

The background is a textured teal color. Several yellow flowers are scattered across the page: one at the top left, one at the top center, one on the right side, and one at the bottom right. The title text is in a large, bold, gold-colored font with a metallic sheen.

AND SO,  
WE  
FALL

*An ex-Army Ranger's fiercest opponent? Love.*

BELLA MICHAELS

Copyright © 2023 by Bella Michaels

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Editors: Melissa Frain, Nancy Smay

Cover Designer: Qamber Designs

# *contents*

## Free Novellas

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

## Epilogue

[Become an Insider](#)

[Also by Bella Michaels](#)

[About the Author](#)

*~To Lucas, Nate and Jax~*

*Mou zalizeis ta ardxethia mou*

*free novellas*



Get two free novellas by becoming a Bella Michael's Insider!  
To receive her newsletter full of exclusives and fun  
shenanigans [sign up here.](#)

AND SO,  
WE FALL

BELLA MICHAELS

ONE



*natalie*

“I’ve got it, Jamie. You go ahead. Your dad is waiting.”

I watched as nine-year-old Jamie bounded up the hill to the makeshift dirt parking lot. As I finished tying off the boat, I waved one last time at Jamie, who jumped into the passenger seat of an old Ford pickup truck. I refused to cry. Every time the sweet little kid mentioned his “mama” who died last year, I had to hold back the floodgates.

Of course, this wasn’t unusual.

I cried at a lot of things. Always had. The other night I was watching a rom-com, one that was supposed to be more funny than sad, and needed a half box of tissues when the couple broke up. If nothing else, I was a source of amusement among my friends.

“Why do you look like you’re about to cry?”

Speaking of friends.

“Where the heck did you come from?” I asked Charlee.

“The lake, silly. I came in from the lake like a mermaid right in front of your eyes. You didn’t see me?”

Smiling, I turned back around to where Jamie’s father’s pickup had been a few minutes before. In its place, not surprisingly, was Charlee’s car.

“Funny. I didn’t even hear you pull up.”

“Probably because you were staring so intently out into the lake. Penny for your thoughts?”

“Without wine? No way.”

Charlee lifted a wine tote. “Just need some glasses.”

“Be right back.”

By the time I returned from the wooden shed where the boats were stored, Charlee was sitting on one of the Adirondack chairs opening the wine. Her fiancée had a five-hour tattoo today that didn’t require her help, so the two of us had decided an impromptu day-drinking session was in order.

I held out one of the two wine glasses, and Charlee poured.

“It still cracks me up that you keep full-on wine glasses in there.” She nodded to the shed.

“Pfft. As if I’d have us drinking out of plastic cups. Here you go,” I said, holding out the second glass.

“To impromptu day drinking,” she said, holding up her glass.

“And a beautiful spring day.” I clinked her glass before sitting down—not an easy feat, getting myself into an Adirondack chair with a full wine glass.

“That is so on-brand for you.”

“What can I say? Nature lover at heart.”

“A good quality for a conservationist.” Charlee extended her legs out and tilted her face up to the sun. “How’s your marshland project going?”

“It’s going. Mostly stalled at the moment, but that’s the story of my life.”

“Any word about that developer you were telling Zoe and me about last week?”

Zoe was the third of four spokes on our friendship wheel but couldn't make it today courtesy of a surprised weekend getaway from her boyfriend. It was rare for the two of them to go out of town for a night, especially on a weekend, since Nate owned the local bar on Main Street. But Zoe had been so busy at work the past two months, he somehow made it happen.

“Nothing besides what I told you guys. I thought for sure the regulatory requirement report in January was the nail in the proverbial coffin. So I have no idea where all this is coming from.”

“Strange. You don't think it will gain legs, do you?”

“I dunno. My boss seems a little more concerned than I'd like.”

“I just don't get it. How can you purchase and develop protected land? Isn't that, like, an oxymoron?”

The optimist in me wouldn't dwell on the fact that, technically speaking, Charlee was right. “Sort of. But I have faith it'll work out. No way he'll be allowed to develop this.” I waved my hand to the wide-open space in front of us. “Do you remember how long it took for me to get permission to use it for the lessons?”

“Free lessons,” she added. “A give-back to the community. You'd think that would have been a no-brainer. But yeah, I remember. And have to hand it to you. I'd have given up. What a pain in the balls.”

Taking a sip of wine, I chuckled. “Lucas's colorful Army language is rubbing off on you.”

“Oh god, please no. Some of the things that come out of his mouth would make a truck driver blush.”

“And I have to hand it to you. Not sure I could date a guy like Lucas. Those military types are way too disciplined for me.”

Charlee laughed. “What’s wrong with being disciplined? That’s a good quality, no?”

“Sure. For some. But put a guy like that together with someone like me? No bueno.”

Charlee nearly spit out her wine. “I just tried to imagine it. You’re right. That would never work.”

“I bet you have to make your bed, don’t you?”

“I made my bed before Lucas.”

“Did you really?”

“Yes. Don’t you?”

“Hell no. So that I could mess it again at night?”

“No, so you can come into your bedroom with the sense of calm and order a made bed gives you. Plus, they say it’s a small accomplishment that sets the tone for the day.”

I pointed to the lake, where a duck and her ducklings swam past. “Look at that. And their wake, the way the water ripples behind them. Nature. The only sense of calm I need.”

Like a good friend, Charlee watched the ducks for way longer than she probably wanted to. “To each his, or her, own. But yeah, you and Lucas probably wouldn’t make it. Speaking of . . .”

“Hell, no.”

“How did you know what I was going to ask?”

“Are you kidding? I’m surprised it wasn’t the first thing you asked me.”

“It was that bad?” she asked of my date the night before.

“Worse. I deleted every single dating app on my phone.”

“No you didn’t.”

“I did.”

“Ugh. Swiping was so much fun.”

“For you, because you don’t actually have to go out on dates with these assholes. For me, pure torture. I’m over it.”

“So what’s the new plan? Meet someone in Kitchi Falls as if you don’t know every single guy in town already?”

“Maybe a tourist?”

“Yeah, cause they’re great long-term boyfriend material.”

“I’ve done the long-term boyfriend thing and am over it. So yeah, that’s the plan. Weekend flings with hot tourists.”

She laughed. “There are soooo many of those too.”

“Maybe I’ll hang out with you and Lucas at the shop on weekends. There’s bound to be hot tourists getting tattoos at some point.”

“Sure. Even better plan.” Charlee shook her head at my ridiculousness as we fell into a companionable silence. Why couldn’t finding a man be as easy as finding girlfriends? It was so much less complicated. “Tires or a dick,” I said out loud.

“Excuse me?”

“I was just thinking of the saying, if they have tires or a dick, they’re bound to give you trouble.”

I might not have a boyfriend, but at least I had wine, my lake, and the ability to make my friend laugh. All good enough for me.

TWO



*jax*

“Shut. The fuck. Up.”

If there was anyone I didn't expect to see in a town the size of Kitchi Falls, it was Gian DeLuca. But sure enough, there he was behind the bar.

“You've got to be shitting me,” Gian said, holding out his hand. I shook it, sitting down on a bar stool. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Me? What are you doing bartending here in the Finger Lakes? Don't you own a marketing firm or something?”

“Still Yuengling?” he asked.

I nodded.

“I do own a marketing firm.” He turned to a woman who'd just come out of the kitchen. “Can you get the bar for a bit? Old friend,” he said, gesturing toward me.

“Sure,” she said. Before happy hour, this would typically be a dead time for a bar. But on a nice day like this one in a tourist town? People were here to unwind, and it was busy, but not packed.

Pouring himself a beer, Gian joined me.

“A friend of mine owns this place. He took his girlfriend out of town for the night. Doing him a favor by helping out.”

“You talk like you live here.”

“I do. Moved up from Bridgewater.” My old friend smiled.  
“For a girl.”

“Ahhh, now the pieces are coming together. Where’s the girl?”

“Mazzie has her own bar down the street. Sort of a honky-tonk, live music and all.”

“So your friend owns a bar down the street from where your girlfriend owns another bar?”

“Yep.”

“I see.”

“Small towns. You get it.”

I did. Grew up in the town next to Gian, and we met playing football. Hit it off right away and hung out all through high school. We stayed friends through college despite going to different schools, but drifted apart when I enlisted.

“Unfortunately, I do. Still live in Maplewood. Like you, I moved back for a girl. But unlike you, it didn’t work out.”

“So what brings you to Kitchi Falls? Last I knew you were some big deal in the Army. A Ranger, right?”

“Ranger in the 75th. Stayed in for eight years, but the last deployment nearly killed me. Literally. Was time to get out.”

“Shit. Were you hurt?”

“Repeatedly.” Rather than talk about a raid gone bad followed by an IED that nearly took me out, I changed topics. “Moved out near Pittsburg. Broke up with the girl when I caught her fucking her boss. Came back to Maplewood. Had a few good deals as a land developer who specialized in

purchasing protected property, another long story. And here I am. Looking at acquiring some property on the lake.”

“Jesus. Her boss? Tough break.”

“For him, yeah.”

Gian smiled into his beer. “How does a business major and sergeant first class in the Army get into land development?”

“I met a guy in Ranger school whose father made millions doing it. Seemed like as good a gig as any.”

“You can buy protected land?”

“Under the right circumstances, yes.”

“Hmm. Seems like that would upset a lot of people.”

“I’ve seen shit and dealt with some real scum over the years. Not upsetting a few tree huggers isn’t high on my list of priorities.”

“This is the same Jax who got his ass busted for being a candy striper at the hospital in college because he wanted to help people?”

I laughed. “First of all, motherfucker, I wasn’t a candy striper. I was a hospital intern. Second of all, I only got into it when Gram died and her roommate was alone. Or would have been if I hadn’t sat with her. It was a good deed. And third of all, I’m the same guy. Just a little more realistic.”

Gian looked skeptical. I could tell him I started a program at our local hospital when I moved back home, bringing volunteers in to sit with and read to lonely patients dying, but I knew I’d get my ass busted so I didn’t bother.

“Fair enough. So how long are you in town?”

“As long as the deal takes. A few weeks probably. Hard to say.”

“You’ll stay here the whole time?”

“Sure. I can afford to, and it just makes things easier. Most of what I do is remote anyway.”

Gian’s genuine smile reminded me why I liked the guy so much. You couldn’t find a bigger bust-ass than him, and back in the day he was a cocky bastard too, but he seemed to have mellowed out a bit.

At least that made one of us.

“I’m happy to show you around town. Where you staying?”

“I rented a house on the lake less than a ten-minute drive from here. Nice place. I can see the appeal up here.”

“You’ve never been to the Finger Lakes before?”

“Once as a kid, but I think it was one of the other lakes. I’ll have to ask my mother.”

“How is she doing? And your brothers?”

We talked about my two brothers, one older and one younger, and Gian’s family, and shot the shit for long enough that the other bartender started to give Gian the evil eye.

“I better get back behind the bar. Don’t leave without giving me your number.”

I winked at him. “And I didn’t even have to buy you dinner.”

Gian laughed.

“You can buy me dinner.” She came from behind me. Generally I sat where no one could come from behind, but

there wasn't a great spot at the bar for that. Plus, I knew she was there already. Her perfume smelled way too strong. And floral.

I wasn't a flowers kind of guy. But exceptions could be made. This one was a beauty. Legs for days and tits I could happily bury myself in.

"Now why would I do that?" I teased her.

"Lots of reasons," she said. Though I didn't look away, from the corner of my eye I could see two of her friends sitting at a high-top watching us. "I'm Christina. What's your name?"

There was absolutely nothing wrong with her. Slamming body. Pretty face. Probably a very good time, and it had been a few weeks courtesy of a job that never quit. But the monotony of it gave me pause. We'd fuck. She'd beg to see me again. I'd give her the slip. And if she was local, probably see her again out and about somewhere.

"Do you live here?" I asked without answering. "Or just passing by?"

"Local," she said. "How about you."

Figured. Just my luck.

"Just passing by. And unfortunately going to have to pass on the dinner too. Catching up with an old friend tonight," I said, nodding to Gian.

She pouted. I hated women who pouted. One thing none of them realized? My discipline game was stronger than their tease game. This one was going to be a no. A good fuck wasn't going to be worth the trouble in her case.

"You sure? I think we'd have a lot of fun. At . . . dinner."

"I'm sure," I said. "But thanks for the offer."

She hesitated. I really didn't want to go harder on the "no" but would if I had to. Thankfully, she made a face and walked away, back to her friends.

Gian came back to me.

"I've never once seen a man turn down Christina. Clearly you didn't get the memo that she's the hot ticket in town."

"Oh, I got the memo alright. She all but read it to me."

"You have a girlfriend now?" Gian asked.

I shook my head. "Nah. Just not my type."

"Hmm." Gian took my glass to refill it. "The military has changed you."

"In more ways than one, buddy," I said aloud. And then softer, to myself, "In more ways than one."

THREE

*natalie*

“Come sit down.”

That wasn't good. Whenever my boss said, “come sit down,” it meant shit was about to hit the fan. Dave was a good guy. As dedicated to conserving the land in our area as any, and had been in this business for nearly thirty years. But sometimes pressure from higher ups got the best of him. The guy was between the rock and proverbial hard place on most days.

“I don't like the sound of that,” I said, sitting in a chair across from his desk.

On the rare occasions I was actually in the office, a smallish building three blocks off Main Street, Dave usually used the opportunity for a sit-down. Today, it seemed, would not be an exception.

“The inlet.”

Worse than I thought. “Please don't tell me.” If only I were ten years old and could block his next words by covering my ears with my hands.

“I know your affinity for that property,” he began.

“Affinity is an understatement, Dave. I use it for the rowing program. Got permission to build that shed.” I stopped



at saying that inlet was mine because . . . it actually wasn't. Property of Finger Lakes Land Trust. But still.

“Unfortunately,” Dave continued as if I hadn't told him what he already knew, “the buyer's been given permission to run a full environmental impact assessment.”

My eyes narrowed. “Um, not to be Captain Obvious here, Dave. But when you say ‘given permission’ that sounds suspiciously like you weren't the one giving said permission. But I know full well that's your job.”

As director of the Seneca Lake branch of FLLT, he could green-light or kill these negotiations anytime.

“Guilty as charged,” he said. “I gave them permission.”

I refrained from saying “duh” and sat there instead. Waiting.

“We're bleeding funds, Natalie. You know that.”

“And you're getting pressure to give this sale a hard look?” I finished.

“I am.”

That land might be protected, but it was also a prime piece of real estate that could put money into the coffers of FLLT for other projects. Since Finger Lakes Land Trust encompassed all of the lakes, there was a perpetual push/pull between directors that I didn't envy Dave having to navigate.

“Why this one? There are a hundred other projects like it.”

“Frankly?”

“Yes, please.”

Dave's gray and white peppered beard made him look very fatherly, and usually, he did take care of his staff, and the land

we tried to protect, like a dad sometimes. But like my own father, tough love was sometimes the name of the game.

“The proposed sale price is twenty percent more than market value.”

My eyes nearly popped out of my head like one of those old-fashioned cartoons. “Are you kidding me?”

“Unfortunately not.”

“Shit,” I said, slinking into my chair, completely forgetting that I was a professional and sitting across from my boss. This was worse than I thought. “They’re gonna sell it?”

By “they” I mostly meant “you” since Dave had to approve the sale before it went to the FLLT board. But throwing him under the bus wasn’t any way to get what I wanted. And I wanted to conserve this land.

I sat up. “Dave,” I began. “This has only a little to do with my rowing program and the community well-being. There are a million reasons why that inlet should not be developed. Water quality. Erosion control. Old-growth trees.”

I was just getting started, but Dave stopped me. “Natalie. You know as well as I do all of that will be taken under consideration in the impact assessment. This is far from a done deal.”

“But—”

“I wanted you to know first because of your ties to the property. But it’s moving forward.” His tone, firmer than it had been before, left little room for continued discussion. “Now unless you want to actually meet the buyer, you might want to head home early.”

I sat up even straighter. “He’s coming . . . here?”

“In fifteen minutes.”

Oh man. Part of me wanted to meet this douchebag, but the other part of me wanted to be as far away from this place as possible when he came. Watching Dave watch me was the clincher. For the most part, the guy had been a great boss. The best call here was probably to leave without doing anything I would regret.

This would be a battle, keeping the inlet in the Trust. One that wouldn't be won this afternoon.

“Leaving early,” I said, standing, torn between saying “thanks for the heads up” and “thanks for rolling over so easily for some cash.” This Bitter Betty needed to get out of here.

“Good call,” Dave said as I opted for neither and simply walked out of his office.

Opening the door, I half expected to see the devil incarnate himself on the other side, but instead, the office was, as usual, mostly empty. The majority of us usually worked in the field, and today was no exception.

Grabbing my stuff from the small office at the end of the hall, I flipped off the lamp—I'd dismantled the disgusting fluorescent lights that did no one any favors—and headed out. But just as I got to the front door, a perfectly see-through front door, he appeared.

Black suit. Black tie. Short, dirty-blond hair that reminded me of Nate or Lucas, sort of military-like but a little less perfect. Walked liked them too, as if he owned the place.

Drop. Dead. Freaking. Gorgeous.

I hadn't realized I'd stopped walking until he saw me and opened the door, forcing me to confront him. For a second, I

couldn't find the words. His presence filled the entire room in a way I couldn't compare to a single person I knew.

*This* was the guy trying to take my land?

The universe had one hell of a sense of humor.

When he stepped inside the small lobby, if it could be called that since there wasn't really a reception desk, I got my first whiff of him. Dear lord in heaven. I had to get out of here.

"Do you work here?" he asked as I attempted to step around him.

Crap.

I didn't like the guy, but it wasn't in my nature to be rude.

"Yeah. You're looking for my boss," I said, pointing to Dave's door within sight of us. "You're early," I blurted.

"If you're not early, you're late."

His tone wasn't condescending, necessarily. But it wasn't *not* condescending either.

"I guess."

Looking at him would just not do. I tried again to walk around him, but this time he physically stopped me. Though his hand lay gently on my arm, it felt as if he were branding me. Likely because he was trying to steal my land.

I looked down at his hand, and my expression must have said it all.

He immediately removed it.

"You don't like me. Why?"

Condescending and direct. What a surprise.

“I don’t know you,” I said honestly, trying like hell not to bury myself in a hole here.

“Even more confusing then,” he replied.

*Don’t say it. Do not get into it with him, Natalie.*

“Let me enlighten you then.” Oh shit. So much for using my head.

“I thought I heard voices.”

Spinning back around, I made eye contact with Dave, who silently asked how much damage control he needed to do. I pursed my lips together, refusing to say anything more.

“So you’ve met Jaxon?” he asked me.

Jaxon. Stupid name.

“We didn’t exactly meet yet,” Jaxon said.

“Ahh, well, you will eventually anyway.” Dave seemed resigned to the fact, confusing Jaxon even more.

“Jaxon Hayes, Natalie Hartwell.” Then with a *behave* look, he continued. “Natalie works here and”—he shrugged—“can’t say she’s exactly pleased about the potential for this inlet sale.”

Jaxon’s sharp gaze met mine.

His eyes. Blue? Green? I couldn’t tell. Must be hazel then. But so light, almost like you could see through them. Why did the guy have to be so damn hot?

“I see.” His voice was assured, like the rest of him.

Smiling, though one hundred percent sure my smile didn’t reach my eyes, I said, “Glad to hear it. Have a good meeting.”

Half running toward the door, I swung it open, wondering if I'd managed to keep the sarcasm out of my voice when I said, "Have a good meeting." Probably not.

Thankfully my apartment was about an eight-block walk to work, and I'd walked today. I needed the time to clear my head after that. First, Dave's news. And then, meeting Jaxon. It was too much for this simple girl for one afternoon, and I needed to walk off having met my nemesis and, frankly, him looking like that.

Jaxon Hayes.

You've met your match.

FOUR

*jax*

“What are we celebrating?” Gian asked.

I bought a round of shots after Gian introduced me to some of his friends.

“A good day,” I said, lifting my shot glass in the air. “Cheers.”

As the smooth liquid ran down my throat, a flash of the minx that had stared me down earlier came back to me. Again. It was just such an unusual response from a woman. Typically they fell at my feet, and that wasn't bragging. Just a fact. But not this one.

Long blond hair pulled half back in what should have been an understated style. On her, it fit. I'd noticed those incredibly gorgeous brown eyes and full lips first, and when I'd gotten up close, an absolutely incredible pair of tits. She hardly wore any makeup at all but didn't really need it, though she had been wearing mascara. I'd stared at her eyes long enough to see that, and the anger in them too.

When Dave explained her situation, I understood. In my line of work, I was constantly pissing people off, and it seemed, this time, Natalie Hartwell would be one of them. Too bad. I could have had a lot of fun with that one.



“I take it your meeting with the Trust went well?” Nate took away our shot glasses from behind the bar, also listening.

“Extremely well.”

“I think I know the property you’re talking about,” one of Gian’s friends said. “Is it just off Sutter Road?”

“That’s the one.”

“Nice spot. What’s the plan for it?”

That was the beauty of my line of work. Although it was a pain in the ass to purchase protected property, once you got through all the red tape and acquired the land, it was almost always a quick resale.

“No plan on my end. I’ll resell to the highest bidder. In this case, there’s no shortage of interested buyers. Probably the most interested is a guy who owns a chain of B&Bs. We’ll see.”

“I’ll have to ask Zoe,” Nate said from behind the bar. “See if Mr. Donovan knows about this.”

Donovan. I turned the name around in my head. “Doesn’t sound familiar,” I said finally as Gian’s friends left the bar for a game of darts, leaving just the two of us, and Nate, behind.

“Zoe’s boss. He owns a chain of resorts around the lake.”

“His daughter is a good friend of my fiancée’s,” Gian said. “She also manages one of the resorts. Like Zoe.”

“Lemme get this straight. Your fiancée’s friend manages a resort for her dad,” I said to Gian. “And your girlfriend,” I asked Nate, “manages another one of his resorts? And the two of them are friends?”

“You got it,” Nate said, pushing two beers across the bar. “I’d be surprised if Mr. Donovan doesn’t already know you’re in town. Guaranteed you’ll be hearing from him.”

“Happy to entertain an offer, but there’s still a long road ahead.”

Nate moved away to serve other customers.

“Speak of the devil. Nate’s girlfriend.”

I looked toward the door, spotting her. “We actually met before. She works here sometimes.”

“She does. Though not on trivia night. I think Mizzie’s even sneaking over for a bit.” Gian took out his phone. “Lemme ask her.”

While Gian texted his fiancée, I watched as Nate’s girlfriend made her way over to the bar. Heading behind it, she snuck up on Nate, putting her hands over his eyes. He pretended to be surprised, but I knew better. You don’t surprise an Army sniper. Like me, Nate never stopped noticing everything even when he appeared not to. Occupational hazard.

Like seeing Ms. Hartwell walk in the door.

She was with another woman, the two of them laughing hysterically at something.

“There she is.” Gian was looking at the pair of them as well. And by the smile on his face, I quickly put it together. When Gian waved the ladies over to us, the other woman’s smile at Gian confirmed it.

His fiancée. And she was with Natalie.

Though her hair was the same, she had a bit more makeup on and a pair of jeans and cowboy boots. I had no business

picturing her wearing nothing except those boots, in my bed, since it was clear she despised me, but the mind does what it will.

Jesus fucking Christ, what a vision.

“Hey cutie,” the other woman said to Gian, kissing him on the cheek. He pulled her toward him.

“Mazzie, I want you to meet someone. Hey, Natalie,” he added as she cautiously walked up to us with no other choice. Clearly, she’d rather be anywhere else.

“This is Jax Hayes. He’s from a town near Bridgeport, knew him well in high school. Jax, this is my fiancée.”

Mazzie stuck out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Jax. And this is my friend Nat . . . oh boy.” As she looked back and forth from me to Natalie, it became clear what was going on. Natalie had mentioned me already and Mazzie was just putting the pieces together.

Gian, on the other hand, was clearly confused. “What am I missing?”

In response, Natalie fake-smiled at me. “How did your meeting go?”

Her expression. Her tone. The fact that any woman, especially one as attractive as Natalie, didn’t like me? It rankled. “Extremely well,” I said, more smugly than I normally would.

“That’s fantastic for you.” She turned to Mazzie. “I’ll go grab us a seat.”

With that, she turned on her heel and all but stomped over to a high-top.

“Uh. What the hell was that?” Gian asked.

Mazzie gave me a look that was half “sorry” and half “you’re an asshole” before joining her friend. “Your friend will explain,” she said over her shoulder.

Clearing his throat, Gian sat back in his seat. “Can’t wait to hear this one.”

“Apparently she has some ties to the inlet property,” I said. “Met her earlier today when I went for that meeting.”

“Oh man. Don’t tell me you’re buying her rowing spot? Well,” he continued before I could answer, “her rowing and the girls’ day-drinking spot. They’ve got quite a setup there. I know exactly where you’re talking now.”

I watched as Nate’s girlfriend joined the others. Apparently, it was some kind of trivia night, and the ladies looked pretty serious about it.

Natalie didn’t look over once. She took a sip of draft beer and laughed at something one of the others said. She was even prettier when she smiled.

“Day drinking?” It had taken me a minute to process his words.

“Natalie is a nature lover, if you haven’t figured that out already. She practically lives on that spot during the weekends, between the rowing program and when the girls take wine over there. It’s kind of like their sanctuary. Which I don’t get. There are a hundred places around the lake for them to drink, but they love that spot.”

“I see.” Pulling my gaze away from her, I turned back to Gian. “And she’s friends with your fiancée?”

“Good friends. Along with Nate’s girlfriend, Zoe, who you already met.”

Good friends. My, what a tangled web this was becoming. But again, small towns. Came with the territory.

“Oohhh.” Gian laughed. “Did you see the daggers she just gave you?”

I did indeed. Finally, she’d looked over. I didn’t turn away or try to hide the fact that I’d been staring. Instead, I lifted my glass in a mock toast.

“You’re playing with fire, my man.”

“Yeah?” I was only half listening to Gian as I watched the women enjoy themselves. Specifically, one particular woman.

“Natalie is one of the nicest people on the planet. Wouldn’t hurt a fly. But she’s passionate as hell about the environment and loves that inlet. A bunch of terrorists have nothing on that crew,” he said, nodding to the women, “when they’re united for a cause. Not sure your superior Ranger training covered this particular brand of offensive.”

She looked again.

“It didn’t,” I admitted, realizing that this could actually be a lot of fun. “But I’m up for the challenge.”



*natalie*

“I cannot. Believe. He’s a friend. Of Gian’s.”

I was usually kick-ass at *TVD* trivia, but tonight? Not so much. We were playing as a team, and even Mazzie and Zoe couldn’t carry me. Every time I peered over, Jax was looking back. He didn’t even pretend otherwise.

“Yeah, well, Gian has some colorful friends, as you can imagine,” Mazzie said after we lost another round.

“I bet.” Zoe jumped off her stool. “Another round, on me?”

Mazzie, as usual, seemed torn. On one hand, she loved *The Vampire Diaries* trivia night. On the other, she had her own bar to run just a few blocks away. Usually she dipped into KC’s Taphouse for a round or two and then bolted.

“Come on,” I prodded, needing the moral support. “Everything’s under control down there. Boots & Brews runs like a well-oiled machine.”

“Ahh, fine. I wanted to talk to you guys about the wedding anyway.”

