kitchen at The Sleepy Moose, the lodge on the lake where everyone stayed when they visited the Beard. I was surprised she’d taken Thanksgiving off this year because the lodge was always booked full for holidays.

“Anything major?” Mom asked.

Shea opened the carton of vanilla ice cream on the island and used the scoop next to it to put ice cream onto a plate of warm pie.

“We didn’t get our full shipment of eggs and they replaced the mushrooms I ordered with turnips,” she grumbled. “I hate it when the produce supplier does that. We can’t make turnip risotto.”

Shea lived and breathed for cooking at the lodge. She’d gotten a job there the summer after her freshman year of college and never returned to school. I never turned down an invitation to test new menu items for her because she was a phenomenal cook.

“So what’s going on between you and the new *Chronicle* owner?” Shea asked as she settled a scoop of ice cream beside another slice of pie.

My mom looked back and forth between us, her eyes wide with hope. I scowled, trying to dispel the visions of grandchildren dancing through her

head.

“Nothing,” I said.

Shea narrowed her eyes in a doubtful look. “I heard the two of you recently left The Hideout together on a Saturday night.”

That wasn’t surprising. There was no such thing as a secret in the Beard. Everyone talked about things that happened and speculated about things that hadn’t.

“I gave her a ride home,” I said, taking a plate of pie over to Dad.

Shea laughed and exchanged a look with my mom. “I heard you saw her with Austin Lawson and went over to the table like a jealous caveman and dragged her out of there.”

I grunted wearily because, as police chief, I was used to everything I did being gossiped about in my small town. But there hadn’t been a hint of “jealous caveman” in me that night at The Hideout.

At least, I didn’t think so.

“I’d help any woman Austin Lawson was trying to seduce,” I said dismissively.

“Her name’s Avon, right?” Shea kept going, undeterred. “Avon Douglas. I heard she’s beautiful.”

“I don’t really pay attention.” It was a lie, but a necessary one. “She comes in to get information for the paper and I give it to her. That’s it.”

Mom gave me a serious look. “Ryan, you don’t seem to have any interest in any women here, so if a pretty new face comes to town, maybe you should pay closer attention to her.”

I scoffed. “She’s a pain in the ass. She wants to start digging around in police business instead of just taking the information I give her. That’s how Pete always did it and it worked just fine.”

“Maybe she just wants to spend more time with you,” Shea said, grinning.

I swiped my plate of pie from the counter and went over to the couch, done with the conversation.

“I thought the paper would fold when Pete passed away,” Dad said. “I’m glad his niece is making an effort with it.”

“She’s not making any friends at City Hall,” I said gruffly. “She’s pesky.”

Dad gave me an amused look. “Since when is it a journalist’s job to make friends? Pete loved taking photos and keeping his staff in a job. The rest of it he just muddled his way through.”

“His system worked. We do things differently here than in California.”

“People tend to be set in their ways here,” my mom said, prompting me to give her a confused look.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” I said.

She shrugged as she walked over with a piece of pie and sat down next to Shea on a love seat.

“It can be,” she said. “Just don’t assume all change is bad.”

My mom was born and raised in Minneapolis, and she moved to the Beard after falling for my dad when they were introduced by mutual friends. She was past ready for me to get married and give her grandchildren, so she saw women in our town in a very rosy light.

“I deal with change all the time,” I grumbled. “But no one’s going to tell me how to run my department.”

“Are you for real?” my dad yelled at the TV. “That was not a catch!”

Shea picked up her phone, groaning as she read a text. “I have to go. There’s a mascarpone situation at work.”

“I should go too,” I said, forking up the last of my pie. “I have to meet my Winter Showdown group for some axe-throwing lessons.”

Dad turned toward me, suddenly interested. “Who’s in your group this year?”

I shook my head. “I got Georgette and Olivia. We don’t stand a chance.”

Every year, the Sven’s Beard Business Bureau held a Winter Showdown and a Summer Showdown. The police chief and the fire chief were each the captain of a team, and the teams were made up of representatives of the ten businesses that donated the most to the bureau. It was a status symbol for the businesses. Half the town showed up to watch our teams compete. This year’s Winter Showdown would consist of axe throwing, an obstacle course, snowball throwing, and a cold plunge into Lake Karlsson.

Georgette Hoyer, the owner of Beard Blooms, the local floral shop, was on the losing team every year. Not only was she slow, she didn’t have a competitive bone in her body.

I’d definitely be giving the showdown trophy up, but I wasn’t going down without a fight. I was giving axe and snowball throwing lessons to anyone in my group who would show up.

“I remember those days,” Dad said. “I know it doesn’t feel like it now, but it’s really not about who wins.”

When he was police chief, my dad led dozens of showdowns. He’d always been competitive, but the accident had made him more introspective.

“I don’t want to listen to six months of Painter’s shit,” I grumbled. “And that trophy looks good on the shelf in my office.”

“Happy Thanksgiving, you two,” Mom said to me and Shea as we put our coats on. “It’s hard to believe that someday soon we’ll have little ones running around here on Thanksgiving...hopefully.”

Shea and I exchanged a glance, both of us deciding to just ignore her comment. I was thirty-four and Shea was thirty, and neither of us was anywhere close to getting married.

Mom still believed, though. She irrationally hoped I’d fall crazy in love with some woman, move her into my house and have babies with her. I was too set in my ways for that, though.

I liked my life just fine as it was, Hungry Man dinners and all.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Avon

THE MONDAY MORNING after Thanksgiving was a quiet one in the *Chronicle* newsroom, everyone scrambling to make up for the time off last week.

“I forgot where I’m supposed to put photo captions,” I said to Bess from my side of the newsroom.

“It’s a cutline, and it goes in the cutline folder. Make sure it has the same slug as the photo.”

I’d taken some decent photos over the weekend. A couple of them were of women selling quilts and noodles at a church bazaar, and others showed men ice-fishing and kids sledding. Every week, I got excited about seeing my pictures in the paper. It was like I’d frozen time for a second, and now I got to share that second with our subscribers.

I was peering at my notebook, typing the names of the ice fishermen when a text popped up on the screen of my phone, which sat on my desk next to the keyboard.

Kerry: We need to talk.

Shit. My boss in San Diego only said that when she was pissed. I was technically using paid time off right now, but I still checked emails daily and kept up with as much as I could.

I picked up the phone and texted her back.

Avon: Sorry, on deadline to get the paper to press on time. This afternoon okay?

Kerry: I suppose it will have to be.

My stomach rolled. I was a classic people pleaser, working extra hours not just so I could make more money, but so that my boss would know I was devoted to my job. That was why I had six weeks of vacation days built up—I'd never taken time off.

"It's Lake Karlsson, not Karlsson Lake," Bess said absently as she read the photo caption I'd just uploaded. "Or just 'the lake,' because everyone knows which one it is."

"Lake Karlsson," I said, trying to decide if I should apologize to Kerry for not being available until later.

"The B section is done," Devon said from his desk. "Other than the two photos Sam is sending over."

"Did the obits jump?" Bess asked.

"Yep. There were a lot this week."

The front door was pulled open and a tall blond man in a coat that said SBFDF stepped in and stomped the snow from his boots.

"Avon Douglas?" he said, his gaze landing on me.

"Yes, how can I help you?"

"I'm Curt Painter, the fire chief." He walked over to my desk. "You're on my team this year for the Winter Showdown."

I stopped typing and looked up at him. "The what?"

He lowered his brows, looking aggravated. "The Winter Showdown. The gold level supporters of the Sven's Beard Business Bureau all send a representative to compete. We're throwing axes and snowballs, running an obstacle course, and jumping in the lake."

I laughed a single note. "Jumping in the lake? When?"

"Saturday."

Yeah, that was a big no. I shook my head. "I can't make it, sorry."

Bess sighed her disapproval.

"You have to make it, or we're disqualified," Curt said. "Both teams have to be full."

There was a zero percent chance I was going to jump into a lake in subzero weather. I looked over at Devon but spoke to Chief Painter.

"Can't someone else from the *Chronicle* do it? I'm sure Devon would be better than me."

"I'm not a full-time employee," Devon said, not looking away from his screen.

“Has to be a full-time employee,” Bess said, giving me a scolding look. How was I supposed to know that?

“Sam would be great, and he’s full time,” I suggested.

“Sam has a heart condition,” Bess said.

“One of the pressmen?”

Bess shook her head. “Pete always did the showdowns.”

“You don’t want me on your team,” I told the chief. “Try one of the pressmen.”

“The rosters are already finalized and you’re on my team,” he said firmly.

I scoffed. “No one even asked me.”

“You don’t want to do it?” the chief asked, disbelief in his tone.

Bess jumped in. “Of course she wants to do it. The *Chronicle* has always been a top supporter of the business bureau. The businesses in the community are the lifeblood of this newspaper. Avon’s just stressed because she’s on deadline. She’ll be there.”

I met Bess’s gaze, her eyes doubling in size as she silently warned me not to say another word about not wanting to do the showdown. And deep down, I knew she was right. We couldn’t afford to offend anyone from the business bureau.

“I’ll be there,” I echoed, dreading my jump in the lake already.

The chief nodded. “Wear comfortable clothes and good boots, and bring a change of clothes for the lunch after.”

“Where is this event being held?”

“At The Sleepy Moose,” he said. “You guys have a table for eight for the lunch.”

Lunch after jumping in the lake? That sounded great. Just great.

“We’ll see you Saturday, Chief,” Bess said. “And good luck in the showdown.”

He grinned at her. “I won’t need luck. Grady got Georgette.”

Grady. Of course. It seemed like wherever I went in this town, there he was.

TWO HOURS LATER, Bess, Sam and I all stared at Devon’s computer monitor, getting our final look at the front page of the paper before it went to press.

“That’s a nice layout,” Sam said.

“Thanks,” Devon said. “I thought I’d try something different.”

We’d all pored over large hard copies of the front page already, all of us checking for spelling errors or other oversights. But this step—staring at it on Devon’s monitor—was always part of the process.

The silence was broken by a loud gurgling noise from my stomach. Bess gave me a disapproving look, like I’d offended her with my hunger.

“I skipped breakfast,” I said absently.

“You want a granola bar?” Sam offered.

“No, thanks. Once we finish this, I’m going to Tipper’s to eat lunch and read.”

“So we’re good?” Devon asked.

I looked at Bess, and she nodded.

“I think so,” I said.

“You betcha,” Sam said. “Nice work, everyone.”

The group disbanded and I grabbed my laptop and put my coat on, hoping to get to Tipper’s before the lunch rush. Some days I went up to the apartment and made lunch, but Tipper’s food was better. I also liked to run into business owners there so I could casually mention advertising to them.

More than a foot of snow covered the ground, but it wasn’t actively snowing now. Sun glinted off the piles of fallen flakes, giving the downtown a picturesque look.

I smiled as I passed Sweets of Gold, the locally owned candy shop and bakery that had a gold brick walkway leading up to its front door. It was my favorite place to stop in to drop off the latest edition of the *Chronicle*, which I’d be doing this afternoon. The owner, Olivia Carmichael, was always behind the counter cutting and wrapping her fresh chocolates in gold foil wrappers. Even her cupcakes had gold dust sprinkles on top. Her signature candy was a chocolate-covered beard filled with caramel.

Not even the smell of her caramel could distract me today, though. I needed an actual meal. I’d worked late last night and made do with a few pieces of leftover turkey in my fridge for dinner, and I was starving.

When I opened the door to Tipper’s, I deflated when I saw people at every table and booth.

“Hey Avon, there’s room at the bar,” a server named Savannah said to me as I scanned the room.

“Thanks,” I said, heading that way to grab any open seat I could find.

There was only one open seat, though, at the very end, and I recognized the man in the seat next to that one immediately from his massive shoulders and back.

Grady. Of course. But it didn't matter because I had a book about Freedom of Information laws to keep me busy.

"Chief Grady," I said in greeting as I took my coat off and hung it on the back of the barstool.

"Hey, Avon," he said.

"How's it going?" I said, feeling obligated to make small talk.

"Not bad. You?"

"Good."

Tipper saved me from further awkwardness by showing up with his pad and paper in hand.

"What can I get you today, Avon?" he asked.

"Do you have that chicken tortilla soup?"

"Sure do."

"I'll take a bowl of that and a grilled cheese. And an iced tea."

"You got it."

I snuck a glance at Grady to see if our conversation was still going or if we'd dispensed with the niceties. He was looking straight ahead, so I opened my book.

I'd only been reading for about thirty seconds when he turned to me, brows arched.

"Really? You just happen to be reading a book on how to break my balls while sitting next to me?"

I set the book down. "I do just happen to be reading a book on Freedom of Information laws, yes, because this is the only time I can fit reading in. And I'm not reading this to break your balls."

"Sure you're not. The city attorney already lectured me on Freedom of Information laws, so don't worry, you're going to get your way. Might as well just give you the keys to my office and let you go through my files."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm glad you're not melodramatic or anything."

He shook his head, about to say something else when Tipper slid a plate in front of him.

"There you go, Chief. Careful, those potatoes are hot."

"Thanks, Tipper."

Steam rose from the mashed potatoes and gravy on his plate. He'd also

gotten the meatloaf and some broccoli.

“Eat some carbs; it’ll improve your mood,” I said, smiling sarcastically.

“My mood’s just fine, thanks.”

“Great, then eat a bag of dicks instead.”

He set his fork down. “Are you always so surly?”

“Me? I just came here to read and have lunch.”

Tipper grinned as he set my iced tea down. “Thanks, you two. You just won me ten bucks.”

Grady and I both gave him puzzled looks.

“How’s that?” Grady asked.

Tipper gestured toward the other end of the bar with his thumb. “A few of us had a bet going on how long it would take you two to start going at it.”

My face heated with embarrassment. People speculated about me and Grady *going at it*?”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Grady said. “I’m just eating lunch.”

“And I’m just reading a book,” I said, gesturing toward it.

Tipper winked at me. “Sure you are.”

He tapped the counter and headed away, grabbing a towel from a bucket to wipe down the counter where someone had vacated their seat.

Grady finished his food, threw down some cash and slid out of his seat.

“See you Thursday,” I said, the day I came in to gather police news. “And Saturday, too.”

He scowled. “Why Saturday?”

I smiled sweetly. “The Winter Showdown. I’m on the fire chief’s team.”

“Great. Make sure you wear those ridiculous boots.”

Asshole. I’d gone from not caring about the showdown to caring *a lot* in a matter of a few minutes.

“I hear Georgette’s your co-captain,” I said.

His nostrils flared and his lips thinned. I’d hit a nerve.

“Have a nice day, Avon,” he ground out.

“You too, Chief.”

I went back to my book, my heart racing for some unexplainable reason. Apparently people knew that Grady drove me crazy and that I had the same effect on him. But no one knew my heart raced every time we were within five feet of each other or that I loved his light, woodsy scent, and I planned to keep it that way.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Avon

I CAREFULLY SET a rusty cake pan on top of the mountain of dishes and small kitchen appliances in the middle of the apartment kitchen, then threw my arms up in celebration.

I'd done it. I'd cleaned out every kitchen cabinet. Pete had a collection of outdated kitchen implements, most of which I suspected he'd rarely used. And since it was Svensday and I couldn't work in the newsroom, I'd decided to spend the day purging the apartment of clutter and cleaning it. My new bed and bedding had inspired me to see the potential in the small but functional space. After spending nearly five thousand dollars of my own money getting a furnace and new ductwork for the apartment, I wanted to maximize my return on investment by making it cozy and appealing to potential buyers.

I was hoping I'd have time to paint, and I had my eye on a small brown leather sofa from a local furniture store. But first, I had to get the place clean.

Grabbing the sub sandwich I'd picked up earlier from the local deli, I sat down at the kitchen table to eat and look through the stack of letters I'd found in a kitchen drawer while cleaning.

The pile was thick, a rubber band wrapped around it. I'd flipped through the pile when I found it, tears welling in my eyes when I saw my mom's handwriting in the return address section of each one.

Part of me didn't want to read them. What if the rumors about Pete being my father were true, and the confirmation was inside one of these envelopes?

These letters weren't intended for me. But my parents had left me with too many unanswered questions to ignore. I needed to know more, and these letters were my best chance.

I pushed the sandwich aside and opened the first envelope.

OCTOBER 14, 1990

Dear Pete,

I'm sorry. I know those words will never be enough to make up for what I did, but I mean them.

I hope you're well. I'm writing from Venice, Italy. We've been here for about a month, and both of us are working. The pay isn't much, but it's enough that we are able to travel on weekends. The gondolas—boats, not sandwiches, ha ha—are incredible. I thought of you on our first gondola ride and wished you were with us experiencing it.

I agonized over whether to tell you that and whether to even write this letter. But I decided to be honest and the truth is I love both you and Dave. I always will. When you and I got engaged, I didn't realize how much I wanted to leave the Beard and experience the world. I want you to move on and find someone who loves you with her whole heart. You deserve that. But it was important for me to tell you I didn't run off and forget you. I think of you often and I'm deeply sorry I hurt you.

Be well, Pete.

Amelia

FEBRUARY 16, 1991

Dear Pete,

Hello from Nazaré, Portugal. This little beach town is heavenly. It's my first February without snow. We both work baking bread in a little bakery here and the kitchen feels like it's about 100 degrees. But the evenings and weekends are worth it. The people here are so nice, and I love to watch the surfers take on the huge waves.

I hope you're well. We plan to be here for at least another couple of months, so if you could write back at the return address, I'd love to hear how you're doing.

Amelia

APRIL 2, 1991

Dear Pete,

Thank you for writing me back. I feel terrible that you forgive me but not Dave. What happened was just as much my fault as his. We both love you and Dave knows that it's only because you're staying to run the Chronicle that he was able to leave the Beard. I won't say anything more about it unless you want me to. I'd like to continue keeping in touch about our lives with letters.

We've had a great stay in Nazaré, but we're ready to come back to the States. Our next destination is Key West, Florida. I'll write to you when we arrive. I'm sending a photo of the beach here, isn't it beautiful?

Amelia

I FOLDED the letter and slid it back into its envelope. I already knew, based on my birth date of May 11, 1994, that my dad, not Pete, was my father. Though I'd already known deep down inside, it was good to have confirmation.

As I read the letters, I heard them in my mom's bright, warm voice. I'd never expected to hear anything in her voice again—even if her voice was coming from inside my head. I wanted to tear through them, but I also wanted to read them slowly and savor each one.

I carefully opened the next letter.

DECEMBER 7, 1991

Dear Pete,

Key West is a dream! I love the people and the weather here. I'm working as a waitress and Dave is working as a mechanic. We've made lots of friends and may end up staying here.

Just because I don't write often, that doesn't mean we don't think of you. I hope you're well.

Amelia

FEB. 12, 1993

Dear Pete,

I'm so sorry it's been so long since I last wrote. Last June, we left Key West with some friends and made a trip across the country in a friend's van. We saw so many places but never stayed anywhere long. We are currently in San Antonio but won't be staying. I'm ready to find a place and be more settled.

I wish you could have seen the Grand Canyon. It was breathtaking. Hope all is well with you and everyone else in the Beard.

Amelia

October 25, 1993

Dear Pete,

We are expecting a baby. I hope you have babies already or that you will soon. I'm so excited to be settled in an apartment in San Diego. As soon as I found out I was pregnant, I started buying little white outfits, books and blankets. We planned to wait a bit longer, but this was a very happy surprise.

I hope you'll write me at this address and let us know how you're doing. We miss you and love you, Pete.

Amelia

I SET THE LETTER DOWN, tears blurring my vision. Pete had probably been in this very apartment when he read that letter—maybe even sitting in the same worn wood kitchen chair I was sitting in right now.

How had that felt, getting a letter from the woman he thought he was going to marry and probably have babies with, saying she was expecting a child with his brother?

I loved my parents. Nothing would ever change that. But when she wrote these letters, what was my mom's intent? It seemed like she was trying to absolve herself of the guilt she felt. And for Pete, each letter must have reopened his wound.

After sliding the letter back in its envelope, I put the stack back in a kitchen drawer, feeling better the moment the letters were out of sight.

Though I wanted to lie down and mindlessly scroll on my phone, I had a lot of stuff to carry to the dumpster behind the building, and I planned to pile the items I was donating to a local charity in the *Chronicle's* back room.

The busier I was, the less time I'd have to think about my mom, my dad, and my uncle.

"I'LL SEE if the chief is in," Barb said the next morning, giving me her usual warm smile.

Grady was definitely in. What she meant was, *I'll see if the chief feels like dealing with you right now*, but we had an appointment and I wasn't leaving.

"He says you can go on back," Barb said. "And I love that sweater. It's a beautiful color on you."

I looked down at the emerald-green cardigan I'd ordered online and said, "Thanks."

When I reached Grady's office door, he seemed to be engaged in a conversation with a cat.

"Do I piss on your stuff?" he asked the black cat, who stood on his desk with its head cocked. "No, but I might start if you don't knock this shit off, Radar. I brought you smoked salmon and got you those treats you like. What more do you want from me?"

He sprayed some sort of cleaner on his desk and wiped it away with a paper towel, catching a glance of me as he threw the towel away.

"Oh, hey," he said. "Come on in."

I smiled as I walked through the doorway. "Don't let me interrupt your conversation."

He gave me a pointed look and passed me a stack of papers. "I redacted some things. Let me know what questions you have."

I looked at the log of calls the SBPD had gotten in the past week, the type

of call shown beside a date and time for each one.

“What’s W-W-O-W?” I asked.

“Wrong way on a one way.”

I nodded. “I’ll need more on the DUI.”

The cat, Radar, jumped into Grady’s lap. Grady tapped keys on his keyboard, unfazed.

“Is Radar yours?” I asked.

“He’s more of an office cat.” He looked up from the screen and met my gaze. “I’ve got the DUI up. Let me know what you want to know.”

I wrote the DUI information in my notebook and also got the details on a tourist who’d been arrested for assault last weekend. Then I closed my notebook and sighed softly.

“What’s on your mind?” Grady asked.

Where to even begin? There was so much on my mind, and my supposed best friend back home, Blaire, never had time to talk. I wanted to open up to Grady—the first person who had asked me what was on my mind in a long time but I didn’t want it to turn into an argument.

“I’m having trouble sorting out the city budget information,” I said. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t think it would make sense to anyone who doesn’t work with it all the time,” he said. “It’s not just you.”

His kindness made the well of emotions inside me overflow.

“Am I arrogant for trying to run an entire newspaper on my own?” I asked, my throat tight. “I don’t want the employees to lose their jobs, but I ask myself about a dozen times a day what the hell I’m doing.”

“You’re not arrogant.”

I waited for a punch line. A dig. But as seconds passed, I realized there wasn’t one. Grady had read my mood and realized it wasn’t the time.

I would not cry in front of him. I wouldn’t. But it was hard not to when my usual sparring partner was looking at me with concern in his green eyes. If he got any nicer, I was going to break down. Over the paper and its shoestring budget, over my parents, and over my recent conversation with my boss Kerry, who had told me I needed to get back to San Diego soon if I wanted to keep my job.

“Let’s see if I can help you with the budget stuff,” he offered. “I know how mine works, and I think all the departments are about the same.”

He stood and walked around to the front of his desk, picking up a chair

with one hand, like it was no heavier than a napkin, and set it down next to his behind the desk.

So I'd be sitting right next to him. I needed his help, but my heart raced at the thought of being inches away from him.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

I met his gaze. "You know you're imposing, right?"

He scrunched his face, confused. "Imposing? Like you're scared of me?"

Was imposing the right word? I shuffled through options in my head as my heart raced. What was the right word for this man who commanded my attention anytime we were in the same room together?

"No, not scared," I clarified. "You're just...a lot."

Grady balked. "You're a lot, too. Now get over here because I've got a staff meeting in forty minutes."

I walked over and sat down, setting my folder full of papers on the desk. "A staff meeting? It's hard to imagine you in a staff meeting."

"Yeah, well, I'm not a fan. Turns out the higher up you move in a police department, the more boring the work gets."

"You don't get to chase bad guys anymore?"

He smiled. "If there were bad guys in the Beard, I'd find a way to chase them."

He put on his reading glasses then, and I had to clear my throat just in case he could hear the flutter in my stomach. He made those glasses look sexy.

"Okay, here's my current year budget," he said. "Our fiscal year starts November first."

I peered at the screen, nodding slowly. "Yours make sense. But look at this public works one..." I flipped through the pages and pulled out a stapled packet. "This is the part that's throwing me on this one."

Grady furrowed his brow and looked at it for a few seconds, nodding. "It's because of the bond debt service for the new wastewater plant. The revenue for that isn't shown here."

"Oh. I didn't even think of that."

He passed it back. "You should ask the public works director, Rich. He's a good guy, he'll explain it to you."

I took out another stapled packet. "And what about this one? There's a lot of money going in from Strauss Enterprises and a lot coming out to KSK Holdings."

Grady nodded, meeting my gaze over the rim of his glasses. “Hasn’t anyone told you about Keller Strauss yet?”

“No.”

“He’s a billionaire businessman. I actually played baseball with him in high school when I was a freshman and he was a senior. His dad grew up in the Beard, so Keller built a big place outside of town and he’s there a lot. He gives a lot of money to the city, the library, the park, and local businesses to keep them going strong.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it costs a lot to run a business in a place so far from distribution hubs. Costs more to get things here. Keller offsets that, and more.”

I was floored. Had the answer to my problem been here all along?

“Think he might want to buy a newspaper?” I asked Grady.

He shrugged. “Couldn’t hurt to ask. He usually just gives money; he doesn’t have the time to run anyone’s business. But I’m guessing those Strauss Enterprises and KSK line items have something to do with him.”

I forced myself to focus on the issue at hand—understanding city budgets.

“Okay, thanks,” I said, returning my paperwork to its folder.

“Hey, have you met Mrs. Jenkins?” Grady asked.

His stubble was perfect. Dark and even, and I knew, looking at it, that it was perfectly coarse. Just thinking about the goose bumps it could leave on my bare thighs gave me preemptive goose bumps.

“Avon?”

“What? No. I haven’t.”

My voice was higher than usual and my face was hot. He hadn’t caught me fantasizing about him, but I still felt busted.

“I’ll take you up to meet her. She’s the city treasurer.”

I got up and walked back to the front of his desk, needing some space. It wasn’t just because of his size; anytime Grady was in the same room, I felt his presence more distinctly than anyone else’s. And when we were in a room alone, it was even worse.

“Does everyone call her Mrs. Jenkins?” I asked as I picked up my coat.

“Everyone,” Grady said, grinning. “Because we all had her for fifth-grade math. She taught it for almost fifty years.”

“Oh wow, how old is she?”

Grady considered. “I think she’s seventy-three.”

“And still working? That’s impressive.”

“The mayor recruited her a few years ago. She works part time. And... well, you’ll see.”

He opened a door beside a wall adjacent to his desk. “Get in there, Radar. I don’t trust you alone in here. Go hang out with the dispatchers.”

The cat obeyed and Grady closed the door, then led the way out of his office, closing that door and entering a code to lock it.

He led me up a stairway in the back of the building, giving me a chance to ogle his backside. He drove me crazy most of the time, but good lord, his body was a work of art. His legs were built like tree trunks and his shoulders were impossibly wide.

I hadn’t had sex since my ex-fiancé and I broke things off eight months ago, and it showed.

Grady stopped at the first door on the second floor, which was open, the nameplate beside the door reading, “Betty Jenkins, City Treasurer.”

“Grady, come on in, dear,” a little voice said from inside.

