

Vacations like This



A LOVE LIKE THIS
CARINA TAYLOR

VACATIONS LIKE THIS

CARINA TAYLOR

CONTENTS

Synopsis

1. [Kimber](#)
2. [Mack](#)
3. [Kimber](#)
4. [Kimber](#)
5. [Mack](#)
6. [Mack](#)
7. [Kimber](#)
8. [Mack](#)
9. [Kimber](#)
10. [Kimber](#)
11. [Kimber](#)
12. [Mack](#)
13. [Mack](#)
14. [Kimber](#)
15. [Mack](#)
16. [Kimber](#)
17. [Kimber](#)
18. [Mack](#)
19. [Kimber](#)
20. [Kimber](#)
21. [Mack](#)
22. [Mack](#)
23. [Mack](#)
24. [Kimber](#)
25. [Mack](#)
26. [Kimber](#)
27. [Kimber](#)

Epilogue

Author's note:

Also by Carina Taylor

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2021

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. Copyright law.

Editing: Elaine York, Allusion Graphics

Alison Maxwell, Red Leaf Proofing

Cover Design: Cover Ever After

 Created with Vellum

SYNOPSIS

Kimber

Some people view nosiness as a character flaw. I prefer to think of it as a useful skill. Like a sixth sense or intuition. It's my super power. And since I became a reporter for my small town newspaper, I like to think my super power puts bagels on my table.

A tiny (quite big, actually) mistake has me eagerly accepting a contract job investigating a resort being built in a small Colorado town.

But there's one small problem. (6'4" according to his license—maybe my nosiness does go too far sometimes.)

What I didn't count on was being double-booked in a cabin with **Mack Boone**.

Our families have known each other since high school, so it feels wrong to kick him out of my cabin.

Besides.

He's kind, he's protective, and a great kisser.

Three qualities I admire in a man.

But when I find out *why* he is in town, I realize I've made yet another mistake.

No more kissing, Kimber. He's the enemy.

Lines are drawn. (Literally.)

Wars fought.

Hills sledded.

Lips kissed. *Oh right, I wasn't going to do that one anymore. Maybe I'll call it research...*

The more I investigate the resort, the more I spend time with Mack, the

more I wonder what I'm really fighting against. The more I wonder if I *can* take a chance on love.

What if the villain is really the hero in this story?

DEDICATION

To chiropractors. The unsung heroes of the medical world.

Chapter One

KIMBER

Taking a deep breath, I opened my mouth wide and screamed as loud as I could.

Not a single sound came out. I tried again —still nothing.

It was a nightmare...no, it was real. I was wide awake, so I knew what I was seeing was real. I'd always hoped soundless screams were only in nightmares, not real life. Too bad I'd just learned that silent screams were a horrifying reality. No one was going to hear my call for help with my... problem.

My very big problem.

Someone was standing in the middle of the kitchen.

Someone other than me.

Someone other than me...and much larger than me.

Which was why it was a problem.

Because I was supposed to be on vacation in the Colorado mountains. In a cabin. Alone.

The cabin had a glorious lake view that I didn't want to share. Though there were other cabins surrounding the lake as well, they seemed to pay homage to the serenity of the water and the beauty of the mountains. Right now, in the dead of winter, snow blanketed the cabin with a quietness.

A quietness I was about to ruin, because just as soon as I fixed my broken screamer, I'd be calling out for help.

The stranger—a very large someone—currently had their head in my refrigerator. I had wanted weeks of judgment-free chip eating, but now I was about to be robbed in my (okay, not mine) lovely mountain cabin. A cabin with a hot tub on the back deck where you could watch the stars dance over

the lake at night. A cabin stocked with vacation snack food.

Except now I was going to be murdered. And this intruder apparently needed a bite before he stole all my belongings and killed me.

That sent a chill down my spine. Well, not the robbing and murdering part, at least. Those chips weren't going to eat themselves, and I didn't want to think about them being lonely, never to have fulfilled their destiny.

The man reached a hand into the fridge. He still hadn't spotted me on the stairway balcony, but I could see the frown on his face from his profile. His confusion over seeing food in the fridge wasn't stopping him from helping himself.

I took another deep breath. I would force my voice out.

And then I saw what his hand was resting on in the fridge.

"Don't take the nacho cheese!" Did I just yell that—rather shrilly—at someone who may or may not kill me? Yes, yes, I did. I even managed to drag out the word 'cheese' into a healthy scream. Apparently, several silent scream attempts stacked on top of each other made the audible scream much louder.

He closed the door and stood up to his full height. Even with me standing at the top of the stairs looking down at him, I could tell he was a giant.

This was not looking good for me. I mean, he looked good—at least his profile did, but he had the size advantage. I pulled my phone from my pocket and tried to dial 911. I got a dial tone on the connection. I didn't know that was even possible in the twenty-first century. But in the short time I'd been here, I'd noticed that heavy snowfall interfered with the signal.

The small Colorado town hadn't seemed that far out in the middle of nowhere when I paid the driver to bring me here from the airport. Turns out it was the gateway to off-grid living, if unreliable cell service was any indication.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" The stranger asked as he lumbered toward the stairs slowly. I waited for him to say fe-fi-fo-fum.

Without answering my would-be-killer, I hung up and tried calling again. "I'm calling 911 to tell them about the intruder."

He spun around and looked behind him. "What intruder?"

"Um...you." I tapped furiously on my phone settings, trying to get it to connect on roaming. It still wouldn't connect. The mountains surrounding the town made cell service an unreliable thing, which was why most houses still had landlines. I'd learned a lot about what interfered with cell service in the

short time I'd been here. Mountains, snow, Friday nights. It didn't take much to lose a cell signal. After my stay I hoped to be considered an honorary Long Pine resident. I'd make T-shirts: *I survived Long Pine's cell service.*

"Hey, could you hand me that home phone there by the fridge?" I asked him politely, hoping that would delay his obvious intentions of eating my chips and dip and murdering me once he'd had his fill.

He glanced to where I was pointing, then limped over to the counter. He'd probably injured himself when he broke the window to get inside. Serves him right. Of course, my mind immediately wondered how I could use his obvious injury to my advantage.

I watched as he picked up the phone and carried it back to the staircase.

"This is what you wanted?"

"Yes, if you could toss that up here, that would be great." I smiled encouragingly.

I reached my hands over the railing, ready to catch it when he threw it.

But he paused, all my hope dashed.

"You expect an intruder to toss you a phone that you're going to use to report him to the cops?"

"I mean, I did ask nicely." I shrugged.

"I don't remember you saying please..."

"Will you please hand me the phone? Better?"

He pretended to think about it a minute, then bent his head to stare at the phone. He took two steps up the stairs.

"Wait! Stop! What are you doing?" I asked as I looked around for the closest exit. I leaned forward on the balls of my feet, ready to run. I was in a cabin, in the middle of nowhere. Currently no cell service or way to call for help, and a large man was limping up the staircase after me. Maybe I could outrun him...that is, if I could get around his hulking frame down the stairs.

"I'm bringing you the phone."

"Stay down there!" I cleared my throat and tried to harness the southern belle my mother had tried to raise me to be: polite and frightening. "Just throw it up here, thank you."

"You didn't look like you would be able to catch it." He kept climbing the stairs.

There was a time and a place for bravery. A secluded vacation cabin in the Colorado mountains was *not* the place for bravery.

I screamed, running down the short hall to the nearest room and slammed

the door. What did people do in these situations? And I'm not talking about what do women do in the horror movies—because that never ended well. My mind ran through every thriller movie I'd ever watched with my dad. (There weren't many to remember, I didn't like scary movies.) But in the three I'd watched, the heroines were quick to block the door. I glanced around frantically, searching for something to barricade myself in with. I'd only briefly glanced in this room before now. Luckily it had a standalone dresser.

Stepping behind the waist-high dresser, I shoved it across the hardwood floor in front of the door. It wasn't much, but hopefully it would hold him out while I tried to figure a way out of here. Time for sheets out a bedroom window.

Then, the door opened.

My heart slid down to my empty, now-growling stomach.

I'd been in such a hurry to get safely inside the room that I didn't realize the door had been installed incorrectly, and rather than swinging inwards into the room, it swung outwards into the hall...

The tall man held the phone out to me over the dresser.

Up close, I confirmed what his profile view showed. He was the best looking intruder I'd ever seen. His strong jaw, full lips that didn't seem out of place on him. Thick brown eyelashes that matched his hair and would make a world of women jealous. A twitch in his jaw that showed he was in danger of bursting into a smile.

He broke eye contact and studied the doorframe. "This isn't up to code. I should have a talk with the owner." He thumped the doorframe with his empty hand, while still holding the phone out to me with his other.

I hesitated to take my lifeline from his hand. What if it was a trick? Except, I didn't think anything was going to stop him at this point. I slowly reached out to take the phone from him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He shoved his hands in his pockets and took a stumbling step back.

"You're not here to kill me?"

"No." His lips twitched as if he were fighting off a smile.

"Okay. That's nice. I mean, not knowing if I can trust you or anything, so I guess I have to take you at your word. I'm sorry I ran off like a loon." I shrugged as I turned the phone on. How did one go about making a call on a landline? I remembered the last time I'd used a phone like that. I was seven years old.

"Are you still going to call 911?"

"What? Maybe. I haven't decided yet."

He shrugged and leaned against the wall opposite the door. "All right. Let me know."

Not the typical behavior of a thief. Or a murderer. I'd assumed they would get right down to business, a busy schedule to keep.

"Why are you here if you're not here to kill me? And if you ate my nacho cheese before I got into the room, so help me..." I didn't bother moving the dresser. I still wanted some type of barrier between us. It was pointless, but my mind told me differently.

"I'm here on a working vacation." He shrugged.

A mix up. I sighed with relief. This was nothing more than a misunderstanding. No one was here to hurt anybody. We'd just somehow ended up in the same Colorado cabin. And he even sounded suspiciously like he was from Louisiana as well.

"I'm here on a *working*-vacation as well." *Sort of*. "There seems to be a mix up with the accommodations. You'll have to go and stay elsewhere."

He shook his head slowly. "I don't believe so. I have the keycode to this place."

With a deep, cleansing breath, I pasted on my smile that was reserved for testy people. And boy was he testing me. He didn't look anything like I imagined a Karen would...but... "I have already spent three glorious nights in this cabin. I've already walked around the lake several times and I'm on a first name basis with the librarian in town. I was told that I have it for however long I need."

"I was told that *I* had this cabin for three weeks. Or longer if I needed." He straightened from where he was leaning on the wall and grinned at me.

"Who told you that?" I demanded.

"Hagen Raglund. Who told you to stay here?" He shot back.

"Lara Raglund." I pulled my shoulders back. "She's one of the owners of Glacier Bank. She and her husband own this cabin."

"Yes, they do. With Hagen. Joint ownership. Raglund." He dragged out the name slowly.

Unfortunately, I also knew who Hagen Raglund was. His parents owned Glacier Bank, a bank based out of Louisiana. I'd always thought the name Glacier Bank had been a bit ironic—or perhaps hopeful. There was nothing glacial about the south.

Hagen's mother, Lara Raglund had been the one to hire me to look into a resort that was being built in Long Pine, Colorado.

The man slipped his phone from his back pocket and pulled open an email, showing it to me. It included the calendar of the cabin's booked dates. Although the dates didn't say anyone's name on them, the email clearly stated that the cabin had been reserved.

"I think you're the one who is confused," he said. "These are my dates to be here."

My reply froze on my lips as I stared at the calendar on the phone. It looked real, but my confirmation had seemed legit too. "That can't be. They blocked out those dates for me! I'll even show you the email. Lara had the bank manager handle everything for me."

He shrugged. "Don't worry, we'll get it straightened out. I'll give Hagen a call and find out what's going on. Maybe you can call the bank manager too."

I sighed. "You're right. This sounds like an honest-to-goodness mix up. I'm sorry I freaked out at you. Here you are probably tired after traveling today, and you weren't expecting someone to be here before you."

He smiled, brightening the entire hallway. "It's all good. I'm sure they'll get it all straightened out in no time and find you a new cabin to stay at."

Leave this perfectly good cabin with a lake front view? I don't think so. The surrounding houses were close by and several of them looked like vacation rentals to me. He could be the one to go look for somewhere else to stay. In fact, the house next door looked empty so I could only assume that was a vacation rental as well.

He was busy studying my face as I thought about our situation.

That grin of his was starting to get annoying.

"I'm so sorry they double-booked you too. *Are you* going to be able to find somewhere to stay?" I smiled sweetly at him. It was one of those customer service smiles that you got when they were trying to tell you that you couldn't return an item because your receipt was over ninety-days old and oh, you were an idiot.

I shoved the dresser out of the way and stomped past him to the landing. I glanced around the bottom floor, the open balcony giving a clear view, and spotted his bags still by the door. "Would you look at that? You haven't unpacked. It would be perfectly easy for you to use those massive tree trunks of yours and walk right out that door. Just think about it...maybe you'll be able to find a cabin that you like even better." I swept my arm toward the

staircase, gesturing for him to lead the way.

That was when I noticed the black boot on his foot. No wonder he'd been stumbling so much as he tried to deliver the phone. I hadn't been paying attention earlier because my brain had been too busy processing the information that there was an intruder in the house.

"Did you break your foot leading a life of crime before you got here?"

His face fell. "Even worse than that."

He took a halting step toward me, still stopping a few feet away. He teetered precariously. I leapt forward and caught his arm before he could topple down the stairs.

My arm made the perfect conduit for the electric shock. My hand locked tighter onto his arm. And what a nice arm it was. He wore a T-shirt, so my hands were wrapped around his forearm skin on skin. My hands couldn't meet around it. The corded muscles twitched beneath my hands. I licked my lips then released him as he regained his balance.

"Runaway horse. The poor kid was just standing right there in the field about to be trampled. I had to jump in front of the horse to save him."

I blinked. Bless his heart, he pretended like nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Then I spotted the corner of his mouth twitching up in a grin.

He had to be making this up.

"You saved him?" I asked skeptically. I couldn't wait to hear this...

He visibly swallowed, blinking rapidly. "I was just in the right spot at the right time. Anyone would have done it. I wish I'd been quick enough to avoid this, though." He pointed at the foot in the boot.

"It stepped on you?" I pictured a giant angry horse stepping on his foot, him going down just as he thrust the kid he'd just saved out of the way. It was all very surreal and in slow motion running through my mind.

He nodded earnestly.

I craned my neck to study his face. "That's not how you hurt your foot, is it?"

He grinned. "No...but I was trying to rectify you thinking I was an axe murderer. I pulled my Achilles tendon playing tennis. That's the real story."

Here I'd been feeling sorry for the man. I ground my teeth together, frustrated but finding it oddly humorous as well. "I'll call the bank manager who set this up for me, and see if I can get this straightened out," I said, shaking my head as I realized I'd been about two seconds away from

believing his story about the runaway horse and his superhero status.

We made it downstairs, and I pulled my cell phone out to check the dates the bank manager had given me. His number was on the bottom of the email. It was only four in the afternoon, so I was sure I could get a hold of him before the bank closed at five.

The connection decided it was going to work now. It was a good thing the "break-in" hadn't been a true emergency. The fickle cell service would have failed me and I would have definitely been dead. Barricading myself in a room with no escape had not been the best plan.

I dialed the number, keeping an eye on the man limping down the last couple of stairs to lean on the banister at the bottom.

The phone call went through, connecting to a messaging system informing me that the bank manager was out of the office until the next morning. It was already past five in Louisiana.

"He's out of the office for the day, but here, this is my confirmation email." I turned my phone around and handed it to him. "I forgot about the time difference between here and Louisiana."

He leaned forward over the phone, reminding me how tall he was.

"Hmm, it sure seems like this isn't either of our faults, doesn't it?" He observed.

I nodded slowly. "I think you must be right. I'm sorry I overreacted when I saw you in the house."

He straightened back to his full height. "That's perfectly understandable. You find a strange guy in your house, and you should react. Can I make a suggestion for next time, though?"

I slipped my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, cursing women's tiny jean pockets for the countless time. "Sure."

"Don't take the time to get friendly with the next intruder. Run and get out as fast as you can while you call the cops. The next guy might not be nice enough to bring you the phone." His lips twitched as he delivered his lecture.

"It was my first experience with a break and enter. I'll have to make notes for next time, maybe run a few 5ks." I laughed, his manner putting me at ease.

"Yeah, I'd hate to think of something happening to you, so next time just run. Ask questions later." He winked and hobbled forward with his walking boot thumping loudly on the floor. "Do you mind if I sit down for a minute?"

"Of course! You need to rest that, I'm sure." I stepped out of the way so

he could shuffle into the living room and sit down.

He thumped past me, holding his phone up to his ear. "I'm trying to call Hagen. He's probably still working and might not answer yet."

"Okay," I said as I walked into the living room with him. Was this the proper protocol when you were in a house with a stranger? Did you both sit down in the living room like civilized people and discuss what to do? This hadn't been covered in the etiquette book my mother forced me to read growing up.

His ringing cell phone echoed loud and clear across the living room. I wanted to ask him what cell phone carrier he used. Obviously not the same unreliable one as I did. Maybe it wasn't a Colorado problem, but a phone problem.

I reached under the coffee table and pulled out my travel basket of knitting supplies. I grabbed my round needles and continued working on the hat I'd started earlier that morning. Nothing helped me think better than knitting. Something about keeping my hands busy helped me solve all sorts of issues.

The room was silent as my needles clicked away. Just then, I had a troublesome tangle from jerking the yarn too tight. I tried to pull it lightly and not draw attention to my actions and frustration. The darn knot just wouldn't give.

I gave it a quick jerk. Now the needles were stuck tight. I released my hold on the tail of the yarn and grabbed both needles, one in each hand, and gave them a good twist and pull. The yarn broke, along with my connected wire. As if I wasn't mortified enough, one needle went sailing across the room and landed on the couch next to the man, barely missing impaling him in the eye.

I realized that maybe pulling out my knitting basket wasn't the best way to say, "hey look at this charming woman."

It seemed to scream more "guess who's still single."

I slowly lifted my eyes to meet his. They were a mixture of terrified and amused.

Not my best first impression.

But, then again, nothing about the past fifteen minutes had been my finest moment.

Chapter Two

MACK

When the taxi dropped me off in front of Hagen's cabin in the Colorado mountains, I'd felt a sense of relief. Peace. There would be no demands on my time here except work. And even that was going to be easy. I was here in an advisory capacity, just to make sure things were done right.

My working vacation was something I'd looked forward to. Home had been feeling a little claustrophobic. Hectic. I needed to get away, to be able to heal. I kept overdoing it on my leg and had been in the walking boot for far too long. My doctor had threatened me to take it easy or else.

Hanging out in the snow-covered mountains was a great way to do that. Not to mention, it had turned out to be quite convenient that one of the Raglund's many vacation homes was in the town where I would be doing some surveying work.

There weren't very many surveyors around. Which was why my company had sent me to their branch in Colorado to oversee a job rebuilding a bridge and main road through a small town. When my cousin Kylie's husband—Hagen—heard that I was going to be in Colorado for a couple of weeks, he offered the use of his family's cabin so that I wouldn't have to live out of a hotel while I was here.

I'd been happy to take him up on the offer...obviously.

I hadn't expected a beautiful knitting needle-throwing woman to be here ahead of me, though.

There hadn't been a car parked out front, and no indication that anyone was home when the Uber driver dropped me off. The front door opened with the number code Hagen had given me, so nothing seemed out of place. Until

that ear-splitting scream about not eating her nacho cheese brought me to my senses.

The woman sitting across from me was perched on the edge of the couch as though she were still considering fleeing. She rapidly stuffed the yarn and remaining needle in between the cushions. I'd wanted to sit down in the living room—neutral space—to put her at ease. But the way she'd immediately started nervously knitting meant I'd failed.

I hated that. I didn't want to be the reason she was uncomfortable.

I'd even been exaggerating my limp. My booted foot was painless, and I had nearly full mobility, but I didn't want to scare the girl. I was a big guy, something that made a lot of people uncomfortable. I imagine it would be especially intimidating for a female who thought I was an intruder. And for some reason, I didn't want this woman to fear me. At least she wasn't hysterical though she should be.

If it were one of my cousins who was nonchalantly sitting in a living room with a complete stranger, I would chew them out. Give them a lecture on safety...and make them carry at all times a can of Mace. Make them promise to never do that again. I didn't even know this girl, but I had an overwhelming urge to give her the same lecture.

I studied her out of the corner of my eye, pretending to stare at my phone screen. Her blonde hair fell in loose curls around her shoulders. Her jeans were tucked into big fuzzy socks, and her light blue sweater fell off one shoulder, looking like she'd stolen her big sister's clothes. She also looked very familiar now that I thought about it...but that's impossible because there was no way I'd ever met her before.

"My name is Mack Boone," I started the introductions, resting my phone on my leg. She jerked a fraction of an inch, but then a friendly smile spread across her face.

"You don't happen to be from Charlesville, Louisiana?"

I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees, flipping my phone over and over in my hands as I waited for Hagen to call me back. "Yes. Are you from Charlesville too?"

It would explain our mutual connection to the Raglund's.

She nodded and her smile grew warmer. It was the first time I'd seen her face relax in the fifteen minutes I'd been here. She answered, "I am. Born and raised there. I thought you sounded like you were from somewhere close to home. You don't happen to be related to Mimi Boone, do you?"

Shoot. My whirlwind of a grandmother. Everyone called her Mimi. Even her grandkids. We weren't allowed to call her grandmother, or any variation of it because that would make her old. Her words, obviously. None of her twenty-four grandkids were allowed the privilege. The woman most definitely left an impression, and I wasn't sure exactly what impression she'd left on this young woman. I didn't want to scare her by admitting that I was Mimi's grandson. My Mimi was a wonderful woman. We also took to calling her Hurricane Mimi because nothing was ever the same after crossing her path. "Yeah, we're distantly related..."

Her eyes sparkled and she clapped her hands together. "That's great! I love her. She's the sweetest thing."

I raised an eyebrow. Were we thinking of the same woman? We couldn't possibly be. My grandmother was many things, but sweet wasn't one of them.

"I'm Kimber Lyons," the beautiful woman said excitedly. "I work at the Charlesville newspaper. I grew up there!"

"At the newspaper?" I teased.

"Charlesville," she corrected with a little grin and leaned back in her seat, tucking her legs beneath her.

"You said your last name was Lyons? I might know some of your family."

The Lyons family I was thinking of had lived in the community for as long as I could remember. They'd always been involved in local businesses and regular volunteers at community events.

"That's wonderful! How crazy is it that this happened to us!" She gestured at the house. "Two people who grew up in a small-ish town get double-booked in a Colorado cabin! What are the odds!"

I laughed with her. "I guess pretty good when the people who own this cabin are heavily involved in the same small town."

She pressed her lips together. "Touché."

With a last name of Lyons, I would have thought I'd remember her from high school. I know I attended high school with some of the Lyons sisters, but I didn't remember Kimber. I definitely would have remembered going to school with someone like her.

"What year did you graduate from Charlesville High?" I asked nonchalantly.

Kimber leaned back against the couch and tucked her legs under her. "I didn't go to Charlesville High. I went to the charter school. My older sisters

went to Charlesville High, though. You might know them: Charity, Jessica, and Courtney."

I thought there had been a lot of them. One (Courtney, maybe?) was in my class, which meant Kimber had to be younger than me. "I remember your sisters. You said they're all older than you? I think at least one of your sisters was in school the same time I was there. A big age gap between you?"

"If you're trying to figure out how old I am, you could just ask," she suggested, a little smile danced on her lips.

I grinned. "I'm trying to figure out how I've never met you before when we've grown up in such a small town."

"It's a small town compared to New Orleans, but it still has twenty-thousand people in it. It's not easy to meet twenty-thousand people in your lifetime. Why, even with my job, I don't know nearly as much about people as I—" She stopped abruptly and smoothed out a wrinkle on her jeans and cleared her throat. "Anyway, it's no surprise our paths haven't crossed."

"You're a reporter?"

"Of sorts," she replied. "I was able to interview Mimi Boone about the scholarship program she started for local kids. I loved getting to interview her and write that piece on her. I wish I had another reason to sit down and talk with her."

I knew the article she was talking about. Mimi still had it taped to the front of her fridge. Mimi was great at getting things done. If the community needed something, she was the one to ask to do it, because she could get people moving. But she also wasn't afraid to take the credit and enjoyed a little (a lot) of appreciation here and there.

"You don't need an excuse to sit down with Mimi. If you mention a project that needs done, she'd probably jump at the chance."

"How are you related to her again?" she asked, looking like she was warming up to the subject and forgetting that I was still a stranger in her vacation cabin with her.

My phone rang, saving me from having to admit that Mimi was, in fact, my grandmother, not a distant relative like I'd already led her to believe. Although, from what she said, it seemed like she loved Mimi and I didn't need to worry about claiming a close connection with her.

"Hello?" I watched as Kimber became occupied with straightening the magazines on the coffee table.

"Did you get lost?" Hagen's voice filtered through the line.

"No, I didn't, Lewis. Did you forget how to fill out a calendar?" I fired back.

"Lewis? What's that supposed to mean?"

I stretched my legs out straight. "Kylie told me about you getting lost on your honeymoon..."

"Kylie!" Hagen yelled in the background. "That was supposed to be a secret you take to the grave with you."

I could hear my cousin Kylie laughing and saying, "And now Mack will help me bring it there."

"Very funny," Hagen snapped, but he couldn't hide the laughter in his voice.

I waited until they were done talking as I watched Kimber now pretending to be entranced with the fabric pattern of the chair. It was brown...nothing exciting about it at all.

"Hagen." I tried to get him focused on our conversation. It was hard to do, though, when Kylie was in the room with him. He was easily distracted where Kylie was concerned.

"Right. What's going on?" he asked.

"You double-booked me at the cabin, you jerk."

"What? No. That's not possible. Is there someone there? They shouldn't be. It wasn't on the calendar. We usually keep this whole month free."

"I think it has something to do with your mom."

Hagen groaned. "Aw, no. Man, I'm so sorry. Let me get on the phone and see what I can figure out."

"She's tried getting a hold of the bank manager who set this up for her, but he's not answering."

"She?" Kylie's voice came through the line loud and clear. "It's a she? Is it a young she or an old she?"

"Young."

"Good looking?"

I glanced up to see Kimber staring at the seat where she was tracing an invisible pattern with her fingers. She was fighting a grin, and I knew she could hear every word.

"Very," I answered Kylie.

Kimber's lips twitched a little wider.

"Text me a picture." The glee in Kylie's voice was increasing her volume.

"No. Put Hagen back on the phone."

"He never left. You're on speaker phone."

"Kylie?"

"Yes?"

"Go away."

"Hey, Mack?"

I sighed. "Yes?"

"Don't accidentally use her toothbrush."

Something that sounded like a snort, or a laugh came from Kimber's direction. I didn't want to look to find out. Now it was my turn to be embarrassed. Leave it to family to air all your dirty laundry—and the unfortunate toothbrush incident that happened when I stayed at Kylie's.

"I texted my mom to see if she knows anything about it. Can I call you back once I find out?" Hagen asked.

"Sure. Thanks, man."

"No problem. Sorry for the confusion. We'll get something figured out real quick."

He hung up, and now the cabin was quiet again. The snow falling outside muting any sounds from the rest of the world.

"So...a toothbrush?" The look of amusement on her face made me want to laugh.

I cleared my throat and stretched out a leg. "There was an unfortunate incident. I thought it was a new one, but it ended up being my cousin Kylie's."

"I take it she wasn't too happy about it?"

"No, definitely not."

Kimber's phone rang just then, and she excused herself and answered it. "Hello?"

She crossed her legs as she listened to the person on the other end. Unfortunately, unlike Kimber with my phone call, I couldn't hear what was being said.

"Good, you got my message. Yes, I arrived at the cabin three days ago. And today someone else showed up who has a confirmation email and the key code to the house. Mack Boone. Good. You do that."

Her sarcastic tone almost made me laugh.

"I'll keep my phone close by." She hung up the phone and set it on the arm of the loveseat. "That was the bank manager. He's going to look into what happened with the schedule and call us back."

"Great. Good." Now what? There wasn't a hotel anywhere near here. Work started on Monday. It was already Friday night. That didn't give me much time to figure out something else. I'd never had much experience driving in the snow and ice, so I didn't want to make the commute from the next town over with unpredictable winter weather.

I opened my phone and did a search for available vacation rentals in town. Of course. There were none.

"I can't find anything," Kimber said as she looked up from her phone. Apparently, she'd had the same idea I had.

"Yeah, seems like there are mainly long-term rentals in town."

"Remind me again how long are you here for?" she asked.

"Three weeks. Maybe." Possibly less. Possibly more. Hagen had blocked out an entire month for me, just in case. But it depended on the job site and the crew I had to work with. Regrettably, the crew sounded new and inexperienced, which was why I was here. It was a sad state when a twenty-nine-year-old surveyor was the most experienced on the job. There was a definite shortage of us across the U.S.

We spent a few minutes pretending to look at vacation rentals, but in reality, we were surfing social media—or at least I was. Maybe she actually was looking for rentals, but I highly doubted it with the way she was typing away on her phone. Most likely texting someone.

"Not to creep you out or anything, but I asked my sister if she remembered you from high school."

I tried to hide the panic in my eyes. What if I hurt Kimber's feelings by only vaguely remembering her sister?

"Courtney says she remembers you." Kimber's smile was growing. When someone was talking about your time in high school with a huge grin on their face, you could bet there wasn't one bit of it that was good.

"She says she had the biggest crush on you." She turned back to her phone as it chimed. "She also says you turned her down when she asked you to the Sadie Hawkins's dance."

"Oh hell." I remembered her sister. She'd been popular. She'd been great at sports, academics, and boys, and I'd been so shocked that she'd asked me out, I'd automatically said no, knowing she was so far out of my league.

Later, I'd had time to realize I'd inadvertently given the right answer. Courtney, though beautiful, was not someone I was interested in, and even in high school I'd taken dating seriously.

I tugged at my collar. "And how is Courtney now?"

"She's doing great. She's married and has two-point-four kids and drives a minivan." Kimber was looking positively gleeful at my discomfort.

I decided to call her out on it. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Immensely." She crossed her legs and rested her chin in her hand as she continued to beam at me. "It's not often I can hear embarrassing stories about my sister. And whenever I do, I feel as though the world is a little bit brighter."

Her phone rang and she lifted it to her ear to answer.

"Hello? Yes, this is Kimber." A silent pause and I could still only hear a faint murmur coming through the phone but not make out the actual words. "How are you?" Kimber's voice warmed. "That's great. Thank you for taking the time to call me. Yes. Yes, of course."

I sincerely hoped this was an answer to the mix-up.

Kimber set the phone on the coffee table, turning it on speakerphone. "This is Lara Raglund," she said to me before she spoke in the direction of the phone again. "Mack Boone is here."

"Hi, Lara," I said. I'd met her at Hagen and Kylie's wedding and had seen her a couple of times since. She'd enlisted my help setting up a crib in Hagen and Kylie's nursery the week after Hagen and Kylie had announced the exciting news. Lara was a woman who was dying to have a second grandchild to spoil.

"Hi, Mack. I'm so sorry about this mix-up for the two of you. Hagen put you on the family calendar, and our bank manager didn't update the main calendar correctly. It's my fault for not following up with it since I was the one arranging everything for Kimber. So I've been trying to find an open cabin for one of you, and I'm having some difficulties. I'm supposed to hear back in the morning on a possibility, but in the meantime, is there a hotel or bed and breakfast in town yet? I haven't been up there in almost five years and can't remember. I couldn't find one online, but I was hoping there was something."

"Not that I've seen," Kimber answered her.

Awkward pause. I would have volunteered to sleep in my car, but I didn't have one.

Kimber looked up at me. Studying my face. Then she answered Lara, "It's not a problem. The house is big and there are two master suites. He can stay here until we get something figured out."

I hummed my agreement and tried to hide my surprise.

"Are you sure?" Lara asked. "Mack, is that okay with you?"

"That's fine, Lara," I said. "I know you'll get everything straightened out. We'll be fine."

She chatted five more minutes, promising all sorts of things to make up for the mistake, then with a final promise to call us back first thing in the morning, she hung up.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" I asked Kimber when the phone call ended.

She hurriedly agreed, "Of course. I'm not the kind of person to kick you out in that." She pointed to the snow outside.

"As long as you're sure..."

"Don't be silly. You turned down my sister in high school. It's the least I can do."

I laughed at that. "I take it she wasn't a protective sister?"

"She was a competitive sister. I love her, but she usually got her way in almost everything." Kimber rolled her eyes. "Now don't worry, there's plenty of room here, and you won't even know I'm here while we wait on Lara to get things straightened out for us."