Gian and Mazzie were getting married in a few weeks, and everyone, including me, was so flipping excited. What was not to love about a destination wedding in Sicily? I’d never been before and could dearly use the vacation.

“Talk to me,” I said, trying not to glance over at the bar.

Too late.

For a change, he wasn't looking. I took the opportunity to peruse just a bit.

“You talk to me,” Mazzie countered. “For someone claiming to hate the man, you're looking at him like he's a plate of pulled pork nachos.”

I did love pulled pork nachos.

“I mean, have you seen him?” I asked as Zoe rejoined us. “Dear lord in heaven.”

“If you're talking about Jax,” Zoe said, sitting down, “I have some scoop.”

“Dish away,” Mazzie said, taking a sip of beer.

“He's actually an ex-Army Ranger. He and Gian were talking about it when I got the drinks.”

An ex-Army Ranger. Made sense.

“What exactly does that mean?” I asked, despite myself. Zoe was a military brat, and ended up dating a former Army sniper, so I figured if anyone knew more, it would be her.

“Think of the Rangers as the Army version of Navy SEALs.”

“No shit?” I had no idea about these things, but everyone had heard of the SEALs. “How come no one knows about them?”

Zoe laughed. “Most people do. At least, the ones that don't spend their days sans a cell phone, knee-deep in wetlands.”

“You should try it sometime,” I said. “Getting out in nature. No cell. Completely disconnected. It does a person



good.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Zoe said.

“Same,” Mazzie added. “Especially now with the wedding plans in high gear.”

Attempting to get the focus off my interest in a man I was most definitely not interested in, I encouraged Mazzie to update us on all things wedding. It would be small, just forty people or so with only a maid of honor and one bridesmaid, old friends of Mazzie’s. But having it overseas definitely made things a bit more complicated. And exciting too.

I snuck another peek.

Jax’s slow smile told me that not only had I been caught, but that he wasn’t shy about doing the same. In fact, it was almost as if he were daring me to look at him.

An Army Ranger.

I knew nothing about them, and hardly anything about the SEALs either, but I could guess that it meant he was highly skilled and much more disciplined than the average person. Knowing his profession, which I guessed took a fair amount of negotiation skills and gumption, added to the fact that he was an Army Ranger . . . a more complete picture was forming. And it didn’t necessarily bode well for me or my land.

“Earth to Natalie.”

It took me all of three seconds to realize I’d zoned out for a little too long.

“Oh my god,” Mazzie said. “She likes him.

“Natalie, you poor thing.” Zoe tried to hide a smile. “You poor, poor girl.”

“If by ‘like’ you mean ‘hate,’ then . . .” I tried to sound casual. “You’re onto something.”

“Two things can be simultaneously true,” Zoe said as we geared up for the next round of trivia.

I ignored her. “Not in this case. The guy is arrogant, clearly gives two shits about the environment and . . .”

My pause was long enough for Mazzie to pounce. “Hotter than hell, obviously very skilled and probably smart too. Although, I have to admit, another Army guy in our group might just be one too many.”

“Speaking of Army guys,” I said, anxious to change the subject. “Shouldn’t Charlee be here by now?”

The fourth of our friend group was also dating a former Army sniper—Nate the bartender’s partner when they were stationed in Africa.

“She should.” Zoe pulled out her phone. “I’ll text her.”

“Can you imagine if you two started dating?” Mazzie said. “Three out of four of us with ex-Army boyfriends. Weird.”

“Um, I think Natalie is pretty far away from boyfriend material with that one,” Zoe looked back at the bar. “Not to mention he’s only in town for a little bit.”

“Yeah,” I pointed out. “To take the inlet. Let’s remember the fact that his sole purpose here is to buy and sell land he has no right to touch. Asshole.”

“Whoa.” Mazzie pretended to be shocked. “Where’s our sweet little Natalie?”

The girls loved making a big deal out of me being the “sweet and nice” one of the group, and it might be mostly true, but not one hundred percent of the time. I liked to party with

the best of them and, in cases like this, certainly had no problem pulling out my claws.

“She’s currently being stared down,” Zoe said. “He really hasn’t taken his eyes off you all night.”

Dammit. Why did she have to remind me? Sure enough, he was staring.

“That’s it,” I said. Jumping off my stool, I ignored Mazzie and Zoe attempting to talk reason into me. That was the thing with super-sweet girls. Once you made them snap, it was game over.

“What,” I asked as I approached him, “is your problem?”

Gian’s face said it all. Clearly shocked, his mouth made an “oh” as in “oh boy” as he swiveled around to talk to someone on his other side.

The guy looked me up and down like the head cheerleader from an opposing squad.

I waited for him to finish. Pretended he had no effect on me when quite the opposite was true. Even sitting on the stool, he exuded power and control.

“I have a few problems,” he said. “But none at the moment. Thanks for asking.”

Adding *dismissive* to *arrogant prick* in describing this guy, I remained calm, knowing he would do the same. Military discipline and all.

“Let me rephrase, then. What’s with the staring?”

Gian nearly spit out his beer. So much for that pretend conversation of his. I would have smiled, except it would completely ruin the effect I was trying to achieve.

“A guy can’t stare at a beautiful woman from across the bar?”

Refusing to acknowledge the hard thud in my chest at his mention of a beautiful woman, I forged ahead.

“Sure, he can. But that’s not what’s going on here, and we both know it.”

His perfect eyebrows rose. “You sure about that?”

Why did his voice have to be so deep and sexy, like an ocean at night that tried to lure you in for a dip, moonlight shining down all peacefully, even though it was beyond dangerous? Waves. Undertow. Not to mention sharks. I was unusually terrified of sharks, given the very remote possibility of ever actually being attacked by one.

“Yes,” I lied. “I am.”

“Hmm.” When he leaned forward, I got my second whiff of him that day. Two too many. “Sorry to say you’re off the mark on this one, Natalie.”

First, could I hate a man but still want him to say my name a hundred more times?

Second, if he was trying to convince me his staring was really just because he thought I was pretty, and this wasn’t some mind game . . . he was sort of succeeding.

“Be that as it may,” I said, pretending to be completely unaffected. “I just want to be clear about our relationship while you’re in town, Mr. Hayes.”

“Jaxon. Or even better, Jax.”

Hell no. “As I was saying, Mr. Hayes, you and I are on opposite ends of the spectrum with respect to your interest in the inlet property, as I’m sure you know.”

“Oh, I’m well aware.”

“And I might as well go on record and tell you that what you’re doing, trying to purchase protected land, really sucks.”

His mocking smile made me wish I had my beer to dump in his smug face.

“Protected land? Or your own private little happy hour spot?”

Oh, the gall of him. Gian peeked over then, so it didn’t take long to figure out who the Benedict Arnold was.

“I run a community rowing program on that land. For kids. You know, cute little people you obviously don’t give a shit about.”

“Careful making assumptions, Natalie.”

His use of my name was obviously intentional.

“It doesn’t take a huge leap to assume you are buying the land to resell it for a huge profit, and that”—I rubbed my fingers together to indicate cash—“isn’t a huge assumption to think you care about this most of all.”

“You think so?” Mr. Army Ranger, aka Smug-head, asked.

“I know so.”

My God, he was sexy. What a waste.

Time to bolt.

“It’s been really nice talking to you,” I said with as much sarcasm as possible. “Have a lovely evening.” And then, before waiting for his response, I said to Gian, “I’ll talk to you later, mister.”

When Jax laughed, I nearly jumped out of my skin, the sound was so surprising. And pleasing. I had to get out of

there.

After I made my way back to my seat, the girls wide-eyed, they asked how it went.

I answered honestly. “Round one. Jax, one. Natalie, zero. And you really need to rein in that fiancé of yours,” I said to Mazzie.

In response, the two of them laughed as if something was funny. But it wasn't.

Not. Funny. At. All.



*jax*

No. Fucking. Way.

I wasn't even halfway finished with my coffee when I saw her. It had only been a few days since I came to Kitchi Falls, but Seneca Lake was already growing on me. I could get used to working on the deck with this view every morning.

When I first saw the kayak in the distance, I didn't think anything of it. But as it made its way down the shoreline, I became curious. Every so often the kayak slowed and its rider reached down into the lake.

Curious enough to get a better view, I grabbed my coffee, abandoned the mounds of paperwork I'd been sorting through, and made my way onto the dock of my lakeside rental. I could tell it was a woman, but she wore a hat so I couldn't see much. Until she rowed closer.

Of all the people in the world, or on this lake, what were the chances?

"Good mornin' beautiful," I yelled, a reference to our very enlightening discussion two nights ago.

She'd been leaning over the opposite side of the kayak from where I stood. At the sound of my voice, she whipped around so quickly her kayak became unbalanced. And then the unthinkable happened. At least, for someone like Natalie who



likely lived in that lake and could handle a kayak as well as anyone. She was tossed right over the side. I knew I was going to hell for it, but simply couldn't help it. I burst out laughing.

Natalie, however, wasn't laughing at all. She frantically searched the lake for something, not bothering to turn the kayak right side up. I took a sip of coffee, glad to have abandoned my work for such a show, and waited.

It didn't take long.

She glared up at me with some of the vitriol I'd seen in the face of other adversaries I'd faced. But instead of wielding a gun pointed at my chest, this one, thankfully, was armed only with a paddle. She'd fished it from the water and was now in the process of turning the kayak over. Accomplishing the feat deftly enough, Natalie tossed the paddle inside and turned back to me.

I made a motion for her to come to my dock.

She shook her head.

"Come on," I yelled out. "Use my dock. Temporary truce."

Clearly torn, she looked around only to discover what I knew already. No neighbors. This particular property came with enough land to ensure it, since my privacy was more important than the astronomical price I'd paid for a monthly rental.

"Don't be stubborn," I yelled, trying again. It would be one hell of a feat for her to get back into that thing on the water.

Glowering at me one last time, Natalie finally gave in. With the kayak trailing behind her, she slowly made her way to my dock. I tried, and failed, not to smile at the sight she made. Hat, soaked. Nose scrunched up in annoyance.

Adorable.

Putting my coffee mug on the deck, I made my way over to where she pushed in. Squatting down, I held out my hand for the paddle. Reluctantly, she gave it to me, still glowering, and swam over to the ladder.

Knowing she wanted nothing to do with me helping her out of the water, I pulled the kayak up onto the dock instead.

“That’s not necessary,” she said. “I’m getting back in.”

She was ridiculous. “You’re soaked. And it’s not exactly warm out,” I said, the cool morning warranting the light jacket she wore and the fleece I’d put on to sit out on the deck. “How far do you need to go like that?”

Dripping everywhere, Natalie took off her hat and began to squeeze the water out of her clothing. “Take a guess,” she quipped.

The inlet.

“What . . . do you live there?”

“Pretty much,” she said. Unfortunately, her words lacked their usual heat, making me almost feel bad about the fact that I’d be buying that piece of land.

I chose to focus on “almost,” given that the woman was shooting daggers at me with her eyes that were at odds with her soft tone.

“That’s too far to go like that. Let me get you some dry clothes first.”

She stopped wringing out her jacket.

“Dry clothes? If you think I am going into that house with you, today or any other day, you’re out of your ever-living

mind. Lord knows what evil lurks in there.”

Christ almighty. She really had it out for me.

“Natalie. I need you to access your non-crazy side for a second. If you have one. Evil? really? A bit strong for the circumstances, wouldn’t you say?”

“First of all, Mr. Land-Stealing Army Ranger—”

“Ex-Army Ranger.”

“Whatever. First of all, if I’m acting crazy, you drove me to it. Second of all, I’m not acting crazy. Third of all, evil might be *slightly* harsh.”

So she could be reasonable?

“Probably deranged is a better word.”

So much for that. I walked over to my coffee mug. “Suit yourself. Get back in the kayak. Freeze your ass off. Or follow me into the house where I can grab you a towel, a pair of sweats and sweatshirt, and a warm cup of coffee. You can hate me on the way back and for every day I’m here, but at least admit you’re freezing.”

She was shivering now, her breath visible in the air. If there was one thing my training had taught me, it was that it was easier to let people convince themselves than to convince them. She was either coming or not. To that end, I began to walk off the dock toward the house, giving her one last prod.

“Come on, Natalie.”

By the time I climbed the steps to the deck, I could sense her following. Sure enough, as I got to the door and turned, a very soaking wet Natalie was behind me. I opened the door and held it for her.

“Thank you,” she grumbled, clearly not thrilled to have anything to thank me for.

“You’re welcome,” I said sweetly, just to rankle her.

It worked.

Since I’d never had a woman hate me before—certainly not a young, beautiful one like Natalie—this was uncharted territory for me. There was really no need to press her already inflamed buttons, but the woman just made it too easy.

“Help yourself to some coffee,” I said, coming in behind her. “Mugs are in the cabinet right above. I’ll grab some dry clothes.”

The house was spacious, an open concept with a fireplace all the way up the wall in the great room. I bounded up the stairs, looked for something appropriate for her to wear, and took a pair of sweats and hoodie back down to where Natalie was, sure enough, sipping a mug of coffee.

No woman had any business looking that sexy after they were just doused in a lake. But she did. Except for her eyes. Big, beautiful eyes that hadn’t looked kindly at me once. And probably never would.

“Sweats. Hoodie. Pair of socks.” I smiled. “I was gonna grab some underwear but didn’t know if you were a boxers or briefs kinda girl.”

The faintest hint of a smile betrayed her before Natalie put her mug on the kitchen counter and took the clothes. Her fingers brushed me so briefly, I might have imagined it. Except, I didn’t. Her touch was electric. Something I wanted again, despite her hatred of me.

“Sorry,” I said belatedly. “I keep forgetting you work for the Trust. I’ll keep it more professional.”

It was clear by her expression Natalie hadn't been thinking along those lines. She didn't respond but did look around the room. I pointed to a door off the kitchen. "Bathroom." And then, because I could be an asshole sometimes, "Unless you'd feel more comfortable changing in the bedroom?"

Her head cocked to the side. "Bathroom is fine, thank you."

Natalie took her clipped tone and sweet body with her to the bathroom while I refilled my coffee and tried not to think about her changing in there. By now, she was likely completely naked. Unfortunately, that thought alone was enough to make me hard as a rock. Before I could walk, I needed to get my mind as far away from that bathroom as possible. Instead, I thought back to the moment she fell in the water.

"What's so funny?"

Snagged. "I was just thinking about when you fell into the lake."

"And that's funny?" she asked with an armful of wet clothes. If I thought naked Natalie was sexy before, seeing her in my clothes was even more so. Her hair was still wet but on top of her head in a messy bun. She looked as if she'd just come from a bout of sex and a shower, both of which I'd gladly participate in with her.

Which got me thinking.

Even if Natalie didn't hate me, she'd be firmly hands off. For some reason it had never occurred to me until now that tangling with her could be bad for the deal. She did work for Finger Lakes Land Trust, after all.

Heading to the kitchen, I opened and closed cabinets until I found what I was looking for. Handing her a plastic bag, I said, “I’ll meet you on the deck after you top off.”

With that, I headed back out, fully expecting Natalie to march out the door, down the steps and out onto the dock. Instead, she gently pushed open the door with a coffee in hand, no bag of wet clothes in sight.

“One coffee,” she said, sipping it with the reverence it deserved.

“Suit yourself,” I said. “But you’re welcome to stay for two.”

“Jaxon,” she said, with a “you’re a bad boy but not in a sexual way” tone.

“Jax. If you’re sharing a coffee with me, it’s Jax.”

Natalie took the seat next to mine. “Just one.”

Feet tucked under her, cross-legged, a coffee mug lifting to her mouth, Natalie could easily belong here, next to me like that.

*What a ridiculous thought.*

“Just one,” I repeated. “And a temporary truce.”

She frowned, not responding. But Natalie did seem to have softened her expression toward me, even if just slightly.

“So tell me,” she said finally. “What are your plans for my land?”

SEVEN

*natalie*

Jaxon nearly spit out his coffee.

Good.

About time I took him off guard for a change. It was only fair since he seemed to be doing it to me since the second we met. Wednesday night had been a disaster, me being unable to keep my mouth closed, and now today.

I'd been so shocked by the sound of his voice, one I somehow recognized instantly, I did the unthinkable. If any of my college rowing teammates learned I fell out of a damn kayak, I'd never live it down. I lived and breathed on the water for years, and had been collecting a water sample when he called out to me.

Some freakin' luck. And somehow here I was sitting on a deck with the guy. I'd nearly turned down his offer of dry clothes, for obvious reasons, but something occurred to me that really hadn't before, I'd been so angry with his presence.

*You catch more bees with honey than vinegar.*

And so I agreed and pretended to grudgingly accept his offer of sitting on the deck for a coffee. But in reality, I needed to play the cards that were dealt to me. And falling into the lake in front of his house—a rental, I assumed—were my cards.



Time to play them.

“So it’s your land now, is it?”

Biting back a smart-ass reply, I plastered a smile on my face. “Freudian slip. Feels like mine,” I admitted.

I refused to notice how sexy the man looked, legs extended, jeans and a light fleece making him very much blend into the lakeside lifestyle, coffee in hand. I’d looked him up on social media. Nothing. But I did know, now, what the Army Ranger uniform looked like since I sort of searched that too yesterday in a moment of weakness.

*Could you imagine him in that uniform? Dear god.*

“I can appreciate that,” he said. “This must be hard for you.”

*Keep smiling. Pretend you don’t hate him.* “It is,” I said in the sweetest voice I could muster. “If you could see some of those kids that come through the program. For a few of them, it’s the only extracurricular thing they’re involved in.”

“If the land is purchased, that doesn’t mean the end to your program. Surely you can find a new spot for it?”

I took a sip of coffee to hide my face. I’d never been good at poker. “By the time I found a spot and got the necessary permits, the season would be over. I usually run three six-week sessions. So the summer and fall kids would be out of luck.”

He couldn’t argue that, and didn’t. Likely no one knew the red tape of something as simple as my program, never mind actually purchasing protected property, like he did.

“I could help you. I’ve got a lot of contacts that are good at that sort of thing.”

Unsure if I wanted to thank him for a surprisingly kind gesture or throw my coffee mug at him for assuming his purchase would go through, I took another sip instead. Then a few deep breaths.

*Honey. Remember. Honey.*

“I appreciate that. But I guess we’ll see what happens first. No use rocking the boat if it’s not necessary,” I ventured.

“Interesting analogy.” He smiled. “Considering.”

I let myself smile back.

“Would you look at that? A real smile. Glad to know you’re capable.”

“It’s very much like you to ruin an actual decent moment between us.”

His laugh was everything. Deep, like his voice. But oddly cheerful.

“I didn’t think you were actually going to take me up on the temporary truce offer,” he said, laughter still lingering in his voice.

I lifted my mug. “I’m sitting here drinking coffee with you, aren’t I?”

For some reason, though my friends often called me the nice one, I found it hard to keep my cool completely with him. Maybe if he looked like a normal guy and didn’t exude absolute confidence and sex and manly vibes.

“True statement,” he said. “We’re clearly not going to find common ground on the subject of *your* land. How about you tell me how you ended up squatting there in the first place?”

“Ugh, you are incorrigible.”

“I’m kidding,” he said, taking a sip of coffee and turning his attention out onto the lake. Which was good, because for a second there, I swore he looked at me appreciatively. Ridiculous. He was way out of my league—looks-wise, not personality-wise—and I was an absolute fright after that dunk in the lake.

“I meant to say, with the Finger Lakes Land Trust. What’s your backstory, Natalie Hartwell?”

*Honey. Remember, honey.*

“Nothing extraordinary. I grew up two hours from here. We moved to Kitchi Falls, where my parents had a summer home, when I was fourteen. I’ve always loved the charm and natural beauty of the region, so aside from missing my friends, I was okay with the move. And met some great girls here. I majored in environmental science at Cornell—”

He whistled. “Cornell. Impressive.”

Ignoring the compliment, I forged ahead. “Where I joined the school’s rowing team and fell in love with the sport. After college, I was lucky enough to get a job with FLLT and came back here. End of story.”

“And your personal life? Family?”

I wanted to ask him why he cared, but that was more vinegar than honey.

“Parents. Older sister. One major relationship that ended in disaster.”

Now why the hell had I gone and said that? The fact that it was true had no bearing on the situation.

“Can you define disaster?”

Enough was enough. “I’d rather not.”

Telling him I was cheated on by a guy in college who I thought was “the one,” which had led to some very poor dating decisions and a general distrust of men, simply would not do.

Thankfully, he didn’t seem offended. Which was good, I guessed. Honey routine and all.

“And you? Backstory?”

Jaxon took a sip of coffee, and I had to admit, it was quite a peaceful morning, sitting out here like this. Despite my company.

“Born and raised in Maplewood, PA by my parents. I have two brothers, one older and one younger. Middle-child syndrome had me signing up for the Army after college despite the fact that no one in our family had ever been in the military.”

“Trying to stand out and all?” I asked. It was both surprising he’d mention the fact and more self-aware than I’d have expected.

“Pretty much. Served for eight years. Ended up in RASP, eventually Ranger school, and then assigned to the second battalion of the 75th Ranger Regiment. Was deployed three times, etc. etc.”

“RASP?”

“Ranger Assessment and Selection Program.”

“I see.” Although clearly, I didn’t. “And the whole land purchasing thing?”

I seemed to have lost him for a second, Jaxon remembering something, maybe from his past. This was a guy who’d seen and done a lot of crazy shit if even half of the

stories Lucas and Nate told us were true. And neither of them had been Rangers.

“Met a guy in Afghanistan, an infantryman, who was one hell of a character. Funny as hell. And loaded too. His dad made a career of buying protected property, cutting through the mounds of red tape that scared most buyers off, and then reselling. I did some research and”—he shrugged—“here I am.”

I couldn't help it. Honey be damned.

“So it's purely for profit? You talk about buying protected property like it's not protected for a reason.”

“I'm a realist, Natalie. There are a lot of things to get worked up about in this world. I've seen some crazy shit. But buying and selling a piece of land isn't one of them. No offense.”

“None taken,” I said sarcastically. “It's just my life's work, protecting the environment. Why would I possibly take offense?”

Jaxon frowned, clearly displeased.

Good. That made two of us.

“That's not what I meant. There's a process. If a piece of protected property is deemed sellable, there are still mitigation measures and easement adjustments that are made to ensure preservation of the land's essential conservation values. But you know that.”

“I do. But that still doesn't make it right.” I stood and put my mug on the table beside me. “Thank you for the dry clothes. And coffee.”

Without another word, I left Jaxon Hayes behind and made my way back to the scene of the crime. Ignoring his calls of “Natalie,” I quickly got into the kayak and pushed off. Looking back, I finally realized why he’d been calling for me. Not to apologize for minimizing my life’s work or for profiting from harming the environment.

Jaxon was just reaching the dock with a bag of clothes in his hand.

I’d left my things. And probably should go back for them, but I just couldn’t be around him. He was too unsettling.

Vinegar. Honey. It didn’t matter. Jaxon Hayes had my number, and I wasn’t going to give him the opportunity to press even one more button.

EIGHT

*jax*

I looked around but didn't see Gian or his cousin. He'd asked if I wanted to check out his fiancée's bar, saying "the singer this Saturday is one of the best she books." Sure enough, he was damn good. The bar, Boots and Brews, reminded me of an old-time honky-tonk.

Great vibe. Crowded place. Seemed like Gian's fiancée had carved out quite a niche for herself in Kitchi Falls.

"Jax," a voice called from near the bar. As I got a bit closer, Gian and Neo came into view. I'd never met his "Finger Lakes" side of the family before but had certainly heard a lot about them. Antonio Grado, according to his cousin, was both vice president of his family vineyard and one of the nicest guys going. You could definitely tell the two were related.

I shook Gian's hand as he introduced him.

"Neo, this is my buddy Jax."

"So you're related to this loose cannon?" I said, referring to Gian.

"That's the word on the street," Neo said, his handshake firm. "In our family, Gian is actually considered one of the sane ones."



Gian handed me a beer. There wasn't an open barstool so I stood to the side.

"Tells me a lot about your family," I said.

"Sorry we couldn't grab another seat. The place is packed," Gian said. "I almost feel like jumping behind the bar."

Apparently, he helped out from time to time, but the bartender stopped, obviously having overheard him. "Don't even think about it," she said. "I have a system." She looked at me, appreciatively, as if noticing me for the first time. "Gian is a control freak."

"Is that so?" I asked.

"It is." She looked as if she wanted to say more, and by the look in her eyes, I had an idea of which direction her thoughts were headed. And though she wasn't bad looking, about the right age, she also wasn't my type.

Not that I had a type, really. Except suddenly, spunky, smart-mouthed tree huggers seemed to be on the top of the list. I'd woken up that morning with the biggest boner in history, and it only took me a minute to remember the dream I'd been having. One where Natalie had stayed the night after she'd changed inside my house.

"There's my girl."

Taking the reason to end my conversation with the bartender, I said hello to Mazzie as she rubbed Gian's neck from behind. "I should be giving you the back rub," he said, turning around.

"Later. Too busy now. Hope you guys are enjoying the music."

“This guy’s great,” I said. “And the place too. Reminds me of a honky-tonk we used to frequent near the base in Texas.”

“My dad owned one in Arizona,” she said. “Old Town Scottsdale. This is sort of an ode, or memorial or whatever, to him and the old place.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said about her dad.

“Thank you. And I’m sorry we have that in common. Gian said your father was a great guy.”

The lump in my throat that formed every time I thought about him, which was every day for years, kept me silent for a second until I found my voice. “The best. A real jokester. Loved to laugh.”

“Well, I hope you honor his legacy by doing the same.” She smiled. “Gotta go,” she said to Gian. “Will be back.”

And just like that, Mazzie was gone back into the crowd.

I thought about what she’d said. Honor his legacy by laughing. An intriguing thought.

“She’s something else, isn’t she?” Gian asked, watching me.

“You did good,” I said. “I can see why you’re locking this one down.”

“Speaking of.” Gian turned completely toward me. “You should come to the wedding.”

“Isn’t it in like three weeks? In Sicily?”

“Sort of,” he said. “But I won’t take no for an answer. I know you have the funds. And who doesn’t love Sicily in the spring?”

“Have you been?” I asked Neo, already knowing Gian had been there. It’s where he met Mizzie.

“First time,” Neo said. “But you should absolutely come. It’s gonna be a great time.”

Sicily. In three weeks.

I’d probably still be here, based on the timeline Dave and I had discussed. “If the environmental impact assessment clears, there’ll probably be a public hearing soon.” I thought about the timing out loud. “But aside from that, most of the process could be done remotely, though it’s good for me to be here as needed.”

“And you are. Except for a few days. Most people are coming for a week, but you could come for a long weekend if you wanted. It might be a long way to travel for just a few days, but . . .”

“Do it,” Neo prompted.

*Carpe diem.*

Since Dad died—and I never got to say goodbye, being halfway around the world when he had a heart attack—coupled with an acceptance of death from my many brushes with it, the mantra had become more than a string of Latin words etched into a guard tower I’d been manning when the news came.

I lived it.

Not giving a baker’s fuck about inconsequential shit that a lot of other people worried about was freeing in a way that made my mother worry sometimes. But despite what she said, I neither had a death wish nor was dismissive of other peoples’ feelings. I simply refused to do anything but live my life on my own terms.

Sicily.

“He’s thinking about it.”