“Hey, Mrs. Jenkins. I brought the new *Chronicle* owner by to meet you. This is Avon Douglas.”

“Oh, Avon,” Mrs. Jenkins said, rising from her desk chair. “What a pleasure. I taught your parents. You look so much like your mother.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to meet you.”

She was a tiny woman, weighing maybe a hundred pounds, and her office walls were adorned with needlepoints. A little table sat in a corner, covered by a flower-patterned tablecloth, a teapot, and empty white cups turned upside down.

“Would you like some tea, dear?” she asked.

“No thanks, I have an appointment at the candy shop pretty soon.”

She slowly walked over to me, Grady looking like he was ready to catch her if she fell. When she cupped my cheek and grinned at me, I melted.

“You’re so pretty,” she said. “We need more young people here in the Beard. If I can ever help you, or if you just want to have a cup of tea, you come see me anytime.”

“Thank you so much. I will.”

Grady and I locked gazes and he said, “We’ll leave you to it, Mrs. Jenkins.”

“Grady, can you help me down the stairs for the staff meeting?” she asked. “The elevator still isn’t fixed.”

“Of course. I’ll be here ten minutes before the meeting, just like last week.”

“You’re such a sweet boy, thank you.”

We said our goodbyes and Grady led me back down the stairs and walked me to the lobby.

“If you need more budget help, let me know,” he said. “Mrs. Jenkins is great, but...just ask me.”

“Thanks.”

He nodded. “See you Saturday. Try not to kill me when we throw axes.”

“I make no promises,” I said, smiling.

He smiled back, both of us just looking at the other for a few seconds. I forced myself out of the trance, saying, “I have to go.”

He walked me to the door and held it open, and I didn’t look at him as I walked through it and went on my way.

I was starting to think Ryan Grady wasn’t really an asshole at all. He could be gruff, but he also had a soft side. In another time and place, I would have crushed on him hard. But I wasn’t here to fall for a man; I was here to keep the *Chronicle* running, sell it, and get back to my life in San Diego. Where my real job would hopefully still be waiting for me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Avon

PETE'S rusty old pickup truck made a rattling sound, but it ran. The passenger side of the bench seat had a stack of old copies of the *Chronicle* and a little wood carton with a notebook, several pens, an extra camera battery, and several photo memory cards.

When I pulled down the visor to check my reflection in the mirror, there was no mirror, but there was an old photo of my mom. It was pinned to the visor, showing her smiling in front of a lake with her head tilted to the side.

There was a catch in my chest as I took it out and studied it. She was so young. Younger than I was now. And she looked so carefree. This had to be a photo Pete had taken of her when they were still together.

Technically this was my truck now, but I still silently promised Pete the photo was safe as I gently tucked it back into the visor and closed it.

I drove through downtown, where Floki and Helga were casually walking down the sidewalk on Main Street, no one batting an eye. Businesses had handmade signs out for today's showdown.

The banner hanging in front of Beard Books and Brews said, "#BeardWinterShowdown, #TeamGrady, hot drinks inside." At Tipper's, there was an all-you-can-eat pancake and sausage breakfast, with showdown competitors eating free.

I didn't have time, though. I'd had to tuck my wet, freshly showered hair beneath a thick stocking cap earlier to meet up with the rest of my showdown

team at the Sven statue, where people took photos of all of us touching his long beard.

People here really believed that statue brought luck. And many of them also believed in Bigfoot. Deacon Morris, the owner of The Hideout, was on my team for the showdown today and he was doing it in a Sasquatch suit.

As Main Street veered off, buildings were spaced farther and farther apart. The undisturbed glinting snow in the distance was pretty, but the reverse side of the coin was that I could still see my breath in the truck. It was freezing.

After the statue photos, I'd gone back to the apartment to dry my hair and bundle up. I wore a T-shirt, a sweatshirt, a coat, two pairs of lined leggings, and a pair of rugged snow boots I'd borrowed from my aunt. I also had a stocking cap, gloves, and a scarf on, though nothing would help when it was time to jump in the lake.

I was jumping into a lake so cold they'd had to break through the ice around the dock and make a big area of open water for the jumpers. This was nuts.

"Avon!" Curt Painter called as soon as I parked and got out of the truck. "We need you for more pictures!"

Curt was shirtless, wearing nothing but blue paint on his chest and face. He also had on a Viking helmet and pants that looked like they were made from animal skin.

As soon as I joined the group of competitors, Grady's gaze landed on me and my heart skipped a beat. He wore a long-sleeved gray T-shirt that said "SBPD" and a navy-blue stocking cap with the SBPD union logo on it. He gave me a little nod and I smiled.

Nothing was more confusing than my feelings for him. I was attracted to him, but he also drove me crazy most of the time. Or at least some of the time.

We posed for photos as a group and in teams. Bess was taking photos for me today, and she gave me a thumbs-up as the competitors headed for the starting line.

"Huddle up, guys," Curt said.

Our group of six was rounded out by Deacon, a tall, fit Black man with a dimple, Austin Lawson, a pretty doctor from the hospital named Calla Finch, and Sally Hawkins, the manager of the local grocery store.

"Balls out, guys," Curt said, looking around at the faces in the small

group. “They’ve got Georgette and that’ll slow them down, but they’ve also got Keller and Grady, and Grady’s superhuman at this stuff.”

There was some grunting and chanting from the men, and Calla, Sally, and I all exchanged glances.

“You know how to throw axes?” Sally asked me.

“Not really. I practiced a little, though.”

She patted my shoulder. “You’ll be fine. The obstacle course is the hardest.”

If that was supposed to reassure me, it didn’t. There were hundreds of people watching. My aunt and uncle were here somewhere, and so was Harper. I’d been out of my element since I stepped foot in the Beard, but never so much so as right now.

As soon as the shotgun was fired, I raced for the axe-throwing station with my team. Curt went first for our team and Grady went first for his. Grady hit the center of the first target on his first throw, his cheering section erupting. Curt wasn’t far behind, and my heart raced as I realized I was up fourth.

I forgot how cold it was as I watched the competitors throw axes. Our team was ahead when I was up, and I grabbed the axe, shocked by its weight. The ones I’d practiced with hadn’t been this heavy.

I was supposed to throw this? I wasn’t sure I could even pick it up.

“Like this!” Curt yelled from next to me, demonstrating how to pick it up with both hands.

I did it like he showed me, but when I threw the axe, it hit the ground short of the target.

“That’s okay, Avon!” Sally said from behind me. “Try again!”

From the corner of my eye, I saw an axe from the other team hit its target. Panic rooted my feet to the ground. What was I doing here? I didn’t belong in this icy little town where moose roamed the streets and people threw axes for fun.

“Come on!” Curt called from next to me. “Throw it!”

I shook my head, bracing myself. This was going to be a complete embarrassment.

“Come on, Avon!” a deep male voice yelled from the crowd. “You can do it! I know you can!”

I looked over and saw my Uncle Don, who was holding up a sign that said, “Let’s Go Avon.” Aunt Laura stood beside him, both of them yelling

their encouragement.

That was my family. I still had family, and they were cheering for me. I smiled at them and lifted the axe, using every ounce of strength my arms had. When I threw it, I closed my eyes, not opening them until my team broke out in celebration.

Somehow, I'd hit the target. And somehow, I hit the other two. Georgette was up for Grady's team, and she was unable to even get the axe off the ground. She saw someone taking a picture and let go of the axe, its handle falling to the ground as she posed and smiled.

I looked over at Grady, who was shaking his head. As soon as our eyes locked, he mouthed, "Good job," and butterflies took flight in my stomach.

"Let's go!" Curt called out. "They get to leave this station thirty seconds after us, so move your asses!"

We had to put on snowshoes for the start of the obstacle course. Calla helped secure mine, and I walked between her and Sally. It was harder than I'd imagined it could be, all of us quickly winded. Curt was barreling through the course like a wild man, beating on his bare chest.

I focused on putting one foot in front of the other, the finish line for the snowshoeing part in sight. Uncle Don was following along on the sidelines, waving his sign and encouraging me to keep going. Tears welled in my eyes as I pushed on, wanting to make him proud.

Next, we had to army crawl through the snow beneath metal bars. When I collapsed to the ground, breathless, Deacon came back and passed me a rope.

"Just hold on," he said. "I've got you."

I caught my breath as he pulled me the rest of the way through, thanking him when I crawled out. How had he made it through that narrow opening in a Bigfoot costume?

"Snowball throw," Curt announced. "Who's going to kill this one?"

"Me," I announced, still breathing hard.

He gave me a skeptical look, the rest of the group quiet.

"I played softball through high school," I said. "I can hit those targets."

"Let's go, Avon!" Uncle Don cheered from nearby. "You've got this!"

And for the first time in the competition, he was right. Curt and Deacon made snowballs for me and I fired them at the targets, easily hitting all of them.

"That's my niece!" Uncle Don yelled. "She's my niece!"

"Nice job!" Curt said, fist-bumping me. "Just the lake jump, guys! It's

over when we're all out and we've all touched the flag.”

I looked over my shoulder as we ran for the lake, and I saw Grady carrying Georgette over his shoulder at the front of his group on the run from the obstacle course to the snowball throw. Curt was right; Grady was superhuman.

I made it to the edge of the dock, hesitating.

“Together?” Sally asked me, taking my hand.

I nodded, closing my eyes as we jumped.

It wasn't just cold—it was like ice running through my veins. For a few seconds, I literally froze, unable to even move. Then I scrambled for the ladder and climbed out, Grady racing toward us with Georgette still slung over his shoulder.

We all touched the flagpole and an alarm sounded, signifying that we'd won. I was a little lightheaded as people embraced me and congratulated our team.

Grady had jumped in with Georgette over his shoulder, and he'd also climbed the ladder while still holding her. He reached his team's finish line, panting as he set her feet on the ground.

“That was fun!” the older woman said, clapping.

I understood now. Whoever had her on their team was guaranteed to lose. Poor Grady.

Calla led the way inside The Sleepy Moose, which was a beautiful, sprawling lodge. Each competitor was given a key to a room so we could shower and get changed.

Hot water had never felt so good. I just stood and let it wash over me for the first five minutes. Bess had dropped off my bag with extra clothes, hair tools, and makeup, so I had everything I needed to get ready for lunch.

After I finished, I dropped my bag off in the truck and went into the big dining room at The Sleepy Moose, which had open rafters, tall windows, and dozens of beautiful wood tables surrounded by chairs. The *Chronicle's* table was filled with Bess and her husband Harry, Sam and his wife Deb, and three pressmen who were all there solo.

“Nice job, Avon,” Sam said. “Pete would've been proud.”

“Thank you. And thanks to all of you for coming to this lunch.”

“Best meal in town,” Harry said. “Shea's a heckuva cook. It's too bad she won't settle down and give her folks some grandkids, ain't it? She's pretty and she can cook. But she's married to this place for some reason.”

Bess gave him a scolding look. “She’ll settle down when she’s good and ready. Or not at all. It’s her decision.”

“So Shea is the chef here?” I asked.

“Yes, and she’s a lovely girl,” Bess said. “You’d like her.”

Servers in black clothes and white aprons delivered bowls of cream of mushroom soup to our table then, the garlicky scent making my stomach rumble. As soon as everyone at our table had a bowl and I took my first bite, I held back a moan.

“This is the best soup I’ve ever had,” I said.

One of the pressmen, Benji, nodded and pointed his spoon at his soup. “This is the reason I come to this lunch every year. You can’t eat at the Moose unless you’re a guest, but if they opened this place up as a restaurant, it’d be packed every night.”

After the soup, servers brought out plates with sliced roast beef, mashed potatoes, and roasted green beans. Every bite was delicious, and I was ravenous, so I ate it all.

Dessert—trifle flights—was being served when I snuck a glance at the City of Sven’s Beard’s table, where Grady and Curt sat together with the mayor, Mrs. Jenkins, and a few other people I didn’t know. A pretty brunette in an apron was standing beside Grady’s chair talking to everyone at the table, her hand on Grady’s shoulder as he smiled up at her.

I kept my expression neutral, but inside, I was crushed. Of course there was a woman in his life. Behind his gruff exterior, Grady had a lot of great qualities. He was supportive and loyal. Smart. Funny. And hot. So, so hot.

Bess leaned over and softly said, “That’s his sister. Shea Grady.”

I couldn’t help letting hope flicker on my face. “His sister? She’s the chef here?”

“You betcha.”

It was time to admit to myself that I had a crush on Grady. My time here was limited, though, and I didn’t want to start anything that would be hard to walk away from.

Not to mention that I was too busy to add anything else. I needed to get the *Chronicle*’s subscription numbers up and hopefully, make a little something on the sale, because my job back home was hanging by a thread.

Shea said goodbye to the members of the city table and headed back to the doors I assumed led to the kitchen. Someone was testing the microphone, preparing for the showdown’s trophy presentation ceremony.

It was difficult to force myself to look at anything but Grady, but I had to. I was warming up to the Beard, and while thoughts of Grady made me more than warm, this only ended one way—with me back home in San Diego.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Grady

“WELL, SHIT.”

I looked up at the bright blue Sunday afternoon sky, wondering how the hell such horrible things could happen on such beautiful days.

“I know,” Coulter said. “They haven’t covered him yet, and it’s pretty gruesome.”

The dispatchers always called me, no matter what time it was, when major incident calls came in. I’d left lunch at my parents’ house to come to the scene of a single-car fatal accident in a heavily wooded area just outside of town. I hadn’t been prepared to hear that my high school football coach Rick Spellman was the one who had died.

“What the hell happened?” I asked Coulter, who had arrived before me.

“No signs of drugs or alcohol. Jimmy thinks it might’ve been a seizure, and he was doing at least sixty-five, so when he hit that tree...”

“Shit,” I said again.

Jimmy Bond had been the county coroner for more than twenty years, and his preliminary guesses were usually right. Spellman was in his early sixties, though, and his first grandchild had been born a few weeks ago. Nothing about this was right. His family would be devastated.

“You’d better call Cindy before it spreads that there’s been an accident,” Coulter said, reading my mind. “You know how many people listen to scanners and tell the whole town before we’ve even left the scene.”

I nodded, remembering the way Spellman made us run laps if anyone on the team had a shitty attitude. One comment and the whole team was running, glaring daggers at whoever had gotten mouthy.

“If you want a hug, go see your granny,” he used to tell us. “I’m here to mold you sad sacks of shit into football players.”

We’d busted our asses to please him, and he was the kind of man who noticed and acknowledged it. I’d once seen a kid on my team without a dad at home break down in tears when Spellman put a hand on his shoulder and said, “I’m proud of you, son.”

I exhaled heavily. “I’ll go take a look to confirm and then I’ll go see Cindy.”

TEN MINUTES LATER, I was about to leave the accident scene to drive to the Spellman house and deliver the bad news when I saw Avon walking toward me, Pete’s old pickup truck pulled over to the side of the road about a hundred yards behind her.

“Hey, one of our pressmen listens to a police scanner and he told me there was an accident,” she said.

The camera around her neck and the notebook in her hand sent a jolt of anger through my chest. We had to take photos of the deceased at accident scenes, but we were tight about them, and we made sure only the people who had to see them did. There was no way she was getting a single photo of this crash scene.

“You can’t be here,” I said. “This is a crime scene.”

“Can I ask what kind of crime?”

“No.”

She furrowed her brow. “Chief, I’m not trying to be a pain in the ass. I’m just trying to get some basic details.”

“Not now,” I said shortly. “Not here. You need to go.”

She looked down at the road. “I’m on public property.”

It hit me all at once. Coach Spellman was dead—I’d just seen the devastating evidence of it—and I had to go tell his family. There were so many people in the Beard who were going to be shaken by this. And I’d be damned if a single detail from this crime scene would be reported in the

paper. Spellman deserved better than that, and so did his family.

“Public property or not, this is a crime scene,” I said, anger seeping out of me with every step I took toward her. “I said get the fuck out of here and I’m not going to say it again. Stand there five more seconds and I’ll arrest you.”

Her eyes looked the slightest bit watery as she held my gaze for a second, nodded, and walked back to the truck. I’d been an asshole, but I had to pack our interaction into a corner of my mind for now and focus on the job at hand.

My phone was blowing up with texts, and I wished I could toss it into the woods and never look back. I never gave out information, but it didn’t stop people from asking me to.

Rick and Cindy’s house was a well-kept two-story in a neighborhood just off Main Street. The driveway and sidewalk were freshly plowed, of course. No one beat Rick Spellman at clearing the driveway. He still loaded up former players in his truck to plow and shovel for elderly and disabled people, and he never took a dime for it.

I steeled myself as I put my work SUV into park. This was the hardest part of my job. But I did it the same way my father always had, with respect and compassion.

The walk up the sidewalk that divided the Spellman’s front yard and led to their door was endless. And at the same time, it was over in seconds.

I rang the doorbell and steeled myself. My sadness would have to wait. I had to be strong for Rick’s family.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Avon

BESS'S EXPRESSION was fond as she stared at the large color photo of Rick Spellman on the front page of the *Chronicle*.

"I remember when Pete took this one," she said. "Our football team made it to the playoffs and Rick and the players were all crying. That was a really big deal for our little team."

I picked up the newspaper one of the pressmen had just delivered to my desk; it was still warm. I'd never worked so hard on anything as I had on this edition of the *Chronicle* in the past twenty-four hours.

As soon as Bess had called to tell me who died in the car accident and what he'd meant to the town, I'd gotten to work on a story about him. I'd interviewed his friends, colleagues, and past players. Sam had helped me scroll through all the photos of Rick in the archives and choose a few to run with the story.

I'd felt ready to go to press as usual this morning, and then Rick's daughter Shannon called to see if I wanted to ask her any questions for the story. I hadn't wanted to call the family on the day they lost a beloved family member, but since she offered, I asked her to tell me about her dad in her own words.

That had been a total game changer. I'd ended up rewriting the story and we held the press while Bess and I passed the story back and forth to tweak it. Bess, Devon, Sam, and I had toiled over a headline, trying to come up with

one that worked well and fit the available space.

It was a banner headline, across the top of the front page, so it had to be long enough, but not too long. I'd come up with "Farewell to a Legend," and then we'd all pored over the front page on the computer monitor some more, wanting to make sure we got everything just right.

I wanted to publish the best story I could for Rick's family and friends, but I also wanted to use this opportunity to show the community and potential buyers what an asset the *Chronicle* was. As I looked over this week's hard copy edition, I felt like I'd done both.

"How much sleep did you get last night?" Bess asked me.

"A few hours. I kept waking up and thinking about the story."

"You should cut out early and go get some rest."

I considered it for a moment, but there was no way I'd be able to sleep. I still had deadline adrenaline coursing through me, and I had a pile of Freedom of Information responses from the city to go through.

"I'm okay," I said, glancing at the heavy snow falling outside. "How much snow are we supposed to get today?"

"At least a foot."

I groaned. "I miss green grass and blue water."

"We have that here in the spring and summer. That's the nice thing about the Beard—you get to experience it all."

But you also had to be buried in a few feet of snow for months at a time.

I wasn't going to argue with her because it was impossible to win an argument with Bess. Instead, I looked at the front page of this week's edition again, wishing my parents and Uncle Pete could have read it. That was a strange wish, though, since it was only because they were all gone that I was doing this work.

I bought an overpriced but cold iced tea from the vending machine in the back room, put my headphones on, and got to work on my stack of paperwork. I'd had my face buried in the documents for more than half an hour when Bess nudged my shoulder.

"Hmm?" I slid my headphones off and looked over at her, and she nodded toward the front of my desk.

Grady stood there, his arms crossed and his expression unreadable. I stared up at him, unwilling to break the ice after the way he treated me yesterday. Seconds of silence ticked by.

"I came to say I'm sorry," he finally said. "About yesterday."

I waited to see if he was going to say more, but he just stared at me.

“Is that all?” I asked.

He moved his hands to his hips and huffed out a sigh. “I said I’m sorry. What more do you want?”

“I’m not sure what you mean. I didn’t ask you for anything.”

He shifted from one foot to the other, clearly inexperienced at apologizing. “What, do you want me to grovel?”

I took off my headphones and stood up, wanting to be closer to eye level with him than I was while sitting. His size threw me off course sometimes.

“Again, I didn’t ask you for anything,” I said sharply.

He looked at the front door, and I was sure he was about to turn and leave when he instead turned back to look at me.

“I was an asshole. I was out of line, and I apologize.”

Okay, that was better than his non-apology “for yesterday.”

“I appreciate that,” I said. “But I feel like it’s going to happen again when I piss you off by just trying to do my job.”

“Command One, status,” a voice said over the radio on Grady’s shoulder.

He pressed a button on the radio and said, “Command One is out at the *Chronicle*.”

“Ten-four.”

“Look, Rick was my high school football coach,” Grady said to me. “He meant a lot to me. I’d just...seen him when you got there yesterday, and I may have overreacted.”

“You may have?” I arched my brows.

“I *did* overreact,” he said, scowling. “I already felt like a horse’s ass and then I saw that article you wrote about Rick and I felt about ten inches tall. I came to apologize and...see if I can take you to lunch.”

My heart raced, but I kept my expression neutral. Grady and I ran hot and cold. We fought one minute and laughed over something the next. It wasn’t a good idea to fall further for him.

Not to mention that he’d really hurt my feelings yesterday, and I was still sore over it.

“I have a lot of work to do,” I said. “But thanks anyway.”

He sighed, aggravated. “Come on, Avon. You always go to Tipper’s between 1:00 and 1:30 on Mondays, so I know you haven’t had lunch.”

I put my palms on my desk, looking up at him in challenge. “I accepted your apology, okay? Buying me a burger isn’t going to mean it didn’t

happen. Let's just move on."

"Why are you so damn stubborn?" he demanded.

"Why am *I* so stubborn?"

"Avon," Bess said from her desk. "Can I speak to you in Pete's office for a minute? Grady, you stay right where you are."

Reluctantly, I got up and went to Pete's office, where Bess closed the door behind us.

"Stop being such an ass and go have lunch with the man," she said in a low tone.

"This has nothing to do with you. You don't even know what happened yesterday."

She threw her hands up. "Well, whatever it is, he said he's sorry."

I pressed my thumb and forefinger to the bridge of my nose. "Bess, this is between me and him, and it's not just about yesterday."

"He's a good man," she said firmly. "One of the best. Have you seen that black cat at City Hall?"

I lowered my brows and nodded, unsure what Radar had to do with this conversation.

"Grady found that cat on the side of the road after someone hit it with their car and left it for dead. He took it to animal control and they said it was too far gone and they were going to put it down. He wouldn't have it. He took that cat to Dr. Renner's office and paid the bill himself."

I sighed softly, looking anywhere but at her to avoid responding because what could I say to that? A second later, I heard the door handle turning and when my gaze landed on it, Bess was stepping out of the room.

"She'd love to go to lunch with you," she said. "She'll be right out."

I pressed my lips together, silently cursing her. I wanted to stomp out of the room and fire her, irrational as it was. But I needed Bess, and she knew it. I also knew she meant well, but she didn't understand how much it hurt when Grady threatened to arrest me just a day ago.

A voice in the back of my head told me to just walk out there and be graceful. That was what my mom would have said. "Err on the side of forgiveness" was one of her favorite sayings.

I plastered on a smile and walked out.

"I'll just grab my bag," I said.

"I can get it," he offered.

I picked up my gray leather bucket bag from beneath my desk, passing it

to him. He hesitated, his brow furrowing.

“Sorry, I didn’t know you meant your purse,” he said.

“Well, my arm is a little sore, so...since you offered, you can carry it.”

He reached for it and hung the large strap over his shoulder, and the last of my anger faded away. If he was willing to be seen in public carrying my purse, we were square.

I followed him across the newsroom and he opened the front door, holding it for me.

“We need to take my vehicle in case I get called to an emergency,” he said.

I got into the passenger side of his police SUV, which smelled like him. Light, airy cologne and leather. It made me warm all over.

Grady set my bag in his back seat, then opened the driver’s side door and got in.

“Have you been to the Mexican place yet?” he asked.

Mexican food in northern Minnesota? I was skeptical, but I didn’t let it show.

“No, is it good?”

“I think it is. We’ll go there.”

We drove in silence for a few seconds before he said, “How long did it take you to write that story about Coach Spellman?”

“A long time. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Well, you did a great job. I know it will mean a lot to his family.”

“Thanks.” I glanced at him. “Would you really have arrested me?”

He shook his head. “Probably not.”

I balked. “*Probably?*”

“If you’d tried to force your way into the crime scene or something, then yeah.”

“You think I would’ve done that?”

He looked over and held my gaze. “No.”

I’d assumed Grady chose a place other than Tipper’s so fewer people would see him taking me out for lunch. But when we pulled into Taco Train, I knew I was wrong.

The parking lot of the former train depot was packed with cars. Grady parked, put my bag back over his shoulder and walked beside me to the front door.

“This place looks great,” I said, meaning it.

The bright, spacious depot was fully restored but had its original wood floors. A host led us to a table immediately, people openly staring at us as we walked to it.

Grady set my bag on one of the empty chairs at our table for four and then tried to get comfortable in the little wooden chair that was clearly too small for him.

“So you play softball,” he said, a grin tugging on the corners of his lips.

“I used to.”

“I had to give the trophy back to Painter this morning,” he said with a sigh.

“How was that?”

Our eyes locked. “Terrible. He was a jackass about it. Made me deliver it to the fire station.”

“You get a chance to have it back in six months, though, right?”

He nodded, his expression telling me he thought it was about five and a half months too far away.

“Hey, Chief,” a server said as he dropped chips and salsa off at our table. “Can I get you guys some drinks?”

Grady’s gaze found mine across the table. “There’s an all-you-can-eat taco special. Do you want that or something else?”

“That sounds great.” I looked at our server. “And an unsweet tea, please.”

“Same for me,” Grady said. “And we’ll take some guac for the chips, please.”

“You got it.”

A woman at a nearby booth was leaning over so hard trying to get a look at me that she fell out. She stood up, stared at me for a couple of seconds, and then slid back into her seat.

“Okay, I have to ask,” I said to Grady. “Why are people staring at us? I know the nosiness runs deep here, but this is ridiculous.”

“It’s because they think we’re on a date.”

I gave him a look of frustration. “So what if we were?”

He looked away for a second and then met my eyes again. “I don’t date. That’s why people are so curious.”

“I heard you had a girlfriend who passed away.”

“Yeah. That was a long time ago.”

I reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks.”

He seemed unable to look up at me. We sat in silence until our server brought the guac, and then Grady cleared his throat, ending the discussion.

“This is the best guac I’ve ever had,” he said. “You have to try it.”

I dipped a chip in, moaning when I tasted the sweet, spicy guacamole.

“That’s amazing,” I said. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Just remember if you come back here that the bartenders have heavy pours. A couple of margaritas from this place would knock you on your ass.”

“Noted.”

He cleared his throat, looking a little nervous as he said, “I have a proposal for you.”

“You want to marry me already?” I cracked. “I think that’s the guac talking.”

Grady narrowed his eyes slightly. “I was thinking maybe we could stop bickering over stupid shit and be friends.”

He wanted to be friends with me? I liked that idea better than being enemies, but I had to resist the urge to make another joke about whether there were benefits involved. Because would it really be a joke?

“I’d like us to be friends,” I said. “And sometimes friends do bicker over stupid shit, but they’re still friends.”

“True. And it’s near impossible not to bicker with you.” He grinned.

My heart pounded as he held my gaze. There was just something about him. He was poking fun at me, but it was almost in a sweet way. Like he wanted to make me smile.