"Thank you, I—" My phone started ringing with an unknown number. Probably work-related stuff. "I have to take this; I'll go answer it on the porch, so I don't bother you."

She waved me off, and I prayed I hadn't completely misjudged her. Hopefully she didn't lock me out once I went out on the porch.

Chapter Three

KIMBER

*H*e was outside on the phone still.

It was the only reason I was bending over trying to read the label on the luggage that he'd left outside the kitchen. The open concept of the house made it easy to keep an eye on the front door, just in case he came back inside.

Yes, we'd agreed to split the cabin, but it wouldn't hurt to know a little more about my new roommate for the night.

I bent at the waist to read the tag.

Mack Boone

431 Rue Fontaine Apt B.

Charlesville, LA

How strange. He hadn't struck me as an apartment guy. He seemed more like a big, sprawling ranch-style home kind of guy. The way he'd taken over the entire couch, his arm spanning the back, stretching his legs out and reaching the coffee table in the middle of the living room. It was hard picturing him containing himself in an apartment. But he was here for work, so he didn't spend a lot of time back in Charlesville...so that must mean more time on the road than what would warrant owning his own home. I wondered what he did for a living, but there wasn't a single helpful hint on his luggage.

The rumble of his voice on the front porch had me straightening and scurrying into the kitchen in case he walked through the front door and caught me snooping.

Ahem, although it wasn't snooping to bend down and stretch my back, but he might misconstrue it as snooping.

Who was I kidding? It was totally snooping.

On the kitchen counter next to the fridge sat a leather wallet. There was a paper map on the counter next to it. It was a list of hiking trails that were in the area.

I glanced out the window at the snow-covered mountains and thought of his booted ankle. He was an optimistic soul, wasn't he?

That was confirmed by the wallet left unattended in the kitchen. What kind of person left their wallet on the counter with a stranger in the house? Didn't he know he shouldn't trust people like that?

Says the woman who's about to share her cabin with a stranger.

It was entirely different, though. Our suites had their own sets of locks along with outside access. If we wanted, we wouldn't even have to see each other.

I pulled a glass from the cupboard as I stared at the wallet. What if he wasn't who he said he was? What if he'd written the name Mack Boone on his luggage to trick me? It would be far-fetched, but...

With him out of the room, my mind was playing every possible murder-mystery scenario in my head again.

Now that I thought about it, this could be an elaborate scheme for him to sneak under my defenses and murder me in my sleep.

I started to reach for the wallet.

On the other hand, he could be exactly who he said he was. The easy-going, good-looking guy who just needed a place to stay. In which case, I had nothing to fear. The Boone family had a decent reputation in Charlesville. Mimi Boone was wonderful, some of the grandkids might start a street race, but overall they were good people.

But I could be dead before I found out for sure.

I wished I had texted Courtney a picture so that she could tell me if he was the same Mack. He could have easily fooled Lara. It wasn't as though he'd had a long conversation with her. And now that I think of it, my sister had said Mack Boone was popular in high school. Maybe this guy had simply picked a name.

My fingertips rested on top of the wallet while I clung to the cabinet door with my other hand.

It was too much. It was a horrible invasion of privacy to lay my hands on his wallet.

Slamming the cupboard, I opened another drawer and pulled out a pencil. I stuck the pencil into the middle of the wallet and flipped open the top flap.

There in the clear casing was his Louisiana driver's license.

Matthias Boone.

So, Mack was a nickname. I'd figured but hadn't taken the time to think about what it was short for.

He didn't look like a Matthias. I studied his serious face on the license.

Six foot four. Good grief. I was no shorty at five nine, but he had me by a solid seven inches.

I scanned the license for any other interesting information. He had his motorcycle endorsement. I couldn't help but think that he'd make any motorcycle look like a bicycle with his height.

"Find what you're looking for?"

I shrieked as I spun around, throwing the pencil high in the air. It hit the ceiling and fell back to the ground with a bounce, then slowly rolled its way under the fridge. The ridges on the pencil clattered on the hard floor with every roll.

Mack stood in the kitchen, leaning against the exposed support beam, an amused look on his face. "If you needed money, you could have just asked. I'm not a complete scrooge."

To my complete and utter mortification, he grabbed the wallet off the counter and pulled out a stack of cash and thrust it toward me.

"Good—" I choked on my words. Somehow my tongue had grown, and I was now convinced I was going to choke on it.

My face was on fire.

"I wasn't going—" I took a step back. "I mean to say, that—"

That was the point when he started to laugh. This was getting out of hand.

"Your face." He chuckled.

"It's not very polite to tease someone," I grumbled.

"It's not polite to snoop through someone else's things either, yet here we are."

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but he cut me off.

"Although, it's probably smart to make sure your new roommate is who they claim they are." He shrugged and grinned at me. He tossed his wallet to me. "Feel free to take a good long look."

I didn't bother opening it. I'd seen all the important information I needed. I'd mastered the art of speed snooping at a young age. Being the youngest of four meant I had to learn most of my information through snooping since I was "too young" to be included in adult conversations.

"Six foot four, huh?" I asked.

He nodded. "On my tall days."

"You seem much shorter." Lies. All lies. He seemed like he was seven-foot tall.

For some reason, that made him grin. "Do you have a preference on what room I take?"

"I took the master suite that's upstairs. It has a bathtub with a view across the hall. The other master suite is downstairs with an attached bathroom. That's probably the best option for you with your injury. Although, you'll have to make do with a tiny shower. But you probably shouldn't be straining your foot by climbing up and down those stairs all the time. Besides, the other bedrooms don't have attached bathrooms. And there's a lock on the door so you won't have to worry about me killing you in your sleep."

Stop talking, Kimber. I couldn't seem to stop the flow of words once I opened my mouth. Sometimes my words were like trying to contain a fizzy root beer in too small of a glass—they bubbled everywhere.

He nodded. "I'll take my bags to the one downstairs. Maybe I should add a second lock in case you turn out to be a run-of-the-mill murderer."

"A funny guy. If I do end up being one of those, I'll try my best to be above average."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the counter.

I cleared my throat and glanced around the kitchen wondering why he didn't immediately leave. "I was thinking about making something to eat. Are you hungry?"

"Starved, since that's obviously how we met." The twinkle in his eye made me a little starved too.

I crossed my arms, then unfolded them again. Then I turned around and opened and closed some cupboards. I'd planned on eating nachos for dinner, but with him here, I felt like I should make something a little heartier. Nachos wouldn't be enough to even hold him over until midnight.

"Do I make you nervous?" he asked. A serious tone replacing his teasing one.

"No!" I squeaked out. Good grief. I stay by myself for three days and I forget how to interact with good-looking men. You'd think that I had been raised by wolves.

Anti-social wolves.

"I can try and find somewhere else to stay. I don't want you to be

uncomfortable with me here," he said in a quiet tone. "I want you to feel safe."

I spun around. "You think I'm worried you're going to hurt me?" I asked in surprise.

"Well...yes..." His frown was adorably confused.

Shaking my head, I opened the fridge door and began pulling out some chicken and bacon. "Trust me, that's not why I'm nervous."

"Are you sure? Because you seem a little anxious, and I don't want to be the one to cause that."

Gosh dang it, of course he had to be good looking *and* sweet. And he was going to make me have to say it.

"Listen, Mack," I said as I slammed the pack of bacon onto the counter. I yanked a knife out of the drawer to open the package. "You don't make me nervous, but you make me nervous, you know?"

"Erm, no. I don't understand." His scowl grew as he watched me stab at the plastic wrapping.

"It's because of that." I waved the knife in his general direction, hoping he would understand what I was trying to say.

He didn't. He licked his lips and shook his head. I was going to have to spell it out for him.

"As I'm sure you know," I groaned as I started to explain. This was going to lodge me in the pitiful category in his eyes. "You're a good-looking guy. You surprised me when I first saw you, and I acted like a lunatic, and I'm not even wearing a lick of makeup! I'm wearing my ugly jeans because I planned on not seeing anyone! I can't even remember if I put any deodorant on today!" I ended on a wail. "I'm disgusting, and you caught me snooping through your wallet, so yes, yes, I'm very anxious right now—but not because I think you want to dismember me."

I set the knife down and grabbed the edge of the plastic, ripping it open. A few bacon slices fell to the counter with a slap.

"So you're saying I don't intimidate you?"

"No, not in a scary way. More like in an 'I've already ruined any chances with him by acting like a loon' kind of way."

"Hmm, good to know." He nodded as though he'd given it quite some thought. "I'll go move my bags into the room."

He pulled his wallet back out of his pocket and set it on the counter, along with his phone. He patted his wallet. "In case you need a closer look."

I pretended like I didn't know what he was talking about and focused my energy on opening the package of chicken.

I didn't look up, but I knew he was still standing there.

"Oh, and Kimber?"

I gradually lifted my eyes from the fascinating package of chicken breast to meet a set of green eyes. "Yes?" Too breathy. I cleared my throat and tried again. "Yes?"

"You didn't ruin your chances." He flashed a grin, then limped around the corner.

The heater must have kicked on because it was feeling hot in that kitchen.

Chapter Four

KIMBER

I didn't like to think of myself as nosy. I preferred to call it curious. Intuitive.

Well-informed?

Fine. I was nosy. My mother always told me it was one of my finer traits. I'd inherited it from my father, who couldn't handle it when he didn't know what the neighbors were up to. He was always peeking out the front window to see who was driving in next. I'd practiced my nosiness on my sisters growing up, and then I managed to turn it into a career.

It was an inherent trait.

At least that's what I liked to tell myself.

Which was why I couldn't help reading the text that was displayed on the front of Mack's phone.

I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of looking at his phone since he'd intentionally left it there, but it was basically catnip.

The chicken breast wrapped in bacon was cooking in the oven, and I was washing my hands in the island sink, glancing at the phone beside me. He didn't even bother to have his texts set on privacy mode. The whole text was displayed on the front.

Page: Can I borrow your truck? I promise nothing bad will happen to it. Have a great vacation btw!

Another text chimed.

I added another squirt of soap to my hands so I could continue pretending to wash while I read it. To be a good snoop, you learn to take extra careful measures in case you're caught.

Jenny: Taking apart a dresser without you is horrible.

How many girls did this guy keep up with?

Noah: I hid your truck keys from Page. You owe me.

Mom: Did you make it there safe? Call me when you can. Love you!

Mom: Can you call your electrician friend and see if he can come take a look at the bathroom renovation?

I shut the water off and dried my hands with the towel hanging on the fridge. He was a guy who still texted his mom and did favors for her. He had to be a good one. Staying with him would be fine. I would think of it as hostel living. I'd almost spent a summer touring Europe and staying in hostels. The idea of meeting new people and seeing exciting places tried to lure me away from Louisiana.

Luckily, my dad reminded me that hostel living was a great way to get yourself killed, or at least all your stuff stolen. He suggested I wait until I was financially able to afford my own hotel room when I toured Europe.

I had agreed and was still alive to prove it...wonder what he'd say about this arrangement?

This was my chance to experience hostel living. It would be great. When my vacation was over, I'd be able to call my dad up and tell him how well it went. He'd eat his words about me getting killed.

Hopefully.

I pulled open the fridge and picked up a container of apple juice. I'd have to stop by the store for some adult beverages in the morning, but for tonight we'd have to make do with what I had.

"Something smells great in here."

I jumped and squeaked, dropping the jar of juice.

Yeah. A sexy roommate was going to be great. If I could stop embarrassing myself, that is.



Hostel living *was* great.

Dinner together was low stress and, dare I say it? Incredibly fun.

We'd talked about mutual acquaintances and similar childhood haunts. We complained about the loose teeter-totter at the city park—we both had childhood scars associated with it.

After dinner, he'd quietly helped me do the dishes and put the food away.

Then we'd both scurried to our opposite ends of the house and hid for the rest of the evening. I was on this trip completely alone, but in my heart, I was a social soul. I loved being around people. But I didn't want Mack to think I was desperate for human interaction. *Even if I was.*

I had been here for three whole days without people. *Three days.* And I was already yearning to have someone to talk to.

The giant cabin seemed much less creepy with Mack in it, I had to admit. I hadn't realized that I was on edge staying by myself. It was supposed to be a relaxing time alone in the mountains.

Too bad I couldn't sleep in a big, empty house by myself with nothing but my overactive imagination to keep me company. Or worse, my conscience. That pesky little thing I was trying desperately to ignore on this trip.

But with Mack in the house? I had the best sleep of my life.

He was a stranger, but I still felt safe with him. Big strong guy like him? Even injured, I was pretty sure he could protect me from any intruder.

Having someone else around also gave me less time to interact with that conscience of mine. Which was great. I didn't need to be spending my time thinking right now. It was a vicious cycle of guilt and remorse, along with a hefty dash of regret.

Not the type of emotions you were supposed to bring on vacation.

The coffee pot was loudly spitting out the last of the coffee as I searched the fridge for my coffee creamer.

Mack entered the kitchen carrying a granola bar. I realized he probably hadn't had time to pick up groceries between his flight and taking an Uber here, so it was only appropriate that I'd offer him some of mine.

"You know you're welcome to help yourself to the food in the fridge...but you probably already know that considering how I found you," I smiled and offered as I pulled out a tub of cream cheese to put on my bagel. I ate bagels the proper way—with as much cream cheese as could fit. Ruin a perfectly good bagel with peanut butter? Not on your life.

I'd developed an immense love of carbs over the last five years. It was a love I'd cultivated and nurtured, careful never to let it stagnate.

Mack smiled, the one dimple on his left cheek popping out when he spotted me behind the fridge door. "Good morning, and thanks. I'll take you up on that."

His morning voice was gravelly and slow, but still soothing.

He set the granola bar on the counter. I left the fridge door open and

gestured to the food lining the shelves. "I don't like to have an empty fridge, so obviously there's plenty for both of us."

He stepped into the same spot I'd been standing a few seconds before and surveyed the contents of the fridge before pulling out a bag of grapes. "I'll walk into town and do some shopping at the market after breakfast."

Long Pine was small, and the neighborhood our cabin sat in was a five to ten minute walk to the center of town depending on the weather conditions. I glanced out the window at the solid layer of ice covering everything. "In the ice storm?"

He looked outside. "Shoot. I forgot I was in Colorado. Meh, it'll be fine. It doesn't look too icy right now."

I stared at the boot on his foot and bit my tongue.

I was not his mother.

I didn't get to tell him that it was a terrible idea to try and walk on that booted foot. He'd probably fall. Yup. I kept my mouth shut and let him make his own decisions. I was a stranger, after all.

"Why don't I walk into town and pick up some groceries since you haven't even unpacked yet?" I pressed my knuckles against my rebellious lips that had turned traitor and voiced the thoughts in my head.

He wasn't fooled for even a minute.

He dropped a few grapes in his mouth, chewing while he looked at me. The laugh lines around his eyes deepened. "You're worried about me falling, aren't you?"

I guffawed like my grandpa did whenever he told a cheesy joke. "Of course not. I wasn't worried about...yes, yes, I was worried about you. I'm sorry. I'm really not a hoverer by nature, actually, I am. I just like to keep everybody safe." I smiled, hopefully lessening the sting of me thinking he was going to faceplant the second he walked out the door. "So I'll go get you whatever you need."

"It's not fair for you to walk into town and get my groceries when I'm worried about *you* falling. How will you even carry groceries back?"

"Me? I'm very, very coordinated," I reassured him as I used the kitchen towel to mop up a little coffee that had splashed over the side of my coffee mug.

"Hmmm," he said as he opened the fridge again and pulled out some of the leftover chicken dish I'd made us for dinner the night before.

"Ew, you're one of those people!"

"What people?" he asked absentmindedly as he loaded a plate.

"One of *those* people who doesn't eat breakfast food for breakfast?"

He grinned. "Why would I eat breakfast food when I could eat this?"

He held up the plate of chicken before he put it in the microwave.

Okay, so he lost a point of attractiveness by eating that for breakfast. It was probably a good thing he had something to knock his ratings down a level in my eyes. Because he was delicious looking.

Did I have a type? I was beginning to think so. Mack Boone seemed like a very nice type to have. He needed a gross habit to keep him on the same level as the regular humans.

With a yawn and a neck roll that cracked joints, he opened and shut cupboards until he found the mugs. I pointed to the hot coffee pot. "That's a fresh pot or there's the Keurig. There's also a French press in the cupboard if you prefer that. The Raglund's must take their coffee consumption seriously. Oh, and I have creamer in the fridge."

"Thank you." He poured coffee into his cup and then limped over to me. I tried to casually lean against the counter, but it took three tries before I could rest my hip against it without the sharp edge digging into my skin through my yoga pants.

He leaned forward, and the coffee pot clinked against my mug as he refilled it for me. A small tornado of steam floated between us. I glanced up and realized that he was studying me.

"Thank you," I told him once my cup was full. Why was my voice so husky? And why was he affecting me this way?

"Of course," he sipped his black coffee.

Uh-oh. Was there anything sexier than a man drinking straight black coffee? No. He'd regained the points he'd lost earlier.

I was fighting a losing battle now.

My phone rang, saving me from my thoughts.

It was Lara Raglund.

The moment of truth had arrived.

I answered the call and immediately put it on speakerphone. Whatever news she had would affect both of us. It was only fair to include Mack in the conversation.

"Hi Lara, I have you on speakerphone here with Mack."

"Good morning!" Lara's voice rang through bright and cheery. "How is everyone this morning?"

Her sing-song-voice could only mean bad news. Overcompensation. Dead giveaway.

"We're doing fine!" Mack grunted his agreement as he took another sip of coffee.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. I can't find another cabin. I've called all the local rentals, and they're all booked out, or so they say. I'm just not sure what to tell you. Kimber, you should—"

Mack interrupted her, "I could commute."

There was an awkward pause. "I'm afraid the nearest availability is an hour away. Would that be a problem?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I stared at the snow outside. Commute an hour in this weather? We were from Louisiana. We weren't built for this. "What if we just share the cabin?" The suggestion popped out before I even thought about how it would pressure Mack. I didn't want to make him feel forced to share a cabin with me.

I stared at Mack with dread. Instead of a frown, he had a goofy little grin on his face. "That works just fine for me."

"Are you sure?" Lara asked. She oozed relief with three little words.

Stay in a cabin with Mack? I couldn't be more sure.

"Yeah, we're sure. We won't even know the other one is here!"

I was lying like a rug, as my grandfather liked to say. Because I would definitely know that Mack was in the house.

Every masculine inch of him.

Chapter Five

MACK

The look of shock on Kimber's face had been worth agreeing to her suggestion of staying together. It wasn't like I needed a great amount of convincing. I liked her, and I was man enough to admit it. What would be the harm in staying in a log cabin together in the dead of winter?

After breakfast and talking over the simple logistics of staying in the cabin together (when we would use the washer and dryer, our hot-tub timeshare, which I didn't even want to think about sharing a hot tub with her right now), Kimber and I suited up in warm snow gear and walked into town together.

We were now roommates, and this was totally something roommates would do—go grocery shopping.

I still couldn't believe Lara hadn't been able to find a single available cabin for either of us. If it had been Mimi on the line, I would have *known* she was matchmaking. But Lara had no reason to do anything like that. It was just a happy coincidence.

I guess I was going to have a roommate for this working vacation. Though I'd been excited to get away from people, Kimber seemed different. I was pleasantly okay with her type of different. I don't know if it was because she had zero expectations or what, but she wasn't draining.

She was a giver, not a taker, and it made it easy to spend time in her presence. Already, I felt more energized after my short time with her.

For one, she seemed determined to take care of me. On our way to the grocery store, whenever we reached a snow drift or patch of ice, she would grab my elbow as though she could prevent me falling. It was rather endearing to see her trying to protect me. She was tall, but she was nowhere

near big enough to catch me and prevent me from bringing both of us down, if that's what happened.

Her happy chatter filled the silence of the morning. The quiet crunch of snow the only interspersing sound between her explanation of various landmarks in town. She presented them with the enthusiasm of a local, even though she'd only been there three days.

"If you need anything from the library, ask for Elsie. She's the young one. She also has a great list of recommended books if you're not sure what you want to read. And I mean she reads everything. From true crime to textbooks to romance, she can help you find exactly what you're in the mood for."

She paused her diatribe of Elsie's fine qualities and waved to the garbage truck driver. He grinned and acted like the Queen of England had just bestowed a knighthood on him. His grin was brighter than a set of headlights. Too bad I knew how he was feeling. Kimber's smiles and energy were full of hope. Peaceful. Caring.

"That little coffee shop has the most delicious pastries. Their house coffee tastes like burnt toast, but their espressos are quite good." She pointed to a little coffee shop with an outdoor patio set in front. The business owners were hopeful, considering there was six inches of snow on top of the tables and chairs.

I nodded. "No to the coffee, yes to the pastries and espresso."

"Exactly. And then there's a cute little diner called the Snowball Bistro. It's the only little restaurant here in town where you're not in danger of having heartburn afterwards. They must be big on breakfast here, because there are three different breakfast diners guaranteed to clog every artery you have."

"Hey, I thought you were from Charlesville. Didn't you grow up eating some down-home southern cooking?" I let my voice drop into a deep southern twang.

Kimber shook her head. "My mother was a big believer in vegetables, bless her heart. Though I don't know that that love was passed down to me." She patted her hips, her bundled up arms made a "poofing" sound as they slapped against her sides.

"My sister hated vegetables too. She used to try and convince my mom that she was allergic to them." I smile at the memory of a 9-year-old Maisy using red marker to draw little circles all over her body after having to eat broccoli. Mom wasn't stupid, but she figured that if a kid hated broccoli enough to fake an allergic reaction, then she wouldn't make her eat it ever

again.

"You didn't tell me you had a little sister!"

"We only met about eighteen hours ago," I teased.

"Yes, but I told you all about my sisters, and we had a great laugh at Courtney's expense. So either I'm an oversharer—totally possible—or you forgot to tell me about your family."

Clenching my jaw, I swallowed the huge lump in my throat. It was always awkward having this conversation. "I had a little sister."

Kimber stopped walking and whispered, "Had?"

I nodded and tried to shove my gloved hands into my coat pockets. They wouldn't fit.

"Geez. I'm an idiot. I shouldn't have pushed to know about her." Kimber shook her head rapidly.

"It's all good. It's normal to talk about families. She was great; you guys would have hated vegetables together," I added on, trying to lighten the mood.

"She sounds fantastic and—" Kimber stuttered, her face bright red. "Did this just happen? Never mind! Forget I asked that! No matter when it happened, it still hurts."

"No, it's okay." Strangely enough, I meant it. Most people tiptoed away from this subject, but if I never talked about her, it felt like I wasn't honoring her memory and the life she'd lived. "She passed away five years ago, an accident."

"Anything I say right now is going to sound cliché, because there aren't any words to make something like that better." She slipped her slender hand into mine and squeezed. And now I was grateful my gloved hands had been too big to fit in my pockets. Somehow that tiny gesture refilled my aching heart with warmth. "But if you're worried about talking about her with me, just know that I don't think it's weird."

I smiled down at her and squeezed her hand back. "Maisy died in a car wreck at nineteen. It sucks. And you're right. Those cliché sayings don't make things better. But it's still nice to talk about her. You know? But sometimes people make grief weird. Like it's not okay to talk about."

She nodded and squeezed my hand. "You can talk to me about her anytime you want. I'm an excellent listener. My sister Charity says I have big ears."

I steered us around an ominous clump of snow, our elbows bumping into

each other. "Charity, huh?"

"And she's the least charitable out of all of us. What a shame, right?" She clicked her tongue in disapproval.

"I only remember Courtney."

"And you barely did that," Kimber teased. "I will never let her live it down that she got turned down for a date."

She had a very evil cackle for someone with such a sweet face.

A small frown settled onto her face, and she pointed to the hillside behind the supermarket. "They are going to build a big resort up there."

"Really?" Something in her tone made me hesitate to tell her why I was there.

"Yes. Isn't it a shame? Such a nice little town that's about to be commercialized."

I kicked a snow clump to the side of the sidewalk. Probably a good thing I hadn't mentioned my work yet. "Are you not a fan of resorts?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I worry about the repercussions for a small town like this. I've been asking the locals about it, trying to see what their experience is. Several of them are afraid it's going to steal their business, especially if the resort puts in its own gift shop and restaurant. And then there's the vacation cabins around the lake. Most of those are locally owned and rented out and will probably lose business when the resort is an option. I talked to one person who doesn't want it coming in because it's going to change the entire feel of the town. It'll probably lose that hometown feeling. It's unfortunate, isn't it? Greedy people trying to commercialize on this beautiful little town."

She tsked her tongue before she turned back to make an exaggerated motion toward the supermarket. "And here we are! The finest grocery shopping in town. Also, the only grocery shopping in town."

"Did you want me to meet up with you later?"

"Nah, I need to grab some wine. Coffee creamer. I can't believe I forgot those essential groceries." She winked and grabbed my elbow to help me step over the curb. She didn't say another word about the resort.

Thank goodness.



I was in deep trouble. Deeper than the snow drift I stumbled into as we

walked home.

I'd had to search the pile of snow for the bottle of Coke I'd dropped when I'd tripped. I swear, Kimber had been fighting laughter as she helped me look. Luckily, she saved the bagels before I could squish them. She was still cracking jokes about my horrible balance as we neared the cabin.

Which was why I was in big trouble.

When Kimber found out why I was there, she was going to be mad. That fun teasing attitude would be gone in a hot second. She was going to regret sharing her cabin with me if her feelings were really so strong about a resort coming into a small town. I could understand why a lot of the locals didn't want it in there, but I wasn't sure why Kimber had such a negative reaction to it. Her vehemence was strong.

I guess it didn't matter why, but the fact that she was upset about it was going to make things a little bit awkward when she found out that I was about to help pave the way for that resort to come in.

I was here to do my job: survey the roads and oversee the surveying crew. I wasn't the one choosing to put a resort in a small town. She couldn't possibly be mad at me, right? Right?

I didn't want to keep talking about it with her, but a morbid part of me also wanted to know what I was up against.

"Soooo, the locals aren't happy about the resort?" I asked as we carried our bags of groceries home.

"No. At least the few I've talked to. They're afraid it's going to change their town for the worse. Even some of the part-timers are worried about it. I know of one person who owns a cabin here and plans to spend retirement here. They're worried about how a big business could push out the locals. Turn it completely into tourist-ville." Kimber stomped up the steps in front of me, shifting a bag of groceries to the other side. "Can you believe a resort is coming to this small of a town? Doesn't it seem strange to you?"

Yeah, I could believe the resort was coming in. But I wisely kept my mouth shut. She punched in the key code and unlocked the front door. I climbed up the steps behind her and elbowed the door shut when we stepped inside.

"You need to go sit down in the living room and prop up your foot," she told me. I chuckled at her bossy tone.

It was slightly comical. Usually, I was the one taking care of other people. She set the bag of groceries down on the counter and turned around to

take the bag from me.

"Give that to me and go sit down."

"No, I'll help you," I insisted.

She stood up on her tiptoes and glared at me as if she could intimidate me into doing what she wanted. It worked. I turned around hobbled to the living room. I hated to admit it, but she was right. I was a little sore from all that walking. Trying to tread carefully on slippery sidewalks wasn't easy.

I sat down on the couch and removed my big snow coat and pulled the hat off my head. Leaning back, I rested my head against the back of the couch. I stretched out my sore leg and rested it on the coffee table. My muscles ached from compensating for the uneven boot. I hoped that I would be able to take it off soon. It did help, though...it took the pressure off of my tendon, and instead distributed it throughout the rest of my body. But now muscles in the rest of my body ached that hadn't before. It was definitely a work in progress.

Kimber wriggled out of her winter gear and hung them up by the front door on the hooks. She walked into the living room and scooped up my things and hung them up as well. Then she headed into the kitchen.

She put away the two bags of groceries as she talked. "I can't believe you paid for my wine." She half complained with a smile on her face as she put the last of the food in the fridge. "I also can't believe I forgot to buy a bottle when I went grocery shopping when I first got here."

We'd grabbed a couple of essentials such as wine and coffee creamer for Kimber, and I'd grabbed some snack things for me, along with some beer and coke.

"You weren't planning on having another guest here with you. I definitely owe you the wine."

"Do you want a cup of coffee? Or something to warm you up?" She acted like I just suffered through hypothermia. "Or if you want, you can go use the bathtub that's in my master suite that might make your leg feel better. Why don't you go soak in the hot tub? I'll take the cover off for you, if you want."

"I'm okay, you don't have to worry about me." Although, I was sort of liking all the attention she was giving me and was hoping she would continue to worry about me. And if I keep her attention on me and my injury, she'll forget about the big nasty resort that's coming into town.

Kimber hummed as she continued putting away the groceries.

"Do you know what I'm doing here, Mack?" she asked abruptly as she turned to stare at me across the island.

"No, I don't know what you're doing." I shook my head and stretched my arms before folding my hands behind my head. It took all my strength to not laugh. She looked so serious; I didn't have the heart to tell her she had hat hair.

"I'm researching the resort coming in. It's called the Mountain Pine resort," she said.

"What do you mean, researching?" This conversation was probably not going in a good direction.

"I had some time off, so Lara Raglund asked me to come here and practice a little investigative journalism. She wanted me to find out exactly how the big resort is going to harm the community, and then write a piece for the local paper. She has a friend there who's willing to publish it. It will be published as an opinion article, but it could be enough to stop that big resort from coming into this town and ruining it."

"What?" My voice sounded a little scratchy even to my ears.

She looked at me curiously.

"Why would Lara Raglund possibly care about this resort?" I asked, even as I remembered Kimber mentioning a couple about to retire who were worried about how the resort would change Long Pine. She must have been referring to Lara and her husband.

"There was a resort that almost came into Charlesville. But they were doing some shady dealings. Basically trying to cheat people out of their property. I can't recall all of the particulars, but Glacier Bank was able to put a stop to it when one of their customers brought a contract to their attention. They went through the permits and contracts carefully then brought it to the attention of the county. It saved a lot of people's homes."

"Hmm, good thing they caught on then." I recalled a little of that incident...and I could understand Lara's hypersensitivity after catching on to a scam. But the Mountain Pine resort was on the up and up. The owner had a good reputation and had already built a resort in Colorado that was doing well. I'd looked it up out of curiosity when I heard I was getting sent to Colorado to survey.

"I know you probably think it's over the top that I think I could stop something that big, but I can at least bring it to the county's attention," she admitted.

"I think if anyone could do it, you could," I muttered under my breath, and not in a happy way.

"It feels like important work. As though I can make a difference with my job," she agreed emphatically. "And I'm going to do it."

"Good grief, she's actually going to do it." I mumbled to no one in particular.

"What was that?" she asked as she stepped a little closer trying to hear me.

"I said that you could do anything you set your mind to," I repeated with a grimace.

She dipped her head to the side. "Thank you. It's sweet of you to support me."

I tried to smile, but I was afraid it looked more like a grimace. And then I realized how surprised she sounded. "Do people usually not support you?" Now I felt like a jerk for being frustrated with her, especially when someone else had put her up to investigating the resort. It wasn't like she had planned this trip to sabotage my job.

She lifted a shoulder in response, then turned around to head back into the kitchen. She didn't necessarily answer my question, which made me wonder why.

"Kimber, why were you surprised that I would support you?" Not that I did. Because if I did, I'd be out of a job. But that was a whole other can of worms I didn't want to pry open.

"No reason," she plastered on a smile and tried to look busy wiping the island countertop that was already clean.

With a sigh, I stood up and hobbled into the kitchen. I kicked my leg out to the side and leaned forward, resting my elbows on the island. I waited for her to stop scrubbing and look at me.

The stand-off took about thirty seconds. "Kimber, I thought we decided that we were friends. And friends talk to each other."

She couldn't hide her grin fast enough. "It's just that so many times people don't take me seriously. They think that with my job, with my very blonde hair color, with my looks, that I'm not anyone worth taking seriously."

"What do your looks and your job have to do with anything? You're a reporter. I'd say that's a pretty impressive job. And what's wrong with your looks? They seem fine to me," I added with a grin.

"I guess I have a confession to make." She set down the rag, and then readjusted her ponytail.

I waited while she gathered her thoughts.

"I'm not some big, serious journalist. I report on community events in Charlesville, and sometimes it feels like I'm a glorified gossip columnist."

"So?"

She stopped messing with her hair and stared at me. "You mean you don't have something to say about that?"

"No, why would I?"

She visibly relaxed, then smiled at me. "Because you're a good guy. Usually, people tell me reporting on community events is not a real job. You know, I originally thought I wanted to become some big famous journalist. To do investigative work like this on big companies, and try to make a difference in the wide, wide world. But it turns out I like being involved in a small community. I guess I let it bother me more than I should when people turn their noses up at something I love."