“Oh man,” I said out loud before I could stop myself. A vision of one wet-haired, cross-legged vixen sitting on my deck pretending to be nice popped into my head. It had been funny to me that Natalie thought I had no idea what she was up to. For someone who’d looked at me solely with anger in her eyes since we met to suddenly turn sweet just because I gave her some dry clothes?

Nah.

Though I applauded her change in tactics, and welcomed the respite, it wasn’t all that surprising to me that we’d parted ways with Natalie angrily jumping into her kayak and rowing away without her clothes.

Despite the fact that she hated me, one thing was crystal clear.

I wanted her.

I wanted Natalie in a way I hadn’t wanted a woman in recent history. Visions of me peeling off those sweats I’d given her had me almost seeking her out, using the clothes as an excuse to see her again. So far, I’d resisted.

Sicily. And she’d be there.

“Sounds like fun,” I said. “But I thought you were keeping it small, mostly family?”

“Small and my family don’t exactly go together,” Gian said. “But it is mostly immediate family and a few close friends. About forty-five, fifty people. Certainly room for an old friend, and a guest, of course. I’ll get you the details.”

“So you’re in?” Neo asked.

Close friends. That must include Natalie, but how to ask without revealing my interest? “You sure my presence won’t irritate Mazzie’s friend Natalie? She doesn’t seem to care for me very much.”

Gian laughed. “I hate to say you’re right. But nah, Natalie will be fine. She’s a big girl. Super sweet, but there’s a streak to her too. I’m not worried.”

There was a lot of information packed in there. So Natalie would be at the wedding. And also, “A streak?”

Gian shrugged. “You know what they say about nice girls.”

My eyes widened.

“Oh no, nothing like that. I’m just saying she can be a bit wild. They went to New Orleans a few months ago and apparently Natalie was the one dragging everyone to a dance club at two in the morning. That kind of thing.”

So my girl had a wild streak, did she? Very interesting.

Also, that sealed the deal.

“Count me in,” I said. “No guest.”

Would Natalie take one? Didn’t matter. Unless she was married or engaged, the woman was fair game. And though I’d started the week thinking it was a good idea to avoid her, while that was still a good idea . . . carpe diem. Even she couldn’t deny that there was chemistry between us.

“Speak of the devil.” Neo looked over my shoulder.

Sure enough, the very woman in question was walking in with a woman I had never met before. Every nerve ending in my body told me what I already knew. There was something between us, despite the fact she despised me.

“Natalie. Charlee,” Gian called. “Over here.”

When I looked at Gian, the glint in his eye told me I hadn't been quite as slick as I thought. “You're not the only one who can read people. I might not be an ex-Army Ranger, but I'm not a total dummy either. This should be fun.”

Gian saw right through me. “Fun might not be the right word,” I warned him. “In fact, it could get ugly. She really dislikes me.”

Before he could answer, I inhaled deeply, her scent becoming familiar. Winking to Gian, knowing exactly what I was about to do, I turned.

“Natalie,” I said, as if just realizing she was there. “I'm glad you're here. I have your bag of clothes in my car.”

Natalie's mouth dropped.

Her friend Charlee started laughing.

Gian muttered, “What the hell?” behind me.

And for my part? I stood there, as if I hadn't a care in the world, taking a sip of beer and waiting for her reaction.

I didn't have to wait long.



*natalie*

I noticed him the second I walked in the door. Boots and Brews' western-style swing doors made you feel like you'd been transported out west somewhere. The whole vibe screamed country-western, and I loved it.

Loved country music.

Loved live music on a Saturday night.

What I didn't love? The smugness of the man in front of me. Or the fact that he'd been stealing my dreams these past few nights.

Thankfully Charlee knew the kayak story, so only Gian and Neo looked at me as if something untoward had happened between Jaxon and me.

"It's not what you're thinking," I said, immediately wanting to explain.

"Do you have your car?" Jaxon interrupted. "I can put the bag in there now so you don't forget it."

"No, I don't have my car," I quipped back. "I live within walking distance of here."

"Really?" He asked it with just enough suggestion in his tone to make the question seem intimate somehow. "We can



always walk your clothes back then. I can grab my sweats from you.”

Gian looked as if he wanted to burst out laughing. Charlee, the traitor, had already abandoned me, probably gone to find Mazzie.

“I fell in the lake,” I burst out to Gian and Neo. “Right in front of Jaxon’s rental property.”

“How does an expert rower fall out of a kayak?” Neo asked.

“Ask him,” I said, uncharacteristically snippy. “I need a drink.”

I turned to walk away but Jaxon stopped me. Looking down at where he’d grabbed my arm as if the guy had leprosy, I tried to give him the evil eye. But Jaxon’s expression had softened.

“I’m sorry for teasing you,” he said. “Let me make it up to you. What’d you want to drink?”

Of course he let go of my arm, but oddly I missed the touch. Wanted him to grab me again. Maybe pull me toward him. I imagined our bodies slamming together, his lips on mine. Instinctively, I knew without a doubt he’d be a good kisser.

“I’m good,” I said before my fantasies got way out of hand.

“I got you,” Gian said. “Vodka soda? Deep Eddy’s and water?”

I really did need a drink and could probably endure Jaxon’s presence for a few more minutes. “Deep Eddy’s,” I said. “Thanks, Gian.”

Jaxon continued to look at me. I held his gaze, not wanting to be the one to look away. His was so intense, though, it began to make me uncomfortable in a squirmy kind of way. My heart raced as our staring contest continued.

“What?” I snapped finally.

“Just trying to figure you out,” he said. “Have to admit, I liked the Natalie that was on my deck better than this one.”

“Oh yeah?” I couldn’t help my tone. Not with him. “I liked the Jaxon who stayed in Pennsylvania better than this one.”

His laugh. Dear lord, I loved that laugh. How was such a thing possible? To hate a man but love the way he laughed.

“Touché.”

“Here you go.” Gian reached around Jaxon to hand me my drink.

“Thanks,” I said to Gian. “I’m gonna find Charlee and Mazzie.”

Without a backward glance, I did just that. The singer was on break, and Mazzie was talking to him, Charlee by her side. I caught the very end of their conversation.

“I’m happy to come back anytime. Probably should get ready for the next set,” the singer and guitar player said.

“I need a drink,” Charlee said as I approached. “Sweet tea vodka?” she asked, seeing mine.

“Yep.”

“Excuse me a sec,” Mazzie said. “Be right back. I’ll grab you a drink, Charlee.”

We stood to the side as the singer kicked off his set with “The Devil Went Down to Georgia.” Guaranteed crowd

pleaser.

“Sorry I didn’t ask Gian to get you one too. Someone,” I said dramatically, “scrambles my brain so I can’t think straight.”

“Nat,” Charlee said as if she were telling me some big secret. “I think he likes you.”

“Likes me?” I nearly screeched. “Are you kidding me? We hate each other.”

We backed away from the singer even more, finding it hard to hear. “Yeah, well, you may hate him but I’m not sure he feels the same. I’m just saying . . . the way he looked at you. Teased you. The guy is into you. Guaranteed.”

I really should be appalled by the thought, but just the opposite was true. Only someone as warped as me would be into the guy trying to steal a beautiful piece of protected land to make a few bucks.

“Uh.” Mazzie came back, handed Charlee a drink and looked at me oddly. “I kinda have some news.”

“Not good news by the looks of it,” Charlee said. “Thanks for the drink.”

“No problem.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked.

“No reason,” Mazzie clearly lied.

“Spill it,” I said, glancing back at the bar. Why did I have a feeling it had something to do with . . . him?

“It’s just that . . .” Mazzie looked back and forth between Charlee and me. “Jaxon, or Jax, or whatever . . . may or may not be coming to the wedding.”

My drink froze midair. I put it back down. “Excuse me?”  
No way Mazzie just said what I thought she did.

“Gian invited him.”

“And he said yes?”

“Apparently.”

I wanted to say a hundred things, but all of them were selfish. This wasn’t about my first trip to Italy, or a vacation ruined. It was Mazzie’s wedding. And that was all that mattered. Taking a deep breath, I told her that.

“It’s fine. I can behave myself. No big deal. The only thing that’s important is you having an amazing wedding.”

Charlee didn’t even let me finish before she started laughing. “Bullshit. You are two seconds away from strangling the guy, and it’s one hundred percent not okay.”

I gave her a good-natured glare.

Mazzie smiled. “I appreciate you taking one for the team, but I agree with Charlee. I know you want to hate the guy but secretly have a thing for him. It’s a tough place to be in. I get it. Pretty much felt the same way about Gian.”

“Gian,” I reminded her, “was a bit of a playboy who needed taming. Jaxon is a full-on land-stealing—”

“Natalie,” Mazzie interrupted. But I continued.

“—cocky—”

“Nat,” Charlee tried to stop me too, but I was on a roll.

“—smug bastard,” I finished.

“Jax,” a voice at my back said. “I really am going to insist on you calling me Jax. You changed in my bathroom,” he

continued without me turning around. “Wore my clothes. I think we’re on a nickname basis by now.”

The girls’ expressions said it all.

*Shit.*

I turned around to pay the piper, as it were.

“Tell me how you really feel,” he said, half smiling.

“No need,” I said as my traitor friends left me. “It appears you’ve just eavesdropped and know exactly how I feel.”

“First, I did not eavesdrop but simply came over to apologize. Again. Second, I may be a cocky, smug bastard, but I’m not stealing anyone’s land. There’s a process. And I’m following it.”

“Forgive me if I see it differently.”

“Natalie.” I hated that he talked to me like I was ten. But at least I was getting to him, that much was clear. Seeming to make up his mind about something, out of nowhere, Jaxon took my drink and put it, along with his own, on a nearby high-top. He then proceeded to grab my hand and pull me onto the dance floor just as a slow song started.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked, aware of his hand. Aware that he was putting his arms around me. Aware that my heart was about to beat out of my damn chest.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Natalie. Just dance with me.”

It sounded very much like an order, and not a request. But as the song played, his arms firmly around my waist, there was zero chance in hell I was going to do anything but put mine around him and do what he said.

And so, we danced.

TEN

*natalie*

“We have to stop meeting like this.”

Dave smiled and nodded to the seat across the desk. The guy I’d danced with two days ago. Whose arms around me had been the stuff of my dreams for the past few nights. I had no business agreeing to that dance, as if he’d really given me a choice.

Damn bossy military guys. I’d been around Lucas and Nate enough to know that I did not want to dance with an ex-Army Ranger. Specifically, that one. But I had, and now I simply could not get him out of my mind. Hiding in the corner of the bar for the rest of the night hadn’t helped. Like a big coward, I’d sent Charlee to his car to fetch my clothes with a promise I’d return his things soon. As in, hopefully never.

My new plan was to completely avoid him. Do what I could to thwart his land-grabbing efforts from afar. If he came into a bar, I’d be leaving it from now on. I simply didn’t trust myself around him.

“I wish I could tell you it was good news this time.”

“You’re killing me,” I said to my boss, clutching my travel coffee mug for dear life. His face said it all. “Just say it. I already know.”

He seemed surprised. “You do?”

“I can guess,” I clarified.

“Ahh, well. You probably can. I met with the purchaser Friday afternoon—”

I stopped him there. “You met with Jaxon Friday?”

“I did.”

Hmm. Conveniently he hadn’t mentioned that during our dance. Not that we talked much. He’d asked a question or two. I stubbornly gave him one- and two-word answers and tried to avoid eye contact. Not that it worked, completely.

And every time our eyes did meet . . .

“Nat?”

I came back to earth. “I’m listening.”

“We went over the conservation easements, land use agreements, and property deeds, since the impact report came back green-lighted.”

Green light. Meaning it was full steam ahead for Jaxon. Fantastic.

“And?”

“And I’m assigning you to the case.”

I nearly shot up from my seat and yelled, “No way!” until I thought it through for a second. How better to know exactly what was happening than by being the case manager on this?

So instead, I made a face to show Dave how unhappy I was about the whole thing. But he didn’t seem to care.

“I know you have a personal tie to the inlet property. This way you can see all the reports and know everything is on the up and up. And that there’s probably very little you can do to stop it.”



“Me?” I pointed to my own chest. “You think I would do such a thing?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes.”

“I love that property,” I said, serious for a second. “But I love my job more. I’d never do anything to jeopardize it.”

“I know that too,” my boss said. “Which is exactly why I’m putting you on this case. You can oversee the process and, if the land is sold, at least you’ll have full knowledge of the details. I’ve already emailed you the files.”

Looked like it would be an office day as I went over the paperwork. But I wasn’t going to complain. Now I could see everything from the initial application to exactly how Jaxon planned to weasel his way into purchasing the land. “Thanks, Dave,” I said begrudgingly.

He laughed. “We’ll find you a new spot for the program. It’s not the end of the world. When you see the files, you’ll probably feel better. I’m actually surprised that inlet wasn’t nabbed up already. Our hold on it was tenuous, at best.”

FLLT had been extremely aggressive years ago snapping up each and every parcel of land that even had a shred of environmental impact. But I was still dying to see those files. Plus, it would keep my mind off *him*.

“Here’s Jaxon’s number. Reach out. Tell him you’re on the case and that a public hearing has been set for next Wednesday.”

So much for getting my mind off him.

“So soon?”

“It’s either that or next month. And since Jaxon is staying in town for the duration of the sale, I got him on the agenda.”

Dave was being awfully accommodating. Almost as if he wanted this sale. Which, to be fair, he probably did. Men and money. It was a heady combination.

I took the note. Stood. And tried not to look as if I'd just swallowed asparagus.

“Natalie.” Dave stopped me halfway to the door. I spun around. “I appreciate you handling this so professionally. I know it’s a kick in the pants for you.”

If I were a guy, he would have said balls. And yeah, it was a real kick in the balls for sure.

“Thanks, Dave,” I said, heading out of his office and toward my own. If it weren’t so sunny out, I’d go to the inlet and work on my computer there. I tried to think of somewhere that I could be outside but shaded to see the computer. When I couldn’t think of anywhere, I sat at my desk and resigned myself to working indoors, at least for the morning. Might hit Devine Coffee House later if I got sick of these four walls.

Actually, they had tables with umbrellas. It was better than nothing.

Mind made up, I packed up my things and decided now was as good a time as any, my office was just too depressing today. On the way, I completed the dreaded call.

His phone rang twice before he answered.

“Hello?”

Shit. I’d been expecting to leave a message. His voice was as deep and sexy on the phone as in person.

Obviously. Same guy. Same voice.

*Duh, Natalie.*

I tried to sound as dry and professional as possible. “Jaxon? This is Natalie Hartwell. Dave just assigned me to your case. I’ll be taking a look at your files today, but he wanted me to let you know you’re on the docket for a public hearing next Wednesday. I’ll email you the details.”

Silence.

“Interesting.”

That was it? Interesting?

It took every bit of my willpower not to hang up.

“He asked that I call you. Which I’ve done. We can follow up at this point via email. Have a good—”

“Natalie. Hold on a sec.”

Ugh. “Yes?”

Another pause. He wanted to say something, probably not about the project. Maybe about Saturday night?

Inexplicably, he actually seemed to be as attracted to me as I was to him. Or at least half as attracted. At first, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me, but the tension between us this weekend had been undeniable. To me and my friends. The gig was basically up. Every single person that was at Boots and Brews saw it and commented on it, which was another good reason to avoid him.

A girl could only be so strong against a guy who looked like . . . that.

“Never mind.”

Good.

“Okay. I’ll be in touch.”

With that, I hung up and mentally prepared myself for a long day of reading. At least there would be coffee. And maybe a cinnamon sugar donut. A winning combination sure to make my morning just a little bit better.

ELEVEN

*jax*

So far, it had been a crap morning.

A land deal I'd been working on for more than a year, one I expected to fall through, had finally received its final nail in the proverbial coffin. Not five minutes after I'd opened that email, my older brother called to tell me his wife had a miscarriage. It was her third and into the second trimester.

There had only been one bright spot.

Pulling into an empty space, I parked and got out of my truck. I wasn't usually a sweets guy, but I'd been hearing about these cinnamon donuts since I got to town, and I needed to get away from my computer. I tried not to think about that bright spot now.

What kind of a masochist was I that a woman who hated me was the best thing that had happened all morning? Natalie wanted nothing to do with me, and honestly, I didn't blame her. The problem was that I couldn't get her out of my mind. Dancing with her Saturday night had been madness, but the urge to touch her, to feel her beneath my hands, was just too strong.

*No fucking way.*

Although her back was to me, I was positive that was Natalie sitting at a table outside the coffee shop. Computer

open, she seemed to be working, and I knew exactly what she was working on too. My case.

I wasn't gonna lie, when she called to tell me she'd been assigned to it, I'd smiled into the phone. Something about the woman intrigued me. Maybe the fact that she didn't fall at my feet? Nah, it was more than that. More than her looks. Usually the crunchy, granola type wasn't appealing to me, so it definitely wasn't that either.

But no doubt, there was definitely something. Trouble was, she was extremely resistant to letting me explore that something.

“How's it looking?” I asked, walking up to her table.

Natalie spun around. Looked up at me with those innocent-but-not-so-innocent, eyes. A vision of her on her knees in front of me, looking like that—but with my dick in her mouth—stopped me cold.

Christ. Where the hell had that come from?

Her expression was all the answer I needed. As she dug into the reports, Natalie wasn't likely to be very pleased. Aside from a small hiccup this winter, this inlet had been one of the most straightforward pieces of property I'd ever purchased.

“Need some help?” I asked when she didn't respond.

“No, thank you.”

“Coffee? Donut?”

“Already have both,” she said, her clipped tone at odds with the look in her eyes. “Just looking to get some work done and catch some air at the same time.”

Natalie wanted me as much as I wanted her. That had been more than clear on Saturday night even though she fought like

hell to hide it. I'd been trained to read peoples' eyes, to anticipate their next moves. Sometimes, my life and the lives of my battle buddies were at stake, so getting it wrong wasn't an option.

I stepped forward. "Had," I corrected. Her mug was nearly empty. "Looks like you're out. I'll grab a new one. You take it with milk and sugar, yes?" I asked, already knowing the answer from when she was at my place.

Sighing, Natalie finally resigned herself to me, but I wouldn't crack a celebratory smile. Today I would be on my best behavior. No instigating.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Turned out, the woman behind the counter knew exactly how to make Natalie's coffee, so with a bag full of donuts and two fresh coffees, I joined her. Without asking, mind you, as I was pretty sure of her answer.

"One coffee," I said, putting it in front of her and sitting down on the wrought-iron chair across from her. "Donut?" I asked, taking one out of the bag.

"No thank you." She picked up the fresh coffee. "I don't remember inviting you to sit down."

"No?" I asked, taking a bite.

Damn. That was good.

"No."

"I figured if you had any questions, this would make it easy. Don't let me disturb you."

Pulling out my phone, I opened my own email as I ate. Natalie didn't say anything more, but she did go back to work, ignoring me.



At least, pretending to ignore me.

Peeking up from time to time, I could tell she wanted to ask something. So I made it easy on her. “Send it.”

Frowning, she sighed heavily. I tried like hell not to smile.

“You’re planning to turn it into a bed and breakfast?”

“No,” I corrected. “I’m planning to sell it to a man who will build a bed and breakfast.”

“Same thing.”

“Not really.”

“Jaxon—”

“Jax.”

“I refuse to call you that. We are not friends.”

“We could be. What if we really started from scratch, like you pretended to do at my house?”

“Pretended?” Her mock indignation was cute.

“Yes, Natalie, pretended.”

She sat back, momentarily abandoning her laptop. Coffee in hand, she watched as a couple, tourists no doubt, walked into Devine.

“How could you tell?”

“Training,” I said, leaving it at that. Staring at her lips.

“Can you be more specific?”

Normally I wasn’t a fan of talking about my time in the military, but for Natalie, I’d make an exception. “Body language, facial expressions, changes in behavior, active listening. Every eye movement or posture reveals a person’s

emotional state and level of confidence. Not to mention any potential threat they might be.”

She took a sip of coffee. I’d never wanted to be a lid on a coffee cup until that very moment.

“And did you assess me as a threat?”

Laughing, I answered immediately and honestly. “Hell, yeah.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

As people came and went around us, I noticed, unable to turn off years of training even if Main Street in Kitchi Falls was an unlikely place for trouble.

“Because of the land?”

Time for some truth.

“No, not because of the land. Because I had no plans when I came here to get tangled up with a beautiful woman who also happens to work for the very trust I’m purchasing the land from. But here we are.”

She blinked. Too rapidly. I’d made her nervous.

“Tangled up? I wouldn’t necessarily classify us as being tangled up.”

Should I be blunt?

Yeah, I should.

“We will be.”

Though she tried to remain composed, Natalie’s slightly widened eyes and parted lips told me she was anything but.

“Right,” she said, clearing her throat. “I’m your case manager after all—”

“No, Natalie. That’s not what I’m talking about and you know it.”

“Jaxon—”

“Jax.”

“Jaxon,” she said stubbornly. “We should not have danced on Saturday. This is strictly a one hundred percent professional relationship, and even if I thought you were the hottest, most charming man in the world, I wouldn’t risk my job for a”—she shrugged—“one-night stand. Especially with you,” she tossed in, for good measure.

“We are two consenting adults. I don’t think your job would be in jeopardy.”

“First of all, I’m anything but consenting. Second of all, it wouldn’t look good, at minimum. Especially now that I’m your case manager.”

“Can you alter the findings? Sway opinion one way or another on the purchase?”

That question didn’t please her very much because we both knew the answer.

“My job isn’t to decide on the land purchase but to answer any questions you might have, or anyone else involved. But you know that already.”

“I do. Which is why I’m not too worried about you losing your job when we get together.”

She laughed, and I fucking loved the sound. “We are not getting together.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No. I do not.”

“Alright. How about a friendly wager on that particular point?”

Natalie shook her head. “No way. I’m not betting on something I already know won’t happen. For many, many reasons.”

I’d played my hand. Time to let Natalie finish her work and think about what we’d talked about. “Scaredy-cat,” I said, standing.

“I’m not scared,” she insisted.

“No? Then take the bet. If you win, if we don’t get together, I’ll drop my bid.”

Was it a bit of fucking madness? Sure. But I was that certain that Natalie would crack. More importantly, if she thought I was dropping the bid, maybe she’d stop looking at me with daggers in her eyes.

I’d managed to shock the hell out of her.

“You’re kidding?”

“I’m not.”

“Done,” she said, clearly banking on her victory.

“But if I win . . .” I reminded her there were two sides to this coin. “You’ll call me Jax.”

Earning another laugh from her might actually be worth the very slim chance I could lose this property because of my goddammed dick.

“That’s it? That’s all you want.”

Walking over to her, I dropped down so that my lips were so close to her ear I had to whisper. “If I win, Natalie, I’ll already have what I want.”

Standing, I watched her reaction, any doubts I had about our little contest erased. Did I think her attraction to me was stronger than her desire to keep that land?

Not yet.

“There is one stipulation.”

She looked up at me with an “of course there is” expression.

“You can work, and catch fresh air, at my place. That way, if you have any questions, I’ll be there to answer them. Since,” I rushed to add, “your job seems pretty portable.”

She opened her mouth, likely to tell me to go screw myself, and then closed it. Natalie had to know a good deal when she saw one.

“How often?”

“Until the deal goes through.”

“Except you’re not buying the land. I will win this bet.”

She was pretty confident of that. “I will move forward but pull my bid if necessary.”

“I have some fieldwork on other jobs too.”

“When you’re working on my case,” I conceded, “my place.”

“Fine. Starting tomorrow.”

“See you in the morning, sunshine, with your coffee ready and waiting.”

With that, I turned and left, knowing I'd pushed my luck as far as it would go. Had I just potentially put an insane amount of money on the line? Maybe. But I'd put a hell of a lot more on the line in the last ten years. This was just money.

Besides, I intended to keep it, and get the girl, too.

TWELVE

*natalie*

“He did what?”

As I drove to Jaxon’s house, I remembered the conversation I’d had with Charlee yesterday the second he’d walked away. When I texted to tell her I needed to talk, she had actually showed up at Devine. Apparently, she’d been out and about already. We finished off the donuts Jaxon left as I dished the news.

“I’m not kidding. He actually bet me that we’d get together before the sale went through. If we don’t, he said he’s going to shut down the deal.”

“And you believed him?”

“Do Army Rangers lie?”

Charlee had laughed at me. “I have no idea, but I assume they’re capable of it. But I see what you’re saying. He does seem like the kind of guy who’s a man of his word, if nothing else. But that’s insane.”

“Totally insane. I’m gonna feel him out tomorrow, see if he really means it.”

“Just don’t literally feel him out if you want that inlet to stay unsold.”



Even now, driving toward his house, I could feel Jaxon's breath in my ear. Luckily, I'd been wearing long sleeves so he couldn't see the goosebumps that had broken out all over my arms. I could feel them, feel my neck flush, as I imagined his deep voice in my ear saying other things.

Dirty things.

Of course, Charlee had been as skeptical as me, and for the rest of the day I resisted texting him something like, "Are you serious?" I didn't want to get my hopes up about keeping the inlet, but I also couldn't help it. I loved that property, and maybe part of the reason I'd lost my mind a bit was because I had started to think of it as mine, but really, it wasn't. I had it on loan, of sorts, from the Trust.

Either way, I was keeping it. No man, even one with Jaxon's brand of sex appeal, would be worth letting it slip through my fingers. I parked, marveling at how much land Jax's rental property had managed to obtain. In most places around the lake, houses had sprung up so close together, for lakefront space, that seeing this much property was rare.

Though the house was a bit outdated, definitely relegated to someone's summer home and rentals, the wraparound deck was pretty sweet. Someday I'd have enough in my bank account to get a place like this of my own, right on the lake. In the meantime, I had the inlet.

And planned to keep it.

Walking around to the back deck and shuddering at the sight of the dock—I must have looked a fright climbing up there soaking wet—I wasn't surprised to see Jaxon, coffee in hand. His Ranger ears probably heard my car a half mile away. Though he didn't talk much about his time in the military, his training oozed from every pore.

It was actually kinda sexy, and scary, at the same time.

“Good morning, sunshine.”

I hated that I liked him giving me a nickname.

“Sunshine? Really?”

I climbed the stairs, taking the coffee he offered.

“It fits. You know, the way you’re always smiling at me.”

Apparently, Jaxon got a kick out of his own joke. Me? Not so much. “I would smile more if you . . .” If he what? What exactly was my beef with the guy now that he wasn’t purchasing the property?

“If I?”

“Weren’t so cocky.”

“Ahh, so that’s my problem, is it?”

“Among other things, yes.”

“I thought you’d be in a better mood. Our deal and all.”

Sitting, putting my laptop on the table next to me, I dove right in. “Actually, I did want to talk to you about that before getting to work.”

“Shoot.”

He even sat sexy. Was that a thing?

“So you are serious about this?”

“If a man’s word isn’t trustworthy, he’s nothing.”

“Is that a yes?” I pressed.

His smile would not disarm me. “Yes, it is.”

“That seems awfully . . . reckless of you. And you don’t strike me as a reckless man.”

Jaxon thought about that. For long enough that I started to think he wouldn't answer.

"Put your coffee down," he said, as if I were one of his men to be ordered about. But dammed if I didn't listen to him, his gaze was so steadfast and intense.

"Now come here."

Fuck. That sounded almost . . . sensual.

"I don't think so."

Jaxon put his own coffee down, stood, and began to walk toward me.