And he did. As he put away nine tacos and I put away five, I smiled and laughed more than I had in a while. We talked about him playing high school football, me jumping into an icy lake for the first time and our shared struggle with not working on Svensdays.

By the time we had to leave the restaurant an hour and a half after arriving so Grady could get to a meeting on time, I was almost willing to carry my own bag through the restaurant and back to his SUV.

Almost, but not quite.

There was a twinkle in his eye as he picked up my bag and put the strap over his shoulder, and I enjoyed the hell out of it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Grady

“AW, COME ON, CHIEF.” Chris Vance gave me a sheepish look. “I saved you some money by not making you pay me overtime.”

Officer Vance was at the top of the state’s attorney’s shit list, and he was close to being at the top of mine. He was one of those guys who liked to wear a badge and uniform but didn’t like keeping up with the requirements of the job. Which was why he was sitting across from me in my office for the second time in six weeks.

“We just had this conversation six weeks ago,” I reminded him. “And I reminded you then that DUI reports must be completed before the end of your shift, even if you have to stay late to get them done.”

“I know, but that was a crazy night. We had that fight at The Hideout and I had to stay a couple of hours late just to get all that booking paperwork done.”

“Doesn’t change the rules about DUI paperwork,” I said. “I gave you a warning last time; this time it’s a three-day unpaid suspension.”

“What the hell?” he yelled.

“Watch your tone and language,” I warned.

“It doesn’t make any difference if I finish it at the start of my next shift,” he said.

He was hardheaded and I didn’t expect him to still be employed here in a year, but for now, I had to coach him as though there was hope.

“As I told you before,” I said, an edge in my tone, “if, for some reason, you missed your next shift, that would create a big problem. The state’s attorney wants our reports on her desk by 9:00 nine a.m. the next day.”

“This is bullshit,” he muttered.

“Would you prefer a weeklong suspension?”

He glared at me but remained silent.

“I’ll take your badge and gun. This suspension is effective immediately. You’ll also have to undergo an hour of training on our DUI procedures with Lt. Sommersby before you can return to work.”

“I’m appealing this,” he said as he unfastened his badge from his uniform.

That was a waste of his time and Coulter’s since Coulter was the police union president and he’d have to do the paperwork. This was actually a light reprimand, considering the potential consequences of his laziness.

“You’ll need to sign here,” I said, sliding him a paper as he passed me his gun and badge. “And I encourage you to read the part about what you are and aren’t allowed to do while out on suspension.”

He signed the paperwork, angrily swiped his copy from my desk and left my office. I checked my schedule and saw that I had seven minutes until my next meeting.

Shit. My day was packed with meetings. I wouldn’t even have time for lunch. I gave Barb cash that she kept in an envelope in her desk for days like this, so she could pick up a sandwich for me to eat between appointments.

My next meeting was with the mayor, the city attorney, and two residents who were having a dispute over snow. One of them was snow blowing his driveway so the snow landed on the neighbor’s driveway. It wasn’t a violation of any city ordinance, but the mayor wanted to try to make peace between the two of them.

I was in the middle of messaging Barb about getting me a sandwich when she opened the door to my office and stepped in.

“Delivery for you, Chief,” she said, carrying a box over to my desk and setting it down.

“For me?”

“Yep.”

“It’s not ticking, is it?” I joked.

“It’s from Sgt. Coulter, so I think it’s safe.”

I stood to open the box, looking at Barb as I did.

“Hey, can you grab me a sandwich from the deli for lunch? I’m booked solid today.”

“You got it. And I’ll make sure you get your pickle this time.”

I’d gotten salty over being shorted my pickle last time, which had felt like a bigger deal than it was at the time. It wasn’t my finest moment. I liked pickles.

There was a small card on top of some tissue paper in the box, which I furrowed my brow over as I opened it. It wasn’t my birthday. It wasn’t Boss’s Day. What the hell was this gift for?

Chief, hope this is your color.

- Coulter

I pulled the tissue paper aside and found a purple purse inside the box. Apparently word had gotten around that I’d carried Avon’s bag yesterday and now Coulter had the jokes. Really fucking funny.

“What is it?” Barb asked, her eyes wide with excitement.

“It’s Coulter thinking he’s funny,” I said, shaking my head. “And he’s not.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “He said you were going to love it.”

“I bet he did.”

Barb took the ding of a text arriving on my phone as her cue to leave, and I picked up my phone to read the message.

Avon: Can I return the favor and take you to lunch today? I have some more questions about the budget.

This woman was dangerous. There was no more denying it—I wanted her. She was smart, funny, gorgeous and she didn’t take an ounce of my shit. I’d never known anyone like her. I no longer cared about the rumor mill. People could speculate all they wanted about seeing us together and me carrying her bag. But the more time I spent with her, the more I wanted *more*.

I’d had an early breakfast at Tipper’s this morning, where I heard Avon wrote the *Chronicle*’s bookkeeper a check from her own bank account to give every *Chronicle* employee a \$500 holiday bonus. She was the kind of woman I could get in deep with.

I didn’t want that, but I did want her, and I couldn’t figure out a way to have one without the other. With a minute to spare until my meeting started, I responded to her message.

Grady: I’m booked all day. How about dinner this evening at The Hideout. 6?

Avon: That would be great. See you then.

I moved the box with Coulter's "gift" to a chair and went to help settle the driveway dispute.

THAT EVENING, I was freshly showered and dressed in jeans and a hoodie, waiting for Avon to arrive at The Hideout, when I looked up from my phone and saw Jake and Coulter waving at me from the bar.

Before I could wave back, they both slid off their barstools and stuck their left hips out, showcasing the large purses on long straps they were carrying.

Assholes. I shook my head at them and Jake pulled out a tube of lipstick, pretending to put some on. Which was rich because he was more whipped than any husband or boyfriend I knew.

Coulter pulled a hand mirror out of his handbag and admired himself in it, and I was about to get up and go crack it over his thick skull when Avon walked into The Hideout.

She walked over to our table for two and said, "Hey, you look even grouchier than usual."

"Nah, I'm good. How are you?"

She sighed heavily as she sat down. "Busy. But I hired a new ad rep this afternoon, so that's going to help a lot."

Our server sat my beer on our table and looked at Avon.

"Can I get you a drink?" she asked.

Avon considered before saying, "Sure, I'll take a margarita on the rocks, please."

She got into her bag and pulled out a folder. "Okay, before we start eating and drinking, I want you to take a look at this."

Passing me the folder, she looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was within earshot and then spoke in a low tone. "Do those first few pages look familiar to you?"

I squinted, taking longer to make out the numbers without my reading glasses. "Yeah, this looks like the general fund budget summary."

"Right, but you know what's weird?"

"What?"

She leaned in. “There’s no line item for the money going out to KSK Holdings. And it’s a lot. It was around \$600,000 last year.”

“That could be an account that doesn’t fall under the general fund,” I said, still scanning the numbers.

“I checked every account I’ve been given records for, and my Freedom of Information request was for all city income and expenditures. I can’t find it anywhere.”

That *was* strange, but I didn’t let her see my surprise. I’d taken classes on budgeting after becoming police chief, and I’d learned how to account for every dollar that came in and went out of my department.

“Could Mrs. Jenkins have left something out?” I asked.

“I wondered that, but the city attorney has been filling my Freedom of Information requests, so it would have been an oversight by both of them.”

I looked up at her. “It could’ve happened, though. Or it could be that Keller Strauss is providing that money like I said, and he doesn’t want anyone to know what it’s paying for. He’s kind of funny like that. He doesn’t like people knowing how much money he gives.”

She nodded. “I guess that could be. But city income and expenses have to be openly accounted for. The city is a taxing body.”

Our server brought her drink, Deacon on her heels.

“Hey guys, how are you?” he asked, grinning.

“Hey, Deke,” we both said at the same time.

He slid a plate onto our table. “I brought you some complimentary potato skins. It’s a new recipe; let me know what you think.”

“Looks amazing,” I said, eyeing the plate of halved potatoes loaded with cheese sauce, crumbled bacon, and chopped green onions.

“There’s some beer in the new cheese sauce,” he said.

“Sold,” I said, putting one on a plate and passing it to Avon.

“Let me know,” he said, pointing at us as he walked back toward the kitchen.

I plated a potato skin for myself, closing the folder with the paperwork before taking my first bite.

“I wish I could help more with this right now, but I can’t,” I said. “I will find out more, though. Just give me a few days.”

“I don’t even care anymore because this is the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted,” Avon cracked.

The bacon was crispy and the beer cheese had just the right amount of

spice. We ate all of them, and then Avon motioned for me to hand her the folder.

“Enough business,” she said, sliding it back into her bag. “What are you doing tomorrow for Svensday?”

“The business bureau is doing sleigh rides and ice-skating at the lake. I have to make a showing at that.”

“That sounds like fun, though.”

“You should come.”

She smiled. “I’ll be there with Pete’s camera.”

Movement in the corner of my vision caught my attention, and I looked at the bar to find Coulter animatedly passing Jake a box of tampons he’d taken from his giant purse. Jake did a little celebratory dance and tucked them into his bag.

Payback would be a bitch for those two. I used my middle finger to scratch my temple, turning my attention back to Avon.

“The Italian beef here is amazing,” I said.

“That’s what Bess tells me.”

Her long, wavy hair was tamed into a bun at the nape of her neck today. It was pretty, a few pieces of loose hair framing her face. All I could think about, though, was watching her pull the pins from her hair, seeing it cascade around her bare shoulders. And then brushing it aside so I could kiss her there.

“Earth to Grady,” she said.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, realizing I’d gotten carried away with my daydream.

We both ordered the Italian beef and Avon told me about her supposed best friend, Blaire, who never had time to talk to her anymore. I stopped myself after three beers, so I knew I wouldn’t let slip how much I wanted her—or worse, act on it—and after a couple of hours of nice conversation, she pulled her wallet out and went for her credit card.

“Too late,” I said.

She looked up at me. “But the check’s right here.”

“I paid it when I went to the bathroom about an hour ago.”

“Grady. This one was supposed to be on me.”

I put my hands up in mock surrender. “I never agreed to that.”

“Next time I’m getting the check.”

“We’ll see.”

She gave me a look, but her eyes sparkled happily. “Have you been this

exasperating since the moment you were born? Or did you have to work your way up to this level?"

"My mom says I was a perfect baby," I said. "I believe the exact word she used was *angel*."

We both stood and put our coats on, then added our stocking caps and gloves. It was barely above zero outside right now.

"I may have to verify that with your mother at some point," she said, smiling.

"I stand by it." I nodded toward her bag, which she'd slung over her shoulder. "Your arm feeling better tonight?"

"Much better," she said, smirking.

I walked her out to where she'd parked Pete's truck and she got in, the truck struggling to start up.

"I don't like the sound of that," I said. "I'll follow you home."

"You don't need to do that," she said, waving her cell phone. "I'll text you when I get there."

"Okay."

"Good night."

"Night, Avon."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Avon

“IT’S ALL LOADED UP, Miss Douglas,” the driver from Helping Hands said. “Here’s a receipt for your tax records.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it,” I said, taking the slip of paper.

I’d donated all of my uncle’s clothes, shoes, small furniture, and kitchen items to the local charity that helped those in need. They’d sent two men over to load it all into a truck, saving me countless trips up and down the stairs.

Bess had been side-eying me from her desk the entire time, silently judging me for parting with Pete’s things. There was no reason to keep them when they could do others some good, though. I was getting to know my uncle by running the *Chronicle* and by studying his photos. I didn’t need his blender or his flannels anymore.

“Can you come take a look at this layout?” Bess asked me.

Christmas was on Monday, so the *Chronicle* would be closed. We were preparing next week’s paper today, on Friday, so we could take Monday and Tuesday off. I walked over to Bess’s desk and studied the large computer monitor, double-checking spelling and kerning. Devon was off for two weeks visiting family, so it was only me and Bess making sure this week’s edition looked just right.

“That’s a beautiful photo, you know,” Bess said. “You’ve come a long way with your photography in the past month. Pete would have been proud.”

I blinked rapidly, trying to quell the tears filling my eyes. Not only had

Bess just dished out a very rare compliment, but she'd also praised me for something that meant a lot to me. Being told my sweater was nice hit differently than being told that the thousands of photos I'd taken while trying to make the *Chronicle* look its best had paid off.

"Thank you," I said.

I'd been in the right place at the right time to capture the photo of a reindeer at the sleigh ride event on Svensday this past week, looking like he was smiling at a little girl who was petting him. In the moment, I'd kept the camera up, snapping off photo after photo so I would have several to choose from.

Immediately after that, though, when I looked at the photos on the camera's small screen, I knew I had something special. It felt great to know that Bess liked it, too.

This afternoon, I had a meeting at Max Morrison's office. Half of me wanted him to tell me there was a buyer for the paper, but the other half was conflicted.

I was surprisingly hooked on seeing my work in print every week when one of the pressmen delivered the first few hard copies of the paper to the newsroom. I'd only ever worked in sales before, where the evidence of my hard work came solely in numbers. Units sold. Customers retained. Bonuses earned.

I'd always thought I loved the numbers; they were a black-and-white measurement of my success. But here, my week of work was displayed in stories about school board meetings and women who had been quilting for sixty years. It was in photos of people laughing, shoveling snow, and sledding down hills on their stomachs, arms in the air.

There was no question I'd continue pursuing photography once I got back to San Diego. Pete's camera belonged to the *Chronicle*, but I hoped to buy it when I sold the paper. When I was taking photos, I felt a sense of peace that nothing else gave me. Stopping to observe the world around me instead of racing to keep up with it was a nice break.

"I've been over it so many times my eyes are crossing," Bess said. "Does it look okay to you?"

I nodded slowly, reading every headline one more time. Last week, I'd caught myself in a headline error about an upcoming "pubic meeting" that was supposed to be a "public" one, and now I was paranoid.

"I think we're good," I said.

“I’ll print hard copies and go over them again later.”

“Will you print some for me, too?”

“You betcha.”

I started walking back to my desk, but something made me turn back to Bess.

“Do you like me more than you did when I first got here?” I asked. “Because I felt like you hated me then and now it seems like you...hate me less?”

Bess smiled, and I realized how infrequently I saw her smile. Did she smile more at home, or was she just a serious person?

“I never hated you,” she said, her expression soft. “I was never able to have children, so I’m not good at the warm and fuzzy stuff.”

“Your love language is acts of service.”

She furrowed her brow, the softness gone. “What?”

I walked back over to her, sitting in the empty chair at the desk next to hers. “There’s a book about it, and therapists use it all the time. People have love languages. Well, everyone other than my ex, but let’s not go there. I think there are five.” I mentally tallied them, then counted them off on my fingers. “Words of affirmation, physical touch, quality time, gifts, and acts of service.”

She frowned. “I don’t buy into all that new age hippie mumbo jumbo.”

“No, there’s something to it. Like when someone has a death in the family and you make them a casserole. That’s your way of showing you care.”

She sniffed, her gaze back on her computer screen. “It’s just the right thing to do, that’s all.”

I’d had a lot of time to think about things since getting to the Beard, and I’d learned a lot about myself. I needed to own my part of Bess and me getting off on the wrong foot.

“I think,” I said, pausing to find the right words, “that when I got here, I didn’t appreciate how important the *Chronicle* is to the community. I just thought of it as an asset, and I didn’t know anything about Pete and how he devoted his life to this place.”

Bess turned to face me, nodding. “Exactly. You thought we were all just a bunch of small-town hicks. You looked down on us.”

That was taking things a little too far.

“I didn’t look down on you,” I said. “But I did judge you. I judged...well,

everything. But this has been a humbling experience for me. I've learned a lot. And you've been the one to teach me a lot of it."

Bess's eyes flooded with tears and she made a shooping motion with her hand. "Oh, stop that nonsense."

"I mean it. I couldn't have kept this place going all this time without you."

She swiped at the corners of her eyes. "Of course you could have. You're a smart, hardworking young woman. It's no wonder Grady's head over heels for you."

I shook my head, wanting to laugh. "That's so not true, Bess. We decided to be friends, but that's it."

She rolled her eyes and focused her attention back on her computer monitor. "You two are ridiculous. Deny it all you want, but I'm nobody's fool and when you go back to sunny California, you're going to miss him more than anything else here."

Her words were a direct hit to my heart. It was true—I'd grown very fond of Grady. I'd also come to appreciate the newspaper my uncle left me and the community it served. But this road had to come to an end. I lived in San Diego, and I had a job and a life waiting there.

The job was a grind, and the life was a tiny apartment and a best friend who only seemed to have time for me when it suited her, but it was *my life*. My parents had settled in California when I was a kid and I'd lived there since. I loved beaches, oceans, and sunshine. Piña coladas. Walking outside without a parka and a ski mask on.

I had to sell the *Chronicle*. But I didn't relish it like I thought I would when I got here.

"AVON, YOU'RE LOOKING WELL," Max Morrison said that afternoon when I walked into his office.

I smiled. "Do you mean I'm looking more appropriately dressed for the Beard?"

He chuckled at that. "Yes, exactly. You've got the right idea with that nice, long coat."

"Thanks again for letting me use yours until I bought one."

“No problem at all. That’s what we do here.” He slid on his reading glasses and looked down at the papers on his desk, then back up at me. “I’ve got good news for you.”

My stomach rolled nervously. This was it. The moment I’d been waiting for.

“We have a preliminarily interested buyer,” he said. “It’s a company based in New Jersey that prints and distributes shoppers all around the country.”

“Shoppers?” I asked, wrinkling my brow in confusion.

Max met my gaze over the rim of his glasses. “It’s like a small newspaper, but it’s only ads. The prospective buyers said they’d use your existing ad customer list and try to bring them on board the shopper.”

I sat back in my chair, my excitement slowly deflating. “Are you saying they don’t want to continue with the *Chronicle*?”

His eyes crinkled at the corners in a look of fatherly concern. “Right. They only do shoppers. They’d be buying it for the press, really. Those things cost a mint. They plan to use the office space as a distribution hub for shoppers in the northern region. They’d like to talk to all of your pressmen about working for them.”

That was great for the pressmen. But what about everyone else? Sam, the sports editor? Dandy, the HR and payroll director? Shelly, the ad rep I’d just hired? And of course, Bess, who had devoted her entire working life to the *Chronicle*.

I cleared my throat. “What’s the offer?”

“\$250,000. It’s solid, and they’ve already provided me proof of financing approval. That’s for everything—the building and everything in it.”

I didn’t need the money, though it would be nice. I just couldn’t reconcile walking away with it to travel the world while leaving the people who had built the *Chronicle* with nothing.

“I could use that for severance packages,” I murmured. “For everyone who doesn’t get hired by the new owners.”

Max nodded. “I know they’d appreciate that very much.” He paused. “We can always counter their offer if you want to, Avon. I wouldn’t ask for a lot more, but I bet we can get another ten percent.”

I imagined myself telling Bess, Sam, and Dandy that their full-time jobs were gone. The jobs they’d spent their entire adult lives at. And even worse, telling them the local newspaper was about to be gone for good. The

community would go from having the *Chronicle* to having nothing.

“I need some time to think about it,” I told Max.

“Of course. Take the holidays to consider it and then let me know.”

I stood, my emotions a mixed bag. This was supposed to be good news, but it didn't feel like it.

The *Chronicle* was an asset to the community. A local newspaper still standing and fighting the good fight when so many others had been forced to fold. Why didn't anyone else see that and find it worth saving?

“Thanks, Max,” I said. “Have a good holiday with your family.”

“Thanks, same to you,” he said.

I was going over to my aunt and uncle's house on Christmas, but I already felt guilty about the prospect of showing up. Should I tell them about the offer?

For now, I put it out of my head. There was so much on the line. I needed time to consider everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Grady

“OH, LOOK—MISTLETOE.”

A server at The Hideout, Lana, pointed above me and gave me a flirty look.

“Find someone else,” I mumbled, nodding in thanks as the bartender slid me a fresh iced mug of beer.

Lana scoffed and left without another word. Fortunately. It was Christmas Eve, and I wasn't in the mood to be around anyone. This was the exact day my world came apart eleven years ago. My girlfriend, fellow SBPD officer Megan Bright, literally took a bullet for me that day, and I'd never forgive myself for it.

I was directing traffic, of all fucking things. The business bureau was hosting an ice sculpture contest and people descended on the Beard in numbers we never anticipated. So Coulter and I were working overtime directing traffic and other officers were covering regular calls that night. Megan was on one of those calls when she was shot and killed in the line of duty.

If I hadn't been directing traffic, it would've been me. It *should've* been me.

“Hey, you.”

The voice of the person sliding onto the barstool next to mine was female, and I turned with a scowl, expecting it to be Lana again. But it was Avon,

wearing a hideous green sweater covered in actual Christmas balls and a sad expression.

“Hey,” I said, doing my best to unscowl.

“I can go if you’d rather be alone,” she said.

“No, it’s okay.” I looked at the assortment of red, silver, and green Christmas balls hooked onto her sweater. “If anyone needs a drink, I’d say it’s you.”

She smiled slightly, not enough to reveal any teeth. “Yeah, I went to an ugly sweater party with Harper.”

“I take it you didn’t love it?”

She shrugged. “It was okay. It’s just...I have a lot on my mind.”

It didn’t matter what was weighing her down; I understood how she felt. Christmas Eve was supposed to be one of the most festive nights of the year. In the Beard, there was a specially made, oversized Santa suit that city workers dressed the Sven statue in, and people lined up to take photos with it. The whole downtown was lit brightly, carols being piped in over a high-tech outdoor sound system Keller Strauss had installed. Everyone was light and happy tonight. Except me. And apparently, Avon.

“What can I get you, Avon?” asked Deke, who was tending bar tonight.

“A Long Island iced tea, please.”

Damn. She was serious about her drinking tonight, which I understood.

When Deke returned with her drink, he asked, “You guys up for a shot of Fireball?”

I cringed. “Hell no, you cheap bastard. What are we, college students?”

Deke threw back his head and laughed. “Okay, Chief. I’ve got just the thing.”

He pulled a bottle of Green Chartreuse down from the top shelf. “Festive, right? And it’ll put some hair on your chest.” He glanced at Avon. “Not yours, though.”

“That’s more like it,” I said.

Deke lined up three glasses and poured liquid to the top of each one. We all lifted them and he said, “Merry Christmas, guys. Bottoms up.”

I downed it, blowing out a breath afterward. “Dude, that tasted like sucking off a pine tree.”

Avon laughed. “I got a little hint of lime.”

A large group came into the bar and sat down at a long table. Deke put the bottle back and went over to greet them, and Avon looked over at me.

“Tell me more about your pine tree—sucking habit,” she said.

I smiled, which was a rarity on Christmas Eve. Her cheeks were pink and her hair was loose around her shoulders. Even in that stupid sweater, she looked sexy as hell.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind instead?” I said.

She sighed heavily. “So many things.”

“Such as?”

“My dad used to make the most amazing barbacoa on Christmas Eve every year. We always had some friends over and played games. And my mom would get me the most thoughtful gifts, like little cosmetics or my favorite candy, and wrap each one in tissue and put it in my stocking. They swore they’d never let me have a cat, and then when I was six, I got one on Christmas morning and I was so damn happy. I named it Crush because it was orange.”

She had a faraway look in her eyes as she sipped her drink.

“You must miss them,” I said.

“I do. I always miss them on Christmas Eve. But this year, there’s also...” She glanced away.

“What?”

She met my gaze, looking troubled. “You can’t share this with anyone, okay?”

“I won’t.”

“There may be a buyer for the *Chronicle*.”

That had to mean she’d be leaving the Beard. It hit me hard to imagine her leaving and never returning. For as hard as we’d clashed when she got here, I liked her. A lot.

“You don’t seem happy about it,” I said.

She shook her head, closed her eyes, and took another sip of her drink. “It’s complicated.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“You may need to take me back to my apartment tonight if the drinks keep going down as smooth as this one is.”

“You should take it easy,” I said. “Tomorrow’s Christmas and Don’s lutefisk is bad enough without adding a hangover into the mix.”

She groaned and then laughed. “Are you serious? I thought that was just a Thanksgiving thing?”

“Sadly, no. He’s probably got a giant portion reserved just for you.”

“Oh, hell.” She threw back a big sip of her drink.

“You could always come eat with my family instead,” I suggested.

Where the hell had that come from? The words had fired directly out of my mouth before I had time to really think about them.

“Is your sister cooking?” she asked in a teasing tone. “Because I might not be able to say no to that.”

“She makes a scalloped sweet potato casserole every year that’s incredible. But my mom does everything else. She wants Shay to get a break from cooking.”

“That’s nice of her.” She bit her lower lip, hesitating for just a second before saying, “Tell me something about you.”

I took a drink of my beer and considered what to say. There was only one option that felt authentic, though.

“My girlfriend passed away on this day eleven years ago,” I said. “And I haven’t been with anyone since.”

Several seconds of silence passed before I looked at her. And then she took my hand and squeezed it.

“I’m so sorry, Grady.”

I shrugged, the emotion of the moment feeling too heavy and uncomfortable.

“I’m always hungover on Christmas,” I cracked. “So really I’ve got no business telling you not to be. This is the one night of the year I tell my deputy chief he’s on call in case of emergency.”

“When you said you haven’t been with anyone since, did you mean...at all?”

“I meant in a relationship. But I never...see women from the Beard.” I laughed nervously and ran a hand through my hair. “I can’t believe I’m telling you this.”

“I won’t tell a soul,” she said, making it sound like a promise. And I believed her.

“I used to go to Minneapolis a few times a year,” I said. “I guess I still go at least once a year for a police chief’s conference. But I’d...you know...”

“Hook up with women?” she supplied.

“Yeah. I haven’t done it for a couple of years, though.”

“I was engaged,” she blurted.

I turned to her, surprised by her admission. “You were?”

She nodded, looking shamed. “He broke it off almost nine months ago

because he said I'm not the kind of woman a man can fall crazy in love with."

Her words made me recoil. "Well, that guy's a stupid asshole."

"That's sweet of you," she said softly.

She didn't believe me. Her ex had planted a seed of unworthiness in her and whether she realized it or not, it was blooming. I wanted to stomp the shit out of the doubt he'd created in her.

"I'm not just saying it. You're a ten, Avon. If you were staying in the Beard..."

I couldn't finish the sentence. I could easily shoot a target at a hundred yards and deadlift more than anyone in my online training group, but I couldn't tell her that I wanted a relationship with her. It didn't make sense, but the thought of saying the words was too risky.

She shook the ice in her glass and then tapped it against my near-empty mug. "Another round?"

Fuck it. I'd already let enough slip, so why hold back now?

"Yeah," I said. "But let's have the next round at my place."

Her eyes widened slightly and then lit with the same desire I'd been holding back for what felt like forever. She was leaving, which meant I couldn't have her forever, but I could have her for tonight.

"Yes," she said, her voice slightly hoarse.

I took out my wallet and put down enough cash for both drinks. Avon slid her coat on, a smile dancing on her lips as she moved to stand right in front of me, only a couple of inches separating us.

"I've wanted you to kiss me since the moment we met," she said softly.

I cupped her cheek in my hand, my thumb stroking her soft skin. It had taken me all of one moment to decide that being private about my personal life didn't compare to making her happy.

Putting my free hand on the small of her back, I closed the distance between us and lowered my mouth to hers. She slid her arms around me, the warmth of her touch and her sweet, soft scent making me hard.

She parted her lips for me immediately, my heart pounding as I kissed her, my blood pumping with arousal. She was so damn perfect, our mouths doing a dance that had become unfamiliar to me. It all came back, though, and she moaned slightly as I deepened the kiss.