She shrugged and continued, "But the fact is, I like going to community events and getting to write about them. I like getting to write all the birth announcements and the wedding announcements. I like getting to write about local celebrities, like Mimi Boone."

I shook my head. I could never tell Mimi. That tidbit would go straight to her head.

"And people give you crap for that?"

She nodded. "I fell into the dumb blonde category for a lot of my friends. It's silly that I let it bother me, but I do. If I were to do something good and big for once, they might see me as capable, even if I choose to stay a small-town reporter."

"Those people aren't your friends," I stated because it was the truth. "You shouldn't have to prove yourself to anyone."

Her eyes widened as she stared at me for a few seconds. Then she surprised me by walking around the island and throwing her arms around my neck. She hugged me so tight that she lifted herself off the ground a few inches.

"Thank you."

I hummed my agreement, because with her arms wrapped around me and her body pressed against mine, words weren't exactly possible.

I wasn't sure what she was thanking me for. But it was definitely nice. I breathed in deeply. She smelled nice, even after being bundled up in snow gear and sweating on our walk back.

"I'm sorry," she apologized as she released her hold on me. "You say the

nicest things and you don't even know me."

"I might not know you well, but so far everything I've learned about you has only made me want to get to know you more."

She blushed and shook her head. "Well, you wouldn't like to know certain things about me."

I held my tongue even though I wanted to question her about those "certain things." Definitely had my interest piqued. She would tell me when she was ready.

Besides, we were going to be cabin mates for a while, depending on how long she stayed. I had time to earn her trust.

Chapter Six

MACK

"Do you care if I turn on the TV?" Kimber asked as she poured a glass of wine.

"No, of course not. Mind if I join you?"

"I was hoping you would! I always feel funny watching a movie by myself." She smiled and held her glass up in a little salute before she took a sip. "Would you like a glass?"

"Er, no thanks. I'll stick with my own poison." I grabbed a bottle out of the fridge and headed into the living room. I picked up the remotes and tossed them to Kimber, where she now sat on one of the couches. "Did you have something specific in mind?"

She tucked her legs beneath her and began scrolling through the movie options. "I hadn't thought that far ahead. I'll make sure to pick something we'll both like."

"I'll be happy with whatever you decide," I promised her.

I lied.

She picked a horror.

I wasn't one for horror, usually. It was practically sacrilegious to admit that when you were the guy. So I kept my mouth shut since it was the movie that Kimber suggested.

Two hours of trying not to jump every time a zombie popped out from some random spot in the house the main characters were staying in, and I was ready for the movie to be over. Somehow Kimber ended up sitting right next to me, even though she'd started watching the movie on the other couch.

She was close enough to me that I could feel every single jump of hers, though. It coincided with mine quite nicely.

The end credits began rolling—finally—after everyone died.

With a relieved sigh, I stood up. "I think I'm going to head to bed." I had a meeting at the diner in the morning and planned on reviewing the work orders first thing.

Kimber leapt up from the couch and smiled. "Great idea! Me too."

"It's not going to bother me if you have the TV going. I can sleep through anything if you wanted to stay up later." I didn't want to ruin her vacation by being the one who was going to bed at ten o'clock.

"No, I'm tired as well." She faked a big yawn, even though her eyes were bright and frantically glancing out the dark window.

"Goodnight, then," I said with a smile as I glanced down the hallway. Nothing to worry about. Nothing was hiding in that painting of the Rocky Mountains that I had to walk toward in order to get to my room.

I trudged slowly toward it.

A shuffle sounded behind me. Kimber was following me down the darkened hallway.

"I forgot that I need my clothes out of the laundry room." Her sheepish look told me everything I needed to know. She didn't want to walk down a dark hallway any more than I did. The laundry room sat at the end of the hallway just before the master suite where I was staying.

Horror movies were not meant for bedtime, obviously.

We walked down the hall, side by side. Belatedly I realized we had forgotten to turn the light switch on. Now that we were a third of the way down it, it seemed silly to turn around and walk back to flick it on.

The refrigerator groaned, echoing through the house. Kimber's breathing accelerated and she stepped closer to me. That wasn't good. She was supposed to be the brave one in this situation. She was the one who wanted to watch that movie. She had to be the one to survive at the end.

The hall was completely dark where the door to the laundry room opened up. I stopped and waited as Kimber fumbled with the doorknob. I glanced around, half expecting a crazed man to come rushing down the hall at us with a knife, or a zombie to jump out and remind us of what our afterlife would look like.

The door finally swung open on loud, creaky hinges. Kimber stepped back, closer to me.

Nothing ominous happened, and she let out a sigh. I stepped forward a scant few inches. The floorboard under my sock groaned. Kimber's shoulders

rose to her ears, and I cleared my throat. I wanted to ask if she planned to stand there all night, but I never got the chance. A bright light flashed, followed by a loud screech and a hollow crunch.

Kimber screamed and flew into my arms. I ran three steps before I stopped and shook my head, laughing.

Kimber's arms locked around my shoulders; her legs spindly irons clamped around my waist. I couldn't pry her off of me if I'd wanted to.

And I didn't want to.

Kimber was shaking.

I wrapped my arms around her and walked back to the laundry room.

"It's okay, it sounded like someone skidded on the ice into a mailbox or something like that," I tried to reassure her as I patted her back. Walking into the still-dark laundry room, I looked outside the window and spotted a white sedan backed against a streetlight. The driver was standing next to the car in a fluffy winter jacket, muttering and surveying the damage they had done to the bumper.

"No murderers on the loose tonight," I said with a laugh.

Kimber finally lifted her face from where she'd buried it in the crook of my neck. She whispered softly, "I hate horror movies."

"What do you mean, you don't like horror?" My voice grew louder as I tried to keep from laughing, or possibly throttling her.

She was still hanging onto my shoulders like a lifeline. "I thought you would be into scary movies. I mean, look at you! I didn't think you'd be scared of anything!"

"Wow, stereotype much?" My chuckle died in my throat as I realized my hand was splayed across her silky soft hair. "I don't like horror, but thankfully I didn't freak out the way you did. We would have broken a wall, or my other foot, or something.

She leaned back in my arms. "You screamed too!"

"I did not." I totally did. My scream might have been higher pitched than hers.

In that moment, she seemed to realize that I was still holding her. Her long legs still wrapped around my waist and her hands on my shoulders. I had an arm wrapped around her waist, and a hand flattened against her back and her soft hair.

"You're very strong," she said conversationally. "And very fast for someone with an injury."

"Why thank you."

"If you're worried about sleeping by yourself, you can sleep in the room across from mine," she suggested. Her thumbs traced light circles into my shoulders.

"I could definitely do that."

"Great! Because it'd be a little awkward if I had to sleep downstairs in front of your door."

I shook my head and reluctantly released my hold on her as she unwrapped her legs and put her feet on the floor once again.

"Why on earth did you suggest that horror movie?" I asked as I grasped her hand and we hurried down the dark hall together.

"I didn't want you to feel stuck watching a romcom movie?"

"What's wrong with a romcom?" I asked as I flipped the light on that led up the stairs.

"Exactly! What's wrong with a romcom? That's what I want to know! But anytime I've suggested it to a date before, they poo-poo it."

She sucked in an audible breath as she rushed on, "Not that you're a date or anything. That's not what I meant at all!"

"So now I'm undatable since I like romcoms? I see how it is."

She slowed her steps since I was having to swing my boot up the steps at an awkward angle. She didn't seem in a hurry to let go of my hand. And she kept staring at the dark landing as though it might start spewing zombies at us.

"I was trying to explain why I picked the horror movie, and then I put my foot in my mouth. Big surprise. I seem to keep doing that around you."

"Big surprises?"

"No, I mean—" She stopped abruptly when she saw my face. "You're teasing me!"

"Guilty as charged."

She leaned toward me, then stopped herself. "Oops. I almost poked your arm, but I don't want to knock you off balance. Here, better hold onto me so you don't tumble backwards."

"That's very sweet of you."

"What are you talking about? This is for my benefit. I just need you alive as my protection." She grinned the cheesiest grin and gave me a wink that would've melted the ice outside. She's really adorable.

And her wink made me think I could be downright happy as a bodyguard.

At least *her* bodyguard.

Chapter Seven

KIMBER

I'd slept great the night before. Sort of.
Two things had kept me awake.

One, I couldn't stop thinking about how it felt when Mack picked me up—all right, saying he picked me up is sort of a stretch considering I'd climbed him like a tree.

And two, Mack had slept across the hall from me.

At first it was my own dang mind keeping me up as I thought about how close he was to me. But that was before the snoring started.

The snoring.

The snoring was enough to make me swear. I now knew why they called him Mack. It had nothing to do with his size, and everything to do with the fact that he sounded like a freight truck rumbling through the house when he slept.

That man needed to take a sleep test and find out what was wrong because those sounds were a lot—and I mean a lot—to unpackage.

When he'd stumbled (quite literally) down the stairs the next morning, he'd told me how thirsty he was. Shocker.

While he was in the kitchen getting breakfast—leftover pizza, bleh—I walked past the front window as a van pulled into the driveway next door. The neighborhood had nice large lots, but it was still easy to see what was going on at the houses next door.

The van was black with darkly tinted windows.

The back door slid open, and two men climbed out, glancing over their shoulders before they hurried up to the front porch steps of their cabin. Once on the porch, they were out of view, and I couldn't see what they were doing.

Probably opening the door.

My deductive reasoning was the stuff of legends.

The driver got out next, and so did a fourth man sitting in the passenger front seat. The two of them walked to the back of the van while they glanced around furtively. They opened the back doors and pulled out two long, black cases. I couldn't stop the gasp.

"What's wrong?" Mack asked from where he stood in the kitchen. I shushed him and stepped closer to the window to get a better look. I closed the curtain halfway to hopefully shield my body while I continued to stare at the newcomers. The only thing I suspected were in those long black cases were hunting rifles. I wondered if other types of guns traveled in the same types of cases.

"What are you looking at?" Mack whispered in my ear. I jumped a couple inches in the air as he tried to get a look over my shoulder. I grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him closer to me so that he wouldn't be directly in the strangers' line of sight.

"Don't let them see you!"

"Why not?" He leaned around me and waved out the window.

"Stop that!" I smacked his hand down. "Why do you think four adult men are unloading black gun cases? It's like they're a hit team!"

Mack stared down at me, his facial expression not changing as he looked unimpressed with my supposition. I didn't want to be right, but I knew I was. Whatever they were doing, they looked guilty. Innocent people didn't jump out of vans and rush indoors. They didn't glance around frantically when they unloaded things from the back of their van. Therefore, by default, these people were not innocent.

But Mack wasn't exactly what I would call observant. I'd learned that in the short time we'd been together. So I couldn't exactly blame him for not noticing the same things I did. Some people weren't as observant as others.

"Do you think they're here to kill someone specific?" I asked. There could be a celebrity vacationing here. Or possibly a political figure. *Oh yes, political intrigue.* That would be enough of a reason to kill someone.

"No, I don't think they're here to kill anyone." Mack frowned as he glanced between my face and out the window. "Don't you think you're jumping to some conclusions?"

"How do you explain it then?" I planted my hands on my hips as I looked back out the window. The men were gone, but the van was still parked in the

driveway, so I could only assume that they had already gone into the house. I needed a better look at the van so that I could memorize their license plate number. If an unexplained body showed up in the news, with that detail I could point the police toward the right van.

Mack finally answered me. "I think...you know, I think—" I leaned forward, waiting for his answer. "I think that we should mind our own business." He ended his words with a grin.

"You're impossible." I waved him away and tried to look out the window. The van was parked perfectly parallel to me, making it impossible to read the license plate number from this vantage point. I was going to have to go outside. I turned around, intent on my task, and forgetting that Mack was directly behind me. I ran right into his chest. His big arms wrapped around me, and it was a good thing he was so large, because otherwise I would've toppled him over with him wearing that boot on his foot. "By the way, how did you sneak up on me with that on?"

He still held onto my arms even though neither one of us was in danger of falling anymore. "You were too busy staring at the neighbors."

"Someone has to pay attention to what's going on around here," I teased.

"It must be that nosy reporter in you coming out." He winked and I forgot to be insulted.

"We'll make sure we lock the doors tonight," I said, bringing our attention back to the matter at hand.

"They're vacationers," Mack said with such confidence that I almost believed him.

"It can't hurt to be careful," I reminded him.

He leaned forward and tapped my forehead. His finger felt warm and heavy against my skin. I could feel the callouses even from him touching my forehead.

"You have a very suspicious mind," he stated.

"That's what makes me good at my job," I replied as the tapping stopped. His finger still resting against my forehead.

"Your face is so small," he said as he flattened his hand along the side of my cheek.

"It doesn't have anything to do with my small face. You have giant hands." I grabbed his hand and held mine up to it. Mine looked like a child's next to his.

"You know what I find funny?" he asked.

"What?" I tried to stretch my fingers higher against his. My fingers were half the width of his. His hand was big enough to wrap around my entire head.

"I'm amazed you let me stay here with you, if you're so sure the neighbors are here to kill someone."

"It's different because I know who you are!"

"Barely..."

I shook my head slowly, wondering at the insecurity I thought I detected in his voice. "I'd been here for three days. In that time, I learned that I don't like staying by myself. When you came here, it made me feel safe. I had the best sleep of my life that first night. I felt like you would protect me. I know that sounds weird, and creepy in its own way—"

"No," he interrupted me. "Not at all creepy. It sounds nice. I'm curious, what is it about me that makes you feel safe? Or put you at ease?"

"I don't know. Probably because I thought you were so good-looking." I battled a laugh.

His grin froze on his face. "Wait, thought? As in, past tense? You don't think I'm good-looking now?"

"You've really gone downhill in the short time that we've been here. I mean, look at this." I rapped my knuckles against his rock-hard abs. "It's as soft as a pillow...you went from hero to zero in forty-eight hours."

He scowled, caught my hand and held it flat against his chest. "Careful there. You might lose your hand in all that softness." His scowl cracked into a grin, and I had an overwhelming urge to brush my hand up and down the decidedly not-soft abs. It was unfortunate he was wearing a shirt.

His stomach rumbled under my hand. "Hungry?"

"Starved." The look in his eye didn't look like he was wanting food.

I cleared my throat and pulled my hand back. "You were right about one thing."

"Just one thing?" He teased.

I smiled and shook my head. "I don't know your family very well. How big is the Boone family? It seems like they're spread out all over the county. Is it all the same family or multiple Boone families?"

"Every Boone you've met is probably related to me. I have twenty-four first cousins. I think I have somewhere around a hundred second cousins."

"Is Mimi related to you through a second cousin? A great aunt? Or what is the connection there?"

He fidgeted with the string on the blinds.

His phone rang just then, and if I didn't know better, I would have assumed he looked relieved. "I've got to take this."

I nodded and waved him away.

"Hey Jenny, what's going on?"

I stared out the window, half waiting for an explosion as Mack continued to talk on the phone.

"Yeah, I'll hire you a moving truck. Don't worry. I'll get it scheduled out for you."

His voice grew muted as he disappeared down the hall toward the downstairs master suite.

I wondered who he was helping move. He seemed to have a lot of friends. Or maybe it was all those cousins he mentioned.

With no small amount of effort, I turned away from the window and walked into the living room. Mack was right. I was letting my imagination run away with me.

Just like I had after the horror movie. An imagination that had gotten me in trouble before.

I'm not sure what small speck of courage possessed me, but I found myself walking upstairs. I grabbed my laptop and carried it downstairs into the living room. I sat down and set my laptop on the coffee table, opening my email. I stared at the screen, contemplating what to say before finally giving up and picking up my knitting needles.

What would I say? How could I even respond? It had been two weeks since I'd received the email. I needed to answer her.

But how did a person begin to apologize for nearly ruining someone else's life? There was no sorry big enough to cover that.

Clack. Click.

Knitting away, the hat was almost finished. And I still hadn't figured out a good way to start an email to someone who deserved a serious apology...and more, if I were being honest.

Screeeech.

An eerie sound split the air. I dropped the yarn and needles to the floor and shot to my feet.

The sound was unfamiliar; all I knew was that it was hurting my ears. I yelled for Mack. It was almost like what I would imagine a dying moose sounded like. I wasn't sure if there were any moose in Colorado. Mack came

hurrying down the hall as fast as he could.

"What on earth is that sound?" Mack asked. It was the most serious I'd ever seen him look. I was glad I wasn't the only one who had been startled by the noise.

"I'm pretty sure there's a wounded animal out there," I told him.

He nodded.

"It sounds like it's dying!" I guessed. When I said the words, I immediately remembered watching the neighbors unload the van only half an hour earlier.

"Oh my word!" I yelled. "They've killed someone. I knew it! I should've called the police right away."

The sound continued and Mack looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

"Can't you hear someone yelling for help? They've been shot."

Mack shook his head, marched past me and slid open the window.

"Don't do that!" I shrieked. "We don't want to let them in."

"If they're going to shoot us, this window isn't going to stop them."

"Dear sweet Lord, in our time of need—" I began my prayer as Mack started laughing.

Some people didn't do well in stressful situations. Mack must be one of them. And now he was getting hysterical. I'd have to be the grounding force for us, obviously. His hysterical laughter was going to make it hard to run and hide from the murderers next door. Not to mention the whole injured leg part.

But I wouldn't leave him behind.

I wasn't that type of person.

Mack walked over to me and dragged me closer to the window.

Even though I resisted, it wasn't difficult for him to do, which is just sad because I had to be the strong one for us both.

I dug in my heels because I did *not* want to get closer to where our assassin neighbors could get a shot off at me.

"I don't want to look, Mack! I'm too young to die!" He let go of my arm in favor of wrapping an arm around my waist and lifting me off the ground. It was the first time he'd put his arms around me—first, that is—and despite the fact that he was dragging me to my death, my body still reacted to him.

Unfortunately he must not have felt the same way because he wasn't buying my excuses. "Wait, I have more...I'm too pretty. I'm too dumb? Too useful? Too much?"

Dang it, if I was going to come up with some valid reason not to die today, it had to be a good one. Mack released his hold on my waist and gently grabbed the sides of my face, angling my head until I was forced to look out the window. It took me a minute to adjust to what I was looking at.

Four grown men sat on the back deck of the house next door.

One held a trumpet to his lips.

Another was playing a saxophone.

The two other men sat there tapping their hands against their knees with the rhythm they thought they were making.

"What am I seeing?" I whispered. The hands on the sides of my head were shaking as Mack laughed. It was at exactly that moment that I realized maybe, just maybe; Mack had a warped sense of humor. And he didn't seem to mind a laugh at my expense.

"What in the world—"

"Would you just look at those murderers?" He was snickering. A full-on snicker. The jerk.

"How was I to know they were carrying instruments? It looked like a gun case! And they were being all sketchy and stuff," I wailed over the sounds of Mack's laughter.

What made it even worse, was that his laughter was so contagious, I was soon gasping for air right along with him, teasing or not.



Two hours later, we sat on the couch together, watching a romantic comedy this time—with subtitles because the noise was too much.

I had a pillow wrapped around my head and Mack was wearing a set of earmuffs his mother insisted he bring with him.

Neither of us was laughing anymore.

"Do you know what?" Mack yelled over the sound of the trumpet, saxophone, and now the addition of an occasional cymbal clash.

"What?" I yelled back, lifting the pillow slightly so I could hear him better.

"I wish you'd been right about what was in the cases because at least then we could be miserable for different reasons."

"Me too, Mack. Me too."

Chapter Eight

MACK

"*I* 'll see you on Monday at seven, then," I repeated the time to the two young surveyors, CJ and Eric, who had met me at the diner for a late breakfast.

My working vacation. The reason I was here.

My company had sent me to their Colorado branch to be survey manager for the survey crew that would be prepping to put a road up the mountain that the resort would be built on.

The company I worked for had local branches in multiple states. When I first took the job, I rarely had to travel. But ever since two of their top surveyors retired, it had left me as one of the two senior surveyors. I'd been travelling more and more, and it seemed like that wouldn't be changing anytime soon. I wasn't sure how much longer I wanted to keep working for the company since it was turning out different than I had expected.

I zipped up my coat and tugged my hat low over my ears. The air had a definite bite to it.

Icicles hung from the rooftops. Not many cars drove by on the icy streets. The weather had predicted severe freezes this week which was unfortunate timing after the slightly warmer temperatures and meant it had frozen the layer of melting snow into practically an ice rink.

I glanced up the street in the direction of the resort property.

Luckily, my job in Long Pine was going to be easy. I would simply be managing, making sure everything went right. They had a great GIS technician and the surveying crew of two had experience, and they would be the ones doing the actual work. After my meeting with them, they seemed knowledgeable enough that I hoped my job would simply be advisory.

CJ and Eric waved goodbye and walked in the direction of their parked cars. As Colorado natives, they didn't have the same issues I did when driving in the snow and ice. I had taken the local overpriced taxi to the diner but decided to walk home. The taxi had taken almost as long as walking because of the ice on the road. With it only being a ten-minute walk to where we would begin our work, I planned on doing just that when we started the job.

I couldn't believe anyone would want to drive in this much ice.

I walked down the sidewalk, headed for the cabin. The hot tub on the back deck was calling my name. Technically, today was the last day I was supposed to wear the boot—full time. I would still have to wear it if I felt too much of a strain. It would take me a while to gain back full mobility, but it was going to feel great taking my boot off sometimes.

My phone chimed.

Page: I have a friend coming into town, and we're staying at my tiny house right now. Can she stay at your apartment?

I had no clue what state I'd left my apartment in.

I texted back.

Mack: When?

Page: Next weekend.

Mack: Sure.

Dang. Now I was going to have to hire a cleaning company to go in and clean up the place before her friend came to stay.

With a heavy sigh, I glanced across the street at the public library. A wide set of concrete stairs led up to a carved, wooden double door. The single-story building looked like something out of one of those Hallmark movies my mom liked to watch.

The window to the library offered me the perfect view of none other than Kimber leaning against the counter chatting with whom I assumed was the librarian.

Kimber's hands were flying through the air, and there was a bright smile on her face. The librarian was young and seemed subdued compared to Kimber. Then again, everyone seemed subdued compared to Kimber, but the woman had a contented smile on her face as Kimber spoke with her.

"Are you lost?" Another pedestrian asked me as they were about to walk across the cross walk.

"Er, no?" I answered. *I like to stand here and stare at my sexy roommate through windows.* That would probably land me a little talk with the local

sheriff, so I kept my mouth shut.

She looked at me suspiciously. Standing still on the street while staring at the library did seem like some strange behavior. "I was wondering if the library gave out temporary cards. I'm in town for a vacation."

"I'm sure they do." The woman nodded at my halfway-reasonable explanation. "It was on the voting commission recently. I do believe it passed."

"Thank you." I told her.

And now I knew. It would be the perfect reason to go into the library. Was I getting obsessed with my vacation housemate? Yes, I was. I missed her and it had only been a couple hours.

If anyone asked, I was in the library to pick up a bestseller. Too bad I wasn't much of a reader. I wouldn't know a bestseller if it hit me in the forehead. The last book I read was when Kylie made me buddy read some vampire books with her. I hadn't enjoyed them. But it had made my cousin's week that I'd been willing to read them with her. That had been about four years ago.

I walked across the street, careful to not move too quickly. It had frozen over a light dusting of snow, and I wouldn't have been surprised if someone could have ice skated down the road...or busted their rump and rolled down it like a snowball.

As I reached the other side of the road, the front door to the library opened and Kimber stepped out.

I panicked. If I went into the library now, it would be pointless.

She was busy talking to someone over her shoulder—which meant she was not paying attention to where she was going. She threw her head back and laughed at something the other person had said as she walked forward. She was too far away for me to remind her to watch her step.

I still couldn't see who she was talking to.

She took a step forward, still not paying attention. That was when she hit the top step of the concrete stairs...and the ice hiding underneath it.

Her feet flew out from under her.

I watched in horror as her body lifted into the air before slamming back down onto the top step.

She didn't stop there.

She bounced and slid down all seven concrete steps until she came to a stop on the concrete sidewalk. Screams, shrieks, and swear words swirled in

the air and I wasn't sure what was coming from whom.

Even though she landed on the sidewalk on her butt, she leaned backward and lay flat, groaning loudly and yelling a few choice words.

Those were definitely coming from her. It was the first glimmer of hope I'd experienced in the last two seconds.

Might as well have been two years, watching her fall and not being able to do anything about it.

I realized that whoever had been screaming wasn't Kimber, though. The screamer stepped out onto the porch, staring with a horrified look on her face. I probably had a matching look on my own face. Frozen concrete steps were not forgiving. The screamer turned out to be the young librarian I'd seen Kimber talking to through the window and she was standing there pointing at Kimber with a shaking finger.

She didn't seem to be much help. I hurried over as quickly as I could while still maintaining my balance on the frosty sidewalk.

"Kimber!" I called, trying to keep the panic out of my own voice. I wouldn't be much help to her if I freaked out.

But I was freaking out. She fell down a flight of concrete stairs. Instead of having the decency to only land once, she landed seven times. Probably resulting in multiple broken bones.

It felt like it took me ages to get to her side. And kneeling down was an experience as I tried not to bump her with my boot.

"Kimber, can you hear me?"

She groaned. I wasn't sure if that was an agreement or involuntary.

I took a deep breath and tried to organize my thoughts as I demanded again, "Kimber, I need you to answer me."

She groaned again as she shifted. My instinct was to lift her head off the icy sidewalk, but my emergency first aid training reminded me I didn't want to move her head in case she had sustained a neck injury.

"If you don't answer me, I'm going to call 911."

My hands shook as I carefully patted her legs looking for a break.

"I'm fine," she wheezed. "Only call 911 if they have good-looking firefighters."

I let out a happy sigh. She was going to be okay, just bruised and battered. She finally opened her eyes and I stared into those light green orbs that stared back at me.

"Elsie, is the paramedic crew good-looking?"

There was a time growing up, that my cousin Jenny routinely asked the same question over and over again. We finally figured out that it was something she asked when she didn't want to do something. It was a shield to protect her from doing things she didn't want to. She needed to eat her dinner? Well, Jenny would pull out the question, "would you love me if I turned into an alligator?" Of course you would, so why would you bother with something petty like asking her to eat her vegetables.

The distraction technique wasn't new, and Kimber wasn't the first person to use it.

A shaky voice answered Kimber, "No. My dad's the youngest on the crew."

I fought the urge to laugh when Kimber swore. "I never get the lucky breaks," she lamented.

She sat up and stared at me.

"Mack! I didn't realize it was you threatening to call 911."

"Well, thanks for hurting my feelings."

"Of course, anytime. But I'm not sure how?" She grimaced as she pressed a hand to her back.

"You didn't even recognize my voice." I was so thrilled to see her sitting up. Now I could be offended that she didn't even realize I was there.

"You were yelling, and I'd made a record-breaking exit from the library, so I was rather preoccupied dealing with getting the wind knocked out of me."

"Good point." The image of her falling down those stairs would be forever imprinted in my mind.

She started to stand. I grabbed her arms and steadied her. She cried out as she made it to her feet.

I shouldn't have let her stand. She was broken. "That's it, I'm calling the paramedics."

"Don't you dare!" She clung to the front of my jacket. "I don't like needles."

"Then I'm taking you to urgent care. We have to make sure you didn't break something."

Her eyes narrowed and her gloved hands reached up to squeeze my cheeks together. "No needles."

Shaking my head, I wrapped my arm behind her back and grabbed her behind her knees, lifting her into my arms. "No needles. I'll be there with you

the whole time if you'd like."

She nodded haltingly. "Pinky promise?"

"Yes, pinky promise."

"But our pinkies haven't promised." She argued as I adjusted my hold on her.

"They'll make their promise when we get inside a warm building." I wasn't going to let her stall the trip to urgent care any longer.

"Okay. I'll remind you," she told me as she patted my shoulders.

"I know you will."

The librarian hurried down the steps. "I'll show you where the urgent care is!"

Kimber laid her head down on my shoulder and I limped us both around the corner following the young woman who was running ahead of us.

If it had been under any other circumstance, I would have enjoyed having her in my arms, but the thought of her having shattered a bone chased away any happy thoughts.

Chapter Nine

KIMBER

"*I*'m going to carry you home," Mack stated as I stepped into the waiting room. He looked as though he'd been rehearsing that long speech the whole time he waited for me to finish with the doctor.

The sterile room held about fifteen chairs. Only four of them were filled, and I felt as though I stood before judges. They seemed to be studying me to gauge my level of recovery from the urgent care doctor. I smiled tentatively and the four waiting patients visibly relaxed, leaning back in their seats. If I could come out smiling, there was hope for them.

Elsie had returned to the library when I headed back to be seen by the doctor. I ignored Mack for a moment and texted her to let her know everything went okay, and that I was just going to need to spend some time at the local chiropractor's office to make everything right again.

I felt the warmth radiating from Mack towards me. He was hovering like a mother bird.

His hands were busy fussing over me. Straightening my jacket, pulling my hat from my coat pocket and settling it on my head. His fingers slipped under the edge of the stocking cap and tugged it tight over my ears.

I liked it, and I wasn't ashamed to admit it.

His fussing made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Just call me a fuzzy caterpillar.

"No, you're not. I'm perfectly fine," I told him. "There's no reason for you to carry me...you already have a hurt foot. If anything, I should be carrying you!"

"Nonsense. What did the doctor say?" he asked.

"He gave me some pain relievers and muscle relaxers to help with the

pain. Apparently, this is a common thing here in Long Pine. A lot of us out-of-towners aren't used to the ice. And cracked tail bones aren't abnormal. They even gave me this handy little pillow to sit on at home." I lifted the donut-shaped pillow that I had my arm stuck through. I tried to smile, but I felt like I was on display standing there in the waiting room looking like an out-of-towner.

And although I was one, I didn't like the fishbowl setting.

Mack still looked serious. "You could've cracked your head," he scolded. "You're lucky the only thing you cracked was your tailbone."

"I know." I lifted the donut pillow and hooked it over my shoulder like I was carrying a big fat purse—which I also had hooked over my other. I hadn't even noticed that Elsie had scooped it up for me when Mack insisted on carrying me to urgent care. She'd passed it to me when the desk clerk had asked for insurance information.

"Well, I'm going to head home and test out this fancy contraption," I told him.

"Then let me call for a taxi," Mack said.

"It's not that far," I reminded him.

"It's far enough." He raised his eyebrows and glared at me.

I stepped outside with Mack following right behind me practically chirping with worry, just like the mother bird I pictured him being.

"If you're not going to let me call a taxi, then I'm going to carry you. "

"Don't be ridiculous. We'll walk together. It doesn't hurt me too much to walk. It's more of the change in pressure on my tailbone that hurts. Like when I sit down or stand up, but as long as I walk slowly then I should be okay. Are you going to be okay to walk home?" I asked. "You're the one who has the hurt leg. That seems a little bit more important for walking than a butt."

"I'm fine as long as I don't overextend it. Why don't you let me carry your big purse and that pillow for you?"

I shook my head, and was about to utter a protest, but he simply took the purse and the pillow out of my arms.

"I'll worry less if you let me carry something, at least."

"Okay." Before I knew what had happened, he pulled my hand close and latched on. He led the way down the sidewalk back toward our cabin. It was a nice feeling holding his hand. Even if it was through a pair of gloves.

And even though he was injured himself? I sort of felt like he would keep anything from happening to me again. His firm grip gave me something

steady to lean on. Because even though I wouldn't admit it, I felt a little unsteady on my feet after that fall.

The last time I'd injured myself, I'd taken a dare from my sister to swing across the monkey bars one handed...I'd been eight. It ended with my arm in a cast. I'd gained a nice sense of self-preservation and fear of heights from the experience.

"So, tell me something about yourself...were you a daredevil as a child? Were urgent care trips a common thing during your growing up?" I asked, not liking the silence between us as we walked home. I was getting too obsessed with the feeling of his hand in mine. I needed something to distract me. That muscle relaxant was working in all the wrong places.

"No," he answered me as he adjusted his hold on my hand. "I wasn't."

"I find that hard to believe," I answered with a smile.

He grinned. "I didn't like pain even as a child." I laughed as he continued. "I still am that way as an adult. Doesn't have anything to do with the adrenaline rush for me. It's the hitting the ground after the fact that I worry about."

"There's something about immense pain that's a great deterrent for me, too," I agreed.

"What about you? Did you give your parents gray hair as a child?" he asked me.