"Come here, Natalie."

Maybe because he was meeting me halfway, this time I did listen. When we were so close, I could smell his musky Jaxon scent, he reached out to me, his index finger going under my chin. My heart raced at the touch.

"I'm going to kiss you," he said, so matter-of-factly that for a second, I didn't react.

"Oh, no, no—"

"This is a pass. Doesn't count toward the bet."

A pass.

Still, not a good idea.

But he smelled so damn good. Looked even better. Every single fiber of my being wanted to know what it was like to kiss him. I'd dreamt about it, fantasized about it, almost since the second we met.

"You okay?"

No, I wasn't. Not even a little.

*Say no. No kiss. No pass.*

Instead, I swallowed. And nodded.

His finger became a grip as Jaxon guided my face toward his. This was actually happening. Might be my only chance to kiss him, pass and all.

When his lips were almost touching mine, I closed my eyes. But I didn't even need to lift my face toward his. Jaxon did that all on his own. And then, they were there.

The first touch, electric.

Slow. Sensual. Not at all like I'd imagined. In my head, our first kiss had been almost out of control. But as his lips parted, and our mouths melded together, I actually liked this better. It was a deliberate kiss, meant to show me exactly what he could do to me.

I wasn't stupid. I understood his intentions.

But didn't care.

Neither of our hands moved except the one on my chin, which he dropped. I didn't touch him for fear of getting even more lost in this kiss. He didn't touch me again either, except for his lips, of course. When he moved closer, our chests touched, and his kiss deepened. Tilting his head, he took me deeper and deeper, and I allowed it.

Our tongues tangled, our mouths seemed to almost devour one another. It was easily the most sensual kiss ever, and one I definitely did not want to end.

But it did.

Jaxon pulled away, his lips still wet. Staring at them, I finally peeked up and looked into his eyes. For a change, they

weren't mocking. Just simply mesmerizing. I tried to breathe normally but instead it came out like one big sigh.

"Fuck," I said.

Not the most elegant thing to say, but it summed up our kiss well enough.

"In answer to your question."

I waited.

He never finished.

What was my question?

*That seems awfully . . . reckless of you. And you don't strike me as a reckless man.*

Not a question, exactly, but he answered it well enough anyway. In Jaxon's mind, he wasn't being reckless because he knew I desired him, and he'd just proven it.

"No more passes, sunshine," he said, breaking the spell.

Good ol' Jaxon was back.

"Not gonna need any, Ranger," I declared, heading back to my seat.

His laugh was Jaxon's only response. But it was enough. He thought he had this bet in the bag. A scary thought, that, because I was pretty sure Jaxon played to win.

Every. Time.

THIRTEEN

*jax*

She wasn't coming today.

That shouldn't matter, but somehow, it did. After three days in a row of coffee, lake views as we worked, and a more mellowed-out Natalie than the one I first met, I'd gotten accustomed to mornings with her. Today, though, she had some fieldwork to do and the deck was conspicuously empty.

And then, of course, there was that kiss.

For a "big tough guy" as my younger brother liked to call me, I'd buckled under my own desire, and that was before we actually kissed. Afterward, my fantasies of Natalie had taken a turn I never expected. From hardcore to something more akin to a Hallmark movie. I'd gone from envisioning her riding me to her sitting with me every day, drinking coffee, working from home.

I picked up my phone. Nothing. She should be done by now, and I'd told her to swing by anytime today if she finished with her fieldwork. But it approached eleven, and usually by lunchtime she was gone, so it didn't look like I'd be seeing her today.

On a whim, I pressed my older brother's number. He picked up after two rings.

"A call? From Jax? Something's gotta be wrong."

I wasn't much of a phone guy. Text, sure. But calls? Nah.

"Funny. You have a sec?"

My brother still lived in Maplewood with his wife and two daughters. As Mom said, "Thank god for Teddy or I'd have no grandchildren." When I pointed out both my younger brother and I were under thirty and this wasn't 1950 when people married young, she ignored me. There was nothing my mother loved more than babies, including her own sons.

That might be a stretch. But Mom did love babies.

"Sure. What's up?"

The question that popped into my head, the one I'd thought to ask him, seemed ridiculous now.

"Never mind. How's it going there? Anna okay? How are my girls?"

"She's hanging in there. And the girls are great. But you're not getting off the hook that easily."

I didn't respond.

"I have patients waiting, so spit it out."

"I was surprised you answered, to be honest," I said, my brother's practice usually being slammed.

"Jax."

"Fine. When you met Anna. Was it different? Like right away?"

He whistled.

Teddy was the only person on the planet I could have this conversation with and not get my ass busted. I actually smiled thinking about what would have happened if I'd called our



younger brother. Or one of my buddies. They'd have laughed me off the phone already.

"Who is she?"

"Believe it or not, a woman who works for the Trust."

"The one you're trying to buy the land from?"

"That's the one."

"What does she do for them?"

"Conservationist."

Speaking of laughing me off the phone . . .

"Nate," I interrupted him. "It's not fucking funny."

"Actually, it's hysterical."

"If you're a sick bastard, maybe."

"Takes one to know one. Alright, so she clearly hates you."

"How did you guess?" I asked wryly. "It's actually worse than that," I said, knowing he was on borrowed time. "She has a personal connection to the land I'm buying. And is now the case manager for the project."

"And how's that looking?"

I winced. "It was good. Public hearing next week."

"Was?"

My conservative, non-risktaking brother would think I'd lost it. "Was. Until I made a bet with her earlier this week that we'd get together. Told her if we didn't, I'd drop my bid."

More laughter. What the hell had I been thinking to call him?

“You crazy motherfucker. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “She hates the hell out of me, but wants me too. She’s been working here, at my place, since she was assigned to the case on Monday.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” he guessed.

“We kissed. Just once. Told her it was a pass from the bet.”

Nate exhaled. “You are seriously batshit crazy. How much are you looking to lose if she wins the bet?”

“A lot of fucking money,” I admitted.

“So why’d you do it?”

Why indeed? “I guess as an excuse to get close to her. So she stops hating me so much.”

“Since when does my brother need an excuse to get close to a woman?”

I was a stubborn bastard, but at least I knew myself and wasn’t afraid to admit it. “Since Natalie.”

Nate was quiet for a second. “Alright. To answer your question, no, I didn’t know Anna and I would get married after our first date. Or even our second. As we got to know each other, though, it became pretty clear she was different.”

“How so?”

“Jaxon,” my brother said. He hardly ever used my full name. “You already know how so. It’s why you called me and made the stupidest fucking bet in history.”

Of course, he was right.

I didn’t want her to hate me. Just the opposite, in fact. So I’d made the bet thinking the possibility I wouldn’t buy the

land was the only way to get her to soften. And it had somewhat worked. Problem was, I really wanted the land too.

“I guess you’re right.”

“Got yourself in a real pickle, little brother.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I did.”

“Guess you have to decide what you want more. The girl, or the land.”

“Trouble is, I want both.”

He laughed. “You of all people should know life doesn’t always work like that. It’s not neat and clean.”

True. It was the opposite, actually. Life was messy, filled with the worst sort of people imaginable, so much worse than the general public imagined.

“I know you gotta go.”

“I do, but call me anytime. Actually, glad you did. Feels like old times.”

Before the Army, when I was younger, I’d gone to Nate for everything and anything. He was one hell of an older brother, and I probably never appreciated it fully.

“I am too,” I admitted. “Thanks, brother.”

“Good luck. Keep me posted. And get your ass down here to see the girls. They miss their uncle.”

“I miss them too.” Then I remembered. “I’m actually heading to Sicily in a few weeks. Do you remember Gian DeLuca? He’s getting married and invited me to the wedding. But I’ll get home after that.”

“Sicily? No shit. Of course I remember him. You have the life, Jax. I’ll say that.”

“No complaints here.”

“Glad to hear it. Talk soon, Beans.”

Smiling as we hung up at the childhood nickname, one I'd earned by stealing the jellybeans from everyone's Easter basket, I wondered why I didn't get my ass home sooner. After this deal, after Italy, I'd go home to see my mom and nieces. And I guessed my brothers too.

Smiling to myself, I looked down when my phone buzzed.

A text had come through.

I could have saved myself a call to Nate. The fact that my heart raced seeing the name pop up was all the answer I needed. I'd dated. Had girlfriends. But not once had my entire body come to life over a simple a text question.

Have a sec?

Damn straight I did.

For her, I had more than a second. And it was time to kick this bet into high gear.

Yes. But since you couldn't come here this morning, be here at six. I'll have dinner. Bring your question then.

As I waited, and watched my phone, I was glad not to be with the guys. My unit would laugh their asses off watching me watch my phone like a damned lovesick puppy.

Fine

Short, though not sweet, but I'd take it.

FOURTEEN

*natalie*

“I brought wine.”

I hadn't meant to blurt that out, or stick the bottle of local red wine in Jaxon's face the second he opened the door.

Of course my friends thought I'd lost my mind when I canceled on them to come here. I couldn't argue with them either. But not seeing him today unsettled me in a way that had me grabbing my phone half the morning and putting it back down, refusing to text him.

I had nothing to say.

After spending the week going through all the paperwork, now that the public hearing was set, there wasn't much to do until then. Except, I wanted to talk to him. So I'd finally come up with a question to ask and caved in. When he responded, my first instinct was to say, “no way.”

First, I had plans.

Second, I didn't like being told what to do. His high-handedness was downright annoying.

Third, I'd been thinking about our kiss every minute of every day, so dinner at his place was probably a very bad idea.

Bet and all.

Then, magically, as if someone had taken control of my fingers, I sent the word “fine” and had been a bundle of nerves since.

“I have some open,” he said, taking the bottle. “But thanks. Come on in.”

By Thursday, we’d begun to converse like human beings and not feral dogs in competition for a meal. While I couldn’t account for Jaxon’s changed attitude, mine was simple. He wouldn’t be selling the inlet. The fact that I wanted to jump the guy’s bones every second I was with him was of little consequence. That kiss had been our first and last.

“Oh wow,” I said, trying not to inhale too deeply as I walked by him and into the house. “It smells amazing. You cooked?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?” he asked, putting on a mitt and opening the oven door.

“I dunno.” I almost said, “I never dated a guy who cooked before,” but since we weren’t dating—far from it—I refrained.

“When you asked if I liked chicken parm, I assumed you were ordering out,” I admitted.

He plated the chicken and then went to a pot on the stove. Pulling out tongs from the drawer, he reached into the pot and added what looked like angel-hair pasta, sauce and all, onto the plates.

“Nope,” he said, nodding to two wine glasses on the counter. “Feel like pouring wine?”

“Of course.” I went to work, again coming so close to Jaxon that I could smell him and quickly moving away. Pouring each of us a glass of wine, I watched as he grabbed two napkins and forks and then our plates.

“I figured we could eat on the deck?”

I had secretly hoped that was the plan. “Sure.”

Settled at the small table on the deck, I took a bite of the chicken. “Holy shit. This is really good.”

Jaxon finished chewing and made a face. “Should I be more insulted you were surprised I can cook or that it tasted okay?”

“That’s up to you.”

He chuckled. “So, sunshine, what’s your question?”

*Sunshine. Remember, he’s turned on the charm for a reason. Do not fall for him, Natalie.*

“You know the inlet is protected by a conservation easement, but I didn’t see anything in the paperwork about a negotiation with the easement holder that would allow for development while preserving the property’s conservation values.”

“Since in this case the easement holder is also the Trust, Dave said we could discuss it after the public hearing. Assuming that goes well and things move forward.”

“I see.”

“Didn’t you say you were stopping by the office this afternoon?”

“Yes,” I said, taking a bit of the pasta. It was as good as the chicken. This guy could actually cook.

“So you could have asked Dave who was also working this weekend?” Jaxon’s smile told me he knew the question had been an excuse to contact him.

“I texted you before I went in.”



“Mmhmm.”

Looking intently into the glass of wine before I took a sip, I hoped Jaxon might just drop it. But of course, this was Jaxon, so fat chance of that. When I looked back up, he was smiling at me.

“Admit you like me, Natalie.”

“Never.”

God, I loved his laugh so much.

“Alright, we can pretend if you want.”

“Pretend what?” I asked, knowing I was stepping in it by continuing this topic of conversation.

“Pretend that land shouldn’t have been sold years ago. Pretend there’s not an intense attraction between us. Take your pick.”

He was right. On both counts. Going through the paperwork made it clear that the inlet could certainly be developed while preserving the surrounding environment. But that wasn’t the point.

“I’ll concede,” I said, “that maybe, maybe, there’s a tiny thing between us.”

“Maybe?”

“Maybe.”

“Fuck that,” he said, taking a big bite of chicken.

I nearly choked on mine. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me, sunshine,” he said when he’d finished chewing. “I reject your ‘maybe’ and offer our kiss as evidence.”

Our kiss. He made it sound so intimate.

“So you asked me here tonight so I’d, what? Act on it? And lose the bet?”

Calling him out wasn’t really in my nature, but I was manifesting my best Charlee imitation. That’s exactly what she would have said.

“I asked you here because I missed you today.”

I opened my mouth to offer back a sarcastic retort until Jaxon’s words actually sank in. “Excuse me?”

He shrugged. “I guess I got used to your sassy mouth this week.”

Playing it off as no big deal, Jaxon went back to his dinner. But he didn’t fool me for a second. His voice had actually softened ever so slightly. As if . . .

As if he were being serious.

Which was ironic, because I missed him too. Knowing I had fieldwork today, my first thought when I woke up was that I wouldn’t get to see him. Which was ridiculous because the man drove me crazy.

“You’re not kidding?”

“I never said I was.” Jaxon could have been talking about the cicadas that were currently serenading us, or the fact that there wasn’t a cloud in the night sky. But he wasn’t talking about the weather. The man had just admitted he . . . liked me.

*Natalie, were you actually present for that kiss?*

Of course, the kiss could have just as easily been for the sake of our bet. I was pretty sure Jaxon didn’t want to abandon his bid on that land any more than I wanted him to keep it.

“I can’t figure you out,” I admitted, finishing my meal and tossing the napkin he’d provided on the table. “Who the hell are you, Jaxon Hayes?”

“There’s not a lot to figure out. I’m just a simple man sitting across the table from a beautiful woman who is absolutely determined to hate me.”

“Am not.”

He raised his brows.

“Maybe a little.”

“Right. About as little as the thing between us. Refill?”

Before I could answer, he grabbed the wine bottle and stood up. Jaxon could have easily poured from his seat if I pushed the glass toward him. Instead he came around to my side and squatted beside me.

“Sure,” I mumbled, unable to think straight with him so close. Remembering the kiss, I held my breath as he poured, unwilling to breathe in his scent.

Except, when he finished, Jaxon didn’t stand back up. Instead, he remained there, right next to my chair, his face level with mine. Finally, I had to inhale.

Our eyes met.

“Maybe, my ass,” he said, before standing and heading back to his seat.

It was a fine-looking ass too.

I took a deep sip of the wine. “Maybe. Definitely. Doesn’t matter. We won’t be getting together either way. I think you underestimate how much I want that land to remain in the Trust.”

Jaxon sat. "I think you underestimate how determined I can be to get what I want."

Oh dear lord.

"And you really want that land," I finished.

"I really want . . ." He paused. "You."

FIFTEEN

*jax*

Every time she leaned over, I imagined what Natalie's tits looked like without that sweater over them. Envisioned the color of her nipples, my thumbs running over them, taking them into my mouth.

She really did have incredible breasts.

"I guess we're done being coy?" she asked.

"Seems so," I said, trying to think of anything but Natalie's tits. As it was, the seat was getting mighty uncomfortable.

"You have to realize no amount of charm will override my desire to keep that land."

*We'll see about that, sunshine.*

"Why is that inlet so important to you? By now you must have read through most of the reports. The environmental impact will be minimal."

Her frown said it all. "I suppose."

Surprised she admitted as much so easily, I pressed. "So this is really about your rowing program. Surely we could find another spot for that."

"Like I said—"

"I know, there isn't time to move it this summer. But what if the sale included a stipulation that you had access to the

shed and dock until your rowing season was over?”

I'd managed to surprise her. “Would the buyer agree to such a thing?”

“I don't know,” I admitted. “But if all went well, the sale probably wouldn't even go through until June. I can't imagine it would be a deal-breaker.”

When Natalie's lips pressed together, I could tell the idea I'd been considering all day wasn't very impressive to her. One thing I'd learned about her was that Natalie could be stubborn.

Took one to know one.

“Think about it,” I said. “Maybe we can all get what we want here.”

With that, I got up to clear the table. Natalie immediately stood too.

“I got it,” I said. “Will meet you in our regular spots.”

As soon as that was out of my mouth, I realized how familiar it sounded. As if we had spots, which, to be fair, we did.

If she thought my statement odd, Natalie didn't question it. By the time I cleared off the table and joined her, Natalie was sitting as she always did, with her legs crossed, staring out at the lake. Only difference was that this time she held a wine glass between her legs instead of a coffee mug. And, of course, it was dark. White bulb lights from the dock and a few boats still trolling the water, plus the light from inside, prevented it from being pitch black.

“You never answered my question,” she said, as I sat down.

“Which one?”

“Who the hell are you, Jaxon Hayes?”

“Ahh, that one. Like I said, there’s not a lot to me.”

“Bullshit. I looked up the whole Army Ranger thing. Most regular people do not make the cut.”

“You looked it up, huh?”

Natalie shrugged, as if it were no big deal. But it was a big deal. She was as curious about me as I was her.

“Like I said, the Ranger thing was just me being a typical middle child, trying like hell to stand out with two brothers who got all the attention. My older brother because he’s perfect, and my younger brother because he’s such a pain in the ass no one could ignore him, even if they tried.”

She laughed. “I have a perfect older sister too, so I totally get that. Although I’m still not buying the ‘no big deal’ thing. Seems to me like a pretty big deal. Your parents must have been really proud.”

Didn’t matter if it had been years. Thinking of my dad was like a gut punch every time. “They were. Especially my dad.” I looked over at her. With Natalie’s typical animosity toward me gone for the time being, I added, “I lost him a few years later. Was stationed in Afghanistan when he had a heart attack, so I never got to say goodbye.”

“Oh Jax, I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. I think about him every day. But yeah, he was so proud. Told all his friends.” I smiled at one particular memory. “One year I was home for Christmas, and my dad, brothers and I went to a local bar. An old friend of his complimented the three of us, and my father for being such a good role



model. My father put his hand on my shoulder and began to regale the poor guy with a story I'd been able to share without compromising OPSEC."

"OPSEC?"

"Sorry. Operational security. Probably ninety percent of my time as a Ranger can't be shared, despite my family begging for details."

"Got it. So why did you get out?"

"Mostly for that reason. Every time I went dark it took years off my mother's life, or so she told me. Then with Dad . . . I just couldn't do that to her anymore. Plus, being deployed? It just felt like my time was up."

"Do you miss it?"

"Being deployed, no. The other guys? Yes, I do. We stay in touch, but . . ." I trailed off, my mind wandering back to the first time we'd gone outside the wire in Somalia. Of all the memories, I wasn't sure why that one popped into my brain.

And then something occurred to me.

"You called me Jax."

Natalie obviously hadn't realized it. She took a quick sip of wine to cover up her smile.

"Can't take it back," I said. "It's gotta be Jax from now on."

"But that was your prize," she said. "Although I have to admit, if you lose the land, that doesn't seem to be much of a consolation."

I didn't plan on losing the land, but since we were getting along, I wouldn't point that out.

“Nice try,” I said. “But it’s too late. Jax it is.”

Natalie rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

I needed to distract myself from thoughts of that kiss, as if I’d suddenly be able to stop thinking about it. About Natalie naked. Underneath me.

“Your turn, sunshine. Tell me something I don’t know.”

Natalie took a big breath in and then exhaled. It was the most relaxed and unguarded I’d ever seen her.

“I’ve never been out of the country.”

“No?”

“Nope. Which is why I’m so excited about the wedding. I’ve never even had a passport before now.” She side-eyed me. “I hear you’re coming.”

“I am. Looking forward to it. Sicily is a really unique place.”

“You’ve been there?”

“Once, though just for a few days. I was stationed in Vincenza, on the mainland, at one point. A few guys and I made our way over to Sicily for a few days while on leave. One of them had ancestors who lived there.”

“Have you been to where the wedding is?”

“Cefalù? Nah. I’ve heard of it though. Supposed to be a nice place.”

“Mazzie raves about it. She and Gian met there.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“You know . . .” She took a sip of wine. “They didn’t get along very well at first. Mazzie thought he was a big, huge

playboy and wanted nothing to do with that.”

I kept my mouth shut. Gian *was* a big, huge playboy, as she put it. At least when I’d known him.

“They seem like a great couple,” I said instead.

“They are.”

With both our wine glasses empty, I got up, planning to refill us, when Natalie stopped me.

“If I drink any more, I won’t be able to drive home.”

I didn’t think twice. “You can stay here.”

For a second, she actually considered it. Natalie watched me, contemplated what an overnight at my place might entail, and dismissed the idea. I could tell even before she opened her mouth she wouldn’t be staying.

“That’s probably a bad idea.”

I disagreed. “I actually think it’s a great idea.”

“You would.”

The damned bet. If I could take it back, I would. Then again, the only reason Natalie was even speaking to me cordially was because she expected to keep the inlet. Without that possibility hovering over us, she likely wouldn’t even be here right now.

I’d gotten myself into a fine mess.

Of course, I could abandon the purchase completely, no strings attached, and pull Natalie into my arms, and my bed, right this second. But as much as I’d love to do that, I had at least a shred of discipline left in me and knew it was an even worse idea than the bet itself.

“Suit yourself,” I said, trying to sound as if it didn’t matter.  
As if I didn’t care if she stayed or not.

Truth was? I did care.

Too much.

SIXTEEN

*natalie*

“Any other questions?”

I had a few choice ones.

The public hearing, at least the portion of it covering the inlet sale, was just about over. And while it was true I hadn't had a meaningful conversation with Jaxon—no way I was calling him Jax anymore after tonight—in days, I thought we'd had an understanding.

After the dinner where I nearly lost the entire bet because my urge to say, “fuck it,” and stay at his house became nearly overwhelming, I decided it was best to stay away. By Sunday, when I hadn't heard from him, I came up with another bogus question and texted him. That led to another text. And another. By bedtime, we'd been chatting all day, but not about the land. Favorite movie. Favorite food. Everything and anything was suddenly on the table after he fired off, “Your turn. Tell me something I don't know.”

On Monday, he asked if I was coming over, but I reminded him I'd finished going through the paperwork and there was no need. That led to more texting, and me nearly breaking down and heading to his place to work anyway. I loved sitting on the deck, enough shade to see my laptop but still be outside, but also could admit I liked his company too.

I liked the way he looked at me.

And the way he looked in general.

I liked feeling safe in his presence, despite the fact I never really felt unsafe out of it.

It was precisely for those reasons I'd stayed in the office and avoided texting him today too. Knowing I'd see him at the meeting tonight, I'd spent extra time getting ready but not overdoing it as if I were trying too hard. And all for what? To have traitor Jaxon navigate questions about the sale and thank everyone, saying he was looking forward to "bringing a new bed and breakfast experience to the area" that he was certain would "add value to both the lakefront and local businesses."

As if it were a done deal.

Hearing enough, I got up to leave. Since the public hearing was held in the courthouse, I'd walked from my apartment. Never mind it was pouring outside. Never mind I didn't have an umbrella. I simply tucked my purse inside my jacket and pushed the door open. Angrily making my way down the stairs, already soaking wet, I took off down the block.

"Natalie, wait."

I didn't stop. Even when he called my name, louder and louder, apparently closer to me, I kept going. In fact, I picked up my pace. It wasn't until I'd turned off Main Street toward my apartment that he caught up with me.

"Natalie," he said, right behind me. Even still, I kept going. But now there was no way to avoid him as Jaxon was walking beside me. "I had to go through with that meeting."

I was drenched. He was drenched. But it didn't matter. Nothing did, except his betrayal.

“Talk to me,” he said just as a crack of thunder made the ground rumble under my feet.

“No thank you,” I said. Fumbling around in my purse for the keys, I was about to climb the stairs to my apartment when Jaxon spun me around to face him.

“Talk to me,” he repeated, this time more forcefully.

A crack of lightning filled the sky, almost, but not quite, making me jump into Jaxon’s arms. The thing scared the crap out of me.

“Can we just do this another time?” I asked. “If you haven’t noticed, it’s pouring.”

The street was dark and completely empty, with all the sane people not standing in the pouring rain.

“You’re angry—”

I cut him off. “I wonder why?”

“What was I supposed to do? Go in there and say, ‘No need for me to answer questions. I’m not purchasing the property’? You knew about this meeting since last week.”

“You made it sound so . . . final.”

I forgot about the rain. Looking into his eyes, I forgot about everything except that kiss and how badly I wanted him to do it again. A stupid kiss. Of all things to be worried about when Jaxon had all but finalized the property sale tonight.

“Nothing is final,” he said, looking like a sexy wet version of himself. I tried to imagine him in uniform, stationed somewhere, looking like this but even deadlier. Shivering, I tried to remember that I was angry. Very angry.



“Fucking hell.” He reached for me. Grabbed my neck from behind as if he was planning to kiss me.

“Oh no,” I began, but he stopped me.

“Another pass.”

That was all it took. I let him guide my head toward him as our mouths slammed together. Our second kiss was as out of control as the storm that swirled around us. Another crack of thunder seemed perfectly timed to the tangling of tongues and frantic speed at which we devoured each other.

Even still, I wanted so much more. To consume him, and let him consume me. Someone moaned as the kiss deepened. Was that me? Or him? Or both of us? Soon the kiss spiraled so far out of control that our hands were everywhere. If I could have torn off his clothes right there on the street, finally getting a peek at what I’d only been able to imagine so far, I’d have done it.

Pushing away, I held up my keys between us. His quick nod was all I needed to sprint up the stairs and let us both into my apartment. Once we were inside, a lamp turned on automatically. He looked around and then back at me.

“Nice place.”

“Thanks. Let me get some towels.” And then it occurred to me. “Actually, I have some clothes that might fit.”

Heading to the bathroom, I grabbed a towel and changed in record time. Then, grabbing the bag I’d intended to give back last week but somehow kept forgetting, I headed back out to find him looking at one of the pictures on my fireplace mantel. When I handed him a towel, Jax gave me a once-over.

“I love that look.”

“Yoga pants and a messy bun?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“Your clothes,” I said, handing the bag to him. “Bathroom’s over there.”

He took it without a word. As I watched Jax disappear into the bathroom, I wondered when I’d started thinking of him as Jax and not Jaxon, even though I refused to call him that out loud after tonight. But the more important question was . . . were we still on a pass? Or had that ended once the kiss was over? And why did it matter when I wanted to murder him?

I should never have pulled away.

*You’d both be half undressed by now, giving the neighbors one hell of a show.*

Speaking of a show, I’d dearly love to head over to that bathroom door and yank it open right about now. Instead, I relegated myself to putzing around the apartment, picking up any stray items and tidying up a bit.

“Thanks for the dry clothes.”

I spun around and groaned. Maybe I shouldn’t have suggested the sweats even though they were his. I’d forgotten the sweatpants were gray. Geez.

“They are yours.” I managed to tear my gaze from his crotch. Clearly, by Jax’s expression, I hadn’t been very subtle.