People were cheering, but I drowned out the noise. This was all that mattered right now. For the first time in eleven years, it was Christmas Eve

and I felt something good. Something amazing. Something that wasn't guilt and pain and remorse.

Avon pulled away, slightly breathless as she looked up at me, her eyes dazed but her lips smiling.

"It's ABOUT. DAMN. TIME!" Deke yelled from the other side of the bar, his hands cupped around his mouth.

Lana gave me a scathing look and I just shrugged. It wasn't the mistletoe. It was Avon. And our night was just getting started.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Avon

GRADY'S HOUSE was a neat brick ranch not far from downtown. As soon as we walked through a side door that led to the kitchen, he flipped on the lights and I took everything in.

It was clean, of course. The kitchen had white cabinets and dark granite counters, and the living room was furnished simply with a couch, a recliner, and a big-screen TV on a stand. There were no pictures on the walls. And it smelled like freshly cut wood.

"Smells nice," I said, setting my bag down on the kitchen counter.

"I put in real hardwood floors a few months ago." Grady opened a cabinet and took out an unopened bottle of whiskey. "That's why it smells like wood in here."

He opened the bottle, then went over to another cabinet and took out two shot glasses.

"I've got some good craft beer if you're into that," he said, walking over to the stainless steel refrigerator. "And I don't have much to eat, but I have some cheese and crackers."

"You don't have to worry about that," I said.

Why wasn't I bent over his kitchen island by now? Our kiss had worked me up to boiling point level hot, and all I could think about was *more*. More of his closeness, more of his tree trunk arms wrapped around me, more of his mouth on mine.

I tried to catch his eye as he took a small block of cheddar cheese out of the fridge, but he was preoccupied. He found the crackers he wanted in the pantry, took out a wooden cutting board, and pulled a knife from a butcher block.

It wasn't until he was halfway through carefully slicing the cheese that I realized he was avoiding looking at me. Had he changed his mind about this? One glance at the sizable bulge in his pants said *no*, but his actions said *maybe*.

“Hey, um...if you want me to go, I can,” I said.

I'd followed him over here in Pete's truck, and I could always drive it back to The Hideout for a few drinks and some food like I'd planned when I went there in the first place.

“No.” His gaze locked on to me, his tone firm. “Why? Do you want to go?”

What was that I saw in his eyes? Disappointment, and a mix of other emotions I couldn't place. Which was strange because usually, I could read him better. His shoulders were rigid and it looked like he was wound tight. Could it be that the cool, calm, always-in-control chief of police was... nervous?

“Hey.” I walked over to him and put my hand on his wrist. He stopped slicing cheese and met my gaze. “Tell me what you're thinking.”

He set the knife down, his brow crinkling slightly. “It's...I'm not even sure what I'm thinking.”

I smiled and patted his arm. “We could just watch a movie or something. We don't have to”

“Fuck.” He looked up at the ceiling. “Am I acting like a teenage virgin or something?”

Despite the gravity of the moment, I laughed. “No, I can just tell you're nervous.”

He lightly pounded the counter with his fist. “I just haven't done this in a while.”

The tenderness in his tone lit a spark that danced up and down my spine and settled in my belly. Gruff, strong Grady was being vulnerable. It made me want him even more.

“It's like riding a bike, right?” I said gently. “And you know what they say. Sex is like pizza. Even when it's bad, it's good.”

He scowled. “I'm not worried the sex will be bad. Jesus, that's what you

think? That I'm worried I'll blow my load in ten seconds?"

"Grady, no"

He cut me off. "I'll get you off in ways you never imagined. I'm fucking fantastic in bed."

I laughed again, this time incredulously. How had things gone so far off track from our kiss at the bar?

"I apologize," I said. "I shouldn't have assumed that when you said you hadn't done this in a while, it meant you were nervous the sex wouldn't be good. Okay?"

His response was a grunt. He took a slice of cheese from the board, popped it into his mouth and chewed, looking contemplative. After he swallowed it, he spoke again.

"I meant feelings." His tone was gruff. "I haven't done feelings in a while."

He had feelings. For me. Part of me wanted to melt into a puddle on the floor and the rest of me wanted to get down on my knees and show him how much his vulnerability turned me on.

"Kiss me again," I said. "Like you did at the bar."

He turned to face me, putting his hands on my hips. The uncertainty was gone from his gaze now; he was all desire and intensity.

"Is that what you want from me?" he asked in a low tone. "A kiss?"

My heart thumped as I looked up at him. "Kiss me like you mean it and I might want more."

One corner of his mouth tipped up in a confident smile as he slid his massive hands around my waist and then down to cup my ass, pulling me against him as his mouth crashed into mine.

A crunching sound between us brought things to a stop, and I laughed as the shattered remains of a Christmas ball from my ugly sweater fell to the floor.

Enough with the sweater. I pulled it off over my head and tossed it aside, Grady's gaze dark with arousal as he took in my breasts, covered by a pale-pink satin bra. I hadn't even taken a full breath before his arms were around me again, his hands lifting me up, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist.

I put my palms on his cheeks, returning his hungry kiss. He squeezed my ass and ground his erection against the perfect spot, making me break the kiss with a hard gasp.

“I’m on birth control,” I said.

His grin was wicked. “You want it already?”

I slid my core up and down his erection and he groaned. “Don’t you?”

“Fuck yeah, I do.”

He held my weight with one arm, his other hand moving up to grab a fistful of my hair and gently tug it, exposing my neck. He kissed me there, his beard brushing against the delicate skin and making me break out in goose bumps.

I threaded my fingers into his hair and tugged it back, his groans telling me he loved it.

He took a few steps forward, and I thought he was taking me to his bedroom, but instead, he moved his hand from my hair to my lower back and set me on his kitchen island. He put his hands on my knees and slowly pushed them as far apart as they’d go, then took a step back and ran the backs of his fingers over my seam. Even through the fabric of my leggings, his touch sent a jolt of arousal through me that brought out a whimper.

He reached around my back and unfastened my bra, taking it off and tossing it aside. I leaned back on my hands as he cupped one breast and ran the tip of his tongue around my nipple. My head fell back and I sighed with pleasure as he took his time licking and sucking until I thought I might combust.

When I felt his hands on the waistband of my leggings, I looked up and Grady’s eyes locked onto mine as he started tugging them down.

Oh. *Oh*. He planned to get me completely naked right here on his kitchen island. I bit my lip, smiling tentatively. His gaze was the dark green of a forest right after a rainstorm, matching the flannel that covered his wide shoulders.

I closed my eyes and lifted my hips, allowing him to get my leggings and underwear off. He got them to my calves and then stopped to toss off both of my boots and remove my socks before taking off the rest.

His palms were back on my inner thighs, spreading them wide. When I felt his warm breath hovering above my core, I shivered. I wanted him so badly.

As he ran the tip of his tongue along my center, I cried out, my hands scrambling for something to hold on to. I had to settle for the edge of the island counter, and I squeezed hard as Grady gently explored me with his tongue.

Soon, though, I was rocking my hips, silently begging for more. He slid his hands beneath my ass, holding me as he tongued and licked me until I was yelling his name, begging for release.

When he finally gave it to me, I saw stars. He kept his hold on me, his tongue still working as I rode it out. By the time I dropped my hips, I was breathless.

“Wow,” I said. “Merry Christmas to me.”

“You need a break?” he asked.

I smiled. “Nope. You?”

He shook his head. “Next round’s gonna be rougher.”

“I’m counting on it.”

He scooped me into his arms and carried me down a hallway and into a room with a king-size bed and a big dresser. I couldn’t make out much more in the dimly lit room, but I wasn’t here for the scenery.

After he laid me on the bed, he unbuckled his belt and unfastened his jeans, the sound making me clench my legs in longing. It felt like it took forever for him to kick off his boots, drop his jeans and underwear, and get his flannel off, but then he was hovering above me.

He was all heat and muscle, his lips meeting mine in a tender kiss as I ran my palms over his broad, corded back. I felt him gasp, and I wondered if it had been eleven years since he’d had this. Something other than a quick, pants-dropped, down-and-dirty quickie.

“I love your body,” I whispered against his lips.

He kissed my forehead, my cheeks, and my nose. “I love yours.”

I slid my hands down, pushing down on his lower back to encourage him. “You won’t hurt me,” I promised.

When he slid himself inside me, I inhaled sharply from the pleasure of the fullness. I’d never been with a man this size, and...damn, it was good.

He started slowly, his expression strained as he forced himself to hold back. I rocked my hips up into his, letting him know I wanted more.

Our mingled heavy breathing filled the room, turning into groans as he thrust deeper and harder. I was close to coming apart again when he put his face in the crook of my neck, his lips grazing my chest. The intimacy of it sent me over the edge, and he was right behind, holding himself inside me as he shuddered with his release.

As soon as he moved to his back, I rushed to find the bathroom and clean up. His bathroom was clean and basic, and it smelled like his evergreen soap

and his light cologne.

When I came back and crawled into bed, he lifted the covers for me and I snuggled into his side, his arm wrapping around me above the covers.

“I was hoping you didn’t leave,” he joked.

“After that?” My laugh was low and relaxed. “I might tie you to this bed and keep you to myself for a few days.”

He hummed his amusement. “No need for restraints, Miss Douglas. I’m at your disposal.”

I traced circles on his chest, content. I didn’t know if I’d be staying the night or if this was a one-time thing, but that was okay. Usually, I wanted to have all the answers all the time, but this moment was perfect because of the unknowns.

Grady and I needed each other tonight. We’d healed a little of our pain and loneliness. It was more than enough—for tonight, it was everything I needed.



“THIS ISN’T A FUNNY JOKE,” I told Grady the next morning as I glared at him across his kitchen island.

He widened his eyes and threw up his hands. “I told you; I didn’t touch your underwear.”

Shaking my head, I looked at the clock hanging above his kitchen sink, which was a Bigfoot. Its arms kept time, and based on where they were pointing, I was running very late.

“Harper will know something’s up when I don’t show up on time.” I gave him a pleading look. “Can I please have my underwear back?”

Grady crossed his arms over his chest. “Stop treating me like some underwear-hoarding perv.”

“What? Some guys like to sniff them. I’m not judging. But I need to go home and shower.”

“This is fucking ridiculous.” He put his hands on his head, walked another lap around the island and then checked the kitchen sink. “They were in your pants when I took them off last night? Are you sure they’re not stuck in the leg or something?”

“I checked.”

He sighed heavily.

“You really didn’t take them?” I asked.

“I’d never take anyone’s underwear,” he said, his voice agitated.

“Well, there’s no one here but you and me.”

Something dawned in his expression. “I know who did it.”

He walked down the hallway and I followed him past the doorway to his bedroom and through the doorway of another one. It was his home office, with a big wood desk, a laptop, and a couple of bookcases along the walls. One wall was nearly covered with photos, news clippings, a map of the woods surrounding Sven’s Beard, and other papers.

“What’s that?” I asked, referring to the papers on his desk.

He glanced over, distracted. “A cold case from a long time ago. I work on it at home sometimes.”

Bending down, he scooped Radar out of a stuffed cat bed and then picked something up that he’d been lying on.

“The case of the missing undies has been solved,” he said, holding them out on the tip of his finger. “Radar likes underwear. Sorry about that.”

I laughed as I took my gray undies back, which were now covered in black cat hair.

“Okay, I feel silly for accusing you,” I said.

He set Radar back on the ground. “Lucky for you, it’s Christmas, so I can’t be mad.”

I walked over to him and put my arms around his neck. “I had the best time last night slash this morning.”

“Me too.” He put his arms around my waist. “Sure you don’t want to blow off our family things and get back in bed?”

“It’s tempting, but I need to go to my aunt and uncle’s.”

He kissed me. “Okay. I’m working from three to ten tonight, otherwise I’d ask if I can call you.”

“You’re working on Christmas?”

“I’m covering for a lieutenant whose wife just got home from a military deployment. I want him to be able to spend the holiday with her and their kids.”

I kissed him. “That’s nice of you. I wish I didn’t have to go.”

“We’ll see each other again soon,” he said.

“Is that a threat or a promise?” I cracked.

He winked at me. “Little bit of both.”

After another long kiss, I said, “Merry Christmas, Grady.”
“Merry Christmas, Avon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Avon

A KNOCK on the apartment door made my heart flutter. I raced to the bathroom to check my teeth again, also doing a last-minute pit sniff.

Teeth clear. Pits powder scented. I was safe to open the door.

“Hey,” I said casually when I saw Grady standing there, a brown paper Taco Train carryout bag in hand.

“Hey.”

A warm light danced in his eyes as he gave me a lazy grin. That grin made me forget anyone else existed. A world of people surrounding us? Nope. When he looked at me like that, it was just us.

He set the bag on the floor and cupped my face in his hands, kissing me gently. I put my palms on his chest, my body heating from the light scent of his cologne, which I’d woken up smelling like on Christmas morning after sleeping in his bed.

It had been a couple of days since then, and I hadn’t heard from him much. We exchanged a few texts a day and had both been busy at work. When he texted me earlier today to ask if he could drop by my place with dinner, I paused, remembering my dating rule—no texting back in less than ten minutes for the first three weeks. Random and pointless? Yes, but I did it so I wouldn’t seem desperate.

That was a San Diego rule, though. In the Beard, with Grady, I wasn’t worried about nonsense like that. He was amazing, I had limited time here,

and I wanted to see him. So I immediately said yes.

“Damn,” he muttered, taking a step back from me. “I have to put a little distance between us so I can tell you about what I found.”

He picked up the bag and carried it over to the kitchen counter, unpacking its contents.

“You said you liked the chicken tacos you got when we went there, so I got you four of those with rice and beans and extra guac. Plus a bunch of chips and salsa and more guac.”

“Sounds amazing. I’m famished. Dandy brought in some soup he made for lunch and it wasn’t my thing.” I opened the apartment fridge and frowned. “I hope you like water because that’s all I have.”

“Water’s great.”

Grady moved the containers of food to the table while I got out dishes and bottled water. Once we were both seated, I gave him an expectant look.

“So what did you mean when you said you found something?”

His expression turned serious. “I’ve been doing some digging on the income and expenditures you pointed out in the budgets. First, I wanted to check with Keller to see if that money was from him and he was traveling for work, so that took some time. It’s not from him, though. I know that.”

My heart swelled. Grady was helping with my story, which was more than I ever would have asked of him.

“I appreciate the help, but I don’t want you to feel like you have to do it just because...you know.”

Just because we had mind-blowing sex and hopefully would again. Preferably tonight.

“That’s not why I’m doing it,” he said, dipping a chip into the thick guac. “And this is all off the record, by the way. I’m looking into it because something’s off, and I think this is about to turn into a criminal investigation.”

I sat back in my chair, stunned. “What?”

“Again, this is just between you and me,” he said. “Okay?”

“Okay.”

He leaned forward on his elbows, the food forgotten. “I knew something wasn’t right when you first showed me those records. I get reports on the budget all the time because I’m a department head. I sit through endless budget meetings. And I didn’t recognize where that money came from or where it went out to. It took me a few hours of comparing budgets from past

years and going through things, but...bottom line is that the income and expenditures you showed me don't appear on any of the official budgets that have been given to me, other city officials, the mayor, and the council members."

I shook my head, still reeling. All I had been looking for was an explanation—I hadn't suspected anything like this.

"How can that be?" I asked.

"I think when your Freedom of Information request was filled, those accounts were on it by accident. They've been intentionally left off of all the official budgets."

"But why?"

He sighed heavily. "I don't know the answer to that yet. But I need you to do something for me."

"What?"

"I need you to not talk to anyone but me about this for now. I know someone who has access to the city's accounts is doing something they shouldn't, but no one knows I know. That's going to allow me to look into things without anyone having a chance to cover their tracks."

I slumped in my chair, knowing what I *should* do. It wasn't my job to work with any city official. If the city had large amounts of unaccounted money coming in and out, and no one could explain it, that was a huge story.

"I can't just look the other way," I said.

Grady nodded. "I get that. I'm just asking for more time. And if you'll give me that, when the time comes, you'll have a much better story. I promise I'll give you everything I possibly can. On the record."

A few seconds of silence passed. I wished I had a journalism mentor to tell me what to do, but it was just me. I wasn't even a journalist. I was just keeping the seat warm until I sold the *Chronicle*. But I still wanted to do the right thing.

"You wouldn't even know this much if I hadn't told you," he said. "And if you'd kept asking other people, eventually whoever's doing this would have gotten wind and done their best to cover it up."

"That's true," I admitted.

"Please." He gave me an imploring look. "This can work out for both of us if you'll just give me some time."

I didn't have much to go on for a story. On the record, I had nothing. Just my questions and no answers. There really wasn't much of a choice.

“Okay,” I said. “But I want everything when I write my story. I don’t want the brick-wall treatment. Agreed?”

A smile played on his lips. “I promise I’ll give you everything I can. I’m about to call in the state police, so they’ll be leading the investigation.”

My eyes widened. “Seriously? You don’t think anyone else will hear about it when they start investigating?”

He shook his head. “They know what they’re doing. They have the power to freeze the accounts so no one has a chance to cover their tracks.”

“But this is *your* investigation. Your big discovery.”

He sat back, rubbing a hand down his beard. “It was your discovery. And I can’t run an investigation into my own city as a city department head. I’m required to call in the state police.”

“I can’t wait to find out what their investigation turns up. I’d understand if someone was just taking money from a city account, that’s stealing. But why would someone be depositing money and *then* taking it out?”

Grady arched his brows. “Hopefully we’ll know soon.”

“You know more than you’re letting on, don’t you?”

He grinned, then turned serious. “I’ve told you everything I know. Do I have suspicions? Yeah. But let’s give it a couple of weeks and see how things shake out.”

“A couple of weeks?” I balked. “You want me to sit on this for *a couple of weeks*?”

“Investigations take time.”

I was already overdue on getting back to Max about the offer on the *Chronicle*. My four-week deadline had come and gone—I’d been here for five weeks now. Kerry’s ultimatum to return to San Diego or lose my job was still hanging out there too.

The wise thing to do was make a counteroffer to the potential buyers, as Max suggested, and get back to California while I still had a job there. That was the plan all along. The goal.

But things were more complicated now. Because of the story I badly wanted to break and because of the lumberjack look-alike eating his third taco across from me right now.

“I’ll give you a couple of weeks,” I told Grady. “But you’ll have to keep me happy in the meantime.”

His smile was fond. “How can I do that? Other than sex and tacos, I mean?”

“Sex and tacos are an excellent foundation. You should also tell me I’m pretty and apologize when you’re wrong.”

He scoffed, still grinning. “Pretty isn’t the right word for you. You’re stunning. And if I’m ever wrong, I’ll apologize.”

My heart raced as our gazes locked. This felt so good. San Diego was full of single men; it was so unfair that the only one I wanted lived in snowy, icy northern Minnesota.

“Can you stay here tonight?” I asked him.

My ex never stayed at my place. He argued that his place was better because my bed was too small, my apartment was too bright, and he could never get a good parking place, so we always stayed at his place. I held my breath as I waited for Grady to respond.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’d like that. As long as you don’t mind that I get up and go early. I have to work out and then I’m meeting up with a state police buddy to talk about this investigation.”

“I don’t mind.”

We finished dinner and went into the living room, where we sat beside each other on the couch and Grady took some papers from an envelope he’d brought, showing me the discrepancies in the budget.

“I never expected anything like this,” I said as I scanned the numbers.

“I owe you an apology,” he said, his expression somber.

“I was kidding about making me happy by apologizing,” I said lightly.

“No, really. I pushed back when you got to town and wanted to do things differently. I get it now. Why it’s good to have someone outside City Hall looking at things.”

“Even ongoing investigations?” I teased.

“No, not those. But city officials handing Pete the stuff we wanted printed in the paper...that clearly wasn’t working.”

I leaned my shoulder against his large upper arm. “Thanks for saying that. I spend about sixty-five percent of my days in the newsroom doubting myself, so I appreciate it.”

“Don’t doubt yourself. I believe in you.”

I lifted my head and set my chin on his shoulder. “Don’t you also believe in Bigfoot, though?”

“I was born and raised in the Beard. Sven and Bigfoot are just part of the territory.”

I turned on the TV and scrolled through all three channels Pete got from

his antenna.

“Looks like an early bedtime,” Grady said.

“I’m not tired yet.”

“Me either.” He grinned. “That’s the point.”

“Ah.” I stood up, my body already warming at the thought of going to bed with him.

My nights in the Beard were numbered; I had to make the most of each one.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Grady

“HEY, HON!” my mom called as soon as I walked into their house. “How are you?”

She’d heard about me and Avon—I could tell by the way she was glowing. We’d made no effort to hide anything, and between our Christmas Eve kiss at The Hideout, her car in my driveway that night, and my truck parked in front of the *Chronicle* building a couple of nights ago, everyone knew.

“Good,” I said, my stomach growling from the smell of her chicken and dumplings. “It’s been quiet. Pretty lonely, actually.”

“Ryan Andrew Grady, I was in labor with you for seventeen hours. You tell me about you and Avon right now.”

I smiled, knowing she was dying for information. She hardly ever broke out her mom voice anymore.

“We’re seeing each other,” I said. “I like her.”

“Good for you,” Dad said, rolling his wheelchair from the living room into the kitchen.

“Are you making mashed potatoes, too?” I asked Mom.

“Of course I am, but back up. I’ve waited a decade for this. I want details.”

I should’ve known it wouldn’t be that easy. My mom wanted Shea and me to both get married and have kids more than anything.

“What do you want to know?” I asked, opening the fridge.

“There’s summer sausage in the little glass container,” she said, focused on her cooking. “How many dates have you two been on?”

I thought about it. “I’m not sure we ever said anything was a date, but we’ve been out three times.”

“You better tell me you picked up the checks,” she said in a threatening tone.

“Mom.” I glared at her. “Of course I did.”

She put her hands up in mock surrender. “Well, these days young people like to *hang out*,” she said, putting her fingers up and making the sign for air quotes, “and split checks, and I’m not for it. You pay the check, you hang up her coat, you open her door. I raised a gentleman.”

“I feel like I was there, too,” Dad said lightly.

“We,” Mom corrected. “We raised a gentleman.”

Dad gave me a conspiratorial look; we both knew Mom was just getting started.

“When do we get to meet her?” Mom asked.

I took a bottled beer out of the fridge and popped off the cap, taking a drink before answering.

“I don’t know. Things are up in the air right now. The *Chronicle* is for sale and she might not be here for much longer.”

Mom shook her head, took the oven mitts off her hands and set them down, then crossed her arms.

“Well, you just make her stay, Ryan. Wine her. Dine her. Make sure she knows she’d be walking away from the most incredible single man in this hemisphere.”

“Carol,” Dad said. “Let him live his life.”

“I want him to live his life, but not alone for the next fifty years! If he acts like he doesn’t care, she’ll think he doesn’t care.”

I took a long pull on my beer. I knew coming into this dinner with them that we’d have to talk about Avon. I hadn’t expected it to be quite this intense, though.

“How long until dinner’s ready?” I asked, considering waiting in my truck until it was time to eat.

“Another forty-five minutes or so,” Mom said. “Are the two of you looking for the same things?”

I set my beer down and my dad sighed, wheeling himself out of the room.

“I’m not doing this with you,” I told my mom.

“Doing what? Talking about your life?”

“Mom,” I said gently. “I’m seeing someone. I like her a lot. That’s all there is to know for now. I know that’s hard for you, but that’s just the way it is.”

Her eyes filled with tears and she looked away. “I just want to see you happy.”

I approached her and put my hands on her shoulders. “I am happy. I never thought I’d date a woman who lives in the Beard again, but I couldn’t *not* date Avon. She’s amazing.”

“I could talk to her,” she offered.

Lord help me. That was the worst possible idea ever.

“You don’t need to do that, Mom.”

She turned to look at me, swiping at the corners of her eyes. “I mean just to let her know how much you’ve been through and how much you have to offer.”

My mother was a normal, rational woman until the subject of potential partners and babies for my sister and me came up. All bets were off then.

“Either I’m enough for her, or I’m not,” I said. “If she’s even staying here. She has a job back in California.”

“She has a job here, too! And she’s a business owner.”

I walked over to the fridge and opened it, taking out the half-full bottle of white wine my mom had placed a wine stopper in and using it to refill the nearly empty glass on the counter.

“The *Chronicle* is a tough business to own,” I said. “I heard through the grapevine that she paid for the employees to get Christmas bonuses out of her own pocket.”

“Has she asked Keller Strauss to help?”

I shook my head. “I think she’s trying to sell it now. We’ll see what happens.”

She sipped wine from her glass, taking a deep breath. “It’s nice to see you caring about someone again. And having fun. You deserve that.”

My parents had loved Megan, the girlfriend and fellow officer I’d lost eleven years ago. We’d only dated for seven months, but my parents had welcomed her like a family member from the first time I brought her home. I often forgot that they’d been devastated by her death, too.

“Can you behave yourself if I invite her to dinner?” I asked.

Mom gaped at me. “Behave myself? What’s that supposed to mean?”
“It means no talk about commitment, marriage, babies, or the future.”
She furrowed her brow. “I’d never talk about anything like that in front of her.”

This from the woman who just wanted to persuade Avon to stay here and make babies with her son, “the most incredible single man in this hemisphere.”

I gave her a look and she huffed an exasperated sigh.

“Not a word!” she said. “I’ll keep things light. I promise.”

I took out my phone to text Avon, hoping I wouldn’t regret it later.

“SO WHAT DO you do back in San Diego?” my father asked Avon over dinner an hour later.

“Pharmaceutical sales. It’s not very interesting.”

“I’ve heard it can be very lucrative, though.”

She nodded. “It can, but you have to work a lot of hours to get there.”

“Avon, this wine you brought is fantastic,” my mom said.

“Oh, I’m glad you like it. My mom always liked that one, too.”

I patted her knee under the table and she met my gaze with a reassuring smile. I’d told her she didn’t have to come, but she’d immediately responded to my text and said she wanted to. My parents were thrilled.

“Dinner is amazing,” Avon said to my mom. “This is the best meal I’ve had in a really long time.”

“Well, thank you. Did your parents like to cook when you were growing up?”

Avon smiled. “My dad loved to cook. And my mom didn’t dislike it or anything. They usually made dinner together.”

“That sounds nice.”

“I actually wanted to ask you about something,” Avon said. “When I used the bathroom right after I got here, I noticed a photo in the hallway of a little boy in a cape.”

Dad laughed heartily and I shook my head.

“When he was four years old, Ryan refused to wear anything but that red cape for months,” Dad said. “He wouldn’t even wear underwear. Just the

cape.”

Avon smiled warmly at me. “Were you a naked Superman?”

“Something like that,” I mumbled.

“That’s how he broke his arm,” my mom said, laughing. “Jumping out of a tree, wearing nothing but that cape, convinced he could fly.”

“Ouch,” Avon said. “Did you try again after that?”

“Nope. And I ripped the cape on a branch on the way down.”

“You were more upset about that than your arm,” Mom said.

It was true. I’d been a hellion as a kid, bouncing back and forth between wanting to be a superhero and wanting to be a police officer like my dad.

“Those were the days,” Dad said fondly. “What I wouldn’t give for just one more day with my children as kids.”

“Hopefully, one day, we’ll have grandkids to help us remember those days,” Mom said.

I shot her a quick glare and she gave me a look of mock innocence.

“Avon, I didn’t know your parents well,” my dad said, “but I want to share something with you.”

Avon looked at him, her eyes bright with interest. “Please do.”