I thought about it for a moment before I answered him. "My parents couldn't even convince me to play soccer. Getting kicked in the shin or head-butting a ball did not sound like fun to me. They tried to convince me to play softball instead, but I watched a friend of mine get her nose broken and decided that wasn't for me either. I'm afraid that any time that I spent in the ER was completely accident related. I still swear there was butter on the monkey bars." That muscle relaxer the doctor gave me seemed to be affecting my tongue, now. I couldn't stop it.

"Sounds like there's a story there..." he waited for a response, but I wasn't going to give it to him.

"Did you do any sports as a child?" I asked, redirecting the topic back to him.

"The usual. Nothing crazy. I mainly played football. "

"Really?" I asked. "I bet you were amazing. I can't believe how good your balance is even with a healing foot."

"I was halfway decent," he said as he wobbled a hand back and forth in

the so-so gesture. "There were lots of people better at it than me. But it was fun."

"Did you play all through high school?" I asked.

"Yeah, I did."

"Did you play in college?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Did you go to LSU?" I gestured to his sweatshirt peeking out from his open snow coat.

"Yeah, I did."

"Aren't you a fountain of information and conversation?" I commented dryly as I glanced up at him. I almost slipped on the sidewalk from not paying attention. His hand tightened around mine. Holding me upright, his cheeks were flushed, and his eyes locked on mine. I let the topic of football go but made a mental note to see what I could find out about Mack's glory days on the hundred-yard field.

When we got back to the house, I headed straight for the kitchen.

I was starving. Who knew that falling on my butt could make me so hungry?

It felt like it'd been about ten hours since I'd eaten, though. I glanced at the clock...geez, it had only been two hours since I last ate. Maybe I had low blood sugar from the impact.

I opened the fridge and pulled out my stash of candy bars and pulled the freezer open to yank out a container of ice cream.

"Do you want any of this?" I asked Mack. He shook his head and set my purse down on the counter.

"Do you want to sit in the living room or in here at the bar?" he asked me.

"I'll sit in here. The donut pillow will probably work great on the barstool."

He muttered something under his breath that I couldn't quite understand, but I didn't think it was something flattering. Probably about me. He set the donut pillow on the barstool and pulled the chair out for me.

"You need to take care of yourself. If you would just sit on the couch in the living room, I'll bring you whatever you need."

His ringing phone interrupted his lecture, and he pulled it out of his pocket, glancing at me like he wasn't sure if he should answer it and leave me to my own devices.

"Go ahead, I'll just be here eating my weight in Snickers and ice cream."

He smiled and lifted the phone to his ear.

"Hey, Jenny, what can I do for you?" He walked out of the room, and I could hear his heavy footsteps in the hall heading toward the master suite. I'd seen the name show up on his phone the first day he was here. I still didn't know who it was, and it bothered me how much brain space it was taking up, trying to figure it out.

I was beginning to wonder if he was someone's personal assistant, or maybe some hotshot corporate person. He was on his phone quite a bit. Someone always seemed to need him. He said he was here for work things, but he never explained what that was. It seemed a little strange that he hadn't brought up the subject himself. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten to ask him about his work. I didn't even know what he did for a living.

He hadn't volunteered that information, and I hadn't bothered prying yet. Maybe he was just self-conscious about his job.

I sat down on my donut pillow slowly. Even the pressure of sitting down on the soft pillow sent a shooting pain through my tailbone to my lower back. I was going to be regretting my accident for quite some time. The pain slowly subsided, and I took a big bite of ice cream to distract myself from it. Ice cream fixes everything, after all.

I glanced around and realized Mack was still out of the room, so I pulled my phone out and searched Mack Boone. I don't know why I hadn't done that yet. The reporter in me was silently cringing at not jumping on that first thing...I'll blame it on his good looks that distracted me from the task at hand.

Searching 'Mack Boone' didn't produce very many results, then I remembered that I needed to search for his real name.

Matthias Boone. Louisiana.

That was when the search results started rolling in. LSU tight end.

With article after article about his prowess on the football field, I discovered that he was a modest man. He didn't just 'enjoy' football like he said. He took that sport and owned it.

After scouring the internet, I couldn't find a single scandalous story. Everything sang his praises. It was all good. Everyone loved him.

Which meant I was going to have to go deeper.

I'd have to text the authority on Mack Boone. My sister Courtney. Her crush had extended to her college years, and I imagine she still cyber-stalked him occasionally. If anyone would know about his past, it would be her.

Me: What do you know about Mack Boone's football career or basically about his life up until now? He says he wasn't a very good player, but I searched online and found out he was amazing.

Courtney texted me back quickly. I started to read her texts, but Mack came striding down the hall, muttering to himself and seemed to still be on the phone. I tucked my phone closer to my body, afraid that he might spot his name on the small screen all the way across the room.

Courtney: He was the wonder kid! Played all four years of college and ended up in the top ten pick in the NFL draft. He turned it down!

Me: What???? Why?

Courtney: Said he had other things he'd rather do! Can you believe that?

Me: Other things he'd rather do than make millions of dollars?

Courtney: I know they tried to follow up on the story, but he kept his answers vague and eventually stopped talking to the press altogether. I never could figure out why he turned it down. But I think it was around the time his sister passed away. He went silent on social media for a while after that.

"I've already taken care of it. You said Kylie's there helping you?" Mack's voice took on a worried tone as he sat down on one of the couches.

"You're not letting her lift anything are you? That's it, put her on the phone."

I scraped my bowl clean as he lectured Kylie, the cousin married to Lara Raglund's son, about lifting boxes while pregnant. My ears perked up when the subject changed to me.

"Yes, she's still staying with me."

I pointed at him, then pointed at myself. "No, you're staying with me," I whispered with my best scowl as I slowly stood up from the barstool.

He grinned and kept talking. "We're getting along fine. She likes to sit on a pillow and frequently wants to call 911 about the serial killer neighbors, but other than that she's pretty normal."

I picked up said donut pillow and hurled it at his head. He was laughing too hard to stop it, and it knocked the phone out of his hand.

"I am not crazy," I said as I picked up his phone and repeated that phrase into the speaker part as I passed the phone back to him and retrieved my pillow.

I walked past him and squinted out the window toward said neighbors.

The serial killer jammers were loading up their van. I nearly cheered when I saw the black cases being loaded into the back. No more eardrum torture! One of the aspiring but most-likely-destined-for-failure musicians glanced toward the window and I smiled and waved happily. He waved back, then headed up the sidewalk into their cabin once again. I'd never been so happy to wave someone off.

"What kind of meat do you want grilled?" Mack asked of the person on the phone.

I didn't hear the answer from the other end.

"Okay, I'll pick it up when I get home. You're planning the party for that Saturday?"

It was silent except for Mack's heavy sigh.

"Forty people, huh? Sounds great!" Mack's cheerful tone didn't match the look on his face.

I realized I was staring creepily at him. I had to quit. 'Desperate' wasn't a good look on anyone, especially me.

His eyes met mine.

Whoops. Caught.

I looked away and marched past him, around the back of the couch to a picture that hung on the wall almost directly behind his head. I pretended to straighten it.

Mack said goodbye to whoever he was talking to, and I forced myself to not turn around and demand who it was. He was making me out to sound like a crazy person...honestly, I was starting to believe him myself.

"Was that your boss?" I asked as he turned around and knelt on the couch, resting his arms on the back of it as he faced me. He still hadn't told me what he did.

"No it wasn't my boss. Get that frame straightened out?"

I ignored his question, along with the sparkle in his eye. "First draft football player?"

Mack groaned. "I should have known you wouldn't let that go."

"You acted like you barely knew what a football was!" I jabbed a finger into his chest. He wrapped a large hand around my wrist.

"It wasn't a big deal."

"It's a big deal. You were amazing. And you turned down an amazing deal."

His cheeks flushed and he glanced down.

"Was it because of your sister?"

"My family needed me more than I needed football," he spoke quietly.

That big lout had given up a career in football to take care of his grieving family all while grieving the loss of his sister himself.

And right then he looked incredibly uncomfortable talking about it.

I took pity on him. "I know exactly why you didn't want to tell me."

He eyed me warily. "You do?"

"You were afraid I'd turn into a rabid fan, weren't you? Afraid I'd just throw myself at all this?" I gestured at his body, and he caught my waving hand.

He grinned, tugging me closer until my thighs pressed against the back of the couch. "Maybe. But I might not mind so much."

My gaze fixated on his mouth. Now that I'd started joking down that road, I didn't mind traveling there.

They were full lips on a man. Almost as wide as mine. He had a slight shadow on his cheeks that hadn't been there yesterday. His shoulders tensed, and a soft smell of cologne hit my nose.

Cedar. Pine. Or Christmas tree.

I wasn't sure what it was, but it reminded me of a good-smelling mountain man. If I didn't know better, I would have said he tromped through tall forests before kneeling on this couch in front of me. A soft heat radiated from his body toward mine, luring me closer. His tan cheeks were ruddy from the cold windburn. His dark lashes swept down slowly as he studied me.

There were dark green specks accenting his green eyes.

His top teeth sank into his bottom lip. I stepped closer. Or maybe he tugged me. I didn't know, and I didn't care because the end result was the same.

I wanted to kiss him.

I was *going* to kiss him.

He growled and dragged me against his chest. I threw my arms around his neck and pressed my mouth against his.

He took my lips with his. They were his now. He owned them. This was no gentle exploration. No polite greeting of lips to one another as they decided if they should explore more of each other.

Mack's lips knew what they wanted.

They wanted me. *Me*. He saw me. He saw past the nosy, over-imaginative, accident-prone mess that I could be.

Mack explored. Took. Tasted. And those white teeth bit my bottom lip, tugging it between his as he sucked on it.

I gasped and held on, bracing one hand on his shoulder and the other on his hairline.

And then he was dragging me over the back of the couch. I was happy to go. He was welcome to take me anywhere. *Officer Mack-kisser reporting for duty, sir.*

He grunted as one of my knees hit him in the stomach. He leaned back to sit down, and I placed my knees on the cushion beside him. He folded both arms around my middle and pulled me as close as he could.

This was nice.

Really nice.

Amazing, actually.

I rested a hand against his chest, enjoying the beat of his heart beneath my palm. The heart of a kind man.

His hand ran down my back as his lips drew mine in.

His hand dipped lower, pressing my hips against his, as his tongue tangled with mine.

I gasped when he pulled back suddenly.

"I'm sorry." He muttered something else under his breath. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken it so far."

I blinked away the haze from my eyes as his words registered. I whispered, "I wasn't exactly putting the brakes on."

He paused, his face breaking into a grin. The sparkle in his eyes doing dangerous things to me.

I slowly pushed myself off his chest and stood up, realizing that the moment had passed.

"I could have hurt you. You just fell a couple of hours ago. Are you okay?" He asked, looking at me as though he were worried I would fall apart. I adjusted my shirt and pretended to fix my hair while trying to figure out how to excuse myself from the awkwardness of the moment.

"Kimber?"

"Yes?"

"I really like it when you don't put the brakes on."

I was in so much trouble.

Chapter Ten

KIMBER

The next morning I woke up early. Which was just wrong because it had taken me a couple hours to fall asleep.

My brain was too busy trying to figure out what that kiss meant that Mack and I shared. Was it an accidental kiss? *Whoops, didn't mean to kiss her but I did!* Or a fling kiss? *I wanted to kiss her, so I did, but it doesn't mean anything* kind of kiss. Or was it wrapped up in the moment? *She's attractive and I kissed her and I'm not sad about it.* Or did it mean he really liked me?

Luckily, I wasn't the one with an injured Achilles tendon, so when I woke up early, I piled on my snow gear and prepared to go for an early morning walk.

I knew Mack was in the living room before I saw him. I could hear him snoring, and the glass door was rattling. Okay, it wasn't that bad, but for someone like me who liked to sleep in quiet, I couldn't imagine sharing a room with this guy. You'd never sleep again.

You'd think that would be enough of a deterrent for me. But noooo. He had me wrapped around his finger, even if he didn't know it. I liked him. I mean I really, really, liked him, and this was the best working vacation I'd ever been on because of him.

Which now that I thought about it, he was becoming a distraction from the work part of my vacation. Time that I'd planned on using to interview people about the resort coming in had been reallocated to spending time with Mack.

Today. I'd get serious about writing the article today.

After my walk.

I pulled open the sliding door.

"Hey," a deep gravelly voice said behind me.

I glanced back.

Mack sat up on the couch, looking around and rubbing a hand over his sleepy face. His hair stood out to the side, and it was adorable. "Where you going?"

"I thought I'd go for a short walk," I whispered, though I didn't know why. We were both awake now.

"You couldn't sleep either?"

Either? What did he think he was doing when I walked down here? He sure wasn't busy tossing and turning like I'd been.

"No."

He smiled then. A droopy, happy grin. He *knew* why I couldn't sleep. "Be careful, okay?"

I smiled. "Okay."

"I'll be here if you need me."

With a quick wave, I stepped outside into the muted, snow covered winter wonderland.

The lake looked especially dark with the moonlight barely reflecting off it. The sun hadn't crested the mountain ridge yet, meaning it was the darkest few moments of the day.

I followed the lighted path down to the dock and sat there until the sun made its grand entrance.

I had some soul searching to do, both about Mack and myself.

I was going to be honest with him and tell him how I felt about him. Transparency was the best policy was my new personal mantra. And there was no better time to start than now.

Not to mention I'd be able to focus more on digging up dark secrets on the incoming resort if I weren't preoccupied playing the he-like-me-he-likes-me-not game.



My nose was a popsicle, but I was hopeful by the time I made it back to the cabin. Mack didn't seem like someone to accidentally kiss someone unless he wanted more—or at least liked the person he was kissing. I pulled open the

sliding door and stepped inside to a blast of heat. The fifty-degree difference made it feel like I was stepping straight into a furnace.

I pulled off my boots and carried them across the living room to the front door and dropped them onto the boot tray that caught the melting snow.

"Hi, yes, I told the other surveyors to meet me at the locked gate at seven tomorrow morning."

Mack's voice echoed down the hall from where he stood in the laundry room. He must still be on the phone. I didn't want to interrupt him by taking my dirty laundry in there, so I turned back to the front door to hang up my wet jacket. I could still hear him talking and would wait until he was done with the call he was on before barging in there to wash a load of my clothes.

My reasons had everything to do with laundry and nothing with eavesdropping.

"Yes, I think it will be fairly quick. We should be able to be finished within a week or two. It depends on the weather, of course. And if they are wanting to punch in that back road right away. The service road will take more time, though."

I wondered why he was talking about punching in a road. And a service road? The locked gate? He must be talking about something back home. But he said that the *other* surveyors were meeting him tomorrow morning, so that can't be right. Did that mean he was a surveyor?

Mack told me he was going to be here in Long Pine for the next few weeks on work. Maybe now would be a good time to find out what he did for work. Was he in construction? The guy could be an asphalt ripper with his bare hands, no machine required. I wondered which roads he was talking about. Maybe he was adding a new service road to the lake. I'd seen a locked gate close to the boat dock on my walk just now.

"Yeah, some of the locals aren't too thrilled about the resort. But several I've met are giving it their full support. They should be cooperative about the equipment rolling through town. Just make sure you send the flagging crew. There's only one bridge across the river. And it's only thirty ton. We're going to need to bring that up. They didn't mention that."

The resort.

He was talking about the road they would have to build to put in the resort.

The resort he knew that I was against.

Mack had some explaining to do.

Like what his connection to the resort was. Why he was talking about "roads" and "resort" in the same conversation. A sinking feeling hit me. He had to be working for or with the resort in some capacity.

I turned around and walked into the kitchen. I opened the cupboard and pulled out a packet of hot chocolate mix. I didn't want to take the time to boil hot water, so I simply put a mug in the microwave. Just as the microwave dinged, Mack walked into the kitchen. He was no longer on the phone.

He gave a little jerk of surprise to see me standing there. "I thought you were still out walking around the lake."

I pulled the mug out of the microwave and picked up my spoon to stir in the cocoa. "Did you? Bizarre. Guess that's why you continued the call you were just on...because you thought I wasn't here."

The frostbite in my tone must have been catching, because he sighed, resting his hand against the countertop. "You have an eavesdropping problem."

"It's not my fault you always have these conversations in places where I can hear. If you didn't want people to listen you should go somewhere private," I snapped. "Please tell me I misheard that phone call."

He shook his head slowly. Two words left his mouth slowly that I wished I didn't have to hear. "You didn't. I'm a surveyor for Connor & Brock Excavating. They've won the bid for the Mountain Pine resort."

My breath caught as I recalled talking about the resort and how much damage it was going to do to the small economy. "So all this time you were listening to my rantings about that resort and you're here to build it?"

"It's not like that—"

"Then what is it like, Mack? Because it feels like you were playing me. That whole time I was talking about plans to prevent the resort from destroying the small town, and here you were listening to me, never saying a word. Sleeping—under the same roof. Oh no. I've been under the same roof with the enemy!" I took a sip of my hot cocoa, and it burnt my tongue. Just perfect. Absolutely perfect.

I'd trusted him.

No, even worse. I trusted the first thing I'd seen. I'd repeated the past. I was the fool who rushed in.

I'd done it before and messed up big time.

I was back to my old habits it seemed. Except this time, I was going to fight back. I would own my mistakes, and I would make a difference.

"Let me get this straight." Because I refused to fight on uneven ground. "You flew to Colorado to build a big fancy resort in a small town that doesn't want or need one?"

"I'm the surveyor. That's all. It's not my call to let a resort come into town or not. That's not my decision. I go where my boss sends me."

"And you spend all that time listening to me and letting me talk about stopping it! You were using me. And I call myself a journalist. I should be ashamed of myself. But I'm not nearly as ashamed of me as I am of you!"

Mack slapped a hand against the counter. I hadn't seen him mad yet. This was a new Mack. Mack 2.0 had arrived. He growled, "That doesn't even make sense!"

I tried to think of explanation, but instead I blurted out, "You made me kiss you!"

"I did not make you do anything!" he thundered.

Okay, so now I could see where he would seem intimidating to some people. "Fine! You made me like it!"

"Right. Of course," he agreed quickly. "Now I see what a terrible person I am. Next time I kiss you, I'll try to make sure you don't like it. No promises, though."

I opened my mouth to respond, but I couldn't come up with anything quick enough. With a frustrated growl, I turned and stomped upstairs. I couldn't bear to look at his smug face a minute longer.

Chapter Eleven

KIMBER

I couldn't believe that I trusted him.

I thought that he was one of the good guys. One of the last few men who made you feel safe, whom you could trust implicitly, cast all your cares upon. Only I'd been wrong. Again. Taking things at face value was coming back to bite me in the rear.

He was a snake in the grass.

No. He was lower than that. He was a snake in a hole underneath the grass.

The last time I'd been wrong about someone it very nearly destroyed their life. But for the grace of God, it didn't happen that way.

My knitting needles clanked together as I thought about what led me here to this cabin: the reason I'd taken a contract reporting job.

I had completely misjudged a situation, then written an article about it and it was printed in our newspaper. The article had sold a lot of newspapers and digital subscriptions.

It was too bad it was all a lie. I thought I had the juicy, small-town scoop. I'd been so excited to expose corruption and lies.

I had exposed it all right.

My own corruption. My own haste to believe the worst in people.

Though the situation was different this time, I'd been so quick to trust that I'd allowed Mack in to hurt the small community. I should force him to leave.

Click click click.

Knit, purl, knit, purl.

At this rate, the scarf I was working on was going to be long enough to warm the whole town. If I couldn't work out a problem while knitting, then it

could never be solved.

Click click click.

I had been at the cabin first.

He should be the one to leave now that we were fighting. If I made him commute, maybe it would take longer to get the resort built.

But I had given him my word that I wouldn't kick him out, that we would be able to share the cabin happily together. Too bad I'd let the fact that he was easy on the eyes influence my better judgment. What a sneaky weasel he was, using his looks to get his way and make me forget everything that was important to me.

But I could do something about it. I wasn't helpless.

Clickety clack, click clack.

I could fix this. I could make a difference in someone's life. Make things right.

I was learning to own up to my mistakes.

It was settled.

I set the knitting needles and yarn down. Climbing off the giant king bed, I solemnly walked to the dresser where my laptop rested on top.

I owned up to my mistakes. I would own up to my mistakes.

I repeated my mantra over and over as I slowly carried the laptop back to the bed. I sat down and logged into my email again. I needed to fix this—as much as it could be fixed. A written apology was way past due, and I'd kept putting it off...but no more.

It was time.

I stretched my fingers and began typing the body of an email I should have started much sooner.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Landry,

The easiest part to write. Beginning the next sentence was much harder, but with each word I wrote it became easier and easier, until the last half of the email flowed from the sincerity of my heart.

Hitting send both scared me yet relieved me. I couldn't control if they accepted my apology or not. But I knew I was sincere in asking for their

forgiveness for using their lives to sell newspapers.

And now that I'd finally sent the email that had been eating away at me, it was time to do something about the other problem I'd exacerbated.

I hurried downstairs past Mack, who was wearing board shorts and heading in the direction of the hot tub. His bare chest rippled—full on rippled, and not the way my thighs rippled when I ran—as he pulled open the sliding door.

"Care to join me?" he called as I hurried to the front door...trying not to count his multitude of abs, knowing I needed to remain focused and angry at him.

Ignoring him, I pulled on my coat, hat, and boots, then turned toward the door, not giving him a second glance as I headed into town.

Where I stomped the entire way to the library.

I clung to the railing as I climbed the slippery concrete steps. Didn't want a redo of my spill the other day...didn't think my tailbone could take a round two.

"I messed up big time," I announced once I made it inside the warm building.

Elsie looked up at me from her desk, a questioning look on her face.

"Mack's here to put in the resort."

Elsie's face contorted before she groaned and said, "No way!"

It was the first time she looked upset...and I think it was with me. But I could understand her distrust, especially after finding out that my vacation roommate was helping to bring in the resort I'd badmouthed so much.

"I didn't know, I promise you," I wailed. We'd built a fairly close friendship over the short few days I've been here.

"I thought when you said he was here for work, you meant virtual work," Elsie answered. I'd told her all about how my quiet vacation had taken a turn—for the better. Or at least, that's what I'd thought.

"I didn't know people traveled for actual work anymore." It was a lame excuse as far as excuses went. *I had travelled for work.*

I was a reporter for crying out loud. I should've investigated more. This was how I made that first big mistake—misplaced trust and a lack of investigation. I definitely had enough curiosity that would kill the cat, but I lacked the follow up because those abs of his bewitched me.

"It's really happening. The resort's coming whether we like it or not." The hopelessness in her voice was enough to make a hardened criminal cry.

"Elsie, I'm not going to let this go. I messed up. I've been telling him how I'm going to write the opinion article and hopefully expose the resort. I welcomed him with open arms, talking about the resort not so nicely, and he's been listening and nodding like he agreed. And all along he's been doing whatever it takes to keep his job." My cheeks burned as I remembered our kiss. I'd opened more than my arms on that one. "I'm going to fix it," I promised. "I know you love your town the way it is, and I promise I'll help save it. That's why Lara hired me to come look into things."

Elsie sighed. "Kimber, I believe you. But I don't blame you for this either, especially since you didn't know. You told me about how you accidentally ended up in the cabin together. You didn't bring him here on purpose. You're as much of a victim here as the rest of us."

I nodded profusely. "You're right. I even asked about his work, and he somehow avoided telling me what he was really doing here. Although maybe I gave off the impression that I was very anti-resortish. I mean, I am here to write an article exposing the corruption behind it. That could be why he was reluctant to tell me what he's really doing," I admitted. "While I understand it's his job, he needs to understand that big money makes me so mad! Corruption has no place in a small town."

"Me too," Elsie agreed. "I wish there was something we could do. It's going to destroy this town." She closed a book she'd been reading and set it on the counter. It looked like a thriller.

"I should just go home," I thought out loud.

"No! Don't do that! You're my only chance to get this thing stopped."

Elsie had been very vocal about not wanting a resort to come in and change the landscape and feel of her hometown. If I went home, I'd not only be letting Lara down, but Elsie as well.

"It's only an opinion article. That's the only space Lara could get approved," I reminded her.

"But a well written opinion piece? I think it could help bring people's attention to what could happen to our small town. Maybe even get the city council to withhold the permits."

I sighed and leaned forward resting my arms on top of her desk.

"You know, we could do something *else* about it," I said slowly.

Elsie's eyes sparkled as she looked at me. "I was hoping you'd say something like that."

"I have a few ideas," I whispered.

"Then, let's get to work." She turned the sign around on her desk that read 'librarian out to lunch.' Then she stood up, tightened her ponytail, and adjusted her glasses. "We've got a town to save."

Chapter Twelve

MACK

I made it into the kitchen before Kimber did. No big surprise. It was six AM, and she didn't have to be the first one at work on a survey crew. She was also still avoiding me which was frustrating. I was sure I could explain everything if she just let me. I didn't like knowing that she had a poor opinion of me. I cared too much what she thought.

I was desperate for her to like me.

I hadn't heard any movement upstairs since the wee hours of the morning. I halfway wondered if she packed her things and left in the middle of the night. I'd heard the stairs creaking close to one in the morning. I simply assumed she was still too mad to sleep, but maybe she'd been mad enough to leave.

That would be unfortunate. I liked her company. I liked *her*.

Opening the fridge, I laughed. All the food had been shoved to the right side and some on the left. There was masking tape down the middle of the fridge, and little name cards labeling ownership of each side. The name on the right side of the fridge where the majority of the food was said 'Kimber'.

The name on the card on the left side of the fridge that was almost completely empty, read 'Mack'. Empty except for a jar of peanut butter and a few coke bottles. Even my beer was slid over to her side of the fridge.

So that's what she'd been doing in the middle of the night.

I shook my head, relieved that she hadn't left, and glanced through the contents on her side of the fridge where she had managed to stack all the food. Mine included. I grabbed a yogurt cup and shut the fridge.

She had stolen all my food. Or at least tried to. I couldn't wait to hear her explanation for something so petty. But I had an idea why she did it and it

involved the reasons I was here.

I heard a door open upstairs.

Hopefully, she would be in a little better mood this morning after rage sorting the fridge and wouldn't be as mad at me as she had been the night before. It was a little irrational on her part.

Sure, I could've told her why I was there. But it didn't really come up. I hadn't purposefully kept it a secret.

Besides, it wasn't like I was the one who decided to build the luxury resort. I was simply there to survey the roads. I didn't have a personal vendetta against anyone in town, wasn't trying to put anyone out of business, so I didn't see how she could hold that against me.

She was a reasonable person. Kind. Welcoming. Surely she wasn't the type to hold a grudge.

We could go back to the way things were. Where we enjoyed each other's company, and where I was working up the courage to ask her out and possibly continue whatever this was when we both got back home to Charlesville.

Another upstairs door slammed, shaking the big bay window overlooking the lake. Though the balcony was open, I couldn't see which door had slammed. She must be walking back and forth across the hall from her room to the bathroom, or vice versa.

I clenched my fists in anticipation. The knot in my stomach threatened to keep me from enjoying breakfast.

That was when inspiration struck. *I'd make her breakfast.* The proverbial olive branch. Literally. But without the olives. Or the branch.

It would be a toasted bagel peace offering.

I pulled open the bag of bagels and popped two down in the toaster.

Then I spotted Kimber walking down the hall toward the open balcony. She wore a dark green sweater that showed off both her shoulders. She was wearing a pair of yoga pants and a matching pair of green tennis shoes. Her hair was braided to the side, her makeup done.

And she looked angry even from downstairs. She jogged down the steps and marched into the kitchen, looking like a general heading into battle. I guess that made me the enemy.

"Good morning," I said, because that's what people do when they live in the same house and have an ounce of civility to them. She turned her head slowly toward me and glared, not bothering to respond. I took another bite of

yogurt, realizing that maybe I had misjudged her. Maybe she was the kind to hold a grudge.

I was more scared now than I had been watching that horror movie a couple of nights ago.

She walked past me and started preparing the Keurig to make a cup of coffee, mumbling something that sounded like "hostile hostel living," but I couldn't be sure. I knew she wasn't talking to me. That was apparent from the way her back was turned toward me, the anger radiating off of her. If someone could glare out of the back of their head, Kimber was somehow managing it.

"You can't be mad at me still?" I asked the rhetorical question as she rage-sorted the coffee mugs. I set the cup of yogurt down.

"Watch me." Pulling out a mug, she slid it into place, then slammed the lid down on the Keurig and hit start the coffee spluttered angrily as if to support her claim.

And just when I thought the conversation was finished, she continued.

"Crush any hopes and dreams yet this morning?" she asked as she marched over to the fridge and pulled out a yogurt cup that matched mine. I was the one who bought the yogurt; she had to know that even though it had been placed on her side of the fridge real estate. And I had a feeling it was a deliberate choice on her part.

The toaster chimed and I watched her warily as I pulled the hot bagels from the toaster. I set them on two plates as she narrowed her eyes at me.

"I'm a surveyor. I've never been considered a dream crusher before. I'm a dream builder." I rubbed a hand over the front of my face, afraid I'd start laughing at any moment and put myself in more hot water with her. But it was just too fun to see her this angry. I was glad I'd been wrong. It wasn't often people got angry at me. This was an entirely new experience.

I held out the bagel plate to her.

"Did you poison it? Steal it from a neighbor? Something shady like that?" She asked as she took it from me.

"I mugged someone in the grocery store parking lot for that bagel."

Her lips tightened together, and her jaw muscle twitched.

There was nothing worse than trying to fight with someone who was indomitably cheery. So, I smiled and pulled out some butter knives and peanut butter. I set my own bagel plate on the counter next to hers and set the jar of peanut butter between us.

"Please don't make things worse by defiling that bagel with peanut butter," she said in disgust as she searched her very crowded side of the fridge for some cream cheese.

I kept my eyes on her as I began slathering peanut butter on the bagel. "You mean this bagel?"

She slammed the container of cream cheese onto the counter and glowered at me.

I didn't bother hiding my laugh. No one was mad at me. No one. I was Mack. I was the problem solver and shoulder to cry on. I'd never crossed the line with anyone enough for them to get angry at me. So for it to finally happen—for someone to hold a petty grudge against me for things out of my control?

It was comical. For it to be Kimber who even while furious had absentmindedly set out an extra mug for me? Way too much fun. Her anger wasn't aimed to crush. It was meant as a statement.

She slammed the butterknife into the cream cheese and spread it on the bagel liberally.

Crumbs flew as she spread it unevenly on the second half.

I filled my knife with more peanut butter. Maintaining eye contact with her dagger-look, I finished making my other bagel half. The knife bumped against my opposite hand smearing peanut butter on my thumb.

Kimber spread another layer of cream cheese on her bagel. She looked as though she were prepping a house foundation.

I stuck my thumb in my mouth and sucked the peanut butter off.

Kimber's eyes widened and she dropped the knife. She picked up both pieces of bagel and took a big bite of one, crumbs flying as she tore a bite away with her teeth. A speck of cream cheese sat on her upper lip, and I fought the urge to stare at it. It sat there as a perfect reminder that I had been there before. Like a little red dot on my maps app. *Return to previous location?* Yes, please.

We stood there together, Kimber eating her bagel angrily, me eating my bagel...distractedly. When we both finished, we put away our topping choices and bumped elbows as we worked together to clean up the crumb mess.

A horrible dark thought crossed my mind. One that I didn't want to entertain for multiple reasons. "Does this mean you're so angry that you are heading home today?"

"Not on your life. I'm staying exactly as long as I'd planned to," she snapped. "Why do you ask?"

I rocked back on my heels, feeling incredibly relieved—and dare I say it, energized by her response.

She *needed* to stay. *I* needed her to stay. She was making me feel like Mack the human again.

"You seem a little out of sorts still. Not enough coffee?" I smirked as she marched past me into the living room. She grabbed her laptop off the coffee table on the way as she stormed back upstairs.

By the time she came back downstairs, I was putting my coat on about to start my workday.

She surprised me by coming to stand in the entryway with me and folded her arms across her chest.

"You won't change your mind about going to work today?" she asked quietly.

I blinked slowly and shook my head twice. Her request was so off the wall it almost made me smile. "It's my job."

"Then there's nothing else I have to say to you." She shrugged and her sweater fell a little lower, revealing more of her shoulder. She was definitely not making this easy on me.

But she wasn't demanding I quit. Wasn't asking me to do things her way instead.

"Did you want to kiss me goodbye before I head to work?" I asked as I leaned toward her, tapping my lips with my index finger. Trying to see if I could gauge her true feelings about that kiss we'd shared and the current turn of events.

She jerked backwards, but not before I witnessed her licking her lips.

Yeah, she wasn't nearly as mad at me as she was pretending to be.

This was going to be fun.