In response, Jax closed the distance between us. When he reached up, I thought he was going to pull me toward him, like before. Instead, he took a strand of my hair that had fallen and wrapped it around his finger.

“I’ve had an overwhelming desire to touch your hair since the first time we met. Is that strange?”

He must have been able to hear my heart beating. “There’s nothing normal about our situation, Jaxon.”

“Understatement.”

“I was so pissed tonight,” I admitted. It was difficult to be mad with him looking at me that way. Touching my hair so intimately, as if he had the right to do so. Something I wanted even as I fought it every step of the way.

“I had a feeling.” His hand dropped. “I want nothing more than to continue where we left off outside. But, like you said, there’s nothing normal about this situation. The old me wouldn’t have given a flying fuck about leading you on right now. The old me would take you into my arms, kiss you until you had trouble standing upright and then take you into your bedroom and explore every inch of that luscious body of yours. With my lips, my tongue—”

“Jaxon,” I stopped him. One more word and I wouldn’t ever get another wink of sleep. As it was, I lay in bed awake thinking of his lips against mine. Ran through every word he ever spoke to me.

“Sorry,” he said, though he didn’t look very apologetic. “I guess that was a pretty shitty way of saying that nothing is finalized, like it sounded tonight.” I didn’t like the change in his expression. “I’m not gonna lie to you. I still intend to purchase that land.”

It took a second for his words to sink in. When they did, I took a step back.

“You’re going back on our deal?”

“I would never back out of a bet. But I do intend to win and thought you should know that’s why I’m moving forward. Just so we’re clear.”

“So your plan is, what exactly? That I’ll fall into your arms because you’re being truthful? Or that your charm and magnetism are so strong I’ll decide the land doesn’t matter to me anymore? Because honestly . . .” I was getting worked up again. “Neither is going to happen.”

God, I wished he wouldn’t look at me like that.

“I’d love to think I’m that charming, but no, I don’t think that will happen.”

I put my hands on my hips. “So what’s the plan?”

In truth, I really hoped he came up with something good. Because I really, really wanted to kiss him again.

“I’ve spoken with the potential buyer and am pretty sure we can work out a deal for your rowing program to stay there for the summer.”

Honestly, I’d forgotten about that. Well, not completely forgotten but just pushed it to the back of my mind. Agreeing felt like conceding the land should be sold, and even though I was fairly certain tonight’s public hearing sealed the deal—Jax had handled every question with ease, his knowledge of the property and the laws that protected it surprisingly strong—I wasn’t ready to give in.

Sighing, I tried not to look down. Damn gray sweats.

“I’m not interested.”

Jax’s slow smile disputed my words. “No? Seems to me you’re very interested, Natalie. And the feeling is mutual. As you can see.”

Inwardly groaning, I made sure no sound escaped my lips.

“I’ve always thought kissing in the rain was overrated. Something you see in the movies but that isn’t as hot in real life,” he said.

I wanted to back away, but my feet didn’t move.

“Turns out, that’s not the case. I’ll be dreaming about that tonight, Natalie. Will you?”

Oh my God, yes.

“No.”

“Liar.”

He was so close I could smell him. Feel the heat from his body. A part of me wanted to give in so badly. To say “fine” and succumb to the inevitable. But a deal was a deal. All I had to do was hold out, not let this man charm me, and there would be no sale.

*Is that fair? The environmental impact was minimal. The Trust, the public . . . no one else really has any major reservations about this sale. Was I being stingy because I thought of that inlet as mine?*

Nonsense. What kind of environmentalist was I if I didn’t try to protect land from being developed?

“I think you should leave.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to take them back. But I wouldn’t. This thing with Jax had to stop. It was a dangerous dance that would only end with me compromising my values just for the sake of a few thrills. With a guy who would be leaving town soon anyway. I’d do well to remember that.

“That’s what you want?”

No, dammit. Not even a little bit.

“Yes. I do.”

Jax looked as if he’d argue with me, but instead, he grabbed the bag of wet clothes—his this time—and left without another word. I stared at the door as if waiting to see it open back up. But it didn’t. And wouldn’t. I knew Jax well enough to predict that with some certainty.

What wasn’t certain?

Everything else. The whole situation was confusing as hell, and I didn’t know what was up or down anymore. Thank goodness for the Sicily trip. I needed a distraction, something to clear my head a bit. I’d spend the rest of the week packing, forgetting about Jax, and then sunny Sicily would fix everything.

Thankfully, Jax was only going for a few days. How much trouble could we get in over a long weekend?

SEVENTEEN

*jax*

I followed my phone's directions through the cobblestone streets, passing shop after shop. Having landed in Palermo, I caught the train to Cefalù two days after most of the other guests had already arrived in Sicily, so I was on my own finding the beach lido.

As I passed restaurants and a gelateria, I wondered, not for the millionth time, what Natalie thought of Sicily so far. I wondered if she was having a good time. If she thought of me at all. For my part, I hadn't thought of anything but her.

The sale? Sure, it was moving forward. But instead of being happy about the fact, I dreaded every second. If I couldn't convince Natalie to negotiate with the purchaser, I was screwed. Seducing her away from the property seemed like a good idea, but as I got to know her, victory by those means would only make me feel like shit.

Could I do it?

Potentially. But that wasn't my goal anymore. Sure, I wanted to be with her. But not like that. I needed to make her talk to me, something I'd been unsuccessful at since the night in her apartment. Aside from two very impersonal emails and one even less personal text, all land related, Natalie refused to communicate with me.



“Buongiorno,” I said to a man standing just outside a shoe shop at the edge of town.

“Buongiorno,” he responded kindly. I’d always found Italians, Sicilians especially, extremely gracious, and this man was no exception.

“Dove il Lido Pura Vita?” I asked.

“Di qua,” he said, pointing to the right in the fork I’d come to that my phone didn’t think existed. “Alla spiaggia.”

Though my Italian was rusty, I at least knew in which direction to head.

“Grazie,” I said, moving along.

“Prego.”

A block later, it became clear where to go. So this was why people loved Cefalù. Leaving the quaint town with its Duomo and winding side streets, just a short walk away it became an entirely different experience. With a street of sidewalks lined with restaurants on one side and the beach on the other, suddenly Cefalù had turned into a beach town. I passed lido after lido filled with people grabbing a bite to eat or an aperitivo as they took a break from sitting under the umbrellas packed together like sardines. Mine was still a half mile away, and every step I took toward it, I wondered what she’d say. No doubt Natalie knew I was arriving today, but did she care?

Why she wouldn’t work with the property owner, I couldn’t say. Did she not believe the reports and worry about the environmental impact on the land? Or did she just not want to relinquish it under any circumstances?

Again, my gut told me the answer, and it was the latter. Seemed like I may have actually met someone as stubborn as me.

“Whoa, look who it is.”

The groom himself spotted me as I made my way from street level down the ramp toward the lido. Like the others, this one included a building and deck right on the beach filled with people eating and drinking. But unlike the others, there weren't many locals here. It seemed as if Gian and Mazzie must have rented the whole thing out for their pre-wedding party. Tomorrow was the rehearsal dinner, and the day after, the wedding. But today was for the party people, and from the look of it, they were already in full swing.

The mid-afternoon heat had most of the guests either under their umbrellas on the beach or on the deck with just a few brave souls sitting in full sun.

I was most interested in one guest in particular, but I didn't see Natalie anywhere.

“Glad you found us,” Gian said as I approached him and Nate. “Welcome to Sicily.”

I shook hands with both men, still looking, but finding no sign of her.

“How's it going so far?” I asked. “Seems like the party's in full swing. Did you rent out the whole place?”

“Actually, a friend of mine did. The woman I worked for when I stayed here. Pulled some strings, as it were.”

Gian had traded odd jobs at a local resort with a friend of the family for an extended stay, which was when he'd met Mazzie last summer.

“Nice. Looks like I need to play catch-up.”

“Hell yeah.” Nate nodded to the bar. “Go grab a drink.” Then, as I was about to walk away, “She's on the beach with

Zoe and the girls.”

I stopped. Turned to look at Nate and Gian, who both grinned knowingly at me. Playing dumb, I pretended I had no idea who they were talking about. “She?”

The two of them burst out laughing. Ignoring the pair of the guys, I grabbed myself a Peroni since it looked like they already had fresh drinks. Making my way to the edge of the deck, I took in row after row of bright blue umbrellas. Beyond those, blue and white striped ones marked a different beach lido.

It always amazed me when people talked about Italian beaches. To me, though the country was absolutely beautiful, the packed beaches weren't a selling point. I preferred to spread out a bit. But there was a certain beauty to the crystal-clear water of the Tyrrhenian Sea with hordes of umbrellas and beachgoers that gave it a distinctly Italian flair.

Or Sicilian, rather. The two were not the same.

*There she is.*

As I watched, Natalie and the other ladies began to pack up their belongings. Damned if the woman wasn't wearing a white bikini, her tan giving evidence to the fact that she'd been here a few days. Hair piled on top of her head, Natalie was a total knockout. I imagined myself grabbing that waist and pulling her toward me. Imagined lifting her so Natalie's bare legs wrapped around me.

She looked up.

It was, as always between us, as if we were the only two people in the world. The party, the beachgoers . . . everything faded away as Natalie stared at me, and I at her. A second later, she snapped out of her surprise and turned away, giving

me a very enticing view of her backside just before pulling a sundress over her head. Also white, with spaghetti straps.

As the women made their way toward the deck, I wondered if she'd come over to me. The silent question was answered a few seconds later when she made a wide circle around where I stood and headed toward the bar.

"You two have the strangest relationship," Gian said, joining me.

"It's a strange situation," I admitted. "Every day we get closer to the sale, the more pissed she is at me. Plus . . ." I looked at him, wondering how much the girls talked. "There's the whole matter of a bet between us."

Gian's expression gave away the fact that he knew of it already. "Mazzie may have mentioned that."

"I'm sure she did."

Now with drinks in their hands—looked like Aperol spritzes all around—the women all stood in a circle. Drinking. Laughing. But Natalie did not look my way.

"I've been meaning to ask you about that. Was a little busy this past week or so."

"Understandable. You nervous?"

"Nah. Mazzie's the one for me. No doubt about that. I can't wait to call her my wife."

I couldn't help smiling. "Not words I ever thought would come out of Gian DeLuca's mouth."

"Love does strange things. Like putting a huge land deal on the line to get a girl to talk to you. That sort of thing."

"I am not," I said that last word emphatically, "in love."

“Maybe not. But there’s no doubt something is brewing between the two of you.”

That I wouldn’t deny.

She did look then. I raised my beer bottle, and for a second, I thought she’d do the same, in a silent toast. Instead, Natalie scrunched her nose as if something smelled bad and turned back to her friends.

“I take it things aren’t going well between you at the moment?”

“Understatement,” I said, finishing my beer. “I’m trying to convince her to let the sale go through. She’s been through all of the paperwork and knows the environmental impact will be minimal. And I’ve spoken to the potential buyer who will allow her to keep the rowing program there throughout the summer so it’s not displaced. And offered to find a new spot for it.”

“Good luck with that. I can’t see Natalie ever willingly agree to the sale. If she digs her heels in, word on the street is that you’ll lose the bet and drop the bid.”

I looked at Gian. “That was the bet.”

“You’re nuts, man.”

“I know. But it was the only way I could think of to get her to talk cordially to me. But after the public meeting, she was convinced I was backing out of my word.”

“As if you would ever consider such a thing. She must not know you very well.”

“Eh. I was working on remedying that when she stopped talking to me.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, and I’ll deny saying this if you ever repeat it, Mazzie says it’s killing Natalie not to talk to you.”

I couldn’t say I was surprised. Clearly there was a “thing” between us. The damn inlet was just getting in the way.

“Good to know. Thanks, Gian. Need a beer?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Thanks.”

Heading to the bar once again, I wasn’t surprised when Natalie pretended to see someone she wanted to talk to, making a beeline in the other direction to avoid me.

It went like that for more than an hour. Which was fine. Natalie could walk away from me all she wanted. But eventually, I would talk to her.

We had some things to discuss, and she couldn’t avoid me all night.

EIGHTEEN

*natalie*

“Do you seriously think you can avoid him all night?” Charlee asked.

“That’s the plan.”

It had been nearly two hours since I first spotted him. Two hours since I’d been able to breathe like a normal person. Two hours of trying so hard not to notice his casual light blue linen shirt that made him fit right in. Between that and the sunglasses . . .

“Oohhh finally,” Mazzie said. “My friend from Arizona. I think she’s the last one to get in. I’ll catch up with you guys in a bit.”

With that, the bride was gone to mingle, leaving me with Charlee and Zoe. I was surprised we’d even gotten her on the beach at all earlier with the party in full swing behind us. But Mazzie had been on the go since landing in Palermo and insisted she wanted at least an hour or so to kick back before the wedding festivities kicked into full gear tomorrow.

“Seriously, Nat,” Zoe said. “You know you’re going to talk to him at some point. Just go over there. He must have looked your way ten times.”

Or more. I only knew that because I couldn’t take my eyes off him. Unfortunately, I wasn’t the only one. It seemed every



single woman, and probably some not-so-single ones, had eyes for him too. And who could blame them? He was the epitome of maleness with a dash of arrogance, but not cockiness like I first thought. Just someone who knew their worth.

Adjusting my bikini strap for the hundredth time, I declined. “Nah. I think I’m good right here. Actually, I might grab my stuff and take this bikini off. The straps are seriously digging into my shoulders.”

“Changing rooms are over there.” Charlee pointed to the wooden stalls that lined the ramp leading off the beach and onto the street level above.

“Next to the bathrooms?”

“Yep.”

Grabbing my beach bag from behind the bar, I made my way over to the changing rooms, hoping there was a light inside. Darkness had fallen, and even though bulb lights lined the lido’s deck, the bathroom and changing area looked pretty dark. At worst, I’d use my phone as a flashlight.

Pulling open the wooden door, I looked around for a light switch before letting it close and losing any of the moonlight streaming in. A few Aperol spritzes didn’t help. About to give up, I began to fish my phone from the bag when the door I was holding open swung open even farther. Before I could even say the changing room was occupied, Jax stepped fully inside and closed the door behind him.

Only a bit of light streaming in from a large crack where the door shut allowed me to see him at all. But it was enough. He wasn’t playing.

Grabbing me by the waist, he hauled me into his chest. “You are so fucking hot, Natalie. Do you realize how

incredibly sexy you are?”

His voice, deep and smooth in my ear, was only slightly more mesmerizing than the way his fingers gripped my waist, as if I were his possession.

“Jaxon,” I said, wanting this so badly but knowing it couldn’t be. “The bet.”

“Screw the bet.”

“Um.” I stared up at him. Jax’s face was just inches from my own. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means there is no bet in Sicily. We can go back to being on opposite sides back in New York.”

“So, another pass?”

“Sure,” he said. “Another pass. For the weekend.”

It was all I needed to hear. No way I was leaving this changing room without kissing him if the bet was on pause. He must have sensed as much because Jax’s lips came crashing down on mine. His head slanted, his tongue finding mine as we shared the most passionate of kisses yet. It was like the one in the rain, except this one was not going to stop so quickly.

“Fuck,” he murmured against my mouth.

“Yes,” I said, deliberately misunderstanding. Somehow my hands worked their way between our bodies as I unbuttoned his shirt. Taking my cue, Jax grabbed the hem of my sundress and lifted it up and off my body, tossing it aside.

“Look at you. Just fucking look at you,” he said as I finally finished unbuttoning. I watched him shrug out of the shirt and explored every single nook and cranny of his Army Ranger body. His arms, his shoulders. Then down to his chest and abs.

“Your workouts must be intense.”

“Not as intense as the one I’m about to give you.”

With that warning, which sent shivers all along my arms, seemingly down to my toes, Jax reached around to untie my bikini top.

“My only regret is that there isn’t more light in here,” he said, as the top followed my sundress to the floor. When his hands covered both of my breasts, Jax’s groan and subsequent teasing of my nipples with his thumbs made me feel like mine were the first set of tits he’d ever felt.

Clearly, not the case. But fun to consider.

“I love the sounds you make,” I said as his hands explored.

“Your turn to make sounds,” Jax said, one of his hands not wasting any time and moving southward, dipping right into my bikini bottoms. Without warning, his palm cupped me as one finger slipped inside, followed closely by a second. “So wet,” he murmured. “Mmmm.”

As Jax predicted, it was my turn to make sounds.

Overachiever that he was, Jax’s fingering game was strong. I may have even stopped kissing him back for a second or two when he built me to a budding climax. Either for that reason, or some other, Jax did stop kissing me as his fingers and palm worked together in tandem. Suddenly, his other hand was over my mouth, a good thing, as I couldn’t keep it in. With his chest pressed against me and his fingers working magic beneath my bikini bottom, not to mention the very pleasurable sensation of Jax basically pinning me against the wall with one hand over my mouth and the other deep inside me . . . it was simply too much.

He must have known I was close. As if his hands weren't enough, Jax leaned forward and kissed behind my ear, whispering, "I've wanted you to come for me since the second we first met. If only I could see your face, sunshine. But I can feel you wet beneath my fingers. Make them even wetter."

So. Damn. Close.

"Mmmm, wish I could remove my hand and hear what you have to say, but can't take the chance of someone hearing you scream."

I came apart in his hands at that, pulsing around him. Squeezing his shoulders with my fingertips and screaming against his hand, only a muffled sound escaping. Wave after wave took me until I finally returned to earth. Sensing as much, Jax removed his hand and kissed me so thoroughly, his fingers still deep inside me, that I wanted to melt to the floor.

But I had other plans. Ones that did include the concrete floor, which my knees would not thank me for later. But no way was I getting off like that without paying it forward, mostly because I wanted Jax to know what he'd be missing after this weekend when his pause button was unpressed once again, and we were back to being at odds with one another.

"Natalie. What are you doing?"

"You know exactly what I'm doing," I said as I pulled his hand from my bikini. "I'm going to suck you dry, Mr. Army Ranger, because I know you've thought of this."

"Fuck," he murmured as I got into position. "I have, many times." The floor wasn't the most comfortable on my poor knees, but I wasn't worried. This wouldn't take long. He was hard as a rock, more than a little primed, and as my hands

wrapped around the base of him, I only wished I could see his face.

There was an ongoing joke among the girls about my dislike for giving blow jobs. The fact that I'd willingly gone down on my knees and taken Jax into my mouth, was actually enjoying this . . . they'd never believe it. But to hear a man like him, one who'd done the things he had, groan that way . . .

It encouraged me. Made me want to please him.

As his hands wrapped themselves in my hair—not pushing hard into him, exactly, but not entirely gentle either—a bubble of excitement built in my chest. At least, that's where it started. Was I really getting wet again?

What a turn of events.

“Natalie, my god.”

Cupping his balls, his hands firm on my head, I used my tongue and my mouth in tandem the best I knew how and willed him to come. To explode in a way he never had before. Unlikely, given his experience, but one had to aim for the stars.

I was still thinking of that orgasm he gave me when Jax pulled me into him and stilled. Waiting for that inevitable moment when I'd change my mind and dislike the whole thing, I swallowed every bit.

That moment never came.

When Jax hauled me to my feet and kissed me, seemingly not caring I still had the taste of him on my lips or that voices could be distinctly heard from just outside our door, his mouth moved over mine hungrily.

I'd never wanted to be consumed by someone, but at this moment, it wasn't enough. The kiss, our chests pressed together . . . I wanted more.

I wanted him.

A knock at the door was like a bucket of cold water being tossed on us. As we broke apart, Jax whispered, "Go ahead and answer."

"Someone's in here," I called out.

There were like five changing rooms. Surely some were empty.

"I know, silly," Charlee said from the other side. "You've been in there forever. All okay?"

More than okay. Jax leaned down to grab our clothes. Standing, he handed me my bikini top. I quickly put it on as he did the same with his shirt.

"I'll be right out."

No response.

"How the hell are we going to get out of here without anyone noticing?" I asked frantically.

"More importantly, when can we do this again?"

Good question.

As we dressed, Jax and I whispered back and forth to each other. "What exactly does a Sicilian pause look like?" I asked. "We get together for a weekend and then go back to being enemies next week?"

He sighed. "We don't have to be enemies, Natalie."

"I just have to agree to be cool with selling the inlet. And then all is well?"

“How about this? We don’t talk about the inlet at all. No property talk while we’re here. When we go back to New York, we can sit down and go over all the options.”

Dressed, I picked up my bag. “Options as in I agree to the sale?”

“That’s one.”

No talk of the land. Come to think of it, since this didn’t affect our bet, that worked fine for me. Then we could go back, I could pretend to listen to Jax’s plan and then, avoiding him like the plague so there was no more getting together, he could find another piece of protected land to purchase.

*And then what? He leaves Kitchi Falls and you never see him again?*

Seemed like it would be the way of things. Even if he bought the land, Jax didn’t plan to use it for himself. Either way, he’d be out of dodge. In the meantime, why not have a little fun? Give in to temptation a bit. What did I have to lose?

“You go out first since your friends are looking for you.” He leaned down and kissed me one last time. “I’ll follow in a bit.”

What did I have to lose, indeed? The answer was staring me in the face, but I had no desire to acknowledge it. There was no past, and the future was uncertain. All we really had was the present.

“Deal,” I said. To the escape plan, but more importantly, to our weekend truce. Jax’s smile as I cracked open the door told me he knew exactly what I meant and was looking forward to our Sicilian adventure.

That made two of us.

NINETEEN



*jax*

I sat on the steps of the Duomo watching tourists, and maybe some locals, make their way lazily through the piazza. Unlike last night, when I'd had to fight my way through the crowd to get back to the hotel, this morning's pace was less frantic. Certainly less crowded. By Italian tourist town standards, it was still early in the morning, even though back home, I'd have been up and working for hours now.

Some meandered into the bakery on my left. Others sat with their cappuccinos at small tables in front of two of the open restaurants that served breakfast. And still others walked up to the counter at the cafe to my right to get their espresso fix.

Italians, Sicilians especially, loved their espresso.

And I loved the fact that Natalie and I weren't at odds for a change. Just the opposite, in fact. After our changing room escapade, we spent the rest of the night drinking and generally enjoying each other's company. Agreeing not to talk about the land, after a pair of incredible orgasms, did wonders for our relationship.

*Careful with that word, Jax.*

The only awkward moment, besides the two hours she ignored me when I arrived, came at the end of the night.

Natalie was staying with some of her friends in a rental house on the edge of town, and I'd have loved to ask her back to my hotel. But we were both pretty wasted, and that wasn't how I wanted our first time together to go down.

Because there was no doubt about the fact that Natalie and I would be together this weekend. That wasn't wishful thinking on my part, either. When we walked from the beach back into town, before she left with her friends, Natalie leaned into me and whispered, "I cannot wait for you to fuck my brains out, Jaxon Hayes."

With that, she walked away, turning back once to wink at me. Was she drunk? Yes. Was she also serious? I hoped so.

I looked at my phone. The last message was from an hour ago when Natalie had texted to ask if I had breakfast plans. She was only five minutes late, but it was enough for me to wonder if she'd changed her mind.

But then I spotted her.

Emerging from a side street in the opposite direction from the way I'd come, she wore wide-legged pants, a tank top, and a baseball hat. I'd never seen her in a hat before but liked the look. Hell, Natalie would look good in just about anything she wore.

I stood up as she walked up to me.

"Tell me I'm not the only one with a splitting headache?"

"Water and aspirin before bed. Feeling fine. I take it you're not?"

"Negative." She turned to the bakery on the corner. "We've gotten pastries from there and brought it back to the house. But I haven't eaten anywhere else this early."

“How about that place?” I asked, pointing to unoccupied tables right in the center of the piazza in front of a cafe.

“Looks good to me.”

We sat and ordered two Americano coffees. I added a water for Natalie’s sake.

“Frizzante or naturale?” the waiter asked.

“Naturale, grazie,” she said to him. Then to me, “Good call.”

Neither of us said anything for a few seconds. Natalie sighed. “This is weird.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Um, were you in that changing room last night?”

“I can assure you,” I said as the waiter put our coffees down. “I was very much there. Grazie.”

“Prego,” the waiter responded before moving on.

“Not to mention what I said at the end of the night.” She made a face that had me smiling like a fifteen-year-old wet under the ears.

“So you remember that?”

“Oh yeah, distinctly.”

“Good,” I said. “I very much look forward to fucking your brains out, Natalie.”

She nearly spit out her coffee. I, on the other hand, took a sip as if I’d asked her what she thought of the lovely weather that morning.

“Jesus. Talk about blunt.”

“As if we’ve been anything else from the start.”

“True. So now that that’s settled . . .” She took a sip of coffee. “What the hell do we talk about if we can’t bring up you-know-what?”

“Maybe start with that bad relationship you mentioned. Asshole ex and all of that.”

“Oh boy. We’re really diving in this morning, I guess.”

We dove in deep. Not only did she tell me about the ex, but we talked about our other past relationships. We talked about college, times we were stupid. Things we would do over and aspirations for the future. We ate croissants, drank copious amounts of coffee, and watched as the waiter began to serve slices of pizza and wine in place of pastries and coffees.

I could have stayed there all day sharing stories with her. Without the inlet sale stymieing us, conversation flowed. Until there was an unusual pause between us and our gazes locked. I was pretty sure Natalie was also thinking about last night.

Pretty soon, I’d have to actually stand up, so instead of going down that path, I addressed the first part of the night instead.

“Were you ever planning on talking to me yesterday?”

“No,” she said immediately, making me laugh.

“Not for the entire trip?”

“Maybe. I dunno. Probably not.”

At least she was honest.

“But I can’t say any more without bringing up the topic.”

A part of me wanted to break the rule. To tell Natalie that I'd gotten a purchase agreement from the Trust that morning, though she likely knew that already. To ask her why she was really so resistant to the land purchase, especially if she could keep her rowing program there for the summer. But that would essentially ruin all the headway we'd made, so I kept my mouth shut.

“What do you think about moving a bit? Do you have time?” I asked instead.

“Sounds good,” she replied, looking at her phone. “I have to be back around four to get ready. A bunch of us are meeting for aperitivos before the rehearsal dinner. Want to join us?”

“Sure. What's the plan?”

Having paid the check already, we got up from our seats and strolled the streets. We talked about plans for the night and the fact that everyone at the wedding was invited to tonight's rehearsal dinner at a sea-view restaurant on the edge of town.

I waited outside as Natalie ducked into a shop until I heard my name. When I went inside, her baseball hat was replaced by a wide-rimmed sun hat.

“Whatya think?”

“I like it,” I said.

“It's probably impractical. I can't imagine wearing it back home ever.” She paused for a minute and then put it back. I immediately picked it back up and took it to the register. Once purchased, I handed it to her. “Doesn't matter if it's practical or not. You like it, so enjoy.”

She put it back on, sticking the baseball hat in the bag.

“Thanks,” she said as we left the small shop. “You know, I had you pegged completely wrong that first day.” As we strolled the cobblestone streets, she continued. “I thought you were a cocky son of a bitch.”

“You don’t think so anymore?” I teased.

“Jury’s out.”

“Hmmm. I see.”

It went much the same for the rest of the day. Between gelato and shopping, Natalie helping me pick out souvenirs for my mom and nieces; we acted very much like a couple. With one glaring exception.