“I was a few years younger than Dave and Pete, but I knew who they were. Everyone did. They were both talented baseball players. I was walking home from school one day and I had to walk past the field they were practicing at. A few older kids were giving me trouble, and Dave and Pete left practice to come help me. They chased the older kids off and told me to come sit on their bench until practice was over, and then they walked me home. I never forgot it.”

Avon found my hand under the table and squeezed it, looking misty-eyed. “Thank you for telling me about that.”

Dad nodded. “Pete later became a good friend of mine. We had breakfast at Tipper’s together often and went fishing several times. He was a good man.”

“I wish I could’ve met him, even one time,” she said. “I feel like I’m getting to know him just through his photography and his work at the *Chronicle*.”

“That was his life’s work. He was so proud of that paper. There was a woman he liked to spend time with, but mostly he poured himself into the paper.”

“Really? I hadn’t heard there was anyone special in his life.”

“Her name is Christine. She grew up here, but now she lives in a town about an hour from here. I’d be glad to put you in touch with her if you ever want to meet her.”

“I may take you up on that, thank you.”

We finished dinner with no more talk of grandchildren from my mom, Avon raving about the pound cake she made for dessert. After about an hour of after-dinner coffee and conversation, I put an arm around Avon and said, “Better get going.”

“Oh, really?” Mom didn’t even try to hide her disappointment. “We could play some cards or something.”

“Another time,” I said.

I planned to go back to the station and work some more. Evenings were the best time to go into the secured room where old hard-copy budgets were stored. I still had a lot of digging to do for the state police.

“It was so nice to meet you, Avon,” my mom said, hugging her. “I hope to see you again soon.”

“Me too.”

Dad shook her hand and said goodbye, and we headed out together.

“That was nice, thanks for inviting me,” she said.

“Thanks for coming. And my mom will be watching us until our vehicles aren’t visible anymore, just so you know.”

She grinned and threw her arms around my neck. “Better give her something to look at, then.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist and kissed her. She kissed me back, threading her hands into my hair. As soon as I pulled away, she kissed me again.

“You know she’s literally dancing right now, right?” I asked, touching my forehead to hers. “She’s dying for me to find a nice girl and settle down.”

“It’s probably time. What are you, about forty-five?” she teased.

“I’m thirty-four, funny girl.”

She kissed me again. “Good night, *Ryan*.”

“Night. Drive safe.”

I opened the door to Pete’s truck and she got in, stomping snow off her boots like a pro. Then I followed her down my parents’ long driveway and back into town, reluctantly turning into the City Hall parking lot instead of the one behind the *Chronicle*, where she was parking.

Everything in me wanted to be with her instead of going into my office,

but the investigation was too important to blow off. More time with her would have to wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Avon

“HEARD YOU MET GRADY’S FOLKS,” Bess said the moment I walked into the newsroom the next morning.

Going straight for the coffeepot, I poured coffee to the top of my mug, took a couple of sips, and then topped it off before carrying it over to my desk.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “They’re both very nice.”

I signed onto my computer and pretended to get right to work, but really I was just avoiding further conversation. I’d had a restless night of tossing and turning after getting a text from my boss Kerry yesterday evening. I was officially out of paid time off and she couldn’t keep up with my clients and her workload anymore. She gave me an ultimatum—be back in the office by noon today or I was fired.

Fired. I’d silently repeated the word to myself so many times. Not only had I never been fired from a job in my life, I’d never even gotten in trouble at work. I was a people pleaser, showing up early, working late, and never complaining.

I did what I was supposed to do every time. Until today. This morning I’d be working in the newsroom and watching the hours pass on the fish-shaped clock hanging by the door until I was officially unemployed.

Four hours to go. And then my small *Chronicle* paycheck would be my only one.

There hadn't been a decision to make, really. I wasn't walking away from the story about the irregular financial activity at City Hall. Maybe I wasn't really a journalist and I'd accidentally stumbled onto it, but it was still something I started that I wanted to see through.

"Oh, good Lord," Bess muttered from her desk. "Shawn O'Malley is in intensive care. That's what happens when you go ice-fishing in the middle of the night after drinking moonshine."

I cringed. "What happened?"

"I heard he was at a lake with some friends about an hour away from here and he fell through the ice looking for a bathroom," Bess reported, not looking away from her computer. "But he's never been the sharpest knife in the drawer. Even sober, he couldn't find his ass with both hands."

There was no appropriate response for that.

I read over my notes from interviews I did yesterday with Ida Bane, a local woman who was turning one hundred in a couple of weeks. Her keys to longevity were tacos and staying single. This was going to be a fun story to write.

I took my time with it, finishing the story and then uploading the photos I'd taken of her. There were so many good ones that it would be hard to choose which ones to use. My favorite one was of her eating a taco, with about ten more on a plate in front of her. She'd made some just for our interview, making sure to point out the importance of not skimping on the cheese.

I was a couple of hours closer to unemployment and ready to start writing another story when I saw a text from Grady on my phone. My heart skipped with excitement before I even read it.

Grady: Can we meet up for lunch at your place?

Avon: Sure. Everything okay?

Grady: Yeah. Noon?

Avon: Yes.

I frowned as I set my phone back on my desk. Since I was behind on laundry, I was wearing an old nude-colored bra with a tear in it and white cotton briefs. And lunch at my place had to mean Grady would be seeing my undergarments, if only for a quick moment.

Picking the phone back up, I texted him again.

Avon: Hey, you mean "lunch" right?

Grady: ???

Avon: Well, there's lunch and then there's "lunch"...

Grady: I actually wasn't thinking about either of those.

Avon: Elaborate, please.

Grady: Just wanted to tell you about something. I'll bring sandwiches. And if "lunch" is an option, I'm in.

I stood, about to run up to the apartment for an emergency leg-shaving session when it hit me what Grady probably wanted to tell me. He'd passed a lot of information on the money transfers to the state police, promising to update me when he heard anything back from them.

My heart raced with excitement as I texted him that I was on my way to see him instead.

Avon: I'm coming to you. Be there in 3 minutes.

"I have to run an errand," I told Bess, grabbing my coat and shoving my phone into my bag.

I ran to the newsroom door, a blast of cold air hitting me in the face as I opened it. Grabbing my coat's hood, I pulled it over my head, holding it in place as I checked for traffic and ran across the street. I couldn't wait to find out Grady's news.

Once inside City Hall, I stomped the snow from my boots and met Barb's gaze across the lobby.

"Hi Avon," she said brightly. "How are you?"

"Hi," I said breathlessly. "The chief should be expecting me."

She gave me a conspiratorial look. "I hear the two of you have been spending a lot of time together."

I looked at the door that led to Grady's office, willing him to open it and walk through the doorway. Barb was certainly in no hurry to let me in.

"He's really just a big teddy bear, you know," she said. "There's a heart of gold in that big, burly chest."

I smiled at her, dying inside. If Grady had an update on the case, I wanted to know what it was immediately. This was going to be the biggest story the *Chronicle* had ever broken. It wasn't the time for small talk.

"Is he in his office?" I asked Barb.

She lowered her brows and squinted at her computer screen. "Yes, but I think he's in a meeting."

I took out my phone to text him, my impatience making it hard to stand still. Before I started typing, the door that led to his office opened and he stood there, filling the doorway and giving me a puzzled look.

“Everything okay?” he asked me.

I rushed over to him. “I just couldn’t wait until noon. Let’s go.”

He gave me a wry smile as I darted past him.

“My meeting was almost over anyway,” he said. “But I don’t have any sandwiches yet.”

He fell into step beside me, following me into his office, where he closed the door behind us.

“Been hitting the coffee hard this morning?” he asked, noticing how amped I was.

I set my bag in a chair and slid out of my coat. “Is there news on the case?”

He gave me a quick kiss, walked around his desk, and sat down in his big leather chair, picking up a manilla envelope. “I got something this morning. I was planning to look it over and tell you about it over lunch.”

“Let’s look at it now,” I said.

His expression turned hesitant. “This will have to be completely off the record. You can’t talk about it with anyone. I really shouldn’t be sharing information about an ongoing investigation with you.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You mean the investigation that wouldn’t be happening if I hadn’t shown you those discrepancies in the budget?”

He put up a palm. “I know. I’m just telling you”

“Don’t patronize me, Grady.”

He arched a brow, falling silent for a few seconds. Our gazes locked in challenge, neither of us willing to back down.

“We already made a deal,” I finally said, my desire to know what was inside that envelope winning over my desire to banter it out right now. “I get all the information when the time comes. Either you trust me to do what I said, or you don’t.”

“I do.”

Radar jumped up onto his desk, cocking his head as he studied me. I got an odd sense that the cat thought it was protecting Grady somehow.

“Let’s open it,” Grady said. “You want to come around to this side so you can see it?”

I got up and walked over to his side of the desk, where he got up and offered me the chair.

“No, you sit,” I said.

“I’m fine. You go ahead and sit.”

I sat down just to end the standoff. Grady used a letter opener to open the end of the envelope and pulled out a handful of papers.

“This should be information about the account holder for KSK,” he said. “Everything was buried in corporate names, but I tracked down the registered agent and the state police were able to find out who owns the bank account.”

It was several papers held together by a paper clip, the first few pages looking like bank statements. The transfers into the account were all incredibly large sums.

“It all says KSK,” I mumbled as I scanned the pages.

Grady flipped to a new page, which looked different from the bank statement pages.

“We’ve got something different here,” he said, sliding on his reading glasses.

He picked up the paper and read it, his brow furrowing. “What the hell?”

“What is it?” I asked.

“This can’t be right.”

“What does it say?”

He set the paper down, his expression stunned. I looked at it, eager to find out what he’d seen.

“Leonardo Bardot,” I read out loud. “Is that someone”

Grady’s expression silenced me. His eyes were wide with disbelief and he was leaning both palms on the desk for support.

“What is it?” I asked him.

“Leo Bardot was the head of a large drug smuggling ring,” he said, his tone sounding automatic, like he’d repeated this information many times. “He was the worst of the worst. Didn’t care if he was selling tainted drugs and he killed anyone who crossed him. Once slit a guy’s throat over a hundred bucks.”

My excitement over the story faded as I took in his words. This wasn’t what I was expecting. No story was worth pissing off a crime boss and possibly finding myself in his line of fire.

“My dad spent years chasing Bardot,” Grady continued. “He was always a step ahead, though. But then, eleven years ago, Bardot was driving a car one of our officers initiated a traffic stop on. The car was loaded with drugs.”

His tone was far off now, his emotions tucked away safely somewhere else. A sense of dread crept through me as I realized where this was going.

“It was Megan,” he said flatly. “My girlfriend. When she tried to arrest

him, he opened fire and shot her. She called for backup and my dad was the closest to the scene. By the time he got to her, she'd bled out. He caught up to Bardot and they exchanged gunfire. Both of them were hit. Bardot got away, but he'd lost so much blood we were sure that he'd died. And my dad was paralyzed from the waist down."

I put a palm on his back, searching for the right words to say. Grady looked like he'd been physically struck. All I could do in the moment was be here for whatever he needed.

"I've been chasing Bardot's ghost for eleven years," he said softly. "I couldn't stop until I had proof he was dead."

"You should sit down," I said. "I'll get you some water."

He scrubbed a hand down his face. "No, I'm okay. I'm just..."

"Stunned," I supplied.

"Yeah, that."

"What should we do?" I asked, my story forgotten.

He took in a deep breath and let it out. "I have to talk to Coulter. And my dad. And the state police." He met my gaze. "I'm sorry, but"

"You need me to leave."

He nodded and put a hand on my waist. "It's not that I don't want you here."

I nodded. "I understand."

When he wrapped his arms around my waist, I wound my arms around his neck. He held me tightly, his entire body rigid with tension.

"I'm here if you need me," I said. "Anytime, day or night."

"Thanks." He kissed my temple. "I'll call you later."

"I'll be at the office searching the archives."

When the time came for me to write my story, I needed to be prepared. I was going to read up on Leonard Bardot while I waited for the investigation to unfold.

"Grady," I said softly. "We know who's on one end of this, but who's on the other end? The city end? Who's making those transfers to Leo Bardot?"

"That's what I have to figure out." He leaned back, cupping my face in his hands. "Listen to me, okay? Not a word of this to anyone. Not Bess, not *anyone*. Bardot is dangerous. Promise me you'll stay at the *Chronicle* and not go out digging for any more information."

"I promise."

He leaned in to kiss my forehead. "Thanks. I need to know you're safe."

I gave him an encouraging smile. “Do what you need to do. I’m good.”

He walked me to the door of his office and then through the City Hall lobby, giving me another quick kiss at the door.

“Talk later,” he said softly.

“Okay. Be careful.”

“Always.”

He watched me walk across the street and back into the *Chronicle* building, giving me a little wave as I stepped into the newsroom.

“Hey,” the new advertising representative, Shelly, said to me.

“Hi, how’s it going?”

She launched into details about which clients she’d already met and which ones she was hoping to meet with today. I put on my game face and did my best to listen, even though my mind was swimming with the revelation about the case.

Suddenly this story was more than just a story. I pictured Grady’s kind, silver-haired father and Megan, whose life had been snuffed out in an instant.

They deserved justice. And playing even a small part in that would be the greatest accomplishment of my life. I wished my uncle could be here to guide me, but I had to find my own way and hope my choices would be the right ones.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Grady

“I WOULDN’T BELIEVE it if it wasn’t right there in front of me,” my father said sadly.

I pursed my lips and stared at the small computer screen a state police detective had put on my desk, feeling the same way. But there was no mistaking the identity of the man walking across the Minneapolis bank lobby in the video.

“Dale Meecham,” Dad said, disbelief ringing in his tone. “All this time being mayor has been a front for his scheme.”

Once the state police found out Leo Bardot was alive and involved in money laundering through the City of Sven’s Beard’s accounts, things had moved quickly. My buddy from the police academy, Steve Haroldson, was one of the state police detectives on the case, and he’d brought the video footage by my office as a courtesy.

“Mr. Meecham is being taken into custody at his home,” Steve said, looking at his watch. “Right now, actually.”

Coulter put a hand on my back, looking as sick as I felt. All these years, Meecham had gotten away with this on our watch. He’d covered his tracks well, choosing Mrs. Jenkins as treasurer because she didn’t question his authority.

“I promised Avon the details she needs for a story,” I told Steve. “Can I give her your number?”

He looked wary. “We’re not there yet, Grady.”

Avon wasn’t going to be thrilled with that news. She’d been more than patient, and once Meecham was arrested, everyone would be talking.

“How much longer?” I asked. “And what about Bardot? You got eyes on him?”

Steve shook his head. “We’re hoping to use Meecham as a decoy to draw him out. But once the news hits, we won’t be able to do that.”

I considered the different options I had. It was New Year’s Eve, but there wouldn’t be any celebrating until Bardot was behind bars. I’d let him slip away once; I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

“I’ll talk to her,” I said.

“Turn on the charm,” Steve said, grinning. “Assuming you’ve still got some, that is.”

I wasn’t in the mood to come up with a response. Worry and regret swirled in my gut over Bardot. It didn’t matter if we busted up his money laundering scheme with the mayor if he escaped yet again. He’d killed a police officer and paralyzed another. If I failed to deliver justice yet again, I wasn’t worthy of the badge I wore.

“We’ve got this covered,” Steve said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “You’ve done everything you can do, man, and you did good. I’ll let you know when we have any news.”

I shook my head. “I need to be involved. I can’t just wait to see what happens.”

“Give us a few days,” he said. “Let us do what we do. You’re too close to this.”

It was because of how close I was that I couldn’t just stand by and wait. If it had been Steve’s father who was paralyzed or his girlfriend who was murdered, he’d get it.

“He’s right,” my dad said. “The case is in good hands. You need to sit this one out.”

Pacing to the other side of the room, I laughed humorlessly. “I’m not sitting out shit. I never gave up on this case. I run Bardot’s name through every database I can on weekends. I may not have known he was as close as he was, but I never gave up. I’m sure as hell not giving up now.”

Steve gave me a pained look. “No one’s asking you to give up. But this is out of your jurisdiction now. You know how this needs to go down.”

“That’s bullshit.”

His cell phone buzzed, and Steve looked down at the screen, reading the message there aloud. “We have Meecham in custody. I have to go, but I’ll update you when I can.” He arched his brows in a serious look. “Out of courtesy. Because this isn’t your case anymore.”

I flipped him the bird as he went for the door of my office.

“I saw that, you know,” he said, his back to me as he turned the doorknob.

“Good.”

He left the room and Coulter, Dad and I just stared at the empty door for a few seconds.

“Guess we just try to make it look like business as usual,” Coulter said. “Helps that it’s a holiday and not a normal workday.”

I ran a hand down my face, feeling like a caged beast. How could I just stand by and wait for others to take Bardot down? Especially when that plan relied on help from that snake Meecham?

“Go see your girl,” Dad said to me.

I imagined having Avon in my arms and suddenly felt more relaxed, knowing I had someone, someone special, to talk about this with. If I had to stand back and wait, there was no one I wanted to be with more than her.

I nodded. “Yeah, I think I will.”

“Everything’s covered here,” Coulter said. “Go enjoy the holiday. We’ll have something to celebrate soon.”

I hoped he was right. This wasn’t over until Bardot was in custody. That could happen within a day because there weren’t holidays for cops working cases like this.

I’d waited eleven years. I could handle one more day.

“NOT A BAD WAY TO spend the last evening of the year,” Avon said from beside me in bed a few hours later.

She was curled into my side, sated after a couple of hours of foreplay and sex. I’d channeled all my nervous energy into pleasing her, and I could still hear her whimpering my name as she came for the third time, my face buried between her thighs.

“I’m glad it wasn’t bad,” I said wryly as I kissed her temple.

She laughed. “You know what I meant. It was incredible. I am getting kind of hungry, though.”

I did a mental run-through of what I had in my fridge, deciding eggs and beer probably wasn't much of a dinner.

“Want to go eat at The Hideout?” I asked.

“Yes.”

She went to move away and I tightened my hold on her, the feel of her warm naked body better than any meal could ever be.

“Or no?” she asked, amused.

“I guess yes,” I said, reluctantly letting go. “But you're staying here tonight.”

“Oh, I am?”

“Yep. And if you wear one of my flannels again in the morning, you'll be here tomorrow night, too.”

She grinned at me as she picked up her jeans and stepped into them. “As long as I can pick up my toothbrush.”

“I got you one.”

Her brows shot up. “You did?”

“Yep.”

I hadn't thought much of it when I'd tossed the pink toothbrush into my cart at the store, though the clerk had given me a knowing look when I checked out.

“So the mayor was officially arrested?” she asked me as she fixed her hair in the bathroom, the door open.

“He was. But that's still under wraps.”

“Not for long, though.”

“I hope not.”

She poked her head out of the bathroom, giving me a serious look. “I can't let our personal relationship get in the way of running this story. I hope you understand that.”

I gave her a knowing look as I buttoned my flannel. “You wouldn't even know about the arrest if not for our personal relationship.”

“True. And on the record, I don't know about it. My story will just lay out what I do have on the record.”

“Which is?”

“A lot of unaccounted money moving in and out of city hall.”

I sighed, wishing there was some other way. Mrs. Jenkins would be

mortified when she found out what had been going on while she was serving tea and making needlepoints.

“Just wait until they bring Bardot in,” I said, walking into the bathroom. “Can you do that?”

She met my gaze in the mirror. “Honestly? Probably not. That’s not how journalism works.”

I sighed, aggravated. “I think we can agree that the *Sven’s Beard Chronicle* can bend the rules a little on this one.”

She turned to face me, hurt flashing in her eyes. “Don’t you dare act like the *Chronicle* is less than just because it’s a small weekly. Our staff works hard to give this community a good newspaper.”

I’d spoken carelessly and set her off. Now I had to back up and get back in her good graces.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I said. “You guys do an incredible job. But you know how much is riding on this investigation. Can’t we agree that Bardot’s arrest is more important than any news story?”

She furrowed her brow, her frustration showing. “It doesn’t have to be a decision between the two. It’s not my job to accommodate city officials; my job is to report what’s going on.”

My mind immediately flashed back to Megan, responding to that call about Bardot without any backup. She’d been a capable officer, but her inability to wait had cost her life.

“Listen to me,” I said, putting my hands on Avon’s shoulders. “This is important. Leo Bardot is fucking dangerous. I don’t want you putting yourself anywhere close to his line of fire by running a story too soon.”

She shook her head. “I’m not afraid to run a story if it’s the truth, Grady.”

I shifted, glaring at her. “You should be afraid. This guy’s a murderer who would do anything to save his own ass. There’s a lot more at stake than some newspaper story.”

She folded her arms. “You think my work at the paper is a joke, don’t you?”

“Of course not!” I shot back. “Now you’re just making shit up.”

“Have I tried to tell you how to do your police work?” she demanded. “Or questioned your methods?”

My sigh held a groan. “No.”

“Then don’t question how I do my work. I’m doing my best to run this paper with journalistic integrity, which I admit is complicated by sleeping

with the police chief.”

I put my hands on her waist. “You’re doing great. At running the paper *and* sleeping with the police chief.”

A smile played on her lips. “Stop trying to make me not be mad at you.”

I kissed her cheek, then her jawline, and then her neck. “I’m not.”

“Grady...”

“Avon...”

She put her palms on my chest, leaning back to escape my mouth. “I’m not letting you lure me back to bed until we’ve eaten.”

“Wouldn’t dream of trying,” I said with a wink. “Are you ready to go?”

“I’m ready.”

I took her hand and led her to the kitchen, where we both put on our boots and coats. We’d avoided a fight for now, but my concern for her wasn’t going away.

When we got to The Hideout, it was packed. It seemed like half the town was there to celebrate New Year’s Eve. Even Bigfoot was decked out in a hat and glasses. Avon’s cousin Harper made someone scoot over at her table, freeing up one chair.

“You take the chair,” Avon said.

I scoffed. “Absolutely not. You take it.”

“I’m planning to sit in your lap,” she said, arching her brows playfully.

Okay then. That changed things. I sat down and she slid onto my lap, putting an arm around my neck. Having her there felt right. She was warm and happy, and I wished our night together could last forever.

After several hours of snacking and drinking and a midnight kiss at the Sven statue, though, the night came to an end. It was a reminder that Avon wasn’t staying in the Beard. At least, I didn’t think she was. So while I could find happiness with her and bask in its glow for a few weeks, I’d never be able to keep it.

I had to take what I could get while I could get it, because sooner rather than later, my time with the gorgeous, fiery reporter would be nothing but a memory.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Avon

BENJI GAVE me a questioning look as his finger hovered above a button in the pressroom. I wasn't normally in here when it was time to start printing the paper, but today...I couldn't imagine being anywhere else.

"You ready, boss?" Benji asked me.

I weighed my decision again. There was no question that running the story was the right call from a journalism perspective. Misappropriation of public funds was a huge story, and I'd taken my time to make sure everything I was reporting was accurate and on the record.

Then again, I was just keeping the journalism seat warm here. Grady was going to be furious when I told him I couldn't wait any longer to run the story. That wasn't supposed to matter in my decision, but it did. It also mattered that Leo Bardot still hadn't been caught, and the story could send him into hiding.

I'd feel the same need for justice that Grady did if people I loved had been killed and injured. This decision had kept me up at night recently, but in the end, I had a sense of peace from knowing I was doing the right thing by the newspaper my uncle had entrusted me with.

"Yes, go ahead," I told Benji.

He nodded and pushed the button, my heart racing as the massive, two-story press hummed to life. Only Bess, Sam, Devon and I knew about the story that was running, but every employee here knew something was up.

“This is gonna make some waves,” Benji said as the press continued its start-up process.

I looked at him, puzzled.

“We read it as soon as you sent it over,” he admitted. “I’d be nervous as a cat in a roomful of rocking chairs, too, if I was you.”

My stomach rolled as he walked away to check things on the press. It hadn’t factored into my decision, but this story proved the value of the *Chronicle* to the community. I couldn’t fathom why no one wanted to continue running the paper. That was out of my hands, though. I’d given Max ample time to find a buyer, and I would’ve been willing to take a low offer just to unload it. Even though this was my only job now, I didn’t plan on that being the case forever.

It felt like forever until the first copies of this week’s edition started printing, the smell of fresh newsprint filling the air. I stayed where I was, not wanting to get in the way of the pressmen doing their job. Even from my spot on the sideline, I could see the banner headline.

“City can’t account for missing money”

Sam, Bess and I had gone back and forth trying to come up with something that fit, both literally and figuratively.

My work on this week’s edition was done now. The pressmen and circulation team would take over. I hoped they all shared my sense of pride in our paper this week.

My pride was mixed with dread, though, about the text I had to send. With a deep breath, I walked back into the newsroom.

“Did you do it?” Bess asked me.

She’d prepared a backup front page without the story in case I changed my mind at the last minute. Though she never offered an opinion, I could tell she had reservations about running the story.

“Yes,” I said, keeping my chin level.

She nodded and smiled. “Good for you, Avon. I’m proud of you.”

I gaped at her. “Now you have an opinion? I asked you at least a dozen times what you thought I should do and you wouldn’t say a word.”

“It wasn’t my place.”

I scoffed. “Are you serious? When does that stop you? You have an opinion about the kind of mayo I use for chicken salad and the way I apply eyeliner, but you don’t have an opinion about the biggest story ever to run in the paper?”

“I’m not the publisher—you are. This decision was yours to make.”

I threw my hands up, angry tears welling. “I never asked to be the publisher of a newspaper. Or the reporter. I’m just doing my best and something I’m woefully unqualified for. We’re supposed to be a team, Bess. A team that works together every week.”

“And we are. But you make the big decisions, whether you asked for the responsibility or not.”

I hated the tears that slipped from the corners of my eyes. The last couple of days had been the most stressful of my life, and I’d never felt so alone. Now my stress had morphed into fury.

“Is this your way of getting back at me?” I yelled at Bess. “Because Pete left me the *Chronicle* instead of you? You just sit back and let me screw things up while secretly enjoying it?”

Bess narrowed her eyes at me. “I can admit that I thought Pete made a mistake when you first got here, but I don’t feel that way anymore. Now go get some sleep and if you still feel like running your mouth after that, you know where to find me.”

My shoulders slumped as I exhaled. I picked up my phone and bag from my desk and walked from the newsroom to the stairs that led up to the apartment. As I slowly made my way up each step, I realized Bess was right about one thing—I needed some sleep.

Gathering my courage, I typed out the text I’d been dreading sending Grady.

Avon: I ran the story in this week’s edition. It’s all stuff I got on the record from city department heads other than you. I know you’re going to be mad, but please know this was a hard decision and I did what I think is right.

To keep myself from frantically checking for a return text, I switched my phone off, crawled into bed, and fell asleep within minutes.

WHEN I WOKE UP, I grabbed my phone from the nightstand and walked into the living room. It was snowing so hard I was only able to see a swirl of white through the window. I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, drank half of it, and curled up on the couch.

As soon as I turned my phone back on, it blew up with texts and missed

calls. I'd been asleep for three hours, and the story was already making the rounds.

GRADY: I appreciate the heads-up.

Aunt Laura: Avon! What a story in this week's paper! Uncle Don and I are so proud of you. Call me when you can.

Max Morrison: Nice job on that story. The whole town is talking. Reach out when you can about the offer; the buyers are asking for an answer.

Unknown: Avon, this is Betty Jenkins's granddaughter. She's very upset about the story you wrote. Thanks for doing that to a 74-year-old woman with heart problems.