Chapter Thirteen

MACK

*A*fter leaving the cabin, I walked the five minutes into town where I would be meeting the other guys. I'd taken my boot off and I felt like a new man. I'd been practicing without it for a couple weeks now, so it wasn't my first time walking sans boot, but it would be my first full day without it. My leg felt free, light, and a little strange. I was sure I'd forgotten something at the house.

By the time I reached the edge of the resort property, I'd reminded myself five times that the only thing I'd "forgotten" was the walking boot.

I beat the rest of the crew by only four minutes. They'd shown up early for the first day of the job, so that was a good sign. After conferencing a bit about how we would like to proceed, we stood beside the locked gate reviewing our plans with the other two surveyors.

The main entrance to the future resort was going to be between the grocery store and the same urgent care that we'd been at a few days ago. The road would tie directly into Main Street and would be wide enough to bring eighteen wheelers through. The resort owners had bought the small empty lot between the store and urgent care, rather than rely on the easement rights. In doing so, they had already made a statement.

With an easement, they had the legal right to force the grocery store to allow them to drive on their property. Rather than do that, the resort had bought connecting vacant lots to punch the road in. Though I didn't even know who owned the grocery store or the land it sat on, Theo Merrick, the owner of the resort was being careful to not encroach on the locals. Something that I would have explained to Kimber if she had given me a chance.

A gravel drive led to the top of the small hillside where they would be placing the resort. At the bottom of the drive, stood a barrier gate. There was no fence, simply a standalone gate that anyone could walk around, but prevented cars from driving onto the property.

Both my surveyors, CJ and Eric, were unloading their gear from their work truck already. We were off to a good start.

As I was about to unlock the gate, voices reached my ears. One very familiar one in particular. I turned around to see Kimber walking up the road toward us and she held a sign behind her. When she noticed that my eyes were on her, she swung the sign around and held it in front of her. It read in giant handwritten letters: **Big Money, No Heart.**

A familiar young woman was also walking behind her.

A couple who looked like they were in their fifties who I hadn't met before trailed after them. They each held signs. One had the word "Go" written on it. The other said "Away."

Short and to the point. I could appreciate brevity.

They seemed to be of the same opinion as Kimber about the resort. Although, I still didn't know why she was so concerned about it since she didn't live here. She didn't know the dynamic or what a resort like this would do for the local economy. She knew that the resort had already gotten the approval from the town council. They had to be issued the necessary permits before any construction or surveying was started. I don't know what she hoped to accomplish by this.

"I'll be right back," I told the two men.

I stomped forward to the edge of the gravel. The toe of my boots touched the pavement.

Kimber walked toward me. She stopped two feet in front of me. I was sure if I'd pulled out a measuring tape it would have read twenty-four inches right on the mark.

She glared at me, some wisps of blonde hair swirling around her face from underneath her snow cap. The cold made her cheeks red. Or maybe it was the anger. Maybe a potent combination of both.

She snapped her sign up between us, a very on the nose physical reminder that she was angry with me.

"So that's what all the thumping was last night. I didn't know using a marker could be so loud," I commented.

Her top lip quirked up in something that could only be described as a

snarl.

"You're taking everything from us."

"You don't even live here. But if you ever audition for a Broadway play, make sure you apply for the tragic heroine."

"Them," she corrected herself, ignoring my Broadway suggestion. "You're taking everything from them."

She pointed at the three locals with her elbow. I finally realized where I recognized the young woman from...she was the librarian Kimber was talking to when she cracked her tailbone. Elsie, I think her name was. I'd been distracted that day.

"Remind me how I'm ruining their lives?"

"You're bringing in tourists!"

"You mean tourists like you or me?" I asked as I folded my arms across my chest.

"We're different!" She argued. "Or at least, I am."

"Right. You came here to vacation in this cute little town. And look for problems. Maybe even cause some problems to get your article written." Her eyes narrowed dangerously, but I continued, "That's completely different than what the other visitors will be doing. They'll probably all drive bulldozers through the middle of town, flattening all the business and houses into rubble."

Kimber took a step forward and pointed a finger at me, but in doing so, she almost dropped her sign. I caught it one hand and her in the other, making sure she had a solid standing before I let go of her arm.

"Watch out for that."

"Hey, Mack, can I have the key? CJ and I will open up the gate," Eric, one of the other surveyors, asked from behind me.

"Here, can you hold this for a minute?" I handed her the protest sign back. I could have sworn she had a ghost of a smile on her face as I pulled the keys from my pocket and tossed them over my shoulder to Jack.

"Be careful where you walk while you protest. I have to get back to work and won't be able to catch you if you slip again."

"I'll be fine, thanks," she answered drily.

"Are you going to be warm enough out here this morning?" I adjusted her hat to cover her ears. She didn't swat my hands away, she simply looked confused.

"Why aren't you mad at me?"

"I like to save my anger for a good reason. And honestly, you're too much fun to see mad." I chucked her under her chin and headed back to work.

Or at least, I tried to.

CJ was not unlocking the gate with Jack like I thought he was about to do. He was busy signing the petition that Elsie was holding. And leaning way too close. I didn't know Elsie beyond what Kimber had told me about her, but she looked uncomfortable with CJ's overt attention.

"CJ!" I barked.

He jumped back, and Elsie's shoulders relaxed back to normal height. She'd make a horrible poker player.

"Did you unlock the gate yet?" I asked.

"Er, no."

"Well, get to it."

His face hardened as he glanced from Elsie to me, then he turned to do what I said. I was the boss, at least for now.

Elsie surprised me by mouthing 'thank you' when CJ turned his back to her, I dipped my head toward her in acknowledgement. I knew what jerks were like. Just because Elsie was picketing didn't mean I'd let a guy on the crew make her feel uncomfortable.

I wasn't the complete savage that Kimber was making me out to be, after all.

Chapter Fourteen

KIMBER

"Our day of picketing was very successful," I told Elsie. It had successfully cemented how confused I was about Mack, at least.

We stood in the lobby of the library, evaluating our first day of Operation Stop-a-corrupt-resort. I could feel my cheeks growing red as we were still bundled up in our snow gear but standing inside the warm building. I think I was sweating underneath all my layers, but kept my arms firmly pinned to my sides. I didn't want to confirm that belief.

"How many signatures did we get on the petition?" I asked as I recalled Mack coming to Elsie's rescue, when one of the crew was pushing her personal boundaries. It had been the sweetest thing to see Mack step in like that. And how he fussed over me in the cold.

No, Kimber. You're falling for the lie again. Remember what's underneath the surface. *Deceiver*.

Elsie adjusted her glasses and looked at the paper.

"We have forty-three signatures already," she said.

"That's great news!" I buttoned the top button of my jacket and adjusted my scarf. It was cold now that I wasn't pacing back and forth and chanting. Picketing wasn't glorious work, but it seemed to be a tried-and-true way of gaining attention for just causes. It didn't hurt that we were close to the grocery store parking lot either. Lots of traffic coming in and out. It wasn't hard to run after people asking for a signature.

"Do you know what we need?" I asked her.

"No, what do we need?" she mimicked. She looked a little wary. She'd already admitted she hated the outdoors. She told me she wished there was a more effective way to gain petition signatures than spending it outside in the

cold. I had a feeling she would like my next idea better.

"We need a car. Do you have one?"

Elsie shook her head. "My car is in the shop right now, and I live close enough to walk to work. What do we need a car for?"

"Going door to door and collecting signatures and handing out flyers. It'd be much easier if we could drive anywhere we needed to—and much warmer."

Elsie's eyes lit up. "I know just the thing."

I waited for her to elaborate.

She just stood there smiling at me.

"Okayyyyy, what's the thing?" I prompted her.

"There's a car rental in town. They charge tourists a crazy amount of money to rent a car, but if I go in with you, they'll give you the local discount."

"That's a great idea. But why don't you rent the car?"

She shook her head. "'They' won't rent to me. It's my uncle. I scratched the paint on his car when I was fifteen. He doesn't trust me behind the wheel. He hasn't ever since that incident."

"Then I'll rent the car." I lifted the satchel up to my shoulder, careful to tuck it under my elbow to keep any papers from falling out. Elsie picked up the signs and tucked the clipboard under her arm. "It's down the road a little bit. It's across the street from the school. He parks all the cars in the school parking lot."

I was careful as we walked to the car rental office. The ice was back. It had warmed up and began to melt yesterday and then dropped temperature again over night. I was really missing home. I think I preferred to *look* at the snow rather than *be* in the cold, yet another reason having a car would be nice.

Elsie stopped in front of a small, bungalow-style home. A sign hung above the porch: Henry's Car Rental.

"Uncle Hank should be somewhere around here," she said.

I glanced across the street and saw a line of cars in the parking lot at the high school. Those must've been his rentals.

They weren't brand new, but they weren't complete junkers either. They would be perfectly drivable.

I followed Elsie up the steps and waited as she knocked on the door.

That seemed strange. I'd never knocked on a place of business before.

"Wait, I thought you said this is the car rental place?"

"It is, but it's also his house." She shrugged as though it was the most normal thing.

And I thought I was from a small town...

The door opened, and a man with salt and pepper hair and a five o'clock shadow stood in the opening. He was tall and lean. Sharp eyes and a handsome face were not what I was expecting from someone who went by the title of 'Uncle Hank'. The smile on his face didn't belong on the face of someone who rented cars. I closed my slackened jaw when I realized this could be Uncle Hank's son. I had been jumping to conclusions, as my mom would say. Obviously this man was not a Hank.

"If it isn't hot rod!" he greeted Elsie, who rolled her eyes and stepped forward to hug him.

"Hello to you, too, Uncle Hank," she replied. *Not his son.*

He grinned and winked at me over her shoulder—but not in a creepy way, more in a compulsive habit way—and I could tell that he was fond of his niece, even if he didn't let her drive his cars. I waved my hand in a little greeting.

Elsie stepped back. "Uncle Hank, this is my friend Kimber, and she's needing to rent a car while she's here in town. I was hoping she could get the friends and family discount."

Uncle Hank rocked back on his heels and studied me.

"Well, which one is it? Do you want the friends' rate or the family rate?"

"Which one is cheaper?" I laughed.

Hank hooked a thumb into the front pocket of his faded jeans. "The friends' rate, of course."

"Then it's great to have a friend like you, Hank."

He chuckled, "Then come on in and I'll get you some keys."

Elsie nodded encouragingly and pulled me forward to follow them inside the small house. He walked over to his fridge, and I spied a rack of keys hanging on the front with magnets.

"Here, this one ought to do. It's got all-wheel drive."

"That sounds great." I'd always assumed that all cars were all-wheel drive, but I had a sneaking suspicion it had something more to do with the snow and was a regional thing...like cars in Louisiana wouldn't necessarily have to be all-wheel drive capable. Having never needed anything to be able to drive up a steep hill or through thick snow, I've never paid attention to

those kinds of things when I was car shopping. Growing up, my dad, of course, insisted that he have a four-wheel-drive pick-up for whatever reason, but I doubted he'd ever used the four-wheel drive for its intended purpose. Rather to have it for bragging rights. He didn't just own a pick-up truck; he owned a four-wheel drive. In case he ever needed to dive off the highway or pull someone stuck in a mud pit out.

"Here's a paper for you to sign. And I'll have to snap a picture of your license information for insurance. Insurance is in the glove compartment of the car. The friend discount is twenty-five dollars a day."

"Hey! You charged Mom thirty-five after her fender bender and she had to rent a car from you," Elsie butted in.

Hank nodded as he ran a hand through his thick gray hair. "That's because I gave her the family discount, Els. She never asked if the friends' rate was cheaper, now, did she?"

I couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of me.

He grabbed some papers out of a cupboard above the kitchen sink, then pulled his phone out of his pocket and grabbed a pen out of a mug on the counter.

"Here you go." I opened my purse and dug out my license, setting it on the counter so that he could take a picture of it with his phone. Then I took the pen from him and signed the paper that said I would return the car with a full tank of gas. I was pretty sure there was supposed to be a lot more legalese than that, but I didn't press him. That car was going to be a well used tool in the fix-another-mistake-I-made operation run by me: Kimber. Head of mistake making.

I wondered what that would look like printed on a business card...I'd have to think of something snappier.

Past Mistake Maker: Current Mistake Fixer.

Meh. It wasn't quite right. I'd have to sleep on it.

"Is there a gas station in town?" I asked. "I didn't remember seeing one, but I wasn't exactly looking either."

"It's on the other side of the bridge before you get into town."

"Okay, thank you."

He pressed the keys into my hands, and I felt the surge of excitement. I hadn't intended to rent a car while on vacation, but now that I had, it held endless possibilities. I could explore the area when we were done going door to door collecting signatures. Maybe I could write an article about must-see

places in Colorado.

"My number is on a card in the glove compartment of the car in case you have any trouble."

"Thanks, Hank. And thank you for the friends' discount," I added as I opened the front door.

"I'm telling Mom," Elsie told him cheekily.

"I'll erase you from my will," Hank threatened her when he followed us out and stepped onto the porch.

Elsie laughed. "Thank goodness. I don't want to inherit a termite-infested bungalow anyway!"

He called after us as we walked down the sidewalk. "There's only one termite! And I think you're being unfair to him! He's a great roommate."

"You need a life, Uncle Hank!" Elsie called over her shoulder.

We walked across the street toward the cars lined up in the school parking lot. I hit the unlock button on the key fob. A small, blue SUV flashed its lights and beeped at me. We kept going until I stood behind it.

I held the keys in my hand as I stared at the car. I could do this.

I'd never driven in the snow before, but it couldn't be that difficult if millions of people lived in snowy places. People drove in the snow all the time. It was very normal in most states. I bet it would even come naturally.

"What are you doing?" a voice boomed behind me.

Elsie jumped. I kept my feet planted firmly on the ground because—well, because I knew I couldn't stick the landing. My ice skating was still a little bit shaky.

I turned around slowly and stared at Mack. "I'm getting into my new rental car."

Mack shook his head rapidly. "Not a good idea, Kimber. Not. A. Good. Idea."

"It'll be fine. Not that it's any of your concern."

"Kimber, have you ever driven in the ice and snow before?"

"What a sexist remark!"

"It has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with geography!" He pointed at the mountain to our left. "We don't have those in Louisiana. We definitely don't have ice storms." Now he pointed at the icicle hanging from the yield sign. "You don't know how to drive in the snow and ice. Heck, I don't know how to drive in the snow and ice. Why do you think I haven't rented a car myself? The town's so small, just walk to where you need to go!"

I glared at him and clenched my fist. My fingers bumped the panic button on the key fob, and the car alarm went off. I stabbed at the button with my index finger to turn it off.

Refusing to look at Mack, I tucked my hair behind my ear, then marched toward the car. My foot slipped on a thick patch of ice, but I caught myself.

I glanced around at the parking lot. Now that I looked at it, there really was quite a bit of ice. But I'm sure the car would have better traction than my no-tread tennis shoes.

Elsie spoke up, the dirty traitor, "You know, Kimber, maybe you should wait to drive the car tomorrow. It's supposed to thaw and warm up a little. Then you won't have to worry about driving on such thick ice."

"It'll be fine," I assured her. I didn't know that—not really. But I didn't want to back down with Mack standing right there. It would feel wrong to agree with him. And he looked so stern standing there glaring at me. He'd make a great disapproving dad someday. I opened the door to the car and climbed in.

Closing the door, I buckled my seatbelt before starting the car up. I jumped when a shadow fell over the driver-side window. Mack stood outside the window, knocking on it. Even knowing he was going to continue his rant, I rolled the window down.

"Do you need a ride home in my new rental car?" I asked with a sickly sweet voice. Mack leaned down and rested his elbows on the doorframe and leaned into the car.

"Kimber, please get out of the car."

"Mack, it'll be fine. I don't know why you care."

He practically rolled his eyes at that as if he had a right to be mad at me. He didn't. "You're making me out to be some super villain when I'm only here to do my job."

"Even villains have jobs," I reminded him. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take this car back to the cabin so that I can deliver flyers with it. I have a super villain to stop."

I rolled the window up and Mack was forced to step back.

With a smirk and a little wave, I put the car in reverse, but I was distracted by Mack shaking his head looking disappointed at me. I shouldn't feel guilty. He was the one in the wrong. But while I was busy thinking about his misplaced disappointment, I stepped on the gas and shot backwards out of the parking space. Mack's eyes widened, and I frantically stepped on the

brakes.

Nothing happened. The car drifted to the side, but it didn't stop. I glanced behind me and realized that I was heading straight for a light pole. I stomped on the brakes again, but the car was already in motion and going with the momentum of the ice rink that was in the parking lot. I was going for gold. If the judges didn't give me a 10/10 for my flying spin I was going to be upset.

I screamed and cranked the wheel of the car. It didn't go where I steered it. It was as if my toe pick had stuck in the ice and the hard surface was zooming up toward my face.

The car spun in a complete circle until I was facing the light pole. My scream stopped and it hurt to breath.

It felt surreal as I drifted past it, through no fault of my own. As soon as I knew I wasn't going to hit the pole, my scream came back and I couldn't seem to stop screaming until the car slid to a stop by bumping into the curb. I panted, looking around to see if I'd run anything over in the thirty seconds I'd been in the car while my life flashed in front of my eyes, grateful that I'd never tried to become an ice skater.

Glancing out the window I spotted Mack running toward me. If he wasn't careful, he'd re-injure his leg.

I shut the car off and climbed out. I slammed the door and locked the car, leaving it right there in the middle of the parking lot. Mack stopped right next to me. I didn't look at him as I brushed past him. This disapproving skate coach may have been right, but I didn't have to be happy about it.

"Not a single word," I growled as I marched across the street, up the steps, not a single knock on the door as I hustled through and set the keys on the counter.

Hank sat at his table sipping a cup of coffee and working on a laptop. "I take it that wasn't on purpose?"

I stared at him. His lips twitched as I shook my head slowly.

"Paul Walker you are not..."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" I accused.

He ignored my question and jabbed a thumb towards the window that had offered him a clear view of the entire event. "Your young man seemed concerned."

"He should be," I replied. And then I stomped home before I could scream in frustration.

Chapter Fifteen

MACK

*K*imber was pouting in her room. Or at least that was what I assumed she was doing when I got home from work. There was no sign of her. I figured I'd make dinner for two and leave it outside her door. Like setting a bowl of warm milk out for a stray cat. I knew it was driving her crazy that I wasn't raging mad at her. I hadn't meant to come across as controlling today, but I had been so worried she would crash into a tree. It ended up being worse than that—she couldn't even make it out of the parking lot.

My phone rang and I answered it without looking.

"Mack!"

"Hey, Jenny." Her calls had become more frequent as she prepared to move.

"Mack, I don't know what to take to Oregon."

"Everything," I answered firmly as I opened the coffee and hot chocolate cupboard.

"That's not helpful. I don't want to take everything." I could hear a thumping sound in the background. I could picture her packing her room by throwing things haphazardly into cardboard boxes.

"Just do it. You're going there to find yourself, right?" We'd had this conversation at least a hundred times.

Jenny was my cousin. And as my cousin, we were close. There was a reason she needed to get out and try something new. Her relationship with her parents wasn't the best, and so it seemed to overshadow a lot of her life decisions. Distance seemed like the best thing for her to establish those boundaries she needed.

"Right," she agreed.

"Are you going to have a new beginning if you keep one foot in Louisiana?" I pulled out the canister that held the hot chocolate packets. The latch operated like a lunch box latch, and Kimber had slapped a small lock on it. I fought a laugh as I put it back up in the cupboard. That one required some forethought.

So Kimber decided the hot chocolate was hers. There was going to be a custody battle for that one.

"I'm deserting the family," Jenny lamented.

"No, you need to do this. We all understand. Even Mimi."

"Page is still mad at me." She referred to our other cousin, who was a bit of a livewire.

"Page is usually mad at somebody. It changes who she's mad at from time to time. It's your burden to bear right now," I teased as I tried to guess the number combination to open the small lock.

"My parents..."

"I know. I understand. It's time. Jordan's made the break. You need some space too. Maybe someday you'll be able to work things out with them."

She sighed. "Thanks, Mack. You always know what to say to make me feel better."

I bit my tongue to keep from telling her that I really, truly understood the smothered feeling.

"What am I going to do without you?"

The sliding glass door opened, and I nearly choked on the words on the tip of my tongue. Kimber was not in her room pouting.

She'd been on the back porch.

In the hot tub.

Wearing a bikini.

"Mack, are you still there?" Jenny's voice, along with a loud thump, hit my ears.

I cleared my throat when Kimber raised her eyebrows at me, almost in a challenge as she closed the sliding glass door.

She walked across the tile floor, water beads rolling down her bare legs until they splashed on the floor. Where was her towel? She took her time walking across the room to the open staircase. Her bare feet and painted toes curling into the carpet as she untied her hair from on top of her head when she was two stairs up. She paused mid-step, shaking her hair out and I

watched as it cascaded in blonde waves down to her wet shoulders.

I'd never been so grateful someone had forgotten a towel.

"Mack? Mack? Hello? Earth to Mack?"

"I'm here," I rasped out.

"Are you okay?" Jenny's wry voice filtered through the line.

"I'm fine." My voice cracked and Kimber glanced over her shoulder with the smuggest-smug smile that had ever been smiled.

She knew exactly what she was doing to me.

I spun around and faced the wall while I tried to concentrate on my conversation with Jenny.

"Ahem. Yes. Take whatever you want, Jenny. The swimsuit. A full body one. No bikini."

"It's Oregon, not Miami. What are you even talking about?"

Clearing my throat, I tried to get a hold of my thoughts. "I meant to say that this move is for you. Do what you need to do, and I'll help you in any way I can."

"Will you help me set up my bed when you drop me off?"

That was right. I was supposed to be driving out to Oregon with her, then catching a flight back home. She didn't want to drive that distance by herself. I didn't want her to drive that distance by herself either. Not even mentioning the dangers that other people posed, there was the possibility of falling asleep behind the wheel. Jenny had the ability to sleep anywhere—and through anything.

She wasn't allowed to drive across the country by herself. So I'd taken on that responsibility.

"Have you decided on what weekend you're going?"

"No, not yet."

"All right. I'll need to know a little bit in advance so I can put in for a day off. It'll take us two days to drive out there, and I'll have to schedule that flight home so I can be back in time for work."

"I'll let you know, don't worry."

"You'll forget."

"Yup. I'll totally forget. Can you text me and remind me?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I won't go for another month. Maybe six weeks," she hedged.

"Let me know."

"Okay."

"Love you, Mack."

"Love you, Jenny."

She hung up, and I studied my phone as I heard footsteps on the stairs again. I could not look at her in that navy blue bikini again. I couldn't. I'd snap. Mack Boone who was known for his self-control and even temper would blow his top like never before.

I opened my messages app and read the two that had come in while I was on the phone.

Jordan: I need to do some work on my truck. Think you could help when you get back from your trip?

I texted him back a yes, then opened the next text as I walked over to the fridge.

Page: Jenny's leaving me. Fix this.

Me: She needs this.

Page: I wanted to go.

After a quick internet search, I texted her a link to a nice vacation rental in Oregon close to where Jenny would be living.

Me: It's the travel excuse you've been looking for.

Page: Brilliant.

Kimber was reaching for the fridge when I glanced up. I slapped my hand against the door, holding it closed.

"I don't think so," I said.

"What!" she squeaked, adjusting her t-shirt hem, and tugging it down to meet the top of her jeans. It was quite a change from her previous outfit. She wasn't wearing any makeup, and a light smattering of freckles were visible. I hadn't noticed them before, or maybe she had always had them covered with makeup.

"You and I are going to have a talk."

Her eyes widened as she tried to jerk the door open again. "I'm not talking to you."

"Very mature," I said as I folded my arms and leaned a shoulder against the door.

Kimber pursed her lips and slapped a hand against the fridge, looking as though she wished it were my face.

"Careful there. Don't want you to break a nail."

She squinted at me.

"Is that your best intimidating look?"

"I have three older sisters," she ground out.

"That's nice," I agreed amicably. Her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink.

"That's not what I meant."

"I see what you mean." I crossed one leg over the other. "You're the youngest, so you never learned how to share."

She fisted her hands at her sides, and I tucked my chin toward my chest. If she was going to punch me, I'd rather it was my jaw and not my throat.

"Fine. I'll share the fridge with you."

"Now that's more like it. See? That wasn't hard." I smiled and stepped back from the door. She jerked it open, bumping it against my arm in the process.

"You're going to have to step up your tantrum if you want me to take you seriously."

She ignored me, grabbed a cup of yogurt, and set it on my side of the fridge. "There."

Her smug smile was brighter than the fridge light.

"I think there's more work that needs to be done here," I said as I slid the carton of chocolate milk over to my side.

She began making a choking sound. "No! Not that."

"Yes. If you're going to lock me out of the hot cocoa, then I get custody of the chocolate milk."

"You could drink that chocolate milk all in one sitting."

"True, true." I hummed. "In fact, that sounds like a great idea."

She tried to reach for the carton of chocolate milk, but I blocked her way by sticking my arm out to the side.

"What's this!" I pulled out a bag of grapes. "Looks like the last bag in the fridge. Oops, it seems to be on my side of the fridge now."

I slid it across the line of tape she had put up in the middle of the night.

Kimber growled and tried to reach past me again.

"I might try cream cheese on my bagels in the morning." I nodded to her over my shoulder. She placed a hand under my arm, lifting it up so she could slip under it and stand between me and the fridge.

"You're not taking my cream cheese!" She grabbed the container and slid it back to her side of the fridge.

"Here, why don't you go sit down and rest while I finish cleaning the fridge." I picked her up by her hips and set her behind me again. I winked.

Like a jerk. Then I watched as her eyes narrowed and I think her internal steam began to rise.

I yelped when she latched onto the skin under my arm and pinched. "Hey!"

"I told you I had sisters."

"Why are you pinching my arm?" I tried to pull away, but she held on tighter.

"Because sisters don't fight fair."

She darted forward again and stomped onto my foot.

"Ouch! You're heavier than you look!"

She didn't like that, and elbowed me in the stomach, pushing me away from the fridge, before slamming the door.

"This is out of control—" I started to say just before she pinched again—and now twisted—the skin on my side.

I yelped. "That's it."

Her eyes widened and she shrieked as I latched onto her, dragging her after me into the living room. She kicked. Clawed. Twisted. She was surprisingly hard to hang onto.

She kicked backwards into my knee. We both tumbled to the carpet lying side by side. Instead of getting up and running away, she launched herself on top of me. Slapping and pinching anything she could get to.

"How dare you!" she ranted.

"I just wanted a bagel!" I laughed and blocked a slap coming at my ear.

"I liked you!"

I locked my legs around her calves, preventing anymore flying feet or knees.

"How dare you be so attractive, and nice, and devious!" She kept screaming but with those words she stopped me in my tracks.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on." I locked her hands in mine and held them out to the side, forcing her flat against my chest. "You're mad at me for being nice?"

Her hair draped across her face, but I could still see the fury in her eyes. Or maybe I felt it.

"You tricked me! You didn't tell me why you were here. I'm supposed to be doing a serious job here. I was hired. This was my chance to do something good for a change. And it's going all wrong! I can't do anything right!"

Before I even had a chance to form a rebuttal, she was crying.

"And it's all my fault. I didn't get answers. I didn't look into it further. I hurt them! I hurt them both and I apologized, and—"

I let go of her hands and wrapped my arms around her body as she collapsed against my chest, crying.

She snuggled her head just below my chin and continued sobbing. "I almost ruined their lives. And it was horrible!"

I sighed as all playful thoughts fled.

Wrestling almost always led to kissing, and I'd been looking forward to that part. Except Kimber didn't do the expected. She derailed that plan by soaking my T-shirt with her tears. I trailed a hand down the length of her hair and patted her back. I'd held a lot of crying women in my time. But this was the first time I'd held one I was attracted to.

Pure torture.

I tried to catch up with her thinking. Trying to guess what it was that had gone on before she'd come to Colorado. Whatever she was crying about had nothing to do with me, and maybe had everything to do with the reasons she was here.

And so I did the only thing I could. I sat up, scooped her into my arms, and carried her to the couch where she could have a good, comfortable cry on my shoulder.

Sometimes I hated being the good guy.

Chapter Sixteen

KIMBER

The warm water cascaded down my back as I stood in the rock-walled walk-in shower. Maybe I could renovate my apartment to fit in a shower like this. It had two shower heads in it so that you were never cold. The constant barrage of hot water was enough to wash your worries down the drain.

But not enough to wash away an ounce of embarrassment.

It had been two days since I'd used Mack's shirt as a tissue.

After leaving the hot tub that evening, I'd gone upstairs to get dressed and had discovered an email—an answer to my apology email.

It was gracious, forgiving, and classy. It was the knife that drove my guilt even deeper.

Instead of feeling chipper and ready to relax after a successful day of picketing, I'd come back downstairs in a melancholy mood and ready to pick a fight.

Mack, of course, had obliged.

He was very accommodating that way. He hadn't asked what I was talking about. He wrapped those gorgeous arms around me and let me cry it out. Then he carried me upstairs, tucked me into my giant king-size bed, kissed my forehead and turned off the light. Not one mention of me tackling him to the ground and literally hitting him, which was great because now I really wanted to die of mortification because of everything I'd done over the last three days.

Bury me deep, because there was a lot of embarrassment to escape.

I'd tried to avoid him ever since then. I spent my time with Elsie and had even gone to dinner with her and Hank one evening. Hank was quickly

becoming one of my favorite people, and I was going to miss him and Elsie when I went home.

Earlier in the afternoon I'd walked all the way around the lake and discovered a great sledding spot that I would have to try out soon. The hike around the lake had been some great people watching with a mixture of vacationers and locals. I'd also taken the time to have conversations with both.

Some of the locals weren't thrilled about the resort. They were worried their second houses wouldn't rent out as well if there was competition from a full-amenity resort. Some of the others seemed completely unbothered by the fact the resort was being built.

One final rinse and I stepped out of the shower, reluctant to leave the heat.

It felt so good after a long afternoon in the snow. And now I was ready to go downstairs and make some dinner. Hopefully Mack was in his room. I don't think I could bear to look him in the eye.

Reaching toward the towel rack, I realized it was empty. I must have forgotten that I threw the towel in the laundry.

I opened the cabinet to grab one of the extra towels. But then I realized that it was also empty.

That was strange.

I knew I had folded a fresh load of towels and put them away yesterday. There was no way I could've possibly used five towels in one night. I opened another cabinet door.

Even the hand towels were missing. I opened the drawer. There was one small washrag folded into a tiny triangle. Typically, I preferred a square fold...

Mack had struck.

I couldn't believe he had taken my big fluffy towels and left me with a washrag.

I couldn't exactly go streaking out of there. I had to go across the hall to get into my room. If he were standing at the end of the kitchen, he could see through the open balcony and down the hall. And I didn't want to give him a show on the way.

With a groan, I pulled out the washrag, unfolded it from the six folds he'd done, and proceeded to try to dry myself off with a postage stamp. By the time I attempted to dry my hair, I was putting more water back into the

strands then I was taking out of it. But at least my body was dry enough to put my clean clothes on. Pulling on my pajama pants and T-shirt, I put my hair up in a messy, dripping bun.

I'd have a good set of damp curls in the morning. Hopefully they looked like I planned to do it that way.

I marched downstairs and found Mack sitting in the center of the couch with a laptop on his lap. He was focused on the screen, but I could tell he knew I was standing there by the way his nose was twitching as though he were trying to hold in a laugh. I flung the dripping wet rag in his face. It made a loud slapping sound. He jerked back in surprise and watched me warily.

"There seems to be a towel shortage," I said. "Better double-check your stash before you get in."

I went into the kitchen and made myself a cup of hot chocolate. I locked the canister after myself, careful to hide the lock with my body so that he couldn't read the combination. If he thought he could leave me stranded in the bathroom with a tiny washrag, he was so wrong. I was made of stronger stuff.

Stuff that didn't include me sharing my hot cocoa mix with him no matter if he was pranking me to pull me out of my funk.

I'd never admit it to him...not in a million years.

It had worked.



I spent the next morning speaking with more of the locals, picking up where I left off when I'd began interviewing the people who lived around the lake. I made my way through a small neighborhood surrounding the public library this time.

I kept my questions simple. Just asking them quickly what they thought of the resort coming in. Several were hesitant, one downright hostile, and yet again I was shocked by how many didn't care one way or another.

I wish I could say I walked into town just to interview the businesses, but I also had another driving need: hunger.

But I promised myself that I needed to interview one more person before I solved the hunger issue.

The problem with a working vacation was that I wanted to lean more

heavily on the vacation part, less on the working part.

I opened the door to the gift shop, intent on locating the owner. *My last interview.*

I stopped short when I saw a familiar brown head perusing a shelf of mugs. I quickly ducked to the side, hiding behind a kiosk of personalized key chains.