Knowing she’d be leaving to get ready soon, I nodded toward an alleyway that I’d discovered yesterday when finding my bearings. It led, as many paths did here, to the back of a line of buildings that overlooked the sea. We walked toward the railing, and Natalie’s expression as she looked out to the clear blue-green water was one I’d never forget. The woman truly did love nature, and I’d somehow never appreciated how much until that very moment.

There were a few other tourists milling around, but I didn’t care. I’d been wanting to touch her all day, but holding her hand hadn’t felt right. We weren’t a couple. But that didn’t mean my desire to be closer to her was one I felt like ignoring any longer.

Moving next to her, I put my hand on Natalie’s waist.

Peeling her eyes away from the sea, she watched as my head leaned toward her. When our lips touched, it was as different from last night’s kiss as possible. This one was slow and sensual, our tongues touching but not demanding.

It was the most dangerous sort of kiss.

Drunk on the Sicilian sea and Natalie's lips, I knew this was a kiss that hinted at more than just a romp in the sack. Or, as Natalie put it, fucking each other's brains out.

"You're laughing," she accused, breaking the kiss.

"Maybe a little," I admitted. My hand remained where it was, on her waist. I had no desire to move it.

"Mind telling me what's so funny?" she teased.

"I was just thinking of the very articulate way you asked me to take you to your bed last night."

Her smile widened. "Articulate. That's me."

"There's a wild side to Miss Sunshine that I wouldn't have guessed at first, isn't there?"

"Maybe."

Natalie turned toward me so my hand now sat on her hip.

"I'm trying to decipher that look," I said as she gazed up at me. A second later, when her hands lay on my chest, the question was moot. "Ahh, never mind. I'm onto you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I said, leaning down once again. What started as a kiss like the other quickly escalated, and unless we were willing to put on a very X-rated show right here on the street, a little cold water on this fire between us was in order.

Pulling back, I stated the obvious. "Not talking about the land is good for us."

"Agreed. But it's really only delaying the inevitable."

"Which is?"

Natalie started to say something, but then stopped. “I can’t say without talking about the land.”

“Fair enough.”

If I’d wanted to douse us with cold water, mentioning the elephant in the room had certainly done it. Natalie was still smiling, but her hands dropped from my chest, and some of the lightheartedness that was between us suddenly shifted.

I was such an asshole.

Or maybe I’d done it on purpose. Not only was I becoming less sure about Natalie’s willingness to compromise on the land, but either way, my time in Kitchi Falls was coming to an end. Which was fine, except . . .

“So serious all of a sudden.”

*It’s only going to get worse if you sleep with her.*

I wasn’t a fucking moron. And I knew myself well enough to feel the difference between a woman like Natalie and, well, just about anyone else I’d dated. This . . . something . . . between us was quickly spiraling out of control. The fact that I wanted to grab her hand as we began to walk back wasn’t a good sign either.

Resisting that particular temptation, I shot Natalie a bit of honesty. “I was just thinking about when we get back.”

Natalie’s lips flattened. Clearly the thought was as distasteful to her as it was to me. “We agreed, no land talk.”

It wasn’t just the land. I was talking about what happened afterward, but Natalie misunderstood. I didn’t clarify.

“Alright, forget I said anything.”



“Isn’t your hotel the other direction?” she asked as we got back to the piazza.

“I’m walking you to your apartment.”

“I appreciate it, but you don’t have to do that. I’m quite safe.”

“I’m aware.”

Her sidelong gaze told me she understood. I wanted to be with her. And by the way Natalie looked at me, I was pretty sure she wanted to be with me for as long as possible too.

“So you’ll meet us for a pre-dinner drink?”

“Sure,” I said as we strolled down the hill, the side street lined with restaurants and shops, a bustling town center and probably one of my favorites in Sicily. Maybe all of Italy, of the places I’d been at least.

“That’s the drink place,” she said, pointing to a place with forward-facing half tables where already people were drinking as they watched passersby like us.

“What time?”

“Six. We’ll probably stay until about seven forty-five and then walk to dinner.”

“Got it.”

“Welp, there I am.” She moved toward a door that led to a rental apartment above.

“Great location,” I said.

“Tell me about it. I only wish we had a view of the sea.”

“My hotel does,” I said, not meaning anything by it. At first. But it only took two and a half seconds for me to throw caution to the wind. We were happening whether it was a good

idea or not. “Why don’t you run up now and grab some stuff? That way I can take it back now.”

“Stuff for?”

I cleared my throat.

“Oh. You’re asking me to stay at your place tonight?”

“Unless you’re opposed to waking up to a view. And some Americano coffee on the balcony tomorrow morning?”

I loved the twinkle in her eyes. “Is that all you have to entice me? A sea view?”

I closed the distance between us. “We both know I have a hell of a lot more than that.” I leaned closer so only the two of us could hear and whispered, “Maybe you should bring enough for two nights. I’m pretty sure after tonight your apartment won’t hold as much appeal.”

Her breath coming noticeably more quickly, Natalie swallowed as I stood back straight. “I’m screwed, aren’t I?”

That was too easy of a softball not to hit. “I’m pretty certain you are, sunshine. In more ways than one.”

TWENTY

*natalie*

“Damn it.”

Jax wasn't coming. I stared at the text, trying to read into it.

“What's up?” Charlee asked next to me.

“Look at this. What do you think it means?”

We sat facing the street drinking limoncello spritzes, my friend completely up to speed on the day I spent with Jax, including the last bit about me taking a bag down to him in case I stayed the night at his place.

In case. Funny. As if there was a chance I wouldn't. At least, I hadn't thought so until now. Maybe he wouldn't come at all. Maybe we wouldn't be getting together tonight.

Maybe that was a blessing in disguise.

“I think it means he has a work issue, won't be coming for drinks but will see you at dinner. At least, that's what he said. Am I missing something?”

“I guess not.”

We continued to people watch, but Charlee knew me too well. Her expression said she was clearly not convinced. “Okay, spill.”

“I'm just being silly.”

“Because?”

I shrugged. “I was thinking maybe he had a change of heart.”

“About tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“What makes you think that? Ahh, never mind. Let me guess. The ex from hell.”

“Exes,” I clarified. “But yeah, college boy in particular.”

“Okay, but that was a long time ago and a totally different guy. Jax isn’t an immature asshole.”

“True. But what about the work thing? Is he talking about the inlet? Did something happen? Is he going back on the bet and moving forward with the sale anyway?”

“It’s not like you to be such a nervous Nellie. What’s really going on, Nat?”

I deflected. “That would be nervous Nat in my case.”

Charlee made a face. She wasn’t letting me off the hook.

“I dunno. It’s probably nothing. But if he doesn’t come, maybe that’s a good thing.”

“Because you’re liking him.”

I nodded.

“Is that so terrible? He actually seems like a decent guy, land-stealing aside.”

“He is a decent guy. I talked to him for a while last night,” Lucas said to Charlee’s right. We both turned to look at him.

“Sorry. Couldn’t help but overhear.”

“Anyway,” Charlee said dramatically, swatting Lucas on the shoulder, “you’re overthinking this. I think his text means what it says. Relax. Enjoy your spritz and have the night of your life when, not if, Jax joins us later.”

“You’re right,” I said. And I did just that. Brushing off my overthinking as nerves, I texted him back, “See you later,” and tried not to think about it.

Tried. But did not exactly succeed.

When Jax didn’t show up by the time salads were served, I stared at my second empty seat for the night.

He wasn’t coming.

“Look who the cat dragged in,” Charlee said, my friend sitting next to me again at dinner. The restaurant overlooked the sea, and we were in a prime location for a view. The bride and groom sat with their families across the room, the DeLucas and their extended Grado families making up more than half of the attendees. The mood was festive, and things were about to get more interesting. Because sure enough, Jax was walking toward our table.

He looked, in a word, amazing.

It wasn’t the first time I’d seen him wearing a sport coat, and with luck, it wouldn’t be the last. Model gorgeous, he turned more than one head in the room. But thankfully, he was looking straight at me. He sat, greeting Lucas, Charlee, Nate, and Zoe.

And then me.

“Sorry about the drinks,” he said. “You look stunning, sun—Natalie.”

Sunshine. I loved when he called me that. But I hated the question that I knew would burst from my lips at some point. Might as well get it over with.

“Thanks. You look great too.” Great was an understatement. “So, work emergency, huh?”

The question left no room for interpretation. But technically I hadn’t brought up the land, so I wasn’t in breach of our weekend agreement.

“Nothing to do with that,” he said. “Another deal in Jersey. Long, boring story, but it’s all taken care of.”

Although I was thrilled to hear it, I wondered what kind of deal he was talking about. More protected land, obviously, since that was his specialty.

“No frowning in Sicily,” he said, ordering a beer when the waiter came up to us.

Charlee agreed with him. Zoe apparently did too and made me laugh with her not-so-amazing Italian as she tried to share what she’d learned since coming earlier that week. Between Lucas and Nate’s Army backgrounds, and Charlee and Zoe’s ability to charm the pants off anyone, the six of us talked and laughed through dinner as if we were on a triple date. Only the toast Mazzie and Gian gave, thanking everyone for traveling for their wedding and giving logistical information for tomorrow afternoon’s nuptials, reminded us this was not just an ordinary dinner, but a very special occasion.

Mazzie had never looked happier, or more beautiful, and I couldn’t wait to see her tomorrow in her dress. “I still can’t believe they met here,” I said. “So you knew Gian when you were young,” I remembered. “Tell us about him.”

Jax shifted in his seat. “That guy,” he said, pointing to the groom, “is quite a bit different from the one I knew.”

“Really?” Charlee asked. “Do you think people change though? Or are they, at their core, always the same?”

“You really have to ask that question?” Lucas asked. “How many times have you literally said, ‘You’ve changed’ since I’ve been back?”

Good point.

Lucas and Charlee were high school sweethearts and had gone through a rough patch when he first got back. Apparently being an Army sniper did change a person slightly.

“But,” she argued, since Charlee would never let Lucas win an argument that easily, “deep down inside, you’re the same Lucas I knew before.”

“The same, but different?” he asked.

As the two of them debated back and forth, Nate and Zoe watching with rapt attention, Jax leaned toward me, whispering into my ear. “Speaking of changing, I hope you haven’t changed your mind about staying at my place tonight?”

His breath on my ear, Jax’s easy manner at dinner . . . everything about him had me anticipating tonight more than should have been humanly possible.

“I thought maybe you had,” I admitted.

His hand rested on my leg. All night we’d sat close but hadn’t touched, but now that his fingertips brushed the bare skin below the hem of my dress, I willed it to stay.

“Not a chance in hell.”



“What are you two whispering about over there?” Zoe teased.

“Nothing,” I blurted, making it obvious we very certainly were talking about something.

“Sure,” she said as our dinners were taken away.

Thankfully, Jax didn’t take away his hand. As dessert was served, a lemon cake we agreed to share as a table, his finger ran circles on my thigh. But he didn’t move his hand otherwise even though I wanted to grab it and push it upward. To come apart under the expert guidance of his fingers.

To come apart with him inside me.

“You’re a dessert girl, aren’t you?” Jax asked as I pushed my fork into the cake in the center of the table.

“You know it. No apologies for that.”

“Now why would you apologize for such a thing?”

Charlee looked at me as if to say, “Why indeed?” Mostly because my last dickhead boyfriend, who was also a fitness nut, thought sugar was the actual devil.

“Excuse me a sec,” Lucas said, getting up, presumably to use the men’s room.

Jax took the distraction to lean into me once again. “Thankfully I remembered how much you loved desserts and have something waiting for you back at my place.”

My head whipped toward him. “Really? What?”

“For me to know and you to find out.”

By the glint in his eyes, I had an inclination of what he was talking about.

“Something you like too?” I guessed.

“Mmhmm.”

Immediately a vision of me sprawled on his bed, Jax licking some sort of cream off my nipples, made me hope my imagination wasn't running too far off course.

“Looks like the party's breaking up a bit,” Nate said, glancing around the room. Sure enough, at least one table was getting up to leave. Was it too soon for us to go?

“Some of us are heading to the cafe next to the Duomo for nightcaps,” Charlee said. “But I have a feeling you guys are going to skip it?”

Astute of her.

I tried not to smile too broadly as I looked at Jax. “Up to you.”

He thought about it, or at least pretended to, before answering. “I did grab a bottle of wine in case you want to have a nightcap at my place. Or we can go with your friends. Up to you.”

Oh, the devil, making me decide. Making me admit I wanted to all but run out of this place. Before I could answer, his hand moved upward. Finally. I wasn't sure if the others caught the movement, but I certainly could feel it.

He was teasing me. Taunting me. And if it were anyone but Jax, I'd probably laugh it off and go immediately back to his place. But this *was* Jax we were talking about, and pitting myself against his iron will came second nature.

As his fingers continued tormenting me, I said brightly, “You know what? Let's go to the cafe. That sounds like fun.”

Jax let out a low groan.

Charlee and Zoe both laughed.

And I beamed, knowing, at least for once, I'd won this round of wits against a man who wasn't very accustomed to losing. Very likely, I'd pay the price. But that was a problem for later.

TWENTY-ONE

*jax*

Enough was enough.

Time to take control.

Nearly an hour after we should have bolted from the rehearsal dinner for my hotel, we were mulling around the main piazza, drinks in hand and making small talk, mostly about tomorrow's wedding. Natalie was talking to Neo Grado, presumably about wine as they peered into their glasses. But not for long.

Natalie didn't see me coming from behind until I'd already apologized to her companion and guided her by the elbow away from the conversation.

"Um, excuse me?"

"Mi Scusi," I corrected. "When in Rome, and all."

"Either way," she said, looking over her shoulder though Neo had already moved on to a different conversation. "Did you want something?"

"Yes." I took a step toward her and leaned into her ear, much as I had during dinner. "I want to peel that dress off, bury my head between your legs and make you come so hard every single fucking person in the hotel hears you scream my name."

When I stood back and assessed, I silently gave myself a point. For a second, I thought she might argue, just for the sake of it, but instead, Natalie not so eloquently put her glass on the nearest table, took my hand and started walking.

“Aren’t you going to say goodbye? To the girls, at least?”

“Nope,” she said. “I’ll text them. Maybe.”

I tugged her hand. “Wrong way, sunshine.”

“Oh.”

“You’re walking at a pretty good clip considering those heels.”

“Yeah, I was told not to wear them. Cobblestone streets and all. But I can be stubborn.”

“I’m aware.”

“For someone who chose not to leave right from dinner, you seem awfully eager all of a sudden.”

She smiled. It was a secret smile, but I could decipher it easily.

“Competitive too,” I added.

“A little.”

Laughing, I pulled her down a side street. “This way.”

“Oops.”

Somehow, we made it to my hotel without me tearing her clothes off. Thankfully, the back stairwell was empty at this time of night. When the door closed behind us, I reached for her, pulling Natalie into me.

No words were exchanged.

Our mouths crashed together, tongues tangling as I finally gave in to the urge I'd had all night to inch my hand higher than the hem of her dress. I took the briefest of seconds to relish the feel of her inner thigh, and with Natalie pinned to the wall of the stairwell, I plunged two fingers into her, knowing she would be wet for me already.

And she was. So fucking wet.

"All night," I murmured, her moans only encouraging me. If someone came in now, we were well and truly caught. No way I'd give a shit enough to stop. "All night I've wanted to do this."

"Jax." The way she looked up at me managed to somehow make me even harder than I was already. "Oh my god, please. Do. Not. Stop."

"Stop?" I used my thumb then too, rubbing circles around her clit as my fingers worked Natalie until her hips gyrated with the rhythm I'd set. "I have no intention of stopping. Not at the moment, not all fucking night. I just hope you can keep your head up tomorrow for the wedding because I don't have sleep on the agenda in my head."

"I can't." She gripped the shoulders of my jacket. "Jax," she panted.

"Come on, sunshine. Wet my fingers like you did last night. Show me how it's gonna feel in a few minutes when my cock is deep inside you. SHOW. ME."

"Oh my god."

On her tiptoes now, eyes wide, Natalie began to pulse. Then, slamming her eyes closed, she gave in completely, making my promise that she'd call my name come true. Loud

enough that if someone didn't hear us and come running, I'd be shocked.

And I didn't give a flying fuck. All that mattered was the woman coming apart in my hands.

"That's it," I encouraged, wanting to kiss her but knowing Natalie was lost for the time being. "Do you have any clue how fucking hot you look when you come?"

Her eyes whipped open.

"Do you have any idea how magical your fingers are? Or how much you curse during sex escapades?"

I pulled out my fingers and pushed Natalie's dress down.

"Seems like your ears might get a workout tonight, along with other parts of you. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. It's kinda hot, actually."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Um, Jax? Why aren't we moving? Like, upstairs."

I looked down. Natalie's gaze followed.

"Oh."

"Exactly. Talk about puppies. Or something like that."

She chuckled. "The first time we met, I actually thought about that."

"About puppies?"

"Uh huh. I thought you were an arrogant prick who hated nature and probably puppies and babies and rainbows and all things sweet like that."

I couldn't help but laugh even though it was an insult. "I happen to like babies."



“And puppies?”

“Definitely.”

“Rainbows?”

I shrugged. “Those I can take or leave. I think I’m good to go.”

“Which we should probably do. I’m surprised no one has come in here yet.”

“Maybe the walls are soundproof,” I said, heading up the stairs.

“How did you even know this stairwell existed? I saw the main one from the lobby and assume this isn’t used as much.”

I turned back to her and smiled. “Reconnaissance.”

“You’re telling me,” she said as we continued to the fifth and top floor of my boutique hotel, “that you scoped this out. For this purpose?”

“I did.”

“Didn’t have much confidence we’d make it to the room?”

“No,” I responded, pushing open the door and letting her through. “With good reason.”

“Can’t keep your hands off me, Ranger?”

“Something like that.”

And I wasn’t planning on keeping my hands off her for the rest of the night, either. We were exactly one foot into my room, moonlight streaming in from the balcony, when I made good on my promise. Natalie’s purse fell to the floor as I pulled the damn dress up and off her. Groaning when her black lace bra and thong were in full view, I made quick work of my jacket and shoes.

“So back at the cafe, you said—”

“I know exactly what I said.” Barefoot and shirtless with only my pants remaining, I backed Natalie up to the bed until she had no choice but to hop on. And when she did, I all but tore the thong from her body and buried my face between her legs.

Pushing her legs open, I wasn't exactly gentle, but Natalie didn't seem to mind. Just the opposite, actually.

“I was going to say, you don't have to do that since you already . . . holy shit, Jax.”

Obviously, I ignored her and plunged my tongue as deep as I possibly could into her. From there, I didn't let up. My hands holding her legs open, I teased a bit first, and then plunged deep inside again. As Natalie's hands gripped my hair, encouraging me, pushing me into her as if I could possibly get any closer, I licked and swirled and then pulled out, flicking my tongue against the most sensitive part of her with the tip of my tongue.

“You've got to be kidding me.”

I could use my thumb but didn't want to. Having Natalie come just using my tongue was a challenge I'd been pondering all night. And would tell her so, later. But for now, my fingers dug into the sweet flesh of her thighs as I sucked and swirled, the sounds she made so fucking hot I was getting hard myself.

Well, that was a first. I loved giving women pleasure, but couldn't say I'd ever gotten off this way before. But if Natalie kept up her squeals and squirms, I might have to make like a soldier and discipline myself back into submission.

Jesus.

“I'm gonna come, Jax.”

*Do it*, I willed her, not letting up. *Do it, sunshine.*

When she did, I licked every drop, ignoring her pulling back her hips as if the sensations were too much. Taking her to the brink, and then beyond it, was my goal. Nothing less would do.

“Holy. Shit.”

I pulled my head up.

“I have no words.”

That was a good start. “I do.”

She tried to sit up, didn’t seem to be able to muster the strength, and fell back down on the bed. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Natalie Hartwell, it’s time for me to fuck your brains out.”

TWENTY-TWO

*natalie*

If I thought there was any hope of my escaping this weekend without residual feelings for the man that was currently stripping off his pants to reveal two perfectly thick, muscled thighs, I had another thing coming.

Speaking of coming . . . dear lord. If there was anything more magical than Jax's fingers, it was his tongue. I guess Army Rangers really were elite, although I highly doubted he learned that in training. At least, I hoped not.

"What's the secret smile for?" Jaxon asked as he removed his boxer briefs.

"Uh." I'd planned on answering him until all breath was sucked from my lungs. I'd never thought a guy's junk was particularly pretty. More utilitarian than anything. But for some reason, Jax was unique in this way too. I'd felt his size between my hands, and definitely in my mouth—taking all of him had been pretty much impossible. But completely nude like that?

"You're perfect," I blurted.

As he stalked back to me on all fours, to say I felt like his prey was an understatement. For a second, I thought he'd go right in for the coup de grace. He was certainly hard enough, and I'd been primed pretty much since he whispered to me in

the piazza. No, since the restaurant. Or maybe since I turned on that beach and first saw him in Sicily.

“If anyone in this room is perfect,” he said between my legs, his lips starting with my inner thigh and kissing a trail upward, “it’s not me.”

I’d have loved to argue that point, but I couldn’t speak.

He kissed me, everywhere. Sometimes his tongue flicked out to join the party. Other times, like when he moved from my waist to the front of my hip and finally, my breasts, he blew gently. As if my nipples weren’t already peaked, he continued to tease.

“Jax, I can’t take it anymore,” I said, trying to pull him on top of me. “And I’m on the pill by the way. Happy to use a condom too if you want.”

He stilled. Looked at me. “Do we need one?”

“Like I said, I’m on the pill.” We’d had the ex talk and knew exactly when we’d been with other people, unless Jax was sneaking around Kitchi Falls with someone I didn’t know about. The thought was more than a little unsettling.

The man was so stealthy, I didn’t even notice his hand snake down between us.

“You are actually checking to see if I’m wet?” I nearly laughed. “Seriously?”

“Mmm, you really are primed for me, aren’t you, sunshine?”

“Jax,” I warned. He was just teasing me now.

“You want something more than this?” he asked, his fingers circling as if he knew exactly—and I mean exactly—what I liked.

“I want you,” I said, not mincing words.

“Convenient,” he said, pulling his fingers from me. “Because I want you too.”

At first, he moved slowly, guiding himself into me. I reached between us to help, but Jax didn't need my assistance. He filled me, little by little, seemingly aware that at his size, such a thing was necessary.

He looked into my eyes, and I didn't dare turn away. We watched each other as Jax filled me completely. The muscles of his chest and shoulders rippled as he held himself above me. I couldn't touch enough places at once.

“Perfect,” he said, pulling out just slightly. “Fucking perfect.”

It was like we didn't want to ruin the moment by moving, like the feel of finally being joined after so much buildup was something to memorize. Except, he did start to move. And if I thought his fingers and tongue were magical, well, they had nothing on his dick.

Unlike most guys, he actually knew how to use it.

*Maybe don't say that out loud.*

Pressed against me, Jax circled his hips as I pulled him down to me. He claimed my lips then, our eye contact finally breaking, and then it was no-holds-barred. The slow, leisurely pace turned wild and tempestuous. Soon, our bodies slammed against each other as eagerly as our mouths. My hips thrust upward as he somehow managed to be gentle and rough all at once.

As Jax's tongue mimicked his movements down below, I tried to hold on. Usually I needed a finger, or something, for stimulation to climax like this, but he was pressed against me

just the right way. Plus it was Jax, for god's sake, and he was inside me.

And it felt so damn good.

I was close. My nails dug into his back. My ass cheeks clenched. He'd already delivered two magnificent orgasms tonight and this was about to be a third. I pulled my mouth from his.

"I'm gonna come," I told him, and Jax stared down at me as if I'd done something fantastic. When really, it was him doing all the work. "Oh my god."

"Call my name."

I loved that he asked me that. No idea why.

"Jax," I said, wondering when I'd started calling him that. So much for his prize if he won the bet.

He continued to thrust. To circle. To look at me with that deadly but sexy stare.

"Jax," I called, more loudly as the spasms began. "Jax," I pretty much screamed as my world exploded. Clenched. Jax made a sound so guttural that somehow it made me come even harder. He pumped into me one last time and stilled.

"Natalie. Fuck."

I held on, relishing in the wonder in Jax's voice, as if this weren't a regular occurrence for him. If it was, a climax that powerful, I didn't want to know. His head dropped down to my chest as I continued to hold him, not willing to let go.

"Fuck," he said again.

Yes, we did.



I wanted to say it aloud, make him laugh. But my voice wasn't working yet. Maybe I'd blown it out screaming his name so loud. We were definitely getting tossed from this hotel.

When he finally lifted his head, Jax smiled.

"What?" I asked.

"Are you hungry?"

Odd question.

"Not really, why?"

It hit me just as he said, "I have dessert."

\* \* \*

Turned out, dessert was a cannoli.

"Who knew you liked ricotta?" I asked.

We sat on the balcony, the sea nothing but a swath of darkness before us. Since I'd completely forgotten a change of clothes for the night, having tossed only an outfit for tomorrow and some toiletries into my bag, I wore the hotel's robe. Jax sat across from me, sipping the wine he'd purchased, as if we needed more to drink, in shorts and a tee.

We both looked as if we'd been thoroughly fucked. Because we had. The second time as hot as the first, Jax licking cannoli cream from places that probably were making me blush thinking about it. Thank goodness it was too dark out here to see well.

"What else don't I know about you?" I asked.

"A lot, I'm sure."

“Like? Tell me something nice,” I said.

Jax’s arched brows were his only response.

“Come on. Counterbalance the nature-hating image I have of Jaxon Hayes.”

“I don’t hate nature, sunshine.”

I sort of loved that Jax had taken to using that nickname.

“Forget I said that.” Even though he totally hated nature, I shouldn’t have brought it up. “Tell me something nice.”

“Nice,” he repeated, as if the word was so foreign to him Jax couldn’t quite wrap his brain around it. I took a sip of wine, wondering what time it was, and alternatively not caring, as I waited. The wedding was at four o’clock tomorrow with the reception immediately following, so there’d be plenty of time to sleep in and get back to the apartment.

I waited.

“When my grandmother was sick, I visited her every day. We were really close. She had a roommate with no family, which bothered me well after Gram died. So I started volunteering at the hospital, sitting with patients who had no one to visit them. Eventually I got a few other kids to come too.” He shrugged. “Basically started a little program.”

My jaw dropped. “Kids? How old were you?”

“High school.”

No. Fucking. Way. “You started a program at the hospital to bring comfort to lonely patients?”

“Sit with them. Read to them. Whatever. Yeah. It’s still running,” he said with a hint of a smile. I could tell he was proud, as he should be. “Does that qualify?”

“It more than qualifies. Wow.”

I’d so misread him when we first met. Or maybe not. That cocky grin was back.

“What?” I asked.

“You seem pretty pleased over there.”

I wasn’t going to lie. “I am pleased. Four orgasms in a night is a record for me.”

“Oh yeah?”

I nodded.

Jax stood, put his wineglass on the table between us and stood over me. Then, squatting down beside me, kind of like that day on his deck, he plucked the wineglass from my hand.

“Whatdya say we make that five?”

Leaning forward, he put my glass on the small table between our chairs.

“Jax? What are you doing?” I asked, my heart racing as he grabbed one of the legs of my wrought-iron chair and spun it around as if I weren’t sitting in it, as if I weighed absolutely nothing.

I was facing him now as Jax reached up to untie the belt of my fluffy robe. Thankfully there were walls between balconies, but even though it was private enough, I couldn’t believe he was ready again so soon. The man had stamina, that was for sure.