I SIGHED HEAVILY, going back to Grady's text. I'd been expecting more than that, good or bad. Was this his way of dismissing our personal relationship? Would we go back to being just reporter and police chief now?

After brushing my teeth and pulling my wild hair back in a ponytail, I walked back downstairs to the paper. In the office, Sam was sitting at his desk, scowling, while Bess was immersed in typing on her computer.

"Hey," I said, sitting down at my desk. "Everything okay, Sam?"

"We've been getting prank phone calls," he said. "Some punk saying we all better watch our backs."

"It's Matt Meecham," Bess said simply from behind her keyboard. "The mayor's son. He can't hold down a job and he lives with his parents. I'm sure he's just having a fit over what his daddy's been accused of."

"He was arrested," I said. "I'm just the messenger."

"I know," Sam said. "But I'm not leaving you girls here alone when we're getting phone calls like that."

The phone rang and Bess snatched it up. "*Chronicle*, may I help you?"

After a pause, she said, "I know that's you, Matthew Meecham. I've known you since you were in diapers, and the only thing you're capable of murdering is a family-size bag of potato chips. Get off the couch and get a job."

She slammed down the phone, leaving Sam and me staring at her with our jaws practically dropped to the floor.

“You just...” I stumbled over the words. “That was a death threat and you just...?”

“See if he calls back,” Bess said, squinting to find her place on the document she was inputting. “I’m not listening to that deadbeat’s nonsense.”

I met Sam’s gaze across the room. He just shook his head.

“I’m going to have my wife bring in my gun,” he said.

That I hadn’t seen coming. I wasn’t about to let anyone turn the newsroom into a Wild West shoot-out.

“Absolutely not,” I said. “I’ll call Grady and let him know what’s going on.”

I held my cell phone, staring at the screen as I wondered if I should call his personal cell phone about something official. Would he even answer? I was afraid to risk his rejection, especially when death threats were being called into the newsroom.

I dialed the nonemergency number for the Sven’s Beard Police Department, which was posted on a paper beside my office landline phone.

“SBPD,” Barb said in answer.

“Hi Barb, it’s Avon. Is Grady available?”

“Hold on, I’ll check.”

About thirty seconds later, I was taken off hold and a deep voice spoke into the phone.

“Hey, Avon,” Grady said.

“Hi. Um...how’s it going?”

He laughed bitterly. “Absolute shit show. You?”

“I know how busy you must be, and I’m sorry to bother you, but we got a couple of threatening calls at the newsroom. A man telling us to watch our backs.”

There was a pause, and then he said, “Stay where you are. I’ll be right there.”

The line went dead and I hung up. Less than two minutes later, Grady walked into the newsroom, his expression grim, like he was ready for a fight.

“Hey,” he said, walking up to my desk.

“Are you mad at me?” I blurted, not caring that Bess and Sam could hear.

“No. Are you okay?”

Was that the truth? Or did he just not want to admit in front of others that he was mad?

“I’m okay,” I said. “Sam and Bess have been the ones who took the

calls.”

Grady looked over at Sam. “What did the caller say?”

“That we better watch our backs; that we’re dead. I think I need to have my gun here.”

Grady frowned and looked at Bess. “What’d they say to you?”

She huffed a sigh. “It’s Matt Meecham, Grady. I know his voice. He said he’s going to blow up the building.”

“Are you okay with me putting a tap on your phone lines?” Grady asked me.

“Of course. I mean, it’s probably nothing, but”

“No, we’re taking this seriously. I’d have you come stay at my place, but I’ve been sleeping in my office.”

Just the thought of sleeping in Grady’s arms tonight made me want to cry. Not because I was scared, but because I needed to know he and I were okay.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “I’ll keep everything locked up.”

“I’ll post an officer here for security,” he said.

Our eyes met and I searched his for a sign of something. Anything. He didn’t seem to be mad, but he also didn’t seem like the Grady I knew. He was far away, his mind occupied with everything that had been going on.

“I appreciate it,” I said. “And if you don’t mind me asking...how are things?”

He groaned as he typed into his phone. “A mess.”

“I got a text from Mrs. Jenkins’s granddaughter,” I said. “Mrs. Jenkins is okay, right?”

“Yeah. She’s at home; some of the public works guys are packing up her office for her.”

“Packing up her office? Why?”

He gave me a half smile. “She has to resign. The council has lawyers and auditors coming in and...it’s either resign or be fired.”

A guilty weight settled in my stomach.

“Guess that’s my fault,” I said.

“Nonsense,” Bess snapped from her desk. “It’s Betty’s fault. Dale Meecham’s fault. And everyone over at City Hall who was supposed to be paying attention.”

A uniformed SBPD officer walked through the front door, his gaze on Grady.

“Hey Chief, what do you need from me?” he asked.

“Guys, this is Officer Glen Denton. He’s going to be here for security until another officer takes over later tonight.” He looked at the officer. “Denton, they had some threats called in here. The owner has an apartment upstairs. You need to be on her until relief arrives at ten tonight. Call me if you have any questions or see anything suspicious.”

Officer Denton nodded. “You got it, Chief.”

He was young, his blond hair cropped short and his blue eyes shining eagerly. He reminded me of a puppy.

“I have to go,” Grady said, looking at his phone. “I’ll talk to you later.”

He left, and my shoulders sank with disappointment. I hadn’t expected a kiss or anything, but he was being more formal with me than ever before.

If Leo Bardot escaped arrest, I didn’t think Grady would ever forgive me. The thought was like a heavy weight strapped to my back.

“Avon, I have dummies for you to look at,” Bess said, bringing over a set of hard copy pages with ads and boxes for news that she’d prepared for next week’s paper.

I nodded, trying to focus on what I could control. Right now, it didn’t feel like there was much that met that definition.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Avon

“YOU SAID THIS IS ANONYMOUS, right? Is that the word for it? No one will know it was me?” Carla Swift, a city council member, asked as she looked over each shoulder.

“I’ll identify you as a city source who asked not to be named,” I said. “No one will ever hear from me that you talked to me.”

She lowered her brows in question. “Not even Chief Grady? I heard you two are dating.”

“Not even Grady. No one. I promise you. The only way anyone will find out it was you is if you tell them.”

We were meeting in the back of the ceramics shop she owned on the outskirts of town. I’d been trying to get every city council member to talk to me for follow-up coverage about the missing money, on or off the record, and she was the first one who had agreed.

She’d been a wealth of information. Investigators had discovered that the mayor had been taking money from Leo Bardot, depositing it into a city-owned account, and then writing him checks from the city. It was money laundering, with the mayor getting a ten percent cut, and it had been going on for fourteen years, since a year after the mayor was elected.

The total amount of money he’d laundered was close to \$2 million. The story had made national headlines, and people were eagerly awaiting the next edition of the *Chronicle*, where they expected to find new details that the

other news outlets didn't have yet.

"Thanks again, Councilwoman," I said. "You have my number in case there's anything else you have to share as things develop."

She took a long drag from her cigarette. "I should have been the mayor pro tem, but it's an old boys' club. People have a right to know how things are done at City Hall."

"I couldn't agree more."

Smiling, she stubbed out her cigarette. "Grady's a great guy. He's been alone for a long time. It's nice to see him with someone again."

I smiled back, unsure how to respond. I awkwardly said, "Thanks," and saw myself out of the ceramics shop. I'd walked there so no one would see my eyesore of a truck, and it was about a quarter of a mile walk to Tipper's from here, where I planned to eat lunch.

Grady and I had texted, but we hadn't spoken since he left the newsroom on Monday, and it was Thursday now. He was buried in the search for Leo Bardot and the investigation into the money laundering, but I wondered if that was just a convenient excuse for avoiding me.

I'd really started thinking about how hard it was going to be to leave all this behind and go back to San Diego. If things were solid with me and Grady, I was considering staying, which was a shock. But if he didn't want to be with me anymore, I *couldn't* stay. Not with the *Chronicle* across the street from City Hall. Not when we'd be running into each other all the time. Not when I'd had a taste of how it felt for him to look at me with reverence and warmth, like being with me was his happy place.

My phone rang and I took off my glove to dig it out of my pocket, seeing Grady's name on the screen. My heart jumped with joy.

"Hi," I said.

"Where the hell are you?" he barked.

Not the reception I'd been expecting when we hadn't talked all week.

"I'm walking to Tipper's for lunch."

"You deliberately shook Denton, didn't you?"

Oh. I couldn't explain to him that I'd had to shake the officer he had following me so I could meet with a confidential source.

"I had to take care of something," I said, keeping my answer vague.

"What the hell, Avon? You're getting death threats and someone broke into your office. I've got an officer on you around the clock for a reason. You can't just go places by yourself."

The calls were still coming, all of them from burner phones. And Tuesday night, someone had thrown a rock through a window at the *Chronicle* and broken in, but they'd run away when they heard the night shift police officer coming to check things out. I couldn't be a prisoner, though. I still needed enough latitude to do my job.

"Sorry, I'll let him know next time," I said.

"You'll let him know?" Grady moved the phone away from his ear and let out a string of curse words that were a little muffled but fully understandable, then returned to the call. "Look, I'm under a lot of pressure right now. I'd be there if I could, but the next best thing is to send one of my officers. Don't go off on your own again, you get me?"

I sighed heavily, his tone not sitting well with me. "Yeah. Fine."

He ended the call without even saying goodbye, and I shoved my phone into my coat pocket. It was hard to believe this bossy, grouchy asshole was the same man who had recently kissed my cheeks and told me I was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Tipper's cheese soup would help. Not just with my mood but with my frozenness. I walked into the café, taking my scarf off, but I stopped short as soon as I made it inside.

The place was packed. Not packed like usual, but packed, as in overflowing with people. Every seat was taken and there were about a dozen people standing at the bar waiting for seats to be vacated. I couldn't even walk forward because there was a massive TV camera sitting on the floor in my path.

It was the damned state and national news reporters. Print, TV, even some political bloggers had landed in the Beard since the initial story ran. And they showed no signs of leaving anytime soon.

I craned my neck to read the sign Tipper was posting behind the counter.

Out of all soups—sorry

"Son of a..." I muttered.

The door to the café opened behind me and someone walked in.

"Ope, guess not," they said, chuckling and leaving immediately.

I did the same thing, scowling at the crowd of out-of-towners before closing the door behind me. Taco Train probably looked the same way. I'd be making a chicken salad sandwich in my kitchen for lunch.

The thought of the notes I'd taken at my meeting with the councilwoman cheered me up. The overly made-up TV reporters may have gotten all of

Tipper's soup, but I'd have the last laugh when my next story ran. The lowly, little weekly newspaper owner would be showing them all up.

I started writing the story in my head as I walked back to the newsroom. I had to lead with the fact that millions of dollars had been funneled through city accounts.

Millions. It blew my mind that my questions about the budget documents I'd been given had led to this. I was trying to remember the councilwoman's quote about the amount when I suddenly remembered I'd finished my leftover chicken salad for dinner last night.

Crap. It was either crackers and peanut butter for lunch, or I had to make a trip to the store. And I was hungry, bordering on hangry, so it would be the store. Maybe I'd get some cookies and ice cream while I was there.

I went through the newsroom, thawing a little before I got the keys to Pete's truck out and went out the back door. As soon as I laid eyes on the truck, I knew something was wrong. It was sitting wonky and a little lopsided.

One look at the tires confirmed my suspicion—they'd been slashed. I walked around to see if there was any other damage, my heart sinking when I read the words someone had spray-painted in white on the truck. *Die Bitch.*

It wasn't the words themselves, but the fact that someone had vandalized my uncle's truck. Driving this truck always made me feel connected to him. I remembered the photo beneath the visor of my mom and ran to open the truck and see if it was still there.

It was. I tucked it safely into my purse and went back into the newsroom, where Officer Denton stood and gave me a dirty look.

"Stop making me look bad in front of the chief," he said. "I'm just doing my job."

"Sorry," I said, my heart not in the apology. "Someone slashed the truck tires and wrote on it with spray paint."

"Shit," he muttered, reaching for his radio.

I grabbed the bag of pretzels I kept in my desk drawer and sat down to eat some, my excitement over the next story gone.

This job was hard. I wondered what Pete would say if he could give me advice. Or my parents.

I'd eaten enough pretzels to make up for missing lunch and almost finished typing up my story when Bess walked into the newsroom, returning from her lunch break.

“What in the world happened to Pete’s truck?” she demanded, looking ill.

“Vandalized,” I supplied, though the answer was obvious.

“The nerve of that family.” Her eyes bulged with anger. “The Meechams aren’t even one-tenth the people that Pete was. I’ve got a good mind to go put my foot so far up Matt’s ass he starts crying like the little bitch he is.”

“It might not have even been Matt,” Grady said.

Bess and I both turned to find him approaching us.

“Hey,” he said to me, our eyes locking.

He looked like he hadn’t slept in a while, dark circles rimming his eyes and his short beard not as neatly trimmed as usual.

I got up and walked over to him, not caring if he had the time or if this was the right place. He seemed to know what I was about to do because he opened his arms and pulled me in close.

The solid warmth of him was the answer. The answer to all my questions and problems. If I had this, I’d be okay.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Kind of,” I said, my desire to be honest at war with staying strong.

“You can’t stay here anymore,” he said, pulling away and giving me a serious look. “I want you to go stay with my parents.”

“She’ll stay with me,” Bess said.

“I will?” I gaped at Bess, surprised.

“Harry’s still a crack shot,” Bess assured us. “You don’t need to send an officer to the house. Anyone tries to come into our home, Harry will blow a hole through their chest.”

Grady nodded, his arm still around me. “I’d trust Harry in any situation. I think that’s a great idea.”

A great idea? Bess and I drove each other crazy. I loved her but wasn’t sure we’d both survive being together around the clock for who knew how long.

“I could go to The Sleepy Moose,” I offered.

“You’re staying with me,” Bess said. “That’s final.”

“I think you should,” Grady said. “For now. I’ll have someone pull all the surveillance videos we can get of this area and try to get someone identified. We’re close on Bardot. I just need a couple more days and then you can stay with me.”

They were close on Bardot. That was music to my ears. I had a feeling Bardot’s arrest was the only chance I had of getting back the Grady I’d fallen

for. He felt like he had failed eleven years ago and this was his shot at redemption.

“Okay, I’ll stay with Bess,” I said.

Grady nodded. “I’ll have Denton stay with you until you guys get to her house, and then he’ll come follow you back here tomorrow. And I’ll be sending someone to get photos of the truck. We’ll tow it to our impound lot.”

I nodded.

“Be careful,” he cautioned. “Don’t assume this is just Matt Meecham messing with you. If you see anything suspicious, call me, okay?”

“I will.”

I hoped for a kiss. Just one quick kiss to remind me that there was more to us than stress and worry. Grady just squeezed my shoulder and turned for the door, though.

Fear flared in my chest. I had a bad feeling that unless Bardot was arrested, there wouldn’t be an *us* anymore after all this. It would be the end of something wonderful that had barely gotten started.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Grady

“GO HOME AND GET SOME SLEEP,” Coulter said. “You’ll just be answering your phone here or there, so what’s the difference?”

“I can’t sleep.”

Federal agents were trailing Bardot now, but they were hoping to catch him committing more criminal activities before arresting him to make a more solid case. It was maddening, knowing they *could* arrest him, but they wouldn’t. I was levelheaded and able to shift my focus to other things when I needed to, in all cases but this one. Not the lowlife dirtbag who had shot Megan in the chest and left her for dead, then shot my dad in the back and cost him the use of his legs.

“Maybe you need to go see your doctor about that,” Coulter suggested.

I scowled at him. “What I need is for Bardot to be taken into custody. That’s what I need. None of this waiting bullshit.”

I rubbed my forehead and grabbed my phone to check the text that had just come in.

Officer Denton: Avon has an interview with Dale Meecham’s wife this afternoon. Thought you should know.

“Why is that woman trying to kill me?” I snapped at no one in particular. “Danger is like her catnip.”

“What’s she doing now?” Coulter asked.

I told him about the interview. He arched his brows, looking impressed.

“She’s got balls, man. I can’t wait to read what Margie Meecham has to say about all this.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. “That’s all you have to say? She’s walking into the lion’s den and that’s your response?”

“Denton will be with her. Matt Meecham’s a fucking idiot.”

“It could be someone else who’s after her, though. This interview could be a trap.”

I texted Denton back.

Grady: What time are you guys leaving for the interview?

Officer Denton: 2:45

Grady: I’ll be there to go with you.

“You’re going with them, aren’t you?” Coulter asked, grinning.

“If you don’t wipe that smile off your face, I’ll remove it for you.”

“Chief.” My friend sat down in a chair across from my desk. “I hope like hell they catch Bardot, because I’m starting to wonder what kind of a life you’re ever going to have if they don’t.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, same.”

I’d gotten a fitful couple hours of sleep on the couch in my office last night, and I could hardly eat because of the sick sensation churning in my gut. I went through meetings with accountants and investigators over my budget mechanically, answering their questions but still thinking about Bardot in the back of my mind.

“Grady,” Coulter said, his serious tone forcing my gaze to his.

“What?”

“You’re missing out on what *is* because you’re so damn stuck on what *was*. Nothing’s going to bring Megan back.”

I shook my head. “You don’t get it. It’s not about wanting her back. It’s about wanting justice. Bardot got away with murder and he’s continued running drugs and laundering money right under our noses. It just...” I looked away, my throat tight with emotion. “I can’t function because it feels like it’s happening all over again.”

“What is?”

“I can’t lose her. Avon.” I looked over at my bookcase, wishing I had a punching bag in that corner instead. I needed to let loose some of this frustration. “I want to be the one to watch her back and keep her safe. Not Denton. But I have to do all this budget and investigation bullshit because of my position as chief.”

This was the price of letting myself feel something again. I'd never made a conscious decision to let it happen; Avon had stolen my heart without me even realizing it was happening.

"You know this is PTSD, right?" Coulter asked.

I nodded. Yeah, years of therapy had shown me that my past held me hostage. But just wanting to overcome it wasn't enough. I had a deep-seated belief that if I let go of the fear and worry, karma would creep in and pull the rug out from beneath me again.

That was why I had to keep my distance from Avon. Because I was weak. Even my best efforts wouldn't necessarily keep her safe. I still had to try, but with other people leading up the investigations now, the outcomes were out of my control.

Coulter stood up. "Listen. We're going to get some lunch, even if it's gas station sandwiches, since every damn restaurant in town is full of reporters. You need to get the hell out of here for a little while."

I looked at my watch. "I have to be back by 2:30 p.m. so I can get to the *Chronicle* on time."

"You will be."

I grabbed my phone and stood up, knowing he was right.

"I'm not eating any of those shit egg salad sandwiches from the Sun station," I grumbled.

"I know, because they gave you the runs five years ago." Coulter gave me a wry look. "You've mentioned it at least fifty times."

"I barely made it to the bathroom."

"No egg salad," he promised.

"I know what we should do," I said. "Let's go to The Sleepy Moose for lunch. Shea will feed us."

I followed Coulter out of my office, double-checking my phone to make sure it was still on. Maybe this would be the afternoon I got the call that Bardot had finally been arrested.

"WHAT'S THAT?" Avon asked as I held out a gold box an hour later.

"It's for you."

She smiled, took it, and opened the bakery box.

“Oh, wow. It smells heavenly and looks amazing. Thank you.”

“It’s chocolate chip pudding cake. Olivia said she thought you’d like it.”

I rarely had occasion to set foot in Sweets of Gold, but I’d decided on impulse to pick up something for Avon. Since there wasn’t a section of desserts that said *sorry I’ve been so weird lately*, I’d asked the owner, Olivia Carmichael, for a recommendation. Chocolate or baked goods. I would take either if it would help me make it up to Avon.

“It’s really good to see you,” Avon said, setting the box on her desk.

“I’m coming with you to the Meechams’ house.”

“Ah.” She cast a quick smile in Officer Denton’s direction, disappointment flickering in her eyes.

Damn, why was I so bad at this?

“But I wanted to see you too,” I added quickly.

She glanced at the open-mouth bass clock on the newsroom wall, its tail swishing up and down to track the seconds. “We should probably get going.”

Denton gave me a sympathetic look as we all walked toward the newsroom door and stepped outside.

“You can ride with me,” I told Avon. “Officer Denton, you can go on a break. I’ll text you when you need to be back here.”

“Okay, Chief.”

“I’d rather take Bess’s car,” Avon said. “It might intimidate Margie if I show up in the police chief’s car.”

My sigh was weary. “If anyone needs to be intimidated, it’s that family. I might bring in a long gun and hold on to it while you talk to her.”

“Stop it.” She glared up at me, crossing her arms. “You can come with me to the interview, but you can’t be in the same room as us, and you’re definitely not bringing in a long gun.”

I stopped walking. “How am I supposed to watch out for you when you’re in another room?”

“Grady, this woman is a senior citizen. And I’m the one who asked to come meet with her. I don’t think she’s planning to attack me.”

“That’s what everyone thinks before they get attacked.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

I threw my hands in the air, frustrated. “Her son is probably the one who’s been threatening you. And you think you can just walk into the house where he lives, and nothing will happen?”

“I need this interview. And she would only do it in her home.”

Her stubbornness was maddening. I softened my approach.

“All I’m asking is that you let me sit there with you.”

She considered my request, but I felt like I wasn’t getting any further with her. “Let’s just get there and see how receptive she is.”

“I brought you a cake!” I said, out of other arguments.

“And I appreciate it, but it doesn’t mean I’ll do whatever you say.”

Her cheeks were rosy with anger. She looked like she was ready for an argument, but all I wanted to do was kiss some sense into her. Wrap her in my arms, take her to my house, and forget any of this was happening.

“Fine,” I snapped. “I’ll follow you there. But I am officially on a protection detail, and that’s going down the way I say it is.”

“Please don’t ruin this interview for me.”

I shrugged, unwilling to argue about it further. The drivers of passing cars were already giving me amused looks, like the big bad police chief couldn’t handle the feisty redhead.

She got into Bess’s ancient sedan and fired it up, dark smoke pouring out of the tailpipe. I followed her in my police SUV, hoping I wouldn’t need to dig Bess’s little car out of a snowbank with the shovel in the back of my vehicle.

The Meechams lived in a neat little home just a block from downtown. They’d been there for decades, despite Dale apparently being able to afford something more lavish with his cut of the laundered money.

I didn’t think it was possible that Margie Meecham hadn’t known something about her husband’s activities. As I followed Avon to the front step of their home, I stood back about ten feet and said nothing when the front door was opened.

“You’re Avon?” Margie said, her tone dripping with condescension.

“I am. Thanks for agreeing to this interview.”

“Let’s get it over with.” Margie opened the door wider, then spotted me. “What’s he doing here?”

I stepped forward. “Miss Douglas has a protective police detail because of threats she’s been getting over the story she published regarding misappropriated city funds.”

“Oh, that’s rich,” Margie said, glaring at Avon. “You brought your boyfriend?”

“I’m only here to make sure she’s safe,” I said.

She shook her head. “You’ve all made our family out to be a bunch of

criminals. Come on in, both of you. Let's get this over with."

We followed her inside, the small entryway lined with glass-shelved cabinets. Each cabinet held a collection of glass figurines; there had to be thousands of them. Margie led us to a small living room with a sagging flower-patterned couch and two wingback chairs.

"We're going to sue you," she said simply as she sat down in one of the chairs.

"I'm sorry?" Avon said, flipping to a fresh page in her notebook.

"I said we're going to sue you for the lies you printed. Dale is a good man, and you ruined him."

I opened my mouth to respond, but Avon silenced me with a wide-eyed look of warning.

"Mrs. Meecham, are you aware of the video footage state police obtained that shows your husband making deposits and withdrawals into accounts controlled by Leo Bardot?"

"That's a bunch of hogwash," Margie said. "Lies made up to smear my husband."

Avon took notes as Margie spoke.

"You never even asked him for his side," Margie said, her voice rising with emotion.

"I left three messages with his secretary at City Hall," Avon said. "He never returned any of my calls."

"You're a lying little bitch." Margie pointed at Avon.

I couldn't listen to another word.

"Okay, that's enough," I said. "Avon, you can either get up and leave, or I'm arresting her for assault."

"Assault?" Avon gaped at me.

"Yes. This is considered verbal assault."

Avon nodded and stood up. "This interview is not going to be productive. I have to agree with you there." She looked at Margie. "Mrs. Meecham, if you ever want to comment on the pending criminal case against your husband, you know where to find me."

Margie laughed bitterly. "I do know where to find you. Don't you forget it."

I walked over to Avon and stood next to her, anger running hot in my veins.

"I could arrest you for that threat, but I'm giving you a break because of

what your husband has put you through,” I said. “I won’t be so lenient next time, and you can tell your son the same goes for him.”

She walked over to a window, pain etched in the lines on her face. “Get out of my house.”

I put a hand on Avon’s back and she led the way back out the front door.

“That was rough,” she said in a low tone as we walked back to our vehicles. “Do you think she knew about what he was doing?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say no.”

She stopped next to the driver’s door of Bess’s car, and I stood next to her in silence for a few seconds.

“Thanks for coming with me,” she said softly.

I met her gaze, the gold flecks in her eyes shining bright in the sunlight.

“I need to know you’re safe,” I said. “This is all really hard for me, but I’m trying to give you the space you need to do your work and make sure you’re safe, too.”

“I know. And look, I know things are...I’m not sure how to say it, but if you’ve changed your mind about me”

I cut her off, taking her hand in mine. “I haven’t changed my mind. You drive me crazy with your stubbornness, but I still...yeah, my feelings are the same.”

“I’m trying to give you the space you need to do your work, too.”

I squeezed her hand. “Thanks.”

“Why don’t we go back to the newsroom and eat that cake?”

“Yeah,” I said, grinning. “Let’s do that.”

“I’ll even buy you a root beer from the vending machine.”

“Deal.”

I released her hand and she gave me one more smile over her shoulder before getting into Bess’s car. I glared at the Meechams’ house as I walked back to my vehicle, eager for Avon to be far away from here.

Though I wasn’t sure the Meecham family had hit rock bottom yet, I knew one thing for sure—if they planned to mess with Avon, they’d have to go through me first.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Avon

BESS WAS GLOWING with pride when she hung up the phone at her desk.

“There’s a line at the newspaper machine outside of Tipper’s,” she gushed. “A *line*. All those people waiting because they know we go to press today and the circulation people will be filling that machine with this week’s paper within the next hour. Never in my wildest dreams did I see that happening.”

I warmed, knowing all my hard work on follow-up coverage would be worth it. The *Chronicle* was the only local newspaper. We had to have the latest news before the state and national outlets did.

After basking in the good news for a moment, I sent a text to the circulation manager, asking him to bring extra copies for that stop on the route and to make sure every copy that went out got counted.

Our circulation was up by more than a hundred subscriptions from last week. It didn’t seem like much, but I was proud of every single one.

“Oh!” Bess practically howled as she read an incoming text. “Tipper said the guy from the national nightly news is in line! He sent me a picture! Pete would be so tickled.”

I smiled to myself, wondering how I could ever go back to a regular job after this. I’d never felt such a sense of accomplishment or that my work mattered. I couldn’t even walk down Main Street without people coming up to thank me for my coverage of the misappropriated funds. This week I’d

also done a feature story on a woman who was retiring after fifty-two years as a lunch lady at the grade school. When I took a photo of her, surrounded by smiling first graders giving her a group hug, I'd felt the same sense of pride I had over the line at the newspaper machine.

My phone buzzed with an incoming text and I looked down at the screen.

Grady: How are you?

Avon: Still alive. How about you?