Unfortunately I was on the A-J side, K's were on the opposite side.

A woman came to stand next to Mack, and I recognized her as the owner of the shop. I'd popped in here my first day in town and had interacted with her briefly.

"How are you doing? Can I help you find something?" Her customer service smile was firmly in place.

Mack smiled down at her and I watched her melt into a puddle of goo. Her brittle smile turned genuine. It was annoying how he could do that. Age was no respecter of looks. She was old enough to be his mother.

"I'm just browsing. I wanted to find a little something for my mom."

"That's so sweet of you," she answered as she patted his hand. Did people touch complete strangers still? I thought we were past that. She continued, "You must be from out of town. I would remember you. Are you here for some skiing?"

Mack picked up a stainless steel mug and inspected it. I leaned forward to try and read the writing on it, but his broad back hindered my view.

"I'm here working, actually," he answered her.

"Oh! You must be part of that construction crew for the resort."

I barely resisted the urge to snort. The man was wearing work boots and a jacket that had the crew name on it. It was obvious what he was doing here, and it wasn't becoming a champion cross country skier.

My elbow bumped against a display of shot glasses.

An unfortunate clink sounded, and I now found myself shrinking down behind the display of key chains.

"I think that's wonderful you're here working. What exactly do you do?"

"I'm a surveyor," Mack responded, but his voice was pointed in my direction, as though he were trying to see who was obsessed with Colorado souvenirs in this corner.

Nothing to see here, just us shot glass collectors.

"I'm so glad Mountain Pine Resort is coming here. Did you know my son has already applied for a job with the resort? He's been hired and will be

moving home soon!" The woman was ecstatic.

A sell out. The resort was buying her loyalty. I wondered what the boy was hired to do and how old he was. I tuned in to the conversation again.

"Yes, he's head of guest services. A wonderful job. But enough about my family. Can I help you find anything?"

Their voices shifted as they walked to another section of the small store. "Do you have any knitting supplies here? I was thinking my mom might like to try something new."

"Right this way."

I quietly slipped further down the shelf line, their bodies distorted by the glasses I was looking through.

"So you're glad the resort is here?" Mack asked.

"Oh yes, it will mean so much more business for us. We barely scrape by as it is. When the resort is finished, we'll have all the business we can handle, not to mention several young people—my son included—who grew up in Long Pine are finally able to move back and make a living here."

"How nice," Mack said.

His solicitous voice made me want to claw my eyes out.

I ducked behind a display of sweatshirts.

"I think I'll get these if that's okay with you," he said to the woman. Dripping. He was dripping with kindness.

Was he like this to everyone? Because that was definitely *not* the same man who had left a mouse sized rag for me to dry off with last night.

"Would you like me to gift wrap it for you? I have a special paper I stamped myself. It has our mountain range on it."

"My mom would love that," he replied.

I recalled him speaking fondly of his parents when we'd been on civil speaking terms...and if we had been on civil terms I would have thought it incredibly sweet of him to buy a present for his mother.

The woman laughed happily. "I'll be just a moment. Look around and see if there's anything else you'd like."

"I have my eye on something right now."

Why did that sound so ominous?

"Wonderful." Her footsteps were quick and loud against the hard floor. The click of her boots, heels, whatever she was wearing drowned out the sound of Mack's movements.

I couldn't tell where he was. I didn't want him to know I was here. He'd

gloat that one of the locals was in big support of the resort coming to town.

If I moved back to the shot glass display, I'd risk him seeing me.

I *should* stop hiding, but now that I'd started, I was committed to the course of action. I slipped my hands between sweatshirts that were hiding him from my view. I slid the sweatshirts apart a few inches...and came face to face with Mack.

"Bah!" I shrieked.

He grinned, his face perfectly framed by the sweatshirts he was peeking through. "Hi, Kimber. Find what you're looking for?"

"Oh, shut up."

I stood up and straightened the sweatshirts out, then headed back to the key chain display.

Needing to play it cool, I quickly grabbed a 'Courtney' keychain and walked to the front of the shop. Mack was shockingly close behind.

"Do you want her to gift wrap that for you? She's made her own special paper," Mack needlessly explained. The glee on his face was painful. He knew I'd been snooping on him.

But I couldn't call him out on his attitude, not in front of the woman who had made her own special wrapping paper.

I handed her the key chain and smiled weakly.

"Would you like me to gift wrap this for you?"

"That would be wonderful!" I replied weakly. I jerked out my card. Oh my sister would be thrilled to get a key chain from my trip. *Not*.

"Do you have a boyfriend back home?" She asked as I pulled out my card to pay her. Mack leaned a hip against the counter next to me, smiling down at me. He was awfully close for a guy who steals towels.

"Oh, are you Christopher?" She asked Mack. "You two must be together."

"This is Mack—" I started to explain, confused as to why she would ask if he was 'Christopher.'

Mack interrupted me and told her, "We're staying at the cabin two houses down from the dock." He smiled down at me, a little devil dancing in his eyes. "Ready to go, sweetie pumpkins?"

I glanced at the key chain being wrapped.

My eyes land on the name: Christopher. I thought I'd grabbed the one saying Courtney.

I hadn't.

The name was quickly covered with mountain stamped wrapping paper.

"Here you go!" The woman handed me the small key chain. "Next time when you buy him a present, don't let him see you with it!"

My smile was more like a grimace as I grabbed the key chain and stalked outside to the sound of Mack's booming laughter.

I wasn't hungry anymore.

Chapter Seventeen

KIMBER

Though I had interviewed quite a few locals, I was a firm believer in investigating things thoroughly after the last unfortunate incident. Which was why I hired Hank (at the friends-discount-rate) to drive me to a town two hours away that had recently had a resort built in it from the very same company, owned by Theo Merrick, that was building the one in Long Pine.

I was sure I would go to the town and discover dirty deals. Paid off politicians. Blackmail. All sorts of nefarious things.

All right. So maybe I needed to lay off the late-night TV. But the point was, that I figured I would witness the damage to the little town with my own little eyes. And then I would interview the resort's victims with my own little ears.

We spent three hours there. Elsie had come along as moral support, and she and Hank had been great sports waiting while I interviewed anyone willing to talk with me. Although I suspected my rental rate had been bumped up to family level.

I was beginning to feel like I was hunting for sasquatch. Because I wasn't finding what I was looking for. We eventually called it quits and climbed into the car to head back toward Long Pine.

"Do you suppose he paid them to lie?" I asked. It was beginning to look like I had no story to work with. The resort had only brought more business to the locals, without overly changing the landscape or feel of the town. The only animosity they had was over rush hour traffic at the one stoplight during peak seasons.

Hank shook his head slowly.

"Do you suppose I even have a story here?"

This time Elsie shook her head and answered, "I wish you did. But it seems like there's nothing crooked going on."

I had to agree. I'd been digging online, making phone calls to different commissioners and inspectors, and lots of time interviewing people who had been directly affected by it. Dang it all, the resort owner seemed to be conscientious of the towns he was building in. He seemed to go out of his way to get local approval and do right by all of the smaller businesses.

He hired locally and paid well. I couldn't find a single skeleton in Theo Merrick's closet—and it was probably a walk-in.

"Do you think Lara will be disappointed?" I'd had time during the drive to explain to Hank why I was in town and tell him about who had hired me.

"Probably," Hank replied. "Sounds like she's just scared of how this will change the town that she wants to spend a lot of her retirement in."

Elsie said, "I guess it's good to know that they're in good company. I still don't like that it's coming into town. But at least it's not corrupt and isn't going to damage our town."

"That's the spirit," Hank said. "Who knows, it might even bring in some interesting people. You might even meet a boy." He dropped his voice another octave for saying 'boy.' He stared at me through the rearview mirror. "Just like Kimber did."

"Hank?" I said.

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

He pretended to smack a meter on the dashboard. "Your rate just changed to the family rate."



Saturday morning, I made an important decision to stop hunting up those skeletons that didn't exist. I was going to do something vacation-y. I would not interview anyone unless it was about which bagel I should eat.

I was going to do something *fun*.

I was going to worry about corruption and saving the world on Monday.

Which led me to staring out the window, trying to decide what to do with my time. I hadn't been sledding a single time since arriving in the snow-

covered town of Long Pine.

There was plenty of snow here. There was even a sled in the closet by the front door, and I hadn't used it even once.

Now was the time. I needed something to distract me from the big ol' stinker who was keeping our war alive and well. He'd swapped out my cream cheese for low-fat cream cheese. It was a horrifying moment when I'd blindly made my bagel first thing in the morning.

I wanted to be frustrated with his juvenile behavior.

But he refused to get angry and kept making me smile despite my best efforts to be offended by his very existence.

The man was suspiciously absent—especially considering this was his day off—which meant it was a great time to make my escape.

I hoped sledding on the fresh snow would be a soft enough sport that it wouldn't hurt my tailbone. I didn't think it could handle much. I guess it wasn't a muscle you could slowly work into place. It was a bone, after all.

I opened the extra-large closet next to the front door. I knew I had spotted a sled in there. There were two of them, and even though I wanted the company, I didn't feel like I could ask Mack to come along. Not after the gift shop incident, Or the fridge fight. Or the car...I'd done too many mortifying things in the past few days to ask him to come with me.

When it came down to it, it didn't bother me that he was the surveyor for the resort; what bothered me was that he listened to me drone on about finding the scoop on a corrupt business and didn't tell me why he was there.

I didn't like feeling used by people.

I pulled out a shiny red sled with a rope tied to it. I couldn't go home without sledding—I wouldn't think about the broken neck possibilities. Snow was not easily found in Louisiana, at least never enough to sled on.

I put on my coat, then buttoned it all the way to the top of the collar. I pulled my mittens from my pocket then picked up the sled and looped the rope handle over my shoulder.

"Where are you going?"

Spinning around, I found Mack standing there leaning against the doorframe. Trying to hide any possibility of him seeing a smidge of delight in my eyes, I said, "Don't you have something you should be doing?"

He grinned. "It means the world to me that you keep track of me. I didn't know you cared so much."

I narrowed my eyes at him and reached for the door. I couldn't resist just

one little jab. "I assume it's a full-time job trying to destroy hopes and dreams."

"Of course, it is. That's why you're going to wait for me to put my boots on and come with you. I don't want you to have too much fun today."

I opened my mouth to argue with him but changed my mind. I wanted to go sledding, but I didn't want to be hiking up that slope by myself. Didn't Colorado have bears and wolves roaming in the woods and hills? Things that could eat me?

Yeah, I'd let him come with me *and* be happy about it. I swung open the door and gestured for him to lead the way. He sat down on the bench in the hall and pulled on his boots, lacing them up. He kept his eyes on me as he shrugged into his coat and pulled his gloves on over those calloused hands I'd memorized.

"Will you be able to walk up the hill with your ankle?"

He looked surprised. Almost like he expected me to be heartless about his injury. Another reminder that I hadn't been fighting our war with class. My mother would be embarrassed. No one could win wars with as much dignity as my mother. She somehow managed to get her way, and the opposition thanked her for it afterwards. I lacked her finesse.

"Yes, it's been holding up fine this week walking to work."

"Let me know if it starts to hurt you too much. I'll carry you back to the cabin," I joked as I hurried outside ahead of him, his booming laughter trailing after me. I smirked to myself, pleased with my little joke, as I trotted through the snow. For some reason it was easier to run. I'd never have thought that would be something I would say to myself, but I was light enough that if I moved quickly, I wouldn't sink all the way through the snow.

I cackled as Mack sank with each step.

I stopped when I reached the packed-down path that wrapped around the lake and would lead us to the sledding slope.

"Sheesh, you didn't say you'd been training for the hundred-yard dash," Mack said as he reached the packed snow and brushed the loose snow off his calves.

I set the sled down on the ground behind me, grabbing the rope handle to drag it behind me when Mack fell into step beside me.

"It's easier that way."

"If you say so. Have you done much sledding?"

"No. My sisters and I would pull each other around our yard growing up

whenever we had a freak snowfall, but other than that, this is the first time I've been in the real snow!"

"You don't leave home often, do you?"

I considered that. While to some people that might seem offensive—practically accusing me of being a hermit—to me it wasn't a bad thing. I shrugged. "I love Charlesville. It's home. I guess traveling isn't a big part of my life right now, and that's okay. Getting sent here on a working vacation was a godsend, though, because I needed some time away to myself."

"I'm sorry I messed that up for you."

He even sounded like he meant it.

I could practically see him waving the white flag, and decided to lay down my own weapons. "No. No. You've helped remind me of some things. Like, if I can fix something I should. If I can help someone, then I should. You're my should-man."

"Should-man? What is that supposed to mean?"

I jumped over a fallen log, lifting the sled behind me. "It means you've reminded me that I should take responsibility for my actions. That I shouldn't just be talk. I've, well, I may have—accidentally, of course—overheard you on the phone several times. You seem to always be helping people with something."

"Overheard, huh?" His eyebrows were very condemning. "I didn't realize you were paying such close attention."

He totally knew I paid that much attention.

"You're busy taking care of all your friends and family, all the freaking time."

He chuckled. "You picked up on that by eavesdropping?"

"Yes. And I learned you're annoyingly responsible. I don't like it. It reminds me that I should be that way too. Which is why I'm calling you my should-man."

"Is there a better title you could call me?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Guilt-tripper?" I suggested.

"Nah, I prefer should-man. Let's stick with that."

"I thought so."

"And what is it you *should* be doing?"

"I should—" I paused, knowing I wouldn't tell him right now. He'd already witnessed the epic Kimber Lyons-style meltdown. He didn't need to know what an epic screw-up I was. I should be demanding that Wayne print a

retraction. That's what I *should* be doing. Instead, I said, "I should be sledding down that hill."

I pointed at a slope that didn't look too steep and ended well before the edge of the lake. I began my trek up the hill. "Feel free to wait down here, I don't want you getting hurt!"

By the time I got to the top of the hill, I was winded, sweating, and not at all sure sledding would be worth another trek up Mount Everest.

I turned around and stared down the slope.

"It's much steeper from this angle," I commented to Mack who had managed to make it up the hill. He seemed to be limping a bit, and now I felt guilty for teasing him about his injury. I knew he was only keeping up with me because he wanted to make sure I was safe. It seemed to be an affliction he had.

"I'll sit here and let you have your fun," he said with a sigh. He sat down on a snow-covered stump and rested his elbows on his knees.

"Don't you want to go down? With me?"

"Are you scared?" he asked as he pushed his snow cap a little higher on his head, making it dome at the top. The slope was obviously too steep for him as well.

Now he'd practically dared me to do it by myself. But since I had nothing to prove, I admitted the truth. "Yes, I am."

With an exaggerated sigh, he stood up and dusted the snow off his pants.

"In that case." He took the sled from me and placed it at the crest of the slope. "Climb on. I won't let it go."

I quickly climbed on before I lost my courage. Because when in the snow, one should do snowish things.

Even if it scared them.

"Pick up the rope and hold on tight so it doesn't get tangled around anything."

I did as he said and waited inevitably for death.

He jumped onto the sled behind me, and we shot down the hill. I screamed and Mack laughed like a maniac. His arms tightened around me as we neared a little bump in the slope. "Listen, buddy, I'm not big enough to keep both of us on here."

"Just don't let go of the rope!"

"Ahh!" We hit the bump. And I let go of the rope.

Mack still clung to me as we sailed through the air, the sled shooting off

to the side—without us.

I sobbed as we hit the snow and tumbled down the rest of the hill together.

"We're going to die. We're going to die. We're going to die." I chanted over and over with each roll. Finally, once the world stopped spinning, I lay sprawled face down on the walking path. I pushed myself up and looked around for Mack. He'd gotten left behind a few feet, where he'd met an abrupt stop next to a tree.

He wasn't moving.

Despite all my rolling head over heels, all my limbs still felt intact. I'd obviously had a softer landing than Mack.

"Hold on! I'm coming!"

He was starting to stand by the time I got to him, thankfully. He held one leg up a few inches off the ground while he leaned against the tree.

"You almost killed me!" he said in disbelief.

"I did not!"

"You let go of the rope."

"I did do that, didn't I?" I grinned sheepishly. He scowled back.

"I don't think I can walk." His groan seemed a bit much for a leg injury. It was an extra appendage, really. "I think I hurt my Achilles again."

Shaking my head, I stomped up the slope to where the sled was lodged against a bush. "It's no wonder Achilles didn't survive the war. It's the first thing to go!"

"I heard that!" Mack called.

I jerked the rope out of the brush and dragged the sled over to Mack. "Hop on. I'll drag you home."

His eyes sparkled with pain as he slowly lowered himself to the sled. "My leg!" He clutched his leg as he sat down on the sled.

I grabbed the rope with both hands and began tugging him toward the house. The sled moved a couple inches.

I strained against the weight of pulling him. "Are you sure you can't walk?"

"Positive." His voice didn't seem filled with enough pain to warrant that.

"You could crawl home." I gasped as I tugged him up a slight incline.

"I really don't think I could." I stopped and caught my breath. I glanced behind me.

He was relaxing on the sled with a beaming smile on his face. His eyes

were shut, and his hands were folded behind his head as he reclined on the sled.

"Hey!" I snapped at him. "You're not hurt."

His eyes flew open, and he groaned loudly. "That wasn't a smile. It was a pain-induced grimace."

"Stop it, you big phony."

"Are you discriminating against me because of my size?"

"No, I'm discriminating against you because you're faking it."

"Are you going to make me walk?" He rubbed his leg and looked at me with a sad puppy dog face.

"That's the wrong leg." I jerked on the rope with him still in the sled to gain some momentum and continued my slow tread home.

I knew he was so proud of himself back there.

I wanted to be mad. Give him a piece of my mind. But I knew if I turned around to look at him, I'd burst out laughing.

Chapter Eighteen

MACK

"*Y*ou need to print a retraction." Kimber's voice shook as she spoke.

When we made it back to the cabin, I sat in bed and iced my leg. I'd been exaggerating about my leg hurting—I'd wanted to see how far she would pull me. I didn't think she would drag me all the way to the back porch.

But when we got back to the cabin, I realized my leg really *was* sore. The muscles in my calf had lost flexibility from being in the boot so long. It hurt like a mother when I stuck out my leg trying to slow down the sled before we hit that speed bump on the slope.

Could I have walked home on it? Definitely. But it was way more fun to act like it was a huge injury and witness Kimber's determination to drag me home.

When we got home, Kimber went upstairs to take a hot shower. She told me dragging me home had worked up a sweat. It was supposed to be an insult, but her brightly flushed cheeks meant she wasn't exaggerating either.

I had thought she was still upstairs when I left my room. But then I heard her voice in the laundry room behind the closed door talking on the phone.

I couldn't hear the response on the phone. But I could hear the anger in Kimber's voice, so I had to assume the other voice was being argumentative. "I don't care what it does for circulation. They deserve an apology."

I leaned a little closer toward the doorway, wondering when I would begin to turn into Kimber—a professional eavesdropper. My phone vibrated with a text. I wasn't quite as stealthy as she was apparently because I heard her move farther from the doorway as though she knew I was there listening.

"I already told you that it was a lie." There was a pause. "Because I talked

to everyone involved! It was in the arrest report at the county sheriff's. His case is going to court in a couple of weeks. That's how I know it's the truth."

The washer lid slammed closed, and a beep sounded.

"I'll be home next week. And then you can let me know what you decide. Because there will be a retraction if I stay."

I hurried past the closed laundry room and into the living room and flopped down in the big chair. I pulled out my phone and pretended to be deep in thought answering my family's group text about the barbecue I was suppose to be taking care of when I got home.

Truth was, the barbecue had been someone else's idea and then handed off to me. But now everyone thought it was a brilliant idea.

After I answered the twenty-seven texts—no exaggeration—I wondered what I could do to bring the amount of peace and tranquility I'd found here, back to my home in Charlesville. I hadn't felt this rested, this at-peace in years. I wasn't sure if it was the company, the lack of demands on my time, or the combination of both, that made me feel so rejuvenated.

Kimber walked into the living room thirty seconds later. Her usually bright face had a frown on it.

And I couldn't let that frown stay there, not after the ground we'd made up with our time in the snow, so I said, "We have a problem."

Her gaze snapped up from the floor and she stared at me. A deer in the headlights look in her eye. I knew she was wondering how much I'd overheard.

"There's a foosball table upstairs and you didn't even tell me."

Her frown disappeared, and she turned toward the kitchen. "I didn't know you cared."

I folded my hands behind my head and reclined in the chair. "It's because you're afraid to lose, isn't it?"

She spun around to glare at me. "Lose? I don't think so. I'm a Lyons. Lyons don't believe in losing."

"Hmm, you might not believe in it, but it most definitely happens..." I vaguely recalled an older Lyons sister—Courtney, the one who had asked me out—throwing a toddler-worthy tantrum after losing a tennis match in high school.

I mentioned it to Kimber.

"So my sister has an anger management problem, that match still should have had a line judge."

"Should I grab a set of earplugs?"

She tipped her head to the side. "What do earplugs have to do with it?"

"If you're going to cry and scream when you lose at foosball, I want to be prepared."

"So now you're a funny guy. Why don't you get out of your old man chair, and I'll show you how it's done?"

"With pleasure. This old man will be happy to beat you." I pretended to have difficulty standing up.

With a heavy sigh Kimber walked over and grasped my wrist with both hands. "Ready?"

I nodded seriously, loving that she kept 'helping' me even when we were at odds. "Ready."

She pulled for all she was worth, and I couldn't resist the urge to pull at the same exact time. She flew forward and sprawled across my chest. Stepping on my foot in the process.

Worth it.

I laughed at her surprised look.

"You did that on purpose!" She accused as she planted her hands on my shoulders.

"Complete accident, I swear—" I started to defend myself, but she planted an elbow in my stomach as she hurried to scramble off my lap.

"See if I try to help you again," she muttered, but she couldn't quite hide the laughter in her voice.

Maybe we were starting to break through that frosty wall she'd readily built.



She didn't play fair. She spun the handles with vicious yanks. She moved them back and forth with sharp jabs as though she were more intent on harming me physically than winning.

"If I didn't know better, I would say you'd never learned the finer arts of foosball," I commented as I blocked one of her spinning shots.

She groaned before she answered, "We played on every family vacation growing up. There's no room for niceness."

She launched the ball through the hole with another wicked spin meant to

head it toward the goal. I moved my goalies in the nick of time, caught the ball, and gave her a dose of her own medicine.

The foosball sailed across the board faster than the eye, but the tell-tale clunk meant I had sunk the goal.

I lifted a hand to my eyes as I pretended to look off into the distance. "Did I see any chance of you winning fly by?"

She groaned and stomped her foot. "Act like you've been there before."

I should have taken her advice.

I lost the next two points amid some ear-piercing yells and furious spinning.

"Game point." Her smirk was positively evil.

"It's not over yet," I reminded her.

"But it practically is." Her gleeful laugh echoed through the exposed beams of the ceiling.

I spun the ball in and cranked the middle group of men as hard as I could. The foosball slammed into the goal before she could even move.

She gasped. "That was cheating! I wasn't ready!"

"Is that so?"

I rested a hand on the edge of the table. "Seems to me you did the exact same thing to me. You said it was my job to pay attention."

She puffed up her cheeks and slammed her hands onto the handles. I pushed the ball through the hole. Slowly.

"Wow! You're looking flushed," I commented. She didn't look away from the ball.

"No, I'm not."

"Whoa. Even your chest is turning red."

"I'm wearing a turtleneck, dumbass."

But her quick glance down cost her. I scored another point. There was nearly some visible steam coming from her ears.

The next point was a dirty-fought battle. It was game point in my favor.

She rocked the table. She tried stabbing me in the leg with the bars.

She tried screeching anytime I took a shot. She tried blowing the ball in the opposite direction when I was lining it up for the shot.

In the end, I still won.

I'd managed to get under her skin—or her turtleneck.

And then I found out that Kimber had more in common with her sister than she thought.

I should have put those earplugs in.

Chapter Nineteen

KIMBER

*I*t had been eighteen hours since the unfortunate foosball game. Mack whistled the funeral march quite cheerily every time he walked past me in the house. It was Sunday morning, and I was in the mood for something warm after another walk around the lake. Walking the lake regularly was the most cardio I'd done in years. Something about the brisk air made it fun though.

Mack was in the kitchen when I walked inside, stomping my boots on the rug. After shucking my snow gear, I went straight to the coffee pot and turned it on. Then I tried to reach into the cupboard with my right arm. My elbow seized up.

"What?" I gasped.

Why was my arm so sore?

Someone cleared their throat.

I glanced behind me to find Mack smiling while leaning against the stove, a pan warming up with a pack of bacon sitting beside it on the counter. I hadn't even noticed him in my quest for a mug.

"You all right?" he asked, with a decidedly cheerful tone in his voice. "I'd be happy to massage that for you."

"I'm sure you would," I replied dryly. I tried reaching in the cupboard with my left hand. That elbow had the same problem.

And now I knew why T-Rex's went extinct. They couldn't reach their coffee mugs in the morning. Tragedies like that could always be explained if a person did enough research.

"Did you hurt yourself? Dang. I'm so sorry."

His false sympathy nearly made me laugh. Nearly.

Gone was the sweet guy, and he was replaced with a snarky, poor winner.

I tried to reach into the cupboard again. My elbow creaked loudly. I didn't know it was even possible for an elbow to creak. I glanced at Mack to see if he realized my dilemma. He finished dumping the package of bacon into the pan before he made any comment.

"Here, let me help you," Mack said with a heavy sigh.

I happily stepped back, grateful that he was going to take mercy on me in my desperate state.

But instead of reaching into the cupboard himself, he wrapped an arm around my waist and lifted me up. My back pressed against his front as he stepped closer to the counter.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I squirmed.

"Helping you pick out your coffee mug," he explained in a not-so-innocent voice.

His chest rumbled against my back as he spoke.

With a soft grunt, he adjusted his hold on me and lifted me higher so that I could reach the mugs.

"Remember how you were making fun of me in the snow for having a torn muscle?" he asked as I reached forward for a mug.

He took a step back and the mugs were out of my reach again. I tried stretching my arm out, but it was no use, it was cramped too tight.

"Yeah, so about that..." he stepped forward again and we moved closer to the mugs. I tried to wiggle higher, but his hold kept my butt firmly planted against a nice, firm set of abs. It was unfortunate that we weren't vacationing somewhere tropical because we'd both be in a lot less clothes right now. I'd caught a glimpse of those abs and they were most definitely some nice scenery.

"Wouldn't you know it? It's frustrating when someone makes fun of you." He jerked me back when my fingertips brushed against the mug.

"That's it." I twisted around. I wish I could say that it was thanks to my superior strength that I was able to maneuver myself into that position, but it had everything to do with him allowing me to twist around.

Ugh. Men.

I stared down at him, trying my best to seem aloof. It wasn't really working. I could feel my flushed cheeks. I could see the muscle on his jaw tic. That cologne must have been full of pheromones, because I wanted to plant my face in his neck and just breathe.

Mack shifted his hold on me, so that he held me up with one arm while he reached behind me and pulled down a mug. He set it on the counter with a clink.

The bacon sizzled and popped on the stove.

He moved his free hand down to grasp the back of my thigh. His lips parted and he leaned closer to my ear.

"Are your arms sore from losing so bad at foosball?"

I wiggled in his arms until he put me down. "You big jerk."

He chuckled all the way back to his bacon pan. And here I thought he'd been about to kiss me.

After guzzling a cup of coffee, I pulled out the cutting board and set it in the middle of the island. I needed a knife from the block next to Mack.

He stood with one hip leaning against the counter, sipping his coffee with one hand, holding a spatula in his other.

"Excuse me," I said as I waited for him to move.

"It's okay, everyone has gas sometimes." He tipped the mug back and took a long, loud sip.

"Eww. Are you twelve?" I shot back. "I need something from the knife block."

"Whoops!" His surprised look made me relax. "Go ahead!"

He gestured to the knife block behind him—but didn't move. He took another long sip of coffee. His eyes were practically sparkling over the rim of the cup.

So today obstinate-Mack had come out to play.

I hated to admit it to myself, but I rather liked this side of him.

With a grunt, I leaned around him to reach for the block. I could only reach around him on one side because otherwise I'd risk getting burned by the bacon pan. The sizzling and popping were the only sounds in the kitchen as I pressed against the counter and tried to reach the knife block without touching Mack. My arms were still locked tight.

I muttered some nice insults under my breath and scooted over until I could reach the knife block. I pressed against Mack's side, and suddenly that knife wasn't what was on my mind. The warmth emanating from his body. My side stuck to his. The magnetic pull of him wouldn't let me move away.

"You're not planning on stabbing me in the back with that, are you?" he asked as he set down the mug then folded his arms across his chest. He leaned closer toward me. The shift in his stance pushed me back a few

inches.

"I'll admit I've been tempted," I whispered. Then I pushed back, taking him by surprise, then took the knife I needed and hurried back to my side of the kitchen.

It was safe there. No teasing. No scorching looks. No chance of me saying or doing something I might regret.

I began chopping peppers for an omelet.

"You know, there's a quicker way to chop those, right?" he asked as he pulled his pan of bacon off the stove.

I glared at him and deliberately slowed my chopping down. He narrowed his eyes and turned off the stove. My back stiffened as he walked around the island. If he touched me one more time, I'd snap. I held the knife in the air as I waited to see what he would do.

He stepped directly behind me and placed one hand on the counter next to the cutting board. Next, he reached forward and wrapped a hand around mine that held the knife.

His chest pressed against my back as he leaned forward and began chopping the vegetables. My hips pressed into the counter. His chin rested on top of my head as he chopped. The rhythmic thump-thump and my heavy breathing were the only sounds that filled the kitchen. The red peppers weren't getting chopped any faster, but my heart rate was speeding up to make up for it. His hand tensed around mine each time he brought the knife down on top of the vegetable.

Desperate to do something, I reached forward with my free hand to hold the pepper steady.

Mack grasped my hand and pinned it flat against my stomach. His fingers splayed across mine.

Then he began chopping in earnest. Every snap of the knife matched my heartbeat now.

His chin moved from the top of my head, but then I could feel his warm breath against my temple.

I flexed my fingers against his, entwining them with his hand. His breath hitched when I leaned back into him. The knife paused momentarily before it continued to obliterate the pepper.

"You're not chopping it uniform," I managed to croak out.

"Not everything has to be perfect," he said in a surprisingly steady voice. Was I the only one affected by this close proximity? I swallowed and tried to

focus on something. Anything.

Unfortunately, my gaze came to rest on the entwined hands pressed against my stomach. A large thumb was tracing lazy circles above my navel.

"All done," he said as he released my hand, then pried my fingers off the knife.

He kept his hold on me.

"Do you still hate me?" he whispered.

I shook my head slowly, bumping against his chin when I did.

"Do you—" he paused to brush my hair away from my face. "Do you like me?"

I turned slightly to stare into emerald eyes and whispered, "Sometimes."

He slowly pressed his lips to my temple. The stormy look on his face wasn't borne from hate, that was for sure.

He pulled back and studied my face for a moment, then leaned down to kiss my cheek slowly.

I turned and kissed his jaw.

His hand slipped from my stomach down to my hip. I spun slowly, keeping my face tilted upwards toward his as I placed my hands on his chest.

Open invitation to Kimber's lips.

He smelled amazing. Like someone had dipped him in fresh pine and cedar the day he was born. It was like catnip for me.

And because I was patient and ladylike and...well, I kissed him. I pulled his head toward mine and kissed him square on those full lips of his.

I didn't have time to wait for his RSVP.

His groan rumbled through my soul, and he tightened the hand on my waist. So this was what it was like to have a firework go off in your heart.

My chest pressed against his and I tightened my arms around his neck. Wanting him closer. Hate him? No, I didn't hate him. Furthest thing from it. I wanted him more than any other man I'd known. I wanted him to trust me—to want me the same way I wanted him. To know that I wasn't angry at him anymore.

And then he began to move. He slanted those lips against mine and took the lead. Tugging me as tight as possible against him. Running a hand up my back until he gripped my neck. Slipping his tongue past my lips. I parried it, then bit it lightly.

He growled and lifted me up to set me on the counter. Later I would remember we were lucky he didn't set me on the knife, but in the moment

that was the last thing I was thinking about.

I gripped his shoulders to fight the sensation of falling. It had nothing to do with where I was sitting and everything to do with the sensations his kissing invoked.

And then the shrill ringing of a phone ruined everything. The rest of the world came into sharp focus. The smell of bacon became more pungent, and my lips were cold without Mack warming them up.

He groaned as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

"It's your day off. Surely you don't have to answer that."

"It's not work. It's Jordan."

I tried not to let my disappointment show when he answered the phone. "Yup?"