Again, I thought of his Ranger training, wondering exactly what they had these guys doing. Someday I’d love to learn more about that.

*Someday. Better check yourself, Natalie. That's some dangerous language there.*

“Well, first, I’m opening your robe,” he said, doing exactly that. “And then I’m going to spread your legs.” He did that too. “Revealing that sweet pussy of yours.”

*Oh god, please keep talking.*

“And then I’m going to make you come for the fifth time tonight.”

It was a promise, and Jax meant to keep it. As his head descended between my legs, I grasped his hair, reveling in the softness of it, the only soft thing about him.

Nah, that wasn’t exactly true. I was learning that bit by bit.

When his tongue first touched me, I jolted back. The coolness of the sea air, in direct contrast with the warmth of his tongue, had me grasping him even harder. Like before, he didn’t let up once he’d started, Jax licking and swirling so perfectly that the tight coils within me had already begun to loosen. To seal the deal, he brought his thumb out to play, circling my clit as his tongue licked me from bottom to top, as if he couldn’t get enough.

The sight of it.

“Jax.”

I couldn’t scream out here. It was a wonder we hadn’t been called out yet, between the stairwell and the noise I’d made in his room. Biting my lip almost bloody, I kept it together even as the tension built and built.

“Mmmm,” he moaned against me, the vibrations and that sound my undoing. That he actually seemed to be getting pleasure from my writhing beneath him set me off. Somehow,

I kept from crying out as Jax unleashed pure pleasure between my legs. Throughout my entire damn body. This was the singular hottest night of my life, Jax between my thighs like this a vision that would be scalded onto my memory for life.

*There's no going back from this. I'm ruined.*

A problem for another day. Looking up at me, his lips still wet, Jax licked them, smiling. My chest rose and fell as my breath began to return to normal, the sight of him like that just too fucking much.

“I need you,” I said, my hands now gripping the sides of the chair.

“You want me,” he corrected. “You don't need anybody, Natalie.”

What a strange thing to say. But oddly freeing too. I liked it.

“I want you,” I agreed. “More than I've ever wanted anything in my life.”

That, I wouldn't take back. It was true. And though Jax didn't refute it, he did pause for a second as if trying to decide if I was being serious. Unfortunately, I was being deadly serious. And in that moment, everything shifted.

Would he laugh? Reject me? Reject the gravity of what I'd just said to him?

“Good,” he said finally, standing. “That makes two of us.”

TWENTY-THREE

*jax*

There was something about a wedding, especially one in a small chapel in Sicily, that brought out an unusually sentimental side of me. I never dreamed of marriage or a wife, even if a family was something I wanted someday. But every time a buddy of mine got married, there was a little piece of me that thought, yeah, I could see it.

Today was no exception. And unlike the usual vague notion of a someday marriage that would probably happen, when Mazzie walked down the aisle and I got a peek of Gian's expression, there was a very real longing to see Natalie coming down that aisle instead.

Ridiculous.

We weren't even dating. Didn't live in the same place. And yet, I'd envisioned it nonetheless, brushing it off easily until the next equally intrusive thought wormed its way into my brain.

She would marry eventually. And it would be another man.

The thought of Natalie, *my* Natalie, in bed with someone else was all the proof I needed if there was any doubt in my mind about the strength of my feelings for her. Which, to be honest, there wasn't.

I liked her. A lot. And after last night? There was no fucking way on Monday I'd go back to Kitchi Falls and pretend none of this happened. We needed to have a little chat, Nat and I. Problem was, that would mean talking about the one thing whose absence had allowed Natalie to retract her claws for a few days.

"Here you go." Natalie handed me a Peroni. She'd cried at the wedding, and if I weren't mistaken, those were tears in her eyes now too as she watched Mazzie and Gian slow dance.

"Thanks," I said, moved by the depth of her feelings for her friends.

The reception was in a huge courtyard of a restaurant two blocks from the church. The procession here was one of celebration and clapping, onlookers cheering the newly wedded couple. A perfect wedding, in my opinion. Not too big, family and close friends, in a place known for celebrating the love of both. Well done, Gian.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

I turned to her, Natalie in a pale-yellow silk dress that accentuated every curve. With her hair piled on top of her head, she looked like some kind of sun goddess.

"I was thinking about the wedding," I admitted.

"Yeah? What about it?"

"Just that it was so . . . not Gian."

She laughed. "I wish I knew this 'old Gian' everyone keeps talking about."

"Be careful what you wish for."

"If you could have three wishes, what would they be?"



“That’s a tough one.”

Actually it really wasn’t. One came to mind pretty easily. And by the way Natalie was looking at me, she could read the direction of my thoughts.

“That can’t be one of your wishes.”

“No?”

“No. To waste a wish on sex? I’m talking big wishes, like life-changing ones.”

I resisted saying that sex could be life-changing, refusing to consider that last night’s might have been. “Okay, life changing. Can I wish my mom to stay alive forever?”

“Nope. Immortality isn’t possible.”

“Neither are having wishes come true, but I guess we’re ignoring that bit.”

“Sometimes wishes come true.”

“Do they?”

She nodded. “Hmm. Alright, more realistic. But not sex. This is tough.”

Her laugh lifted my soul. An odd thought if I’d ever had one. “Did I ever tell you that your laugh is amazing?”

“No,” she said, “I don’t believe you have.”

“Almost as amazing as the way you call my name,” I said more quietly, “just before you come. And don’t think I haven’t noticed exactly which name you’re using these days, by the way.”

“Jax.” She swatted my arm. “People are watching us.”

“Are they? Seems to me they’re dancing and having a good time and don’t give a shit about what we’re talking about in this corner.”

“Look at Mazzie. She’s peeking at us over Gian’s shoulder.”

True enough. “Then let’s give her something to see.”

With that, I stepped in front of Natalie, leaned my head into her and kissed her just like I’d wanted to all fucking night. We hadn’t talked about being “public” about us, but I supposed it was too late for discussions. There was nothing nebulous about that kiss.

Before I wouldn’t be able to walk to the dance floor, I pulled away just as another slow song started.

“Dance with me,” I said, taking both of our drinks and putting them on a server’s tray.

Natalie didn’t protest, but she did look up at me, arms around my shoulders, as we began to sway to the music. “So I guess cat’s out of the bag.”

“Is that a problem?” I glanced at Mazzie. She wasn’t looking anymore but the smile on her face said it all. She was a happy bride who also seemed to be happy for her friend. I guessed Nat hadn’t trash-talked me too much to them.

“Not really.”

“Not really?” I’d have preferred “no.”

“I mean, they know it’s temporary.”

We were gonna have that talk sooner rather than later. At least we’d do it with Natalie in my arms, the real reason I asked her to dance. All night I just wanted to be close to her, to touch her. And more than just a brush of our legs at the

wedding or a quick slip of my hand on her waist as I'd guided her into the restaurant.

“Do they now?”

“Obviously. When we get back, we've got the whole land thing between us. Not to mention the fact that you don't even live in Kitchi Falls.”

“True,” I said. “There's that.”

Fuck it.

“Do you wanna talk about the land thing now? Or wait until we get back?”

“Does talking about it mean you're going to try to convince me the sale isn't a bad thing?”

“Yes.”

“Then let's wait until we get back.”

Stubborn woman.

“And don't forget the bet. As soon as we land on US soil, the pause is off. We won't be able to even touch each other since I'm pretty sure that would be considered 'getting together.' Not that you've ever actually defined that.”

“I guess I could have said”—I lowered my voice—“getting together means me spreading cannoli cream over your nipples to lick it off, making you peak beneath my tongue just before I gently graze my teeth along them to make sure you know I'm there.” With her hair up, it was easy to whisper into Natalie's ear. To brush my lips over it as I spoke. To place the gentlest of kisses just below and then a second on the top of her neck before whispering again. “Or I could have defined it as separating your robe while I was on my knees in front of you,

spreading those luscious legs of yours before diving into your even more luscious pussy.”

Knowing Nat loved when I talked like that, I didn't let up. I wanted to feel her sag against me, almost unable to stand.

“Or perhaps I could have defined it as what I plan for us when we get back. Me spreading your ass cheeks wide with you on all fours up on my bed. And then licking you from front to back, tonguing that fucking perfect ass of yours until you come for me like the gorgeous, sensual woman that you are.”

There we go. I held her up, smiling into her ear.

“Or maybe—”

“Enough,” she said, pulling back to look at me. “I literally can't support my own weight.”

I'd noticed.

“I can't take anymore,” she added.

My eyes widened innocently. “Take what, sunshine? I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Oh no? Not even a hint?”

“Not even a hint.”

“You are a bad man, Jaxon Hayes.”

“Funny, last night you said I was good. Very, very good, if I remember correctly.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don't believe we talked about whether or not I was staying in your hotel tonight or at the apartment.”

I leveled her with a look that some of the guys in my unit told me only to use when I wanted to scare the shit out of

someone. Not that I wanted to scare the shit out of Natalie, only make her realize there were not two sides to this discussion.

“If you think there is a chance in hell that we’re gonna be on a pause and you aren’t coming to my place tonight then you truly have learned nothing about me on this trip.”

She shivered in my arms.

“That sounds like a demand.”

“It is.”

“What if I don’t want to come?”

“Oh, sunshine.” I smiled slowly. “It doesn’t matter if you want to or not. You’re going to come over, and over, and over, making five times look like child’s play. That, dear Nat, is a promise. And I do not break a promise. Ever.”

She licked her lips. Whatever she put on them that kept them glossy and had me fantasizing about those lips wrapped around my cock all fucking night was some special kind of makeup sorcery.

“Do you think we can leave now?” she said finally, making me laugh.

“Before they cut the cake? Probably not. But maybe instead of eating it here, we can take a piece back with us.”

Natalie’s devilish grin was her response—the only one I needed.

TWENTY-FOUR

*natalie*

“Oh no, don’t you dare look at me like that.”

This time, I’d brought comfy clothes, shorts and a tank top, and was sitting on Jax’s balcony, the sun high and our coffees hot. Unfortunately, Jax was already dressed for the airport, which he needed to leave for in less than an hour.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because I know that look,” I said. “And you literally just got dressed. Besides, I’m actually sore.”

“I noticed.” His smile revealed how little remorse he held for that particular ailment of mine. I thought I’d been able to hide it, but apparently walking normally wasn’t on the agenda for this morning.

“My body just isn’t accustomed to the sheer number of times we had sex this weekend.” I took a sip of coffee, looking out to the clear blue sea. I’d really miss this view when we were back home. “What I’d give to wake up to this every morning.”

When Jax didn’t respond, I glanced his way. “You’re looking at me weird.”

“I’m surprised you don’t live on the lake, as much as you love a water view.”

I rolled my eyes. “Working for Finger Lakes Land and Trust is a dream come true, but it doesn’t actually pay the kind of salary that allows for lakeview home purchases. Someday.”

No response. But Jax continued to watch me as if I were some puzzle to figure out. “That’s why you love the inlet so much. It’s like your own little piece of lakefront property.”

Denying it would be dumb. “That, and it is protected land. And the rowing program, obviously.”

“Which could be moved,” he said. “And it’s only protected because the deed hadn’t been looked at in over a hundred years. You know as well as I do, developing that particular piece of property will have very little bearing on the immediate environment.”

“Do we really need to ruin our last hour in Sicily with this?”

Jax frowned. “I don’t want to ruin the best weekend of my life, no. But I’ll be boarding a plane soon, and won’t see you until Tuesday, at the earliest. And I also hate to ruin our reunion but we need to talk, soon. I have a meeting Wednesday morning to meet with Dave to finalize the sale.”

“You have a meeting with Dave Wednesday morning?” I asked, trying to ignore the feeling of a foot being shoved into my chest.

“I do. He thinks the board will approve it tomorrow night.”

“Nice.”

“Natalie—”

“I really don’t want to do this right now.”

But it was too late. The mood was already ruined.



“Fine. We’ll talk about it on Tuesday. Will you come over then? Or Monday night even?”

I’d prefer not to and then just have Jax skip the meeting, not sell the land, and then we could talk about next steps after that. But I kept all of those thoughts to myself.

“Of course,” I agreed. “But the bet will be back on. No messing around.”

Jax stood, walked over to me and hauled me to my feet. “It’s not Tuesday, and we’re still in Sicily.”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, more than willing to shove the very real topic of our differences to the side, like we’d been doing all weekend.

“True,” I said. “Which means . . .”

“Which means, I can kiss you for at least fifty minutes straight.”

As if he were going to make good on that promise, he leaned his head down. His lips were warm and familiar by now, and they glided over me, his tongue wrapped in mine, fitting perfectly. Making out with Jax ranked right up there with having sex with him, Jax between my legs and, wonder of wonders, watching him absolutely explode with pleasure as I took him in my mouth. I loved the sense of power that came with it.

“God, I love kissing you,” he said, finally pulling away.

“Then why aren’t you doing it currently?”

“Because I like looking at you too.”

“Same,” I admitted. “Are all Army Rangers so sexy?”

He laughed. “You’ll get to judge for yourself. If we’re still talking after next week. A friend of mine is coming to Kitchi Falls on Thursday.”

“Get out. Who? Why?”

I attempted to concentrate as Jax’s hands roamed downward, cupping both of my ass cheeks and making it really fucking difficult to want to continue this discussion. We had less than an hour together, and I’d much prefer to recreate one of the many sexual positions we’d explored last night.

“Just before we left, I heard there was an opening in the Kitchi Falls Police Department. One of the guys in my unit works for NYPD currently, but he’s been wanting out. He hasn’t been able to get off the beat yet since he doesn’t have a hook. I told him about the opening, and the town, and he’s coming up before . . .”

He stopped. Jax was about to say, “Before I leave.” A reminder that he was leaving. And this weekend was nothing more than a vacation fling. I ignored the tug in my chest, concentrating instead on the feel of being tucked into Jax’s chest. Of his hands on my ass, as if they were one second away from exploring further.

“Before you leave.”

“Nat—”

“We’re not going to talk about it, remember? Nothing serious in Sicily.”

“I think we said, no land talk in Sicily.”

“Whatever.”

He seemed doubtful. “I beg to differ but will let it go. As long as you come over when you get back.”

“I will. So what’s his name, this Ranger friend of yours?”

“Mason Bennet. But most people call him Mace. He’s a great guy.”

“But you didn’t answer my original question. Is he as sexy as you?”

Jax’s eyes narrowed. Answer enough.

So Mason was sexy too. And if I weren’t mistaken, that was a flash of jealousy. So Jax didn’t like the idea of leaving town just as his sexy ex-Army Ranger buddy potentially moved in?

Interesting.

“Don’t get any ideas,” he warned.

“Ideas? What kind of ideas?”

“Mmhmm.”

I blinked innocently.

“Mace has a girlfriend.”

Oh well, there went that plan. As if making Jax jealous would keep him from selling the land, uprooting his life, staying in Kitchi Falls to be with me.

Except, that’s exactly what I wanted him to do. Silly as it was.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh huh.” With that, he kissed me again. This time, it wasn’t gentle. His kiss was hard and rough and claiming. It was a kiss that reminded us that neither Jax nor I knew when we’d be in each other’s arms again. Because the clock was running out, literally, on our pause. Real life was about to intrude on our perfect little getaway.

Which was when his words fully penetrated.

*The best weekend of my life.*

Maybe, just maybe, there was hope for us yet.

TWENTY-FIVE

“I still can’t believe Mazzie is married,” I said to Charlee, who had just finished a movie. Wiggling in my seat after five hours of flying, with a few more to go, I looked up the aisle for a flight attendant. I could really use a drink.

That had been one hell of a patch of turbulence.

“Right? Wedding in Sicily. Honeymoon in Greece. Does it get any more romantic than that?”

I took a peek at Lucas to see what he thought about all of the wedding talk, but he was watching a movie of his own, apparently none the wiser to our conversation. Nate and Zoe had gone back yesterday.

“So when exactly do we switch to our time zone? Is there an imaginary line in the sky?”

“Good question,” Charlee asked. “Honestly I have no idea.”

I could text someone to ask what time it was back home.

I could text *him*.

After all, we had in-flight WiFi. And he had told me to let him know I landed safely. I could tell Jax I was safely in the sky instead.

Charlee leaned over to look at my phone. “Figured.”

“What?” I said defensively. “I’m curious where it changes time.”

“And that was the only way you could figure it out?”

“Well, I can’t search for the answer. Only messaging works.”

“I bet the flight attendant knows.”

Good point.

“Admit it. You’re totally into him.”

Oh, I was into him all right.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I’d been denying it since he left. Problem was, Charlee wasn’t buying it. With good reason. Apparently our chemistry, was pretty noticeable at the reception.

“So what are you gonna do Tuesday?”

I’d told Charlee about our conversation yesterday morning, the only thing that marred an absolutely incredible weekend. As Jax, said, the best of my life.

“Talk about it, I guess. Remind him of the bet.” I didn’t like the look Charlee gave me. “What? You think I should let him off the hook?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you’re thinking it.”

“Not necessarily. But you do realize what you’re asking him to give up? It’s a lot of money. And the environmental impact is negligible. Your words.”

I had told Charlee too much. Sometimes I should keep my mouth shut.

“I’d love to talk to you about this, but someone’s texting me.”

“Uh huh.”

Charlee shook her head and popped her headphones back on, flipping through the movies once again.

Five thirty. Why?

I was just curious where the time zone actually changes.

What time is it for you?

Two thirty. So it must change incrementally as we fly.

Right. With the . . . time zones.

Smart-ass

Guilty as charged. How’s the flight?

Long

Yeah, coming back is a bitch. You’ll be wiped tonight.

Tonight. I’d love nothing more than to screw the jetlag, and our bet, and head right from the airport to Jax’s place. Since he left, there was a huge void that I’d never expected. Nor wanted. But it was there nonetheless.

For sure

What I wanted, and what had to be, were two different things.



Miss me?

How was he reading my mind? Freaky.

Not even a little.

Liar

This was bad. Really, really bad.

Do you miss me?

His answer was immediate.

Yes

Heart pounding, I thought about how to respond. Thankfully, little text bubbles appeared so I didn't have to think too hard.

I miss talking to you. Touching you. Tasting you.

Holy hell, this man was something else.

Maybe I miss that a little.

He sent a wink emoji.

Tell me what you miss most.

This was getting interesting for sure.

Waking up to the feel of your hands exploring every inch of my body.

Now, there was some honesty. This morning when I woke up and Jax wasn't tucked in beside me, his fingers brushing over the curve of my hip as I lay on my side, I literally groaned in frustration.

I love exploring your body. Hope to do more of it soon.

Fuck it. Here went nothing.

Until you leave.

Silence. So there we had it. I wasn't stupid enough to think the land was the only thing between us. Even if I gave in, something that went against everything I believed, it would be for nothing. Jax would be leaving Kitchi Falls soon, never to return. Without the land purchase, there was no reason for him to.

Text bubbles.

Give me a reason to stay.

My heart slammed against my rib cage. Did we suddenly lose cabin pressure? I couldn't breathe. Did he really just type that? What did it mean, exactly?

Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

Stay? As in, another week or two?

I tapped Charlee's shoulder. She took off her headphones, and I shoved the phone in front of her, pointing to the last few messages. When she finished reading them, she looked up.

"Holy shit, Nat."

"I know." My hands were almost shaking. "Do you think he means stay permanently?"

She rolled her eyes. "Obviously. Hold on, he's texting."

Sure enough, another message came through.

My job is portable. Home base could be anywhere.

“Natalie,” Charlee all but shrieked. “Do you realize what he’s saying?”

I realized it with every fiber of my being.

I guess we have a lot to talk about.

I showed her. Charlee nodded with approval. “Perfect.”

I guess we do.

I’d nearly said, “Coming over tonight,” instead, but something held me back. This conversation had been a game changer, and I needed to think about it. Figure things out. One weekend of wild sex did not mean Jax and I were compatible.

*Yes, you are.*

Even so, this wasn’t the time for wild Natalie. It was the time for measured, thoughtful, focused Natalie. I’d been down this path once before, and even a done deal wasn’t a done deal. People changed their minds. Men could be flaky. Jax came to town for one purpose . . . to buy that land.

“What if he just wants the land?” I whispered aloud.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Charlee said beside me.

Was it ridiculous? I thought about the weekend. Yeah, probably. I was being a goose.

See you tomorrow morning?

Bright and early.

I waited, but that was it for now. I sat back and closed my eyes, but my phone buzzed again. It was a sun emoji.

Sunshine.

It could have referred to the bright and early comment. But more likely, he meant me. Again I lay back and closed my eyes, replaying the conversation over and over in my mind.

TWENTY-SIX

*jax*

I survived Ranger training. Deployments that could have easily seen me coming back home in a body bag. The possibility of death was just something you either had to reconcile with or lose your fucking mind.

And yet, as I waited for the sound of Natalie's car making its way down the gravel driveway behind me, it was a special kind of torture. I could handle ruck marches and an insane operational tempo, but not texting Natalie to ask what time she would be here since it was well past nine o'clock was taking some superhuman restraint.

I hadn't stopped thinking about her, about the land, about a possible relationship with her, for even a second these past few days. Which was how I knew, if Sicily wasn't the number one fucking clue, I was in deeper than I'd ever been before.

Fucking finally.

The crunch of gravel from her car stopped. Silence. Until the sound of her footsteps was followed by a flash of blue. She wore jeans and a navy sweater. Natalie looked good in navy. And jeans. Hell, the woman looked good in everything.

Our eyes met as she bounded up the stairs. When she stopped at the top, I realized the problem. I'd give it to her, Natalie would make one hell of a Ranger. The restraint it must

have taken her to stop halfway to me wasn't the kind of discipline I had, and objectively I could admit my unit and I were some of the most disciplined guys on the planet. We had to be.

“Goddamn it, Natalie. We're on another pause.”

Closing the distance between us, I grabbed her cheeks when she got close enough and held Natalie's head as I kissed her.

And kissed her.

I couldn't stop. Didn't want to stop.

Her hands wrapped around my neck, and I continued to hold her to me. Her cheeks were warm beneath my fingers. Her mouth, even warmer. She tasted like mint and spring and . . . no.

I pulled away.

“What's wrong?”

She tasted like love.

“Nothing. It's just really good to see you.” I dropped my hands.

“It's good to see you too. Thanks for the pause,” she said, backing away. “But maybe we should talk.” Natalie lifted a bag up. “Sorry I'm late. Brought donuts.”

Those cinnamon donuts were going to kill me if Natalie didn't. I followed her into the kitchen as she headed straight for the coffee machine.

“Top me off?” I asked, putting my mug in front of her as Natalie finished pouring her own coffee.

With two full mugs and a bag of Devine's cinnamon donuts, we headed back onto the porch. It took a healthy dose of discipline not to pull Natalie from her seat and carry her to my bedroom.

The only thing that stopped me?

I had a meeting tomorrow with Dave to finalize the sale. We had to figure this out, today.

"How was the rest of the flight?"

"Uneventful," she said. "Jet lag is a bitch. I zonked about an hour after getting home and then woke up at four."

"You should have come over earlier."

"At four a.m.?"

"Sure. Why not?"

There were a few reasons we could both think of, and those needed to be dispensed with. Pronto.

"Nat," I started. "We've got to figure this out."

"Agreed."

I thought about what to say. How to say it. And then went with the big guy's advice. Dad always told me there was nothing as powerful as the truth. So that's what I'd give her.

"I really want to buy that property. It's a huge deal that I've been working on for six months. The thought of losing that much money, not to mention the time I put into it, kills me. But I also wasn't lying when I said that was one of the best weekends of my life. It was fun"—I smiled—"but even beyond the great sex. I like you. A lot."

More than a lot, but that could wait.



Natalie took a bite of her donut. I could see her thinking about what she was going to say, measuring her words. “I like you too,” she started. “And obviously have given this a lot of thought. There’s a huge part of me that wants to say, screw it. It’s just a piece of land. Take it. I’ll find somewhere else for the program by next spring. And it’s not mine to use for drinking wine with friends on a Friday night. That’s a nice perk, but that’s all it is. A perk. The land belongs to the Trust. Not to me.”

I’d start celebrating, but there was a big-ass “but” in there somewhere.

“However.”

But. However. Same difference.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve railed against the Trust’s decision to do something similar. Accusing them of selling out. It starts with a small piece of property or some supposedly unimportant piece of land and the next thing you know, you’re auctioning off all of the Finger Lakes’ natural resources to the highest bidder. The whole reason I got into this business was to preserve and protect. Like you, with our country. But with the natural resources.”

I had to admit, Natalie’s dedication to her mission was hot. Her conviction, something to be admired. But it was inconvenient too.

“I get what you’re saying,” I began, taking a bite of donut too. Damn, these things were good. Although not as good as those cannolis in Sicily. Smiling to myself, I pushed the thought from my mind. Now wasn’t the time. “And admire your conviction,” I admitted. “So we end where we started, at opposite ends of a problem with no easy solution.”

“Precisely.”

“You aren’t letting me out of the bet?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Jax, if you had any idea how many times I replayed our weekend together, how badly I want you to snatch me up from this chair and rip every piece of clothing from my body, you’d be amazed that I’m sitting here so calmly eating this donut and drinking coffee like it was nothing. I honestly didn’t know I had this much willpower.”

I had to at least try. “If you knew how much I wanted to rip every piece of clothing from your body, bury my head between your legs and make you scream loud enough for my neighbors to hear, you’d be amazed I remained this far away from you for more than five seconds.”

“You don’t have any neighbors.”

“Exactly.”

Her lids hooded. Natalie was thinking about us. How could she not? I visualized doing exactly what I said I was going to, actually seeing her fingers close around the arm of the chair, her knuckles whiten as I worked her with my tongue.

“Jax, don’t.”

“Can’t help it.”

She looked away.

I took a deep breath and finished my donut. Hard as a rock and feeling as tortured as racing through my first Ranger school obstacle course, I looked out onto the lake.

“I didn’t say it lightly,” I added. “About moving to Kitchi Falls.”

“You don’t say anything lightly,” Natalie said, kicking off her shoes and tucking her feet under her. I loved when she crossed her legs like that, coffee on her lap as if she didn’t have a care in the world. It made me imagine that she lived here with me, and it was a regular weekend morning. A very domesticated vision, if I did say so myself.

“No,” I admitted. “I don’t.”

“You would move here?”

“For you? Yeah. I would.”

She blinked. *There you go, Natalie. All on the line. Your move.*

“We haven’t even dated.”

“Dated. Whatever that means.”

“You know what it means.”

“I know we’ve gotten to know each other these past few weeks. Unconventionally, sure. But the outcome is the same.”

“What if we don’t work out?”

Oh, we’d work out just fine.

“I’ve lived more places than my hometown these past few years. And before that, as a Ranger. Besides my family, who are a short drive away, there’s nothing keeping me in one spot. Moving around isn’t a big deal to me.”

“So you’d be on the go a lot? Out of town, I mean. Wherever the next big land deal took you?”

“I don’t have to stay as long as I did here. Sometimes I go for a few days. This time, I stayed for a bit longer, but only because I’d been working like a dog and needed a break. Renting this house was as much a vacation as it was for work.”

“I see.”

*No, Natalie, I don't think you do.* But there wasn't a lot more I could say at this point other than to tell her that I was pretty sure I'd fallen in love with her. But no fucking way would I admit that right now, given the circumstances.

“I'm supposed to meet with Dave tomorrow,” I reminded her.

“I'm well aware.”