A Sven's Beard detective had meticulously dusted Pete's truck for fingerprints last week, and he'd come up with a match on the passenger side door. Matt Meecham was in jail now, and I breathed easier knowing the threatening calls and vandalism were over. Grady, on the other hand, checked on me at least every hour now that he no longer had an officer watching me around the clock.

Grady: Eagerly awaiting the new edition of the paper.

Avon: I may know someone who could deliver one...

Grady: Is she a hot redhead?

Benji walked into the newsroom with a stack of newspapers fresh off the press, delivering one to every desk. I picked mine up, soaking in the fresh smell and warm pages. I was the only one with coverage about how much money had been laundered over the last fourteen years and how the people inside City Hall were reacting to it.

"Good gravy!" Bess cried from her desk.

I looked up from the paragraph I was reading over to Bess, her eyes wide and her chin practically on her desk.

"What?" I asked.

"This is an absolute disaster! How in the world did this happen?"

"Bess, what?" I asked, aggravated.

Her gaze met mine in an angry glare. "Page A5."

I turned to the page, which had wedding announcements on top and obituaries on the bottom. And at the very top of the page, I saw what Bess was so upset about.

"Oh god," I muttered.

Apparently, Samantha Wett and Nathan Beaver were getting married. The picture of the young couple showed them staring lovingly into each other's eyes, seemingly unaware of the headline over their announcement.

"Wett-Beaver," I said, trying my best to suppress my smile.

"Don't you laugh; this is an embarrassment!" Bess shrieked. "I TOLD

YOU to proof those pages for me!”

I’d proofed them. Maybe. I couldn’t remember. But we weren’t stopping the press over this—it was too expensive to make a change and reload everything.

“Is her name really Samantha Wett?” I asked. “And is his Nathan Beaver?”

Bess was riffling through papers on her desk, her face the shade of a ripe tomato. “Well, I’ve known the Beaver family my whole life; they live in the Beard. And this is a woman he met at college, so I don’t” She buried her face in her hands. “I will never live this down. Did you proof those pages or not?”

Bess and I had gotten along well during the days and nights I stayed with her and Harry. He was a quiet man who seemed to genuinely enjoy listening to her talk from the moment she woke up until she went to bed. I was suddenly glad I was back at the apartment, though, because I’d never seen Bess this angry.

“Let’s say I didn’t proof them,” I said mildly. “Would it have changed anything since those are their names? Could we have changed it to Beaver-Wett?”

“No, the bride’s name always comes first.”

I shrugged. “Well then?”

“I would have wanted to know! We’ll be a laughingstock!”

Poor Bess. She was working herself into a tizzy over this, and I couldn’t muster an ounce of outrage. I’d gotten the solid follow-up story I needed for this week’s edition. We were meeting payroll. No one was prank calling us anymore. I had nothing to complain about.

I put my coat on and picked up my copy of the new edition of the *Chronicle*.

“Where are you going?” Bess demanded. “You’re leaving me here to field all the Wett-Beaver calls?”

It was all I could do not to burst out laughing at the sound of Bess saying, “Wett-Beaver.”

“I need to drop off this paper for Grady, and then why don’t we go to Taco Train for lunch?” I said. “After a couple margaritas, we’ll be laughing about this.”

She scoffed. “I will never laugh about this! It’s”

A loud shattering noise stopped her short, and I looked at the long, wide window that faced out onto Main Street just in time to see a massive

spiderweb crackling outward. An instant later, the glass fell in shards to the ground in one fell swoop, not one by one like you see in cartoons.

“Oh my God!” I dropped the paper I was holding and crouched down. “What the hell was that?”

Squealing tires sounded outside, and I immediately took my phone from my pocket and pushed the contact for Grady, listening as the phone dialed his number.

“Hey, are you here?” he asked.

“Can you come over? Something just shattered one of our windows.” I peeked around the corner of my desk to check on Bess. “Bess? Are you okay?”

“I’m on my way,” Grady said.

When Bess didn’t answer, I stood up to look for her. She was slumped sideways in her chair, her right hand covering the front of her left shoulder.

“Bess!” I screamed, running to her. “Oh God, Bess!”

There was a faraway look in her eyes when I reached her, blood seeping through her fingers as she tried to cover her shoulder.

“Hurts,” was all she could manage to say, her voice a whisper.

“Help!” I screamed over my shoulder. “Somebody, help!”

Dandy came running as I pulled off the cardigan sweater I wore and pressed it to Bess’s steadily bleeding wound.

“She’s been shot,” I said tearfully. “Call an ambulance and get everyone evacuated.”

Grady came through the front door right then, eyes wild and out of breath.

“Someone shot through our window,” I said, forcing my voice to remain level. “Bess was hit.”

He pushed a button on the radio on his shoulder. “Command One, I need an ambulance and backup at the *Chronicle*. Shots fired. One person hit.”

He ran to me then, and by the time he reached me, my vision was blurred with tears.

“She has to be okay, Grady. Please help her.”

“Listen to me,” he said. “Get under a desk and stay there. I’ve got her.”

He took over, holding my sweater over the wound, picking up Bess in his arms, and settling onto the floor with her. Her moan of pain was like a knife in my gut.

“Avon,” she said weakly. “Tell Harry I love him.”

“No!” I swiped at the tears wetting my cheeks. “You’re telling him

yourself.”

I looked out from beneath the desk next to hers. Grady was pressing my sweater to her wound so hard his knuckles were white, and through all that effort, Bess’s eyes had started to flutter closed.

“Stay with me, Bess,” Grady said, scanning the room as well as he could from his vantage point. “The ambulance is almost here; I need you to stay awake.”

I crawled over to them, not caring about taking cover anymore. Bess and I drove each other crazy sometimes, but she was my family now. I took her hand in mine.

“Bess, stay awake,” I pleaded. “I need you. You’re way too stubborn to go out like this.”

Her head slumped to the side and I cried out, “Bess!”

Her eyelids fluttered again. Voices filled the room then, officers yelling out commands and paramedics running to us with a stretcher. I had to let go of Bess’s hand, and I wept as Grady dragged me away from her.

“Let them help her,” he said softly.

“I’m not leaving her,” I said fiercely. “Don’t you dare ask me to leave her.”

“I won’t. But we need to stay calm and you need to call Harry and tell him to meet us at the hospital. Can you do that, or do you want me to?”

“I don’t have his number,” I said numbly.

“I have it,” Sam said from behind me.

Bess was being loaded onto a stretcher. Sam passed me his phone and I mustered all my strength to tell Harry what was going on without breaking down.

“Not my Bess,” he said mournfully. “I’m leaving right now for the hospital.”

“I’ll meet you there,” I said.

Grady walked me to the ambulance, his arm around me.

“We’re riding in the rig with you,” he told one of the paramedics.

The medic shook his head. “We’ve only got room for one in back.”

“I’ll ride up front, then,” he said.

“Chief, what do you need from me?” Grady’s friend Coulter asked.

“Take lead on this. Pull surveillance, get a vehicle description, secure the area.”

“You got it,” Coulter said. “City Hall is locked down.”

The paramedics wheeled Bess's stretcher into the back of the ambulance and Grady supported my arm so I could step in after them.

"You can have that seat," a medic said, pointing to a little metal platform next to her stretcher.

"Bess, I'm here," I said as I sat down. "I'm with you; don't be scared. We're going to the hospital and Harry is meeting us there."

I met Grady's gaze, seeing concern and helplessness swirling in his eyes. The medic pulled one of the big doors closed and then the other.

"I think we've got a collapsed lung," a medic said.

Hanging my head, I folded my hands together and prayed that Bess could hang on. She'd taken a bullet that was meant for me. All the pride I'd felt in this week's paper was replaced by worry for her. If this was the price, it wasn't worth it.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Grady

AVON HELD HARRY'S HAND, her skin smooth while his was speckled with age spots and lined with wrinkles. She pursed her lips as a surgeon approached.

The hospital waiting room was full, every *Chronicle* employee here and around a dozen people from Bess's church. It was hard to be here instead of working on the investigation, but I wasn't letting Avon out of my sight.

Coulter and one of our detectives had gotten a vehicle description and license plate number that was already circulating statewide. Now we just had to hope for a sighting of the white van or its driver, a known associate of Leo Bardot.

"Mr. Hinshaw, can we speak privately?" the surgeon asked.

Harry's eyes flooded with tears. "Just tell me here. Is she okay?"

All the oxygen seemed to leave the room as we waited.

"Your wife lost a lot of blood, but she's stable now. She'll likely have limited use of her left arm and shoulder, but rehab will certainly help."

"She's okay?" Harry asked, his tears spilling over.

The surgeon nodded, looking around the room. "She'll be asleep for a while, but she's going to be okay. We'll need to keep her here for a few days because of the blood loss. We want to keep a close eye on her. But you're welcome to stay with her in her room. We have cots and there's a recliner in the room, too."

Harry turned to Avon and they embraced, both of them crying now. A

woman came over to hug Harry, and Avon got up and walked over to me, her gait slow, probably from the adrenaline crash.

I stood and wrapped her in my arms, relief coursing through me. Bess was important to Avon, and I knew Avon felt responsible for what had happened to her.

“I feel like I can breathe again,” she said softly.

My stomach rumbled with hunger after missing both lunch and dinner. I cringed inwardly at the impeccable timing. Avon smiled up at me.

“I think you may need to go get some dinner?”

“Come with me,” I said. “We’ll see what they have in the cafeteria.”

She looked over at Harry, her expression wary.

“They said she’ll be asleep for a while,” I reminded her.

“Okay. I am pretty hungry.”

She told Harry we were going to the cafeteria, and even in such a mundane moment, I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She’d pulled her hair back, bringing more attention to her eyes and her radiant smile. I’d given her a navy SBPD hoodie that I had in my police vehicle, which Coulter had driven here, and I liked the way she looked in it. A lot. It hung down to midthigh and she’d rolled up the sleeves. It wasn’t so much how it fit her that I liked, but the fact that it told every man around us to keep his eyes and hands to himself.

She was with me, and I planned to keep it that way.

“How are you doing?” I asked her as we walked to the cafeteria.

“Relieved that Bess is going to be okay,” she said. “But also...I feel guilty.”

I gave her a puzzled look. “Guilty about what?”

She looked at me like the answer was obvious. “Bess got shot because of the stories I’ve written. It was my fault.”

We stopped in front of the elevator doors. I pushed the up button and turned to her.

“You know that’s not true.”

She furrowed her brow. “Grady, it’s completely true. The prank calls, the vandalism, someone *shooting a bullet* into the newsroom...none of that would have happened if not for the stories.”

I’d been cursing myself for ending the protective detail when Matt Meecham was arrested. Since he’d admitted to making the calls and vandalizing the truck, I’d assumed he was acting alone. But even an officer

standing in the newsroom may not have prevented the shooting.

I put my hands on her upper arms. “Hey, it’s not your fault. You didn’t make the news, you just reported on it.”

Anguish swam in her eyes. “It’s not worth it, Grady. Bess could have died. It’s one thing if people want to mess with me, but the other *Chronicle* employees...” She shook her head and looked away. “I can’t live with that.”

“What are you saying?” I asked as the elevator doors slid open.

She stepped inside and I followed behind her, pushing the button for the second-floor cafeteria.

“I still have that offer from a company that wants to buy the *Chronicle* and shut it down. They just want it for the printing press and as a distribution hub for their advertising shoppers. I’ve been putting off responding, but...I think I should do it.”

I just stared at her for a couple of silent seconds, dumbfounded.

“Sell it? After all this?”

I’d never seen the things I saw in her expression in that moment—weariness and defeat. She’d given up on the *Chronicle*.

“I’d find a little place in the Beard,” she said quickly. “And visit so we could see each other.”

I couldn’t put my disappointment into words. This was the last thing I’d been expecting. She and I had something real. Something worth fighting for. But I couldn’t be the only one willing to fight for it.

“Say something,” she said as we stepped off the elevator.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I took it out, reading the message.

Coulter: We have a location on the shooter. He’s with Bardot in Wisconsin.

Both of them in one place? My heart pounded with hope. I texted back.

Grady: Send a detail of two officers to the hospital. We’re going to Wisconsin.

“Everything okay?” Avon asked me.

“I have to go. It’s important. But we’re not done talking about this, okay?”

She nodded, lowering her brows. “Are you about to do something dangerous?”

I sure as hell hoped so. If it took a gunfight to bring in Bardot, I was down.

“Nah. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Grady.” Her tone held warning. She knew I was lying but wasn’t pressing too hard for details. That was something I appreciated about Avon. She understood my job.

“Or I could text you later tonight after my thing is over.”

“Yeah, please do. I’ll be here.”

I gave her a quick kiss, talk of her selling the *Chronicle* and leaving town put on the back burner. For now.

A FEW HOURS LATER, I pushed my gas pedal to the floor of my SUV, barely making it through a yellow light.

“They’re under surveillance,” Coulter said. “No need to break laws getting there.”

“Keep your panties on; we’re almost there.”

He exhaled heavily, which meant he wanted to say more but wasn’t going to. Which was good because I wasn’t slowing down. After all these years, I was finally going to lay eyes on Leo Bardot. I’d get to be there when justice was served.

“Left at the next light,” Coulter said, his gaze on his phone screen.

He was navigating, and our trip had been quiet other than him murmuring when to make a turn every so often. My mind was on getting to Bardot and on Avon selling the *Chronicle*.

In just over a month, I’d gotten used to having her right across the street during the day, and I wanted her at my place as many nights as possible. I’d forgotten what it was like to want a woman so much it drove me crazy. I couldn’t just let her go.

The SUV lurched as I turned at the next light. We’d taken an older, unmarked vehicle owned by the department for undercover work. I just needed to make it a few more miles, and then the engine could fall out of this old piece of crap for all I cared.

“How close are we?” I asked.

“Two-point-four miles. Right at the stop sign,” Coulter said.

I gripped the steering wheel, my heart racing with nervous energy. Knowing where Bardot was wasn’t the same as having him in custody. I needed this to go off without a hitch.

“Oh, shit,” Coulter muttered as he looked at his phone screen.

“What?”

“They’re on the move.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Relax. Our guys are tailing.”

This couldn’t fall apart. The only justice Megan and my dad would ever have was Bardot’s arrest and conviction. I forced myself to take a step back mentally. I needed to handle this like any other case. Turn off my emotions. Be smart.

“They’re heading toward us,” Coulter said, typing furiously into his phone. “White sedan. Haroldson wants us to intercept.”

“You brought stop sticks, right?”

“Yep. You told me to plan for every contingency.” He hesitated. “But are you sure that’s a good idea here?”

He had a point—we didn’t want to risk flattening the tires of innocent drivers. But I also didn’t want to risk a potentially dangerous high-speed chase. I made a split-second call.

“It’s our best play,” I said.

“Okay, I see him,” Coulter said. “Haroldson shared his location with me. Fuck, Grady, we need to get this done *now*.”

I skidded to a stop on the side of the road and ran to the back of the vehicle, Coulter hot on my heels. It was around midnight and we were in a quiet, secluded area. There was a good chance that if Bardot was close, he was the only car that would catch our stop sticks.

“Get that end,” I yelled at Coulter, running across the road to spread the stop sticks across the whole street.

As soon as I looked up, I saw approaching headlights. I unholstered my gun and stood behind a bush, pointing my weapon down but keeping my finger poised above the trigger.

Megan had been quiet and shy but authoritative when her job called for it. She became a police officer because a former SBPD officer had saved her younger brother’s life, pushing him out of the way of an oncoming out-of-control vehicle when he was crossing the street. She’d made the ultimate sacrifice eleven years ago when she died alone on a dark, deserted road.

My dad had devoted his entire career to making his hometown a safer place. He’d never hunt, hike, or run again, all things he’d loved before being shot and paralyzed.

I said a silent prayer to do right by both of them as the headlights approached.

The vehicle rolled over the stop sticks and I heard the tires blow out. Coulter and I approached from each side of the road as the car came to a halt, weapons drawn.

“It’s not them!” he yelled to me. “Vehicle doesn’t match the description.”

A panicked woman held her hands in the air from the driver’s seat.

Shit. My gamble hadn’t paid off.

“Grady!” Coulter called.

Another set of headlights approached. I ran to the woman’s passenger window and yelled out, “Get down. Get down!”

Then I drew my weapon again, pointing it at the oncoming vehicle. It was a white sedan. Perfect match. As soon as the driver spotted us, the car sped up, and I saw what was about to unfold. He was going to rear-end that poor woman hiding in her car.

“Shoot out the front driver’s side tire!” I yelled at Coulter.

We both fired at the same time, me at the passenger side and him at the driver’s side. My bullet made contact with a whooshing sound. The front end of the car dropped suddenly and it started to slow.

“Back tires!” I said, and Coulter immediately fired again.

The car was so close that if we didn’t stop it right now, things could get bad quickly.

All our range practice paid off. Our shots at the four tires were all direct hits, and the car’s back end dropped. It skidded for a few feet before landing on the ground.

“Hands in the air!” Coulter ordered as we approached the car from opposite sides.

The driver was messing with something. If it was a gun—

“Hands in the air!” I yelled. “Fucking now or I shoot!”

The passenger spilled out of the car onto the road, his arms above his head. The cars that had been tailing behind arrived and came to a stop. Officers surrounded the suspect from every direction now, all with weapons drawn.

I’d only seen photos of Bardot, but I knew the passenger wasn’t him. Another officer closed in on the passenger, dragging him to the side and allowing me to focus on the driver.

He seemed to realize there was no chance for escape as we all closed in.

He put his hands in the air when Coulter and I were just ten feet from his door.

“You want to do the honors, Chief Grady?” a burly man in a state police uniform asked me.

“Love to.”

I opened his car door, keeping my weapon pointed at him. He had salt-and-pepper hair now and was a little thinner, but I recognized the face I’d stared at for hours and dreamed of confronting.

“Leonard Bardot, you are under arrest for the murder of Megan Bright and the attempted murder of Owen Grady.”

He sneered at me but said nothing. Another officer recited the laundry list of other charges against him as he stepped out of the car and I took the cuffs from my belt.

Emotion welled inside me as I secured the cuffs around his wrists. If only my dad could have been here.

“It’s over,” Coulter said as we watched Bardot being led away, clapping a hand on my shoulder.

I nodded, my throat tight with emotion.

“Nice work, Chief,” a state commanding officer said, offering me his hand.

I shook it and nodded. “I take responsibility for the car we damaged. I’ll personally pay for the repairs.”

“No need. We’ll cover it. We brought in one of our most wanted fugitives and no one was injured. It’s a good day.”

It was a *great* day. I couldn’t wait to call Avon and tell her about it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Avon

I STOPPED outside the door to Bess's hospital room, preparing myself to watch her lying there silently for a few hours. I'd brought flowers to brighten up the bleak gray room a bit.

"Bacon? You call that bacon? It's cold and not even a little bit crispy. That's more like jerky."

My heart raced at the sound of her voice. I looked around the propped-open door and realized that not only was she awake, but she was awake *and* complaining. That had to be a good sign that she was feeling like herself.

"Bess!" I stopped in the doorway to her room and took her in, tears streaming down my cheeks. "You're awake."

She lowered her brows. "Did you think I was in a coma or something?"

I laughed and wiped my cheeks. "No, I'm just happy to hear your voice again."

On my way to her bed, I set the vase of flowers on a window ledge. Then I put an arm around her and hugged her good side. She wore a sling on her left arm, reminding me that she'd taken a bullet to her shoulder.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, sitting at the foot of her bed.

"I'm fine," she insisted. "Just a little tired. They're making me stay another night because my blood pressure is high, but I told them it's high because of this place."

I met Harry's gaze across the room. He was sitting in a small recliner,

looking like he was about to fall asleep.

“Bess, you were shot,” I said. “You may have a long recovery ahead of you.”

She dismissed me with a wave of her hand. “Can you ask Devon to work more hours this week? I think all these drugs that are making me so tired will be out of my system by next week and I’ll be fine by then.”

I took a deep breath and let it out, preparing myself for the conversation I needed to have with her. It wouldn’t be pretty, but it was necessary.

“Harry, why don’t you go home and get some rest?” I suggested. “I’ll stay with her for a few hours.”

“Absolutely not!” Bess protested. “You have a paper to work on. Devon can’t do it alone.”

“Please relax,” I said in a soothing tone. “The paper will be fine. Everyone at the *Chronicle* cares more about you than next week’s content.”

Harry stood, seizing his opportunity. “Thank you, Avon.” He smiled at Bess. “And what can I bring you when I come back, dear?”

She hummed, passively voicing her displeasure with him leaving. Poor Harry. He was such a doting husband, but Bess most definitely didn’t dote in return.

“More clean clothes,” she said. “Some decent food would be nice. And my crossword book on the table by my recliner.”

He walked over and kissed her forehead. “Of course. I’ll bring you some soup and a sandwich from Tipper’s.”

“Oh, before you go,” I said. “Have you guys heard that they arrested the man who shot Bess?”

Harry’s expression brightened. “They did? They got him?”

“Grady and Coulter went to Wisconsin last night and they arrested the man who shot Bess and they also arrested Leo Bardot. The two of them were in the same car. Bardot was driving and the other guy was riding in the passenger seat.”

Bess scoffed. “Well then, why aren’t you working on a story, Avon? Devon said we need to be putting breaking news on our website to get it out there faster. This would be perfect for that.”

I met her insistent gaze with a softer one. “Because someone very dear to me is in the hospital, and the only place I want to be is with her.”

She scoffed and furrowed her brow, but I didn’t miss the tears shining in her eyes.

“I’ll be back this afternoon,” Harry said.

As soon as he was out of the room, I was about to start my difficult conversation with Bess when she asked, “How many calls have you gotten about the Wett-Beaver wedding announcement?”

I couldn’t help laughing. “Um, none? I haven’t been in the newsroom at all.”

She rolled her eyes. “Next week’s edition is going to be an embarrassment.”

This was my opening. I steeled myself.

“About that, Bess...”

She looked at me expectantly, having no idea what was coming. I could hardly speak past the guilt clogging my throat.

“I have an offer for the *Chronicle*, and I think I’m going to take it,” I said, forcing myself not to look away in shame. “It’s a company that wants to turn the building into a hub for a shopper.”

“A *shopper*?” Bess’s expression was horrified. “Is this a joke?”

I looked at her imploringly. “You could have been killed. Because of a story I wrote. It’s not worth it.”

She recoiled. “Avon, the *Chronicle* has been part of the Beard for almost a century. You and your story are just a tiny piece of our community’s newspaper. Selling it and shutting it down over all that is a disservice to this town.”

Grady had texted me at three in the morning that the vehicle he and Coulter were in had broken down on the way home near the Minnesota-Wisconsin border. Another SBPD officer was on the way to pick them up and tow the vehicle home. And once he was here, I knew he’d want to continue our conversation about selling the *Chronicle*.

I wasn’t sure I had the strength to resist Grady. When he turned those moss-green eyes on me, I forgot how to say the word *no*. So I was telling Bess now, before he got back, to make it a done deal. I’d hardly slept last night, images of Bess slumped over in her desk chair playing through my mind each time I tried to close my eyes.

“Do you think you can just work one-handed from now on?” I asked, exasperated.

“I’m going to physical therapy,” she snapped. “I’ll be damned if I lose the use of my left arm and hand. I’m the one who got shot, Avon, and you’re the one who wants to run scared.”

I held in my biting response, remembering her high blood pressure. This wasn't the time for a heated argument. Forcing myself to count to ten before responding, I continued our conversation in a measured tone.

"But I was the one who was supposed to have been shot, Bess. I'm the one who wrote the stories that exposed the criminals." Emotion welled in my throat. "I'll never get past the guilt I feel, and I don't know how we could just walk back into that newsroom like nothing happened."

She opened her mouth to respond but stopped when a woman walked into the room, a box in her hands.

"Christine?" Bess said, sounding surprised.

I looked at Bess then back at her visitor, wondering if it was the same Christine who had been Pete's girlfriend. She was pretty—tall and lean with a sleek silver bob.

"I won't stay long," Christine promised. "I heard what happened and I just had to come see you."

"Come on in," Bess said. "It's good to see you again."

"You must be Avon," Christine said, smiling at me as she walked over to us. "I recognize you from Pete's pictures of you."

"She's doing him proud with the *Chronicle*, isn't she?" Bess said, her voice loaded with meaning.

Christine's grin widened. "To say the least. I can hardly wait for my copy to arrive in my mailbox every week. Pete's greatest hope was that you'd want to keep the paper going."

Bess cleared her throat, and when I looked at her, she gave me a pointed look. I sighed softly.

"How are you feeling, Bess?" Christine asked.

"Oh, I'm fine. A little drugged up and looking forward to getting out of here. They wake me up every hour, all night long. And then they say I'm supposed to rest."

Christine sat down in a wooden chair next to the bed, putting the box she carried on her lap.

"I brought you some banana bread, Bess."

"That was so thoughtful. They're trying to starve me with the food in here." She shot me a glare. "And Avon wants to sell the *Chronicle*. I could use a big slice of banana bread right now."

Christine gave me a startled look and I silently cursed Bess.

"You're selling it?" Christine asked. "To who?"

Her expression was loaded with betrayal, and I couldn't bring myself to admit I was strongly considering selling it to a company that was going to shut it down.

"Bess got shot because of the leads I followed and the stories I wrote," I said instead. "If I had known that was the price of the news coverage, I never would have published those pieces."

"And Dale Meecham never would have been caught!" Bess said. "Neither would Leo Bardot. I've never been so proud to work for the *Chronicle* as I was the day that first story came out. Pete..." She stopped, trying to compose herself. She couldn't, though, so she spoke through her tears. "Pete was like family to me. He gave everything to that paper. And not for money. He did it for his community."

Christine was wiping away tears, too, and I felt about six inches tall.

"I never should have expected anything else from someone who lives in California," Bess said softly, sniffing. "Go back to your beaches and overpriced coffee."

"Bess, you know me," I said. "I plan to ask for enough money for the *Chronicle* that I can give you a nice severance and you can retire early. You've given your whole working life to the paper, and you were *shot*."

"Oh, sure," she said, shrugging. "Just send old Bess into a corner to shrivel up and die while you go back to your men with waxed chests and earrings. Poor Grady."

She was nothing if not dramatic. I looked at Christine for help, but I could tell by her expression that I wasn't getting any support from her.

"You're good at this," Bess said. "And you love it. I see the look on your face when you look at a new edition for the first time. There's pride there. Ownership. I feel it, too, and I wouldn't give it up for all the money in the world."

"It's not about money," I insisted. "And I plan to come back and visit and to keep seeing Grady."

"Christine, what would Pete say?" Bess asked.

Christine's eyes widened as both of us looked at her. Bess hadn't hesitated to put her on the spot. I was curious about her answer, though.

"Pete always said he hoped Avon would carry on the *Chronicle* one day but that it seemed like an impossible dream. What he wanted most was for her to be happy."

"I am happy here," I said, meaning it. "At first, I didn't think I would be."

It's so cold and far from a big city. But the people...and the *Chronicle*. And Grady." I locked gazes with Bess. "I do love it, but I don't know how to get past what happened to you."

"Stay and we'll get past it together," she implored. "Please. You have family here who love you. Laura and Don and Harper, and...me."

Tears flooded my eyes. I'd never thought I'd have a family again, but she was right. I had family in Sven's Beard, and I also had a purpose—the *Chronicle*. Selling pharmaceuticals had only been a means of earning money, but I had never really enjoyed my job or felt a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day. Putting together a weekly newspaper for Sven's Beard was so much more than that. Here, I was truly part of a community.