The voice rattled off on the other end of the line.

"I'll be home in a couple of weeks. You can use my truck in the meantime. It's at Noah and Page's. Yeah. Yeah. He needed it. I drove my other car to the airport." Quiet for a moment, then he continued. "Noah hid the keys from her, so you might have to call him before you go over there. No problem. Okay. Bye."

He hung up the phone. People were always needing him. I couldn't believe how many times he answered the phone and solved a problem for someone...

"You don't have a girlfriend, do you?" The words popped out of my mouth before I could stop them. My brain waffled back and forth as it tried to settle on dread or panic as I waited for his answer.

He looked equally horrified. "No! How could you think that? Would I be kissing you like that if I did?"

"I'm sorry!" I exclaimed as I threw my hands in the air. "I'm not good at making assumptions! I'm usually wrong."

"I'd believe that! You were wrong this time," he snapped. "No girlfriend."

He folded his arms across his chest and glared at me.

Mood=incinerated. *Good, job Kimber.*

"Your phone is ringing off the hook all the time. Calls and texts. I guess I just wondered if some of it was a girlfriend." I tried for nonchalant, but I sounded needy even to my own ears.

We were nothing. Nothing. Not boyfriend/girlfriend. Not roommates. Not even friends.

We were unfriendly acquaintances who liked to lock lips, I tried to tell

myself. My self didn't believe me...

His grumpy face shifted to an amused look as he rested a hand on the counter beside me. "Were you jealous?"

"Jealous? Of who? Someone getting your truck keys." I shook my head and laughed. "Please. I'm not jealous of whoever it was."

"It's killing you not knowing, isn't it?"

"Crushing my soul, actually." Why couldn't I stop with the nosiness? Was it a biological predisposition or a learned behavior? I'd never know.

"That was my cousin Jordan. He's replacing the engine block on his truck and needs something to drive for a couple days while he does that. I told him he could use mine."

"That's nice. What does he do? Drive a bulldozer through small towns to build big fancy resorts?"

"No, he does the actual building."

"How quaint," I said without any true bite in my tone. The last few minutes had taken any amount of bite away from me.

"He's in construction. He's been climbing the ladder at his company. They generally do commercial buildings, but he's good at residential too. Much better than me."

"Better than you?"

Mack shrugged. "I bought a fixer upper a few months ago. It's still too run down to live in, but it's going to be amazing."

"Really?"

"Want to know how much I've gotten done on it?"

"How much?"

He held his fingers up in the shape of a zero. "Gorgeous 1880's home. I bought it at auction. And I haven't done a bit of work to it. I haven't had time."

"When did you say you bought it?"

"Six months ago."

I climbed off the counter. "Do you have pictures?"

"Yes..."

"Well, are you going to show me while I cook this omelet for us?"

His face lit up as I asked him. And all of a sudden I really did want to hear all about his project house.

"You want to see my fixer upper?" The excitement was evident in his voice. "Are you sure?"

"Mack. If you're not going to finish kissing me, show me the dang house."

He grinned and pulled his phone out of his pocket and proceeded to show me at least one-hundred pictures and four videos of the most gorgeous, rundown, old house that had to have ever been sold at auction.

Chapter Twenty

KIMBER

"*K*imber," Mack's voice sounded very real. Not dreamlike at all. How strange.

My dreams were getting more realistic. High-definition dreams. I liked it.

"Kimber," his voice said again. And now I could practically feel his hands on my body. I needed to get out of here. When I'd dreamed about Mack so many nights in a row that it was beginning to feel real, it was time to call it quits. Go home. I was hitting the obsessed point.

He was shaking me now. That seemed accurate. I'd made myself enough of a pain in the butt that it made sense that dream-Mack would want to throttle me.

"Kimber, I want you to come to work with me today."

I sighed and tried to burrow farther under the covers.

They were rudely ripped out of my grasp. My eyes popped open.

"I'm cold. Give me my blanket back."

Warm hands latched onto my arms, and I found myself sitting upright.

"The owner of the resort is coming into town this morning. This is your chance to interview him. He's meeting me at the diner at eight. I'm going to ask him if he'll be willing to do an interview with you."

I stared at Mack's face. He had a little scruff like he hadn't shaved in a couple days, but it had been smooth yesterday morning when I'd kissed him. I didn't realize that it would grow so fast, but I liked scruffy Mack as much as clean shaven Mack.

His words finally sank in.

"An interview? With Merrick? You're willing to do this for me?"

"Yes, but I draw the line at getting you dressed." He winked and I felt my

heart take a little tumble.

"I'm leaving in fifteen minutes."

"But that's not enough time to do my makeup!"

"Bummer." He laughed and left the room, the dirty little...

I jumped out of bed and managed to get ready in fifteen minutes. The makeup was a bare minimum but at least I managed a little mascara. I tried to love my blonde eyelashes, but my self-acceptance was a work in progress—one paved with charcoal black mascara.

A short while later, Mack was sitting at a table with the other two surveyors and another man I didn't recognize, and I was pretending to be an unconcerned citizen—who was very much concerned.

It took fifteen minutes before Mack waved me over. CJ and Eric, the other two men Mack worked with were already out the door. I swallowed the lump in my throat as I approached them. Mack was sticking his neck out for me. This was his job. What he was here for. And instead of getting angry and lowering himself (okay, the hidden bath towels was pretty low) to my resentful level, he'd arranged an interview with Theo Merrick for me.

I wanted to launch myself across the restaurant and sob into that beautiful man's soft T-shirt. At this point, it wouldn't even surprise him. It had happened before.

"Kimber, this is Theo Merrick. He's the one who owns Mountain Pine resorts. He said he'd be happy to talk with you." Mack smiled encouragingly.

I barely managed to contain my launching.

Because this was my chance. Here it was. An opportunity to interview someone who could make or break a small town. This meeting would also determine the direction my opinion piece article would go.

I held out a shaky hand and shook his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Merrick for taking the time to speak with me."

He smiled briefly. "Please. My brother is Mr. Merrick. I'm Theo. Do you mind talking with me while I finish my breakfast?"

"Of course," I agreed and slid into the booth across from him.

Mack tipped his head in my direction with a wink. "I'm off to work then. I'll see you later," Mack said.

I wanted to leap up and thank him for this opportunity, but that gratitude would have to wait until later. Right now, I needed to recall every question I had for Theo Merrick.

Thirty minutes later, and I was sad to admit that I didn't have any more

dirt on him than I did when I first came to Long Pine.

He went about everything in due process. He'd carefully considered adding a resort to Long Pine and even had the statistics and reasoning on why he chose this location, and why it wouldn't change the town except for the better.

Theo set his napkin on the table. "Listen, I'm not a philanthropist. I'm not out to make the world a better place."

He was being painfully honest, and at the moment, I was intrigued by his honesty. So far he'd answered every question bluntly.

"But do you know what's bad business?"

I could think of a thousand things off the top of my head, but I answered, "No."

"Pissing where you eat. If I come into a small town and piss off the locals. Destroy their economy, change the landscaping, then they're not going to cater to my clientele. There will be hostility, and eventually, I'll start losing money because I'll be fighting to obtain and keep permits and return customers. But, if I hire locally, spotlight the local attractions, then it's a deal that benefits the locals, and me. I make money, they make money, and we all walk away happy."

"What about the people who are nostalgic about change?"

"Then I'd encourage them to find somewhere in the world that doesn't change. They won't find it. Change is inevitable. I hope that the change my business brings is for the better."

Well, he wasn't exactly squeezing out locals and dumping toxic chemicals in Long Pine's back yard, was he?

And just where did that leave my article?

Dangling in the wind.



I waited for Mack at the edge of the property. It was wrong to stand on the property of the resort. Invasive.

Was I actively trying to get the resort shut down only three days ago? Yes, yes I was. I'd thought I was doing the right thing then. I wanted to do something good in the world. But maybe the good I did in the world involved individual lives. Like Elsie's. Mack's. Even Hank's.

Maybe it meant apologizing to the Landrys even if I hadn't meant to print that article.

Maybe, the big change I brought to this world would be instigated on an individual level. And wouldn't that be the longer lasting change?

Mack waved goodbye to the men climbing into a work truck, then trudged towards me. Darkness was falling, and the streetlights of the grocery store parking lot were glaring off the puddles on top of the asphalt.

Mack stopped in front of me. My heart seemed to swell in my chest and there was a symphony of happy stars shooting off in my brain. I wanted to tell him how much I appreciated him. I wanted him to know how good and patient and wonderful he was. I wanted him to know how grateful I was that he got me an interview with Theo Merrick, even at the risk of his own job.

Mack barely had time to catch me as I did what I'd wanted to in the restaurant early that morning.

I launched myself into his arms.

Chapter Twenty-One

MACK

I'd never slept so well. She wasn't mad at me anymore. Whatever grudge she held against big resorts seemed to be fading. Or maybe she realized it was Lara and Elsie's grudge against resorts. Maybe she'd discovered that this resort in particular was not a Big Bad.

After a big thank-you hug, (yes, please send more of those my way), we walked back to the cabin arm in arm. She thanked me profusely for arranging the interview, and then demanded we speak about my house.

I could only assume that since I had solved a problem for her, she wanted to reciprocate by helping me with mine.

Figuring out my huge renovation project. One I liked to call a long shot. I didn't have time to renovate a house. But I was excited about it.

And whatever the reason was, it had been great to be able to talk with Kimber all about my new project house.

My only project house, actually. And she'd listened. She'd asked me a million questions about it and argued the merits of making a man cave in the basement. She'd asked *why* I hadn't done much with it yet. I'd had to remind her, yet again, that I had a large family. Demands on my time. A job that's requiring me to travel more and more.

A job that required me to get up or I would be late.

I groaned and rolled out of bed. I should have set my alarm a little earlier. But I'd stayed up too late last night talking with Kimber after work. #worthit.

I stumbled into the bathroom and flipped the light on. Mornings hit hard. Not because of the going to work bit. But because I believed the lie that my twenty-nine-year-old body could stay up late and get up early without any repercussions. It was a false belief.

After splashing some water on my face, I got ready for the day and headed back into the bedroom. My phone wasn't on the nightstand and the bedroom door was cracked open.

I *knew* I'd left it on the nightstand. Or I was more tired than I thought and had already forgotten where it was.

I checked the bathroom. It wasn't in there either. There's only one place it could be. I headed into the kitchen and found Kimber sitting at the bar sipping an extra-large mug of coffee. "You haven't seen my phone, have you?"

She took a long sip of coffee, then set the mug down. There was an imprint of her red lipstick left on the side.

"I might know where it is," she said as she grabbed the bottle of half-and-half sitting next to her, adding an extra little splash into her cup.

"Kimber. Give me my phone."

"You don't need it."

"I'm going to work in five minutes. I need it."

"You have a work phone," she reminded me.

I glared at her. My work phone only looked slightly different than my personal phone. I was amazed she realized I had two. I didn't think I'd be that observant if it were someone else. "Kimber."

I took a step toward her. She let out a little squeak of fear as she held up her cup like a shield.

"I'm doing this for you!" She yelped.

"If I had more time," I growled.

"But you don't!" She rushed out. "You have to go to work. Enjoy your day! Wear a hat! Watch out for ice! Don't let the door hit you on the way out!"

Unfortunately, she was right. I did have to go to work. I'd have to deal with her later. And hopefully there wasn't an emergency.

Because if there was, I'd be settling up with Kimber tonight.



Lunch break rolled around, and it still felt weird not having at least ten texts to answer. My pocket was hollow. My heart would skip a beat every time my hand came up empty. I wondered what was going wrong in the world. I

should be making sure Jenny got everything packed, I needed to know if my apartment was ready for company, if mom and dad had gotten in touch with Hagen, then there was Page and needing the vacation rental information, and—I stopped myself before my mind could explode.

And there was nothing I could do about any of that. I'd purposefully never given my family my work number. I'd never saved any of their numbers on it either since I always had my personal phone.

Did I have my parents' numbers memorized? Yes. But for some reason I felt committed to protecting my work number, and I didn't want to dissect why I felt that way.

So, for lunch I walked to the diner in town and ordered a pasta plate. The other guys had made it there first, along with several locals.

CJ was bothering Elsie again.

He didn't know how to take a hint. Or a straightforward answer, for that matter. She was sitting at a table by herself looking as though she was waiting on someone. And CJ was hovering.

Standing next to her table and leaning toward her, no less. She was pressed against the back of her chair trying to get as far from him as possible.

I hadn't paid much attention before, but she was cute in that sweet girl-next-door kind of way. The other times I'd seen her she'd been with Kimber, but it wasn't like I'd really noticed her because Kimber had stolen my attention from the first moment I met her.

Elsie was classically pretty but seemed timid. She seemed incredibly uncomfortable with CJ's hovering. I guess I couldn't blame her. She kept glancing over her shoulder at the exit. I wondered if she was hoping to get out of the awkward conversation.

CJ's boastful voice could be heard throughout the restaurant. "Yeah, I'm the top surveyor on this job. I travel all over, wherever my company needs me. Which is fine since I'm an adventurer by nature; I can't ever stay in one place too long anyway."

"Is that because you always overstay your welcome?" I asked from behind him. He stiffened and I caught Elsie's smile from behind her hand.

"CJ, she's taken."

"She could always change her mind," he stupidly argued.

"Are you going to change your mind?" I asked her point blank as I leaned a hand on the table.

Elsie looked up at me and shook her head. "I don't think I will."

CJ mumbled under his breath some not nice things about me as he walked away. It didn't matter. I wouldn't have to work with him much longer. I could respect that he was a decent surveyor, but still recognize him as the jerk that he was being right now.

"Sorry about that. Hopefully he won't bother you again."

I rapped my knuckles on the table and turned to walk away.

"Wait." Her soft voice called out to me.

I glanced over my shoulder at her.

"That's the second time you've helped me. Thank you."

I smiled. "It's not a big deal."

She adjusted her glasses as she turned to face me. "It's hard for me."

"What is?"

"Telling people no. Having awkward confrontations."

Preaching to the choir. But I didn't say what I was thinking. Instead, I defended those of us who hated to say no. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"That's sweet of you to say. I can see why Kimber likes you so much." She smiled. "Why don't you sit and eat with me?"

I glanced at the table with the other surveyors. I wouldn't get a friendly welcome from CJ, and Eric wasn't much of a conversationalist so I didn't see anything wrong with eating lunch with Elsie.

I caught the waiter's attention and pointed to the table to let him know where to bring my food when it was ready.

"Tell me something. You say you hate awkward conversations, but you don't mind telling *me* that. Why?"

She shrugged. "Because you're Kimber's."

"I'm Kimber's?" Yesterday I would have liked the sound of that. Today I was thinking I was mad at her and wanted my phone back.

"I thought you guys were dating with the way she talks about you."

"We just met."

"I know. But she talks about you all the time."

"She's trying to sabotage my job. And is always fighting with me."

"You do know that fighting is flirting, right?" Elsie rested her chin on her hands.

"I won't argue there."

"See? If you were interested in me, you'd argue that point just to see my reaction." She had a point.

"And where did you learn all of this, oh great relationship guru?" The

waiter brought my plate of food to the table. It did not look anything like the pasta I ordered. More like a ground-up paste.

"I read romance novels."

"Aha, that's right. Kimber said you work in the library here. But I thought you had a thing for true crime. Kimber's been trying to force herself through one of your recommended books. Her hands start shaking after a couple of pages."

"Who says you can't read multiple genres?" She stabbed at her salad that looked rather limp. "My point is, you shouldn't let our little town be something that comes between you. I realized that maybe..." She paused to clear her throat. "I think that you guys are fighting your attraction for each other. It's a classic move."

"I wasn't fighting it. I don't think she was either. At least not until she found out why I was here. That was on me, though, because I should have told her sooner."

"Have you asked her out?"

"You know, for someone who doesn't like awkward conversations, you're great at having them."

She smiled so big that her glasses lifted with her scrunched-up nose. "You're nice. And you don't expect anything from me. It makes it easy to talk to you. Plus, I feel like it's my fault you guys are fighting. I'm upset about the resort coming in, but that's because I've grown up here and am invested in what happens in this town."

"I can understand your feelings, Elsie...it's the whole 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' mentality and I can respect that." I took a bite of the pasta. It didn't taste as bad as it looked, thankfully. Wanting to change the subject to more neutral ground—seeing as I was the enemy, after all—I said, "So. You're a romance expert. You tell me: why would Kimber steal my phone?"

"She stole your phone?" she asked incredulously.

"Right off my nightstand this morning. Refused to give it back too."

"Maybe she wants your attention?"

"She stole it on a workday." By the fourth bite, the pasta was seeming okay.

"I shouldn't say, but yesterday she told me she worries about you."

"How does that translate into her taking my phone?"

Elsie shrugged. "All I know is she seemed worried about how much people ask you to do. I don't know what that means. But she said that it was

past time that someone take care of you for a change. She was telling me that yesterday. Did something happen to make her think that?"

I got an entire peppercorn in my next bite, yikes. "She said that?"

Elsie nodded.

"Interesting." It was interesting to me that she would assume that. I did the protecting, not the other way around.

I'd told her about my house. The house I hadn't had any time to work on. I'd talked about my sister with her. I'd shared more with Kimber than I had my own family. It was because she was safe. She could handle it. Maybe I had wanted someone to care specifically about the same things that I dreamed about.

"I told her about a project that I haven't had time to work on."

Elsie stirred her tea. "Maybe she took your phone to make you focus on it?" She phrased it like a question.

Now that I thought about it, it was nice to have this break from my phone. I wasn't coming up with solutions for anyone. Except Elsie, but that seemed a little different. There wasn't a constant pull on my attention and energy. And just today, sans the distraction of my phone, I had finally decided where to put my man cave—I hated the term—when I finally got time to work on my house.

I dropped my fork as I realized that when I wasn't problem-solving for other people, I could solve some of my own problems.

Maybe Kimber wasn't trying to annoy me after all.

Chapter Twenty-Two

MACK

*A*fter getting home from work, I headed straight to my room. I didn't even want to find my phone. I had too much thinking to do. I pulled out a pair of shorts from my dresser and changed quickly. I grabbed a cold beer out of the fridge and headed out to the freezing cold back deck, straight for the hot tub.

It was occupied.

Kimber sat there sipping one of my beers.

"Write it down. A woman who enjoys a good craft beer."

She shrugged. "It's a little too hoppy for my usual taste, but it's decent."

I stepped into the hot tub with a hiss. The contrasting heat against the twenty-degree air made it feel like it was burning my skin. But once I sat all the way down, it felt great.

I tipped my bottle in her direction. "Here's to an excellent phone heist."

She stared at me as she took a sip. Her tone was serious when she asked, "How did it feel?"

I knew what she was getting at. "Peaceful."

She nodded once and then stared off at the snow-covered mountains. "I'll be the bad guy if it gives you a break."

We sat quietly. The soft hum of the hot tub the only sound in the night. The jets weren't running, so there wasn't even the noise of the bubbling water.

"It's hard to let it go. I worry someone may need me," I admitted. "To be physically too far away to help my family has been a nice break. But I hadn't realized I needed the emotional reprieve as well."

She didn't say anything, just nodded as she kept studying the moonlit mountains.

"But something tells me you might have needed this getaway even more than me," I dared to say. I still didn't know what she was running from, but thanks to subtle hints, i.e., her sobbing into my T-shirt, I figured *something* had made her want to take on a contract reporting job for Lara Raglund.

"No. I ran away because I'm a coward," Kimber whispered.

I stretched my legs out on the bench and relaxed with my arm along the top of the tub.

Kimber began tracing circles in the water with her index finger as she started to speak.

"I was eating dinner at a restaurant with a friend one night. It was a soft opening, and I was supposed to be writing an article about it in the community section. I cover everything that happens locally. Wayne—my boss—had been wanting a little bit more printed in our gossip column to spice things up, so I'd been keeping my eyes open for something that would fit the bill just right. I hadn't jumped into gossip column territory before, so I wasn't completely sure what qualified, at least not in a small town. We didn't have any celebrities to write about. No nasty divorces with million-dollar settlements. So I've been on the lookout for something that would constitute gossip news in Charlesville.

"When I left the restaurant, I walked back to where I had parked next to a convenience store. It was off the beaten path, but that's why I parked there. Because I'm cheap and I don't want to pay a parking fee. Before I'd even reached the parking lot, I spotted Pastor Landry coming out of the convenience store."

She glanced at me as though wondering if I knew who he was.

Anyone who grew up in Charlesville knew Pastor Landry as he was heavily involved in the community. I nodded and Kimber continued with her story. "He was with another woman. One who wasn't his wife. They walked very close together, he had his hand on her shoulder. They were both glancing around frantically as though they didn't want to be caught.

"I thought to myself that if I was a prominent pastor in a small town, I wouldn't want to be caught having an affair either. I was sure I had figured out the scoop for the small town. Someone who claimed to be a pillar of the community, abusing his power. It's a story that would be sure to sell lots of papers. With that in mind, I took note of him opening the front door of the car for her and helping her in. I'd never noticed before that he had darkened his windows. Why would a local pastor need darkly tinted windows unless he

was doing something nefarious?

"I wanted to talk with them first. So I wrote a quick draft of an article and planned to interview the woman before anything came of it. Wayne, my boss, printed the article and ran it. Without my permission.

"Not two days later in the arrest section, I discovered that the woman who was with the pastor had been in an abusive situation. Turns out, the pastor was helping get her somewhere safe until her husband was arrested. To make matters worse, the woman emailed me informing me of what a kind man the pastor and his wife were. You see, his wife was in the car with them. They'd stopped for a few toiletries before they drove her to a hotel where the husband couldn't find her. Mr. and Mrs. Landry were helping protect a victim. And I repaid that kindness by spreading malicious gossip about them.

"It made me sick to think of what I'd done. I didn't want to leave my house ever again. That's why when Lara reached out to me to come write an expose on the resort in her little vacation town, I jumped at the chance. I ran because I'm a scummy villain and it took me weeks to get up the courage to apologize to them."

She slowly swirled the bottle of beer. Condensation ran down the side.

"I want to print a retraction. A formal apology. Something or anything to make it better. Both Mr. and Mrs. Landry have communicated with me since I've been here. They promised me that all is forgiven. They told me they understood how things could have looked and they accepted my apology.

"Do you know what's worse than someone being angry at you for hurting them? Someone forgiving you right away. Mrs. Landry explained that it was very common for them to help people who are in dangerous situations. That was part of what they do as pastors. It was also one of the reasons they had tinted car windows. They had dealt with situations like this in the past. They always work together as a couple to help whoever needs it. So instead of finding a nice juicy bit of gossip, I fabricated a rude and malicious lie about the most wonderful couple. That's why I'm a coward."

I sat quietly for a few minutes processing everything she told me, then finally spoke, "So you're telling me that you messed up big time?"

"Yes." She looked as though she were going to be sick.

"And now you're trying to fix it?"

"Somebody has to, I can't let this go. I've done irreparable damage to their reputations."

"It sounds to me like you made a mistake and are trying to repair it.

Sounds to me like you're taking responsibility for your actions and trying to make a difference. Everybody makes mistakes."

"But mine was so mean! And judgmental!" She was making waves in the hot tub with her hands, swishing them back and forth.

"Listen. Everybody's done something they're ashamed of at one point in their life. But if you have the guts to own up to your mistakes, take responsibility and learn from them, then you can grow from that experience. However, if you continually put the blame on someone else, you'll never have the ability to have empathy for anyone else. Taking responsibility is a very brave thing to do. It's the right thing to do. You should be proud of yourself."

Her hands stilled. "You do realize I caused the problem in the first place, right?"

"But I know you're going to make it right in the end. Over and above sending an apology email, you'll do what's necessary to fix it."

She slowly moved across the hot tub to sit next to me. "Thanks for thinking that about me. Honestly, that alone makes me want to do the right thing."

I lifted my arm and settled it around her shoulders. "You'll get it done. You organized a protest in about five minutes. I know you can get a retraction printed."

She smiled before she leaned her head on my shoulder to stare at the stars with me.

"This Wayne. He sounds like a jerk."

"You've picked up on his character so well just from my explanation." I feel her shift as she snuggled closer.

"Does he own that newspaper?" Because I had a sneaking suspicion I knew someone who would be able to change his mind.

"He's part owner. He has two partners. One owns an equal amount as him, he told me, though, that that partner prefers to remain confidential. I don't even know who it is. And then the other one is the man, Martine Broussard, who started the Charlesville Gazette. I think he only owns a small percentage now. I still don't know who that third partner is."

How interesting. Because I knew who the confidential partner was, and her last name was Boone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

MACK

"Mimi." I spoke quietly into my personal cell phone. I was upstairs in the hallway outside of Kimber's room. Kimber was outside walking the lake in the early dawn light. I'd used it as a chance to get upstairs and find my phone.

"Mack, sweetie, you've never sounded so serious."

"Do you still own shares in the *Charlesville Gazette*?" Kimber needed someone to back her up on this. And I couldn't think of a scarier force than my grandmother, the one and only Mimi Boone.

"Yes."

"How much weight do you have there?"

"It depends on what needs to happen."

"Could you make them print a retraction?"

"Did Wayne's gossip column get out of hand again? He should have reined in that columnist of his. Unacceptable." She must have seen the article that had been printed.

"Mimi. She asked him to print a retraction. He won't."

I could hear rustling in the background, making me wonder what she was up to.

"Aha. So that's the way of it. I never liked that cheat anyway. I'll take care of it. Anything for you, Matthias."

"Thanks, Grandma. I knew I could count on you."

"You know, you should ask me for help more often. I do a bang-up job of it. It's hereditary, you know. That's where you get it from."

"I know, Mimi." The front door opened. "I've got to go hide my phone before she finds me talking on it."

"I'd ask, but I don't want to know. Love you, pumpkin. Don't forget Jenny's going-away party."

"Mimi, I'm the one planning it, sort of hard for me to forget. Love you." I hung up the phone, then hurried and returned it to Kimber's hiding place. I didn't want to steal the joy from her of thinking that if she'd hid it so well, I couldn't find it. I glanced both ways, then tiptoed downstairs.

Kimber was coming out of the laundry room. She looked at me like I had stolen her fine china.

"You look guilty." She planted both hands on her hips and stared me down.

The best way to avoid suspicion is to tell the truth—at least part of it. "I've been looking for my phone. I was wondering if you were going to pack it in your suitcase when you leave."

She smiled. "I'll return it, tomorrow. You needed the break."

"Are we going to go eat at that greasy breakfast joint you showed me the first day that I was here? I've got time before work starts."

She was still wearing her coat from going on a morning walk. "As long as I can get all the carbs. I'll text a picture to Courtney. She'll be perfectly horrified. She's into keto and bread is straight from hell in her eyes."

"What does that even mean?"

"It means she doesn't understand my love of carbs and I don't understand her hatred of them. It's pretty much an irreparable divide in our relationship," she joked.

I shook my head. "You guys are messed up."

"I think what drives her crazy is that even with my unhealthy eating I can give her a run for her money in the gym. We have this friendly competition going on about who the strongest sister is. We usually end up pulling muscles trying to outlift each other."

"That seems unhealthy..."

"I'm not denying it, just stating the facts," she said as she grabbed her purse off the hook by the door. "I never said it was a healthy competition, just friendly."

I followed her out the door. "You guys definitely need serious help—or a serious intervention."

"Are you offering?"

"Trust me, I'd win that game in a heartbeat. I could probably lift both of you in a heartbeat."

"Hey now. I'm no weeny! I can hold my own just fine."

"But can you do this?" I bent down and tossed her over my shoulder as I carried her across the snow-covered driveway.

Her shriek of laughter made me smile.

"Put me down and I'll try." Okay. I hadn't been expecting her to say that.

I put her back on her feet and patted the top of her head. Nothing worse than a condescending pat on the hair to rile up a woman.

She pursed her lips and then squatted to wrap her arms around my thighs. And lifted.

Dang if she didn't get me off the ground and carry me a couple feet.

"Okay! You proved your point!" I yelled as she set me back down.

She gasped. "Good. Because I don't think I could have gone much farther." She bent forward and rested a hand behind her back. "Oh, geez. I really am going to have to go to the chiropractor when I get home."

"You know what?" I asked as I rubbed her back in gentle circles.

"What?"

"You do some dumb stuff sometimes."

"Thanks. Now let's go find some breakfast. I need some sustenance."

She limped along at my side all the way to the greasy diner.



I sat with a small coffee mug in my hands, glad that she'd been willing to leave the cabin so early in the morning.

Kimber was diving into the biscuits and gravy like she hadn't eaten in years. She had a bagel with cream cheese sitting on the side as a chaser.

Even though I knew what I wanted to say at breakfast, I was having trouble finding the words. I would never forgive myself if I didn't at least try.

I was working up the nerve to ask her out.

I'd been thinking about nothing else the last couple of days. Ever since Elsie confirmed what I suspected.

"I'll admit this biscuit and gravy plate isn't as good as you could get at home. I'm pretty sure this gravy comes out of the can," she commented between bites.

"It gives it extra special flavor, don't you think? Whenever gravy sits in a can for a few years, it takes on a life of its own."

She threw her head back and laughed. Her eyes watered as she tried not to choke on her mouth full of biscuit.

I had to hurry and swallow my hot coffee before I spit it out with laughter.

"What are you going to do when you get home?" she asked. "I have a whole list for when I get back. When are you going to be able to start work on your house?"

I frowned. "I don't think I'm going to have much time to work on it. I have a lot of family things going on in the immediate future."

She shook her head. "You're close with your family. That's nice. But have you ever said the word 'no?'"

I couldn't quite tell if she's teasing or not. She had a smile on her face, but her tone was serious.

"We're a close family. We try to look out for each other."

"I can see that. And that's a neat quality about a family. But would you take a piece of advice from an unbiased—okay, may be a little bit biased—outsider?"

I nodded slowly.

She set down her fork as she spoke. "I see you trying to take care of everybody. It's an amazing quality. I saw you protecting Elsie. She told me you came to her rescue again in the restaurant. I've seen how you look out for me, then with your friends and family. Arranging things for someone who's moving. Letting people use your apartment. Coordinating renovations for someone. A going away party, a car problem. I swear there isn't something you can't arrange or fix, and you're even a few hundred miles away!

"I see you trying to take care of me. And I'll admit, I love being looked after. I don't like to stay alone in big vacation houses by myself it turns out. And I definitely don't like scary movies." We both chuckled at that. "But you're so busy taking care of everyone else, that you're not taking care of yourself. You don't even have time to work on your house that you bought six months ago. And oddly enough, I feel responsible for you somehow. You're like a little baby bird that fell out of your nest."

"I don't think that imagery works."

She folded her hands together and rested them on the table. "Roll with it. You're a little baby bird that doesn't know how to say no. You're hopping back and forth taking care of everybody and then—" She paused. "That doesn't work as imagery, does it?"

I take another sip of my coffee, trying not to laugh. "Visualization isn't your strong suit?"

"You'd think with my imagination that it would be." She shook her head. "My point is, that it's okay to tell people no. 'No' is a perfectly acceptable answer. In fact, it's a complete answer. It does not require an explanation, it may be used in all situations, and it's a word I've rarely heard from your lips."

"I've told you no." I realize that what I said was true. I had told her no. And it felt great. She was easy to have boundaries with. Or maybe because I felt comfortable with her it was an easy thing to say.

"Exactly. You told me 'no', and nothing bad happened to you. Why don't you tell other people no?"

"They're family and it's my responsibility to take care of them."

She picked up her fork and chased a piece of biscuit around her plate. "Okay. I figured out my imagery for this particular situation."

"Oh no. I'm not sure I can handle it." I signaled the waiter for a refill on coffee. I was going to need it if I made it through her imagery and managed to ask her out all in one fell swoop.

"You're not the baby bird." She dropped the fork with a clank and tapped her fingers together.

The waiter snickered as he filled my mug. She waited until the waiter left to finish her story. "You're the mother bird."

"What if I want to be the father bird?"

"Fine. In this story, you're the nanny bird."

"Do birds have nannies?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. "I've always wondered what it would be like to strangle someone over the breakfast table. If you're not careful, I might try it out today."

I mimed zipping my lips and motioned for her to continue.

"Everyone who calls you needing your help, guidance, or time, are the baby birds. These baby birds need to learn how to fly. And they can't do that if the nanny bird keeps stepping in to fix everything for them. If the nanny keeps bringing them their food, they'll never leave the nest. In fact, they'll become more demanding. Pretty soon an earthworm won't be enough. Eventually they're going to want gummy worms. And then they're going to want the nanny bird to go out and find those sour gummy worms covered in sugar. It's not that they don't love or appreciate the nanny bird, but they're becoming dependent on the nanny bird to do everything for them. If the

nanny bird never makes them go find their own worm, then they're going to stay in that nest the rest of their lives."