If Natalie's voice had an edge to it, that was understandable. I was nothing if not a patient man, but the clock really was ticking.

Silence stretched.

“This is torture, Jax. It honestly feels like I have to decide between my convictions and . . .” She frowned. “My heart.”

I had to know. “What is your heart telling you?”

She held my gaze. “That we'd be really good together.”

“Fucking right we would,” I said, without thinking. That was a given.

“Did you ever have to make a choice like that? In the military?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “My heart never really got in the way. But certainly I had to make tough decisions. Every Ranger comes face to face with who they are, at their core. Facing death tends to have that effect.”

“This must seem like child's play compared to the kind of decisions you had to make.”

“Understanding yourself well enough to have convictions, never mind sticking to them when it becomes difficult, is

never easy.”

“So you understand where I’m coming from?”

There was no part of me that wanted to admit I did. That Natalie was right in any way to choose anything other than being with me. But I did know myself well enough, had been forced to face my fears, my own convictions, my very soul, and any answer but the truth would be a lie.

“I do.”

“What would you do in my situation?”

“Don’t ask me that,” I warned. “Please don’t.”

“Jax? What would you do. If you had to decide between forsaking something you truly believed in for your own personal gain. Or something you really, really wanted.”

“Good to know you really, really want me,” I teased, attempting to deflect her question.

But Natalie wasn’t having any of it. She was serious. So I needed to be too.

Our eyes locked.

The muscles in my shoulders tensed as silence stretched.

“Never mind,” she said finally. “I already know the answer.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

*natalie*

“I don’t understand how you could be sitting here so calmly,” Zoe said, sliding me an Iron City Mango beer. After Sicily, I’d planned to dry out for a bit. But that would have to wait.

“What else am I supposed to do?”

I sat on a barstool at KC’s Taphouse waiting for Charlee, who was coming after work. Zoe was behind the bar with Nate, and for my part, I was just trying to keep it together for the night.

“I don’t know. Go down to the office. See if he’s there?”

After going round and round yesterday morning, I finally left Jax’s before lunch, peeling myself away from his place like a gambler might walk away from a casino. Not easily. Looking back with longing. Thinking of a hundred and one reasons to go back but holding on to that one shred of sanity that keeps you going forward, away from temptation.

He’d begged me to stay. But there was nothing more to discuss. And a few more minutes might have seen me launching myself into his arms, tossing all my convictions to the wind for a little D.

Actually, a big D. And honestly, more than that. But the thought of Jax inside me really was a driving force. It was all I

could think about on that porch, and so finally, I hightailed it out of there.

Had he texted me throughout the day and night?

Yes.

Did I ignore said texts?

Also yes.

It was honestly the hardest thing I'd ever done, but if he so much as sent one suggestive message, I'd very likely have jumped back into my car and his arms.

"I can't," I admitted.

This morning, nothing. I assumed he'd gotten sick of my non-responses and headed to his meeting with Dave.

"Technically, you could. But I guess he'd probably be gone by now anyway?"

His meeting was at one thirty. It was already four o'clock, and when Zoe texted to say she'd come down to the bar to help out Nate after an early day, I literally shut my laptop, stopped pretending to work, and rushed down here.

"Probably. If he went through with the sale, it would take a few hours."

"Do you really think he'd do that?"

"Honestly," I said. "I have no idea. But I can't imagine he didn't."

"Listen." Nate came up from behind Zoe. "I know it's none of my business, but Zoe told me what's going on."

"It's not a big secret," I said, relieving him of any guilt of knowing my situation.



“But for what it’s worth, I like the guy. You don’t become a Ranger without having a healthy dose of grit and discipline. And from what Gian tells me, Jax is one of the good ones. Plus, I saw you two at the wedding.”

“What’s your point?” Zoe asked, cutting to the chase.

“The point is, I think you should work it out. Life’s too short for bullshit.”

“Nat’s love of the environment isn’t bullshit,” Zoe defended me. “It’s something she believes strongly in and is willing to give up her own personal happiness for. You know something about that, do you not?”

Nate moved closer to Zoe. “I do,” he said, putting his hand in the back pocket of her jeans as a show of support even though they were at odds at the moment. “And I’d never call your career bullshit,” he said to me. “But there has to be a way to work it out. Both get what you want. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” I said. “But if he buys the land, I just don’t see how it’ll work out.”

“The bet?” Zoe asked.

“I don’t give a shit about the bet,” I said. “But that he’d buy it knowing how important it is for me that it doesn’t get developed . . .”

“No Ranger would ever,” Nate said, taking his hand from Zoe, “ever go back on his word. Not happening.”

“Looks like we’ll find out sooner rather than later,” Zoe said.

Both Nate and I followed her gaze toward the door. Sure enough, the man of the hour was just walking in with a guy I’d never seen before. He was the spitting image of a cross

between Ian Somerhalder and Henry Cavill. The kind of chiseled good looks with an incredible jawline that reminded me of one of Gian's brothers. Or a Greek god.

Not that I'd ever met a Greek god.

"Dear lord in heaven," Zoe muttered, earning her a smack on the ass from Nate.

That about summed it up.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"I honestly have no . . . wait a minute. A friend of his was coming in from the city. But I thought that was later this week. So I'm not sure?"

And what was he doing here? Had Jax kept the meeting with Dave? So many questions.

"Hey, Jax," Zoe said from behind the bar as they reached us. For my part, I could only stare. Wondering. Waiting.

"Hey, Zoe." He looked at me. "Natalie."

"Hi, Jax."

"This is a buddy of mine from Manhattan. Mason, this is Natalie, Zoe, and Nate," he said as Nate reached across the bar to shake his hand. "You were in the 75th," Nate said.

"How'd you guess?"

"I'm not that good. Jax mentioned you were coming to town. Just got back myself from a year-long deployment in Africa."

And just like that, Jax's friend and Nate were talking all things Army and military as he pushed a beer across the bar to Jax without missing a beat. Mason took a seat as Jax left his drink next to his friend and sidled up to me.

“I thought he was coming Thursday?” I asked.

“Change of plans,” he said. “Mason has to be back by Friday morning, so he came up earlier.”

Still so many questions . . .

“Fancy meeting you here,” I said as a way to ask how he wound up in the same bar as me, especially when I didn’t typically frequent KC’s so early on a weeknight.

“Not really,” he said. “I was talking to Lucas earlier about Mace coming into town to scope it out. He might have mentioned seeing you come into the bar a little bit ago.”

Lucas’s tattoo shop was just down the street.

“I did see him on the way in,” I said.

“I know.”

So he was talking to Lucas about me. Interesting.

“So you came here?”

“I did.”

“To see me?”

“Figured since you weren’t texting me back . . .” He let that linger.

“I didn’t trust myself to respond,” I admitted, not asking the biggest question of all. We stared at each other. Surely, he knew what I really wanted to know.

“I canceled,” he said finally, my heart soaring at the words. “Actually, I should say, rescheduled.”

Soar. Crash. Burn.

“Until?”

“Dave couldn’t get me in until Friday. I figured we’d have a chance to talk again before that.”

“So you rescheduled?” That meant he still had hope for the sale.

“I did.”

“Which puts us right back to square one.”

“Nat—”

“Round of shots,” Nate called, not asking but lining the bar with shot glasses. Just what I needed. I generally did not do well with shots, but it seemed like there wasn’t much of a choice.

“Further, faster, harder. Cheers,” Nate said, mostly to Jax and Mason.

“Cheers,” the others said, everyone drinking, even Zoe. Although the guys had more of a clue, obviously. I looked at Nate.

“Part of the Ranger creed,” he said as Nate and Mason continued to talk, and Zoe served another customer. “I accept the fact that as a Ranger my country expects me to move further, faster, and fight harder than any other soldier.”

“How does Nate know the Ranger creed?”

“Good question. A better one,” he asked, still not sitting down but standing next to my bar stool, “is when we can talk again?”

“We’re talking now.”

“You know what I mean.”

Honestly, I didn’t want to talk to Jax. I wanted to go home with him. Have him inside me. I wanted to kiss him so fucking

badly it was almost physically painful.

“Keep looking at me like that, and we’ll be doing a hell of a lot more than talking.”

I almost said . . . promise?

“I feel like I said everything there was to say yesterday.”

He looked at me for so long, I wondered if he was trying to memorize every feature. “Everything?”

“The important things.”

“We didn’t talk about us.”

“Because the land question is still up in the air.”

“In other words, if I buy it, there is no us?”

“You’d really go back on your word?” I asked, Nate’s assurance he wouldn’t still ringing in my ears.

“I haven’t given up trying to convince you,” he admitted.

“So this is simply a delay until I give in?”

“You see it as giving in, but even Dave agrees the inlet probably could have sold already. Did you talk to him about it?”

“Yes, I did,” I said, my tone clipped.

“And you’re still not convinced?”

“Jax, did you hear anything I said yesterday?”

He was starting to get annoyed, but honestly, I was too. “I heard you loud and clear, Nat. Did you hear me?”

“Of course I did.”

“Good.”

“Exactly.”

I wasn't even sure what we were talking about anymore. Other than the fact that yesterday solved nothing, today would solve nothing, and tomorrow would probably be the same.

“So what, then? I cancel the meeting, abandon the bid, and leave town? Is that what you want?”

I gasped. Was he serious? “What makes you think I want you to leave town?”

“I don't know, maybe because you refuse to discuss us.”

“Well it's hard,” I said, “with the land thing looming over our heads. Don't you think it's all tied together?”

“What are you two lovebirds whispering about over there?” Nate asked from behind the bar. “I'm sure your friend Mason is getting bored with my war stories by now.”

The Greek god looked my way. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, but no doubt Jax had brought him up to speed.

“I was just leaving,” I said.

“Nat, don't.” And then more quietly, he added, “Don't run away again.”

For some reason, his words only annoyed me more. “I'm not running away,” I whispered back. “Just giving you and your friend some space.”

Louder, to Nate, Mason, and Zoe, I said, “The jet lag is still killing me. I'm heading out. Will talk to you guys later. Nice to meet you,” I said, the Greek god responding that it was nice to meet me too.

His voice was smooth and sexy. Like, he could probably make a girl come over the phone sexy. But even so, my heart didn't race at the thought of being in his arms, as gorgeous as he was. His companion, however? I was a heartbeat away

from losing the bet and telling Jax to just hold me tight and never let go.

Before Zoe could stop me—she looked very much like she was going to try—I fled. Despite the fact that I told Jax I wasn't running away, I basically did just that. And never looked back.

TWENTY-EIGHT



*jax*

Pride kept me from texting her.

I did that once, went chasing her to KC's, only to end up right back where we started. Yesterday I'd taken Mace to the police station where he had an appointment with the chief. Nothing was definite yet, but the chief verified there was an opening and that, while Mace would be able to keep his years of service with NYPD on the back end of his retirement, and they wouldn't make him go through training again courtesy of his Ranger's background, he would start at the bottom of the pay scale.

But it was clear the chief was very interested in having a former Ranger and NYPD cop on his payroll. Mace left saying he'd get back to him by the end of the week. In the meantime, I showed him around town, as if I were selling it.

A dumbass thing to do since I didn't know if I was staying myself.

The idea had more and more appeal each day, but without Natalie, it was an empty promise of a life I'd had a brief glimpse of in Sicily. If there was any doubt that what I wanted most was Natalie, seeing her walk out of the bar had obliterated it. It felt, somehow, like a final goodbye. Ridiculous, since if I wanted to talk to her right now, I could drive over to her apartment and tell her I wouldn't leave until

we talked. But I wouldn't do that, despite the fact that I still had a meeting with Dave in the morning.

"What are you gonna do?" Mace asked now as we sat on the front deck, like Natalie and I had. I was getting used to this deck. To this view.

"I have to talk to her before tomorrow, but I chased her once this week already," I admitted.

"Seems to me like she's going to avoid you until the meeting."

"Yeah," I agreed. "She said she doesn't trust herself around me."

That made Mace laugh. "The famous Jaxon magnetism." He took a sip of coffee.

"Not sure how famous it is. Or why I even made the bet in the first place, to be honest. If I actually seduced the woman to win, I'd have felt like shit."

"Wasn't about that. You wanted to give her a reason not to hate you."

True. Mace knew me well. When you risked your life with a person, you tended to get close real quick.

"I guess the question is, if she's not going to budge, and it doesn't seem like she is, what do you want more? The land or the girl?"

He sounded like my brother. "It's not that simple."

"Sure it is."

"I'm not backing out of the bet. I'd just hoped she would change her mind before it came to that."

"Can't see that happening."

“No,” I admitted. “If I can’t convince her today . . .”

Neither of us spoke for a while.

“You sure you want to try?”

I wasn’t following. “Try what?”

“Try to convince her? To do something that goes against what she believes?”

That sounded a lot like Natalie’s argument. It was a piece of fucking land, not a person. Not life or death.

*But something she believes in.*

Land conservation. Honestly, I didn’t get it. Was barely on board with recycling. I guess that made me some kind of monster in this day and age. Did I have to get it, though, to understand the concept of staying true to your values? To understand it was important to her?

No. I didn’t.

“I hear you,” I said finally. “The whole environmental thing is just so foreign to me.”

“Clearly,” he said, “given your career. And you’d still be on opposite ends of the spectrum. Natalie will probably try to talk you out of every deal.”

That made me smile, the thought of Nat and I sitting out here, me telling her about a piece of property I wanted to buy, her giving me all of the reasons I shouldn’t.

“Oh man, you’re fucked.”

I looked at my old unit buddy. “Sorry?”

“Fucked. Shackled. Down the rabbit hole.”

I knew what he meant. Guess I'd been smiling, thinking of her. "I'm in love with the woman," I admitted, both to Mace and myself at the same time.

"So, motherfucker," Mace said, never one to mince words, "what are you planning to do about it?"

Good question. "Thankfully, I have the whole day to figure that out. How about you? Have to hit the road soon?"

"Yeah," he said. "Work and all that bullshit."

I was surprised Mace stayed this long. Yesterday he'd said he wanted to leave early.

"So?"

Mace looked out across the lake. "You were right. There's a lot to recommend this place."

"Told ya. Some good guys here too."

"Yeah, I like Nate a lot. Will have to give it some thought." Mace looked sideways at me. "Might be helpful to know if I'll have an old unit buddy in the same town."

I sighed. "Guess we both have big decisions to make."

"Guess so."

Mace stood, putting down his cup. "I'm gonna grab my stuff and hit the road."

"Sounds good," I said, not moving as Mace made his way back into the house.

Big decisions, indeed.

It was more than an hour later, Mace long gone, my coffee cold, as I stared at the deck remembering the day Natalie tipped over in the lake. She'd been so pissed that day. Little by little, I'd broken down her barriers of hate until we sat right

here in as companionable silence as I was sitting right now. Nat loved this view. The lake.

She loved me.

She'd never said it, but in all of the exchanges we had, one had told me so more than the others. Ironically, it was in KC's, when she found out I'd rescheduled the meeting. The look of sheer disappointment, as if I'd just broken her heart, was one I hadn't been able to erase from my memory.

You can't break someone's heart who doesn't love you.

She also loved that property.

I bolted up from my seat, an idea forming. Walking down to the dock, I looked out across the lake, imagining the inlet in my mind. Next, I imagined Natalie sitting in a big Adirondack chair with the hat we'd bought her in Sicily.

Natalie. Sunshine.

The same woman who resisted being in the office with every fiber of her being, even choosing the uncomfortable wrought-iron chairs at Devine Coffeehouse just to be outside.

I knew what to do.

TWENTY-NINE

*natalie*

I should have called him. Talked to him one last time.

Yesterday, after my lessons with the kids, I stayed at the inlet all day, blowing off work again. I was going to have some serious catch-up to do after this week. I'd deliberately lightened my load knowing it would be a tough transition coming back from Italy, but I would be paying for these extra days off for sure.

I just didn't have it in me to focus.

Even now, as I parked and headed into the office, I had no idea how I was supposed to do actual work. But I had to know. And there was the evidence staring me in the face.

Jax's car.

He was here.

With every step I took toward the building, my anger grew. But I wasn't sure if the anger was directed toward Jax or myself. Sure, I was good and pissed that he kept the meeting with Dave. But as Charlee and Zoe had pointed out last night at my self-inflicted pity party, which Zoe kindly hosted at her bar, avoiding him would solve exactly zero problems.

And wasn't Jax worth trying to figure it out with?

Easy answer. Yes.

Did I want him to sell the land? Of course not. But was it worth losing him over? That answer had become less and less clear every single day.

*He's in this building.*

Part of me wanted to barge in on the meeting, beg Jax not to sign the purchase agreement and tell him how much I loved him. How much I wanted him to stay, like he'd suggested before I froze him out. How much I craved his touch, his kisses.

Dave would definitely think I'd lost my mind.

So instead, I sat in my office staring at the laptop, waiting.

*Fuck this.*

I couldn't take it anymore. Maybe I couldn't blurt that all out in front of Dave, but I had to go in there and see him. Had to tell Jax that, no matter what happened, we'd work it out. That I shouldn't have run.

With a quick knock and Dave's "come in" I popped open the door.

One look at him, and it was over. Jax sat in the chair opposite my boss's desk, legs outstretched, dressed casually in pants and a long-sleeved shirt, rolled up, for god's sake. He looked so damn good.

My chest ached with need for him.

Well, that wasn't the only thing that ached for him, if I were being honest.

"Sorry," I said, not sorry at all.

"Come in," Dave replied amicably. "We were just finishing up."



“Finishing up?” I asked, taking a tentative step into the office.

Was it me or was Dave acting a bit strange?

“Yep, finishing up,” he repeated.

Jax didn't say a word. This was military Jax. Ranger Jax. The disciplined military man turned successful entrepreneur Jax. He wasn't giving away a thing.

“I see.”

“Take a seat,” Dave said, still acting weird. So I did. “Deal's done. Jaxon officially purchased the inlet.”

My stomach dropped. Why was that such a surprise? Of course he had. It's what he came to town for in the first place. Was he really going to lose out on the deal of the century for a little bet? One, technically speaking, that I'd lost, because we *had* gotten together. Pause or no pause. He'd predicted it.

“I see.”

“I don't think you do,” Jax finally spoke.

His words made no sense.

“Did he buy the land?” I asked Dave.

“He did,” my boss answered.

“Then that seems pretty cut and dried to me.”

Dave and Jax exchanged a glance. Yep, something weird was happening.

Jax stood. “Maybe we should head into your office so I can explain.”

Explain what? He bought the land.

“Good idea,” Dave replied. “And Natalie?”

I stood too, Jax not giving me much of a choice. “Yeah, Dave?”

“Take the day off.”

I nearly laughed out loud but figured that wouldn’t endear me to him. “I was just off for a week. And honestly have been easing back in. If anything, I need to work overtime today.”

“Up to you. But I’m heading out for a weekend in Cayuga with the wife. No one else is in the office today so . . .”

“So you want to shut down the building? You’re kicking me out?” I smiled despite everything else that was happening around me.

Jax bought the land. Why the hell was that such a surprise?

“I am.”

“Nice,” I said. “I’ll catch up this weekend,” I said, knowing he didn’t care. Dave was not a micromanager and knew the work would get done.

“If you say so.” Again with the secret smile. He stood and Jax went up to his desk. The two men shook hands. “Great to meet you, Jaxon. Glad we could come to an agreement.”

“Same to you,” Jax said, nodding to me.

Following him down to my office, even though he should have been following me, I wasn’t surprised when Jax closed the door behind us. He was a take-charge kind of guy, so the fact that it was actually *my* office? Didn’t seem to matter to him.

The second he turned around, Jax’s expression changed. Gone was the mask, the indifference. This was not Ranger Jax but . . . my Jax.

“You bought the land.” I didn’t know what else to say.

Jax took both of my hands at the same time. It felt so good to touch him again.

“I did. For you.”

He squeezed. I stared up into his eyes, wondering what he’d just said.

“For . . . excuse me?”

“I bought the land for you. Build a house on it, leave it undeveloped. Doesn’t matter to me. Although we already know the environmental impact of the B&B would be negligible. Can’t imagine a house would do much damage at all. But if you’d rather leave it untouched . . . ”

His words began to penetrate.

“You bought the land for me?”

“Technically, yes. But I’m hoping more for us than you. But there are no strings attached. It’s in your name already.”

That’s what Dave had been smiling about.

“I can’t . . . Jax. Are you serious?”

“This would be a pretty cruel joke if I wasn’t.”

Agreed.

“I also rented my current house for another six months. I asked the owner about a possible purchase, which also may be an option if you don’t want to build on the inlet property.”

“You’re staying.”

“If you want me to.”

“Are you kidding me? I am so in love with you,” I said. “If you left, it would have broken me.”

“Good, because I love you too, sunshine. Just wish I said it sooner so we didn’t waste these past few days.”

And so, we fell.

He loved me. And bought the land for me.

I tossed my arms around him, Jax pulling me close. He breathed in deeply, and I just wanted to kiss him. So I did. Pulling back, I kissed him with all of the passion that was Sicily, all of the longing that had been our time apart since, and all of the love that I knew he had for me as evidenced by what he’d just given up.

That last thought had me pulling away.

“Can you afford to buy the land and not sell it?”

“I got a really good deal on it. Dave is pretty fond of you.”

Of course. Dave had the ultimate authority over the purchase price, and though part of me wanted the details, those could wait.

“I’m pretty fond of you too,” he said, kissing my nose.

“Good thing, because you’re not getting rid of me, Ranger. Ever.”

“Promise?”

My heart could not have been any more filled than it was at this moment. When you knew, you knew.

“Promise.”

*epilogue*

“I can’t believe it’s June already.”

Natalie let the screen door slam behind her as she joined me on the deck. Nothing like a lazy Saturday morning watching the haze linger and then dissipate on the lake with the woman I loved.

“Big month,” I said as she plopped down into the chair next to me. Immediately Nat crossed her legs. Smiling, I reminded myself there was no need to pluck her from that very adorable position and carry her to our bedroom. I’d woken up already my favorite way possible, with Natalie’s hand wrapped around my cock.

Hard. Ready. Just for her.

If there was anything I loved more than rolling over to my girlfriend climbing on top of me, riding me as the sunlight just barely peeked through our windows, it was the sight of her sitting with me like this.

“Big month,” she agreed, pulling me back to the present.

“How do you feel about them breaking ground?”

“Fine,” she said, taking a sip of coffee. “Better than fine. Really excited. I still can’t believe we’ll be living there. I’ve loved that spot for as long as I can remember.”

“Tell me about it.”

Nat smiled. “I guess that was a big part of me not being able to let go. To imagine a bed and breakfast on my spot.”

“You think?” I teased. We’d talked about it more than once, so this wasn’t any big surprise.

“Anyway,” she said, clearly wanting to move on from the thing that brought us together, but that almost tore us apart too. “I wonder who will be there tonight?”

Mazzie’s bar was bringing in a singer from her hometown, and by the way she talked about him, we were in for a real treat.

“Mason’s off at nine and plans to stop by.”

“Cool.”

Thankfully, Natalie and Mason got along really well. It could have gone either way. People either loved him or didn’t get his sense of humor. The guy offended as many people as he endeared to him with his “don’t give a shit if they like me” attitude. He made me look like an open damn book. But he and Nat got along well, which made things easy on me. A town the size of Kitchi Falls meant you weren’t getting too far away from people you knew.

“The girls are all going?”

“Yep. Should be fun.”

“If you’re there, it’ll be fun.”

Natalie side-eyed me. “Are you trying to butter me up, Jaxon Hayes?”

“Now why would I want to do such a thing?”

Natalie tapped her chin with her finger. “Hmm, good question. Maybe because you want me to cover a shift at the hospital?”

“Actually, there is an opening on Thursday.”

Since getting the program up and running, we still didn’t have enough volunteers to cover every day. It would take time, but we’d get there. In the meantime, Natalie had been a lifesaver.

“No problem. You’re out of town Thursday and Friday, right?”

“I’ll be back by dinner Friday night,” I said. “Meeting is at one, and it’s only about a two-hour drive.”

“You sure you won’t reconsider this one?”

I laughed. “If I reconsidered every deal I tried to make, I’d be out of a job.”

“True,” she admitted. “I won’t try to talk you out of it on one condition.”

“Anything. Shoot.”

“I love that you agreed before you even know what it is.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Her smile made whatever she was about to ask worth it. To think we’d spent a whole month living apart, trying to take things slow. Natalie and I were perfect together. The fact that we’d gone from dating to moving in together in a month didn’t bother either of us. And that we were currently building a house together? Before I’d even proposed? Also not surprising.

Not to us, anyway.



“Well, lucky for you my condition is pretty simple.”

Couldn't wait to hear this one. “Send it.”

She laughed. “I think you've been with Lucas too much. You sound just like him.”

“Speaking of,” I said. “I'm thinking of some new ink.”

Her eyes lit up. Natalie loved my tattoos. Thought they were hot. Which was the exact reason I was thinking of another one.

“But that's beside the point. What's your condition?”

“Easy. My condition is that we don't move the rowing program. I know it makes sense to find a new spot, and that there are some great candidates, but I've been thinking about it and—”

“Done.”

“Really? It won't be too much, having the kids and their parents coming and going? I was with Sam the other day, the way he ran down the hill to the dock . . . it just felt right. Like it should be a part of the property.”

“That's an easy one. Whatever makes you happy makes me happy, sunshine. You know that already.”

Natalie beamed as if I'd given her a diamond ring. Which had me thinking about how exactly I was going to propose. How to make it memorable. My gaze fell on the dock, a memory of a soaking-wet Natalie climbing from the water.

“Are you ever not going to laugh when you think about that?” she asked, correctly guessing the direction of my thoughts.

“Probably not,” I admitted.

She sighed. “Oh well. I guess I can deal with that.”

“Glad to hear it.” Her smile was infectious. “I love you, Natalie.”

“I love you too. Jax.”

\* \* \*

Want a peek at Natalie and Jax’s engagement? Subscribe to become a Bella Michaels’ Insider at [here](#) for a bonus scene. Already a subscriber? Check the latest newsletter for link to all Bella bonuses.

\* \* \*

Curious about Jax’s friend? [Sign up here](#) to receive a new release notice for Bella’s brand new series coming in 2024, *The Bachelor Pact*.

*become an insider*

Want to snag book bonuses including two free novellas?  
Subscribe to become a Bella Michaels' Insider [here](#).



Chat with Bella and other readers in [Books & Brawn](#), a  
Facebook group full of shenanigans!

Want preorder and new release alerts? [Follow me on Amazon](#).

*also by bella michaelis*

**Boys of Bridgewater**

[Overruled by Love](#)

Last Call

Billion Dollar Date

My Foolish Heart

**Grado Valley Vineyards**

Pop and Pour

Lay It Down

Sip and Savor

Horizontal Tasting

[Entry Level](#)

**Standalone**

[Meet, Pray, Love](#)

**Kitchi Falls**

And So, We Dance

Bring It On

And So, We Fall



## *about the author*

**Bella Michaels** is the pen name of steamy small town books. While not writing historical romance as Cecelia Mecca and contemporary romance as Bella, she loves dreaming up new sassy heroines and alpha heroes for readers to enjoy. Firmly Team Gryffindor, Stark she lives with her husband and two pre-teens in Pennsylvania.

Sign up to be a Bella Michaels' Insider to receive bonuses and updates at [BellaMichaels.com/Insider](https://BellaMichaels.com/Insider).