"You're sure?" I asked Bess.

She rolled her eyes, looking up at the ceiling. "They don't make men like Ryan Grady in California, Avon. If you don't want to stay for me or for the paper, stay for that one-in-a-million man who's crazy about you."

With my emotions overwhelming me, the tears welling in my eyes overflowed and ran down my cheeks. The past few days had been rough. I was behind on sleep and I'd let fear take over. Fear over what had happened to Bess, fear about my ability to run the paper long term, but mostly—fear of falling in love with Grady. I'd been burned by love in the past. But my lumberjack police chief with a soft side was one in a million. He was worth the risk.

"I want to stay for all of it," I said, covering my face with my hands.

Christine came over and hugged me, letting me cry.

"So you're staying then?" Bess asked. "You're not selling the *Chronicle*?"

I pulled away from Christine and smiled at her. "Yes, I'm staying. And no, I'm not selling."

"Attagirl," Bess said, opening her arms for a hug.

Happiness coursed through me as I gently hugged her good side again. This was the right decision, but it still felt like I'd just jumped off the edge of a cliff.

I had to tell Grady. But I didn't want to do it while he was in the car with his friends. I made a split-second decision to book the next flight to San Diego so I could pack up my apartment and notify my landlord that I was moving.

Then I'd return to the Beard and surprise Grady. Now that I'd finally

admitted what I really wanted—both out loud and to myself—I could hardly wait to be in his arms again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Grady

“ALMOST THERE,” Eric Hansen said, as though Coulter and I didn’t know we were five miles away from the town we’d lived in our whole lives.

Hansen was a rookie SBPD officer who had brought a tow truck to the Minnesota-Wisconsin border to pick up me, Coulter, and the broken-down SUV. We’d gotten the vehicle hitched to the tow truck and then the damn tow truck hadn’t started because of a dead battery. Hansen felt personally responsible, but it was just shitty luck. And of course, it had taken forever to have someone else deliver the correct battery and get it installed. Nine hours, to be exact.

“How many hours have we been awake?” Coulter asked me.

I shook my head. “Too many.”

We hadn’t slept in a couple of days, and every hour I’d been delayed getting home had felt like ten. Avon hadn’t responded to any of my texts in the last eight hours, and I was wound tight.

Had she left town already? She wouldn’t do that. We’d agreed to talk about things more. But every time I started thinking about it, I realized I’d been a lousy boyfriend in the brief time we’d been together. Spending nights at the police station trying to run down leads on Bardot when I should have been with her. Never telling her how much she meant to me.

“Hansen, are you unaware of the fucking speed limit four miles outside of the city you patrol every goddamn day?” I demanded.

The tow truck was crawling along so slowly I was about to jump out of my skin.

“Sorry, Chief,” he said, speeding up slightly.

I needed a shower, but I also needed to see Avon. It was around 10:00 a.m., so she was probably at the *Chronicle*. Unless she was with Bess. I checked my phone to see if she’d texted me back yet.

Nothing.

“You need me to keep a hand on the wheel at the station?” Coulter asked me.

He was a hell of an officer and friend. Without asking, he knew I had something personal to attend to, and he probably knew it had to do with Avon. And after all this time without sleep, he was still offering to help cover for me at the station.

“No,” I said. “Lt. Glasky has it covered. I don’t want you coming within fifty feet of the office for the next three days.”

“I’ll probably sleep most of it,” he said with a grin.

I could hardly keep my eyes open, but I couldn’t even consider sleeping until I saw Avon. The knot of worry in my stomach wouldn’t go away until I did. What if I’d blown it? I didn’t have much experience with relationships, but not paying attention to your current girlfriend because you were obsessed with solving the murder of your last one didn’t sound like a great quality.

“Do you guys want to be dropped off at the station or at home?” Hansen asked.

“Take him home and take me to the station,” I said.

“My car is at the station, so you can drop both of us there,” Coulter said.

The last mile was the longest of the trip. It would have been faster if I had jumped out of the tow truck and ran. If Avon would give me a chance, I’d prove to her that I wanted her to be first in my life. I wanted so much more with her. More time, more laughter, more opportunities to show her that I was the only man for her.

I squeezed my hand into a fist and released it again, hoping she hadn’t already given the green light to the prospective buyer of the *Chronicle*. Her story here wasn’t over; it was just beginning.

Hansen rounded a corner and the old newspaper building came into view. My heart rate kicked up as we drew closer. I could have Avon back in my arms within the next three minutes.

“I’ll just let you out and take the car in for repair,” Hansen said, slowing

to a stop beside City Hall.

I bolted from the vehicle and ran toward the door of the *Chronicle* building, which had plywood boards covering the glass windows that had been shattered by the bullet that got Bess.

When I opened the front door and looked at Avon's desk, my shoulders sank when I saw it was empty.

There was only one person in the newsroom, a twentysomething kid with shaggy hair who was wearing headphones.

"Hey, can I help you?" he asked.

"Where's Avon?" I asked, not in the mood for formalities.

"She's in San Diego."

My head reared back in shock. I covered my mouth with my hand and paced a few steps. Fuck. I'd honestly thought she'd stay here so we could talk when I got home.

"I'm Devon. Is there something I can help you with? Unfortunately, I'm the only one here this week because Bess is in the hospital."

This explained why Avon wasn't responding to my texts. She didn't want to deliver the bad news, so she'd just left.

"No," I said curtly. "Thanks."

I walked out the door, freshly fallen snow crunching under my boots until I stopped on the sidewalk. Though I wanted to put my fist through a wall and scream *fuck* as loud as possible, that wouldn't help anything.

Instead, I took out my phone and dialed my sister.

"Hey! I heard you guys got them," she said. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks."

She spoke to someone else. "Hey, take it easy on the salt, Jerry. You're supposed to measure it."

She was busy, of course, probably preparing lunch for guests at The Sleepy Moose. But she was the only one who could help me with what I needed.

"Hey, you know your friend Cheryl, the one who owns that private plane?" I said.

"Yeah, why?"

Tom and Cheryl Baker, and Keller Strauss, were the only people in the Beard who kept small private planes at the airport. Others landed and took back off from there, but only those two planes were stored at the airport when not in use.

“I need a ride to a major airport as soon as possible,” I said. “Minneapolis would be great.”

“Does this have anything to do with the arrests? You guys *did* get them, right?”

“Yeah, we did. This is about Avon.”

“Ah, say no more. I’ll call Cheryl right now. I know they’re at their place on the lake this week, so the plane should be there.”

“Thanks, Shea.”

“No problem.”

I ended the call and walked into City Hall, only staying long enough for brief hellos before I grabbed the keys to my vehicle. I was going home for a quick shower and then heading straight to the airport.

This wasn’t the end for me and Avon. I’d waited too long to find someone who made me feel the way she did. I was going to chase her all the way to San Diego.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Avon

“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” Blaire asked me for at least the tenth time in the past hour. “I mean...I like beards and all, if they’re not long and pubic looking, but”

“It’s not just because all the men have beards,” I said, irritated. “It’s because of Grady. And Bess. And the *Chronicle*. You should come visit sometime; it’s the coolest little town.”

“Is there a Starbucks?”

“No.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t get it. There are hot guys all over, and you can be a newspaper reporter here if you want.”

“Blaire, I’m moving to Sven’s Beard. I’m just here to pack up some things, sell my furniture, and end my lease.”

“What about your car?”

She was right about that. I hadn’t considered what to do with my car yet since I wasn’t planning on driving it back to Sven’s Beard. My Toyota Corolla wasn’t built for three feet of snow.

“I’m selling that, too.”

“Okay, this is insane,” she said. “But if your mind is made up, I’ll buy your couch. How much do you want for it?”

“Um...I don’t know. I paid fifteen hundred, but it’s got a scratch on one leg, so...five hundred?”

“Done.” She typed into her phone. “I’ll Venmo you now. And I’ll take those leggings, too.”

I shook my head as I shoved several pairs of leggings into a bag. “These aren’t for sale.”

She scoffed. “Don’t you need, like, puffy snow pants in that weather?”

“It’s not winter year round. You can swim in the lakes during the summer.”

“Well, shit. I was going to ask for all your swimsuits and sandals next.”

I’d considered Blaire a good friend in the years I’d known her, but I realized now she just wasn’t that deep. She cared most about keeping up with salon appointments and her weekend plans. Maybe someday she’d want more. Maybe not. Either way, I wished her well.

“Can you see my roots?” she asked, approaching me and bending to give me a good view of her scalp. “You’re the only one who ever tells me the truth.”

She had her hair colored from medium blond to light blond, and her roots never had more than two weeks to grow out, but she still obsessed over it.

“Nope,” I said. “Can I give you some cash to go pick up some moving boxes for me?”

“Sure. I was going to make a coffee run anyway. You still like caramel lattes?”

I would miss my caramel lattes. I hadn’t found anything in the Beard that compared. Might as well enjoy one last latte while I could.

“Yes, thanks.”

I took out my wallet and she waved me off. “I’ve got it. You gave me a steal on that couch.”

I went back to sorting clothes into piles on my bed, and she headed for the front door, returning less than a minute later.

“Hey, I found someone at the front door,” she said, her eyes wide. I turned to see what she was talking about and my eyes widened, too.

Grady. My heart raced at the sight of him in jeans, brown work boots, and a gray T-shirt, the sleeves molded around his defined biceps. His face was lined with either worry or fatigue. Maybe both. I dropped the jeans I was holding, shocked to see him.

“Grady! What are you doing here?”

Blaire took a step back and pointed to him, silently mouthing, “He’s fucking hot.” Then she waved and took off through the front door, leaving me

alone with Grady.

“I wasn’t the boyfriend you deserve,” he said, his expression pained. “I’m sorry for that. But now that the case is closed, I promise you’ll be my priority. My top priority. I want to make you breakfast and take you on dates and carry your bags when you go shopping. I want to kiss you every day, Avon, not just when you visit on occasion. Hell, I want to do a lot more than that every day.”

“Wait, why?”

He cut me off, walking deeper into the room and coming toward me as he spoke.

“I’ve never fit with someone the way I do with you. No woman has ever driven me so crazy. You can’t leave now. If you sold the paper already, we’ll have to find a way to buy it back. The Beard needs you and the *Chronicle*, but I’m here because *I* need you.”

He thought I’d sold the *Chronicle*. My heart tugged as I thought of him traveling all the way here in a frenzy, thinking I’d left him.

“Give us another chance,” he said. “Please. I’m in love with you.”

My pulse pounded. God, it felt amazing to hear those words. Part of me wanted to let him keep going, but I had to put him out of his misery. I was a little light-headed as I reached for his hand.

“I’m in love with you, too. And I’m not leaving. I just came back here to pack up my stuff and break my lease on this place since I’m moving to the Beard and all.”

The worry disappeared from his expression. “You love me?”

He closed the distance between us, putting his hands on my hips.

“So much,” I said, warm tears filling my eyes.

His smile held hope and relief. “You’re moving to the Beard? I thought I might have to move here.”

Just the thought of my burly police chief in San Diego made me laugh. “You would have moved here?”

“If it meant being with you, yeah. The traffic is bullshit, though. And how many fucking coffee shops and juice bars does one city need?”

There was the broody man I’d fallen for. I leaned up to kiss him and he met me halfway, his mouth capturing mine in a possessive kiss. He slowly ended the kiss, pulling back just enough while resting his forehead against mine.

“You didn’t sell the *Chronicle*?”

His deep tone held a note of vulnerability that melted me.

“No. I told the buyers no. And Bess is coming back next week, which is insane, but she said I’ll need armed security to stop her, so…”

“So.” His lips curved into a grin.

“I guess I should have answered your texts and calls,” I said sheepishly. “I wanted to surprise you. I thought I’d have enough time to at least pack and get back with all the delays you guys were having.”

He shrugged. “It was only eight hours of frantic air travel on no sleep.”

I laughed at his wry comment. “Well, I still have my bed here, so you can sleep, and I’ll feed you, and hopefully we can fly back together.”

“Sleep?” His gaze turned hungry. “I just found out the woman I love isn’t leaving me, and you expect me to sleep?”

My stomach somersaulted and a tingle of excitement danced down my spine. “What are the other options?”

He cupped my face in his massive hands and kissed me deeply, not pulling away this time. His mouth was warm and insistent, the brush of his beard against my skin making my nipples tighten with desire.

I moaned into his mouth as he tugged my T-shirt up, breaking our kiss just long enough to get it off and toss it to the floor. His shirt followed right after.

His broad chest was cut with muscles and lightly covered in dark hair. I ran my fingertips down the trail that led to the waistband of his jeans, a groan leaving his mouth as I unbuttoned them. Every inch of his body was tight with restrained longing, and I savored it as I unzipped his jeans and slowly slid them down, grabbing his boxers on the way, too.

I took a step back and he lunged for me, but I shook my head, wanting to enjoy his heated gaze a little longer.

I took my bra off first, his eyes darkening as he stared. Then I slid out of the sweats I wore, saving my panties for last. I turned around and slowly shimmed out of them, watching the expression on his face over my shoulder.

One hand worked over his jaw and the other palmed his massive erection. I wanted my hands on him. Now. I lay down on my back and spread my legs, encouraging him forward with the crook of a finger.

“Uh-uh,” he said, shaking his head.

He reached for my hand and pulled me from the bed, then lay down where I’d been, on top of the clothes I’d been sorting.

I licked my lips as I realized what he wanted. I straddled him as he placed

a palm on my stomach, trailing it down until his thumb was on my sweet spot. He stroked my clit, circling his thumb round and round, closing his eyes as I moaned softly.

“So wet,” he murmured. “You need this, don’t you?”

My ragged “yes” came out in an exhale as I rocked my hips, his touch making my whole body tight with arousal. He moved his hand away and I ached for him immediately, but I was also eager for what was about to come.

I positioned myself over him and slid myself down his length, the first few inches making both of us groan with satisfaction. When I looked down at his face, I saw lust, but there was also reverence. Love. Everything I felt for him reflected back at me.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, his voice strained. “You’re everything... everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“I love you, Grady.” My voice was breathy, my arousal building hard and fast.

“I love you,” he said, his gaze locked on mine.

He tightened his hold on my hips, driving himself into me as I rode him harder and faster. As my climax built, I cried out, pleasure rocketing through every nerve ending as Grady and I came together, both of us breathless in the aftermath of our release.

“It gets better every time,” I said, my wonder apparent in my voice.

Grady hummed his amusement and lay on his back, pulling me into his arms and kissing my forehead. I snuggled into his solid, warm side.

“It’ll only keep getting better,” he promised. “As I get to know every inch of you.”

“I can’t imagine anything better than that.”

“That was pretty damn amazing,” he agreed. “But I’ll never stop trying to be better for you in every way I can.”

I was about to respond when he made a snoring sound. Was he...asleep? Another snore confirmed that he was. Poor guy probably hadn’t slept in a long time.

When I tried to quietly move away, he pulled me back against his chest and made a growling sound.

“You sleep,” I said, kissing his cheek. “I’m going to get dressed and start packing the kitchen.”

I couldn’t stop smiling as I put my clothes back on and walked into the kitchen, pulling the bedroom door closed behind me.

Now that Blaire had seen Grady, she'd understand why I was moving to the Beard. Part of me had fallen for him the first time I'd seen him, even though he'd scowled at me and assumed I was just a dumb tourist. There was so much more to Grady than I'd seen that day, though.

I was carrying on a legacy in the Beard, and I finally had a family again, whether I was related to some of them by blood or not. Now that I finally knew exactly what I wanted, I couldn't wait to get home to start my new life with Grady by my side.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

Avon

“I’M GOING to fall and break something,” I grumbled as Grady led me down several stairs.

I was blindfolded, and I had a sneaking suspicion he hadn’t forgotten my birthday, as I’d assumed when we woke up at his place this morning.

“I won’t let you fall,” he said. “We’re almost there.”

We were outside, and it was a beautiful spring day. The snow was gone, replaced with lush green grass and trees and flowers that were coming into bloom. Grady had asked me to help him plant flowers at his parents’ house today, but when we’d gotten into his truck, he’d blindfolded me and told me there was a change of plans.

“Don’t let go,” I said as I took an uneven step.

“Here, this’ll be easier,” he said.

I felt him move his arm behind my knees before he scooped me up into his arms, making me shriek with surprise. I wrapped my arms around his neck, his heat and closeness reassuring me.

“It smells like trees,” I said. “Are we in a forest?”

“Nope.”

“You should just carry me everywhere this way. I like it. Maybe have a platter of cheese and fruit waiting when you set me down, and then you can fan me with some palm fronds.”

“Sounds like a great time,” he said wryly.

He took my quirky sense of humor in stride now, just like my nonstop chattering when I was nervous.

“Have I told you that I love surprises?” I asked.

“Only about a hundred times.”

“I used to hate them, but inheriting the *Chronicle* was a surprise, and look how well that turned out.”

With a lot of hard work and some new marketing tactics, we’d increased circulation of the *Chronicle* by fifteen percent since I took over, a number I was thrilled with. The paper was meeting payroll every week and we even

had a small rainy-day fund. And given the age of the building and some of our equipment, I had a feeling it would be raining often in the near future. I loved walking into the newsroom every morning, though, and being greeted by Pete's photos and the smell of fresh newsprint.

I'd moved in with Grady a month ago, which only made sense since I slept there nearly every night anyway. I was renting the apartment to one of the *Chronicle's* pressmen, giving him a great deal because I liked having someone I trusted looking out for the building when the paper was closed.

"Okay." Grady set me on my feet. "Ready?"

"Very ready," I said, my heart pounding with excitement.

He slid off the blindfold and I gasped as I took in my surroundings. We were on the pristine lawn of The Sleepy Moose, the lake shining behind a setup of tables decorated with fresh flower centerpieces in bright purple, white, and yellow. A banner hanging between two trees read "Happy Birthday Avon" and over fifty people yelled out, "Happy birthday!" in unison.

I looked up at Grady, tears pooling in my eyes. "You did this for me?"

"Happy birthday, baby," he said, giving me a quick, chaste kiss.

Bess and Harry were there, and Uncle Don, Aunt Laura, and Harper. All the other *Chronicle* employees were there, too, along with Grady's parents, Coulter, and some other friends from town. He'd even included Christine, which made my heart swell with gratitude since she was a connection to Pete.

Shea approached us with a platter of food arranged in a way that made it look like it belonged on the cover of a magazine. It smelled incredible too, a mix of savory bacon and something sweet.

"Happy birthday!" she said. "I have an amazing menu planned. We're starting with roasted, bacon-wrapped dates."

"Oh, Shea." I gave her a side hug. "Thank you so much. This is incredible."

I'd learned in the past three months that she had a deep passion for cooking. When she wasn't at The Sleepy Moose whipping up meals for guests, she was often at home experimenting with new recipes. Grady and I were always very willing taste testers.

I approached Bess and Harry with hugs next. They'd become surrogate parents to me, fussing over me when I had a cold and making sure I ate enough. Bess had healed remarkably well, and she was out of her sling and back at work full-time. I'd hired a college student to type for her when she

had been working part-time, and Bess had brought her to tears on more than one occasion with her griping. That was just part of her charm. She was outwardly prickly, but inside, she was one of the most generous people I knew.

“Avon, happy birthday!” Uncle Don said, hugging me next. “I brought some lutefisk! I know how much you love it.”

I tried to muster some enthusiasm for his culinary nightmare since I just couldn’t bring myself to tell him how abhorrently gross I thought it was.

“Oh, wow. You shouldn’t have, Uncle Don.”

“Nonsense, this is a special occasion.”

Aunt Laura hugged me, whispering a quiet apology in my ear. She and I had become close since I moved to the Beard permanently, meeting for lunch every Wednesday. Harper was dating someone new, so I hadn’t seen as much of her lately.

Heads were turning toward the lodge, and I looked over to see what everyone’s attention was focused on. It was Deke, walking toward us in his Bigfoot costume. I burst out laughing.

“I didn’t have a thirtieth birthday party with Bigfoot as a guest on my bingo card,” I murmured to Grady.

“He’s a good dude.”

“Happy birthday, Avon,” Deke said, giving me a hairy hug.

“Thanks for coming.”

“Hope all your wishes come true.”

I looked at Grady, smiling like a schoolgirl with a massive crush. “They already have.”

“Don’t inflate his ego anymore, Avon,” Coulter said from nearby. “If it gets any bigger, it’s gonna explode and make a huge mess.”

“I’m the humblest guy you know, asshole,” Grady jabbed back.

“No way,” I said.

Coulter howled with laughter and Grady gave me a questioning look.

“No, not that,” I assured him. “I was talking about that cake!”

I’d just gotten my first look at a spectacular, three-layer cake that looked like it was covered in newsprint— specifically, the *Sven’s Beard Chronicle*. It was sitting in the center of one of the longer tables that held different food dishes.

“How?” I asked, taking it in with wide eyes. “This is unbelievable.”

“Olivia did it,” Grady said. “I asked for a newspaper cake and she

delivered. Pun intended.”

The Sweets of Gold owner never failed to amaze me with her creations. Neither did Grady, with his thoughtfulness and devotion to our relationship.

“Did you hear Sellers is moving back?” Deke asked Grady. I was a little confused as I listened in on their conversation. I didn’t recognize the name even though they talked about him like he was from the Beard.

“Really?”

“Yeah, he retired from hockey. His wife left him a few months ago so he decided to come home and build a place for him and his kids.”

Grady turned to me. “Holt Sellers is two years younger than me. He grew up in the Beard, and he got drafted into professional hockey after high school. He’s been playing for...what, fourteen years, Deke?”

Deke nodded. “Fourteen or fifteen. I forget which.”

“Well, the Beard will be a change of pace,” Coulter said.

“That’s for damn sure,” Grady said.

“I heard he wants to build a youth hockey facility,” Deke said.

Grady looked impressed. “I’d be on board to help with that.”

I watched him coach youth hockey sometimes, my biological clock ticking loudly whenever I saw my massive boyfriend with his hands on his knees, bending to talk to a kid on their level. Grady and I wanted to have kids someday, and I was eager to see him become a father. If we had girls, though, they’d have to become nuns. No man would ever be good enough for Ryan Grady’s daughters.

“Tiny cucumber sandwiches!” Shea proclaimed as she brought out a huge tray laden with neatly cut stacks of my favorite sandwich. Now that we were living together, it had been amazing learning all the little things about Grady, like what foods he liked and hated, that he made sure to put the cap back on the toothpaste, and more. In that time, he had also learned more about me, like my favorite finger food sandwich.

“You guys.” I looked at her and then at Grady, touched. “You remembered me saying this is my favorite.”

“I remember everything you say,” Grady said.

I laughed and cupped his cheek. “Like when I told you last week that I needed toilet paper and you never brought me any because you got distracted by a baseball game?”

He gave me a sheepish grin. “It was a good game, babe. And I brought it eventually.”

“I was asleep in bed by then.”

“Never said I was perfect.” He grinned. “Guess it’s a good thing I’m hung.”

“No.” Shea cringed and groaned. “Don’t talk about that in front of me.”

Several of her kitchen staffers came out with more plates of food, including chicken wings, roasted potatoes, and broccoli salad. Guests fixed themselves a plate and sat down to eat, and I made my way from table to table to talk with everyone.

The cake was being served when Grady called for everyone’s attention.

“Hey everyone, if I could have you look over here for just a minute. I have a present I want Avon to open.”

He held out his hand to me and I walked over to him, stunned, because the party had already been the greatest gift anyone had ever given me. When I reached him, his eyes sparkled with happiness as he looked down at a box.

It was about the size of four shoeboxes, with holes cut out of one side. My heart hammered with wonder and hope. I pulled the lid off and let out a happy yelp of surprise when I saw a brown and white bulldog puppy, its wrinkled face turning up to look at me.

“Grady! Oh, come here, you sweet thing.” I picked up the pup and everyone *aww-ed* in unison.

Grady cleared his throat, shifting on his feet and looking nervous. “He’s got a special collar.”

I detached myself from the soft, warm puppy to see what he meant, my heart nearly stopping when I saw something sparkling from its collar.

“Are you...*what?*” My gaze flew to his in shock, but I knew I would never forget this moment.

He got down on one knee as someone took the puppy from my hands. Grady took one of my hands in his, looking up into my eyes, and began to speak.

“Avon, I love you more than anything. If you’ll be my wife, I promise I’ll take care of you forever. So...” Hope and concern swirled in his eyes. “Will you marry me?”

Would I? It was the easiest question anyone had ever asked me.

“Yes,” I said softly because, in that moment, no one existed but the two of us.

He swept me into his arms, my feet leaving the ground as he spun me around. It had been Coulter who took the puppy, and he passed Grady the

ring he'd removed from the dog's collar.

"We're keeping the dog, right?" I asked as he slid the ring onto my finger, tears of joy streaming down my cheeks.

He grinned. "Yeah, we're keeping the dog."

"I love you." I cradled his face in my hands and leaned up to kiss him.

"I love you, too."

Our eyes locked and we both smiled, the moment more perfect than I'd ever imagined. When I looked out at the crowd of our friends and family, I saw Bess front and center, wiping away tears.

Champagne was passed around for a toast, and I closed my eyes for a second, taking it all in. I'd never dreamed my forever would find me in the little town of Sven's Beard, Minnesota. There was no place I'd rather be, though.

Grady raised his glass, his booming voice reaching everyone gathered around us.

"To the woman who makes every day of my life better," he said. "Avon, you're strong, kind, and beautiful, and I'll be counting down the days until you become my wife."

I clinked my glass against his, grateful for whatever I'd done to deserve this life.

COMING SOON

The second book in the Sven's Beard series, Mr. Ice Guy, releases 8.1.23.
Preorder it [HERE](#).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first envisioned this book back in 2014. As a former newspaper reporter, I loved the idea of a book about a woman who unexpectedly inherits a newspaper. I started writing it and it just wasn't working like I wanted it to (I hadn't yet discovered the absolute bliss of a great outline). So I ditched it and moved on to another book, but the idea never completely went away.

Fast forward to the Romance Author Mastermind conference in Nov. 2022. Pippa Grant spoke, and she was magical. I had no idea until then that we grew up in the same Central Illinois town. I was fortunate to get to sit down with her for a few minutes at the conference, and she gave me some great advice. She told me to write something that brings me joy. I immediately thought of the book from 2014. My author friend Sara Whitney met up with me at Panera to work it into something I could get excited about. I moved the book to Minnesota, where my dad's family is from. That Minnesota accent just feels like home to me, because my four aunts all have a bit of it. Everything clicked into place after that.

I loved every minute of writing this book. It wouldn't be what it is without the help of Jenn Sommersby from Plumfield Editing, who brainstormed the outline with me. My author pals Sara Whitney, Genevieve Jack and M.E. Carter all read chapters and helped me make every word just right. Kari March and her team made me a cover I adore that fits this story perfectly. Sarah Waites created a beautiful map that brought Sven's Beard to life. T. Bellitto worked her line editing magic and Rosa Sharon proofed it like a rock star.

Around half my books are hockey romances. It's scary to move out of your lane and try something new. It means a great deal when readers take a chance on something new, so thank you to everyone who supported this book, especially readers. Reviews help tremendously.

I can't wait to go back to the Beard for the second book in this series.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brenda Rothert lives in Central Illinois with her husband, children and three dogs. A former print journalist, she has written more than fifty romance novels. Her print and e-books have been translated into German, Italian and Portuguese, and her audiobooks have been translated into German.

She loves to hear from readers through her website or her Facebook Group, [Rothert's Readers](#).