I stared at her. As much as it pained me to admit, her imagery made sense. What I had seen as protecting and caring for my cousins and my parents had turned into me running myself ragged trying to meet their every need and desire.

Was it necessary for me to replace Jordan's engine block? No.

Was it necessary for me to find Page an Airbnb—and book it? No.

Was it necessary that I drive Jenny all the way out to Oregon? No.

My parents didn't *need* me to renovate their house every six months. Kylie and Hagen didn't *need* me to run interference with an overzealous grandma. They would have to set their own boundaries there.

Kimber was also right about something else.

I didn't have time for a girlfriend.

This vacation has only been an illusion. I've spent so much time with Kimber, I'd begun to forget how many demands there were on my time back at home. Once we left this Colorado cabin, things would not be the same. There wouldn't be a closeness between us. I wouldn't have the time to take her on a date more than once a month.

Basically, what she'd just told me without even realizing it was that I didn't have any right to ask her out right now.

At least not until I learned how to stop being a nanny bird.

Chapter Twenty-Four

KIMBER

"Can I carry this out to the truck for you?" Mack asked as he grabbed the handle of my giant suitcase.

It was *not* carry-on size.

"That'd be great. Thank you." I opened the door and stepped outside, reluctant to leave the cabin that had built so many memories. Reluctant to leave the man I'd fallen for.

I tugged my hat lower over my ears.

The mood was somber. The skies clouded and the wind blew. The chill was bitter and sharp.

Mack lifted the suitcase into the back of Hank's truck, closing the bed cover over it to protect it from the elements.

The truck exhaust melted the snow below it. Hank and Elsie sat in the front, waiting for me.

Mack turned to me. "Thanks for sharing the cabin with me. And the bagels."

I smiled. It felt as brittle as the icicles hanging from the porch roof. "Thanks for, well, everything."

He pulled me in for a hug, our coats poofing as he pulled me close.

I didn't want to let go.

He grasped the back of my head and leaned down to kiss my forehead.

"I'll see you at home."

I nodded. "Okay."

We both knew the magic of this working vacation would be gone when I stepped into that truck.

"I'll see you around."

He nodded and trudged slowly up to the house while I climbed into the truck.

"Whoa, got the fiery furnace going on here," I teased, trying to keep myself from crying. People don't cry over leaving vacation buddies. It just wasn't done, as my mother would say.

"Got everything you need?" Hank asked as he backed out of the driveway.

"Yup! I think so."

My suitcase. Check.

My self-respect. Check.

My heart. Left on the porch in the hands of the man watching us leave.

"You know, it's none of my business, but Mack seems like a good guy. I'm surprised you guys aren't dating after staying together that long."

I turned and glared at Elsie. "Would you like a longer knife to stick in my back, or would you prefer to twist the one you have?"

Hank laughed merrily as he drove across the bridge, taking us away from Long Pine. For a fit fifty-year-old, he sounded an awful lot like Santa Claus.

"Look, it didn't work out. Nothing was said. We were vacation buddies, that's it."

Except it didn't feel like that was it. I wasn't okay with walking away. I wanted more. It felt like the door was still wide open. But there was nothing I could do about it. I was going home. My time here was up.

I was going to get a retraction printed, or I was going to hand in my notice. Did I have another job lined up? No. I'd probably have to move back in with my parents until I got back on my feet. They'd be thrilled.

Me, not so much.

I'd be back to sleeping in the twin bed I grew up in. Courtney would gloat.

But at least I would have a clear conscience.

And ultimately, that was more important than creature comforts.



Sitting on the tarmac was one of the more stressful moments of my life. Flying made me nauseous. I wasn't sure if that was because of the motion sickness-related thing, or me picturing the plane plummeting to the depths of

the earth from ten-thousand feet. But whichever was the root cause of it, I always wanted to curl up and hang onto a bag as if that would make me feel better.

Which made the delayed flight seem even worse.

A voice on the intercom announced: "There will be a slight delay, as one of our engines has blown up."

Okay, so maybe that wasn't what the pilot said, but the moral of the story was that we were not getting off the runway soon.

And I knew I had some time to do something that would make a difference for someone. Make a difference for Mack. He'd kill me if he ever found out. But I could do something for him as a parting gift.

I pulled out my phone and opened the link to the newspaper article that had been printed as an opinion piece.

It really wasn't much of an opinion piece. It was more of a statement-of-fact piece. I found that I had no basis to write a critical view of the resort. Not after doing my due diligence and interviewing as many people as I could who had been involved with it.

It was all on the up and up.

Lara had been a mixture of pleased and disappointed. Glad that there would be nothing bad happening to Long Pine, but disappointed that it wouldn't be exactly the same—forever frozen in time as a hidden gem of the Colorado mountains.

I had mixed feelings about it myself. On one hand, I'd managed to fight my own nature and do thorough research. On the other, it took me some time to get to that point. After jumping to conclusions about the resort and about Mack, I'd seemed bent on the same path of destruction that had led me to Long Pine.

I'd stopped myself in the nick of time. And I'd summoned up the courage to apologize for my past mistakes. Mack really was rubbing off on me. I was getting better at doing the right thing—even if it was uncomfortable.

Which reminded me. I wanted to do something for Mack.

I created a group text to the contacts I'd stolen off of Mack's phone.

Mack's Leeches was the name I'd given the group.

Me: Hello to all of you. You don't know me, but I know Mack. And he would kill me (or at least threaten to) if he caught me texting you. But someone had to. I had Mack's phone for 72 hours. A small mix-up.

I paused my typing as I smiled about the mix-up that led to me being able

to steal his phone from him. Oh well. They didn't need to know it was a housing mix-up rather than a phone mix-up.

Me continued: I know you guys love Mack. I saw that when you were sending frantic, worried texts over the last couple days. And he loves you. Can you please do me a favor and take care of him? He loves you all so much that he would do anything for you. Even put his own life on hold. Ask him about his house he bought. Ask him about the job he wants to apply for. Talk about his sister with him. Look out for him.

I hit send.

It didn't take long to get responses. Some of them were not G-rated.

Kylie: Mack's renovating a house? He lives in an apartment though.

Page: Who is this?

Jordan: Mack has always had a protector complex.

Jenny: When I get my hands on him...

I wasn't sure what to make of Jenny's reply, but I guess I didn't need to know. Hopefully she would see what I saw.

A man who loved his family, but was still just that: a man.

Chapter Twenty-Five

MACK

The week after Kimber left had been dismal. I ate lunches with Elsie and Hank who seemed to think it was their job to look after me now that she was gone, then I went home to an eerily silent cabin. I missed her. I wanted her back.

It had been easy to leave. I'd arrived at the airport three hours early, and when I landed in Louis Armstrong, I couldn't get to my car fast enough.

It felt great to be back home. Although I loved Colorado, I realized that what I'd enjoyed the most had been Kimber. So when I pulled into muggy and warm Charlesville, it felt like I was close to her again.

But I still had to do something about the whole not-having-time-for-a-girlfriend bit.

I needed boundaries. Something that I could say to my cousins. To my parents. What would I tell them? How did one establish boundaries while still taking care of them? I loved them. They were my family. I wasn't looking to destroy any relationships.

A text came through on my phone from Jenny. Asking if I was home yet. I'd been home a total of two hours. In that time, I'd been answering phone calls, emails, and unpacking.

Right now would be a good time to practice those boundaries, and tell them that I was busy unpacking. Even if she did need me.

The trouble with Jenny was that she didn't have anyone to look out for her. Her and Jordan's parents were self-absorbed. And due to personality differences—or more likely similarities—Jenny and Jordan didn't always see things the way that I do. And whenever Jenny was in need of advice or comfort, she came to me, not her brother.

I texted her back and told her I was busy unpacking right now. It was the closest thing to a 'no' I'd ever told her. But it didn't hurt to hit send like I thought it would.

A knock sounded on the door at that very moment.

I set my phone down and went to answer it. Probably my apartment manager bringing me my packages. I swung the door open and came face to face with Jenny.

She held her phone up in the air and smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Mack. But I need to talk to you for one second."

I stepped back, motioning for her to come into the apartment. Jordan followed after her. I hadn't even noticed him standing around the corner in the hall. I didn't have time to hide my shock.

It was very rare for them to go somewhere together.

My heart dropped to my toes. Something major must be wrong. Jenny walked inside and sat down on the couch. Jordan headed to the kitchen to grab himself something to drink out of the fridge—routine for both of them if they came to my house. "I'm going to Oregon in a couple of weeks."

"I know, you asked me to drive you out there."

"Exactly. Which is why Jordan and I are here. I know you wanted to make the trip out to Oregon. But I was thinking that it would be so much better if you came out on a less-rushed schedule. I know you'd be taking a day or two off work to drive me out, and it would be better if we had more time to kill. Which is why I'm having Jordan drive with me. He has a small break from work because of inspections, and he's going to deliver me to Boones-Dock. And then I'll drop him off at the airport and he'll fly back. That way I'll have a car up there."

I stared at her. She never voluntarily released me from favors. Something must be wrong for sure. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," she said in an innocent voice. Jordan sat down on the couch next to her.

"Jenny, you have the worst innocent face ever." I reminded her.

She shook her head and grabbed the Pepsi out of Jordan's hand, taking a sip.

"Really, it's nothing, Mack. I realized that you've been so busy, it was unfair of me to ask you to drive me all the way to Oregon. That's putting way too much pressure on you for something that Jordan could do. And that he'll happily do." She looked at Jordan—then elbowed him in the ribs.

"Yeah," Jordan said after a groan. "I'm happy to drive her out there. I've never been happier."

"If you're sure," I said.

They were giving me an out. This gave me a chance to practice those boundaries Kimber told me I needed. The boundaries I *knew* I needed, just never knew how to implement.

I couldn't be all things to all people all the time.

"That would be great. It's not that I don't want to spend time with you, Jenny, but I seem to have a lot of stuff going on right now. I'd love to come visit you and hang out with you when I have more time." I turned to Jordan. "But are you two going to kill each other on the way out there?"

"We'll be fine!" Jordan reassured me. "Besides, I get to be the big brother on this drive. And what are big brothers for other than to help their sisters move across the country?"

I sat down and stared at them. "And what brought on this change of heart?"



Apparently, based on more conversation with Jenny and Jordan, my boundary fairy had struck.

Even though I had left her hanging, knowing that she wanted more just like I did, she still looked out for me. I'd finally managed to drag the truth out of the two of them. They told me about a group text she had sent.

A group text that had spurred a conversation between my cousins on the subject of me: Mack Boone.

No one had realized how much I was doing for each of them. I hadn't realized how much I was doing, even. The best part was that they knew I loved them and wanted to help them. They were simply going to be more conscientious of my time from now on. They had assumed I was trying to deal with my sister's passing the same way my parents were—denial and busy-ness.

And now I needed to learn to be a better communicator to maintain those healthy boundaries.

I couldn't stop smiling.

I was no longer the nanny bird. And I prayed that she would never have

to use that analogy again.

To top it off, I had a job interview on Monday, which if I got it would put me much closer to home for work and would allow more time for working on my remodel of my house.

Dating Kimber might just be in the cards after all. Maybe I would get my own happy ending rather than only helping others find theirs.

But I'd have to come up with something good. She deserved more than a text. A phone call was too generic. Even asking her something in person seemed rather blah. She was a romantic at heart, which meant I was going to need some help.

It was time to call in one of my baby birds.

Kylie would know exactly what to do.

I dialed her number by memory.

"Don't worry, I haven't had the baby yet. Everything is fine. I'm healthy, the baby's healthy, and my blood pressure is great," Kylie answered in a monotone voice.

"Have I been asking you twenty questions every time I text you?" I asked with a grimace.

"Yes. You have. But I like it when you fuss over me, so it's okay. What's up?"

"I need your help to get a girl."

"Say no more. I have muffins in the oven. Want to come over here and talk about it?"

"I'm already on my way."

Chapter Twenty-Six

KIMBER

"*Y*ou're fired."

Wayne looked smug sitting behind his desk as he stared at me. He'd refused to print the retraction.

I'd walked into this office to hand in my notice. And I wasn't even surprised Wayne was trying to beat me to the punch on this.

Unfortunately, Mimi Boone was sitting in a chair in the corner of the office. A woman I respected and admired witnessing my demise? Not exactly how I wanted things to play out. If I was going to be forced to quit, I wanted to leave with dignity. Too bad Wayne wasn't leaving me that option. I'd requested to speak with him alone; he wouldn't let me.

The fact that he was making me do this in front of someone else showed that he had issues. Ego issues? Life issues? Lack of a soul? I wasn't sure exactly what his root issue was, but he had problems.

"Okay," I said. Because what else could I say? He was taking extra care to humiliate me in front of someone else. A woman who was looked up to in the community. A relative of Mack's.

While I felt nothing but utter relief to not be pressured to write shred pieces, it definitely wasn't the dignified exit I was hoping to make.

"I'll grab my things and go."

"Wait a moment, would you please, darling?" Mimi asked as she stood.

I nodded slowly, not wanting to stay a moment longer, but I couldn't ignore her. She was a very sweet woman. Mack had seemed worried about what I thought of her.

"You realize, don't you, that there is a silent partner who owns the Charlesville newspaper along with Wayne?"

"Yes. Though I never did find out who it was," I admitted.

"It's me. And as of three days ago, I am now the controlling partner of this newspaper. Martine Broussard sold me his two percent."

Wayne's face turned a delightful shade of red while I processed the information that Mimi was the controlling partner. Martine Broussard, founder of the newspaper had officially let go of any hold he had, simply to give Mimi Boone bargaining power. What a guy. Or more like, what a woman.

"And, Wayne, I must tell you that I have not been pleased with the direction you've taken this newspaper. And the fact that it has to come to my attention in a negative way because this poor girl decided to put her foot down is frankly appalling." Mimi lifted her large purse over her shoulder.

"Now, Mrs. Boone," started Wayne. "Remember how I told you that circulation was up? We're selling more newspapers and subscriptions than ever with the new direction I've taken the paper. People like reading juicy things about their neighbors."

"And I'm less than impressed. The new direction you took things meant that you published an article that hadn't been verified yet. I don't approve of printing lies. You're trying to tear apart a community in the process. Enough is enough. Martine agreed. That's not the future we see for the *Charlesville Gazette*. Which is why he was so amenable to selling me his shares. You will now be the silent partner and take a less-active role in the paper."

"Less active?" he asked with a raised voice.

"Yes. You're being let go. Your role will be silent. Absent. All around the best role for you."

"You can't mean that! I've raised circulation by two-hundred percent in the last three months alone!"

"And you've sold out the integrity of a small-town paper. You were willing to fire a young woman because she said enough was enough, and you didn't care who you damaged in the community as long as you sold newspaper subscriptions."

Mimi sighed, and I realized that I was leaning forward hanging on her every word.

"I love some good gossip as much as the next person, but what you're printing is straight-up libel. It's not just simple gossip about whether someone is going to get married or have another baby. What you wanted to turn this paper into destroys lives. I suggest you find some boxes and pack your desk.

My first order of business will be to print a retraction. On the front page."

When I was little, my mother used to read me stories about princesses who would inadvertently fall in love with a handsome prince and live happily ever after.

But even as a child there was a very important element that stuck out to me: the fairy godmother. Those princesses never would have been able to live their happily ever after if it hadn't been for the fairy godmother. The woman who swept into their lives with nothing but good intentions and plans to help the good princess.

I'd always wondered if they were real.

And now I knew they were. I hadn't expected her to appear with hair that was ninety-percent hairspray, and a booming southern twang. I'd always imagined my fairy godmother as British not Baptist, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

She'd effectively quashed the villain, and now I could go on my merry way. Not all fairy stories were tied up in neat bows, but at least my conscience would be clear. I could move forward with that. And the knowledge that my mother still had my twin bed set up in my old room was always an option.

Mimi grasped my arm. "Walk with me, will you, honey?"

I nodded my agreement, not that it mattered. She was already ushering me out the office door.

"I hope you'll continue to work here. Martine has already found a replacement for Wayne."

"Martine started this paper, didn't he?"

"Yes, the original owner of this paper. He's as old as the hills, and I remember him being old when I was a little girl, but he has a good heart and wants the best for the community. He's not too worried about money. Rumor has it he made a fortune in oil, but he's never confirmed it. Anyway, he was ready to step back completely from owning the paper, and he was incredibly upset with the puff pieces Wayne had been adding, so he agreed to sell me the last two percent."

Information overload central.

"That's great. I'm so glad it will be going in the right direction now. I just wish I'd had the guts to stand up before I damaged someone's reputation."

She patted my hand. "My grandson told me all about it. That's why I came today."

"Grandson?" The pit in my stomach grew heavier. I had a sinking feeling Mack wasn't as distant a relative as he claimed...

"Oh yes. You didn't know Mack was my grandson?"

"He must have failed to mention that," I told her with a tight smile. I was going to wrap my hands around his neck if I ever saw him again.

"Yes, he's a very sweet boy. Too much like his grandfather, though."

"What makes you say that?"

"He has a hard time with his hero complex. Has to save everyone all the time."

"I know what you mean."

She patted my hand. "Now, as your new boss, I would love to have that fundraiser of mine being held in the park covered by the *Gazette*. Would you do that for me, sweetie?"

"Anything you say, Mrs. Boone."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

KIMBER

I felt a light tap on my shoulder.

I turned around to find a young woman standing behind me. She had straight brown hair, a little mascara, and a light pink lipstick, but other than that was makeup free. Her skin was tan, with light freckles on her cheeks. She was taller than me by a couple of inches. Her lean, athletic build that of a long-distance runner.

She looked vaguely familiar to me, and I couldn't figure out why. It had been thirty-six hours since Mimi Boone had taken over as boss of the *Charlesville Gazette* and I was at the city park covering the fundraiser bizarre...as she'd requested I be.

"Hello," I greeted the young woman. She flattened her lips together and looked slightly amused. She didn't smile, but she wasn't openly hostile either.

"So you're the one."

"That depends." I folded my hands together in front of me. "Did I do something good?"

"That remains to be seen."

I glanced around to see if there was anyone to save me from this awkward conversation. Awkwardness had its time and place, but I still felt drained from the last several months. Too many emotions flowing in and out of my body. Awkward wasn't fun right now.

"I think you might be just the thing for him. I hope I'm right."

"For who?"

"For Mack." She looked at me, surprised. "Are there other guys you're dating?"

"I'm not dating Mack."

She shrugged. "Not yet, anyway."

"At the risk of making myself look like an idiot—"

"You already managed that with the group text," she interrupted. This time she had a definite smile on her face. Shoot. This had to be one of the cousins. Or at least someone who warranted that text. Which meant it was either Kylie, Jenny Jordan, Page, Noah, or his mother. I knew it wasn't his mother. Possibly one of the others.

"Mack never asked me out." Saying that left a bad taste in my mouth.

Her eyes widened a fraction. "Don't worry about that. If I know Mack, he has the good sense to not let you pass him by. Mack's usually the one who champions other people. This is the first time he's had someone step in to do it for him."

"He deserves someone to look out for him."

"I agree. He definitely does. And from now on, we're all going to be more mindful of his time and do our best to help him. Mack's so good at making all of us feel like he's our best friend. Like we're each the most important thing in his life. It's easy to fall into the trap of relying on him for everything."

"You don't have to tell me that. I know how good he is at that firsthand. It can make a girl assume things that aren't real."

She folded her arms across her chest and nodded. "I think they're real. But he's not a quick mover."

I had a flashback to kissing him on the couch. Maybe Jenny didn't know what a quick mover he was...

"My point is—don't give up on him yet."

With that, she turned and walked away, leaving me to wonder just what to expect.



A week later, I was sitting at my desk at the *Charlesville Gazette* when my phone rang. I set it on speaker phone so that I could keep typing an article on my laptop.

"Hi, Kimber?"

"Yes, this is Kimber."

"Great! This is Lara Ragland. I just wanted to thank you so much for being willing to research the resort for me. I've had so much peace of mind

lately, knowing that Long Pine will still be intact when my husband and I finally retire. I have a little something for you. Would it be possible for you to stop by the bank before closing time? I wanted to drive it to you, but my husband is surprising me with a dinner date tonight. I'm not supposed to know."

"Yes, of course! Is anything wrong? I promise you that I left the cabin in working order."

"Nothing like that! I have a little thank you, especially for putting up with the scheduling mishap, which was my fault."

"That's so sweet of you, but you really don't have to do that. It all worked out in the end."

"Yes, I do. I won't take no for an answer. How does today work for you?"

I glanced at the calendar on my desk. The rest of my afternoon was clear. "Yes, I think I can be there before closing."

We said goodbye and I hung up the phone. I took a deep breath now that I knew my savings account was safe.

Three hours later, I left the office and stopped at the bank. It was five minutes before closing, so I knew I was cutting it close. Wrapping up the piece about the winter choir tryouts took a little longer than I thought. The community choir had requested that I list out every available position and the names of those trying out for each spot.

I opened the door to the bank and walked inside, welcoming the cool air. Louisiana's warmth felt extra hot after spending three weeks in the Colorado mountains. I didn't think the heat would affect me very much since I grew up here. But maybe I really was a mountain girl at heart.

There were only two other customers in the bank. I could see that several bank tellers were already packing up their things from the desks. Sliding those little doors closed and locking them.

I glanced toward the offices and spotted Lara Ragland. She was busy talking to the bank manager who had mistakenly booked me in the cabin with Mack.

I slowly approached her, not wanting to interrupt, and also feeling a little strange showing up to get something. Something that I wasn't sure what it was or that I even deserved it. They said to always look a gift horse in the mouth, though. Or was it *never* look a gift horse in the mouth? I couldn't quite remember, but I knew it was a saying my grandmother always told me. I'd have to ask her how it went.

"Hello, Kimber," Lara greeted me. "Thank you so much for coming."

She surprised me by grasping one of my hands with both of hers. "I'm so sorry about the mix-up. I didn't mean to put you through that, and I messed it up by not doing it myself. I should've made sure that the calendars were updated correctly. My son Hagen didn't know that I was going to be scheduling away some of our family time at the cabin. It was completely my mistake. I had hoped you'd get to relax and enjoy your time there, even if it was a working vacation."

"You don't have to apologize," I assured her. "Mack Boone was a nice roommate to have."

A nice roommate who took a piece of my heart with him. I left that part off, though. No one wanted a sad sap in a quiet bank lobby. The sobs would echo too loudly.

"He is a sweetheart, isn't he?" Lara stated.

I agreed with her.

Her eyes lit up at that, "Do I detect romance in the air?" I needed to work on my poker face if both Jenny and Lara had picked up on it. Luckily, Mack wasn't here to overhear me spill my guts.

"Unfortunately, it was one-sided," I laughed. Forcefully. "How could a girl resist him? Good-looking, kind, protective, and fun to be around. He's the killer combination."

"I'm glad you were able to enjoy your time together. I hope that you'll have some great times in the future...the two of you."

I didn't bother to repeat that we weren't together. That he didn't care as much as I did. That I was the desperate one. Instead, I nodded and glanced over my shoulder at the exit.

"I have this paper for you to sign." Lara handed me the paper. "I wanted to give you another chance to stay at the cabin as an apology. Why don't you look this over, and whenever you're ready to take a vacation, you can sign it and bring it back to me and I'll update the calendar for you. And when you know what dates, I'd like to buy your airfare as an extra thank you."

"You really don't have to do this," I reiterated.

"Oh, but I want to. You're such a nice girl, and I like to do things for nice people." She patted my hand. "Now I have to run, I have to get ready for that date and act surprised."

I took the paper from her, said my goodbyes, and walked out to my car. I climbed inside and waited as the air conditioner cooled down the stuffy air. I

finally glanced at the paper. It was a quick overview of the cabin, similar to the paper she'd given me when I had agreed to look into Mountain Pine Resort. It contained a list of local attractions and amenities.

On the back of the page, it had a short contract written in legalese. It included check-in and check-out times, along with a number to call in case the hot tub needed maintenance. There was room for a signature along with the date. Another line indicated which available dates I could be there.

There was some fine print at the bottom of the page with an asterisk. I didn't remember that from last time. I had to hold the paper a lot closer to my face to read it.

I blinked and tried to clear my eyes to make sure what I was seeing was actually on there.

It read: *In the event that you would like to take another visitor, specifically named Mack Boone, it will require an official change in your relationship status.*

I had no clue what that meant. Change in my relationship status? Take another visitor like Mack? Or Mack, specifically?

A knock on my car window had me screaming. Tastefully, of course. Quietly. Probably internally. I rolled down my window.

"You can quit screaming now."

So turned out my scream wasn't quite internal.

"Matthias Boone."

"Kimber Lyons." He grinned and leaned down to rest his elbows on the window of my car. His signature cologne drifted through the open window. "I remember the last time I leaned in the car window while you were driving."

"Shut up," I said with a smile, knowing he'd orchestrated this whole thing. "I like to black out all embarrassing memories."

"Are you going on vacation again?" He pointed to the paper in front of me.

"Why yes, I am. Would you care to explain the fine print to me?" I leaned my elbow on the door next to his and stared up into those glorious green eyes. He reached inside the car and took the paper from me, his hand brushing against mine as he did so.

"I see that fine print on there," he said as he looked at the bottom of the page. His eyebrows came together as he pretended to study it.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well, what?" It was fun watching him squirm.

"Well, is your relationship status going to change?"

"I don't know. No one has asked me out. I don't see how my relationship status could change. I mean, if you really want to go on vacation with me, you could just ask."

He started, "I-"

I interrupted him. "I do know a couple guys I could jump into a relationship with real fast so that you can go on vacation with me."

He narrowed his eyes at me and reached inside the car to unlock the door.

Pop.

He opened the door. "I'm trying to ask you out on a date."

I placed my hands in my lap and turned to face him, doing my best to imitate my third-grade teacher who was also president of the etiquette club. "I hadn't realized you had the time to go on a date with me."

"It seems that I've managed to open up my schedule." He raised one eyebrow and looked at me. "I think I had some help from a little fairy."

"You were never supposed to know about that," I whispered. I grimaced as I confessed, "I stole the numbers off your phone."

"I know. Why do you think I let you keep my phone for so long?" he asked.

"Because you couldn't find it?"

"Oh, please. The tampon box was the first place I looked."

I climbed out of the car, but Mack didn't step back. My shoulder brushed against his chest as I stood up.

"I wanted to ask you out that last morning we went to breakfast. But I realized I needed to make room in my life before I asked you out." His hands grasped both of mine.

"And why would you do that?"

"Because you're going to say yes, and then I'm going to spend every minute I can with you."

I tried to give him a skeptical look, but I was smiling too big to pull it off. "Took you long enough."

He threw his head back and laughed that big booming laugh of his. "Kimber, would you like to go out with me?"

"Yes. Definitely. Gladly." I racked my brain as I tried to think of a hundred ways to agree. I didn't want him thinking I didn't want him.

Mack smiled and pulled me away from the car, lifting me off my feet. "I

love you, Kimber Lyons. You made me fall in love with you every day in the cabin. And I know it's really fast to say that before we've even started dating, but I want you to know where I stand. What you're getting into when you agree to date me. I'm not messing around. I don't want to just pass the time with you. I want *you*. So...are you still sure you want to date me?"

I tried to think of a thousand ways to say yes. A million different ways to explain to him that I loved him too. That I was already planning our fiftieth anniversary together. But I settled for three little words.

"Kiss me, Mack?"

EPILOGUE

Mack

"Now you take the tail and put it over here," Kimber instructed my mother.

Dinner with my parents looked like it had turned into an impromptu knitting lesson for my mother. There was something about my mom. She wasn't scared to try something new.

Oh, and she adored Kimber. Kimber could do no wrong in my mother's eyes.

As far as Kimber? She leapt right into the middle of my project loving parents' life. And honestly it did my heart good to see her embrace them and every last one of their quirks. Because despite their quiriness they were kind people and I'd been lucky to be raised by them.

"Now we're going to do a purl stitch," Kimber explained.

After six months of dating, I still couldn't believe Kimber had picked me. Because she definitely had picked me. I hadn't thought I'd stood a chance, but she seemed to reach out and grab me by the scruff of my neck and pull me along.

I've never been so happy to be wrong about a situation.

"Hey mom, I'm going to steal Kimber for a bit, is that okay?"

"Oh hey! I didn't even see you walk in!" Kimber jumped up. I'd just gotten off of work and walked inside my parents' house. She'd told me she didn't want me to pick her up because she had things to do with my mom.

I grasped her hand, said hello to my mother, then dragged her outside.

I scooped her into my arms and kissed her for all I was worth.

When she leaned back, she looked down at me. "You're dusty."

"Sorry," I apologized sheepishly. I was in too much of a hurry to see her

that I didn't bother stopping by home. "I just couldn't wait to ask you something."

Her eyes widened as I slowly lowered her to the ground, enjoying the feel of her body against mine.

"What were you going to ask me?" Her eyes zeroed in on my hand that I stuffed in my front pocket.

"Kimber, would you—" I paused and swallowed the lump in my throat. I knelt down on one knee on the patio, and the look in her eyes was worth everything.

The excitement, the fear, the love, and the incredulous I-can't-believe-you're-going-to-ask-this-here look.

I pull my hand free of my pocket, careful to keep the object hidden by the palm of my hand. "Kimber Lyons, I love you."

"I love you too, Mack," she replied in a heartbeat. Her eyes glassing over, and a soft smile spread across her face.

I opened the palm of my hand. "Do you think you could help me change my boot lace? Because one broke at work today, so I bought a new one, and I just figured since you were so good at knitting you could—oh, you couldn't, okay! Stop hitting me! Ouch! No pinching!"

Kimber chased me around the yard for a full five minutes threatening all manner of bodily harm and retribution. She told me exactly what I could do with the shoelace in my hand.

She finally caught me, because despite her distaste for running, she was actually quite spry when properly motivated. And over the last six months I'd found out that an irritated and angry Kimber, was properly motivated.

We both tumbled headlong into my mother's soft grass. I was gasping between laughter and grunts of pain as she unleashed her fury on me. "You horrid, horrid man. You can't just give me a fake proposal like that!"

"Proposal? Is that what you thought I was going to do?" I asked as I rolled over, pinning her beneath me this time.

Now she was pouting and looking slightly embarrassed.

"I'm sorry. It was a horrible joke," I admitted.

"Horrible," she agreed. She tried to fold her arms across her chest but couldn't with me laying on top of her.

I leaned down and gently kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry."

She sniffed, disinterested in my apology.

Bracing my hands on either side of her, I leaned down and kissed her

earlobe. "I promise I will never fake propose to you again."

Her shoulders relaxed a fraction as I continued to nuzzle her ear.

"Never?" She asked.

"Never. Cross my heart." I kissed a trail back to her lips.

"What kind of a proposal are you going to give me?" She seemed to be warming up to the idea of kissing me, which was great because I'd been thinking about it ever since I got off work.

"A real proposal, only a real one."

She kissed me then, letting me know I was back out of the dog house. The joke had been in poor taste. Especially since we'd started to have roundabout conversations about the topic. But at least now I knew for sure that she'd be receptive of it...

"Kimber, where are you? I seem to have gotten mixed up here."

Mom.

I groaned and pulled back, pressing my forehead against Kimber's.

"Oh there you are," Mom said as she peered over the line of shrubs separating us from the patio. She held a ball of yarn in one hand that was connected to the two knitting needles in the other. "Do I knit the whole row then purl? Or back and forth each time?"

"Knit, purl, knit, purl the whole way."

"Great! Thanks!" Mom turned around and headed back inside as though it were completely normal for her grown son to be on top of his girlfriend in the back yard.

Kimber was shaking with laughter.

"You know what?" She asked when she finally caught her breath again.

"What?" I kissed the corner of her mouth because—well, because I wanted to.

"I'm looking forward to the real proposal."

"Me too, baby, me too."

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Thank you to my amazing editors, friends, family, and most of all READERS.

Not to overstate the obvious, but if it weren't for you, this book wouldn't be here.

So here is a big THANK YOU for reading *Vacations Like This!*

I hope that it brought a goofy smile to your face along with an awkwardly loud laugh.

Please watch out for icy steps, cream cheese thieves, and double-booked cabins for the rest of your winter!

P.S. Reviews are awesome-possum! You can leave one on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#)!

Want to stay caught up on book news or embarrassing life stories from Carina Taylor? You can sign up for the [newsletter here](#), or follow on [Instagram](#)!

ALSO BY CARINA TAYLOR

A Love Like This series:

Neighbors Like That

Christmas Like This

Friends Like These

Fake It series:

[Mr. H.O.A.](#)

[Miss Trailerhood](#)

[World's Worst Boyfriend](#)